

S4 Advanced Social Anthropology I: Thought, Belief and Ethics
Anthropology of Belief 2. — Ethnographic approaches to belief
Jonathan Mair, Lent 2010

1. Needham, *Belief, Knowledge and Experience* (1972)

‘Belief’ should be abandoned as a category of analysis because...

- Philosophers have failed to agree on a clear definition of ‘belief’
- There is no evidence to accept the implication of ‘belief’ attributions that belief is a distinct psychological state that persists beyond the statement of belief
- Translation problems: other languages may have no term to translate belief, or several terms that translate it approximately but which are quite different from each other
- English language: ‘belief’ has too many distinct, sometimes contradictory meanings

2. Ruel, *Christians as believers* (1982)

—Stages in the development of Christian belief

- Early Christianity: trust in a person-event
- Development of creeds: affirmation of required propositions; heterodoxy clearly defined
- Reformation: new emphasis on the phenomenology of belief
- Diffuse belief: 20C faith is a universal, but personal reaction to the divine

—If we apply this historically rich (and ambiguous) term elsewhere we will be liable to make assumptions based on the following ‘shadow fallacies’:

- Religion is all about belief
- Religious doctrine is a rationale for individual and group behaviour
- Belief is an internal, personal and psychological experience

3. Veyne, *Did the Greeks believe in their myths?* (1988)

- Yes, but not in the same way they believed in other things
- True worlds are plural and are related analogically
- The ancient Greeks were mostly unaware of the plurality of true worlds
- Ancient historians sought to eliminate absurdities of the mythic world of heroes and gods
- Like journalists, they were the authority, required to demonstrate their competence and fairness, but not to list their sources
- Each true world is a ‘regime of truth’, or a ‘programme of truth’ that stipulates truth conditions, the way truth is to be produced
- Regimes of truth discussed by Veyne: ancient myth, ancient history, modern history, modern journalism, theatre and literature

4. *Belief in Inner Mongolian Buddhism*

- Emphasis on belief in the teachings
- ...but ordinary people cannot understand the teachings
- they must rely on developing faith without understanding
- whatever is the true content of the teachings cannot be understood
- whatever can be understood is not the real meaning of the teachings and is not a worthy object of faithful belief
- As well as cognitive attitudes, this belief encompasses emotional and physical practices
- Buddhists must learn how to believe in this way, and become better at it through practice

— Distinctive features:

- A –VE duty to avoid doubt, not a +VE duty to understand and believe in certain propositions
- Humility is key: a faithful follower develops a humble personality
- This belief is relational; it is premised on authority, unequal distribution of knowledge
- Episodic: this belief must be put into practice; it does not endure

5. *Conclusions: is belief a universal?*

- Belief can be both universal and historical/cultural...
- ...in the same way as walking or swimming according to Mauss