

How useful is 'Religious Belief' in the Anthropology of Religion?

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From its foundations anthropologists have attempted to account for the origins of beliefs in supernatural entities, a question which has been raised again by the more recent cognitive scientists of religion who maintain that such beliefs can be accounted for by the findings of cognitive and evolutionary science. In fact most theories of religion take beliefs as central to their explanatory attempts. Belief has been a prominent theme within the anthropology of religion from Tylor, to Durkheim, Evans Pritchard to Turner and in more recent times Rodney Needham and Clifford Geertz. For instance Emile Durkheim, in his book, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, defines religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things... which unite into one single moral community...all those who adhere to them" (1912, p.46). In *The Interpretation of Cultures* Clifford Geertz [1] sees religion standing as the expression of the cosmological order underlining and sustaining all other aspects of society and culture, making it supremely important for the anthropologists to correctly map the meaning and coherence of beliefs before seeking to understand the effects and functions of religion. I will not recount the long philosophical debate concerning the meaning of the term belief [2,3] but as Bielo [4] notes, anthropologists broadly define it as a linguistic -cognitive stance in relation to a propositional claim or as a social psychological emotional commitment evidenced through embodiment, practice and memory.

This longstanding primacy accorded to belief has come under attack in recent years from psychologists, anthropologists, philosophers and religious studies scholars. The behaviourist perspective in psychology, the eliminate visit position in the philosophy of mind (the fact that beliefs and desires do not account for our actions, eg Churchland [5], and beliefs are not brain states) and the social- constructivist position in anthropology and religious studies all question the validity of the term belief. Here I focus on the views of anthropologists and religious studies scholars which largely derive from the social-constructionist position. Before moving on however it is important to note that some [6] have argued for the usefulness of the concept of belief for understanding and predicting actions even though they might not be physically real. American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce described belief not as a linguistic phenomenon, but as a psychological and physiological one. 'Our beliefs guide our desires and shape our actions,' he wrote. 'The feeling of believing is a more or less sure indication of there being established in our nature some habit which will determine our actions' [7]. Belief was feeling and habit linked intimately to action. A belief acts as 'a rule for action' [7]. Lanman [8] supports a functionalist explanation of belief, the prominent view in cognitive science that mental states are not just physical states but also the functioning of these states.

But use of the term belief is problematic. Dan Sperber [9] correctly notes that anthropologists frequently assert that 'the so and so believe that', while leaving undefined what they mean by belief. Lindquist and Coleman [10] write 'The common usages of the term belief are confusing. They may concern a cognitive stance but also an attitude rather emotional in character'. I would be inclined to agree with Jean Pouillon [11] who notes that 'it seems impossible to overcome

the polysemy of the word'. It can simultaneously refer to an internal psychological state or a social claim about truth. Needham's [12] *Belief, Language and Experience* is a cogent critique of the notion of belief through an examination of the lexical and ideational aspects of the term 'belief', arguing against the tacit assumption that this psychological category is a universal human capacity. Taking various uses of the term over time and context, he argues for its social and historical construction and notes that it covers a vast spectrum of commitments from doubt to certainty. In contemporary usage religious belief refers to the acceptance of a religious statement, and colours this acceptance with shades of emotion and loyalty which he likens to love and trust between lovers or friends. It cannot be used in cross-cultural analysis of non-western cultures on account of the fact it places the burdens of the term's history and its emphasis on passion and dedication on their mental lives. He concludes that we should abandon the term and find a new terminology to replace it. Leach debated whether anthropologists can meaningfully comment on the inner psychological states of religious adherents [13]. Bielo [4] underscores the fact that belief reflects the Protestant models of personhood, emphasizing individualism, and demands right belief and seeks to speak it with the utmost sincerity.

Malcolm Ruel's argument about 'the monumental peculiarity of Christian 'belief,' both building on and developing the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, has served as a major impetus to this critique. First there is a translation problem- no words exist in Hebrew, Arabic or Pali which can be translated into the English word belief. Second, he argues that belief is a particularly Protestant Christian phenomenon, more specific post reformation, and is, a western artefact, not necessarily applicable to other religions. Belief evolved from the New Testament to the modern era beginning as the practice of Trust or faith in the event of the Messiah. He sees as false a number of assertions: that belief is central to all religions in a similar way to Christianity, that belief is a sufficient explanation of behaviour, that it is an internal psychological state and finally the determination of belief is more important than determination of the status of what it is that is the object of this belief. For him, the very 'absence of any self-conscious creedal or doctrinal component form a commonplace observation of most, if not all, traditional or community religions. It is correct to state that belief is not the central point of all religions; this results in some confusion when studying Asian religions, like Buddhism. Beyond this, different religious may emphasise other aspects of practice such as ritual rather than belief. Judaism presents a good example of this.

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Received November 13, 2013; Accepted November 14, 2013; Published November 15, 2013

Citation: Dein S (2013) How useful is 'Religious Belief' in the Anthropology of Religion? Anthropol 2: e116. doi: [10.4172/2332-0915.1000e116](https://doi.org/10.4172/2332-0915.1000e116)

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Nye [14] similarly argues that the term belief carries a lot of theoretical and ideological baggage. Those cultural groups in which beliefs appeared strange, unexpected or different were designated as superstitious, primitive and possessing magical practices. He goes on to assert that in order to study them we must locate them within wider cultural practice and embodiment rather than looking at them as abstract words or propositions. Anthropologists should focus on the practising of religious concepts within and through bodies.

Asad's [15] article, '*The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category*' contends that universal definitions of religion are inoperable since the diverse possibilities and power dynamics of the phenomenon placed under the label of religion must be explained as "products of historically distinctive disciplines and forces, not as the result of superimposed systems of belief, ritual, political power and other elements. He argues that anthropological studies of particular religions should therefore begin from this point, in a sense unpacking the comprehensive concept which he or she translates as 'religion' into heterogeneous elements according to its historical character and notes that 'the basic axiom' underlying what Geertz calls 'the religious perspective' is not everywhere the same. It is pre-eminently the Christian church that has occupied itself with identifying, cultivating, and testing belief as a verbalizable inner condition of true religion [16] and questions the bias toward individual, cognitive, and conscious assent to discrete propositional truths. Religious scholars have tried to find something that exists beyond observed practices in other traditions, hence the cognitive emphasis. His account involves a shift away from a symbolic anthropology toward a poststructuralist one that is more centrally concerned with power and discipline and with the way that religious subjects (ie. practitioners) are formed. For him [Clifford] Geertz's treatment of religious belief, which is central to his conception of religion, is a modern, privatized Christian one because and to the extent that it emphasizes the priority of belief as a state of mind rather than a constituting activity in the world [17].

Evans Pritchard [18], Needham [12] and more recently Steadman and Palmer [19] assert that since beliefs are unobservable, there can be no science of beliefs since observation is the foundation of all science. Evans Pritchard [18] writes of his inability to know the psychic attitudes of the Nuer towards their belief in Kwoth and that such interior states are better left to theologians, removing religious beliefs from scientific analysis. Rodney Needham [12] in his study among the Penan argues that has no way of knowing their psychic attitudes towards their god Pesalong. In an examination of the anthropological use of the term belief, he states that the concept 'does not constitute a natural resemblance among men, and it does not belong to the common behaviour of mankind'. Steadman and Palmer [19] rightly underscore the fact that beliefs in supernatural agents are just as hard to observe as the supernatural agents themselves. Because we cannot empirically support or refute whether or not people actually believe in religious ideas, the drive to scientifically understand religion must be motivated by individuals' stated claims of acceptance of religious beliefs. Religious claims and other behaviours, then, are metaphors which are accepted literally. The authors contend that accepting others' religious claims fosters cooperation, which was favoured by natural selection. Their approach lies in explaining religious traditions by their effects rather than with their mental representations (i.e. beliefs).

However there is evidence that entertaining particular religious beliefs not only helps rationalize behaviors that are otherwise irrational, but also radically alters the ways in which individuals invest

in others. Bulbulia [20] and Sosis [21] both argue that the presence of religious post-mortem delayed payoffs (e.g., blissful afterlife, honor, etc.) predicts prosocial behavior, and various studies have supported this prediction [21,22].

While many have critiqued the notion of belief and acknowledged Needham's concerns, few have actually argued for its abandonment. Ritual theorist Catherine Bell states 'theorists do not need to stop using the terms belief and religion, but their historical freight must be part of them'. For her, whatever belief affects or effects, it is constantly contested and negotiated by social actors with divergent interests, who interpret the material or physical aspects of religion, that is, ritual and practice, in a myriad of ways. Others have argued for the need to move beyond belief. For example Webb Keane observed that "Religions may not always demand beliefs, but they will always involve material forms" [17].

As Bielo [4] mentions, within the anthropology of Christianity processes of believing are increasingly being questioned. There is a move from cognitive accounts to ones emphasising phenomenology; from belief as a stable interior state, to believing defined instead as a condition that is constantly sought after and always in the process of being internalized. Furthermore various theorists argue for replacing the term belief with commitment [23] or faith- 'the practice of performative rituals and religious disciplines' [24]. Elisha [24] and Street [25] propose that Christian commitment is grounded in cultural models of faith, which they both define as a relationship between humans and the divine.

So what can be concluded from the above? The term belief is somewhat problematic as a cross cultural construct. I would agree that the term should not be readily applied outside Judeo- Christian religious contexts. Furthermore it is imperative to move beyond what individuals think to look at the ways in which divergent religious practices are embodied. In accord with Nye (2003) anthropologists should examine how religious concepts are practised within and through bodies.

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