TOWARDS A SITUATIONAL THEORY OF BELIEF

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Introduction

BETWEEN January 1984 and January 1986, and again between May 1987 and September 1992, I conducted fieldwork with a number of different Christian congregations in south and east Manchester. During this time I had many opportunities to listen to people talking about their beliefs, discussing questions of belief in small groups, debating matters of belief with those who did not agree with them and dropping statements of belief into everyday conversation. At the end of all this fieldwork, however, I was still left asking what it was we mean by the term 'belief'.

One situation in particular sticks in my mind as typifying the difficulties I had. I was part of a discussion group in a traditionalist Anglican church. We had got on to the subject of death. A number of those present began to talk about the importance of holding a requiem mass for those who had died, particularly for close relatives. The clear assumption being made was that holding a requiem mass would help those who had died to reach heaven. At some point in the discussion, however, one of the group raised the question of reincarnation, and immediately the tone and content of the conversation changed. Practically all of those present (six women and one man, mainly middle aged, all but one of whom had been members of the church for the majority of their lives) began to assert the importance of the belief in reincarnation for their own understanding of what would happen to them after death. Clearly two very different, not to say contradictory

statements of belief were being made in this discussion, and, equally clearly, those who were involved were not aware of the contradiction for themselves.[1]

This is simply one example of many I could give where apparently contradictory statements of belief were being made by individuals, or by groups in discussion, within a very short space of time and without any obvious sign that a contradiction was involved. This particular discussion took place within an Anglican congregation, but this was not a specifically 'Anglican' approach to belief: it was common to many other congregations, although the framework within which statements of belief were made clearly changed from church to church. With Roman Catholics there was a sense of the tradition and the 'teaching of the Church', which formed a backdrop to all such statements of belief. In evangelical and fundamentalist congregations, there was the Bible and a fairly consistent interpretation of the Bible that everybody accepted. In a few radical and liberal congregations, members would say quite openly that they did not 'believe', and the question of belief was wide open to debate. On the whole, however, some notion of belief was present in all the churches, and where that belief was expressed by ordinary members of the congregations, it often appeared to be inconsistent, arbitrary, and at times contradictory.

One phenomenon I noticed with all churches was that particular beliefs were stated as facts and introduced into specific conversations for specific purposes. Even in the example I have just quoted, it was clear that the members of the group had one set of beliefs for those who were close to them (that they would go to heaven and required a requiem mass to be said for their souls) and another for themselves (the desire for reincarnation). Very rarely, however, was the content of the beliefs discussed in depth. This led me to look much more closely at the way 'belief' itself was understood by members of the congregations, and the way in which specific belief statements were being used in everyday conversation.

Belief in Anthropology

Belief is an essentially 'Christian' concept. Other religions are based primarily on 'doing': on following the Law, on performing ritual, and so on. This does not mean that other religions have no concept of belief (although this is debatable). It means that belief, if it does exist, is secondary to other elements. For Christianity, on the other hand, belief is central to almost all definitions of what it is to be Christian. Early Christians were distinguished by the fact that they 'believed' Jesus to be the Son of God. This notion was later clarified and codified in relation to Greek philosophy and led both to the great heresy debates of the third and

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1. Neither I nor the priest who was running the group ever interfered in the discussion, nor did we point out the contradictions to those concerned.

fourth centuries, and the construction of the 'creeds', which became so central to much of Christian ritual. This emphasis on belief was reinforced during the Reformation, with its emphasis on 'justification by faith', and from this time on, even in the wider intellectual tradition, religion in the West has always been associated with belief. The Enlightenment led to the 'privatization' of religion, which was thought to be based on the beliefs of the individual, and rationalism led to the rejection of religion on the basis of a rejection of 'belief': belief was defined as 'irrational'. During the nineteenth century, this emphasis on belief was also applied to other religious traditions through the work of Max Müller and others. Tylor, for example, defined 'religion' as the '*belief* in Spiritual Beings' (1871: 383, my emphasis). While many people questioned whether religion should be defined in relation to 'spiritual beings', nobody seemed to question whether the application of the concept of 'belief' to other religions was relevant or even possible.

Belief, therefore, is an issue that anthropologists have, on the whole, been very reluctant to tackle.[2] Robertson Smith (1894) argued that what people say about their rituals should be secondary to what is actually done. Beliefs, he claimed, change over time and are often created 'post-hoc', whereas the ritual generally remains static. This has led anthropologists to give most of their attention to what is 'done' during ritual rather than to what people say about it.[3] There has, it is true, always been a strong interest in 'myth' within anthropology, but this is not really 'belief', even if, for many commentators myth appears to imply some kind of belief. The debate that has been generated about the relationship between myth and ritual has tended, on the whole, to ignore the possible position of belief between these separate forms.[4]

Another, more recent tendency within anthropology has been to try and construct a system of beliefs—not unlike systematic Christian theology—that is both coherent and all-embracing. The views of the Dogon of West Africa have perhaps been subjected most thoroughly to this technique (Griaule 1965), and Evans-Pritchard, when he came to study the religion of the Nuer, fell into much the same trap (Evans-Pritchard 1956). Evans-Pritchard always had the skill, which is seen in all his work on the Nuer, of creating 'systems'. His system of segmentary

2. The two principal books on the subject by recognized anthropologists, Needham's *Belief, Language and Experience* (1972) and Gellner's *Legitimation of Belief* (1974), are both essentially philosophical rather than anthropological in their approach.

3. Turner and others who discuss symbolism (e.g. 1967) have tried to focus on the local 'meaning' of symbols. This, however, only leads to the questions of the relationship between symbols and belief and whether it is possible to talk about the 'meanings' of symbols at all. I develop both these questions in relation to my discussion of Sperber below.

4. I will not be referring to myth at all in this paper, as I would generally wish to argue that myth is of little real interest to any study of Christian practice. 'Myth' is too vague a word to use in any critical comparative analysis. How far, for example, can the Gospels, creation stories from Melanesia and the grand 'mythic' cycles discussed by Lévi-Strauss all be encompassed by a single term?

lineages and the political consequences of this are well known, as are the many critiques of this system, most of which attack the central idea of there being a 'system' of any kind within Nuer political arrangements (Evans-Pritchard 1945; cf. Kuper 1983: 88–97). His system of belief for the Nuer, however, which also has clear political consequences, has largely been free from such criticism. *Nuer Religion* is an important work in the way that it takes what the people 'believe' seriously for about the first time in anthropology (Evans-Pritchard 1956). However, this book, as with much other work on the Nuer, is probably more of a reflection of Evans-Pritchard's own systematic imagination, strongly influenced by his recent conversion to Roman Catholicism, than a reflection of the actual 'beliefs' of the Nuer themselves.

More recently, the concept of 'belief' and other related terms have come in for more detailed criticism, and the whole debate about the meaning of specific words has become a field opened up for study. Foremost in this debate, certainly within this country, is Southwold's book, *Buddhism in Life* (1983). I would like to begin my own review of this recent literature, however, with a short French essay that sums up the issues much more succinctly and which therefore provides us with a good starting-point for looking both at Southwold's own work and at the way in which belief might be 'used' within Christian congregations.

Remarks on the Verb 'To Believe'

Unfortunately Pouillon's essay, 'Remarks on the Verb "To Believe"' (1982), relies very heavily on the specifically French aspects of the verb *'croire'* and has therefore proved very difficult to translate into English. However, as 'translation' is, in one form or another, the main theme of the essay, this only serves to illustrate the argument. Pouillon tackles the issue of belief in other societies by asking whether those who do not share our language do in fact 'believe' in the way that is implied when we use this term. This leads Pouillon to look at the term and to divide its meanings, in French, in such a way that he can look more closely at what it is that the French, and people of other language groups, might be saying. Pouillon is keen to point out that, on the whole, it is European anthropologists who claim that other peoples believe, not the people themselves. This, he argues, is a direct product of the nature of the verb 'to believe'.

Pouillon distinguishes three uses for the French verb 'croire' (1982: 2). These three uses are best translated into English as 'to trust in', 'to believe that' and 'to believe in'. To illustrate the differences, I will offer two quotations:

> If I have confidence in a friend, if I believe in (*croire en*, 'have faith in') him, will I say that I believe in (*croire à*) his existence? Certainly not: that existence is simply undeniable. (ibid.)

Or rather they [the Dangaleat] do not believe in (*croire à*) it [the *margaii*, a kind of spirit]; this existence is simply a matter of experience: there is no more need to believe in (*croire à*) the margaii than to believe that if I throw a stone it will fall. (ibid.)

At the root of this distinction is the assumption, made explicit by Pouillon, that if we say that we 'believe' a particular statement, then there must be a certain amount of doubt concerning the truth of that statement. If we say, for example, that we only 'believe' in God, then the statement, the concept of 'God', must be open to question. This sense of doubt, Pouillon argues, is central to the European understanding of the verb 'to believe'. Without that doubt, we simply 'believe that...', or we could say that we 'know that...': we know that our friend exists, we know that stones fall, or whatever. Other languages, Pouillon argues, do not necessarily have this distinction, or rather, they make it explicit by the use of distinct terms. I often heard members of an Independent Christian Fellowship I studied making the same distinction: they did not claim to 'believe' in God's existence, they 'knew' that God existed.[5] When they did use the verb 'to believe', they used it in the first of Pouillon's senses, as a statement of trust, of commitment, of faith. Pouillon claims that it is the very ambiguity of the term 'to believe' that gives it its usefulness and power in European languages. This ambiguity, however, does not necessarily translate into other language groups around the world.

Southwold picks up a very similar point in his own discussion of belief among the village Buddhists he has been studying (1983: 150ff.). For Southwold, it is the distinction between 'belief that' and 'belief in' that is the vital one, and he expresses this in relation to Christian theology and especially arguments about the existence of God. To say we 'believe that God exists' is to make a statement similar to the one we would make were we to say that we know that a table or a friend exists. Such a statement would, therefore, be open to a discussion of truth. However, for Southwold, this is only half the story. He argues that the understanding of the word 'exists' in both these statements is acknowledged to be different, because 'God' is a different kind of term from 'table' or 'friend'.[6] More importantly, however, Southwold claims that we very rarely hear people make a statement to the effect that they 'believe that' God exists; rather they are more likely to say, as the Christian creeds do, that they 'believe in' God. To 'believe in' God is, as with Pouillon, to put one's trust in God, to have faith in God, not to make any special reference to God's existence or to the nature of that existence.

5. Evans-Pritchard makes exactly the same distinction in the first chapter of *Nuer Religion* and uses this as the basis for avoiding the verb 'to believe' throughout the rest of the book (1956: 9). The Nuer, Evans-Pritchard argues, *know* that Kwoth, the spirits, etc. exist, they do not *believe* that they exist.

6. At this point Southwold enters a philosophical discourse and moves away from the purely practical use of the terms in everyday conversation.

To believe in God is to take God as an assumption, a starting-point, and to begin to work from that point.

Belief Statements

Throughout his work, Southwold chooses to use the more specific term 'belief statements' rather than the vaguer 'beliefs'. In doing so, he makes comments about the village Buddhists among whom he is working which are similar to those I made about members of Christian congregations in Manchester. The village Buddhists, it appears, use specific statements of belief in everyday conversations, sometimes at cross purposes, but with only an implied sense of a wider system behind them.[7] In talking about belief statements, however, Southwold makes a distinction between 'belief statements' and 'symbolic statements' (Southwold 1983: 50). The basis for this distinction rests in the kind of truth which is being assumed (whether empirical or metaphorical). It is this distinction I would like to question.

Here I turn to the work of Dan Sperber (1975, 1982). Sperber does not deal with 'belief' as such, but rather with symbols, or what he prefers to call 'symbolic statements' (1975: 3). Sperber claims that 'symbols do not mean' (ibid.: 85ff.). This statement, however, seems to go against the whole of anthropological thought on the subject of symbolism, the main aim of which has always been to discover meanings. Sperber begins his argument by criticizing Turner and other anthropologists for taking too much notice of what the people themselves say about the meanings of their symbols. Sperber suggests that any such 'native exegesis' of the symbol should itself be treated as an extension of that symbol and therefore should demand an explanation in its own right. In other words, when the Ndembu tell us that the *mudji* tree stands for mothers' milk or the matrilineal clan during female initiation rites, or when a Roman Catholic talks about 'transubstantiation' and claims that the bread at the eucharist becomes the body of Christ, this cannot in any way help us explain what the rite in question 'means'. Such statements can only take the problem one stage further, in the sense that the statement itself, the relationship between a symbol and its meaning, demands an explanation.

Sperber goes on to draw a distinction between different kinds of 'truth' within his analysis. He claims that certain statements—the example he uses from his own fieldwork is 'all leopards are Christians'—do not need to be empirically 'true', although they are treated as such by the people concerned. For these people, therefore, when they affirm the 'truth' of the statement, what is 'true' is the related

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7. The starting-point for Southwold's whole study is the belief statement made by village Buddhists in reply to his question, 'What is Buddhism?'. 'Buddhism', the villagers told him, 'is not killing animals'. It was Southwold's confusion in the face of this statement which led him to explore the whole question of belief in the first place (1983: 66ff.).

statement that '"all leopards are Christians" is true'. This may sound a rather pedantic distinction, but once we grasp what Sperber is saying, I think it will prove useful. The point at issue is not the empirical truth of the statement itself but the fact that people are willing to accept such a statement as 'true' without questioning its empirical status. This is what Sperber calls putting the statement in parenthesis, setting it apart from ordinary discourse. It is only 'true' because it is said to be 'true', although the exact nature of that 'truth' should not be, and on the whole is not, questioned (1975: 91ff.). What is more, this construction of truth in parenthesis allows for a multiplicity of statements to be held at any one time even if logically speaking they are mutually contradictory (ibid.: 94–5).

The same can be said for much of the religious discourse of any Christian church. All the doctrines of such a church are 'true' only in this Sperberian sense. Where I differ from Sperber, however, is over the empirical truth of such statements. Sperber takes it for granted that these statements—'all leopards are Christians', 'the host is the body of Christ', or whatever—are quite obviously untrue. That, according to Sperber, is how we can distinguish a symbolic statement in the first place (ibid.: 2–3).[8] It is not clear to me how he can be so sure of this. It is only within a certain Western 'scientific' discourse, one that defines the word 'empirical' as Sperber is using it, that such statements have no truth. There is, however, by all known methods of proof, no way of knowing whether leopards are Christians or whether the host is the body of Christ. What Sperber should be saying is that the empirical truth of such statements does not matter, that this is not an issue that anybody would normally dream of raising, that the question is irrelevant. For the ordinary member of the society which Sperber studied, and for the ordinary Catholic, the truth of such statements is simply taken for granted.

The Question of Proof

During a seminar that I presented on my material about a Roman Catholic congregation, I was once asked how far the mass 'proved' the existence of God. This struck me at the time as a very strange question. The implication behind it was that normal, rational people cannot accept such nonsensical notions as the existence of God. What is more, it is only those who go to mass who hold such strange, irrational beliefs. Somehow, therefore, what goes on during mass must 'prove' that God exists if it is to persuade otherwise rational people to accept such irrational

8. What is important for Sperber is that these statements perform the same function as empirical truths, i.e. they are encyclopaedic, not metaphoric (which is something very different). If this is the case, then like all encyclopaedic statements they can be proved wrong (or unknowable) in relation to the world as it is (Sperber 1975: 98ff.).

ideas. That, however, presents completely the wrong picture and, I would suggest, is to begin from the wrong end of the argument.

This is best illustrated by a short passage from Southwold's book (1983: 76) in which he talks about the creation story in Genesis. Southwold comments that this story, whether taken literally or not, is usually seen as saying something about God, about God's creativity, God's love, or—at the extreme, and following one line of argument—about God's very existence. Southwold suggests that this is not the point of the story at all. If we expect such stories to tell us about God, then we are looking at them from the wrong angle. 'God' in such stories, Southwold argues, should be taken as a basic assumption, an unquestioned 'truth', as should God's goodness, God's love and so on. What the story is saying, according to Southwold, is that if God is 'good', and if we accept that without question, and if God created the world, as the story tells us, then the world itself must be good. It is the assumptions that we make about God that give significance to the world, not the other way round. Southwold goes on to say much the same about the doctrine of the incarnation, namely that it is not an erudite philosophical argument about the nature of God, but rather that if God, whom we know to be good, takes on human form, then humanity must in consequence be 'blessed', be special, even be divine. The discourse is not one about the nature of God but one about the world, about humanity, about ourselves and our everyday lives, one which takes the existence and nature of God as a given.

Much the same, therefore, can be said about the mass, but in a rather more complex fashion. The mass can no more prove the existence of God than can the first four chapters of Genesis. The mass is played out within a framework of what Southwold would call belief statements, the truth of which is not to be questioned. It is these statements, therefore, fervently held and known to be 'true', that give significance to the mass. The mass cannot prove that the host becomes the body of Christ, but the knowledge of that 'truth'—the statement held in parenthesis, as Sperber would have it—gives the mass its significance; by implication, it also gives anything else that is brought into that mass, from an individual's personal life or elsewhere, the same kind of significance. The question still remains, however, of where the source of these basic true statements is to be found, and why people are so willing, in fact eager, to hold them as 'true' despite an environment beyond, and sometimes within, the church that claims, like Sperber, that they must be false. As Sperber says in a different context, the acceptance of the explanation must itself be explained.

In an article titled 'Is Symbolic Thought Prerational?' (1982), Sperber develops some of his ideas on symbolism one step further. He re-emphasizes the point that symbols do not 'mean' and claims that these symbols can help us manipulate ideas that the rational part of our mind cannot cope with. The question that Sperber asks is that if symbols do not 'mean', in the normal sense of the word, then what is it that they do? For Sperber, what symbols do is to 'evoke', but he is never entirely clear what it is that is being evoked. At one level what is being evoked is purely an emotional response that has no rational basis. At another level it is some kind of interconnection between ideas such that the idea of bread, for example, will

always be related to the concept of the body of Christ. Sperber, however, rejects both these suggestions as being too simplistic and claims that what is evoked is neither an emotion nor a connection of ideas, but rather a system of thought in which the associations that are presented do in fact make sense. In other words, bread does not in itself evoke the idea of Jesus' body or anything else; rather, the equation 'bread equals body' evokes the system of thought in which this equation makes sense, that is, the whole tradition of the Roman Catholic Church.

If we acknowledge this kind of argument and substitute the idea of a 'belief statement' for what Sperber defines as a 'symbolic statement', then we could say that a belief statement is a statement that is set apart from ordinary discourse, one whose truth is not questioned at an empirical level and which evokes a system of thought within which that statement makes sense. This would match nicely with Pouillon's understanding of belief as implying at least some kind of doubt. The belief statement is of a different order form ordinary discourse. It is a symbolic statement whose empirical truth is irrelevant, a statement which evokes a system of thought, a total system of belief, very like the one which Evans-Pritchard constructed for the Nuer, in which such statements do, in fact, make sense. Here, however, I would claim that the argument begins to fall apart. Sperber's argument may well be correct for Roman Catholics, who have a clear and obvious system of theology, though this assumption might also be questioned. For the Anglicans of my original example, however, I would want to question Sperber's assumptions very carefully and look much more closely at the disjointed nature of the belief statements used, their total lack of reference to belief systems and the seeming inconsistency of these belief statements in relation to death. Such an investigation could prove very instructive. To proceed with it, however, I will have to turn from anthropology to sociology.

Sociology and Superstition

Sociologists have, on the whole, been much more willing than anthropologists to acknowledge the place of belief within their studies. This is probably because they are working within their own society, where beliefs do tend to have an importance that is not so obvious or so easily available in other societies, for the reasons I have outlined earlier. During the 1960s, for example, sociologists of religion produced a series of so-called 'Parish Studies'. These studies measured how many people came to church, what social background they came from, what other aspects of church life they participated in, and so on.[9] Occasionally they asked questions

9. A good example of this kind of work is C. K. Ward's *Priests and People* (1961). In the introduction (pp. 1–29) Ward gives some of the background to this kind of study and gives references to a number of similar works.

about belief. The emphasis in all these studies, however, was entirely statistical. A much more recent and more sophisticated version of this type of study is the Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life produced at the University of Notre Dame in the United States (Leege and Gremillon 1984–1987). This looked at the nature of congregational life, the relationship between beliefs and politics, the experience of worship and so on, all through an essentially statistical methodology. Whatever the questions are, however, and however sophisticated a survey of this kind is, it can only have a limited value.

The use of statistics has also been developed through national and international surveys (Abrams *et al.* 1985). Such surveys have traditionally measured the attendance at, or membership of, religious institutions, but they have also asked questions about belief, which have produced statements such as '76% of British people believe in God' (Thompson 1988: 225). Such surveys, however, very rarely ask what the respondents might mean by the word 'God', and never appear to question what they might mean by 'belief'.[10] Statistics alone, therefore, cannot begin to help us answer the questions about the nature of belief raised in the earlier part of this article. To answer these questions another method is required.

During the 1970s sociologists of religion came to a similar conclusion, and another method was tried, which was much closer to those of anthropology. A number of researchers went out and spent some time living in different parts of the country, usually in isolated communities, and began to ask questions about the role of religion within these communities (e.g. Moore 1974; Clark 1982). The emphasis in these studies was primarily on social factors associated with religious belonging rather than belief as such, but they did provide some ideas and data that can be compared with my own research. One typical example was David Clark's study of a North Yorkshire fishing village, *Between Pulpit and Pew* (1982). The community in question is almost entirely Methodist or Congregational in its church attendance, with a small Roman Catholic presence and a very marginal Anglican church. As the study progresses we learn a great deal about the community, the views of its members, the organization of the chapels and the rivalry that exists between them. Belief, however, is never really explored beyond saying that, like everything else, it is 'old fashioned'.

The premise that Clark is working on is that there is a fundamental conflict between 'official' belief and what is variously termed 'folk' belief, 'popular' belief or 'superstition' (ibid.: 7ff.). It is clear to Clark that there must be a distinction between these two types of belief, as it is said to be clear to the leaders of the various churches and chapels. How clear this distinction is to the average member of the congregations, however, or even to ordinary villagers, is more debatable. Clark gives an excellent analysis of the history of the area, showing how the old

10. Grace Davie, for example, uses such surveys to develop her own thesis that religion in contemporary Britain is more a matter of 'believing' than 'belonging'. Even Davie, however, fails to ask any serious questions about what might be meant by 'believing', or what 'believing' might actually consist of (1994: 74ff.).

superstitious beliefs of the fishermen on the coast had hardly been touched by Christianity until the Methodist preachers arrived in the late eighteenth century. From that time on, however, while there was a constant tension between superstition and official belief in the eyes of the religious establishment, the people themselves seem to have kept the two very much apart: the official beliefs are for the chapel, the superstitions are for the coast. This all seems to make a great deal of sense. However, I would like to question the real nature of the distinction that Clark draws between official and popular beliefs. Clark is seeing the village mainly from the point of view of the official religion—he even acknowledges this at times—not as one of the villagers. How far, therefore, do the people themselves see these two forms of 'belief' as being in conflict? There is, I would suggest, enough evidence even in Clark's own study to raise the question and, I think, to offer an alternative answer.

A similar question could be raised for the members of the congregations of the churches I studied. As I sat listening to conversations at various times when some matter of belief was being discussed, I felt the usefulness of Clark's distinction between official and popular belief. There were a number of women at one church, for example, who firmly believed in the power of astrology and in the healing powers of spiritualist healers, even though it was not the official line of the 'Church'. They were, in most people's view, 'superstitious'. Obviously the superstitions were not as clear-cut and complex as those relating to the fishing industry, although outside the church such superstitions may well be far more prevalent, particularly in relation to astrology and spiritualist healing. I still felt the need, however, to make the distinction. I was aware of the 'official' doctrine and I knew that what was being talked about here was not in line with that teaching. But does this mean that for the people themselves there were clearly two distinct sets of belief? I would argue not.

Superstition and Popular Religion

The article that follows Pouillon's discussion of belief in the same book is Belmont's 'Superstition and Popular Religion in Western Societies' (1982). In this paper, Belmont argues for a distinction between superstition, or popular beliefs, and official beliefs, similar to that which Clark is developing. She goes on to suggest that this must always be true where the Christian religion is dominant, because the logical cohesion of the Christian doctrinal system is unable to take account of all the aspects of an individual's life. Christianity's very systematic approach to belief makes this impossible. Belmont argues, therefore, that there were large areas of life that Christianity failed to touch (including those dealing with sickness, danger or uncertainty), leaving the potential for the continuation of pagan practices as 'superstitions'. This is almost exactly what Clark was trying

to say in relation to his fishing village. So long as Christianity failed to take the real dangers of the fishing industry seriously, superstitions relating to these dangers would continue.

This argument is very persuasive as a historical overview, and as such I would probably want to agree with it.[11] Where I would wish to question it, however, is in the way that such issues are viewed from the point of view of ordinary people. All the views that draw a distinction between official and popular belief—Clark's, that of the clergy in the mainline churches, Belmont's, even my own preconceived ideas—are looking at the situation from the top down. What would the same situation look like if viewed from the bottom up? Would it be any different?

In exploring this kind of question, we should perhaps look beyond the specific context of the Christian churches towards the kind of 'religion' supposedly held by those who do not belong to any kind of religious organization. Scholars talk of 'popular religion', 'invisible religion', 'traditional religion', 'conventional religion', 'common religion', 'implicit religion', 'superstition', or 'civil religion' (Davie 1994: 74).[12] But what do these forms of religion actually look like?

Geoffrey Ahern's contribution to the book *Inner City God*, '"I Do Believe in Christmas": White Working-class People and Anglican Clergy in Inner-city London' (1987), offers one particular insight into what might be called popular religion. This work is based on a 'qualitative survey', that is, on long interviews with specific individuals in the East End of London. The people interviewed had no specific links with the churches, and therefore Ahern was able to investigate how ordinary non-churchgoers understood their beliefs. The survey draws out a number of points, including the 'them and us' attitude to the Church, the fact that people's beliefs were clearly dependent on their past, and finally, how difficult people appeared to find it to talk about specific beliefs at all. None of these conclusions in themselves should surprise us. If we take these three points in reverse order, however, we can see something very similar to the kind of argument I have been developing in this paper.

First, we are told that ordinary people cannot fully articulate their beliefs. This is very common and, following Southwold's argument, should not surprise us.

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11. I found exactly the same experience during a visit to Tanzania. In the area where I was working, traditional healers and exorcists functioned openly alongside the Christian churches and were visited by many Christians, including ministers and priests. It was acknowledged that these traditional healers dealt with areas of human life that missionary Christianity simply could not engage with.

12. Scholars can never fully define or distinguish these different terms. The problem, I would argue, is actually with the word 'religion'. Our primary image of religion is Christianity, that is, of 'a' religion with underlying assumptions of coherence and consistency, etc. The central point of all the terms listed, however, is incoherence. How, then, are we to understand 'popular religion'? We probably have to drop the idea of 'religion' completely and go back to the idea of 'belief'.

Beliefs are simply there. They are accepted as true and never questioned. What this survey does show, however, is that beliefs can exist in many different forms, as stories or images as well as in specific statements. Secondly, therefore, Ahern argues that beliefs or belief statements are related to past experiences. Again this appears to be obvious once we begin to think about it. Ahern talks of elderly men who had been in the trenches during the First World War and of the way in which the most fundamental things they asserted related directly to this experience and were expressed in relation to stories about this experience. Any body of ideas about the world that an individual has, any series of 'belief statements', will grow over time. They will relate to significant times in that person's life. It is this very process of growing, however, which will mean that, for most people, these statements will exist largely in isolation of each other, each one related to a particular event in the past, but never seen as a whole or as in any way related to each other. Here again, we see that it is impossible to articulate beliefs, not simply because respondents have not formulated them, but also because they have never previously been asked to relate them together within a single discourse.

This brings us to the 'them and us' attitude to the Church. As we have seen, the existence of a system of beliefs is itself a central belief within most Christian contexts. This is seen far more clearly by those outside the Church than by those inside. What is more, those outside also appear to see the contradictions and confusions in the way individuals relate to particular belief statements from within the system and often end up dismissing Church people as 'hypocrites'. Those outside the churches, however, still need belief statements for themselves. They will draw on any that are to hand or on any that have helped in the past, without worrying too much about their source and without making any distinction between 'official beliefs' and 'superstitions'. They will also reject those which are irrelevant or have been harmful in the past. Above all they will not put these belief statements into any kind of 'framework' but will simply draw on those that are relevant to the situation in hand. This leads me to propose what I would want to call a 'situational theory of belief', i.e. that belief statements are used only in relation to specific situations, as and when they are needed, and are otherwise forgotten or dismissed. Before doing this, however, we need to return to those people who are members of Christian congregations, to those who supposedly do have systems of belief to deal with, and ask how far they can be said to follow the same, or a similar, kind of procedure.

The Economy of Logic

Bourdieu, I would suggest, raises a very similar issue when discussing a very different field of anthropology in his book *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977). The basis of this book is the distinction between 'rules' and 'practices'. From

Bourdieu's point of view, rules and practices must be analyzed as two separate aspects of society whose relationship with each other must be explored as carefully as the relationship of any other two aspects of society. Bourdieu takes this argument a few steps further as the book progresses by looking at other aspects of what the people he is studying say about themselves and about their society. If we have to distinguish between 'rules' and 'practices', between what people say they should do and what they actually do in practice, can we take what is said about any topic within their society for granted, even religion? Bourdieu does not phrase the question in quite this way, but by showing how the rules that govern marriage can be generated through an understanding of the basic thought process of society, he goes on to show how this process can then be applied to other areas of social life, suggesting that what is being said at any one time about any one issue is governed more by the basic oppositions that underlie the thinking of the members of the society than by what is actually done on the ground (1977: 72–94).

Bourdieu eventually comes to look at the 'calendar' and the way in which the people he is studying think about time and relations between different aspects of time. He shows that this, like everything else in the society, is determined by certain basic underlying oppositions in the thought process of the people (ibid.: 96ff.). However, he goes further than this by showing that for each moment in time, the kind of opposition that is relevant in understanding the place of that moment within the calendrical system changes. From one point on the calendar, the distinction between work and leisure in terms of agriculture might be important, while at another, the distinction might be between hoeing and harvesting, that is, between two different kinds of work. At each point some kind of opposition is vital, but exactly what that opposition is will be determined, not by underlying rules as such, but by the situation in which the speakers find themselves. This is what Bourdieu calls the 'economy of logic', the fact that a person will use no more of the overriding system of oppositions than is absolutely necessary for their specific purposes. What is important, therefore, in thinking about space, time, human relationships, etc., is the perception of oppositions. Exactly which oppositions are chosen, however, is a function of the issue that needs to be stressed.

At first sight this may not seem to have very much to do with the understanding of belief in the Christian church. I am not going to argue, for example, that Christian thinking has a deeply rooted oppositional basis, although that could perhaps be done. It is not the underlying thought process that interests me at this stage. What interests me is the concept of the 'economy of logic' and the implications this has for the understanding of belief. Is it not possible for individuals to use only as much 'belief' as is necessary for their particular purpose at any particular moment in time? A complex and coherent 'system' of beliefs may well exist in academic theology, but there is no reason why this whole system should be invoked every time that any one person makes a particular statement of belief. The statement of belief itself will, as I have suggested, have been made for a specific purpose. Could not the person making the statement use only that aspect of the total system that suits their present needs? This is certainly what Ahern

appeared to find in the East End of London, and it also explains, very clearly, what the members of the discussion group I was involved with were doing in relation to death.

A *Situational Theory of Belief*

If what I have just suggested is the case, and I think that this can be easily shown, then what implications does this have for the way in which 'belief' itself is understood? Let me try and draw together a few of the ideas that I have already presented in this paper and attempt to give my view of the way beliefs are held and used by the ordinary member of a Christian congregation and, by implication, by those beyond the churches. The whole point of this argument, I would suggest, is not that it makes sense of isolated examples, of particular statements of belief, which all the other possible interpretations do just as well; rather it begins to build up into an overall picture that might be able to explain long-term behaviour in which an individual may state one belief one day and another the next without realizing that the two are, by academic reckoning, mutually incompatible. This is not, I would argue, entirely a matter of ignorance; there is clearly a deeper reason for it.

Earlier in the paper I referred to Sperber's notion that belief statements are a different kind of statement from the ordinary, everyday views of any member of a congregation. To say 'I believe' implies that what is 'believed' cannot be proved empirically and that its empirical truth is largely irrelevant; to say 'I believe' is to make a 'symbolic' assertion. However, I suggested that Sperber's own assumption that what is asserted—or, as he would put it, what is 'evoked'—by such a statement is a 'system' of beliefs to be slightly distracting. If we take Bourdieu seriously, we will see that the statement itself will only express as much of any system as is needed to be expressed at any one point. This may well imply the need for a wider system or, following Ahern, it may not. What is important, however, is not the system as a whole but rather the individual statement. If this is the case, then the distinction that has been made between superstition and official belief becomes irrelevant. A person, we are assuming, will state any belief, official or popular, that is of value at any particular moment and in any particular situation. From this I would argue—and my own experience of talking to the members of the various congregations would back this up—that ordinary Christians do not think in terms of systematic beliefs or systems of theology at all; rather, they tend to think almost entirely in terms of specific belief statements as and when these statements are needed. This is impossible to prove, as I have said, not least because one of the belief statements they find most helpful to express is, 'we believe that there is a logical system to our beliefs'. They regard this statement as an unquestioned truth, just as they would any other belief statement, and

it is this which gives each one of the individual statements its particular authority. This is a belief which is often stated, but that is not how particular individuals actually work.

The need for authority reinforces the assertion that there is a coherent system of beliefs, whether this is based upon tradition or the Bible. In the everyday thinking of individuals, however, and especially in the way belief statements are used, we see the isolation of specific statements, each being used within a particular situation. This creates 'situational belief'. What still needs to be asked, of course, is why we need such statements at all and perhaps more importantly why we need the statement that all the statements form a coherent whole. Here I think we must return to Sperber. Sperber argues (1982) that we use a statement of belief when our minds cannot cope with the irrationality of the situation, when an empirical statement no longer makes sense. Belief statements are used to deal with illness, misfortune or grief. Belief statements are used to express the sense of something beyond ourselves, over which we have no control. Belief statements are used to provide security and to justify actions that are largely unjustifiable. In all these cases the assertion of a 'belief' transfers the argument away from the everyday to the 'sacred', to the special, to the other. It gives the argument a special power and relevance. This is, of course, as true for superstition as it is for official beliefs. It is also at this point that we move from Pouillon's 'belief that' to 'belief in'. It is the very fact that belief statements are empirically unverifiable that means that we have to commit ourselves to them, to assert them as truth, to trust them implicitly. It is this that gives them their emotional significance and power.

In conclusion to this paper, therefore, I will sum up my theory of situational belief with the following points:

(a) Belief consists in a series of specific statements which are not necessarily connected.
(b) The empirical truth of such statements has to be unverifiable, that is, they are beyond ordinary discourse.
(c) This means that individuals have to assert the truth of the statements by reference to the past, to faith, to the wider community or to some other external authority.
(d) This demands a certain level of commitment rather than a simple matter of assent.
(e) Such statements therefore become significant to the individuals who assert them and are committed to them (this is also true of superstitions for those who take them seriously at the point at which they are asserted).
(f) By using such statements, individuals can bring significance to situations of danger, sickness or uncertainty in their lives.

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