

Cultures of Belief – New paper out in Anthropological Theory

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I've just had a new paper out in [Anthropological Theory](#) — this is behind a paywall, I'll make a post-print version available through this website soon for those who don't have access to the journal through an academic library.

The paper is titled 'Cultures of ignorance'. In a nutshell, the argument is that academic students of religion have settled on a way of accounting for religious language and thought that distinguishes ordinary, everyday belief from religious belief. The former is understood to be literal and practical. The latter, by contrast, is taken to be indirect, metaphorical, symbolic, affective, moral and so on, and by implication *not* to be about propositional belief. Drawing on my own field research in northern China's Inner Mongolia, I argue that there are ways of relating to a body of true knowledge that fit neither of these models. I argue that in order to understand what is going on in this situation and many others we need to develop an ethnographic sensibility to locally specific 'cultures of belief'. To get this project off to a start, I suggest some initial building blocks for a general anthropology of belief, based on religious thought in ancient Greece, mediaeval Judaism, and contemporary US Evangelism.

Here's the abstract:

In popular thought about the meaning of religion, as well as established debates in anthropology, religious belief is interpreted as either a commitment to a clear set of propositions, or as a non-literal, symbolic, ethical or social commitment. Anthropologists have tended to support the latter of these positions, so much so that this can now be seen as the 'anthropological' position; it is also characteristic of the view of scholars in related disciplines, such as religious studies. This article argues for a third possibility: that religious (and other) believers are often engaged in complex, reflexive practices that stipulate specific cognitive and non-cognitive relationships to propositional content. This is demonstrated with reference to contemporary Buddhism in Inner Mongolia, China. The author argues that the existence of such cultures of belief demonstrates there is a need for a systematic anthropological theory of belief and suggests some sources that may contribute to its formulation.

Mair, J., 2013. Cultures of belief. *Anthropological Theory*, 12(4), pp.448–466.