

S4 Advanced Social Anthropology I: Thought, Belief and Ethics  
Anthropology of Belief

**1. The problem of belief; universalist solutions to the problem**

Jonathan Mair, Lent 2010

1. A standard (problematic) model of belief
  - Beliefs are propositions or attitudes to propositions
  - They should be consistent with respect to each other and to action
  - Beliefs are acquired from direct experience, reason, or by learning from others
  - Belief-motivation model: action can be explained in terms of beliefs and goals...
  - ...so beliefs can be inferred from action as well as from direct statements
  - Individuals and cultures have 'Systems of Belief', by which they explain the world
2. 'Intellectualists'
  - Classical statements: Tylor, Frazer
  - Cultures have practical and theoretical/intellectual elements; the latter are the cause and explanation of the former
  - e.g. "...religion consists of two elements, a theoretical and a practical, namely, a belief in powers higher than man and an attempt to propitiate or please them. Of the two, belief clearly comes first, since we must believe in the existence of a divine being before we can attempt to please him." Frazer, *The Golden Bough*
3. Durkheimian belief
  - *Elementary Forms*: Cultural beliefs, including categories of reason derived from the experience of ritual; only anomic individuals could dispute such beliefs
  - Strong influence on US interpretive/symbolist anth: Talcott Parsons, Schneider, Geertz
  - The world is understood through cultural symbols, experienced strongly in ritual
4. Empirical problems with belief
  - Distribution of beliefs in societies not uniform, esp distribution of those beliefs the Durkheimian view would expect to be shared, i.e. those relating to ritual/religion
  - Little systematicity. Contradictory beliefs common – in societies and in individuals
  - Belief is not a good index of behaviour and vice versa
  - Beliefs made up for anthropologists' benefit
  - People assert *p* but deny a paraphrase of *p* (Boyer, *Tradition as Truth and Communication*)
5. Possible solutions to the problem of belief
  - Exceptionalist: belief is a complex Christian/Euro-American/English-language term; it is misleading to apply it to other contexts (Needham, Ruel, Lindquist and Coleman)
  - Universalist — belief is a universal cognitive faculty, but the standard model is wrong
  - Ethnographic — believing is always a historical product (Asad....and more next week)
6. Universalist Explanations
  - Priority of practice: Robertson Smith, Bourdieu
  - Dogma: Leach *Virgin Birth*; dogmatic statements affirm social structure
  - Degrees of conviction: Gilbert Lewis, Jon Elster ('quasi-beliefs')
  - Degrees of clarity: Bloch, Sperber 'semi-propositional beliefs', Boyer 'Thinking with empty notions'
  - Contextual beliefs: Gombrich (cognitive vs affective belief); Luhmann

See <http://www.jonathanmair.com/> for presentation