Cultures of Belief

Jonathan Mair. Anthropological Theory (2012), 12(4), pp.448–466.

Introduction: A Empirical Question About Religious Belief

> The debate about whether religion really requires literal belief in divine beings and realms has become another pantomime, with the likes of Karen Armstrong and Mark Vernon…shouting "oh no it isn't!" while the atheists in the audience cry back "oh yes it is!" But what we should really be shouting is "behind you!" If only we'd look, we'd see a better way to resolve the dispute: evidence. You cannot decide a priori what actual religion really is. To know you need to see what people actually believe and do. (Baggini, 2011a).

In a recent series of articles in *The Guardian*, the popular philosopher Julian Baggini has complained that the public debate about religion has stalled on a disagreement about the nature of religious belief (2011a; 2011b; 2011c). On the one hand, he argues, the New Atheists—Richard Dawkins, AC Grayling, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and the rest—insist that religious people's language and practice must be taken literally, as representative of an underlying system of propositional belief. On the other hand, a less vocal, but nonetheless influential group of writers who seek to defend religious faith—including Karen Armstrong, a religious studies scholar and popular author, and Mark Vernon, a journalist—insist with equal

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Version of record: http://ant.sagepub.com/cgi/doi/10.1177/1463499612469588
doi: 10.1177/1463499612469588

determination that religious practice expresses deep or transcendent truths in a non-literal form, or that religious belief is about something other than propositions, and that the literal beliefs that the atheists find so problematic are not in fact essential to religious belief at all. And yet, as Baggini points out, while refusing to allow religious people to be held accountable for these beliefs, they also frequently refuse to disavow literal interpretations entirely.

The result is a loud conversation at cross purposes: the atheists continue to rail against what appears to be a grotesque distortion of actual religious life, and therefore miss their mark, while the other side refuses to provide a clear account that might correct the caricature. Baggini suggests that the way out of this impasse is to produce a precise list of the propositions, if there are any, that religious people (as a general class, as members of particular confessions, or as individual believers) actually do, literally, believe. 'Symbolic' or 'metaphorical' beliefs could be incorporated into the list by giving them a literal gloss. Traditional formulae that are no longer understood or meant in earnest would not be included.

Baggini's idea is that such a list would provide a clear idea of which religious beliefs can be taken seriously *as reasons* and thus of which beliefs can meaningfully be submitted to, or defended from, rationalist criticism. Drawing up the list would deny defenders of religion the refuge of vagueness to which Baggini thinks they often retreat, but in return the atheists would be forced to give up the right to define religion as a straw man. The conversation, he (rather optimistically) concludes, might then resume. In one of his articles, Baggini suggests a minimal set of literal, propositional beliefs that he thinks

many religious believers might be willing to sign up to and to defend (2011c), but, after these were rejected by his interlocutors on both sides, he issued the appeal, quoted above, for empirical data about what people 'actually believe and do'.

Part of the purpose of this paper will be to propose an anthropological and ethnographic response to this plea for evidence. My reason for wanting to do this is not only that I think anthropologists have something valuable to contribute to the public debate (though I do, and it is to be regretted that contemporary anthropology makes so little impact on public debates that Baggini did not think to turn to it for an answer in the first place). As I discuss below, I also think that the muddle that Baggini has helpfully pinpointed at the heart of the 'religion wars'—*the failure to specify the extent to which beliefs can be considered reasons*—is a source of imprecision that also afflicts anthropology, especially the anthropology of religion, but one that we fail to notice because a certain view of belief, especially religious belief, has come to be taken for granted by anthropologists. So resolving the problem by learning to be ethnographically sensitive to belief is of fundamental importance for anthropology too and this article should be seen as a first step towards that goal. My argument will be that in order to answer Baggini's question we will need to go beyond it, to ask not only *what* people believe, but also *how* they believe it. That is, we will need to pay attention to modalities or styles of belief.

On the face of it, this observation might sound little different from the position of the defenders of religion whom Baggini criticises, who have

proposed a number of similar distinctions that separate everyday belief from a special category of religious belief. Armstrong's division of thought into *mythos* and *logos* is typical of this genre: "In the premodern world, both *mythos* and *logos* were regarded as indispensable. …Yet the two were essentially distinct, and it was held to be dangerous to confuse mythical and rational discourse" (Armstrong, 2001:xv); only modern fundamentalists and atheists make the mistake of confusing the two. Other prominent examples with a similar logic include Wilfred Cantwell Smith's notion of 'faith' (1963), devastatingly skewered by Talal Asad (2001), and Stephen Jay Gould's notion of 'Non-Overlapping Magisteria' (2002). These distinctions all have in common the idea that there is a universal form of thought or practice which is called into service when we apprehend the sacred or the moral. This univsersality is one of the causes of the vagueness that Baggini deplores. Universal, binary models can provide no guidance about how to specify precisely, for any particular religious group or individual, which aspects of their thought, and which of their behaviour, might fall under the non-literal umbrella of myth or faith, and which are to be taken literally.

However, what I am proposing here is quite different from the schemes advanced by these authors for two reasons. First, the approach I am recommending does not assume any universal 'religious orientation' or style of thought. Instead, I argue for the importance of making an effort to describe with precision *historically specific modes or styles of belief,* in relation to their specific contexts. A particular mode of belief may be widespread, or taken for granted, within a society, another may be practised by only a few. Far from

being a common sense reaction to the sacred, some modes of belief may be counter-intuitive, perhaps only achieved as a result of sustained hard work. Taking an ethnographic approach to belief that can account for this variety is the only way to understand the variation of belief with a degree of precision. Second, rather than arguing that there is a religious or spiritual sphere of activity in any society for which reason is inappropriate, I suggest that specific modes of belief found in particular contexts can impose specific conditions on reasoning that can be precisely described and understood ethnographically.

Had Baggini sought an anthropological answer to his question, what would it have been? One answer suggests itself immediately. Anthropology *has* produced an enduring and useful contribution to thought about belief: namely, the observation that religious behaviour and language are not explained by systems of well thought out beliefs as often as some people tend to think. Instead, the ethnographic record shows many cases of tolerance of contradiction, so-called 'syncretism', and vagueness. It is clear that whereas the vision of a Dawkins sees a world of competing belief systems, in very many cases, actual religious people place no more than a minimal priority on monitoring and imposing order on their own beliefs, that they practice because of habit or traditions, or because of the social meanings that practice has.

The importance of this observation originally lay in refuting the positions of early anthropologists, such as Tylor and Frazer, who interpreted cultures above all as systems of beliefs, and religious or magical practices as

evidence of manifestly inferior beliefs. The rejection of the intellectualist approach[1] can be traced to Robertson Smith's *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889) — an exercise in Biblical scholarship that also drew on modern ethnography — but it has been repeated in many subsequent anthropological works. Classic examples include Evans-Pritchard's description in *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic* of the Azande's lack of interest in theoretical questions (1937), and the essay in which Leach exonerates the Trobrianders from the troubling accusation that they actually believe what they say about virgin birth (1966).

The irrelevance of belief in understanding religion has been so well attested that it has become something of an anthropological truism. It has also been accepted in related fields such as religious studies (hence the role of Karen Armstrong, mentioned by Baggini), partly under the influence of scholars such as liberal theologian John Robinson and Christian student of Islam Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Robinson and Smith, like Armstrong, were themselves religious in a way that made particular, explicit statements of belief at best superfluous and at worst misleading.

Although the observation about the widespread unimportance of belief is old news to anthropologists, and I am about to suggest we move on from it, it bears repeating. In the minds of many who are not personally familiar with religious life, and some who are, it still comes as a surprise that every believer everywhere is not a fundamentalist or a systematic theologian. Still a useful observation, then, but it is not the end of the story, for while it has been shown that many religious people are not interested in beliefs, many

others, and not just Christians, do expend a great deal of effort on understanding, monitoring, debating and cultivating particular forms of belief.

My own interest in the question began with my work on the revival of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia. Inner Mongolian Buddhists do not fit easily into the model favoured by either side in the debate. These are neither the sort of religious people who have a creed, a set of propositions, which they learn and pass on, and which they use to reason about other beliefs and as premises for decision-making, nor the unreflective, practice-oriented worshippers who do what they do simply out of habit or in order to satisfy some deep need for symbolic expression. They are not very interested in the *content* of their belief. But what they do care very much about is defining, judging and achieving the right *style* of belief. This style is not some universally encountered, non-literal mythic orientation to the holy, as Baggini's defenders of religion would have it, but a specific Inner Mongolian Buddhist set of attitudes, associated with specific modes of experience, practices and relationships. It is, in other words, a culture of belief.

Without a way of thinking about belief as a cultural practice—something that is intentionally learned and passed on and practised and perfected and debated—Inner Mongolian Buddhists' accounts of their religious lives make little sense. To do justice to them, we need an anthropology of belief, by which I mean both an ethnographic sensibility that allows for people's reflexive relationship to their own belief to register, and a comparative anthropology that helps us to understand its contours. So

besides providing a possible answer to Baggini's question, that is what I want to do in this paper: to make a case for the development of a systematic anthropology of belief. Below, after discussing the existing anthropological work on belief, I introduce the Inner Mongolian Buddhist approach to belief, before outlining some concepts from a number of other sources — on mediaeval Judaism, on Greek religion, and on contemporary Evangelical Christianity in the US — that might contribute aspects of the sort of comparative theory of belief that I am proposing.

Anthropology of Belief

The anthropological literature, of course, includes countless descriptions of the content of people's beliefs, but there are only a handful of critical examinations of the concept of belief itself. This was recognised—and recognised as problematic—by Rodney Needham, whose book, *Belief, language, and experience* (1972) started out as an attempt to rectify the situation. Needham's conclusion, after diverting but ultimately fruitless detours through etymology, psychology and philosophy, is that the use of the concept of belief for ethnographic and comparative purposes should be abandoned altogether. No anthropologist dared to revisit the task from which Needham ultimately withdrew, that is, to provide a theoretical account of belief that is grounded in the ethnographic literature. A number of anthropologists have ratified Needham's decision, while recognising that his

ban on belief terms would be impossible to implement in practice—among them Malcolm Ruel (1982), and Jean Pouillon (1982), and most recently Lindquist and Coleman in the introduction to their special edition of *Social Analysis*, titled 'Against Belief' (2008). However, despite these arguments against the use of belief, we go on using it. Indeed, it is difficult to think what a belief-free account of human life would look like.[2]

The failure of anthropologists to face up to this problem may have something to do with the intimidating erudition of Needham's work — who would gainsay a man who was able to wrestle, between the covers of one book, with questions of Indo-European etymology, Biblical criticism, theology, empiricist psychology and all that the great philosophers had been able to throw at the question? It may also have something to do with a residual anti-psychologism that still affects many anthropologists, a hangover from the days when structuralism nearly turned to behaviourism as Edmund Leach condemned the foolishness of speculating about the "internal psychological state" of ethnographic subjects (Leach, 1966:40). Or perhaps it is because, in more recent times, mainstream anthropologists have ceded questions touching on cognition to specialist cognitive anthropologists, who, in their cognitive-science-inspired incarnation, are avowedly not interested in belief, but only in information.[3]

It is true that, in the absence of any attempt to work up a consolidated theory, anthropologists have provided a wealth of relatively isolated ethnographic observations on belief. Worthy examples include Gilbert Lewis' work on the Gnau of Papua New Guinea, in which he records the variation in

degree of conviction or sincerity with which beliefs are held (1980; 1986); and early work by cognitive anthropologists Dan Sperber, on what he calls 'semi-propositional belief' (1985), and Pascal Boyer on tradition (1990) — both of whom show how belief can be affected by variations in the degree of clarity with which it is held. There are many other examples too. But what seems to be problematically lacking, apart from an attempt to integrate these diverse observations, is an idea that the variation in belief might be anything other than the result of universal variability in a basic human faculty (they are 'universalist' in this sense: we can *all* believe with greater or lesser certainty, or with more or less conviction). There's nothing wrong with this universalist approach, but none of these observations can really begin to address the Inner Mongolian Buddhist assertion that there are different kinds of belief, and that one kind of belief in particular needs to be learnt and cultivated.

Inner Mongolian Buddhism

Inner Mongolia is a region in northern China, in which Tibetan Buddhism has been undergoing something of a revival since the 1990s, as the regional government has permitted, and even funded, the reconstruction of some 400 of the thousand-plus temples that stood before the Cultural Revolution. Buddhists in Inner Mongolia agree that the revival has been impressive, that

more and more people are interested in Buddhism, and that followers are becoming more and more faithful. And they agree that the influence of Tibetan Buddhism is spreading into parts of society where it was not previously popular, as increasing numbers of Han Chinese — as well as the Mongols who are the traditional constituency — have started attending temples and have been accepted by Mongolian lamas as disciples. In the capital city, at the main temple, Ih Juu, it is clear that the religion is even becoming popular among Communist Party officials and police officers.

However, there is a widespread feeling that this growth masks an underlying lack of content, that the practices that have been revived are superficial because they are not underpinned by real understanding, on the part of laypeople, nor, more importantly, on the part of the lamas. The loss of knowledge and understanding, and the inevitability of ignorance, are things that Inner Mongolian Buddhists spend a great deal of time discussing — in fact, this talk about ignorance is itself so pervasive it must be counted an important part of Inner Mongolian Buddhist life.

The Inner Mongolian Buddhists I studied stress the importance of humility in religious life, and often replied to my clumsy, early questions about the meaning of this or that rite by saying that they did not know and that if I wanted to find an answer to my questions I should look in a book or go to Lhasa or India or Beijing. On the face of it, this sounds reminiscent of the practical orientation that many anthropologists have recorded around the world — such an interpretation would go something like this: Inner Mongolian Buddhists are interested in their religious rituals and specialists

for practical, or social, or traditional, reasons and have little interest in the fact that there might be an abstract theory underlying them.

But, in fact, Inner Mongolian Buddhists *are* interested in *belief*, if not beliefs. They constantly emphasise the importance of having faith or belief, and having as much of it as possible. By this they say they mean believing actively and sincerely in the truth of the teachings of the Buddha. This is important because cultivating faith and getting it just right is the only way to achieve spiritual progress now that, for various reasons, it has become impossible to progress by learning or by perfecting practice or by moral conduct. So there can be no progress through knowledge, or through practices such as meditation or 'works' (good deeds) — only faith in powerful beings such as the Buddhas and boddhisattvas can make religious activity efficacious. In this, Inner Mongolian Buddhism is similar to many other historic and contemporary Buddhist traditions that have decided that the route to spiritual progress lies in relying on 'other-power' rather than 'self-power'.

So one must rely upon faith not works. But there is a twist. Ordinary Buddhists must believe the teachings are true, but they can neither know nor understand them because the truths of Buddhism are deep. The deep meaning (*gün utga*)[4] of the teachings is what one understands when one is enlightened, and ordinary Buddhists, as opposed to the enlightened incarnate lamas, are not enlightened—not yet. Conversely, by the same principle, whatever ordinary, unenlightened beings can understand and know is not worthy of faithful belief. All that talk about reincarnation, the Buddhas and so

on is not false, but it is only the surface meaning (*öngön utga*), not the real teaching. So when it comes to religion, belief and knowledge are considered mutually exclusive classes.

Relying on other-power, in this context, means devotional practice in the presence of sources of power. These include buddhas and bodhisattvas — they can help from afar, but since proximity is important, one can access their power through images of them that have been 'switched on'. There are also local incarnations or 'living buddhas' — these are the best of all because they are present in person and can interact directly with devotees. Though contemporary lamas are — it is agreed — inadequate, they are still considered to generate power because of their ordination. A whole range of objects also emanate power, from volumes of scriptures, to all the paraphernalia that is associated with lamas and worship: relics of monks, their long-held possessions, offerings that have been presented in rituals, and so on. All these beings and objects are classed together under the term *shuteen*: objects of worship.

The degree to which devotees can derive benefit from their practice depends on two factors: (1) the power of the object of worship, and (2) the intensity of faith (*süjüg*), or belief (*itgel*) (these two terms are used interchangeably in this context; the latter is the same term that is used in relation to belief in everyday situations) with which they worship or otherwise interact with the object. As a result, to the extent that people exert themselves in relation to Buddhism, their thoughts and efforts are mainly aimed at maximising these two variables. But the power of the object is

difficult to determine. What is in the power of the believer to change is the sincerity of his or her faith. This is not something that can be deployed at will, one will have a certain disposition for humble faith, and one must work from that point, practising worshipping and devotion (echoes of Pascal and his Wager Argument here), making offerings and performing prostrations, progressively cultivating the ability to worship with ever more intense, sincere belief.

My informants see religious belief as a single practice, but for the purposes of exposition, it is possible to isolate some key distinctive features, which I describe below. All these things come together as an act of homage or worship in a moment of intensity that can bring tears.

1. Cognitive aspects. In terms of attitude to propositional belief. Belief is founded on respect. Scepticism is an act of disrespect, so doubt is forbidden. One of my teachers, put it like this:

> Faith is the open expression of the respectful mind. The foundation of belief is respect. If you have faith in the Buddha, you will believe that the scriptures are real and true. For truth some people offer their lives. If I cannot understand something in the teachings, that shows my level of understanding is too low. I must never ask whether it is right. Doubting is unacceptable.

The duty to believe that faith imposes is restricted to the negative duty of avoiding giving assent to, or even considering, ideas that are critical

of the object of faith. There is no positive duty to be clear about and affirm the content of beliefs, beyond the belief that the teachings are great and true and the beings that really understand the teachings are immensely powerful and worthy of respect.

2. Humility/Aesthetic standard. Humility is absolutely key, one must cultivate a feeling of lowness in relation to powerful beings. This is not so much a matter of recognising the fact cognitively, but more a question of acquiring a certain sensibility and set of bodily dispositions; something like what Michael Carrithers has described as 'aesthetic standard' in other Buddhist and in Jain contexts (1990; 1992). This is expressed in the automatic awareness of the location of lamas, incarnations, statues and other objects of worship, and in the automatic expression of submission through posture, voice and so on.

3. Relationality. Because Inner Mongolian faith involves a sort of distributed knowledge, belief is always relational; one must believe in relation to a teacher (normally many teachers) who are the holders of the knowledge in which one believes.

4. Temporality. This is not faith one acquires in conversion. The story (in some accounts at least) in Christianity is that one acquires belief in childhood or in later conversion and one is then a believer all the time, even in one's sleep. Even in the very active and practice-based forms of Christian belief that anthropologists have written about (discussed later in this paper), the aim seems to be to achieve ever greater constancy of belief by internalising and extending forms of narrative and sensibility. In Christianity,

then, it often makes sense to say one is a particular kind of person: a Christian, a believer, and this status might continue, notwithstanding doubts, unless one actually loses faith definitively.

Inner Mongolian Buddhist faith is not like this at all; it is not so much a characteristic of a person as a manner of doing things. In order to bring it about one must be doing something in a faithful way. This might mean reciting mantras, caring for one's master, watching monks chanting, or an almost limitless number of other things, while cultivating a feeling of humility and confidence in the truth of the philosophy that underlies these things, and of acceptance that that philosophy is beyond the understanding of ordinary believers.

5. Ethical practice and self-cultivation. Finally, belief for Inner Mongolians can be seen as an ethical practice of self-cultivation. Buddhism has often been described in these terms, but what is interesting in this case is that the believers do not aspire, even in most cases in the very long term, to form themselves in the image of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas they worship. Rather their true exemplars are other faithful people who are noted for their humility, or their steadfast devotional practice. Emulating such people is the way to produce the right kind of mental habits to achieve the right kind of belief.

All of these things are important in themselves, and help together to explain Inner Mongolian Buddhists' practice and its orientation to faith. But they are also consequential for other areas of devotees' lives. For instance, the requirement of faith for humility means that Inner Mongolian Buddhists

do not, with very few exceptions, read Buddhist scriptures or even secondary literature in the hope of understanding a little of their religion; and while they are tolerant of all sorts of practice, they do look down on people who do not understand enough about Buddhism to know this sort of study does more harm than good. And though the Buddhists I know say that Buddhism is a religion of compassion, the idea that one could understand enough about the complex chains of cause and effect at work in the world to make ethical decisions as a Buddhist would also be subject to criticism.

This is clearly an odd or exceptional notion of belief — so why call it belief at all? First, because the term that Inner Mongolian Buddhists themselves use in religious contexts, *itgel*, is the same term for the action they may engage in when they listen to the news, or that they refrain from when they suspect a neighbour is lying to them. They themselves see religious belief as a counterintuitive form of belief in general, and something that is difficult to understand and difficult to implement; it is not common sense. Second, however remote this form of belief from the everyday variety, cultivating belief in this way is still, in part, an effort to control one's own relationship to truth, however indirect or attenuated that relationship may be. It has cognitive consequences, despite the disconnection from knowledge, for example, the negative duty to avoid doubt, rather than the positive duty to accept specified propositions, and its episodic nature that means this duty is felt with sometimes radically different degrees of intensity in the same person on the same day.

Sources of an anthropology of belief

I hope that this brief introduction to the meaning of belief in the context of Inner Mongolian Buddhism has shown the potential importance of paying attention to traditions of thought about belief, and of practices oriented towards cultivating belief, in understanding what believers are up to. In the second part of this paper, I want to look at some sources of inspiration that might help to turn my isolated ethnographic observation and others like it into a comparative anthropology of belief. The first is the idea of 'regimes of truth', as described by Paul Veyne in his *Did the Greeks believe in their myths?* (1988). The second is the power of reflection that people involved in traditions of thought about thought have over their own belief. To illustrate what I mean by this, I will briefly introduce the debate over the meaning of belief in mediaeval Judaism, as described by Menachem Kellner (1986). Finally, I want to consider the broader significance of recent anthropological work on Christian Evangelicals in the US.

These sources, in the order I present them, build progressively greater richness in their conceptualisation of belief. Veyne is mostly interested in cognitive aspects of specific genres of truth, each of which has its own truth conditions and is related to other truths metaphorically. The Jewish example, in which a series of rabbis debate the meaning of belief in Maimonides' *Thirteen Principles*, the closest Judaism comes to a creed, fits Veyne's model

to a point. Parties to the debate acknowledge that there are different kinds of belief, distinguished by their conditions and relation to other kinds of true belief. However, whereas Veyne describes believers as being in a constant state of lethargy that prevents them from being aware of the multiplicity of forms of belief, in this case, those concerned are fully cognisant of the fact, and are making reflexive decisions about the relative value of different kinds of belief in a given situation. This is surely typical of many cultures of meta-cognition, and not only religious ones: scientific and philosophical thinkers have been no less aware of the importance of belief. Finally, the recent work on US Evangelists, who are often thought to be exception to the rule of non-belief in religion (these are the people who really are supposed to believe in a list of propositions), shows that although propositional beliefs are indeed important in this context, these believers, like the mediaeval rabbis and like Paul Veyne also distinguish a multiplicity of forms of belief. But whereas Veyne and the rabbis are interested essentially in epistemological differences between forms of belief, the Evangelicals see religious belief as a whole-person skill, with distinctive cognitive aspects, but with equally important embodied skills (including difficult cognitive and linguistic skills), emotional content and associated relationships. The combination of these things takes effort to acquire, maintain and perfect, so becoming a believer is a lifetime's task, not something that happens in an instant on conversion.

Veyne's regimes of truth.

One of the best attempts in modern academic literature to describe modalities of belief as historical products, or traditions was made not by an anthropologist, but by Paul Veyne, a French classical historian, in his short book, *Did the Greeks believe in their myths?* (1988) His answer to this question is complex: there are many kinds of belief, or rather, many ways of believing.

The different forms of belief have in common that each is concerned with truth. But each way, or as he calls it, *modality* of belief is part of a distinct 'programme of truth', in which truth is measured by distinct truth conditions and in which only certain ways of arriving at truth are legitimate. The relation of truth in one programme or 'regime of truth' to 'truth' in other programmes is *analogical*.

> Throughout the ages a plurality of programmes of truth has existed, and it is these programmes, involving different distributions of knowledge, that explain the subjective degrees of intensity of beliefs, the bad faith, and the contradictions that coexist in the same individual (1988:27).

Veyne says that we are not normally aware of the differences that separate these regimes, we lethargically accept as true truths belonging to different regimes. Now although this observation is a universalist one — this is a description of believing that applies 'throughout the ages' — Veyne is going a

step further than the universalist scholars I mentioned earlier, because if he is right about programmes of truth then the task of the historian and the ethnographer will be to understand the specific logic of particular forms of belief, each of which may be quite unique.

To return to Veyne's question: Did the Greeks believe in their myths? Veyne answers that they did. They believed that there was a heroic world, in which gods and humans communicated and interacted, and they believed that a special value attached to these interactions. But this belief was not the same as their belief in everyday facts. The events in myths,

> ...took place "earlier," during the heroic generations, when the gods still took part in human affairs. Mythological space and time were secretly different from our own. A Greek put the gods "in heaven," but he would have been astounded to see them in the sky. He would have been no less astounded if someone, using time in its literal sense, told him that Hephaestus had just remarried or that Athena had aged a great deal lately. Then he would have realised that in his own eyes mythic time had only a vague analogy with daily temporality; he would also have thought that a kind of lethargy had always kept him from recognizing this difference. The analogy between these temporal worlds disguises their hidden plurality (Veyne, 1988:17f).

Veyne discusses a series of programmes or regimes of truth — in addition to mythology, he also analyses ancient and modern history, modern

journalism, theatre and literature — taken together, his examples show us how believing can be a process, or a series of processes, each with its own history, and with its own truth conditions and specific relation to other practices and relationships. While we may recognise the responses to all the diverse programmes of truth as species of belief, simply because they are premised on a relationship to a truth, and because diverse forms of truth are analogically related to each other, we are no longer dealing with a universal practice. What we have is a traditional practice that is suitable for ethnographic description, and whose description is indispensable if we are to understand how individuals are related to the content of their beliefs.

Reflexivity in cultures of meta-cognition: mediaeval Judaism

Judaism is often treated as a paradigm case of a religion that emphasises correct practice over belief.[5] However, at times, the question of what one needs to believe and how one ought to believe it has been debated by Jews, often in dialogue with other ideas about belief that were circulating in the larger communities in which they were living. In an interesting book on the subject of dogma in Jewish thought (1986), the historian Menachem Kellner explains that, although the tradition of Biblical Judaism, and the later rabbinical tradition that stemmed from it, were not at all concerned with formulating statements of orthodox belief, from at least the tenth century the religion did develop a tradition of systematic theology.

From that period, Judaism faced challenges to its legitimacy from inside and out: from Islam, from the Greek philosophy Islam had incorporated and disseminated, and from the Karaite Sect (Jews who had adopted aspects of Greek thought). Kellner argues that this imposed a need to set out, for the first time, orthodox Jewish beliefs in an orderly way, in order to be able to explain why they were not inferior to those of ascendant, monotheistic Islam, and why the Karaites were objectionable, even though in terms of orthopraxy their practices differed little from those of rabbinical Jews.

The systematisation of Jewish theology that resulted began in the tenth century with Sa'adia Gaon, a rabbi whose main contribution was precisely redefining the practice of believing in the context of Judaism, something he did in beguilingly concrete terms in his *Book of beliefs and opinions*:

> We say that belief is a notion that arises in the soul in regards to the actual character of anything that is apprehended. When the cream of investigation emerges, [and] is embraced and unfolded by the minds and, through them acquired and digested by the souls, then the person becomes convinced of the truth of the notions he has thus acquired. He then deposits it in his soul for a future occasion or future occasions... (Kellner, 1986:5)

Although Gaon began a tradition of trying to set out traditional beliefs in a systematic form it took until the thirteenth century for this to be done in such

a way that it was possible to codify a set of indispensable, fundamental beliefs — the equivalent of the Muslim or Christian creed. The first, and most influential of these, was written by Moses Maimonides. Maimonides came to be revered as a legal scholar and one of the greatest rabbis, but despite his prominence, his attempt to impose a creed on Judaism never really caught on. His *Thirteen Principles* were, however, the subject of fierce debate about two hundred years after he penned them. What is interesting is that the debate shows that for Jews like Maimonides, arriving at the content of the belief was only half the battle — the other half was deciding in what way the content should be believed.

Maimonides' stated intention was to draw up a list of statements, belief in which was a necessary and sufficient condition for salvation (access to 'the world to come') and membership of the community. Later scholars, according to Kellner, objected little to the list of beliefs, though some suggested minor alterations. However, a number of important rabbis were very concerned about Maimonides' premise that belief in itself could be a condition of salvation. Reactions included the following views, described by Kellner, which mostly emerged in the fifteenth century.

Rabbi Crescas argued the Law is a mysterious matter and recognition of its mysteriousness is an important aspect of faith: Maimonides had been 'seduced' by the ways of the philosophers. Rabbi Albo argued that Maimonides' Principles could be seen as first principles, or axioms, as in Aristotelian science; they were the foundations on which the rest of

knowledge in the field stood. Rabbi Duran agreed, and argued that those who accept the roots or axioms of the Torah, as identified by Maimonides, are not deniers, even if their philosophical speculation leads them to disbelief in lesser aspects of the Torah.

But Rabbi Abranavel argued that there was a difference between scientific and religious truth: in the sciences, one can distinguish between premises, which are given, and speculations, which may be mistaken. In religion, the Torah is given by God, and it is all correct. He defends Maimonides on the basis of the heuristic interpretation of his principles, but argues that no belief in the Torah is prior, or more axiomatic than any other. Anyone who denies a detail of any narrative or belief in the Torah is a heretic. So this does not appear to be a return to the pre-theological rabinnic faith, but rather, an extension of the requirement to have correct propositional faith to the whole of the Torah, or at least to avoid having incorrect beliefs in relation to the whole.

This debate is interesting for several reasons. It is notable that none of those who expressed a view took serious issue with the substance or content of the beliefs that Maimonides had proposed. The disagreement focused on whether belief in the *Thirteen Principles* ought to be the same kind of belief as belief in general, belief in the fruits of scientific reason (on the Aristotelian model or axioms and speculations) or belief in the truth of the Torah as a whole. Was Maimonides' creed to be fundamental, and other beliefs dependent and relatively dispensable, or was it merely heuristic, with a

derivative value, or was it linked to faith in the Torah by reason as an axiom is to a syllogism? Clearly, these debates acknowledged distinctions between forms of belief, distinctions that were different in content, but similar in principle to those described by Veyne. Unlike Veyne's Greeks, however, these believers were reflexive about their belief and thought it possible to teach others about different kinds of belief. One thing this reflexivity allows is the explicit ethical evaluation of competing forms of belief. It becomes clear when we see the contributions of each of the rabbis that Kellner discusses in the context of an on-going argument that none is seeking to make a definitive, universalistic claim about what religious belief or the language it is expressed in is *actually* like in the way anthropologists (such as Geertz or Tambiah) have often sought to do. Instead, each is presenting a competing normative view of what excellent religious belief, within a specific historical community of practice, ought to be like.

Contemporary Evangelical Christianity in the US

As we have seen, familiarity with Christianity has been blamed — by Needham, Ruel and others — for giving social scientists an unrealistic view of belief in other contexts. However, one of the fruits of the emerging anthropology of Christianity has been to show that there is much more to

Christian belief than that — in places where conversion is a recent memory, such as Melanesia, but also in societies where Christianity is well established, such as the United States, even among those Christians who might be thought to be the most focused on tenets of faith, Evangelical Protestants. One of the things that has become particularly apparent is the way in which belief is regarded as a skill that one acquires through practice and in which one can be more or less accomplished — clear parallels with the Inner Mongolian case here. There are specific ways in which this is worked out in particular groups, but the work of the anthropologists I am about to discuss shows that there is also a degree of commonality. In each case religious belief is distinguished from other kinds of belief in such a way that it might be useful to apply Veyne's idea of multiple regimes of truth to their practice, but like the rabbis in the *Thirteen Principles* debate, they make the distinctions self-consciously, and the sort of distinctions that Veyne and the rabbis were interested in, logical distinctions based on different sets of truth conditions, are only half the story here.

So for example, in his paper, Faith beyond belief, Omri Elisha, describes the process of coming to believe among US Evangelicals (2008). He found that his informants acted as he expected, studying the Bible diligently to learn about their religion. However, they also, perplexingly, he thought, frequently told him that the point was not to concentrate on 'factual data'. That would lead to what they called 'head knowledge', but,

> In their view, the main goal of Bible study was to cultivate a receptive moral disposition conducive to 'heart knowledge', which was served by the specific contents of one's propositional beliefs but not exclusively determined by them. …Rational comprehension and affirmation of biblical scriptures are desired, but they alone do not constitute 'faithfulness' (Elisha, 2008:60).

A similar picture is painted by Susan Friend Harding in her *Book of Jerry Falwell* (2001). Like Elisha, Harding finds that while members of the churches she attends are very much concerned with belief, they are much more interested in different kinds of believing and the ways of moving from one to the other than they are interested in specific doctrines, though these are also important.

Specifically, she finds they distinguish between *three* states: disbelief, being under conviction, and being a born-again believer. Disbelief and belief are about accepting or rejecting specific doctrines, as one would expect, but these things are also about being willing or unwilling to participate in a certain narrative mode of being in the world, in which everyday life events are narrated using Biblical language. Becoming a believer means acquiring the ability to do this, so as well as willingness to take part and to accept the propositional content, it also requires the acquisition of certain linguistic abilities, and the ability to be aware of Biblical parallels and interpretations — so it also involves a very specific form of sensibility or seeing the world.

‘Coming under conviction of the Holy Spirit’ is a sort of intermediate phase, in which one is willing to participate by listening and entertaining the Biblical narrative as it is applied to one’s own life, but one is unable or unwilling to produce the speech of a believer oneself.

> Coming under conviction (listening to gospel stories or voices) is easily compared to being saved (speaking, telling stories). When you come under conviction, you cross through a membrane into belief; when you get saved, you cross another membrane out of disbelief. This passage is more problematic for some lost souls, for what outsiders would say were reasons of education, class, or intellect, and insiders would say was hardness of the heart, pride, or the work of the devil.
>
> Once you are saved, the Holy Spirit assumes your voice, speaks through you, and begins to rephrase your life. Listening to the gospel enables you to experience belief, as it were, vicariously. But generative belief, belief that indisputably transfigures you and your reality, belief that becomes you, comes only through speech: speaking is believing (Harding, 2001:60).

Tanya Luhrmann, in her work on British witchcraft, described universal-type belief processes such as compartmentalism (1989). In her more recent work on US Evangelical Christianity she takes a different approach, paying

attention to specific local traditions of thought about belief, as well as psychological findings, for example on the capacity of the mind to produce particular dissociative states (2008a; 2008b; 2005). Like Harding, she takes Christian description of the process of learning to believe more seriously than anthropologists have been willing to do in the past, though she does it in a different way—perhaps a more detached and psychological way, but one that nonetheless acknowledges and tries to understand the importance of emotion and relationships in belief.

Working with different Evangelical churches in Chicago and California, Luhrmann accepts Harding's assertion that for contemporary Evangelicals speaking is believing, but she says it is also about *feeling* it. New Evangelism emphasises the intense emotional experience that can be achieved through belief, and the feeling of intimacy with God that is associated with it. Achieving this feeling is difficult and it is something that needs to be learned and practised.

Specifically, Luhrmann argues, this involves 3 kinds of learning: (1) Cognitive / Linguistic. This involves learning facts or propositions, but it also involves the acquisition of the specific forms of language skills similar to those that Harding discusses. (2) What Luhrmann calls 'metakinesis'. By this she means specific forms of learned psychological skills and experiences including: paying attention to one's stream of consciousness, achieving dissociational states, experiencing a sense of intimacy through prayer, experiencing specific emotions (e.g. the 'Peace of God'), experiencing

hallucinations and loss of bodily control. (How far we have come from Leach!) (3) Relational Practice: learning to experience an intimate, even 'pally', relationship with God, through prayer and Bible reading, through which the believer respectively speaks to and hears from God.

To reduce these active forms of relationship with God that believers see themselves as cultivating, involving the whole person, physically, emotionally, and socially, as merely so many forms of belief would be missing the point of these excellent ethnographies, and that is not what I am suggesting. But if one is interested, specifically, in understanding people's use of knowledge, one needs to see the cognitive aspects of belief in the context of the whole, complex, reflexive practice of which those aspects are a part.

Conclusions

To return to Baggini's question, on the basis of the few examples I have reviewed in this paper it is already obvious that understanding the nature of 'actual religious belief' — or non-religious belief practices, for that matter — might often require a rounded contextual understanding of all aspects of that particular practice, one that takes in all of its components, including the relationships, embodied knowledge and aesthetic standards, with which cognitive aspects of belief are tied up. This is why the survey of the *content* of religious beliefs that Baggini suggests is unlikely to unravel in any significant

way the tangled debates that have frustrated him so far without a complementary study of *styles* of belief. This is true even if, as is the case for Baggini, what one is really interested in is belief as cognition; as the Inner Mongolian case shows, the skills that are learned in belief practices can profoundly affect the course of thought.

The Inner Mongolian Buddhist case is something of an extreme case, in that the believers expressly rule out their own mastery of the content of the belief towards which their belief is oriented, so it is really impossible to miss the importance of styles of belief in this case. For just that reason, it should act as something of a warning for anthropologists; in how many other cases in which content *is* understood have we disregarded consequential subtleties in the style of belief that is applied to that content? For me, as an anthropologist of religion, the most exciting aspect of moving beyond a universalist model to a comparative anthropology of belief is that it allows us to see the widely varying accounts of religious belief in the work of thinkers such as Maimonides, Tsongkhapa, Bacon, Newman and Kierkegard not as competing, and therefore mostly mistaken, folk anthropologies of belief, but as descriptions of distinct aspirational cultures of belief, each with a different relationship to truth as its goal.

In recent years, a few anthropologists have begun to recognise the potential of an anthropological study of belief — for instance those I mentioned in connection with American Evangelism, or Andrew Buckser who has written about the changing meaning of belief among Danish Jews since

the eighteenth century (2008), or Catherine Bell, who wrote in a similar vein in her work on Chinese religion (2002). However, no one has tried to systematise this work or to put different but similar practices of belief in a comparative frame. It seems likely that if we start looking we will find everywhere distinct, historically specific regimes of truth. In some cases, people will be lethargically unaware of the discrepancies between these different forms of truth, in other cases they will reflect on some of the contrasts explicitly, and they may evaluate different styles of belief, as did the rabbis. In other cases still, we may discover projects of self-conscious belief cultivation, in which, like the American Evangelists and the Inner Mongolian Buddhists discussed above, people not only apprehend the complexity and multiplicity of their relationship to truth, but also seek to objectify and act on that relationship. Recognising and understanding the specificities of cultures of belief will enrich our understanding of the worlds we study.

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Acknowledgements

Early versions of this paper were presented to departmental seminars at Goldsmith's College, Manchester University and the University of Cambridge and I am very grateful to participants for their questions and suggestions. Conversations with Catherine Alexander, Matei Candea, Jo Cook, Grégory Delaplace, Caroline Gatt, Caroline Humphrey, James Laidlaw, Soumhya Venkatesan and Piers Vitebsky were particularly helpful in clarifying my argument and I owe them my thanks. The field research on which parts of this paper are based were funded by the William Wyse Fund for Social Anthropology and St John's College, Cambridge.

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[1] For definitions of this term, see Evans-Pritchard (1933) and Skorupski (1976).

[2] Although recently anthropologists have shown that Melanesians (2008) and Greenlanders (2012) do, or at least aspire to do, just that.

[3] The development of cognitive science, and the cognitive anthropology that is based on it, was a result of the "Cognitive Revolution", a methodological move in which the question of the status of consciousness was set aside and thought was to be treated as information, on the model of data within a processor.

[4] Foreign-language terms in this section are in Mongolian.

[5] In fact, Ruel argued that Judaism, among all world religions, contrasts most strongly with Christianity in terms of its disinterest in belief (1982).