2012-08-10

"What is Bread?" The Anthropology of Belief

https://hdl.handle.net/2144/3851

Boston University
“What is Bread?” The Anthropology of Belief

Charles Lindholm

ETHOS

“What is Bread?”

In this article, I contrast the ideal-typical models for the verification of belief proposed by Max Weber (external and meaning-centered) and Emile Durkheim (internal and emotional). I then put forward a continuum of types of belief legitimization based on these models and place the articles in this collection within this framework to demonstrate the complex interplay between modes of belief corroboration and to provide a theoretical basis for making cross-cultural comparisons of belief maintenance. [belief, religion, Durkheim, Weber, comparative analysis]

A well-known Sufi story goes like this: “A Sufi was accused of apostasy by four learned scholars. He told the judge that he would accept the death penalty if his accusers could satisfactorily answer one question. The question was: ‘What is bread?’ The first scholar said: ‘Bread is a combination of flour and water, shaped and baked in various ways, according to cultural traditions and personal preference.’ The second said: ‘Bread is the staff of life.’ The third said: ‘Bread is the gift of God.’ The fourth said: ‘Bread is a mystery.’ The Sufi turned to the judge. ‘My accusers cannot agree on what bread is. How can they know whether I am an apostate?’ He was released.”

For the faithful, religious belief, like bread, is tangible and nourishing. But, when analyzed by intellectuals, belief is likely to become abstract and insubstantial. The articles in this collection have avoided this problem by not asking what belief is, but instead use discourse
analysis to reveal how believers convince themselves that their beliefs are true. The introduction to the articles laid the groundwork for this approach by revisiting some previous debates about the nature of belief. In my concluding commentary I will build on this foundation by first describing ideal typical Weberian and Durkheimian models of belief as externally or internally verified. Next, I shall present a continuum of externally and internally legitimized beliefs, and then argue that the ethnographic material presented in these articles correlates with, and complicates, these paradigmatic forms.

Before beginning, a necessary caveat. I recognize that there are any number of other theories of belief besides those offered by Weber and Durkheim to which I might usefully refer. My reasons for limiting myself are practical, theoretical, and personal. The practical reason is space. The theoretical reason is that these contrasting paradigms continue to provide useful frameworks for the analysis of social life. Their prestige is a testament to their salience. Finally, I rely on Weber and Durkheim for personal reasons: I know their works well; their theories have oriented me throughout my career. So I believe (using that word very consciously) in their models because I have tested them in practice, because they have proven their usefulness, and because they have long provided me with meaningful and personally satisfying modes of approaching and apprehending complexity.

[1]Beliefs about Belief

Anthropology has had an ambivalent relationship with the notion of belief, both as a concept and as a motivating reality. Much of this history has been covered already in the introduction and in some of the articles, so I needn’t go into too much detail here. Suffice it to say that some iconoclasts, most notably Rodney Needham, wanted to get rid of the whole concept, arguing that it was vague and lacked specific cross-cultural equivalents (Needham
In fact, by his strict criteria almost all anthropological terms would be eliminated in favor of more “experience near” local terminology.\(^2\) Notwithstanding, most anthropologists have carried on without worrying too much about the precise meaning of the indigenous word for belief, just as they have made do with other, equally vague, but equally useful, terms (incl. the word culture). According to their predilections, researchers have generally assumed that beliefs are ideological superstructures expressing underlying power relations, or windows into the secret tensions of social organization, or even, for structuralists, revelations of the hidden workings of the mind itself. Whatever the approach, it was usually thought that beliefs had a coherence and constancy of their own—they formed a system. It was also taken for granted that believers were impelled to act, in large measure, because they adhered to the values imparted to them by their beliefs.\(^3\)

In the United States, the meaning centered operational approach to belief associated with Clifford Geertz predominated (Geertz 1973). Geertz’s notion was that belief systems provided both “models of” and “models for” social life, as people tracked back and forth between the theories and practices proposed and exemplified in their respective worldviews. But after a long reign, this approach was attacked from a number of different directions. One powerful critique was leveled by Talal Asad (1983, 1993), who argued that Geertz mistakenly projected a Western and specifically Protestant worldview, which assumed the priority of thought, meaning, and agency, onto the religious faiths of others. Using examples drawn mainly from Medieval Europe, Asad proposed that belief, at least in some circumstances, was derived from embodied knowledge inculcated by habit and monkish discipline. Ideas were less important than performance; agency was less important than participation. In sum, Geertz placed belief within a culturally constituted framework of rationality, agency, and the search for meaning, while Asad
understood belief as a derivative of emotionally charged habitual participation in collective experience.\(^4\)

This debate is an extension of the 19th-century opposition between the sociological schools of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. Geertz was hugely influenced by Weber’s method of *verstehen*—reaching understanding of motives through an imaginative identification with the worldviews of others (although, crucially, not with their emotional states, which remained out of analytical range). Through *verstehen*, the researcher could intuitively grasp and then explain the various normative paths that actors followed to achieve the goals valued in their particular cultural universe. These value orientations imparted meaning to human suffering—although existential pain was never wholly allayed. Weber argued that for the purposes of sociological analysis it must be assumed that actors are rational—they will do whatever makes sense to them in their struggles to reach the goals valued within a specific sacralized value system, whether that system is dominated by the mystical asceticism of Hinduism, the warrior ethic of Islam, or the instrumental orientation of capitalism. However, what “makes sense” will vary according to the positions, personalities, tastes and capacities of the actors, so there is always a fair degree of indeterminacy in Weber’s motivational model.

Durkheim too assumed that the essential motive for the construction and maintenance of a sacralized worldview is the wish to escape from suffering, but for him the cause of suffering—at least in complex “organic” societies—was the loss of the integrative collective experiences that were characteristic of simpler “segmentary” social organizations. Although he ostensibly gave a central place to rationality in his famous definition of religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things … which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (Durkheim 1965:62), the emphasis in his work
was on emotion and practice. As Durkheim writes, “we must look for determining causes in sensation and impulsions of the sensibility, not in concepts” (1984:232). “Intelligence … accepts without discussion the theoretical postulates demanded by action” (Durkheim 1965:412).

According to Durkheim, the most important originating force inculcating belief in human beings was the immediate experience of the healing power of primordial collective rituals, where “men are more confident because they feel themselves stronger; and they really are stronger, because forces which were languishing are now reawakened in the consciousness” (Durkheim 1965:387). The division between sacred and profane, Durkheim argued, reflected the primal experience of self-loss in the ecstatic ritual performances that stood in radical contrast to the solitude and finitude of the profane individual. Moral life, intelligence, symbolism, language, and indeed humanity itself, were products of this transformative experience, which drew participants out of themselves and fused them into a transcendent collective wherein “it is no longer a simple individual who speaks, it is a group incarnate and personified” (Durkheim 1965:241). Unfortunately, but inevitably, with the evolution of complex “organic” society the sense of shared collective participation was attenuated; paradoxically, the more people became interdependent, the less aware they were of their interconnections until, in the modern era, all that remains to be worshipped is the regent self and its desires. The result is alienation and anomie.

The opposition between these two ideal typical paradigms is evident: interest, agency, and rational action on the one side; emotion, the collective, and ritual on the other side. Of course, the reality is far more complicated. For example, Durkheim also argued that all societies manufacture complex systems of classification that order their universe into patterned symbolic relationships of opposition and analogy, arranged in taxonomies of hierarchical inclusion that
extend out in intersecting webs (Durkheim and Mauss 1963). The connections and oppositions of binary classification systems provide what Durkheim called the “vast symbolism” that is at the core of human life and society. Durkheim’s thoughts on primitive classification prepared the ground for structuralism, and prefigured advances in cognitive and linguistic anthropology, moving toward the schema theory that is invoked in several of the articles in this collection.

Meanwhile, although he argued that sociology must focus on the conscious pursuit of valued goals, Weber also assumed that the most fundamental and satisfying alleviation of human suffering is not to be found in reasoned discourse or the construction of systematic theodicies, but in immediate transformative experience as expressed in the epileptoid ecstasy of the charismatic shaman-magician, who, by convening and enacting the healing ritual of death and rebirth, stimulates the congregation to momentarily forget their suffering while immersed in the “objectless acosmism of love” (Weber 1972:330). As he writes, “for the devout the sacred value, first and above all, has been a psychological state in the here and now. Primarily this state consists in the emotional attitude per se” (Weber 1972:278). So, although emotional states were not admitted into his agent-oriented, meaning-centered analysis, Weber put the passions at the core of his larger theory. For him, only charismatic annunciations can overthrow delegitimized worldviews and build new ones on their ruins.

Although I recognize the overlaps between these two perspectives, I am going to set much of this complexity aside in favor of a simplified version to make some broad comparisons. According to the pared-down version I wish to employ, both Weber and Durkheim agree that shared beliefs are the basis for community. Both argue that “strong belief”—that is, religious faith—is a means to escape from existential suffering. The salient difference is that, for Weber, belief alleviates human misery by making suffering meaningful within a cosmic order, however
that order is constituted. Durkheim argues that belief—in its broadest sense—is an emotionally compelling expression of unity and collective effervescence; it is only secondarily a system of knowledge.

Kinds of Belief

Although belief formed the core of the theories of society proposed by Weber and Durkheim, it fell to later writers to categorize kinds of belief. In formulations that have influenced several of the articles in this collection, Malcolm Ruel (1982) distinguished between weak everyday beliefs and the strongly held beliefs associated with “faith.” Similarly, Joel Robbins (2007) contrasted “believing in” propositions that can be tested, easily disproven, and are of little import in daily life with “believing that” propositions, which proclaim absolute truth and entail strong feelings of commitment to wide-ranging values and premises held on trust. A similar point was made by Melford Spiro (1982), who argued that beliefs are differentially incorporated and enacted. Any particular individual may know some cultural doctrines only vaguely or not at all; others may be understood, but considered wrong or irrelevant; others may be accepted only as clichés; others will be internalized and used to guide decisions. Finally, some deeply held beliefs serve as motivating forces to instigate action. These are the beliefs that one is willing to fight and die defending. But these important contrasts between the motivating forces of beliefs do not help to explain exactly how beliefs (of any type) are justified and legitimizened.

With all due respect to these previous efforts (and many more I have not the time to synopsize), I will here propose my own continuum of belief types, with a somewhat different emphasis than any of those above. My main concern is to distinguish types of verification and degrees of commitment. Here are some examples: I believe that fire is hot; I believe that an ax is a tool for chopping; I believe in gravity; I believe the earth rotates around the sun. I believe that
the bird I saw was a raven; I believe you left the light on. I am convinced that there is a universal conspiracy against me. I believe God speaks to me and that I am his messenger.\(^6\)

These beliefs are differentiated on a number of levels. In the first instance, the belief that fire is hot is indisputable and proven by immediate personal experience. Fire burns.\(^7\) The primary significance of an ax is almost, but not quite, as immediately transparent. According to Heidegger, as a tool, the ax is “ready to hand” (1962), in that people seeing an ax for the first time would not use it as a paddle, or grasp it by the sharp end, or try to cut wood with the handle. They might, of course, find secondary uses for it: the blunt side of the head could be a hammer; the handle could be a pestle. But the main function of an ax would soon be learned after the most rudimentary demonstration—or even intuited without instruction.\(^8\)

The next two propositions are more problematic, because they rely on expert evidence and collective consensus to supply acceptable explanations for mundane reality. I know from experience that most objects do not fly off into the air like balloons when released, but instead drop to the earth. Oddly, it is said that heavy and light objects drop at the same rate. Experts have told me that the cause of this phenomenon is an invisible force called gravity. In high school I studied the scientific explanations for the existence and properties of gravity, and even demonstrated my understanding by passing exams. But that was a long time ago and I can no longer really remember what I once knew. However, I have no reason to doubt that the invisible pull of gravity is indeed the force that holds me to the earth—although I would be willing to entertain an alternative account, should any be offered by equally authoritative sources. The main thing for me is that gravity, whatever it is, continues to operate in a predictable manner. I am not going to attempt to fly.

Somewhat more difficult to believe is the theory of the heliocentric universe, which
directly contradicts the evidence of my senses. Yet, although it seems patently obvious that the sun revolves around the earth, I have been taught that the truth is the opposite, and the people I know also seem convinced that this is the case (although my friends in the frontier of Pakistan, where I did my fieldwork, thought that the earth was the center of the universe). In school I learned the proofs for heliocentricism, just as I learned about gravity, and these vaguely recalled lessons still seem persuasive to me. So I deny the evidence of my senses, bow to the prestige of science and to the general consensus, accept the dimly recalled evidence, and firmly believe that the earth does revolve around the sun. But, as with gravity, it makes no real difference to my life whether I believe in heliocentricism or not. For me, as for my disbelieving Pakistani friends, the sun will rise in the East regardless.  

The next two propositions I’ve listed are more personal and limited in scope, yet they can be more significant in practice. Here belief translates as “in my opinion.” These mundane statements can be proven wrong, or at least plausibly disputed. For instance, I can be told: “that bird was too small to be a raven, it must have been a crow.” Or: “It was you who left the light on, not me.” However, although not as sensually evident as belief in the heat of fire or the function of an ax, such contestable beliefs can be more relevant for daily life than belief in gravity or the solar system. The person who can tell a crow from a raven gains status as a more knowledgeable birder; the person convicted of leaving the light on can be blamed when it burns out. If possible, contestants in such disputes will attempt to back up their opinions by reference to expert knowledge: a book by an ornithologist confirms that ravens are much bigger than crows. But no experts are available to prove who left the light on. In that case, eyewitness accounts are sought. “Susie, was it me or your mother who left the light on?”

When external verification is not possible, disputants may rely on personal memory: “I
distinctly remember that it was you and not me who left the lights on.” This claim aspires to the certainty of experiential truth—I am (or want to be) utterly convinced that you left the lights on just as surely as I am convinced that fire is hot. But unlike the universal truth of fire, the subjective truth of a memory—no matter how clearly recalled—can always be denied by others whose memories differ.

So far, I’ve presented six very simple assertions of belief that traverse a continuum from indisputable statements of fact, immediately and subjectively experienced and (relatively) universally accepted (fire’s heat, the function of an ax) to less immediately transparent beliefs in the existence of gravity and the heliocentric solar system that are (1) objectively verified by experiment, (2) ratified by authority, and (3) legitimized by public consensus. In different cultural universes these beliefs may well be contested and denied. As I mentioned, the people among whom I did my fieldwork thought that the stars and sun revolved around the earth. Finally, I’ve mentioned personal beliefs that can be argued over, sometimes calmly, sometimes angrily, with results that may lead to shame on the losing side, self-satisfaction on the other side, or simply to an exasperated standoff. These beliefs can sometimes be validated by referring to recognized experts or eyewitnesses, but sometimes only personal memory and intuition can be called on.

It is this latter option that that opens up an acute epistemological chasm, because reliance on inner certainty has the potential (rarely realized) to recede away from beliefs that can be legitimized by reference to collectively accepted facts (whether universally felt or intuitively grasped, or ratified by authority, proven by scientific experiment, affirmed by general consensus, or confirmed by eyewitnesses) and to move toward the unprovable and idiosyncratic. At their extremes, internally verified personal beliefs can be very far indeed from the norms of agreed-on
reality. One such belief is the paranoid fantasy that there is a sinister conspiracy against me. The reality of this conspiracy is proven to me by the coded messages I hear broadcast on television or find printed in the phone book, by the searches of my room that occur while I sleep (revealed by the ever-so-slight shifting of my socks in the drawer), by the noises in my walls caused by implanted listening devices, and so on. For the paranoid individual, these subjective beliefs, which no one else shares, are far more gripping than ordinary opinions, which can be challenged and are liable to falsification or doubt.\textsuperscript{10}

If stated and strongly affirmed, idiosyncratic beliefs—which certainly need not be the product of mental illness, but simply the expression of an active imagination—are likely not to be acceptable to those who hold more conventional views. Unless such beliefs are revealed in arenas where idiosyncrasy is expected (e.g., the art world), they are either hidden or else must be defended against friends, family, neighbors, and therapists. Because of the threat eccentric beliefs pose to maintaining the social consensus about reality, the consequences of affirming and acting on them can be severe: incarceration, a diet of antipsychotic drugs, shock treatment.\textsuperscript{11}

However, occasionally what is taken as delusion by some is accepted as a revelation by others. At that point we may witness the birth of a new religious cosmology.\textsuperscript{12} For example, the doctrines of Islam were first conveyed to the Prophet Muhammad during a meditative retreat on Mount Hira, where he had a vision of the Angel Gabriel, who commanded him to proclaim the word of the one God, Allah. Later revelations occurred at intervals, sometimes convulsing the Prophet into epileptoid fits, at other times blandly manifested in words or tinkling noises he could interpret on arousing, and that were taken to be the direct commands of Allah, speaking directly to his messenger. Most of his own close relatives and other pillars of his community dismissed his revelations as unprovable, absurd, and dangerous. They were the ravings of a
lunatic who should be repudiated and destroyed. Yet a core of believers recognized Muhammad as the bearer of Allah’s divine instructions and sacrificed home and family to follow him.

As I mentioned earlier, in the Weberian theory of history, profound social transformation begins with the appearance of a charismatic visionary whose appeal exists beyond or outside of reason, and who overturns the world as it is. As Jesus proclaimed: “It is written, but I say unto you.” For believers, the divine message is an embodied truth, manifested in the actual person of the emissary or exemplary prophet.\(^\text{13}\) The doctrine is true because the prophet proclaims it. Of course, not all are convinced. Muhammad’s own relatives were skeptics who sought to kill him. The vast majority of would-be prophets fall afoul of the world as it is and pay the price.

According to the Weberian theory of history, even those prophecies that do succeed are doomed to erode over time as the original personal annunciation is rationalized into dogma and eventually ossified into tradition. When that occurs, the time is right for the rise of a new charismatic leader who announces the advent of another, better world. However, Weber argued that this cycle is now over, and that humanity is doomed to the permanent disenchantment of the world; religious faith has become merely a “pianissimo” accompaniment to the business of achieving and sustaining instrumental efficiency.\(^\text{14}\) Like Weber, Durkheim also thought that we now live in a compromised world where an ideology of self-interested individualism prevails. He argued that this was because of the evolution of complexity and the consequent rise of the cult of the self. For him, crippling alienation and anomie are the inevitable consequences of the isolating social conditions of contemporary organic society, which have made self-loss in revitalizing collective ritual performance difficult to achieve. But unlike Weber, he was not pessimistic about the fate of faith. “This state of incertitude and confused agitation cannot last forever. A day will come when our societies will know again those hours of creative effervescence” (Durkheim
1965:475).

Contrasting Modes of Sustaining “Strong” Belief

The cases discussed here all take place in settings where the prophet has long been absent, where the basic annunciation has long been rationalized, and where the compulsive effects of a personal charismatic emotional connection exist only in a highly mediated form. Yet “strong belief” thrives. The data clearly demonstrates that Weber was mistaken and Durkheim was correct, although the ways belief has been sustained have not always been as “effervescent” as he imagined. The basic question addressed by the authors of the articles in this collection is: Exactly how have strong religious beliefs actually been maintained and defended despite the threats posed by modern conditions of pluralism and secularization? This question has been answered ethnographically by focusing on the logical and psychological strategies, subterfuges, and affirmations used by Christians in the United States and Thailand, Buddhists in rural and urban Thailand, and Muslims in Indonesia, that allow believers to retain religious faith in an age of uncertainty, multiplicity, and empiricism.

The solutions the authors find to this problem can be usefully placed into the two ideal typical camps I outlined earlier. The first solution is based on Durkheimian affirmations of identity, emotional commitment, belonging, and authenticity within a sacred community; the second solution is a Weberian effort to construct types of legitimated meaning systems that can confirm belief. The writers in this collection subtly explore the culturally specific and uniquely mixed applications of both of these modes of ratifying faith.

To sustain their faith, the Emerging Evangelicals documented by James Bielo have chosen a Durkheimian path that attempts a reconciliation between modern individualism and the compelling power of emotional revelation and collective participation. They practice a
A countercultural version of “missional” Christianity in which a felt spiritual connection is discovered within the seeker, thus transcending apparent distinctions and stimulating a transformative inner revelation of communion. Deeply indebted to New Age philosophy and practice, Emerging Evangelicals downplay the importance of dogma and textual learning; personally illuminated themselves, they wish to live the message of Jesus in practice. The exact content of the call varies from person to person. Yet all agree that it is not to be discovered by reading or churchgoing, but only by personal prayer and meditation, which leads to a felt experience of the divine inner light. All also agree that this new awareness must then be carried into the world in the form of practice. On their mission of salvation, Emerging Evangelicals actively oppose the self-centered individualism, corruption, and materialism of the era by building egalitarian collectives, sharing goods, living simply, and exemplifying the selfless Christian life style through community action. Above all, missional Christianity implies being authentic in oneself and in one’s relationships, which means overcoming personal desire and expressing inner truth in one’s daily life.

In his article on a Quaker community in Scotland, Douglas Kline also finds that the quest for inner certainty and a strong and convincing faith correlates with the construction of a sacred community of spiritually awakened individuals wherein text and dogma are minimized. He argues that the diverse members of the Quaker congregation are able to unite through active participation in the open-ended ritual performance of silent worship, personal revelation, and by reference to the inclusive trope of a personal spiritual journey. The silent and meditative worshippers in a Quaker service may appear to be the direct opposite of ecstatic dancers merged together in trance, as portrayed by Durkheim, but their underlying experiences are similar, albeit much diluted. In this modern community of individualists, each worshipper supports every other
seeker’s personal and ongoing quest for inner clarity and “convincement.” Anyone can testify whenever moved by the spirit, but no criticism or argument is permitted. All are joined together on the journey to ultimate truth (whatever its content)—although some are presumed to be farther along the pathway. Nonetheless, no one has the right to control another’s revelation. The main mode of discipline is through example. The Quakers have constructed a mystical faith based on orthopraxy, not orthodoxy, in which a search for a felt inner spiritual truth is conducted “alone, but together” in a church without a creed (or not much of one).

Another contribution that examines Christian belief is Julia Cassaniti’s. But her Thai subjects follow a very different, much more Weberian, route for keeping their faith. Unlike the inwardly focused and experientially oriented congregations described by Kline and Bielo, Cassaniti’s Thai Christians are strict textualists. They believe that the word of God is literally given in the bible, sent down by an omnipotent creator to save the faithful. For them, salvation comes not through transcendent experiences of inner enlightenment, but through dedicated study of the divine word and strict obedience to biblical precepts. Their spiritual meaning system is externally provided by the unquestioned and unquestionable holy texts; faith is recognized and enacted by the believers’ strict adherence to divine commands, which are prescribed in the Holy book and conveyed by priests, so that the scripture resembles a manual of expert instruction in salvation technology.

To verify their belief in karma, their Buddhist neighbors employ a different, but equally meaning-centered approach. Where the rural Thai Baptists refer continually to the textual evidence of divine revelation as the source of their certainty, for rural Thai Buddhists karma is not a divine prescription, revealed in a holy text and interpreted by experts but, rather, is a mundane fact of life, like gravity, verified daily by experience, and undeniably true whether one
is a Buddhist or not. This distinction corresponds with major differences in practice: for example, Christian prayer supplicates an interventionist God and begs for His intervention; Buddhist prayer impersonally creates good karma and a peaceful state of mind in the worshipper.20

Similarly Weberian is Steven Carlisle’s study of the verification of belief in karma in urban Thailand. In his article, he has carefully elucidated some of the mechanisms by which that belief has been internalized and the existential purposes that it serves. According to him, like their rural cousins, urban Thai Buddhists conceive of karma as automatic and universal in its workings and “scientific” in its principles. By imagining a coherent life story based on the operations of an inexorable and experientially and scientifically verifiable reality, they are able to eliminate complexities and uncertainties in their life narratives without realizing they are doing so. The stories they construct legitimate—or at least provide plausible causes for—personal sufferings and failures in a way that is convincing and culturally validated, and therefore therapeutic.

Continuing in the Weberian mode, but in a different register, Greg Simon outlines the manner in which matrilineal Muslims in Minangkabau, Indonesia, manage to confirm Islamic doctrines for themselves despite the fact that the doctrines stand in contradiction to their daily practices and taken-for-granted worldview. This disjuncture has become more and more obvious as people from Minangkabau have traveled and read about alternative practices associated with Islam in its Middle Eastern heartland, such as patrilineality, or heavy veiling of women. The problem then is how to square their divergent local realities and their own inner doubts with a sacred text that is supposed to be perfect, immediately understandable, and without contradiction. Their solution is to achieve “conviction without being convinced.” That is, believers develop a cognitive capacity to dismiss disconfirming evidence or practice as illusory,
despite their seeming truth.

For example, because the answers to all questions must, by definition, be found in the Qur’an, any apparent discordance must be the fault of the questioner, not the book. And, if the answer in the Qur’an seems to be in tension with daily reality, then daily reality must be dismissed, as one informant says, like a “magic trick,” persuasive in appearance, but false in essence. Such an apparently counterfactual belief system requires actively bracketing off or subordinating all disconfirming information to get closer to the ultimate reality that is hidden from ordinary eyes. But this quest does not require introspection and emotional revelation. Rather, it employs a highly conscious casting away of doubts and an active sculpting of behaviors and thoughts according to the message of the Prophet.

Like Thai Buddhists, Muslims in Minangkabau say that their sacred texts have the same verity as the laws of nature. The Qur’an is as real as gravity. Believers also often affirm that their creed is a practical guide to life, a spiritual tool that functions to provide a secure and easily followed pathway through life; those who wander from the path do so because they willfully refuse to see the God-given truth, and rely instead on their own fallible subjective judgments and personal feelings. At the same time, Islamic texts, if properly understood, will necessarily reveal all of the deepest secrets of the universe—even though these truths are seen only “in a mist” by ordinary mortals. Through a lifetime of study, some experts can reach a deeper grasp of the various implications of the message, and are then qualified to give ordinary people advice about the correct Islamic approach to any and all problems of daily life. So the Muslims of Minangkabau maintain their faith first by considering their belief system to be self-evidently natural, total, and obvious, and then by recognizing and deferring to trained experts who can describe and elucidate the principles and implications of their sacred texts. They thereby
combine the two modes of meaning centered belief described by Cassaniti in her account of rural Thai Christians and Buddhists.

Internal and External Modes of Achieving Certainty

At this point I want to integrate my argument, relating the paradigms of Durkheim and Weber to the continuum of belief I posited earlier, which begins in immediate, experiential, and undeniable facts: fire burns; an ax chops. Less certain are beliefs that are validated by experiment, evidence, and public opinion, such as the existence of gravity or the heliocentric solar system. Finally, there are personal beliefs or opinions that are open to contestation: a raven is bigger than a crow; you left the light on. Generally, these personal beliefs are “ordinary” claims about the nature of daily reality—worth arguing about but amenable to resolution by reference to expert opinion, general consensus, or eyewitness accounts.

However, the personal mode of proof has the potential to open up an epistemological gap from which truly divergent beliefs may emerge (I am the victim of a universal conspiracy; I am the messenger of God). Such beliefs can be troubling, not only for the individual, who may be punished for them, but also for society, which may be changed by them when they are enunciated at the right time, to the right audience, by a compellingly charismatic individual. Then they may be embraced as prophetic revelations, and thereby provide the basis for the rise of a sacralized revolutionary worldview that, if victorious, eventually becomes the taken-for-granted, everyday reality.²¹

As the articles demonstrate, to validate and sustain the world-constituting status of religiously based belief systems, a number of options are available. The Asian examples assuage doubt primarily by relying on external sources for validation of their respective faiths: that is, belief is verified by experience (what I believe is an indisputable fact, like fire’s heat or gravity’s...
pull), by practical reason (my religion is transparently true and serves as a pragmatic recipe for the proper and natural way to live), by objective experiment (karma can be demonstrated by facts and experiment just as it can be demonstrated that the earth revolves around the sun), by reference to authoritative texts (the sacred book says so), or to experts (the scientists or teachers or priests say so), or by general consensus (everybody says so). These modes of verification all fit within the Weberian framework for the legitimization of belief based on the social construction of meaning.

For the Buddhists described in these articles, referring to religious principles as natural facts is the main mode of confirmation. Among laymen, karma is not verified by prophecy or text, but is presented as a self-evident truth—it is real like the heat of fire or the pull of gravity—and therefore undeniable. In the same vein, Buddhists assume that practical experience and honest reflection will inevitably demonstrate that ordinary suffering has its direct source in the inexorable and inevitable operations of karma (although, as Carlisle shows, experience can be twisted to conform with the “natural fact” it is supposed to express). In a different mode, the Thai Christians described by Cassaniti and the Muslims described by Simon are also concerned very much with external verification, in this instance, the accepted and undeniable wisdom of the holy texts, although the Muslims rely as well on their belief that Islam is a natural fact; albeit one requiring an arduous effort to discern beneath the illusions that permeate daily life.

In contrast, for the Quakers and emergent evangelicals described in these articles, what predominates is a Durkheimian experiential and subjective form of faith that is expressed within a supportive collective of fellow believers. Despite differences in the trappings and institutional frameworks that surround and enable the experience, for both groups it is the immediacy of feeling that counts most, not doctrine or meaning. Although collectively nurtured, these truths
are subjectively felt as an inner revelation, and so are as indisputable as the heat of a burning flame.

Yet, the opposition between these two ideal typical “styles of belief”—externally verified versus internally experienced—is not clear-cut, as the case studies amply demonstrate. For example, despite their emphasis on internal “convincement” the Durkheimian Quakers and Evangelicals alike refer to and meditate on biblical texts, which serve as points of inspiration. For these believers, inner communion also requires the foundation of at least some external content. On the other side of the divide, along with various forms of external legitimization of their beliefs, Muslims and Buddhists also make use of emotional modes of belief verification. The Minangkabau Muslims say that sincere immersion in the practices and beliefs of their religion gives them peace of mind. This felt experience—realized in collective prayer—subjectively verifies their faith. Thai Buddhists also say that their collective acts of devotion instill “calm hearts” by putting believers in direct felt contact with the Buddha who resides within. This form of worship is parallel to the meditations of the Emerging Evangelicals or Quakers who seek a tranquil version of collective effervescence. In an earlier version of her article, Cassaniti notes in passing how some Baptist villagers were encouraged by a visiting missionary to speak in tongues to remove their doubts and viscerally prove their faith to themselves. This evidence indicates that for them too, solely textual forms of verification may not always be sufficient sources of spiritual sustenance. These cases show the limits of the ideal typical opposition I mentioned in my opening statement. One-sided models for inculcating belief (meaning-centered and externally verified vs. emotional and internally substantiated) must be supplemented by more inclusive attention to alternatives. Meaning is more compelling when it is also embodied and felt; feeling needs to be concretized in external reality to become
institutionalized.

An emphasis on one side or the other of the dichotomy also implies certain logical and psychic problems. As mentioned, a dogmatic approach to maintaining faith, which enjoins obedience to textual dictates and expert knowledge, must thereby discount or deny disconfirming data, such as ambivalence within the scriptures, disagreements among experts or, more seriously, failures of the sacred texts to jibe with experienced reality. Achieving willful ignorance becomes harder and harder to accomplish in the presence of plausible alternative faiths, or when confronted by variations in interpretation within a congregation. The psychological response may be to cling to threatened beliefs with greater and greater zealotry, although this does not seem to have been the case (so far) among the Minangkabau.

In contrast, the fuzzy experiential religion practiced by the Emerging Evangelicals and the Quakers has the great advantage of being inclusive. In fact, tolerance is built into a faith that is based on felt union with an indeterminate but universal inner truth. However, the religion of personal revelation has the inherent danger of losing all coherence and becoming mere sensation, without moral content. Acolytes also face the insidious difficulty of distinguishing between the revelation of the divine spirit and the whisper of personal desire. Is a devotee truly gripped by the sacred, or wickedly deluded?

Conclusion

The articles collected here justify the usual anthropologists’ assertion that we need better ethnography, less ungrounded theorizing. Or, in terms of the Sufi story I began with, more bread, less abstraction. Through their careful inquiries into the languages and acts mobilized to sustain and defend faith, they open new and promising routes for further interrogation into the nature of belief and the sources of human motivation and self-constitution. In so doing, they carry on the
great tradition of social thought, as pioneered by Weber and Durkheim. But they go farther by providing in-depth analysis of real situations—particularly in complex situations where faith is challenged—and by stepping beyond narrow paradigms to show both the ambiguity and authority of the local responses to modern conditions of pluralism, empiricism, and disenchantment. Carlisle and Simon persuasively follow the logical twists and turns believers negotiate to hide contradictions from themselves, while Kline shows that the Quaker quest for an indefinable “Inner Light” fosters collective solidarity, despite very real distinctions within the congregation. Cassaniti argues persuasively that different cosmologies and notions of agency radically effect the ways faith is expressed and experienced. Beilo explores how Emerging Evangelicals reject cultural values of possessive individualism and seek “authentic” collective relationships that are paradoxically based on disciplined individual effort. These narratives, in attending to complexities, ironies, and ambiguities, reveal that, in the ongoing struggle to retain and strengthen belief, emotional experience and the search for meaning operate in dialectical counterpoint, not in absolute contradiction, although one side of the equation may predominate in any particular case. To begin a truly comparative study of belief, we need more of the sorts of nuanced inquiries featured in this collection, which reveal so graphically the ways beliefs are defended and incorporated into the worldviews and experiences of ordinary people.

Of course, as an anthropologist with a different theoretical, methodological, and personal background than the authors, I have some criticisms to make about their approaches. For instance, the articles suffer from problems endemic to research based mainly on interviews. Questions were asked that probably never occurred to local people. Were the replies efforts to make the anthropologist happy, or to appear logically coherent? How characteristic were the attitudes and reasoning of the interviewees? What differences do their various affirmations of
belief make in their actual behavior? The contributions tell us a lot about what people say, but very little about what they do. To undertake a rigorous comparative study, we need to know much more about how peoples’ modes of belief are related to their cultural, historical, political contexts. How did these patterns of belief come to be held; what cultural forms and structural systems do they correlate with; who are the zealots and who are the lukewarm, how do these differences in intensity relate to circumstances? From these articles, we do not get many clues about how an individual or collective orientation toward the validation of strong beliefs is associated with class, age, ethnicity, or gender; nor do we know much about opposition or resistance to dominant belief systems.

My qualms in no way reflect negatively on the contributions, but they do reflect the tensions implicit in our own disciplinary mandate. It is evident that no article, no book, no method, and no theory, can ever do full justice to the vast scope of human experience, yet that is what anthropology seeks to accomplish. Because of its ambition to explore and explain the full gamut of human life, anthropology contains multitudes, so that accepted doctrine and practice for one practitioner are destined to be anathema for another. Individually and collectively we pursue objective knowledge that can never be fully grasped, never easily distinguished from a form of faith, shifting its shape as we pursue it (thus our self-conscious emphasis on problematizing). Our continued participation in this quest, and our belief in its value, is the shared meaning system and inner experience that unites us, despite differences of approach and character.

Taken together, these contributions do not just illuminate the ways the beliefs of others are maintained. Indirectly, they also ask us how we, the readers, maintain our own. From my perspective, the unending struggle to answer this question is at the heart of anthropology: a discipline that is a science and an art, as well as an act of faith.
CHARLES LINDHOLM is University Professor of Anthropology, Department of Anthropology, Boston University.

Acknowledgments. I want to thank my external readers for their insightful and challenging comments, some of which I have incorporated, all of which I have learned from. I also thank Janet Keller for her usual intelligent, but gently put, editorial interventions. And I would like to express my appreciation to the authors of these articles for the privilege of allowing me to read and critique them, and especially to Greg Simon and Steven Carlisle for inviting my comments.

1. Weber presented ideal typical cases in full awareness that they were simplified models, useful for comparison. He believed that description should show how reality differs from the type, and employ cultural and historical data to analyze why this is so. My article is written in this spirit.

2. This might not be a bad thing (see Wierzbicka 1999).

3. In contrast, Tooker (1992) argues that the religious precepts and rituals of the Akha of Thailand are simply formal public expressions of the Akha’s externalized collective identity, much like their distinctive headdresses, clothing style, posture, house structure, spatial orientation, and so on. The Akha are not believers; they are performers.

4. For reasons of space, I ignore Asad’s discussion of the relationship of power to the instantiation of belief.

5. Spiro contends that to understand the reasons why some beliefs are motivating and some are not, the analyst would have to attend to the degree and manner in which any cultural norm had been internalized. This would require a comparative study of the
effects of differential socialization practices within a population over a long period of time. To my knowledge, this difficult program has never been carried out.

6. I note that Cassaniti’s rural Thai informants tell her that belief (*quam chuea* in Thai) only refers to confidence in the truth of something that cannot be empirically demonstrated. Such categorical linguistic distinctions are well worth exploring. However, the logic of my typology still holds even if the terms referring to the different sources of confidence differ. See also endnote 20.

7. I believe in the heat of fire even though reliable sources tell me that some people can walk on hot coals or pass flames across their bodies without being burned. I am impressed by this secondhand information, but my visceral fear of being burnt takes priority.

8. Of course, the ax can also acquire any number of symbolic meanings and forms that may or may not reflect its original usage. Nonetheless, even if other secondary and serendipitous uses of an ax are theoretically possible, and even if any number of symbolic meanings can be attached to an ax, I making the commonsense claim that its original functional purpose as a tool has logical priority—an ax is a chopper par excellence.

9. See Nussbaum (2001) for a discussion. I assume that for me to be able to blissfully ignore the scientific principles that underpin the theories of gravity and heliocentricism, experts must exist who do understand those principles, and who make use of them to create the world I take for granted. For an anthropological discussion of expertise and culture, see Barth (1993, 2002).

10. Clinicians generally recognize psychosis as a mental state in which reality is obscured by hallucinations and incoherent thoughts, resulting in a serious impairment of ordinary
social interactions. Psychotics often show a remarkable ability to maintain their delusions regardless of the impositions of “reality.”

11. For a classic example, see Daniel Paul Schreber’s famous memoir (1955) as well as Freud’s analysis of Schreber’s case (1996).

12. For a comparison between delusional mental states and strong religious faith, see William James (1982). For more on the social-cultural relationship of charisma, exclusion, and prophecy see Lindholm (1990).

13. In Weber’s theory, the emissary makes no claims to divinity, but is a messenger who brings the commands of God to the disciples. The exemplary prophet, in contrast, embodies the divine principle. Muhammad is an emissary prophet par excellence. Buddha is the paradigm of the exemplary prophet. However, as always in Weber’s typologies, there is considerable overlap between the two. Pious Muslims emulate Muhammad, down to his hair color, and assign him semidivine powers, while Buddhists portray their prophet as a mortal man who promoted a specific doctrine of compassion.

14. As Peter Berger (1967) pointed out, in the modern context sacralized worldviews are doubly threatened by the existence of alternative religious annunciations and by the increasingly hegemonic scientific belief system.

15. According to Greenfeld (1985), Weber divides charisma into a primary irrational form that is emotional and personal, while its weakened secondary form is attached to sacred symbols that faintly represent its original expression. Anthropologists, such as Clifford Geertz (1985), following Shils (1965), have tended to focus only on this latter aspect of charisma.

16. William James (1982) calls this the religion of the once born. He believed it would
become the dominant form of religious annunciation in the future.

17. See also Stromberg (1993). The this-worldly mission of Emergent Evangelists is reminiscent of the this-worldly asceticism Weber attributed to Calvinists, but the Evangelist’s emotional connection to a directive personal divine revelation is the reverse of Calvinism, which repudiates all forms of enthusiasm and mysticism.

18. Although some rules do exist, they serve mainly to minimize disruptions in the meeting. As might be expected in a religion stressing personal revelation, enforcing these rules sometimes leads to splits in the congregation.

19. For this formulation, see Smith (1957).

20. On these grounds, Cassaniti says the assumption that “belief” is an attitude prerequisite for religious belief is unfounded, and is a product of Christian eschatology, irrelevant for understanding her Buddhist material. From the perspective I’ve presented, a naturalistic Buddhist “belief” affirms that karma exists as an undeniable and provable fact of life for everyone.

21. For an exploration of recent examples, see Lindholm and Zúquete (2010).

22. This point was famously made by David Hume (1956).

23. This is a problem faced by all mystical religions, and is often resolved by recourse to the judgment of a spiritual guide who, in recognition of his past success on the path, is believed to have the ability to intuit the level and character of the disciple’s inner spiritual knowledge.

References Cited

Asad, Talal

1983 Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz. Man

Barth, Fredrik

Berger, Peter

Durkheim, Emile

Durkheim, Emile, and Marcel Mauss

Freud, Sigmund

Geertz, Clifford

Greenfeld, Liah
Heidegger, Martin

Hume, David

James, William

Lindholm, Charles

Lindholm, Charles, and José Pedro Zúquete

Needham, Rodney

Nussbaum, Martha
   2001 Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions. New York: Cambridge
      University Press.

Robbins, Joel
   2007 Continuity Thinking and the Problem of Christian Culture. Current

Ruel, Malcolm
      Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth.
Schreber, Daniel P.


Shils, Edward


Smith, Wilfred C.


Spiro, Melford


Stromberg, Peter


Tooker, Deborah


Weber, Max


Wierzbicka, Anna