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-constructivist 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 a mental state and finally the determination of belief is more important than 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-constructivist 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 a mental state and finally the determination of belief is more important than 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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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 he 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 of its focus on the limited 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 (20030 anthropologists should examine how religious concepts are practised within and through bodies.

References

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