Cultures of meta-cognition: developing an anthropological theory of belief

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Introduction

In a recent series of articles in the Guardian’s Comment is Free, the popular philosopher Julian Baggini has complained that the public debate about religion has run aground on a disagreement about the nature of religious belief (2011a; 2011b; 2011c). The enemies of religion — the New Atheists: Richard Dawkins, AC Grayling, Daniel Dennett and the rest — insist on treating religious language literally, wherever they find it. Meanwhile many liberal defenders of faith insist with equal determination that this approach trivialises practices that express, in a poetic fashion, some deeper, mysterious, or transcendent truth; practices whose meaning is owed to their place in traditions that bring community and history together. Many of these commentators argue that the beliefs that the atheists find so problematic, for example, beliefs in the supernatural, or in
disembodied souls, are not in fact essential to religious belief. And yet, while refusing to be held accountable for these beliefs, they also refuse to disavow them. The result is that neither side can communicate with the other; this is a conversation at cross purposes.

His own laudable efforts to overcome this impasse by providing a minimal set of propositions to which all could subscribe were rebuffed by both sides, and so Baggini issued an appeal:

The debate about whether religion really requires literal belief in divine beings and realms has become another pantomime, with the likes of Karen Armstrong [religious studies scholar] and Mark Vernon [journalist and author] ... 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.

I don't have the resources to do the kind of systematic and conclusive research that would settle these issues. But through a combination of crowdsourcing and what we might call suggestive polling I want to at least push things in an empirical direction (2011a).

For anthropologists, of course, it must be counted a collective failure that it did not occur to Baggini to turn to anthropology for evidence about what actual religion really is like. But had Baggini sought an anthropological answer, what
would it have been? Well, 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. This form of rejection of the intellectualist approach can be traced to Robertson Smith’s *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889) — an exercise in Biblical scholarship that drew on contemporary ethnography — but it has been repeated in many classical 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 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 keen Christian student of Islam Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who, like Armstrong, were themselves religious in a way that made particular, explicit statements of belief at best superfluous and at worst misleading.

Although this is old news to anthropologists, and I am about to suggest we move on from it, it is worth noting that it is nonetheless a point that 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. A useful observation, then, but we can go further. 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 universal, non-literal religious orientation, as Baggini’s defenders of religion would have it, but a specific Inner Mongolian Buddhist set of attitudes, associated with practices and relationships.
Without a way of thinking about belief as a cultural practice—something that is intentionally learnt and passed on and practised and perfected and debated—Inner Mongolian Buddhist practice doesn’t make sense. What the Inner Mongolian Buddhists’ concern with belief demands, in other words, is 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 it. So besides providing a possible answer to Baggini’s question, that is what I want to do in this paper: make a case for the development of a systematic anthropology of belief.

**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 1972 book, *Belief, language, and experience* 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 the prohibition of 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.¹

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, empiricist psychology and all that philosophy had 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 “internal psychological states” (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 most recent cognitive-science-inspired incarnation, are avowedly not interested in belief, but only in information.²

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) — all of these authors 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 lacking, 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. Below, I first introduce the Inner Mongolian Buddhist approach to belief, before outlining some possible sources that might contribute aspects of the sort of comparative theory of belief that I am proposing.

**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 itself is 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 didn’t 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: IMBs 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 such faith and getting it just right is the only way to achieve spiritual progress. This is because, 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 far so Protestant: faith not works. But there is a twist. Ordinary Buddhists, as I mentioned, must believe the teachings are true, but they can neither know nor understand them because the truths of Buddhism are deep — they are what you understand when you are enlightened — and ordinary Buddhists 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, it is not false, but it is only the surface meaning, 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 boddhisattvas — 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 (sūjūg), 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 religion, 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 (echoes of Pascal here), one will have a certain disposition for humble faith, and one must work from that point, practising worshipping and devotion, 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 describe some key distinctive features,
which I describe below. All these things come together in 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 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 Inner Mongolian Buddhists do, and they recognise believing
in the religious sense as a case of the same behaviour that they exercise when
they listen to the news, or that they refrain from when they suspect a neighbour
is lying to them — they use the same terms. 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 thought. 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 possible sources of inspiration that would help us to turn this sort of isolated ethnographic observation into a comparative anthropology of belief. There will be countless such sources, but here I want to touch on just three. 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—cultures of meta-cognition—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 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’s 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 the question - the Greeks. Did they believe in their myths? Yes they did. They believed that there was a world, a truly existing world, in which gods and heroes interacted and in which their deeds were more significant or more valuable than everyday acts. But they didn't believe in them in the sense they believed 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, in modern journalism, and in 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 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 — with something ‘that was just lying around’ for people to use (that was Ruel’s complaint about the treatment of belief by anthropologists). 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 advanced as an example of a religion that does not emphasise belief. 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, the historian Menachem Kellner explains that the tradition of Biblical Judaism, and
the rabbinical tradition that stemmed from it, were not at all concerned with formulating statements of orthodox belief (1986).

From around the tenth century, Judaism faced challenges to its legitimacy from inside and out: from Islam, 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 their ritual 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. He defined it in charmingly 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 Principles were, however, the subject of fierce debate about two hundred years after Maimonides penned. What is interesting is that the debate shows that arriving at the content of the belief is only half the battle — the other half is 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 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, 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 rabbinic 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 and their relative value.

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 was 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’ (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 for 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 (2005; 2008a; 2008b). 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 relationship to the knowledge they say they believe, one needs to see the cognitive aspects of their action in the context of the whole, complex, reflexive practice of which those aspects are a part.

Conclusions

To return to Baggini’s question, I hope that I have convinced you that understanding what actual religious belief — or any belief practice, for that matter — is like 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. This is the case 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 a challenge to anthropologists. It is 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; in how many other cases in which content is understood have we disregarded important subtleties in the style of belief that is applied to that content?

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 certain that if we start looking we will find everywhere both distinct regimes of truth, of which we are occasionally lethargically aware, and reflexive programmes of belief cultivation, which are the conscious objects of people’s efforts. Recognising and understanding these things will enrich our understanding of the worlds we study. For me, as an anthropologist of religion,
the most exciting aspect of a prospective anthropology of belief is that it opens up another way of seeing statements on belief by thinkers such as Maimonides, Tsongkhapa, Bacon, Newman, and Kierkegaard, not as faulty anthropologies, but as contributions to a normative as well as descriptive ethics of belief.


Luhrmann, TM (2008a) Learning Religion at the Vineyard: Prayer, Discernment and Participation in the Divine [Religion and Culture Web Forum]. Available at:


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1 Although recently anthropologists have shown that Melanesians manage just that (Robbins and Rumsey, 2008).

2 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.