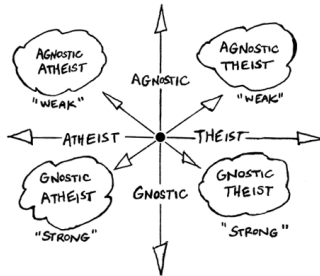


## Anthropology of Belief / Lecture 1

# The Problem of Belief



Archaeological & Anthropological Tripos Part IIB / Paper S4: Thought, Belief & Ethics

Department of Social Anthropology / Cambridge University

*“That men can be said to believe, without qualification and irrespective of their cultural formation, is an implicit premise in anthropological writings of the most varied kinds.”*

Needham 1972, *Belief, Language and Experience*

## The standard model of belief

- Propositions
- Dispositions
- Consistency
- Acquisition
- Belief-Motivation Model
- Praise and blame
- Worldview

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## Intellectualists: Tylor, Frazer

- Societies explain the world through myth
- Magical behaviour is explained by magical beliefs

## Durkheimian belief

- Collective representations derived from experience of the social
- Everything is interpreted through these given categories
- No room for disagreement or change
- Strong influence on US symbolic/interpretive anthropologists

## Empirical problems

- Uneven distribution
- Unsystematic
- Not a good predictor of behaviour
- and vice versa
- Beliefs made up ad hoc

# Solutions

## 1. Universalist

Belief is a universal faculty as we thought...  
...but the standard model needs refining

## 2. Exceptionalist

'Belief' is an ethnocentric category...  
...Cannot be applied to all contexts or generally for comparison

## 3. Ethnographic

Belief is a historical product with specificities in all cases

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### Refinements to the model:

- Priority of practice
- Dogma
- Degrees of conviction
- Degrees of clarity
- Contextual beliefs

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## Priority of Practice

### Robertson Smith

*Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*

- Rites essential to community life
- Belief is a post hoc explanation
- Myth not dogma

### Bourdieu

*Outline of a Theory of Practice, Logic of Practice*

- Most knowledge acquired and expressed in practice
- Objectification destroys practical knowledge

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# Dogma

## Leach

### *Virgin Birth*

- Dogma expresses a commitment to the social structure
- No relation to internal states of mind, which we cannot know
- Trobriand virgin birth is like Cambridge college grace

## Degrees of conviction

Jon Elster

Quasi-beliefs: Conviction is related to whats at stake

Glibert Lewis

Half-beliefs: Many beliefs are between literal and metaphorical

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## Degrees of clarity

Sperber: Semi-propositionality

Stagflation?

Boyer: Tradition

Thinking with empty notions

Vacuity of concepts may increase with salience

Bloch: Deference

Quotation without understanding is a kind of obedience

## Gombrich

### *Precept and Practice*

- Buddhists are puzzlingly contradictory
- Cognitive beliefs: answering questions
- Affective beliefs: practical issues

## Luhmann

*Persuasions of the Witches' Craft* Beliefs can be compartmentalized

## Rejecting belief

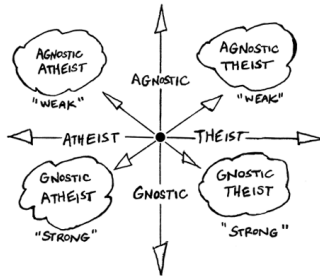
Needham Ruel Lindquist and Coleman 2008

## Ethnography of belief

Asad

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