'Rodney Needham and Paul Veyne on religious belief'

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I recently came across a review by Rodney Needham of Paul Veyne's *Did the Greeks believe in their myths?* I was quite intrigued by this as these two authors are representatives of two approaches to the study of religious belief and the anthropology of belief I have been thinking about for a while . They have often squabbled in my head, and in my imagination, Veyne always wins the argument, so I was curious to see what Needham would make of Veyne's argument and the strong implicit critique of his own position it entails.

Social scientists have a difficult relationship with religious belief. On the one hand, belief is often absolutely central to accounts of religious communities and practice: Group A carries out this practice because of a belief X, religious innovator B used to do Y, so we can conclude he believed Z, and so on. Such accounts are ubiquitous, in the everyday language of religious people and non-specialists, psychologists of religion, and almost just as much, for all their denials, in the language of social scientists. Because this model of religious life sees belief-language as being a more or less reliable reflection of religious people's understanding of the world, it is known (mainly by its critics) as 'intellectualism'.

On the other hand, academic students of religion have long argued that belief is just not what most religious traditions are about, and that the use of the concept of belief is deeply misleading. I call this position 'belief scepticism'. Academic belief scepticism goes back at least as far as William Robertson Smith's 1889 *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*. There are many variations, but a general outline of this position is as follows: we modern students of religion think that religion is all about a set of propositions that followers believe to be true, but this view of belief as propositional and central to religious life is a relatively modern Christian innovation; other religious traditions are more about practice or symbolic expression.

This belief scepticism argument has also been extended to Christianity, for example, by Abby Day, who recently argued that religion in the UK, including the that of her Christian interviewees (not all were Christian), was about social belonging and morality and not about propositional belief.

Although both intellectualism and belief scepticism have important things to teach us about religious and other belief, I do not accept either (1) that religious belief language is *always* a straightforward representation of systematically related propositions to which followers assent, as the intellectualists are alleged to claim, or (2) that belief-language *always* has another function (part of practice, deference to a social system, expression of moral values) and *never* refers to propositional beliefs, except perhaps in the case of (some) Christians, as the belief sceptics often argue.

I have long been a proponent of a third position, which I call the 'ethnographic' approach to belief—it might equally be described as 'historical'. This simply means recognising that it is not only first order information—'God is three persons in one substance', 'twins are birds', 'actions have consequences'—that varies between persons, cultures, periods of history, but also the second-order, meta-cognitive information and practices relating to how one is supposed to relate cognitively and otherwise to this information.

The anthropologist and philosopher Rodney Needham wrote a long and influential book making the belief-sceptic case, *Belief, language and experience* (1972). I have always found his arguments in the book problematic and I'm always surprised by the deference with which his argument is treated by contemporary anthropologists.

Paul Veyne is a French historian of classical antiquity, who was closely associated with Foucault. His 1983 book *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes?*, published in English translation in 1988 as *Did the Greeks believe in their myths?* is, I think, an exemplary instance of an ethnographic approach to belief that takes into account different styles, or 'modes' of belief, as much as the content to which belief was applied.

His answer to the eponymous question is 'yes and no'—the ordinary Greek did not believe in myth in the same way that he believed in things he had experienced directly, but he still believed that the events recounted in myths were true. The different modes of truth were distinguished by different truth conditions.

Veyne neatly demonstrates the importance of understanding the plurality of modes of belief or 'programmes of truth' by contrasting the attitudes of the Greek in the street with those of classical historians such as Pausanias and Thucydides. The historians no less than hoi polloi believe the events described by myths were true, but their activity was motivated by a second-order imperative that insisted that there could only be one programme of truth. The aim of their practice was to apply reason, *logos*, in order to reconcile the apparent contradictions between *mythos*—myths about gods and heroes—and stories of the contemporary lives of ordinary people.

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