

## BRACKETING [BELIEF], OR: THE LOCUS AND STATUS OF 'BELIEF' IN CULTURAL ANALYSIS<sup>1</sup>

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*'At the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded'*

(Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 1969, sec. 253, quoted in Needham 1972: 71).

### ABSTRACT

*This introductory article rehearses some of the difficulties that anthropologists, among others, have with the notion of 'belief', especially when referring to cultural 'others'. The essay calls for a renewal of reflexivity and discretion in anthropological description and analysis. While accepting arguments that 'belief' refers to unexamined premises underlying thought systems, the article suggests a more nuanced approach to statements and interpretations of 'belief'. For one, the tendency to blur the distinctions between belief and knowledge should not be simply taken for granted. Secondly, questions of intentionality and agency with respect to belief should be rethought. Thirdly, we require an epistemological dialogue with other understandings and conceptualisations of the domain(s) in question. Finally, it is necessary to recognise the several historical layers inscribed into the term, existing simultaneously. All these tendencies conspire towards a reflexive realignment of the notion of 'belief'.*

### INTRODUCTION

The word 'belief' evokes images of 'religion' and 'faith'. At the same time, when applying the word to someone, a sense of scepticism and ontological doubt is evoked. To say that someone believes something or in something, is to emphasize that a person lacks proof of this 'something'. It suggests that he or she relies on personal judgement, if not on someone else's personal authority, or some institutional authority, when stating that something is the case or does exist, or that one thinks it is likely that it exists. Belief thus refers to the presuppositions an individual or a social group have. Simultaneously, and intrinsically related though, are the presuppositions of the person observing, listening and com-

menting. Background assumptions are hence to be seen as doubly refracted, suggesting a dualistic perspective only too familiar to anthropologists.

The fact that applications of the notion of ‘belief’, and the meanings evoked, have been so numerous and diverse, explains to some extent the broad range of scholarly deliberations, critiques and disputations around it. These have involved philosophers and theologians as well as anthropologists, sociologists and religious studies scholars. This *SITES* issue, which developed out of the 2006 Association of Social Anthropologists of Aotearoa/New Zealand (ASAANZ) conference, is intended to reconsider our deployment and understanding of the term ‘belief’. The title of both the journal issue and the conference plays with the phenomenological notion of ‘bracketing’. Bracketing provides a strong image, asking us to suspend judgement about things in the world and to put on hold the linguistic system that stands between these things and us, that is, the terms and notions which help us to understand reality and which denote it. Suggested originally by Edmund Husserl, the operation aims to examine and displace the given-ness of the ‘natural attitude’ to get to the phenomena themselves and experience them anew. I am not commending a fully-fledged phenomenological strategy here (insofar as it is at all possible). I merely suggest that we carefully check the usage we make of the notion of belief, which actually in many cases is not applied as a fully-fledged concept, and that we remind ourselves again of what the term implies when applied to the social practices and statements of people. This introduction takes up a few considerations and ideas of earlier thinkers, who explored doubts regarding the possibility of a cross-culturally valid understanding of ‘belief’, let alone of a cross-culturally available experience of ‘belief’. What we deal with may be, in part at least, a linguistic artefact. My proposal therefore is very modest: to review what is involved when we use a term like ‘belief’ in everyday talk, and more particularly in our scholastic discourse, that is to reflect anew on the ways in which we deal with ‘beliefs’, and thus, perhaps, *indirectly* also to reflect on beliefs themselves. All that this introductory piece can achieve is to rehearse key questions, maybe add a few more, and make some guarded suggestions.

#### THE FIELD AT ISSUE

The field of debate is not clearly laid out – if indeed there is a single field of debate that we are faced with. I think one can, however, make out at least three prominent lines of argument in this field: 1) Modern secularists have forgotten the original meaning of ‘belief’, the word being taken in its first sense of (reli-

gious) 'faith'. 2) When talking of the 'beliefs' of others we risk misrepresenting how they see and approach the world, or, to put it slightly differently, we often face difficulties in grasping what statements (propositions) of 'belief', or hints at ideas implicitly held, mean, or what otherwise, without being clearly stated, informs people's actions. 3) There is no such thing as 'belief'.

One can discern various *issues* around which these debates on belief revolve. These include the questions of a) the relationship of 'belief' to 'religion' and 'faith'; b) its relationship to 'truth' and 'knowledge'; c) the relationship of belief to the will and judgement of social actors; d) the relationship of those considered holding a belief to others who, or institutions which act as authority, and/or those with whom one is supposed to share a belief. All these issues and the arguments around them concern the *locus* of belief. They all converge on the question: Is 'belief' accessible by way of propositions made, which then are different from other propositions like, say, those concerning 'knowledge', or is the term supposed to point to a 'state of mind' (Wittgenstein 1953), an 'inner' or 'mental state' of humans? I will touch on some aspects of these issues in the course of this introduction.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith has perhaps provided the best reconstruction of the history of the term belief, and of the significant changes it has undergone.<sup>2</sup> These changes, I assume, are one of the causes for the deep ambivalence(s) of the term today. Smith (1977; 1979) observes a three-fold change in the meaning and usage of 'belief' and 'believing' in the English context, which may in many respects stand for changes that have occurred in (Western) Europe at large. Today, saying 'to believe in something' is meant as response to an uncertainty. Thus to say 'I believe in God' is regarded now as a statement or judgement that I believe that God *exists*. Earlier, in medieval times, 'to believe' meant 'to pledge oneself to, to pay allegiance to, to declare one's loyalty to (God)'. The existence of God was not an issue then. This is evident in grammatical practice. Until the 17<sup>th</sup> century the object of the verb 'to believe' was almost always a *person*, in whom one put trust or faith. But since the 18<sup>th</sup> century it is almost always a *proposition*, which one declares to believe.<sup>3</sup>

The second transformation concerns the subject of the verb 'to believe': 'It represents a shift *from the existential to the descriptive*. In the earlier period the verb occurs predominantly in the first person, as 'I believe', involving self-engagement, commitment'; later on it is more often '*he believes, they believe and the like*' (1979: 119; emphasis mine).<sup>4</sup> Third-person usage, Smith claims, was still rare in Shakespeare's time.

Thirdly, Smith observes a shift in the relation of belief to truth and knowledge. Initially belief signified truth, in the sense of ‘holding dear’, and Francis Bacon in 1625 talked of ‘belief in truth’. Through several steps, which introduced the notion of doubt, the word came to refer today to ‘propositions that were, by preference, improbable, or even false.’<sup>5</sup> ‘Knowledge requires both certitude and correctness; belief implies uncertainty, error, or both’ (Good 2004: 1139).<sup>6</sup>

All three shifts and transformations were, of course, *intertwined* and are highly relevant to anthropology. I would, however, emphasize that these various shifts of meaning and usage do not necessarily mean that earlier meanings and usages have been totally erased. It seems that older connotations have left traces. In a very Bakhtinian sense the term belief has layers of meaning inscribed into it connoting trust and truth, sentiments and an inner state, dogmatic convictions and propositions, feelings of doubt and faith, and also premises and background assumptions. These many ways of understanding the term have made it into the ambivalent conception that it is today.

Smith actually discovers a fourth, more recent development, which he still sees in progress: namely the evolution of the notion of ‘*belief-systems*’ as integrated, comprehensive and multi-faceted ‘sets of *presuppositions*, or conceptual frameworks through which the world is viewed and in terms of which it is understood’, and he also acknowledges that behind this new development lies the growing recognition of cultural pluralism (Smith 1979: 120–121). Here too one may go beyond Smith and state that much of anthropological scholarship today has given up the ‘belief’ in the systemacity of beliefs. Pointing to the polysemy of meanings, the contextuality of their deployment, and the interpretive agency of actors, scholars though still acknowledge the background assumptions or premises made by social actors or implied in their actions and statements. Or if still holding to some notion of systemacity, as is the case partly with respect to the notions of paradigm and discourse, many now acknowledge the entanglement, even hybridity of different belief-systems or discourses. We should also, however, never forget that this history of ‘belief’, and the prominence it has received in some quarters, is a Western phenomenon, and since language matters here, is in certain respects specific especially to the English-speaking world. It is this polysemic term, with all its ambivalences, that has then been extended to other culture areas.

#### REPRESENTING BELIEF

In the centre for us here stand the anthropologists’ concerns with ‘belief’. These may not be exclusive to anthropology, but one can observe great differences

regarding the way the various disciplines approach belief issues. Anthropologists are confronted in one way or the other with the issues just mentioned, but on top of that anthropology has its particular difficulties with 'belief': namely the difficulties and dangers of *representing* the beliefs of *Others*. As indicated above, there are those who argue that applying the term belief to other, non-Western or non-modern, and especially non-Christian societies, basically gets it wrong. As most clearly voiced by Rodney Needham, we encounter difficulties in finding anything corresponding to 'belief' in many other societies, be it a describable inner state of people, or a category or term of their language. Other anthropologists, like Talal Asad (1993: 46), point out – in a way different from W.C. Smith – that the notion of 'belief' has evolved, and that relationships to belief have changed with the change of social circumstances, especially changes in the relationship between religion and power, and between institution and individual. Again, this applies particularly to the term's history in the west and especially to the changes within Christianity.

The deeply anthropological concern behind the search for equivalences to the modern Western notion, and alleged experience of 'belief' concerns the *status* we ascribe to 'belief' intra- and especially cross-culturally and, thus, within our own life-contexts. For, do we know what exactly we refer to when we talk of our own beliefs? Does someone's belief inherently connect to his or her actions and to the propositions he or she articulates? Or, looked at from the opposite end, and that means methodologically, can we legitimately deduct a 'belief' from the statements and actions of people, or is it not rather the case that we tend to impute 'beliefs' to people, or even to ourselves?

A key problem of comparative research on 'belief' is that of distance. Distance from a phenomenon changes its meaning, and it does so particularly when we talk about things we assume to be internal to people. Distance seems to be inherent in the way the modern notion of 'belief' is being used: someone else's belief is something one does not have (direct) access to. The way we talk about 'belief' adds some particular twists to the problem of representation of others' cultural attitudes and viewpoints. We must, it seems, distinguish between trying to capture psychological inner states, which cannot be directly represented, and trying to understand ideas about the world expressed in explicit ways, which can and are being represented, but which may hide or even distort other, and perhaps significant, dimensions.

It was Clifford Geertz who attacked the idea of empathy as giving access to the inner feelings and beliefs of others, and suggested instead deducting social meanings and religious beliefs, as well as 'moods and motivations,' from the

language or other publicly available symbols people deploy in their activities or use to make statements (Geertz 1973: 112; 1983: 56–58). Michael Herzfeld later suggested that we cannot restrict ourselves to representations and talk of the meanings of utterances without assuming intentionalities behind these utterances; and while we cannot or should not impute them, in the form of representations, we cannot avoid attributing intentions to people provisionally or speculatively (Herzfeld 2003). None of these two positions overcomes the crevice, most clearly pointed out by Pierre Bourdieu, that exists between practising something and talking about this practice. Both stances imply a distinction between very different types of relationship to the praxis under consideration: the sense or 'logic' of praxis, and the observational and/or reflexive stance inevitably misses the practical sense (Bourdieu 1990: 80–97; 2000: 49–60). Talking about the inner or embodied beliefs of others, as Geertz or Herzfeld or Bourdieu do in different ways, affirms their non-reducible character.

#### DIVIDING UP THE WORLD

The inaccessibility of mental states, or of the sense of doing things inscribed into dispositions, concerns the methodological side of representation (taking methodology in a wide sense). But it is the question of the background assumptions made by people and implied in social discourses that addresses the epistemological dimension and keeps the wheel of relativism turning: the notion that differences in background assumptions make for different worlds. This usually assumes that different background assumptions function in the same way, and follow the same formal model. Can we actually assume a formal equivalence between different background assumptions or between different 'belief systems'?

In the case of belief the basic feeling of cultural 'otherness' (which we may or may not be emphatic about) is overdetermined by distance of another kind: the knowledge chasm. Most of us, and even more so the larger scholarly and public community around us, tend to talk of people's beliefs from the position of those who have access to better knowledge. Modern scholarly discourse is predominantly guided by the idea of rational understanding, if not explanation – an attitude widely sceptical of non-scientific worldviews and especially of transcendent cause. Anthropologists therefore have to confront the fact that they often have to report something that they themselves disbelieve, or doubt, and have difficulties in reconciling with their 'modern' convictions and 'knowledge'. Evans-Pritchard's Azandestudy is the classic and still most famous case in point (Evans-Pritchard 1977). The distance we talk of here is

not the distance from the cultural other *per se*, it is the distance between forms or kinds of knowledge. In a deeply judgemental way rational, scientific, advanced or even universal knowledge has been distinguished from traditional knowledge, as modernity – emphatically so in sociological discourse – has been contrasted with pre-modernity.

It seems that this contrast between scientific rationality and culturally specific (or culturally received) knowledge and beliefs is still not overcome. Scholars like Byron Good (1994: 1–24) have highlighted the difficulties medical anthropology has in coming to grips with biomedicine's claims for a biologically grounded universally valid notion of disease and physiological processes: Even if we accept a variety of healing methods, we have difficulties in shedding what he calls 'causal-functional' and 'empiricist' assumptions about bodily processes and ultimately of nature. We tend to discuss the efficacy of medicines developed in other medical traditions on the basis of biomedical ontological and epistemological presuppositions which most of us do not usually question.

Difficulties of this kind though are not restricted to what we consider 'hard' aspects of reality. The difficulties we have when trying to overcome, or bracket, ontological and metaphysical presuppositions inscribed into the concept of religion – now a comparative category, but having its main roots in Western and Christian history – have been raised by a range of scholars. Conceding these difficulties Benson Saler (2000: 211–214), for example, suggests sticking to a prototype approach to the study of religious phenomena, combined with a family resemblance approach, basing the prototype on the models of Christianity and Islam. This would still mean privileging a binary stance, which opposes God and world, morals and ethics with social life, ascribing deficiencies to the Others.

In the background of our difficulties with 'belief', 'knowledge', or 'truth' often lies an assumption that others raise the same questions as we do and basically follow life-projects or cognitive projects similar to ours. Magic thus becomes a failed or non-effective effort to manipulate technical processes and understand the laws of nature. In actual fact, the Others are giving the wrong answers to what, ultimately, are *our* questions. This was very obvious in the case of the intellectualist position taken by many contributors to the 'rationality debate' in 1970s and 1980s British anthropology, in which scholars investigated non-Western (religious) beliefs and knowledge practices as variants of rational propositions and explanations or, alternatively, as failed answers to these requirements (Wilson 1970; Hollis and Lukes 1982).

The alternative, however, is not necessarily relativism. The relativism argument is advocated particularly by those who postulate that modern scientific forms of knowledge constitute just another belief system. We have to accept not only that others assign other meanings to the world, the world in which we live as well as the transcendent one, but also that they may be pursuing other questions, and working with other distinctions or, for example, attempting to alleviate notional oppositions. We may thus avoid falling into the trap of asserting that various belief and knowledge systems are ultimately of the same kind, and even declaring belief systems synonymous with whole cultures, as some cognitive anthropologists have done (cultures as generative models). It obviously is questionable to consider belief and modern scientific knowledge as mutually exclusive and stalled in opposition to each other, and it seems self-evident, in these days of paradigms and discourses, to point out that all knowledge systems, our own included, build on *a priori* assumptions and premises. We should not, however, make the mistake of placing all beliefs and knowledges on one plane, regarding them equivalent in formal respects. Nor can we equate *one* belief and *one* quest with *one* culture, treating each as contextually all-encompassing and exclusive. To simply equate belief and knowledge also contradicts our own cultural and linguistic practices, which we cannot simply shed.

Different knowledges and beliefs, or knowledge and belief systems, achieve different things. Some, for example, are more efficacious and efficient in controlling natural processes for specific production purposes, while at the same time they have significant ‘collateral’ effects on human and social life. Other systems, instead of foregrounding technological control of nature, work on the assumption of a ‘close connection’ between ‘understanding the order of things and being in attunement with it’, attunement being understood as embracing the ‘goodness’ of the order of things, and the ‘wisdom of self-knowledge and self-reconciliation’ (Taylor 1982: 95–96).<sup>7</sup> Each of the different approaches (‘systems’) divides the world up in a different way: They work from different ontological and epistemological assumptions. The deep divide between nature/science and society/culture, or ‘non-humans’ and humans, guiding much of what we consider (Western) modernity and followed by another divide between moderns and non-moderns, is just one, although particularly powerful, way of classifying and organizing things (Latour 1993: 97–109). Regardless of what we think of each of these alternatives, and of the modern way of dividing up beings, one thing at least we can no longer do is to view any of these various approaches or ‘systems’ as exclusive.



We should instead look into the *relationships* between different beliefs, or between beliefs and knowledges, track their situational interactions, discuss each one's scope and depth (to apply one of Geertz's ideas) and investigate the power differentials between different belief and knowledge systems. Some forms of knowledge are obviously more equal than others. The focus on relationships includes possibilities of interlinkage, coexistence, overlap or mixture, as well as competition and opposition, of different belief and knowledge systems. Such a multiplex constellation characterizes, for example, the undiscussed ontological presuppositions of many technically highly effective procedures and methods, representing advanced standards of knowledge, or the tortuous relationship of biomedicine and other medical systems (like Ayurveda or Homeopathy) in modern contexts. What we can aim at, when most optimistic, is to develop a form of reciprocal engagement which allows us to address and reflect each one's ontological and epistemological presuppositions. As a result we might get beyond the search for a common denominator and might reach a situation in which the different modalities do not exclude or even erase each other but coexist, either supplementing each other or struggling with each other, referencing the frictions between the different modalities, thus opening different windows on the world.<sup>8</sup>

#### CLAIMING FAITH

Some scholars, and many non-scholars, try to protect 'belief' in its emphatically religious manifestation. W. C. Smith has suggested making a systematic distinction between belief and faith, with the intention of rehabilitating faith after the 'drifting away' of belief.<sup>9</sup> (Other languages, like German for example, do not have two words available to make such easy distinctions on the lexical level.) Smith thinks he finds equivalents of 'faith' in other religions and cultures. This points towards the position advocated by religious phenomenologists like Rudolf Otto or Mircea Eliade, who have tended to assume the universality of the (experience of the) 'numinous' or of 'hierophanies'.<sup>10</sup> Others, anthropologists like Rodney Needham, as we have seen, on the contrary question both the general availability of the *idea* of faith, or belief, and the claim for the existence of an experiential reference of the term 'belief': the existence of an 'inner state' to be described as 'belief'.<sup>11</sup> And even Smith has to recognize that what he considers the common experience of faith would find very different expression in different religions, as propositional doctrine in Christianity, but as ritual dance among African tribes, and as 'law' (*torah* and *shari'ah*) in the Jewish and Islamic cases (Smith 1979: 14f). Thus, to what extent are all these modes of experience about 'the same', or pointing to 'the same', or to what extent do we here too just impute sameness?<sup>12</sup> Obviously Smith is

again imposing a categorical identity on diverse phenomena. As I stated before, though, with respect to the distinction between belief and knowledge, I think we should try to avoid too relativistic an argument in its stead. We should also distinguish between an empirical and an analytical side of the argument: The first one would lead us to distinguish between culturally or discursively or contextually different ways of dividing up and describing emotions and experiences – like with respect to cognitive modes of cutting up the world mentioned earlier. The other one would suggest pursuing a comparative inquiry into the diversity of such experiential and emotional dimensions of life. For us, different modes of thought and praxis might be brought together under a label like ‘faith’. But we can no longer leave it at that. We would require in addition a dialogue with others, who may suggest a very different understanding and conceptualisation of this domain, on the analytical level. We only have to refer to the history of Christianity. Talal Asad (1993) has contrasted the post-Enlightenment emphasis on belief as the essential distinguishing criterion of religion with earlier phases of Christianity, in which certain disciplinary practices, imbued with power, were considered necessary to bring humans to the state at which they would be ready to ‘choose’ faith, i.e. believe. The belief in the ‘priority of belief’ in combination with the unlinking of belief and knowledge – belief understood both in the sense of a state of mind and a ‘set of propositions to which believers [give] assent’<sup>13</sup> – is for Asad the result of post-Enlightenment discussions, which involved the Christian churches as well as comparative religious studies heading for a concept of ‘natural religion’ (Asad 1993: 34–42; 45–48). As with respect to the diversity of cognitive approaches we should also give up the search for a common denominator in the case of religious belief, or faith, and see the different religious modes as alternative options ‘opening different windows on the world’.

#### CHOICE, OR THE QUESTION OF AGENCY

Social actors, including intellectuals, explore the world and the things around them in various ways. To survive they have to be open to new things and events – they cannot just apply principles. Cultural and social life is not pure ‘construction’, construction *ad libitum*, but grows out of an *engagement with* the world. Therefore, taking something as self-evident, and reaching the conclusion that one has got to a point at which one cannot get further for the time being and therefore has to accept working from momentary premises, is not quite the same.

An undifferentiated notion of belief as presupposition and disposition<sup>14</sup> also leaves out another aspect. It prematurely closes the question of agency, i.e.

the question of whether people do decide on their beliefs or passively receive them. Christianity, and the Catholic church in particular, as well as Protestant fundamentalists, demand an ‘act of faith’, considered a ‘free act’ taken in ‘free will’. This also allows them to declare all those who have not made the right decision as ‘not saved’ or even ‘infidels’, with the disastrous consequences we know of. Is there thus a moment of choice, at least in situations where one can think of alternatives? Are social actors then not necessarily, and in all respects, even when we encounter very tightly knit cultural worlds, bound by prevailing ideas and attitudes, or beliefs?

If we see belief and action as intrinsically related,<sup>15</sup> as most do, including anthropologists, it would be nonsensical to assume that the principles guiding one’s actions would not at one point or the other be included in reflection and/or decision making processes. One can envision this on the lines of Anthony Giddens’ notions of discursive consciousness, actors’ knowledgeability and the human propensity to monitor whatever action one undertakes, including the ability and necessity, emphasized by George Herbert Mead, to anticipate other actors’ actions (Giddens 1984; Mead 1934). All this would also mean that we have to acknowledge in principle the faculty of humans to move between different discourses, belief systems and knowledge systems. No one is ever totally determined by underlying or given ideas, premises or ‘beliefs’.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, it is specific premises which govern or influence many of our decisions.<sup>17</sup> Decisions and intentions do not arise in a vacuum. The decisions people take and the thoughts and intentions they have depend to a significant degree on the ideas and ‘beliefs’ that they assume to be held by their peers. In case of religious beliefs it has been pointed out over and again, by theologians especially, that belief requires a guarantor, an authority, whom one can trust, like the church for Christian believers, which vouches for what one cannot directly see, the contents of a belief. Or, as in the case of Jeanne Favret-Saada’s study of witchcraft in Bocage, the others, who are assumed to share one’s beliefs, serve as guarantors for what one fears or hopes for, in the face of scepticism in the surrounding society.<sup>18</sup> To include the *social fact* of authority – a relational aspect! – in our analysis would again mean to rephrase the issue of belief.

Of significance would not be so much the belief as such, but the mechanisms and procedures of closure, of closing further questions and other belief options. Closure can be either imposed or it can be something an actor, who feels apprehensive, looks for, presumably relieving the individual of further doubts.

TOWARDS A COUNTER-INTUITIVE AND REFLEXIVE NOTION OF BELIEF

We cannot just go ahead and present a basic working definition of ‘faith’ or ‘belief’ as descriptive terms, not even in the form of a family resemblance-cum-prototype approach. On the one hand, these terms are to a larger degree problematic rather than straightforwardly analytical terms – like praxis, social action, agency, discourse, habitus and others. As discussed above, these terms, claiming phenomenological validity, entail biased connotations written deeply into them, which cannot just be shed. Our only possibility seems to be to have them conceptually or theoretically questioned and re-contextualised from the points of view of a range of ‘others’, referring to their experiences and experiential worlds, and their own conceptualisations.

The question concerning scholarly discourse is: Would we not do better by introducing other analytical and descriptive terms, and bracket a term that is hermeneutically overdetermined and at the same time culture-specific to such an extent? Should we not rather use separate terms for the different phenomenological, linguistic and social dimensions involved? Do we need an analytical term, and in case we respond in the affirmative, could we do with just one such term, to express the unspoken (the unexpressable?), the assumptions, presuppositions, as well as feelings and states of mind which are, and have to remain, implicit or are being grounded in something which defies complete exposition? But are we, even when we differentiate our analytical terminology further, not again committing a category mistake, explicating what cannot be explicated, assuming to understand others better than they understand themselves? Or, if ‘belief’, or any other term at that, can continue standing for assumptions which are unexpressed, and often, to do their work, have to remain unexpressed, should we declare belief, or any other term standing in, a non-concept, a merely indexical term, indexing just that for which we do not have, and cannot have, a pointed category? <sup>19</sup>

We thus cannot simply set out to find ‘beliefs’ ‘out there’. We are forced to acknowledge the existence of several layers of meaning of assumptions, presuppositions and dispositions, of replies to doubts, convictions and aprioris among the people we research, which all in different ways, and varying according to context, inform or not inform – but definitely do not determine – social practices. The notions of belief as well as faith are, however, widely deployed in public discourse. Moreover, being originally Western, or Christian (and later cognitional), notions, ‘belief’ and ‘faith’ have been imported into the discourses of many of the cultures we deal with today, through missionaries, colonialism, and modern education and science, and have affected religions

as well as conceptualizations of knowledge. Thus in 'the field' itself we are not only confronted with several coexisting layers of 'belief', of the kind mentioned. These layers have also become reflexive, talk to each other, and mix with each other. That is, we can no longer, if we ever could, reduce the statements, practices and feelings of others to a few (core) 'beliefs'.

The difficulty then remains: Who is the subject of belief statements, accepting the fact that the inner state of the mind is closed to us? 'Belief' today has to be addressed from within a field of reflexivity and reflection, or critique. The various layers of 'belief' reflect each other, as do the various religious faiths, all more and more available globally, as we also have to register the imprint of experiences of plurality, of scepticism and of the 'knowledge-chasm' on belief. While the earlier, older meanings of 'belief' are not simply lost, the more recent meanings have impacted on the older ones, and while belief in certain cases may still look the same, it does not stay the same.<sup>20</sup> Voicing beliefs responds to the world people live in and see themselves in.

Explicit statements of belief are often pronouncements marshalled against others and others' assumed beliefs. The very attempts to shed modern plurality and scepticism and return to what are deemed older truths are marked by this context: They are attempts to enshrine and fix the implicitness and self-evidence of predispositions – to essentialize beliefs, to establish and implement universalistic utopian 'ideological tenets' in a very modern Jacobin sense (Eisenstadt 1999: 107), building in fact on new and very modern unquestioned assumptions. This is the case with the contemporary 'fundamentalist' clashes of the various religious ideas and systems of thought in the global arena, which in this process are being disembedded from the earlier life forms, negating the living traditions with whom they had been entwined (Eisenstadt 1999: 98). But this is also often the case with those who vehemently defend the supremacy of scientific knowledge and a secularist attitude – and of the civilization which claims to be its main source.

Or, and this is the only other option, we have to find a place for a reflexive and thus counter-intuitive and paradoxical notion of belief, which respects the fluidity of dispositions and the limitations and diversity, the coexistence and entanglement of meanings, or of 'beliefs'.

#### THIS ISSUE

The articles assembled in this issue undertake explorations of several of the issues just raised. *Antje Linkenbach* deals with very modern beliefs and moves

from considering the locus of beliefs to considering their status. She starts by exploring the relationship between belief and hope, including its empowering and creative sides, in early modern Western utopian notions of 'preferred futures' and the subsequent developmental and environmental discourses. This is followed by a look into the encounter of Western and non-Western developmental and ecological discourses. In both respects one encounters tensions, if not clashes, between underlying or background assumptions. In the first case the discourse of progress and development finds itself confronted with a counter-trend, dystopian or anti-utopian thought, in which this form of progress is regarded as inhuman, even anti-human, and thus not desirable. Connected to this are attempts projecting perfection – a caring relationship to both nature and one's fellow human beings – back into the past, or what is considered 'early' forms of life. Both trends again partially reunite in the form of 'green' or 'transgressive' utopianism. One can regard the conflict between development goals, which continues the ideas of progress, and growing ecological consciousness as conflict of two belief systems. Not only do we find continuities with the belief in redemption, interestingly, what makes this into 'beliefs' is the high tolerance of insufficiencies and contradictions, which are not taken as undermining the core beliefs, e.g. when faced with obvious failures of planned development. This is currently being rehearsed again in the recent debate on global warming, all positions struggling to bridge the gap between underlying beliefs and scientific knowledge, or rather, the rational interpretation of scientific findings.

In the second case not only are Western notions of social perfection countered by, and sometimes fused with non-Western notions of individual perfectibility but also with perspectives of the poor in non-Western countries, derived from their survival, livelihood and rights struggles. The interesting aspect of this is not just that Western discourses tend still to dominate and try to absorb other discourses. It rather is that the perspectives of the poor, expressed in their struggles, show a different pattern of background assumptions, a different kind of disposition. These struggles are not so much based on utopian beliefs in inherent possibilities of human development, but on non-utopian visions (i.e. dreams, not beliefs) of a better life. Linkenbach's article reverses the usual order of arguments: it is not the Others – non-Westerners, non-moderns, members of 'traditional' societies – who are so much caught in beliefs, but it is those who see rationality and science on their side: those developmentalists and modernizers who construct, and attempt to pursue, imaginaries of progress.

*Patrick McAllister* discusses another belief scheme that tries to bridge the crevice between tradition and modernity. This example confirms Linkenbach's

contention that non-Westerners do not necessarily think in utopian terms when considering social perfectibility, or paths towards a good life. McAllister presents and discusses the notion of *ubuntu* which has come to stand for an African ethics and philosophy emphasizing humane-ness and humanism, the social nature of personhood ('a person is a person through other people'), including respect for difference, mutual support and forgiveness. The question he raises is, do people actually 'believe' in *ubuntu*? How do people relate to this ethical concept taken from their tradition, in the context of village-life, and in more contemporary, urban contexts?

The paper is a warning against imputing beliefs to people. McAllister sees the concept as a modern abstraction allowing for versatile discursive uses. That meanings are publicly available, be it in everyday language or be it in the form of public declarations, does not necessarily indicate that they are widely shared or even exist to guide actors. The gap here is one between hegemonic discourse and what people actually 'believe in'. It is not even certain that those who make most use of the term actually believe in it. *Ubuntu*, with its emphasis on 'agreeing to disagree', on forgiveness, and its appeal to a shared sociability and humanity, can just mean avoiding addressing conflict or allowing for redress. *Ubuntu* can act as an ideology. And *ubuntu* goes against the notion of reciprocity, which McAllister encountered prominently in the Transkei villages he studied. In a way, ideas like that of *ubuntu* diverge from what is ordinarily been considered 'belief': *ubuntu* does not so much, or just, signify core or background assumptions, in this case about human nature, but rather an ideal – a wide and diffuse range of ideals – of how one should live and should relate to others. Even further, and somewhat contradicting the ethical implication, *ubuntu* is being put to use for identity politics: distinguishing Africans from others, especially Europeans, *ubuntu* marks an ideal which is available to parts of humanity only. If this is belief, it is a belief in difference among humans, the dissimilarity of humans.

The other two articles of this *SITES* issue are concerned with more religious notions of belief. However, these are 'religious' beliefs which do not, and cannot, take propositional form. Both papers refer to modes of practice which cannot be adequately captured as 'belief in'.

One can see in *Assa Doron's* paper another confirmation of Linkenbach's contention that the social dreams of marginalized non-Western people do not necessarily turn towards utopia. Doron combines an analysis of myth, as interpreted by local people, with an analysis of everyday life strategies and practices. He turns to a myth, a segment of the Indian epic *Ramayana*, which the

low caste boatmen of the sacred city of Banaras, Mallahs, (who, while menial labourers, also have a role as ritual specialists) enact in their daily encounters with pilgrims and Brahmin priests. In their struggle for social recognition and equality Mallahs dissent from more authoritative interpretations of the epic. Doron's paper is an account of how people turn deep devotion to God (*bhakti*) into modes of controlling their fate and even God.

Doron's is another case which shows that beliefs and practices cannot be deduced from a text or other such symbolic structure. He shows how people, and especially subordinate people, actively and creatively engage with the world, including the world of meanings shared by wide sections of their society. Doron tries to shrink the distance between researcher and the actors represented, avoiding representing the 'inner state of mind' of the boatmen, and instead works through the narratives, comments and practices provided by Mallahs. Doron does not use the term 'belief' ever in his paper, a fact which clearly illustrates that what we have here are 'lived meanings', involved in a struggle with the intellectual and social authorities. Doron's study shows that background assumptions are formally of a different kind in the case of India from what is generally assumed when talking of beliefs, being as they are constantly reworked – India has been characterized throughout its history by ongoing debates, commentaries, reinterpretations and rearrangements of the components and layers of philosophical, metaphysical, legendary, and other meaning structures at hand. This process does not stop at religious or cultural boundaries, which dogmatists or political powerholders have tried to set up, be it vis-à-vis Islam, or be it vis-à-vis modern public discourse (Ramanujan 1989). On the contrary, the Mallahs make use of their hermeneutic faculties 'to express criticism of existing power structures', including the state. As Doron's analysis shows the 'ambiguity of even authoritative texts' it also exhibits the ambiguities and tensions that inform the intentions of those questioning an authoritative reading.

In contrast to Assa Doron *Aditya Malik* engages with the notion of belief and its relationship to knowledge in a direct way, with the intention of dismissing its validity in the case under study. Malik's study concerns Goludev, a deity in the Kumaon region of the Indian Himalayas, who is a wielder of justice. The two modes of relating to him are through petitions or through what traditional anthropology has called 'possession'. Malik makes the claim that the category of belief, 'laden as it is with centuries of theological and philosophical debate stemming from Christian/Western cultural traditions', does not facilitate an understanding of various South Asian phenomena. In particular he criticizes



the hermeneutic distancing of scholars from participants in possession rituals, based on the difference between knowledge and belief.

Malik tries to advance the understanding of possession rituals through the notion of embodiment or embodied consciousness. The *jagar* ritual, or 'awakening sessions' of Goludev that Malik refers to has two main actors, the singer called *jagariya* ('awakener') and the person entering into a so-called trance who is called the *dangariya* or *nacnevala* (i.e. dancer). Decisive in Malik's analysis is the contrast between the two roles, of the *jagariya*, whose language is discursive and representational, and of the *nacnevala* or dancer, who embodies Goludev and whose speech, the words of Golu in fragmentary utterances, is non-discursive, non-representational and non-dualistic. Whether we understand the relationship between the two roles as causal or dialogical, what matters is that the speech uttered by the deity is 'of another order': 'His speech causes justice and healing to take place.'

What Malik emphasizes is the presence, agency and efficacy of Goludev. Goludev in the *jagar* effects justice through 'oracular' advice. Dance, for Malik, at least in the South Asian context (he also refers to Shiva's 'dance of rapture'), is a mode of somatic knowledge 'within and through the body'. Malik sees the *jagar* ritual as a 'system of beliefs and practices' and claims that Goludev is worshipped as a 'powerful, active agent' considered more efficacious in dealing with the life concerns of his devotees than other available means, including the civil courts in the region. (It will be interesting to get to know more of these 'other means' available to Kumaonis, and how they handle the differences.)

It seems as if we were back to Evans-Pritchard's notion of closed systems of belief, each logical in itself, and able to handle contradictions. But we have also moved ahead. Malik has shown that it is possible to replace certain usages of the notion of 'belief' with other, non-dualistic notions, like the one of 'embodied knowledge', which stand for other modes of engagement with the world. Overcoming the knowledge chasm, and the idea that there is only one reality outside, which can be understood more or less rationally, does not have to mean that the different modalities of knowledge, or belief, are formally constructed the same way, 'giving different answers to the same questions'. What we have achieved is, rather, to acknowledge that there are different *modalities* of articulating the world.

NOTES

- 1 Special thanks to Antje Linkenbach for critiques and comments.
- 2 Later reiterated and discussed by Byron Good in various writings (e.g. 2004).
- 3 At an intermediate stage belief referred to a person and his word, 'in the sense of trusting that person to be honest and telling the truth' (Smith 1979:119).
- 4 Byron Good (2004:1139) suggests taking 'performative' for 'existential' when depicting the earlier state of things.
- 5 '... the word came to be applied to propositions regardless of whether they were known to be true or not; then more especially to propositions explicitly uncertain as to whether they were true or not; and presently to propositions that were, by preference, improbable, or even false' (Smith 1979: 119–120)
- 6 Compare the German words for superstition: 'Aberglauben, Irrglauben', which are meant to denote wrong or misguided belief.
- 7 I would not unreservedly subscribe though to Taylor's claim that 'modern science represents a superior understanding of the universe' (Taylor 1982:102). I would rather suggest starting afresh from statements of his like the following: 'Really overcoming ethnocentricity is being able to understand two incommensurable classifications' (Taylor 1982:99). Such a position would mean that 'systems of thought' are brought into a relationship and linkages between them are being created.
- 8 See Ramanujan 1989.
- 9 Thus the title of chapter 2 of Smith 1977, 'The modern history of 'believing': The drift away from faith'.
- 10 Rudolf Otto 1950 (1917). Cf. Mircea Eliade 1969.
- 11 '... there are no criteria of belief. [...] Statements of belief are the only evidence for the phenomenon; but the phenomenon itself appears to be no more than the custom of making such statements' (Needham 1972:108). '... it has proved hard to conceive that the word really denotes any homogeneous class of phenomenal objects, whether these be propositions, inner states, or external signs. [...] this unitary feature is just what we cannot find' (ibid.:109). 'Ordinary discourse and

the common-sense psychology that is in part its product tend to induce us into two capital errors: first, the assumption that there must be something in common to all instances of believing; second, the assumption that there must be a mental counterpart to the expression of belief' (ibid:122). '... as far as the supposed inner state is concerned, we have been able to discover absolutely no evidence of its existence; and even those who are most convinced of its reality are forced in the end to concede that they cannot give any account of it' (ibid:123).

- 12 '... for many people in Africa, witchcraft is not so much a 'belief' about the world as it is a patent feature of it, a force that is both self-evident and solemnly real ...' (Moore and Sanders 2001: 4).
- 13 Asad talks both of belief as a state of mind and as proposition and does not discuss the differences implied in both formulations. He brings both together in the phrase 'a verbalizable inner condition of true religion' (Asad 1993: 48).
- 14 The idea of belief as disposition has been forcefully projected first by Ludwig Wittgenstein (for an overview see Needham 1972: 103–106) and, lately and as part of a sociological theory, by Pierre Bourdieu, who also talks of 'practical faith', 'a state of the body', *doxa*, 'practical sense', or 'enacted belief' (see e.g. Bourdieu 1990: 67–69).
- 15 This is different from saying that believing is an action of its own. Wittgenstein's critique of this kind of proposition stands (see Needham 1972: 102).
- 16 Regarding the faculty to distance oneself from cultural schema or discourses see Ortner (1990) and Fuchs (2001). This of course goes against some of the stronger formulations of Foucault about 'discourse'. Also see Fuchs 2009.
- 17 This is not to deny the important qualification suggested e.g. by Bernard Lahire (2003), namely that belief does not necessarily imply a disposition to act. Lahire, arguing against Charles Sanders Peirce, suggests distinguishing between 'dispositions to believe' and 'dispositions to act': 'It is important ... to refrain from assuming from the start that a belief is a disposition to act, because this would be an impediment to understanding such phenomena as illusions, frustrations, and feelings of guilt (or 'bad conscience'), all of which are produced by gaps between beliefs and dispositions to act, or between beliefs and real possibilities of action. [...] particular beliefs or moral, cultural, educational, ideological, or political convictions, although sometimes strong in nature, manifest themselves for the greater part only verbally' (Lahire 2003: 336–338; cf. Peirce 1932: 79, 265).

- 18 Jeanne Favret-Saada (1980). Cf. Michel de Certeau (1985: 201\_). Regarding the Christian theological emphasis on authority, see e.g. Karl Lehmann (1973: 597). This Christian theological stance is reflected in Geertz's article on 'Religion as a cultural system' (Geertz 1973: 109f).
- 19 Compare the conclusions and caveats given by Rodney Needham, with whom mine partially overlap and from whom they in some respects diverge: '... what are we going to advise the ethnographer to look for or to ask about? He cannot start with the word 'belief' (assuming a local equivalent for this to be already in a dictionary, or to be otherwise ascertainable), for to do so would be only prejudicial to the entire inquiry. What he has to do, rather, is to discriminate a mode of consciousness, let us say, in terms other than 'belief', and in doing so to find out whether and in what senses there are corresponding linguistic usages which he can critically translate as expressing or describing belief. Well, he can certainly investigate canons of truth, to begin with, but how can he look for something (namely belief) which is only 'somehow' connected with truth? Or could his field manual any more usefully include the instruction that the connection to be discovered is that any hypothetical belief will be 'appropriate' to truth, and that he must therefore seek standards of appropriateness? Alternatively, could he look for what 'goes with' an assertion or with the other phenomena (not forgetting the 'etc.') listed by Mayo, and thence conclude that he had identified belief among the people under study? More narrowly, if he found that these people were 'favourably disposed' toward asserting or accepting a certain proposition, could he thence infer that they were also in an inner (mental, psychic) state of a distinct kind for which the correct description would be 'believing'? Furthermore, if the ethnographer wanted to find out whether they had a certain feeling of belief, how would he do this? He would have to find a word first, and then ask whether the utterance or conception of that word had a characteristic emotional concomitant. But how could he know that the word was the right equivalent of 'belief' if the distinctive sign of this latter notion were taken to be the feeling itself?' (Needham 1972: 62–63)
- 20 Cf. Smith (1979: 120): 'The notion of "belief" will never be quite the same again.'

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