

Believing the Evidence*

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1 The Naturalness of Belief

Abstract

The study of ancient religion, partly in response to anthropology, moved in recent decades away from thinking in terms of ‘belief’ to studying ‘ritual’: this has a fundamental effect on how we treat the evidence (or decide what evidence is, and what it is *of*). I argue here that the transition is incomplete and explore some of the deeper implications of thinking in terms of ‘belief’ (whether implicitly or explicitly) and argue that these continue to hamper our perspective on ancient religion. The ‘otherness’ of ancient religion does

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not reside in the 'rationality' of their thinking: rather, it is axiomatic (their crediting ritual with power to effect changes in the wider world).

Somewhere around 2000, there was an international movement which encouraged people to put 'Jedi' as their religion in censuses. The homepage of the Jedi Church says:

The Jedi Church believes that there is one all powerful force that binds all things in the universe together...So quiet your mind and listen to the force within you!

The interesting aspect of this for our purposes is the prominence of the word 'believes', which frames everything that follows. Apparently, if you want to start a religion, even as a joke, you talk about beliefs.¹ To a modern reader, it seems absurd even to note this: how can a religion *not* be about belief? A more interesting question for our purposes is whether it is a useful historical category when talking about ancient religions or indeed any religion that does not reside with a broadly secular framework.²

Modern scholarship of religion is built on the attempts since the end of the Victorian era to form a discourse of religion that struggled with the cultural effects of European empire, namely the confrontation with 'primitive' religions: typically the question was built around the assumption of European superiority. Thus what needed to be explained was how we got from 'there' to 'here', so we

had schemas posited where magic had 'evolved' into religion, which had (in our case) been superseded by science. To be associated now with such schemes (the chief culprits are Frazer and Tylor)³ is now academic death: if we centre our discussions on some kind of evolution from religion to science as they did, anthropology and history become the exhaustive cataloguing of others' fallibility. It was Emile Durkheim brought light where there had been darkness, delved into the mysteries and triumphantly returned with the laws for anthropology, and like all hero-founders, has found his words used for contrasting positions ever since. The principle that persists the most powerfully was that of religion as a projection of a group or society – 'from Durkheim onwards insistence on the social as the primary area of analysis has been a commonplace in anthropology and now also in modern history'.⁴ Freed from answering the question 'how could they be so wrong?', 'religion' becomes a broad point of access to how a society functions, since for the most part, 'religion' and politics are impossible to disentangle.⁵

That is not to say that the anthropology and history of religion now has a secure and agreed basis: it might be said that we are still grappling (albeit with greater sophistication) with the original difficulty, namely the shock that underlies the experience of confronting for the first time a culture who take it for granted that the cosmos is a very different place from the one that we are convinced it is (and when I say 'we' I mean a typical Western intellectual with a secular outlook).⁶ Of course I might usefully explore non-secular perspectives but space does not

permit that and secondly, those perspectives would have their own distinctively orchestrated blind-spots. My project here is to extend secular discourse, not to circumvent it.

One of the results of this ongoing discourse is that we have become far more sensitive to what we are bringing to the evidence: when we talk about ‘religion’ and ‘belief’ we are generally drawing on a predominantly Christianised perspective that emphasised inner experience, spirituality, the well-being of the soul (as more important than the body) and some kind of ‘core belief’ (which is suspiciously similar structurally to the Catholic creed).⁷ If we look for these, we frequently look in vain (often even when we are looking at Christianity).⁸ That is not in dispute: the difficulty is that the expectations are often unconscious or unacknowledged.

The study of Roman religion has a similar history: most 20th century scholarship found Roman religion wanting because it did not ‘fit the bill’. Their apparent obsession with ritual, the impossibility of agreeing with the propositions that we inferred underlay their religious practice and a distinct lack of recognisable ‘spirituality’ led to the impression that the ‘original’, more vibrant and altogether more *spiritual* Roman religion had become ossified to the point of meaningless by the time they reached the historical (ie decipherable) period. Thus we were looking for spirituality, rich inner conviction and a preoccupation with the well-being of the soul, but all we found was fastidious legalism and an attachment to ‘sticking

to how things have always been done’.

The persistence of this well-preserved corpse of Roman religion was accounted for by the suggestion that the elite, more intelligent and discerning than the credulous masses (that is, coincidentally unwilling to believe what modern scholars happen not to believe either), had kept up a pretence for political reasons but clearly signalled to those that could read between the lines their disapproval of all the nonsense. This position was reasonably consistent with itself: it accounted for rather a lot of the evidence we had. So when a change began it was not so much in the evidence as a wholesale questioning whether the position was plausible as a whole.⁹

Moving our focus back to anthropology, a major landmark was the publication in 1972 of Rodney Needham’s *Belief, Language and Experience*. A systematic synthesis of philosophical and anthropological scrutinies led him to conclude that we should abandon all use of the word ‘belief’ in discussing religion:

Anything that we might please to say, and which in common speech is usually hung on to the handy peg of ‘belief’, will be better said by recourse to some other word; and if we are clear about what we want to say, we shall find that it can be said clearly only by another word.¹⁰

Thus, as Lindquist & Coleman (2008) put it, we are drawn to think ‘against’

belief rather than ‘with’ it.

Building partly on Needham’s legacy and the resulting anthropology, ancient history also turned its attention away from aspects of belief, experience and spirituality towards ritual.¹¹ The advantages of studying Roman religion from the point of view of ritual instead of some (usually inferred) belief is precisely that most of the evidence that we have is *already* intensely focused around ritual actions.

The march of ritual meant that Feeney (1998) could rhetorically derail the expectation that we should organise our analysis by ‘belief’: it seemed dead in the water.

A dynamically changing polytheistic system as an exceedingly problematic place in which to find the grounding for a question like ‘what were the religious beliefs of Augustus?’ This man . . . was participant in an object of various new and traditional cults at Rome and throughout the empire, and initiate into the mysteries of Eleusis since the age of 32. He was acclaimed in marble, bronze, papyrus and song as the descendant of Venus and the son of divus Julius. He was the vice regent of Jupiter, founder of a new temple of Jupiter’s founder, and always carried a sealskin with him as protection against thunderstorms. In which of these contexts is the core of belief to be found?

The abandonment of belief as an organising principle also led to the acknowl-

edgement that we still have difficulties if we search for a ‘core’ elsewhere. When we speak of Roman religion, it is not a simple (single) entity: should we describe ‘official’ religion (as organised or at least sanctioned by the state)? Or the constellation of practices at other levels (such as family)? There is perhaps one persistent feature – ritual to get the gods (back, if necessary) on your side (a state of affairs known in Rome as the *pax deum*, ‘peace of the gods’).¹² But beyond that general feature (which Rome shared with almost every ancient European culture that we know of), we cannot briefly present any definitive examples, image or ‘essence’. We know that Rome embedded ritual practice deeply into civic life via a rich calendar of sacrifices and several colleges of priests who reported to the Senate rather like expert committees – essentially, an institutionalised habit of getting the gods on their side as often as possible.¹³ In Republican Rome, at state level, a key part of what we call religious practice was concerned with prodigies, adverse signs that warned of future problems because they were evidence of a rupture of the peace of the gods (*ira deorum*, the anger of the gods).¹⁴ A prodigy essentially meant that something had begun to go amiss with the cosmos but there was usually time to put it right through ritual appeasement.¹⁵ Sacrifice allowed for the practice of certain kinds of divination (the entrails of the animal were examined for signs by specialist diviners, the *haruspices*)¹⁶ though that is only a subset of the enormous range of divinatory practices we find in antiquity. The point about ritual is that it not only gave access to the gods’ mood, it was also the remedy to their anger: if

the signs continued to be adverse, one could continue making offerings until they were appeased (a process known as *perlitatio*).

In a state that placed great emphasis on divine support, getting rituals right was a serious matter: a ‘pious’ nation in antiquity was one that diligently looked for adverse signs and appeased the gods promptly. So if we take a look at one of our best (and, we assume, fairly representative) sources for Roman religion, the annals of the Arval Brethren (a ‘minor’ priesthood) we see not debate about one’s inner relationship with any divinity but rather what appears to be a ‘technology of supplication’.¹⁷ Whatever Roman religion was, it seems to have put a great emphasis for the most part on expecting *practical* results: the gods’ had an over-weening influence on the outcome of events and if you failed and could not find a plausible cause in the human realm there was a good chance it was down to ritual error.¹⁸

The Roman state did not attempt ‘personal’ conversion in the modern sense nor even enforce participation in civic ritual (to our knowledge) for centuries until a perceived crisis in 249 AD.¹⁹ None of this is to say that individuals had no personal input or practices, just that ritual practice appears to be the best place to start our enquiries. The ‘ritual turn’ creates a different map of ancient religion from ‘belief’. What becomes important is *whose* gods, *which* gods: they were not universal or personal in the same way that they are in monotheism and they could be induced to join (or change) sides. Rome had a history of bringing foreign gods

into their fold, thus obtaining greater support (and also depriving their enemies of their protecting deities).²⁰ And though we had put a personal focus on religion, it became obvious that it was often more useful to think of it at a state level – thus we now speak of ‘civic paganism’.²¹

Thus in recent decades, Roman religion has seen a massive expansion of interest, and the vast majority of studies focus on identity (what does it mean to be Roman/not Roman?).²² Needham’s argument won the day, it seems. All of which makes a recent resurgence of interest in some quarters in ‘belief’ all the more challenging.²³

2 The Return of Belief

King (2003)’s ‘The organisation of Roman religious beliefs’ is one of the most sustained attempts to restore ‘belief’ explicitly as a frame of reference for studying ancient religion: it is therefore worth examining the arguments both for specific points, but also as opportunities to explore other issues that are relevant, but perhaps less explicit, elsewhere.

It will be argued here that the arguments that have been employed against the use of the word “belief” are not self-consistent, and the calls to banish the term from Roman studies seem premature, for the term “belief” is appropriate and useful for describing some aspects of

the Roman religious experience.

He asserts firstly that Needham rejected the term 'belief' 'on the grounds that it could not be translated into the language of the Nuer people of Sudan. Second, he argues that 'the word "belief" has a wide range of definitions . . . the lack of a consistent meaning makes the term useless for analysis.' He continues by saying that these two arguments contradict each other, on the grounds that one needs a specific definition to know whether or not it can be rendered into Nuer. Needham's argument, so the logic goes, is thus 'disabled' and we must discard his claim that 'belief' should be abandoned.²⁴

This objection seems unconvincing to me on two counts: in order to establish that 'belief' is particular (indeed, peculiar) to the modern West, Needham examines far more languages than just Nuer²⁵ but even if he had limited himself to one language and culture, I also see no logical problem with asserting that something's vacuity or lack of specificity makes it impossible for it to be translated. There is no contradiction in asserting that the English word 'thing' has so many meanings and allusions that it does not have a single Latin equivalent and that we are therefore well advised to avoid using the word in translation from Latin since a different word can always be used with more accuracy. This is precisely analogous to what Needham said of belief.

King goes on to note rhetorically that the term 'ritual' can also be said to

have too many meanings to be of use but has not been discarded.²⁶ Thereby discounting the argument that a lack of an agreed unified meaning invalidates the use of ‘belief’, King (278) proposes we test a redefined version of the term against the Roman evidence:

belief is a conviction that the individual (or group of individuals)
holds independently of the need for empirical support.

He cites an example, an inscription by a mother grieving for her daughter which he translates as ‘I believe (*credo*) that some deity or another was jealous of her’.²⁷ Here we surely have a circular argument – the act of translating this way is supposed to prove that the troublesome concept has relevance. The case might be more persuasive if we had more examples of this type that allowed for comparison. Thirdly, and even more damagingly, King seems to have promoted *credo* to a higher status in the sentence than it deserves: I would prefer ‘some god, I suppose (*credo*), begrudged her existence.’²⁸

Is ‘belief’ the most appropriate translation here, and if it is, is this sufficient evidence to restore its general use? Even within this tiny text, vastly divergent readings are possible: do we see almost impossibly heartbreaking acquiescence to what everyone was saying to a distraught mother who has finally come to agree that there is no other explanation that makes sense of a senseless nightmare?²⁹ Or, at the other extreme, does *credo* indicate a flippant disdain for whatever the

cause of death was, an irritation with the bother of deciphering a diagnosis? We simply cannot tell since this example could be used for either position (though my preference is for pathos). But to make this statement *positive evidence* for one particular frame of mind that is precisely the one under suspicion is unconvincing: since elsewhere *credo* is used of accepting an inference from visible evidence,³⁰ we should probably settle nearer to ‘I suppose/I conclude/I accept/I realise/I deduce/I cannot avoid what seems evident’. It seems we could not wish for a better example of the plasticity of apparently straightforward statements: this evidence is almost entirely at our methodological mercy.

The statement that a conviction was held without the need for empirical support is surely a reasonable representation of what most people understand ‘believe’ to refer to but it is one that can only be meaningful if we make certain limiting assumptions about its interpretation and application. At face value, it permits not just ‘anything goes’ but ‘*everything* goes’ (as long as we ignore evidence). It only becomes meaningful when we use it of conclusions that others have already come to which we cannot accept at face value and therefore call ‘beliefs’ rather than ‘deductions’ or ‘conclusions’ (and so on). It cannot refer to the process by which ‘they’ arrived at their ‘beliefs’ because ‘they’ have applied *some* process of discrimination to arrive at a particular proposition. We must distinguish firstly, *their* gathering of ‘evidence’ and only secondly its use in a ‘reasoned’ argument and their formulation of conclusions (beliefs).

To begin with, the Romans would have vigorously contested the claim that they had no evidence for religious deductions: the historians of ancient Rome (ie historians who lived and wrote in antiquity) went to great lengths to display processes of checking the ‘religious’ facts at every step of the process – verification (if possible) of signs, scrutiny of witnesses and the weighing of testimony. They were certainly sensitive to how evidence was more or less plausible in different political and social contexts (eg adverse signs were more likely to be noticed during times of crisis). Beyond that, they were at pains to enshrine the deductive process in their reporting, clearly distinguishing observation of phenomena from the deductions derived from those phenomena (foregrounding language such as *uideri* (‘to appear to be/to be evident’), from which we get ‘evidence’).³¹

I do not wish to imply that King does not know all this (indeed I have rather unfairly used him as a spokesman for a more general position). He must mean not that they thought they had no evidence but that the conclusions they came to (the gods were angry) are so far from our own that from our perspective they *might as well* have had no empirical evidence. Our interpretation of lightning striking a temple – a regular prodigy – is utterly different from theirs (routine expiation of the god’s wrath through sacrifice). In other words, his definition amounts to saying *they were mistaken*, because there *are* no gods and we routinely use ‘believe’ to signal this paradox – they accepted that Jupiter was king of the gods but we do not (and find it hard to imagine how they did). At this point a non-historian

might well acerbically remark ‘we knew that’, as indeed they did to me during the *Evidence* programme. Is that the beginning or end of our enquiry? Using ‘belief’ in this way seems to me more about explaining religion *away* than exploring their epistemological world.

Something does surely have to be explained – it is just that this cannot be done at the level of evidence or evidential reasoning: it is at the level of the axioms upon which the identification of meaningful evidence and the subsequent evidential reasoning were based. Our secular rejection of the existence of gods in the form that we think *they* conceived them in does not need to be proven or repeatedly highlighted. We can disregard any serious discussion of truth-content because we already know that we do not agree with the ancient Romans. Their difference – which is what makes them historically interesting – is precisely what is avoided by definitions that amount to (simply) reasserting that that ‘they were not like us’ (‘they accepted things with a lack of empirical evidence’). The drawback of this sweeping (and profoundly disorientating, when you think it through) approach is that we never get *near* to seeing the contours of their thinking.

Can we then adapt King’s strategy and redefine belief (but differently)? After all, historians are accustomed to problematising almost every term that they use – ‘state’, ‘society’, ‘the self’ ... but the crucial difference, it seems to me, is that with a little practice these problematise *themselves*. It does not take much study of history to realise how difficult notions such as ‘state’ are in practice. Such terms

refuse to be reductive and insist, by their very usage, on evoking a range of possibilities that must be constantly renegotiated by the writer. ‘Belief’, on the other hand, is utterly reductive (requiring the answers ‘yes’, ‘no’ and having only one grey area – ‘don’t know’); rather than demanding enquiry, it conflates closure (the reasonable ceasing of enquiry) with conclusion (an exhaustion of enquiry). Thus, using ‘belief’ cannot be historically useful. The most carefully factual account, when framed in terms of ‘belief’, becomes an extended confirmation of their collective insanity – but our purpose is to make ancient Rome *more* intelligible. The project of rehabilitating ‘belief’ as a subtle lens of enquiry must defeat itself very rapidly simply because ‘belief’ is a simplifying designation.³²

This is in fact what happens in King’s analysis. He proposes that we use beliefs as a reference point in considering Roman paganism and Christianity pagan beliefs but that the former be treated as a polythetic set, highly tolerant of variation and in contrast to the highly organised and regulated Christian beliefs. He refers to an anthropological commonplace – that a different interpretation of the same ritual can unproblematically and simultaneously be held by different people about the same ritual.³³ Paradoxically, his persistent application to the evidence for a lack of cohesion at the level of interpretation means he is ineluctably drawn into arguing that *ritual* is the single most reliable organising principle:

Instead of attempting to reconcile the contradictions of those be-

liefs and assert an orthodox theology, the state priests instead focused on encouraging conformity in ritual practice [orthopraxy]. . . The same rituals could be employed by those who held different beliefs within the context of state-encouraged ritual conformity. (298)

It seems to me that this is equivalent to saying that the defining difference between paganism and Christianity is that one organised itself around ritual and the other around belief, even though he set out to say that they are both organised around beliefs but differently. Arguing that we should see religious organisation as organised on the basis of largely unregulated assumptions/interpretations (which are highly variable, therefore unpredictable, *therefore* not the most useful focus for ‘organisation’) rather than the ritual (whose form was strenuously maintained and altered with the greatest of reluctance in ancient Rome) seems to me to invert an order of priority. It was the very lack of importance placed on belief that allowed it to be so utterly variable, whereas ritual shows an extremely *high* level of regulation and conformity in its performance.³⁴

2.1 Implicit Belief

Thus far we have dealt with explicit use of ‘belief’ by rounding on King’s expression of more widely-held positions but it also causes difficulties when implicit: even in the scholarship that orientates itself around ritual rather than belief, there

is a tendency for the occasional but trenchant use of deprecatory or sneering remarks, as if the writer wishes to signal their distaste, albeit discreetly. Though far from universal, such remarks are not uncommon even in studies that begin by claiming to offer a more sympathetic and nuanced picture of religion. I will argue that the resurgence of belief and the apparently innocuous occurrence of deprecatory remarks are different responses to the same underlying phenomenon. To appreciate the ‘stickiness’ of belief we must move next beyond a focus on the ‘inner’ and ‘personal’ aspects to the broader social implications.

3 The Utility of Belief: the fiduciary contract

The usefulness (and therefore what lies behind the impulse to rehabilitate it) of ‘belief’ lies, I suggest, in its invocation of a ‘fiduciary contract’ (almost an appeasement gesture, in a secular society). In a nutshell, ‘I believe’ encapsulates (and permits) both *my* certainty but also *your* doubt. If you did not doubt (or I did not care in the slightest whether you did), I would say ‘I know’ or otherwise treat my position as ‘real’ and self-evident. In other words, when two or three are gathered together who believe the same thing, the word ‘believe’ is at liberty to disappear from their language. Christians ‘*know*’ that Jesus is risen, and so on. Conversely, from the point of view of the secular hegemony, to declare something to be a belief effectively says that the truth claims are bracketed out of secular

(‘normal’) discourse: as Wittgenstein, cited by Needham (73), put it ‘it isn’t a question of my being anywhere near him [a religious ‘believer’], but on an entirely different plane.’³⁵ As a modern secularist, I might (to put the position at its bluntest) think you’re mad but I will grudgingly allow you to believe what you want – as long as you say and/or act as if ‘it’s a belief’ and thereby keep it ‘private’ (which carries the implication of ‘innocuous to society’). Though Needham discusses this regularly, he focusses on the inner state rather than the social compromise involved and (more to my point) the fact that this compromise is essential for the continued hegemony of secularism.

Lindquist & Coleman (2008) offer an anecdote about an acupuncturist, called to treat a participant in their workshop who described his own practices as ‘beliefs’.³⁶ They draw our attention to some of the dynamics of the fiduciary contract of belief but implicitly deal with it as if it were the spontaneous position of ‘the religious’ without much external pressure. It seems to me that the *self*-positioning in a secular (possibly critical) environment of the ‘religious’ as ‘believers’ who are acutely aware that they are marginal, is better viewed as an unequal compromise whose violation by ‘believers’ would be met with great resistance by ‘non-believers’.³⁷

I should emphasise that I am avoiding any attempt to describe what ‘religious people’ do with ‘belief’.³⁸ I am specifically interested in the way that it is deployed in secular discussion *of* ‘religious people’, often under the impression that

the term can be unproblematically borrowed from those people to whom ‘it belongs’. When a Christian says “I believe in God” to another Christian, it means something very different in practice from when they say it to a secular audience, and it means something different again when a non-believer says of another person ‘they believe in God’. In the second case, they are (like the acupuncturist) positioning themselves on Wittgenstein’s ‘other plane altogether’, and frequently do so as a defensive move (to protect their discourse from interrogation on what they would consider inappropriate criteria, such as ‘material evidence’). In the third case, while (obviously) a whole range of meanings are possible, the situation will generally involve an element of *abandoning* ‘normal’ discussion. I will briefly discuss the second before focussing more fully on my third distinction.

If we think that the secular ‘conceptions’ of ‘belief’ and ‘religion’, whatever their origins (my first distinction), are in their current usage somehow ‘spontaneous’ and ‘natural’, we might as well also conclude that most members of ethnic minorities in the modern West are ‘instinctively hard-working’ and ‘naturally polite’ (especially to high-status white native Anglophone men) and that women, instinctively happy to be routinely interrupted and ‘put straight’ by men in discussion, just *prefer* to do the lion’s share of the housework (they even enjoy grumbling about it – that’s just what women do).³⁹

We should not then be so surprised by the acupuncturist’s proclamation of his practice as a set of beliefs. He appears to be under no illusions about where the

boundaries lie, and he kept them dutifully even while practising his art. Had he begun to ‘attempts to convert’ his patient or audience (merely reporting his practices as ‘factually-based’ rather than as ‘beliefs’ would probably have sufficed), the breaching of the boundary would no doubt have been made very clear to him.

Focussing now on my third distinction, the ascription of ‘belief’ by a ‘non-believer’, anything circumscribed as a belief becomes a deliberately constructed epistemological black box, impenetrable by usual methods and publicly acknowledged to be idiosyncratic and non-hegemonic.⁴⁰ Thus, whereas a discussion framed entirely within a shared paradigm can potentially end with mutual agreement and understanding between peers, when ‘religion’ and ‘belief’ enter the frame, ‘toleration’ (admittedly, often impatient) is the only realistic form of closure or truce (unless one wants an insoluble argument).

We can now begin to appreciate more fully the propensity to invoke ‘belief’: since the boundary must be ongoing redrawn and reaffirmed in secular discourse, and since the scholar of religion is constantly confronted by alien material, an enactment of secular identity is as much a necessary part of the historiographical art as is footnoting sources responsibly. Put differently, ‘believing’ – discerning explicit or inferred propositions and thereby constituting strange practices or statements as beliefs – is the primary way that we manage ‘the other’ and its normality is such that it would be conspicuous if absent, raising suspicions that the historian or anthropologist had ‘gone native’. Put rather forcibly into a nutshell, if it

doesn't make sense to us, it's best called a belief. Since the function of calling things 'beliefs' is protectively to define secularity's modes and axioms, it is not surprising that it becomes a handicap to a sympathetic treatment of the past – it is not *supposed* to be sympathetic but rather to establish unequal positions. Thus 'explaining' ancient religion in terms of 'belief' – a *refusal* to be drawn into a discussion – is a self-defeating venture. The following discussion is therefore more an exploration of our historicising, 'believing' gaze than about the historical objects of our analysis – it is about what we risk doing *to* evidence rather than *with* it.

4 Beyond Needham

There is a particular consequence of 'believing' which makes historical description very difficult: framing any 'knowledge system' or 'thought system' within 'belief' has a flattening, homogenising and unifying effect on its propositions, dilemmas and epistemological functioning – which is easy to demonstrate with an example.

If I were to mention 'Roman knowledge', my sense is that it would evoke an expansive sense of possibility in the reader: they would expect something nuanced, no doubt rather hit-and-miss 'compared to modern understanding' (but in the right sort of area) – complex if somewhat muddled and operating by recognisable or at least discernible rules. If, however, I speak of 'Roman religion', I

instead evoke a bounded jumble of beliefs, all of equal value to us (none) and of equal interest (as oddities). Thus, if someone asked me ‘what did the Romans know?’ it would be an odd question that they would surely not expect a complete answer to (my response would be something like ‘pull up a chair and bring refreshments...’). Yet I am routinely asked ‘what did the Romans believe?’ with the ‘natural’ expectation that I can somehow identify and briefly render something intelligible. My greatest difficulty is that, apart from the fact that we have extensive information that can be called ‘religious’ (which by no means lends itself to great brevity), their *relationship* with their practices was not ‘religious’. By this I mean it was not a private relationship with one or two ‘simplistic and bizarre propositions’ that were viewed with great suspicion by mainstream society: they *were* mainstream society.

Thus, bringing ‘belief’ in implies a preference to constitute its objects of interest as a single entity or set of conjoined and virtually inseparable entities so that the boundary of ‘rationality’ can be drawn. What gains more from this process in our society is secular rationality rather than ‘religion’ (which gains nothing from the transaction apart from knowing where the ghetto begins and ends). By identifying what we cannot or will not accept or engage with as equals (‘that’s a belief’, ‘so is that ... and that too... I don’t have to work them out’) we are also defining what we *can*. Intellectually, there is now ‘us’ and ‘them’. Since what ‘they’ have in common is that they are ‘not us’, we lean towards grouping them

into one category and can then act as if they are ‘all the same’.

This is an inevitable aspect of identity-building and (I stress) one I wish to explore (rather than decry). The particular drawback for the historian that I wish to draw attention to is that this flattening and grouping perspective does not equip us to find out what is ‘abroad’ in any detail.⁴¹ Imagine a world traveller returning home triumphant with discovery – ‘they’re all foreign!’ Needham might have challenged such a traveller to attempt a description of the places visited without mentioning ‘foreignness’ as an exercise not in truth (‘but they *are* foreign’) but towards a more informative description. We would tire of a description that ran ‘they had foreign buildings for the foreign people, with foreign animals...’ yet we are accustomed to accounts of other cultures (or sub-cultures) that repeatedly invoke ‘belief’ (preferably in a familiarly monotheistic divinity).⁴² The sheer embeddedness of the fiduciary contract means that the impact of this taxonomic gesture on how we see the evidence is virtually invisible to us.

As a result of this unifying process that makes all religions equal (or perhaps ‘equally unequal’), distinctions made within the ‘religious’ realm are meaningless to us – *all* the food was equally foreign. In addition, belief’s binary overtone strongly predisposes us to look actively for its shadow, complete scepticism. With all practices and propositions singularised any single (even isolated) criticism of a religious judgment or action by its practitioners can easily (almost automatically) therefore taken to be dismissing *all* religious judgments. Any ancient writer who

criticises a particular instance (eg a misdiagnosed prodigy that was just a coincidence) is in danger of being held up as a (suspiciously modern-sounding) ‘sceptic’ as if a single example of less-than-total affiliation with a single proposition acts like a needle to a balloon.⁴³ The anthropologist Mary Douglas used to tell an anecdote about a tribal elder she had spent time with who laughed as he said ‘if it’s really important, we consult the oracle again the next day, just to check it got things right’. This is unscholarly since it cannot be referenced but the most noteworthy point is that she added that she usually refrained from introducing it into discussion because ‘people wouldn’t understand’: she was concerned that once it was conceded that they were not unwaveringly and completely sure about their greatest oracle, the entire edifice of their religion would look ready to topple over. Even scholarship that talks of plural ‘beliefs’ and demonstrates a complex set of reasonings struggles to escape this unifying and flattening tendency – multiplying black boxes does not change the fact that all the ideas are still of an equal order in their impenetrability. With this gaze, it is virtually impossible for us to see any distinction between the different orders of reasoning or appreciate what can and cannot be criticised. At best, the description we end up with lacks any nuance or depth: in a narrative (whether fictive or ‘factual’) written in ancient Rome, there might be mention of a prodigy in passing but we cannot tell whether this is a trivial detail or a deeply significant clue to the ancient reader about how events look like unfolding.⁴⁴ With regard to ‘religious’ cues, our sensitivity to ancient narratives

is probably akin to a modern child watching a disaster film who barely registers, let alone understands, the scene where the hydraulic brakelines on a car entering the uninhabited desert are accidentally ruptured or the bolt works loose from the aeroplane's wing on take-off. Even if they do, they cannot see its significance for later events or the different magnitude of another, trivial, scene in the ordering of events.

If this is what belief 'actually means' in the way we use it, is it possible to work historically with this meaning, of this singularising gaze? This seems pointless to me, as well as self-defeating. Firstly (pointless), it abandons the main advantage of using the term (drawing a line between us and them by instead asserting that 'they' were drawing a line between themselves and another 'them'). Secondly (self-defeating), if we *are* moved to redefine belief, we must take responsibility for the fact that we are projecting its effect back in time: that is to say, if we were to say that 'group X believed in Y/believed Y' then we would be concluding that a group in antiquity took up a position comparable to a modern religious group – declaring their allegiance to a framework or set of propositions that they *knew* took them out of step with mainstream society, to whom their discourse was rather impenetrable and also rather trivial. In such a scenario, some slippage of details as we apply the term would be tolerable (as it is in notions like 'state', 'power' and 'society'). But such a project is doomed: it would present even more convoluted problems than our current concerns, as a simple example will show.

One group that set itself apart in such a way in the early Roman Empire was the sect that would eventually establish its own hegemony – Christianity. If we say that ‘early Christians believed in their God’, our problematised and nuanced meaning would be that by doing so, they vehemently asserted their adherence to a singularised proposition and thereby established their contrary identity and mutual solidarity. But because we are so accustomed to using the word unproblematically, our subtlety becomes completely invisible, and it reads like an *unproblematised* and *unreconstructed* version whose redundancy is obvious – *of course* early Christians believed in God (otherwise they would not be Christians). There is no way to use ‘belief’ to indicate that this was *their* forging a (or even inventing *the*) fiduciary contract in a particular context rather than *our* enacting a fiduciary contract in response to *them*. It is much easier (as Needham pointed out) to use a different expression. Thus even this attempt to rescue the term ‘belief’ collapses in on itself.⁴⁵

The insistence on believing is partly what has made defining religion itself such a notoriously insoluble problem – as a family, ‘religion’ and ‘religious things’ (thing to believe, even when they are actions rather than propositions) are united only by that which they are *not* – intelligible and meaningful to secular discourse. Thus it is only when working towards an anthropology of secularism – articulating *our* means of judgment – that Asad can give us a more meaningful and negative description of ‘religious beliefs’ as ‘everything the modern state can afford to

let go'.⁴⁶ For our purposes, 'beliefs' accordingly become 'anything that secular thinking cannot (and does not wish to, and can afford not to) meaningfully engage with' and is an *actively attributed* status rather than a neutral and innocuous description. The implication is that the full range of epistemological handicaps that Needham so painstakingly documented as something accidental and largely unconscious actually reveal a valuable purpose – to declare that we can do without certain things.⁴⁷ It is therefore the elasticity of the criteria rather than the nature of the propositions that allows almost anything we choose into the 'category' of belief. Thus, though Needham can say, after discussing the issue of conviction as a defining aspect of belief, that in the final analysis 'evidentially it could not possibly be said that the members of a society believed anything in common' (92), he does not see that it might be supremely convenient for us to *speak as if they did*. Given, then, that secular discourse routinely (ideologically) discards the religious as meaningful in itself (while nonetheless noting the existence of religion), could we not simply discard the religious as an object of serious historical study? It *is* profoundly alien to us, why not just admit it and spend our time on more promising areas?

The most obvious difficulty is that 'religion' and 'politics' are usually inseparable outside the modern West, which means that avoiding 'religion' is not really an option. We must make the attempt – in all historiography, there is a constant tension as we endeavour to make the unfamiliar as accessible as we can with-

out disguising their particular difference and this should be no exception. But equally, we cannot acceptably equate all knowledge-systems – that would lead to a catastrophic loss of meaning. Secularism has probably reached the point where ‘calling everyone else a foreigner’ is no longer enough – it must explore more nuanced ways of dealing with alterity on its own (but necessarily expanded) terms (and the best opportunity for this is the current interest in reflexivity).⁴⁸

But this project (which goes well beyond History) is not served by continuing to enact the fiduciary contract: ‘belief’ has continued to appear in our accounts because the line must be drawn and pointing out the inadequacies (as Needham did) of the only tool we have for the job does nothing to complete the task that must be done. In a sense, Needham’s admirable study just made everything harder by making the term ‘belief’ illegitimate (or at least, contested).⁴⁹ As a result, when moderns describe ancient religion they either insert (or argue for the right to insert) ‘belief’ deliberately or they follow the letter of the *Zeitgeist* (but miss the spirit) by avoiding the term but nonetheless find themselves ineluctably tempted to signal to their colleagues that they have not been infected by their material by the use of trenchantly placed and mildly (mild will usually suffice) derogatory remarks. Paradoxically, Needham’s legacy has undermined one of his conclusions that we are only dealing with ‘belief’ if someone actually brings the word into the conversation: we now have a ‘belief that dare not speak its name’.⁵⁰

To sum up so far, before we move to the second part of my argument, ‘belief’

creates far more problems than it solves for historical enquiry. To begin with, it forces the reader to confront and hold in their mind the complexities, difficulties and distortions of the attached framework rather than requiring the author to do that part of the work. More programmatically, it shifts the emphasis of our study, as has been said, to propositions we infer underlie their practices rather than those things which we can identify (namely rituals) as what *they* seem to have considered central to their practice. Crucially, even an alert reader will struggle not to reduce ancient religion to a series of binary relationships – they believed, or they didn't. But the most telling objection is that enacting the fiduciary contract (even with acknowledgement of its difficulties) cements the otherness that we are trying to demystify by writing about them in the first place. We are effectively *abandoning* the attempt to familiarise as soon as we start thinking in terms of 'beliefs'. Aligning ourselves with the secular project does not require us to invoke 'belief' – indeed the temptation to do so should sound a warning bell we have slipped into anachronism. And it is not just our understanding of 'religion' that will suffer – we cannot grasp the history of Rome without addressing their *cultus deorum* (roughly, 'the cultivation of the gods').

This is still only a partial explanation, both for the explicit calls for the refurbishment of 'belief' and the perceived need for distancing (as a substitute for evoking 'belief') through dismissive remarks. Deprecating 'belief' by cataloguing its drawbacks is like cutting off the heads of the Hydra – it has not yet achieved

its purpose even in the case of many who endeavour to heed it. We have to dig a bit deeper.

5 Sincerity

Many discussions of belief have noted that one ‘cannot will oneself to believe’.⁵¹ But the discussion has tended to end at that point, thus alluding only to a shadowy negative aspect. It comes more into focus if we invert it: a ‘believer’ cannot will themselves *not* to believe and belief could be described as the absence of will (autonomy) between the believer and the believed.⁵² I would suggest we refer to this identification as ‘sincerity’ and it is my contention here that is actually the block that we stumble over most of all in connection with ‘belief’.

If we provisionally define ‘sincerity’ as the identification of the self with a belief,⁵³ many of Needham’s confusingly disparate qualities are easier to group. We might redescribe his project as an analysis of the *expectations* we have of belief: it is the sincerity implicit in invoking ‘belief’ that brings the expectation of total conviction, lack of contradiction and long-term and unwavering commitment (transience implies shallowness of sincerity) amongst religious believers. This demands the singularisation of the ‘believed’ already touched upon – how else could one be sincere about it? It is also sincerity that implies that action (based on belief) is required by the believer.⁵⁴ Put differently, though ‘belief’ is fairly rea-

sonably assumed to have begun life among ‘the religious’ as an expectation they have of themselves, in secular discourse it is appropriated as a standard to which we intend to hold religious people to: an aspiration of one group for themselves thereby becomes a more rigid demand and expectation that one group has of another. That is too complex to explore here but it does not help matters when one religion functions very differently from another, which is the situation we have here. With this expectations of sincerity, the older models of Roman religion asserted vehemently (in language that denied ‘belief’) that the elite were insincere (sceptical but still performing their rituals). As it became obvious that this was insufficient for the evidence, we drifted towards the polar opposite – a conclusion of ‘insincere’ was replaced by one of ‘yes, sincere’.⁵⁵ This has caused us almost as many problems as the old charge of insincerity and disbelief.

It is easy to see how the subtle unifying perspective of ‘believing’ a society or group leads to a perceived need for sincerity rather than (eg) critical reflection. Since secular discourse permits the existence of belief-systems yet cannot make fine-tuned judgments *within* those worlds, it must take the word of adherents as it stands as the only hope of engaging meaningfully with them. ‘Insincere belief’ is therefore a contradiction in terms: we might say, for rhetorical effect, that if one *must* have a belief, it really ought to be one worth dying for or certainly going to *some trouble* for. Beliefs that are convenient or apparently superficial are rather unconvincing. What would Lindquist and Coleman have made of the acupunc-

turist if he had said as he left ‘You know, I’m never completely sure whether it will work as it’s supposed to!’? Would we think less of the Archbishop of Canterbury if he admitted that he only joined the Church because he had nothing better to do and had just muddled along ever since? Those seem unlikely to gain an understanding indulgence, yet a modern computer specialist (engineer, lawyer, teacher. . .) might say these things with relative impunity because we would ‘just understand’ them without it necessarily undermining our opinion of their practice. We take it for granted that sincerity is ‘a good thing’ that makes some small compensation for the ‘wrongheadedness’ of being religious in the first place, as it were.⁵⁶ But the high value placed on sincerity in religion is not ‘spontaneous’ and ‘natural’: deliberately cultivated within many religious movements for their own purposes, sincerity is then implicitly demanded by the secular world as the guarantee of meaningful and predictable dealings with people who do not operate by the same rules. ‘If you are going to have different axioms (and therefore deductions) from the mainstream, then please at least be predictable so we know how to relate to you’. This, I suggest, is *why* sincerity is so important in religion, and we are uncomfortable in its absence.

The high value of sincerity is so important that it is protected from harmful scenarios: in situations where even grudging acceptance seems inappropriate, ‘sincerity’ is avoided (the preferred alternative is something like ‘fanatic’) because the category of ‘sincere’ would be damaged by such an association. Thus

‘sincere’ (the praiseworthy guarantee that ‘the business of the other’ will be kept away) *must* pertain only to what is constructed as private – religious fanatics are therefore characterised by the fact that they have crossed the line into the public sphere (that is one way we can tell they are ‘fanatics’).⁵⁷ Sincerity and belief are so intertwined as to make it impossible to have meaningful ‘belief’ without sincerity (although the opposite is not true).

I can therefore extend my earlier contention and say that the project to restore ‘belief’ is actually a sympathetic but flawed project to rehabilitate ancient religion by restoring this implicit *sincerity* to our subjects, because in the binary choice imposed by ‘belief’, the only alternative seems to be to deny it, and we (historians and anthropologists) nowadays find that distasteful and unconvincing. On the other hand, deprecatory remarks may then reflect our disappointment that they do seem to have sincerely believed some rather strange things (and we had been thinking they were so rational).

Can we perhaps use sincerity as the basis of enquiry (as has been attempted with ‘belief’)? To do so seems to me hopeless and inappropriate: arguing for ‘hopeless’ is fairly straightforward – Needham concluded his study with the assertion that ‘the solitary comprehensible fact about human experience is that it is incomprehensible’ which is not a promising place to start. Even taking textual statements ‘at face value’ (sincerity) is methodologically suspect: classicists (who are not the same as ancient historians) are more interested in the opposite (irony)

and, given that an important movement of recent decades in the exploration of the authorial *persona* (as opposed to ‘person’) sincerity is a point of reference that is being further and further left behind.⁵⁸ Statements are ‘strategic’ (rhetorical and persuasive) rather than enactments of sincerity, because we have become attuned to the fact that even a phrase like ‘mean what you say’ is far from transparent. As a corrective to the days when textual analysis consisted of assembling statements that could be represented as ‘what the author really thought’, this is entirely appropriate – no one would argue for such position in a modern author (especially of fictive material). The intractable difficulty is that meaning requires context to be usefully intelligible – and this context will change, often rapidly. A statement like ‘I am an academic’ has a vastly changed meaning in the modern day from 30 years ago. Making it intelligible to an outsider demands an extended and nuanced commentary. So it seems that textual approaches – the disciplines that specifically addresses explicit statements – warns us against this project.

Are there then other methodologies we can apply to consider the sincerity of our subjects? There is a discourse about sincerity centred around the writings of the philosopher Habermas, but (from my limited forays into it) that is organised around the notion of ‘an ideal speech community’ of equals – emphatically not applicable here. The historical and textual account of sincerity and authenticity given by Trilling (1972) (and drawing on textual approaches) is at once more and less than we need here. But his situating sincerity (and move to ‘authenticity’)

in a range of historical and literary contexts does permit us to broadly comment that sincerity only exists as a 'natural' and unproblematised state until we actually begin to examine it: its unitary and 'naturalness' (ie implicit claim of being unchanging and common to all humanity) dissolves as it becomes clear that, like virtually every other object of historical enquiry, its particular relevance and meaning becomes differentiated depending on which specific time and place we are interested in. More than ever, then, we should be wary of assigning 'sincerity' to historical individuals.

The lack of suitable methodology should not surprise us: 'sincerity' is simply not an appropriate mode of enquiry for history. Even if we did have a way of assessing the total affiliation of a person(a), historians must marginalise it. We could say 'Cicero genuinely wanted the Roman Republic to survive' without too much controversy, but what is of more historical interest is that he formed an opinion about this in the first place. It was only an issue because of the threats to the political order and even if we were to begin with this proposition about Cicero's sincerity, our historical gaze would slide off it rather rapidly as the assertion prompts more usefully historical questions such as 'who exactly was Cicero to want this?' (an ideologically committed oligarch? merely someone who had succeeded in that system? the philosopher? the man who knew nothing different?). Assessing sincerity (and interior state) cannot be a valid part of the historical gaze – it must yield to other, more appropriate, questions.

For all these reasons, I doubt very much that many historians would explicitly address the issue of ‘sincerity’ and religious experience in their subjects – Green (2007) struggles to address some of its implications in connection with a particular cult, with mixed results. But all the reasons that they instinctively avoid it *should* apply also to ‘belief’ (including the implied search for belief that I have tentatively diagnosed). Put bluntly, as long as it is in a historian’s mind, however far back it is pushed, it will colour the enquiry.

If we shift to ‘ritual’ without fully problematising sincerity we therefore run the risk of merely displacing the search for sincerity from propositions to practices by looking for some kind of unifying or unified meaning or participation, and this search goes on even when the evidence refuses to be organised this way. That is, much of our current exploration, rather than being along the lines of ‘Romans (sincerely) believed that Jupiter was king of the gods’ is now implicitly in the domain of ‘Romans (sincerely) believed that ritual would get the gods on their side and that future events would then play out as they wished’. We therefore reach the point where sincerity must, like belief, be unveiled and then excised from our gaze and I propose to do that by the judicious use of irresponsible open questions that draw on our modern (familiar) understanding of how knowledge-systems function (or rather, of how people function within knowledge-systems). Given my irresponsibility in what follows, I must first offer a disclaimer.

By and large, history is a discipline centred on honouring the distinctiveness

and contingency of its subject material, and building (often creative) representations of other societies.⁵⁹ To introduce an analogy risks going against this ethos: analogies have a levelling effect and making things look more similar is to risk being not just *un-* but *a-*historical. This historical emphasis on distinctiveness means that the introduction of analogy simply provides more material that needs historical explanation. Thus analogies from other historicised societies (eg from mediaeval France to the ancient world) run the risk of multiplying rather than solving our problems. Conversely, analogies with the modern day run the risk of appearing to invite relativism by putting modern propositions on the same footing as those of the ancient world. If this was not problematic, we would not be discussing ‘belief’ in the first place. Direct comparisons of content (knowledge, beliefs) damns us either to Frazer’s shadow (documenting the steady rise of humanity from the murky befuddlement of the past to the shining enlightenment of the present) or, depending on one’s audience, the crippling charge of relativism – once invoked, such a description (when used as an accusation) utterly obscures enquiry. So I must ask my reader actively to ward off the shade of Frazer and Tyler on the one hand, and the suspicion of a relativising argument on the other and, armed only with the modern magical amulet of careful wording, make a strictly limited foray into analogy with the modern age.

I stress that my invocation of modern knowledge is limited to one purpose only (and it is nothing to do with *content* or the truth of propositions): it is to

evoke the *relationship* that we have with modern knowledge and suggest that it is closer to a Roman relationship with their ‘religious’ practices than the way modern secular thinkers claim that modern religious people relate to *their* religion. And my intention is strictly limited to a negative purpose – to strip away the unconscious habit of seeing ancient religious events programmatically through the filter of sincerity (we can still *choose* to consider it, it just loses its default priority). I make no claims to contribute to the field of anthropology more widely (though their habitual disinterest in Roman religion is a puzzling phenomenon in itself, as Rüpke (2007b) 9 also notes in passing): my arena is strictly ancient Rome.

These analogies are not introduced in a move towards greater knowledge, but greater *ignorance*; towards discarding a methodology that handicaps our enquiry by confronting it with rhetorical comparisons in the form of some simple questions. It is a slightly uncomfortable venture, but in this situation it seems inescapable: we already have an *implicit* analogy since belief and sincerity, in their complexity, amount to an analogy in themselves. The choice is therefore not between ‘no analogy’ and inappropriate modern ones, but of *which* flawed analogy to use.

Lengthy disclaimer aside, let me therefore pose some very brief questions. Are we interested in whether the lawyers who drafted the human rights act were sincere? Does a judge *have to be* sincere to fulfill his or her role? Do we consider

that rocket scientists should be sincere in their work? Philosophers? Engineers? Is ‘sincere’ the right word to use when querying a medic about a diagnosis? Does it make sense to ask whether physicists are sincere about string theory? If that one seems vaguely plausible, given the confusion and difficulties of string theory, how many scientists would not consider the following question provocative: ‘do you believe in gravity?’

It is a strain to answer questions like these. Sincerity is not easily accommodated within the relationships that we have with these kinds of knowledge and to introduce it hinders our understanding of the scientist’s relationship with physics, or a lawyer’s relationship with what she or he is drafting (and so on). In fact, we can envisage a situation where a professional does their duty while gritting their teeth in a personal maelstrom of objection, or conversely, a shoddy job done by someone who is wholeheartedly behind a project. Of course *some* kind of answer can be given to my questions but the sense of dislocation (even offence) and inappropriateness that accompanies the attempt is precisely my point: if our interest is in understanding something rather than protecting ourselves from it, ‘sincerity’ and ‘belief’ should be avoided.

I intend to gain two interlinked freedoms here: firstly, to illustrate that sincerity is simply irrelevant to *any* knowledge-system’s appropriate operation if we are thinking as or like historians. This does not mean that our subjects do not have feelings, opinions and so on: it acts as a backdrop to give those personal matters

some meaning. In interaction with our knowledge systems, we think of aspects such as professionalism, integrity, considered judgment and performance of roles rather than sincerity. I do not wish to suggest that the ancient world was an exact mirror of the present, merely to raise the possibility that we should expect a potential spectrum not unlike ours.

Experience shows that a number of my readers will react to the very idea of judging sincerity in modern agents precisely because it is unfair, unknowable, irrelevant, divisive and unprofessional. They may also object to the implicit comparison on 'level playing field' of modern discourses against ancient, but again, it seems to me we are jumping at shadows. Let me be clear that firstly, this is an experiment in perspective, intended to have a bearing on our understanding of antiquity (not the present) and secondly that by exploring this, I am in fact extending (not diminishing) the secular project. If secular history cannot meaningfully explain the religious (the other) on its own terms, then it has effectively failed.

Sincerity is a vast topic, larger than belief, and could easily merit a far greater study than is offered here – but then, our purpose was to unveil it just enough to shoo it away. I have argued that we should actively refuse to seek it in an account of ancient religion since it is both irretrievable and – when you get down to it – irrelevant. We should be looking instead, with fewer preconceptions, at how people managed in societies (or, conversely, how societies managed people). For the most part we see people interacting with complex thought-systems and

finding their way through life in relation to those, negotiating understandings, tolerating uncertainties, making judgments within the explanatory frameworks they inhabited.

6 Beyond Belief

Our enquiry has been less about what we can say about the ancient world than what we should not. What then *can* we talk about? I have suggested ‘ritual’ but, having cleared some space, we should consider whether there are other potentially fruitful options. A first encounter (through text, at least) with the ancient world confronts the modern reader perhaps most of all with what appears to be a pervasive interest in prediction (divination). Space does not permit any disentanglement of divination from religion but the two are closely linked in ritual at least. But we cannot characterise the ancient world as somehow ‘obsessed with prediction’ if we are seeking what is genuinely different from our own. Prediction (forecasting, guessing, planning) is just as pervasive in our lives as it appears to have been in theirs. Indeed, as the anthropologist Robin Horton found, an interest in ‘prediction, control and explanation’ seems to be a universal concern.⁶⁰ Once again, though we are confronted by strange practices, they have a certain logic that derives from deeper assumptions: if there are gods who define future tendencies and who care about the world of men, it makes sense to try to find out

what they intend. So divination confronts us with a similar situation as ‘religion’ – axiomatic difference underlying complex local practices.

If I were to give the briefest possible account of the most challenging question and the *locus* of genuine alterity in the study of ancient (not just Roman) religion it would be not concerned with the thought-system they built up around a different set of axioms (which we refer to in its totality as ‘their religion(s)’ or ‘their beliefs’) but rather with the fact that it was almost universally axiomatic that one could influence gods through ritual, which was usually animal sacrifice.⁶¹ I am unconvinced we are currently in a position to explore this but more optimistic that if we treat the practices and interpretations that derive from it as reasonably intelligible corollaries, we can gain more insight than locating our perplexity at the level of those deductions and practices. This is not a particularly distressing state of affairs – it is unclear to me whether we would benefit from directly tackling the question ‘why was ritual sacrifice an almost universal feature in antiquity (not to mention an extraordinary number of other cultures)?’⁶² Directions for that enquiry might emerge as other studies continue to mature.

The interesting question, it seems to me, is how textured our response can become when we consider questions that, sidestepping the hugely divergent axioms, assume that their relationship with those axioms was not entirely unlike ours with our secular ones. Can we have an account of ancient religion that embraces the full spectrum of possible responses? Antiquity was replete with people who were

deeply committed at a personal level, extraordinarily adept and knowledgeable as state officials, sceptical, iconoclastic, averse to authority, relatively indifferent, particularly interested, pragmatic, cheeky, unconsciously out of step with everybody else, confused, addicted, competent, incompetent, opportunistic, ignorant, hyperbolic, anachronistic ... but for the vast majority of the time wholly *within* the paradigm of their society. Furthermore, we have tended to privilege the extant voices of dissenters and critics who are distinctive and contrary by definition but we should not underestimate the power of 'business as usual': 'the speculative religious ideas of [a few, mostly aristocratic and idiosyncratic] individuals cannot be our yardstick' (Rüpke (2007b) 12).

At this point, it is only fair to mention the Epicureans, philosophers whose resistance to organised religion is well documented: but the existence of a small (if apparently vocal) subset of iconoclastic intellectuals proves nothing other than the existence of a small subset of intellectual intellectuals. That in itself does not seem unduly surprising in a society as sophisticated as Rome. They may have been the fiercest organised critics of religion in antiquity but their influence does not seem to have led to any discernible changes in ancient practice, even though it is clear that some effort had to be made to respond to it in a way that disabled its extreme claims by the time of the late Republic. They were emphatically a rather inevitable end of a spectrum rather than the last word on whether 'one should believe': an ancient Roman's relationship with religion was not a 'yes/no'

scenario, where the existence of a ‘better’ argument would bring down the entire edifice, any more than the presence of one or two vocal left-wing politicians in a position of moderate but genuine influence makes it impossible for a right-wing government to function.

6.1 Believing in Medicine

There is an interesting comparison can be made (fairly fortuitously) with the world of ancient medicine that permits one last warning against expecting sincerity as an authenticating feature of ‘believing strange things’ in the ancient world. There is a striking parallel between the treatment of ancient religion and the treatment of ancient medicine insofar as much scholarship in both spheres can be peppered with deprecatory remarks.⁶³ These two are the areas in which the ancient Romans and Greeks seem most different – and often incomprehensible – to us. The word ‘believe’ is close to hand when talking about their medicine.⁶⁴ We do not say that the medic Galen made deductions *without* evidence even though we do not agree with any item of his reasoning or his prescriptions: indeed it has been argued that, within the understanding of his day, he did the best job possible (Hankinson (1989)). What is useful for us is that ancient medicine is broadly divided (by us) into what we call the ‘rational’ (Hippocratic/humour-based) and the ‘irrational’ (religious).⁶⁵

However, ancient medicine is intelligible to us in two ways that religion is not: firstly, we can *follow* (without agreeing with) their humoral reasoning, which is extensively documented, but also because we grant it an easier hearing since it is orientated around the body (which we grant to exist) rather than ‘supernatural forces’ (which we do not). The analysis of the deployment of terms such as ‘irrational’ to describe ‘religious’ medicine – the inconceivable within the realm of the misguided – is a particular form of the fiduciary contract that sits uncomfortably because no sooner has the distinction been made than scholars point out the epistemological seamlessness of the two domains in ancient thinking. van der Eijk (2004) 189-190 highlights this difficulty in connection with the Hippocratic text *Regimen IV (De Victu IV)* which deals with medical interpretations of dreams:

on the one hand, this work has sometimes been dismissed as one of the most ‘primitive’ and ‘unscientific’ treatises of the *Corpus Hippocraticum* . . . on the other hand . . . it expounds a comprehensive medical philosophy about the connections between nature, man, the world and the divine . . . as such, perhaps paradoxically, the work represents Greek ‘rational’. i.e. philosophically inspired, medicine to a very high extent.

The difference is that the medical material has proven fertile ground for understanding ancient culture and the negotiation of identity in recognisable terms

as an epistemological enactment of their broader values.⁶⁶ In that field then, we are accustomed to detecting nuances in their thinking, even though we would not consider it usefully applicable. What would happen if we assumed that ‘religious’ thinking had the same (or greater) level of internal coherence and integrity whose landscape is *far* more differentiated and nuanced than we have hitherto considered, reflecting a truly sophisticated and variegated engagement with ‘matters religious’? I wish to close with some speculation and experiment in that vein.

6.2 Trouble with Divination

Firstly, in the study of individual texts, especially ‘troublesome’ ones, the charge of scepticism has been a persistent one and I shall briefly discuss possibly the most influential of these, Cicero’s *On Divination*. Cicero wrote a great deal across several different genres that seem to represent different positions (they can be broadly as a political orator, philosopher and as letter-writer). *On Divination* belongs firmly in his philosophical works, and is often treated as the text where he ‘speaks his mind most obviously’ (sceptically) even though it differs from the position adopted in many of his other writings.

This text, written in 45-44 BCE (Wardle (2006) 42-43), has attracted a great deal of attention over the years. It is written in the form of a discussion between his brother Quintus (book one) and ‘Cicero himself’ (‘Marcus’, book two): Quintus

puts forward a case for divination, and Marcus then sets out a rebuttal. Many scholars have considered the second book to have the last word on the issues and then ascribed this conviction to Cicero himself. But it is not that simple: discussion of this text's significance has been sporadic but intense since 1986 and opinions are starkly divided. Though attempts have been made to complicate the reading of this text as a straightforward refutation of divination, many remain convinced that the text represents a clear statement of scepticism.⁶⁷ Given the interwoven relationship of divination and religion, it is a short step to say that he also rejected the entire religious apparatus.

I am not in a position to enter here into the debate about how to read the text beyond outlining some lines of enquiry, though it will become obvious I favour a version that precludes the idea that a single (albeit eminent) statesman held a position so profoundly out of step with his contemporaries. For now, I shall address the 'so what anyway?' factor.

What if he *was* sceptical? What is that evidence of? Treating him as sceptical would force us to posit all kinds of profound changes in his thinking where (to simplify grossly) his political and legal writings are broadly conservative, a supporter of religious institutions, while his philosophical works utterly unconventional. He would be somewhere between an arch-hypocrite and a man who single-handedly thought his way out of his entire cultural framework – hardly a typical venture in any society. Comparisons from our world of a young religious

man becoming an old atheist are emphatically not directly applicable: it would be more like an internationally recognised scientist being converted in our day. That will appear plausible as an analogy – but only with the assumption that the proportion of people who undergo such a change is roughly the same in both societies. What if sceptical (in our sense) philosophers then were even rarer (if prominently loquacious) than religious converts in the modern age? What sort of witness to ‘normality’ would he be, in that case? We can be adamant that Cicero was not typical of his age, even just by pointing at his voluminous literary output. The more positive we are that Cicero was out-and-out sceptical, the more we emphasise his difference. By thus marginalising him we devalue him as a historical witness of the mainstream. So, if we work on this basis that he formulated such a clear and extreme position, we should also minimise his historical impact.

This is unfortunately the opposite of what has happened. Rather, he has become an icon towards which our attention has gravitated, and ‘sceptic’ has become the biggest and most clearly labelled sticker on the map of religious Rome: the fact that we are not so sure what to write on the other labels does not help (and ‘believed’/‘pious’/‘took it seriously’ do not seize our attention in the same way as something familiar).⁶⁸

I would prefer to argue that even if he *was* an absolute sceptic, it is more interesting to see his arguments virtually *buried* in the context, to offset the ease with which we diagnose belief/disbelief: it is just too easy to focus, not without some

relief, on the one position we think we can relate to in the strange world of Roman religion. Of course, it might be objected that I am assuming that the rest of the aristocracy did not share a sceptical position and cannot prove this, even though that general model has been discarded for the most part, but I base my assertion on two brief observations. Firstly, we know that he did not do away with Roman practices, even if that was what he was trying to do: the Roman state and people continued to perform rituals for centuries until sacrifice was forcibly stopped by the Christian emperors (Beard, et al. (1998) 375, 387-8). Further, to pick one example of many, arguments from another of his philosophical works (*On the Nature of the Gods*) in favour of traditional divination are cited over four centuries later by the historian Ammianus Marcellinus (21.1.13-4). In other words, he did not convince his contemporaries to throw the towel in on the ‘elite pretence’ and abandon divination. Either he failed to convince them of the sceptical case or they understood that he was not making that straightforward case (as Beard and others have argued.) Secondly, if any of the foregoing argument is accepted, things just did not boil down to the simple yes/no answers that we, conditioned by ‘belief’ keep expecting: Cicero expected a far more nuanced response to his challenges.

If we refuse to apply a binary ‘believing’ approach and insist on a more contextual and complex one, other positions can come into better focus. The broad historical answer (why this text? why then? why that way?) can then be located in the social and political domain and give us a more historically satisfactory

commentary. Thus, in this vein, Krostenko (2000) argues that though the text is taken to argue for intellectual reasons against the entire edifice of divination at all levels to modern ‘fiduciary-minded’ scholars, it is driven by an urgent political agenda. Cicero is critical of the position taken in *both* books, in response to the extreme problem of Julius Caesar’s meteoric rise to power and attempts to appropriate the influence available through divinatory means. His chosen method was to problematise profoundly the status of divination and contextualise all its offerings within other considerations (something I intend to explore in more detail on another occasion.) He did this knowing full well that the role of divination was deeply enmeshed in Roman life and was not going to disappear because he wrote some philosophical works that encouraged his peers to be reflective and critical (as opposed to sceptical, in the modern sense.)

Just for comparison, several academics have said to me in recent years that they are worried about the future of science, which they describe as being ‘stalled’ and ‘deeply problematic’: comic websites such as phdcomics.com and xkcd.com lampoon science from the most deeply committed scientific position and expertise: their interest is not in debunking science but in redeeming it. That does not mean they know where the next step lies except to carry on going. Thus when Cicero explicitly says that his account is aimed at ‘educating the young’ by emancipating philosophy from its Greek origins, we should not dismiss the claim even if we find it extremely hard to chart the assumptions he is negotiating within. We

should not assume that our lack of understanding is proof of his incoherence or map the methodology of belief onto his dialogue, however well it seems to fit: it is impossible to square this claim with his complex (yet multivalent undeniably critical) account as long as we think sincerity should have anything to do with it.

I should not overstate this case – many such rich accounts do already exist, though perhaps the most sophisticated (such as Cicero's text) have not yet been given the fullest treatment that they might attract. Given the poverty of extant texts that expose the inner workings of divinatory and religious reasoning, to be handed a severe critique as a starting point is quite a handicapped beginning. But as time goes by, more and more authors are accommodated to a methodology that explores their negotiation of identity – complex thinking *within* their system that takes us away from the simplifying mould of 'belief'. We are also retreating from giving the greater priority to written texts when it comes to 'understanding' 'what they thought', since so often 'individual exaggerations, alternatives and misunderstandings constitute the rule rather than the exception' (Rüpke (2007a) 5): while belief persists as a methodology, we risk taking one step forward and two back.

A more difficult area is the broader one, of ancient society as a whole. We run the risk of unnecessarily alienating the reader with a litany of strange practices as we describe Roman religion (however factually). With the historiographical shift to more 'ironic' and polyvalent description, it becomes possible to experiment more: we are moving away from privileging a single model and becoming more

accustomed to looking tentatively at societies through more than one particular lens ('just to see how it looks') without thinking that the model exhausts the truth, and this tentativeness is, in my opinion, a way out of some of our difficulties.

So, for instance, if Mary Douglas, when writing *Natural Symbols*, had chosen to dwell on Roman evidence, she might have posited as an example of the Roman Republic (c. 509-31 BCE) as a hierarchy (high grid/high group, to use her terms).⁶⁹ It exhibited a strictly regulated social hierarchy and a high degree of internalised expectations of members of that society. The Dionysiac cult of 186 BC, with its wild unkempt behaviour, erosion of differences (gender, class, free/servile status and so on) would represent a sudden irruption of sect ('low grid/high group') at a time of stress.⁷⁰ The Empire (from 31 BCE), on the other hand, with its greater 'cultic' aspects across the political and social spectrum (high awareness of the otherness of the outsider, emphasis on the contrasting 'good' leader who purifies the group by his charisma and special qualities) would have had been a society that laid less stress on the rigidity of a hierarchy, become more articulate, been prone to factions and not-infrequently violent changes of leadership. Gordon (1990) vividly when he compares the Roman Emperor to 'a bottle of Vim'.⁷¹

I am informed that the grid/group model (generally known as Cultural Theory) is a marginal one in anthropology, and exhaustive application of Roman material in this framework would arguably do more for Cultural Theory than for History

(so it must be applied only lightly, and to see what it provokes). But it does allow us to generate more questions with a broader scope than hitherto: all the ‘religious’ behaviour in the upheaval going from Republic to Empire can be purposefully explored as a failed attempt to reassert hierarchy in face of charisma to see what that approach yields. We already knew about that as a political change, but if we follow the logical extent of Douglas’ model, it prompts us to consider grouping the formerly disparate religious changes to see if historically legitimate patterns emerge (and prompts questions like ‘was Cicero supporting hierarchy or unconsciously going with the times and aiding the rise of charismatic leadership’?)

In addition, many oddities when comparing the Republic to Empire can be recast: the strange transition in the status of hermaphrodites as prodigies makes more sense within this perspective, with a change to ‘high group/low grid’. For a period during the Republic, hermaphrodites were treated as highly toxic occurrences (untypically for prodigies) in their own right that had to be disposed of and expiated with great urgency.⁷² Yet under the Empire, Pliny informs us that though they were once considered as prodigies (indicating a significant violation of cosmic boundaries), they are classified ‘now amongst exotic treats’⁷³(an *insignificant* violation of boundaries). Given that a major concern of ‘high group/high grid’ societies is the preservation of norms, hermaphrodites would attract greater attention than in a society with ‘low grid’. In the latter society, they would indeed just be curiosities.

This tentative exploration does not exhaust the enquiry and indeed never could (we would be going native in anthropology). But it does allow us to detach ourselves from our first impulsive sense of non-sense by refusing to privilege one model (especially an anachronistic one). Perhaps in the meantime medicine had accommodated this strange phenomenon just as eclipses went from having a predictive value to being accepted as a routine part of the workings of the cosmos (and therefore being non-significant).⁷⁴

I do not wish to retrospectively turn Roman history into a lost footnote, albeit of a great scholar and my examples have proven we don't *need* it (Gordon (1990), for instance, does not cite Douglas). Cultural Theory is too reductive for our purposes: the main value of introducing it is to bring to our awareness that we could configure our approach to ancient religion in a great number of ways before settling on one explicitly *chosen* rather than supplied as 'natural'. The greatest benefit of such a polyvalent approach would be the constant reminder of the ideological power of our chosen approach: furthermore multiplicity is the approach that anthropology has taken towards ritual, so at least we are in good company.⁷⁵ It is more interesting to see what the experimental application of that model provokes as a response than to establish it as a hegemonic model for ancient religion. A generalising synthetic model is not likely to be helpful in teasing out the particularity of ancient Rome – unless it allows us to identify better which questions *are* useful, and appropriating them, by taking a cue from comparative studies.

Resolutely abandoning talk of ‘belief’ and the sympathetic task of establishing an anachronistic sincerity forces our attention onto deciphering the particular constellation of power that Roman religion reflected and authorised. *That* is currently a historical universal, and we can work with it irrespective of the degree of our familiarity of cultural axioms. The diffusion and concentration of power is something ‘we understand’ and are accustomed to working with, and is a preferable interest to re-enacting our own culture-shock. For instance, adopting non-secular perspectives, which some suggest as a ‘solution’ to ‘the problem of religion’, only displaces the incommensurability (we must choose those we understand, ie those that we can build a relationship with and/or fit into the secular gaze in the process).

Instead of masking the privilege of *our* distinctiveness in these ways, we need to unpack deliberately what we instinctively brand as ‘religious’ so that we can explore how each society’s ‘[religious] possibilities and authoritative status’ gained their distinctive character as ‘products of historically distinctive disciplines and forces’ (Asad (1993) 53-4). I have argued that the best site for that in our case is ritual, for two reasons: firstly, it is vastly more appropriate than propositional beliefs, and secondly because anthropology is also busy endeavouring to exhaust what ritual-centred discussion has to offer.

Many will feel that the argument presented here is too late: as I have documented, there are plenty of studies that do successfully evade the traps of ‘belief’: but my sense is that we have not fully abandoned it, and continue to have an

unconscious fascination that quietly hampers our understanding. The true – and currently insoluble – alterity of the ancient world is the presumption that gods, and therefore the world, can be influenced: ‘the rest’ follows fairly intelligibly from that. If we look the real ‘otherness’ in the eye without blinking and without being drawn into questions of how they could be so different from us, we are in a position to write better history, describing and redescribing to ourselves another bunch of people doing what people do.

Notes

¹Even more confusingly for us, it seems that it *started* as a joke but appears to have gained momentum of its own.

²Given an expected interdisciplinary readership, I have (in contravention of normal historical practice) cited as few representative secondary sources as is feasible, often with the criterion that they are the best place to start, especially for further reading: I have also shamelessly referred to my own work for further details, not least because this article is best considered as a gloss on matters not fully treated there rather than a new venture in itself. For the most recent general accounts of Roman religion see Rives (2007) and Rüpke (2007b).

³Original publication dates: Tylor (1871), Frazer (1915), but they have both been reprinted (and in the case of Frazer) profoundly abridged.

⁴Price (1986) 11. For a full history of the emergence of ritual as a focal point in studying religion, see Bell (1997) 1-90.

⁵See eg Stewart (2001) for this anthropological and historical commonplace; Rüpke (2007b) 6-8, 17-36 is one of the most efficient recent versions for newcomers to Roman religion but this has needed little argument since Beard et al. (1998), if not before. How we do it is another matter.

⁶Thus different approaches to religion confront this differently (and I am certainly not in a position to document them all. See Lambek (2002) as one introduc-

tion. On secularism (briefly) Stewart (2001) and (in greater depth) Asad (2003).

⁷Thus Asad (1993) 48 'it is preeminently the Christian church that has occupied itself with identifying, cultivating and testing belief as a verbalizable inner condition of true religion' in the midst of arguing that this is (wrongly) generalised as an assumption applicable to all religion(s).

⁸Lindquist & Coleman (2008) 9, with references.

⁹Rives (1998) is a useful summary of the various permutations of scholarship in the 20th century. Feeney (1998) 3 dates the beginning of the change to the publication of Jocelyn (1966).

¹⁰P. 229, after a painstaking epistemological and lexical set of arguments that sought in vain for a reliable index of what 'belief' means or can usefully mean. A case can be made to distinguish the implications of the uses of 'believe' and 'belief(s)' but space does not permit a full explanation here. For my purposes, any cognate form refers to both the verb and the noun. Nor am I referring here to the 'polite' uses such as 'I believe we've already met' but rather those with religious overtones which have a special significance, as we shall see.

¹¹The scholars most closely associated with this process are Price, North, Beard (culminating in their joint publication *Religions of Rome* in 1998 and John Scheid (most recently Scheid (2005)). In particular' North's 1968 dissertation has become probably the most cited DPhil in the field. Other notable landmarks include Pouillon (1982), Price (1986) and Phillips (1986).

¹²A full account of ‘how one might influence a god’ is much longer than just ritual, but it will function here as a shorthand for asking for a god’s help with the expectation of thanks to the deity.

¹³For the formal priesthoods and their role in Rome, see Beard et al. (1998) 18-30; more generally Horster (2007), Beard & North (1990), Rives (2007) & Rüpke (2007b) (via index).

¹⁴For a less brief, but nonetheless introductory, account of Roman religion see Dowden (1992), North (2000), Scheid (2003): for a summary of recent scholarship on specific themes Rüpke (2007a).

¹⁵Technically, with *your* cosmos – Rome was happy to ignore signs that did not apply to her business or field of influence MacBain (1982) 29f. I have argued elsewhere that Fate was a ‘higher’ order of unavoidable outcomes, and part of religious practice was to decide whether you were faced with a rupture that could be put right by sacrifice to the relevant gods or things were unavoidable (Davies (2004), 106-115, 171-6, 211-221 & 271-82.)

¹⁶On whom Haack (2003).

¹⁷John Scheid has published extensively on the Arval Brethren; the evidence is most recently collected in Scheid (2005) – *Quand faire, c’est croire* [‘Believing is doing’].

¹⁸Davies (2004) 9-19, 90-94, drawing heavily on Horton & Finnegan (1973).

¹⁹For enforced participation in rites (or not), Rüpke (2007b) 7-8 has an overview and further references. I am not referring to instances where individual cults or groups were suppressed, but the general enforcement of the whole population's involvement in communal ritual.

²⁰A process known as *euocatio* (on which see Beard et al. (1998) via index and Ando (2008) 113-119, 128-148).

²¹A model that is not immune to criticism: see Bendlin (2000).

²²See, for instance, the collection of Harvey & Schultz (2006).

²³A phenomenon not limited to ancient history: Lindquist & Coleman (2008)'s introduction exists in the tension of their wishing to side with Needham but finding that 'belief' just 'keeps coming back' in anthropology.

²⁴King (2003) 276-7.

²⁵I note: Penan (which he opens the enquiry with and returns to at intervals); Nuer (14f.); Meru (24); his chapter 'Comparison' (32-39) deals with Anuak, Navaho, Hindi, Kikchi, four dialects in the Philippines, Uduk, Piro, Huichol, the Wewewa dialect in Indonesia, Roti, Chinese and Sanskrit. By the time the reader reaches p. 42 and finds themselves in facing a table covering Indo-European, Hebrew, Greek, Gothic, Old English, Late Old English and Middle English (with more languages mentioned in the running text), the phrase 'bewildering array' seems appropriate. Needham deserves more credit than this even (especially) from his critics and detractors.

²⁶278, citing Goody (1977).

²⁷*quam nei esset credo nesci[o qui] invidit deus*, citing Warmington (1940) 22.

²⁸An improvement by C. S. Kraus on my initial attempt.

²⁹Compare the way Polanyi (1962) 290, drawing on Levy-Bruhl (1928) 44-8, relates an episode where a tribesman comes to accept that he must have turned into a lion and attacked a neighbour because he *must* think within the cultural frameworks and categories that he inhabits ('It is clear to us that K. had not actually experienced turning into a lion and tearing S. to pieces, and so at first he denied having done so. But he is confronted with an overwhelming case against himself. The interpretative framework which he shares with his accusers does not include the conception of accidental death. . .')

³⁰Davies (2004) 40.

³¹For detailed exposition of this kind of handling of evidence in one area of Roman genre (historiography) see my Davies (2004).

³²Even if we allowed some scope to a redefined 'belief', it is hardly as conspicuous in ancient discussions as it is in the modern world, where references to the gods/God are peppered with 'belief' clauses.

³³On p. 292, he notes that the Ahka of Burma and Thailand all agreed that a particular ceremony removed rats but no-one agreed on the precise mechanics.

Feeney (1998) 128 cites a Shintoist ritual of which a senior priest said ‘I’m not really sure [what the meaning of the ritual is] . . . there are many theories. . . but we are not sure which of them are true’. These discrepancies may be deliberate, since stages of initiation can include the revelation that ‘everything you’ve been told up to now is not actually true’, for which see eg Keane (2008) 111.

³⁴Rüpke (2007b) 9-13 outlines ways that religious understanding (not the same as ritual) was transmitted in the apparent absence of institutionalised education and we know that priesthood – a predominantly technical activity – involved what can reasonably be described as apprenticeship.

³⁵This is a strong version of the observation by Lindquist & Coleman (2008) that ‘in using these terms in the way that we do, we have already constructed a hierarchy of value between distinct epistemological systems.’

³⁶I confess to a fascination with their failure to comment explicitly on whether the patient actually reported any relief. If not, then perhaps they were avoiding offence by what might have appeared to be gloating; on the other hand, if the patient did report improvement, they would have put themselves in a partisan position by drawing attention to it. By their silence, they thereby (very understandably) *enact* rather than challenge the fiduciary contract, even in a piece called ‘Against Belief’. I will return to the awkward fit of the ‘religious’ term to unorthodox medical practice.

³⁷One word will probably suffice to evoke the forces unleashed by the breaking of the fiduciary contract – creationism. On the other side, there is the violation of religious privacy when Richard Dawkins put forward the idea of ‘memes’ to

medicalise (pathologise) religion, with the most obvious threat to the truce being his direct calls for children not to be taught religion.

³⁸On which see, amongst thousands of possible references, Keane (2008) 123-4.

³⁹Thus, even words like ‘concept’ become problematic when used to describe ‘beliefs’ and ‘religion’: they are better seen as strategies or transactions by virtue of their implicit claims to neutrality and naturalness.

⁴⁰We shall return below to the theme of ‘believing in’ non-hegemonic medical practices.

⁴¹Lindquist & Coleman (2008) 8 similarly offer that, when we speak of beliefs, we are ‘assuming that a homogeneous, hegemonic worldview prevails in the culture of others in contrast to the heterogeneous, contested, nuanced character of culture in our own society’.

⁴²For a compelling glimpse into the power of language to render the familiar (sensible) into the bizarre, see the satire of anthropological writing that is the account of the Nacirema (Miner (1956)).

⁴³For examples of this kind of reading, see Davies (2004) 44 and 94.

⁴⁴Such difficulty is of course not exclusive to religion: as the *Evidence* programme found, a similar set of problems occur across disciplines and paradigms. But only religion and the ‘wrong’ kinds of medicine (which the reader will have

noted is a shadowy and undeclared theme here) are automatically and pre-emptively marginalised, whereas disciplinary thinking at least has an initial established and accepted claim to legitimacy in most quarters.

⁴⁵In fact, this also forms part of a broader historical issue, namely that verbs are generally unproblematisable (for lack of a suitable discourse or method), whereas nouns lend themselves rather well to it (either that or we have developed stronger habits). So if we say (outside the bounds of religion) that the Romans ‘questioned what a state should be’, we can easily indicate a difficulty with translating modern concepts into any historical period (‘state’ is an example I have used already). It is much more difficult to problematise ‘question’ with any succinctity and in a way that advertises our problematisation. If we cannot easily problematise an ‘ordinary’ verb, the project of doing so with one as complex as ‘believe’ seems a poor place to start.

⁴⁶Asad (2003) 147. Asad’s study of secularism informs this discussion to a great extent but space does not permit engagement with the fullness of his account. See Keane (2008) 110 for similar sentiments and difficulties (‘if we define [religion] in terms of strange beliefs, then explain why, when properly understood, those beliefs are not strange, what remains of the category?’)

⁴⁷I wish to stress that this analysis is not a *complaint*: this account is not tempting the reader into the abandonment of all judgment in a world where ‘anything goes’ and all thoughts are equal. *All* knowledge systems have an identity (ie actively defines what they are and what they are not) and flattening things down to a literal relativity where everything is equally meaningful leads to a situation where nothing is meaningful. But it *is* an exploration to make us more aware of the con-

tours of our own thinking – ie an extension of the secular project of analysis rather than a denial of that project.

⁴⁸Stewart (2001).

⁴⁹For this reason, I suspect Stewart (2001)'s thoughts on integrating anthropologists' personal convictions into secular discourse is unlikely to succeed until secularism has found a more nuanced approach to its 'other': 'religious' conviction has already 'lost' a central and unproblematic place in public discourse – that's *why* it is 'private'. Put differently, such a project could not be restricted to anthropology if it were to be successful. We will return to this in due course.

⁵⁰'Where, then, do we get the notion of belief from? . . . statements of belief are the only evidence for the phenomenon; but the phenomenon itself appears to be no more than the custom of making such statements' (108).

⁵¹Needham (1972) 84-86.

⁵²Perhaps the most famous example from antiquity is the process described in his *Confessions* whereby Augustine of Hippo struggled to align himself with God's will rather than his own.

⁵³I might therefore have used the radical sense of 'identity' (still visible in 'identical') but as a methodological tool, 'identity' has become more associated with difference than sameness.

⁵⁴Needham deals with these aspects throughout his work and though he de-

bunks them as reliable definitions, the fact that he needs to indicates the extent to which they are widely-felt expectations.

⁵⁵Given the strangeness of their practices to us, this is still a little unpalatable so phrases such as ‘taking their religion seriously’ became common.

⁵⁶Based on experience, I must again stress that I am endeavouring to make visible the secular position (to which I am personally committed, albeit with Rortian irony) with rhetorical exaggeration and mild parody, rather than stating a sincerely hostile opinion, as I hope will become clearer.

⁵⁷For deconstruction of the claim that religion is ‘a source of violence’, see Asad (2003) 8-12. Notwithstanding his argument, it is often more convenient for the secular state to construct terrorism as religious (impossible to fathom or deal with through dialogue) in origin where possible. For other brief consideration of ‘beliefs’ as (constructed as) ‘private’ see Lindquist & Coleman (2008) 9.

⁵⁸On ‘authorial intention’ and especially the case that the author is no more privileged than any reader to prescribe the interpretation of a statement, the most accessible general starting point for literature is Fish (1994) 183. For the rhetorical aspects of Roman historiography, Lendon (2009), while arguing against such readings, collects a great number of relevant references (though he has missed their point).

⁵⁹Jenkins (1995) (and his other, similar, publications, all of which draw on the writings of the pragmatic philosopher Rorty (especially Rorty (1989))). For an account tailored to Roman historiography see Batstone (2009) (*contra* Lendon

(2009).

⁶⁰Horton & Finnegan (1973).

⁶¹For a summary of ritual practices in Rome, see most recently Scheid (2007), also Rüpke (2007b) 137-153 & Beard et al. (1998) 35-8.

⁶²Which is not to say that it has not been broached: see eg Burkert, et al. (1987) for a set of propositions and Dowden (1992) is one of those who foreground sacrifice to the newcomer.

⁶³Scholars are actively moving away from the distinction as anachronistic (Lloyd (1979)) and impoverished (eg Nutton (2004) 12, 16, van der Eijk (2004)) but habit is as engrained as it is convenient.

⁶⁴Which allows us to return to our acupuncturist: my impression is that the more orthodox presses on 'alternative' medicine, the more the fiduciary contract is invoked by supporters of the latter, with varying success. The contract will probably not be enough, since medics are unlikely to tolerate a rival model of the body, whereas they do not try to construct a rival model of divinity.

⁶⁵The situation is not helped by the existence of a school of medical thought in antiquity known as 'the rationalists'.

⁶⁶For instance Flemming (2000).

⁶⁷Complex: Beard (1986), Schofield (1986), Krostenko (2000), Rasmussen

(2003). Wardle (2006) 8-28 seems rather unconvinced; Harris (2003) is more emphatic ('attempts to show that Book 2 of *De divinatione* does not represent Cicero's views, or does not mainly mean what it seems to mean, are to be firmly rejected', 27) and his position in Harris (2009) (eg 172, 183) is unchanged.

⁶⁸Eg Haynes (2003) draws on 'the sceptical Cicero' as a symbol at intervals. It does not invalidate her many insights but it does overly privilege scepticism in the overall picture.

⁶⁹Douglas (1970).

⁷⁰On the elision of normal boundaries, North (1979); on the cult in greatest detail Pailler (1986), Pailler (1988); most recently Rüpke (2007b) 31-33, Beard et al. (1998) 91-6 and via index.

⁷¹Gordon (1990) 255.

⁷²Beard et al. (1998) 80 n.25.

⁷³Pliny *Natural Histories* 7.34 *olim androgynos uocatos et in prodigiis habitos nunc uero in deliciis*.

⁷⁴Davies (2004) 98-99. A common feature of prodigies is that they were not 'natural' but space does not permit discussion of what the Romans meant, and did not mean, by 'nature'. Lindquist & Coleman (2008) (6), building on Pouillon (1982) note that the categories of 'natural' and 'supernatural' are a modern construct that does not always bear useful relation to other cultures' perspectives

⁷⁵Bell (1997) 91, after surveying the major approaches offers that ‘the lack of any definitive winner in the history of theory does not mean that scholarship on ritual has not forged useful tools for analysis and reflection.

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