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“*The Chinese believe in spirits*”: *belief and believing  
in the study of religion*

Catherine M. Bell

A recent round of books, both popular and scholarly, reveal that as a society we are, once again, fascinated with the issue of belief. While the more popular books tend to adopt a fairly straightforward and uncomplicated notion of believing and then find major problems of rationality, the more scholarly books readily accept a type of rationality to beliefs while problematizing the act of believing in other, more involuted ways.<sup>1</sup> Both types of argument remind the scholar of religion that the academic discipline of religious studies has not contributed much to this discussion for quite a while.<sup>2</sup> As described in Rodney Needham’s 1972 work, *Belief, Language and Experience*, which was both a fulsome anthropological treatment of the problems and a cautionary tale for further studies, the concept of belief poses particular problems for comparative analysis

<sup>1</sup> Popular titles include Wendy Kaminer’s *Sleeping with Extra-Terrestrials: The Rise of Irrationalism and the Perils of Piety* (New York: Pantheon, 1999); Michael Shermer’s *Why People Believe Weird Things: Pseudoscience, Superstition and Other Confusions of Our Time* (New York: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1997) and *How We Believe: The Search For God in an Age of Science* (New York: W. H. Freeman and Company, 2000). Scholarly studies include Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Belief and Resistance: Dynamics of Contemporary Intellectual Controversy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); and Umberto Eco, *Belief or Non-Belief: A Confrontation* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2000). Indeed, an unproblematic invocation of belief is one of the informal markers between popular and professional studies of religion and culture. For an example of a study on the edge of this divide, see Huston Smith’s popular textbook, *The World’s Religions* (formerly, *Religions of the World* [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991 (1958)]), which describes the main beliefs of each tradition.

<sup>2</sup> The major discussions of these issues are Robert Bellah’s *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970); Rodney Needham, *Belief, Language and Experience* (University of Chicago Press, 1972); and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Belief and History* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977). For an interesting exchange, see Donald Wiebe, “On the Transformation of ‘Belief’ and the Domestication of ‘Faith’ in the Academic Study of Religion,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 4:1–2 (1992): 47–67, reprised in “The Role of ‘Belief’ in the Study of Religion,” *Numen* 26:2 (1979): 234–49, with a response by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “Belief: A Reply to A Response,” *Numen* 27:2 (1980): 247–55. For a useful compendium that addresses belief, see Nancy K. Frankenberry and Hans H. Penner (eds.), *Language, Truth, and Religious Belief: Studies in Twentieth-Century Theory and Method in Religion* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999).

since belief does not appear to be identifiable or similarly important in religions we want to compare and from which we want to abstract more general descriptions. Moreover, it is a commonplace that many of our assumptions about the centrality of belief in religion have emerged in a decidedly Christian context, making comparison a distortion of other religious views.<sup>3</sup> Anthropological studies since Needham have tended to collapse belief into “culture,” which has worked well enough most of the time, but it not only avoids the explicit problem of why and how “beliefs” and “believing” become prominent in the way in which many people participate in a culture, it also retreats from the problem of various ways in which any one person may appropriate parts of the culture. Recourse to the concept of culture not only leaves many of these questions to popular writers, it also tends to push anthropology into an extreme cultural relativism that is painfully dependent upon the fragile and often unarticulated nature of this idea of culture. Scholars of religion, on the other hand, generally want to use the language of belief to say that members of such-and-such a religion generally hold such-and-such conceptions that motivate their activities. While people have pointed to the overriding need for such an abstract language despite ongoing revelations of its weaknesses, we also know that a term like belief keeps tying any meta-language to assumptions that are more culturally constrained than we really care to defend.<sup>4</sup>

Another reason for the field’s hesitation about belief may also lie in philosophical uses of the term. Philosophical usage tends to emphasize a more individualistic version of anthropology’s “culture,” and in so doing deals, at least in passing, with the possibility of idiosyncrasy, madness, or the intent to delude.<sup>5</sup> Philosophers seeking a language with which to analyze how human beings go about interpreting their world, particularly the linguistic communications within it, often make use of the concept of

<sup>3</sup> This point is made by Donald S. Lopez, Jr. in “Belief,” in Mark C. Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (2000), 21–35.

<sup>4</sup> See Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms*, 169–84.

<sup>5</sup> For two explicit examples, see Ludwig Wittgenstein’s comments in his “Lectures on Religious Belief” collected in *L. Wittgenstein: Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, trans. and ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 54–72; his comments are also available in Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Religious Belief,” in Frankenberg and Penner (eds.), *Language, Truth, and Religious Belief*, 311–28. See also the following quotes: “What is the criterion of reliability, dependability? Suppose you give a general description as to when you say a proposition has a reasonable weight of probability. When you call it reasonable, is this *only* to say that for it you have such and such evidence, and for others you haven’t?” *ibid.*, 315; and “For instance, we don’t trust the account given of an event by a drunk man,” *ibid.*, 315. Also see Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 153, for his remarks on the aberrant and idiosyncratic.

belief to link it to, or play it off, a notion of truth. Needham discussed the links and distinctions drawn between belief and truth in the philosophical tradition stretching from Hume to Wittgenstein, Hampshire, and Harnack. More recently, Donald Davidson has made liberal use of belief in his theory of “radical interpretation.”<sup>6</sup> He argues that we cannot make sense of a person’s utterances without understanding something of their intentions and beliefs, but “we cannot infer the belief without knowing the meaning, and have no chance of inferring the meaning without the belief.”<sup>7</sup> His theory of radical interpretation, therefore, assumes the interconnectedness of belief and meaning as well as their formal role in interpretation. For the sake of his larger argument, essentially a theory about a theory, Davidson focuses on the belief (or “preference”), integral to interpretation, that the statements made by another are or can be true. In fact, he points out, we must grant other speakers, however aberrant or idiosyncratic, a great deal of reason and truth, or else we would have no way to conclude they are being unreasonable or untrue. Davidson goes on to propose a theory of how we infer belief and meaning, arguing that the inference that statements can be held to be true cannot be separate from this basic theory of interpretation.<sup>8</sup> However, philosophical discussions like Davidson’s, which relate belief and meaning to truth, however truth is understood, not only seem to threaten religious studies’ post-theological emphasis on the validity of different world-views, they also appear to threaten to push analysis to the level of the sentence, from where it appears hard to come to any conclusions about religion in general.

Despite these fears, the question of how to use the concept of belief, and how to identify the types of phenomenon potentially illuminated by such a concept, remains an inescapable aspect of studying religion within the language traditions that the field of religious studies inherits. This chapter, which is for me both an initial and perhaps belated foray into the topic, will explore some unarticulated tendencies in our use of the notion of belief, and tie our use of this concept to a particular way of thinking about religion. In the end, I will sketch a possible way to approach these issues from a rather different direction.

<sup>6</sup> Davidson, “Radical Interpretation” (1973), and “Belief and the Basis of Meaning” (1974) in *Inquiries*, 125–40 and 141–54.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>8</sup> In a section relevant to analyzing some forms of religious beliefs, Davidson suggests that an indeterminacy of meaning or translation should not be seen as a failure to capture important distinctions, but rather that these distinctions themselves are not that significant. In other words, indeterminacy can be important. See *ibid.*, 154.

UNIVERSAL AND PARTICULAR

A particularly provocative dimension of Davidson’s analysis of interpretation is the attempt to hold on to two positions that are usually polarized in such a way as to force a choice of one over the other. On the one hand, he invokes truth (or reality) as clearly dependent on language (or culture), a stance that supports many current understandings of cultural pluralism and relativism, which are compelling and popular positions these days. On the other hand, Davidson also points to a type of shared rationalism that enables us to recognize and interpret the meaning of statements made by others even when the linguistic or cultural overlap is very thin. By holding on to both positions, Davidson attempts to find something of a middle way or, rather, as he puts it, to place theories of interpretation on a new footing. I have read Davidson primarily for this struggle to hold on to both positions in ways that make sense of what we are looking at in the study of religion: sometimes it feels like we are encountering very different realities that lead us to question our own; at other times, we experience, and point to, a great deal of similarity, although we can get nervous about that too. In both cases, we wonder what is inevitably particular and what, if anything, is, has been, or is becoming universal.

When reduced to this formulation, however, Davidson’s project is one that is widely shared at the moment. Philosophical ethics, in particular, may be doing the most explicit work on how to think about cultural relativism without endorsing complete relativism, but there are and have been other engagements.<sup>9</sup> Among anthropologists, few have tried to imagine a more explicit convergence of relativism and universalism than Richard Shweder. In several studies in the 1980s, he groped to identify all the presuppositions of these polarized positions by delineating and classifying a wide variety of formulations of each.<sup>10</sup> By making transparent what he saw as the main tensions in the field, Shweder hoped to elucidate the basic stance and components of a post-positivist, postmodern anthropology. I do not think his conclusion – that anthropological

<sup>9</sup> The main studies in philosophical ethics are Gilbert Harman and Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996); Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, And Truth: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge University Press, 1991); and David B. Wong, *Moral Relativity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> Richard A. Shweder, “Anthropology’s Romantic Rebellion Against the Enlightenment, or There’s More to Thinking than Reason and Evidence,” in Richard A. Shweder and Robert A. LeVine (eds.), *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 27–66; and Richard A. Shweder, “Post-Nietzschean Anthropology: The Idea of Multiple Objective Worlds,” in Michael Krauz (ed.), *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation* (Notre Dame University Press, 1989), 99–139.

theorists should adopt a “transcendence without superiority” from which they should “take ‘literally’ (as a matter of belief) those reality-positions so alien in order to discover other realities within the self” – is either satisfying or successful.<sup>11</sup> Yet the effort was fascinating, instructive, and bold.

Religious studies, especially the history of religions, has also addressed the issue of universalism and particularism and, like most academic fields, it has probably been formed by the tension between them.<sup>12</sup> The differentiation of the study of religion from theology more than fifty years ago was one early engagement of the issue, by which an emerging “history of religions” approach felt its way to what was arguably a type of universalized theology and a fresh, if incomplete, particularization of Christianity and its siblings. When the field began to focus more on methods of comparison, it took another angle on these polarized options, asking several related questions: are all religions comparable manifestations of some type of universal, such as *homo religiosus* or the sacred? should we be comparing to illuminate the universal or the particular or, somehow, both? and what can be adequately compared to what for what end? With the more recent emergence of linguistic and cognitive theories, as well as studies effectively deconstructing universal narratives, one wonders if there is any other issue so responsible for what we do and how we do it today. In no small way, scholarship understands itself as both a vehicle for identifying particularism (we sometimes regarded ourselves as “liberating” it) and forging formulations of an underlying or abstract universalism. The emphasis may shift back and forth, but each, as Davidson might suggest, is impossible to infer without the other.

#### BELIEF

According to recent critiques, “religion” is an over-reaching folk category that misreads and even does violence to other cultures.<sup>13</sup> This is, of course, a corrective, and undoubtedly a slightly exaggerated one, which has the merit of addressing the many liberties we have taken with the term for so long. Yet these critiques leave two concerns unanswered.

<sup>11</sup> Shweder, “Post-Nietzschean Anthropology,” 133.

<sup>12</sup> Michael J. Buckley, SJ, “The Study of Religion and the Rhetoric of Atheism: A Paradox,” unpublished manuscript (1999); also see Tomoko Masuzawa, “From Theology to World Religions,” in Tim Jensen and Mikael Rothstein (eds.), *Secular Theories on Religion: Current Perspectives* (University of Copenhagen Press, 2000), 149–66.

<sup>13</sup> Among those who have addressed this topic, let me simply note Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); and Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious.”

First, several centuries of talking about “religion in general” has created a sense of religion in many places that might, arguably, have categorized things differently without such influence. It is not so easy to recontain the term “religion” at this point in history. It may be just another form of hegemonic imperialism to claim, for example, that the Chinese today are wrong or deluded in using the word “religion” to describe either past or current practices in their culture. If we are to be clear about the historicity of such terminology, we must follow through and track how the concept is being used today beyond our own theorizing. We know there are no Platonic theoretical categories, but we keep thinking we can freeze them for this study or that critique.

Second, I work in the materials of a culture that has long constituted a good example of classifications that do not fit the Euro-American understanding of religion, namely China.<sup>14</sup> Yet, if one looks beyond the careful slices of Chinese culture that are usually chosen as representative, one can find much that is not completely alien to any definition of “religion,” medieval, enlightenment, or postmodern. It can be refreshing, of course, to drop the notion of religion out of the picture as completely as possible, and either explore the variety of Chinese categories that have been used or fish for other ways of identifying what is either comparable or distinguishable among practices.

These concerns notwithstanding, the attempt to demote “religion” from a universal (the “consensus of nations”), a biological facility, or a cognitive structure to a theory of the specific classificatory organization of a particular culture helps to illuminate some of the problems attending our language of belief and meaning. In the same way, I want to suggest, our language about belief and meaning is part of an understanding of religion that keeps reasserting itself because a tense relationship between universalism and particularism – whether or not it is the type of solution sought by Davidson and Shweder, among others – may be integral to theoretical projects as we have culturally cast them. Even if we pay full attention to the historicity of the social system examined, as well as the historicity of the project of examining it, it is not clear that we secure a

<sup>14</sup> One has only to recall the popularity and fecundity of Jorge Luis Borges’s fanciful description of a Chinese encyclopedia, which was identified as Chinese to locate such wonderfully exotic and still totally alien difference. I will only note here Michel Foucault’s use of the image in *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1973), xv. One of the stronger arguments against the Western terminology of religion for understanding Chinese religion is given in Jordan Paper’s *The Spirits are Drunk: Comparative Approaches to Chinese Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), especially 2–12, even though Paper argues that the comparative study of religion is still viable.

footing for scholarship that drops the allure of transcendence as another version of the particularism–universalism polarity.<sup>15</sup>

While we have tended to use “religion” to denote a dimension of open-ended commonality, something found in most if not all human cultures, we have used the term “belief” in the highly tailored, supporting role of denoting the culturally particular foci of a religion – specifically those things that we hold to not exist in fact. If a group “believes” in less particular or empirically problematic things like love or the tragic dimensions of life, we tend to refer to these not as beliefs, but as cultural values, attitudes, or dispositions. If a group holds convictions about astrological destiny, we are very willing to describe such attitudes as beliefs, not as culture. Belief is our characterization of the specific illusions of others. But the distinction between belief and culture is not dramatically demarcated: belief is also our shorthand for the epitome of what we see as being encultured, culture-bound, or culturally determined.

We explain a culturally particular belief, and that is a very redundant phrase, by its place in a structured system of ideas that we assemble. In this way, we see what the belief “means.” Since the objects of the beliefs do not actually exist in our view, there is no other route for meaning; so the meaningfulness of beliefs is dependent upon rendering them coherent within a system of ideas. Coherent systems of belief create a meaningful structure, namely “religion,” which makes sense to us of the particular and the illusionary. This can be a very circular way to work.

In connection with this tendency to identify belief with extremes of cultural particularism and determinism, we also talk about belief as a type of deeply held mental orientation or conviction. That is, belief is described as one type of thing, an all-or-nothing, on-or-off state. There is little evidence to warrant such a view outside of certain specific confessional practices. Both formulations of belief, as the illusion rendered meaningful when made part of a larger coherent system understood as religion and as a state of deeply held convictions, emerge in Shweder’s argument that the interpretation of beliefs is the central anthropological question – and its fault-line. He evokes the “witch” question that lies at the root of anthropology, namely, if your informant tells you, perhaps at some risk of negative consequences, that she or he is actually a witch, what can you make of this statement when your own reality makes clear

<sup>15</sup> In his 1980 study, *Ilongot Headhunting 1883–1944: A Study in Society and History* (Stanford University Press, 1980), Renato Rosaldo’s recognition of the problems with anthropological analysis led him to abandon many anthropological concepts and adopt an extremely biographical, even autobiographical approach.



there are no witches?<sup>16</sup> Generally, we must reconstruct the system of ideas that rationalize and render such statements coherent if we are to “interpret” them. This is a true advance, of course, on the earlier view that such statements are proof of some sort of “primitive mentality.”<sup>17</sup> Yet it is hard to be convinced that an interpretation in which a belief, taken as a designated illusion that is nonetheless a “type” of truth, that is, as having its own particular reality, is all that different from interpretations based on a primitive mentality. Neither do I think anything is solved by concluding, as Shweder does, that unquestionably the informant is a witch.<sup>18</sup>

A third problematic assumption, which I have addressed at length elsewhere, is the ease with which we grant belief a prior existence in order to cast it as the a priori shaper and instigator of action.<sup>19</sup> While belief may well work this way some of the time, we have no evidence that this happens most of the time. Such an assumption, however, does allow us to “explain” action by connecting it to its motivating beliefs, and from there to a larger reconstructed system, understood to be “the” relevant system by its coherence and ability to explain the particulars with which the interpreter started.

#### COHERENCE

It is a relatively recent thing for scholars to emphasize meaningful and systemic coherence in relation to what religion is all about. Only in the second half of the twentieth century, for the most part, has the provision of coherence been seen as the defining role of religion, that is, what we theorists think it should do when religion clearly can no longer explain the nature of the universe or act as the authoritative source of morality.<sup>20</sup> And this is not just the stance of theorists. When I quiz my

<sup>16</sup> Shweder, “Post-Nietzschean Anthropology,” 109–10. It is interesting to note the difference between the interpretive tasks represented by Shweder’s witch claim, on the one hand, and Davidson’s examples (*pace* Tarski?), on the other, in which he ponders the interpretive process involved in understanding Kurt’s statement, *es regnet*, and Karl’s statement, *es schneit* (Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth*, 129 and 141).

<sup>17</sup> For a thorough history of this ethnographic view and its relationship to cross-cultural interpretation of irrational statements, see Jonathan Z. Smith, “I am a Parrot (Red)” in *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978; reprint 1997), 265–88.

<sup>18</sup> Shweder, “Post-Nietzschean Anthropology,” 109–10. For Shweder, “cultural anthropology will probably come to an end when it comes up with an incontestable answer to the witch question” (109).

<sup>19</sup> Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), esp. 13–66.

<sup>20</sup> Influences on the interpretive importance of coherence have been Peter L. Berger’s arguments about the construction of a *nomos* as a meaningful order (*The Sacred Canopy: Elements of*

students, completely unread in the relevant anthropological literature, meaningful coherence is what they also have absorbed as the expected role and real contribution of religion. They lament that they have not found it or a sufficiently steady experience of it.<sup>21</sup> They are particularly aware of, and appalled by, what they see as the rampant incoherence – the fragmentation, hypocrisy, or compromises – in the lives of adults around them. For these students, as for most scholars of religion, religion should have a holistic coherence that delivers meaningful experiences. Yet even those who have devoted their lives to religion – the clergy of many different persuasions – rarely find those qualities in their religious experience if you ask them.<sup>22</sup> Coherence can be found only in some explicit self-presentations by persons, texts, or institutions. We can argue for the existence of a “deeper” coherence, of course, either in the organization of the brain, the personal psyche, the social structure, or the dynamics of culture – all universalizations that support the major theories and disciplines of the twentieth century. Awkward to use today, but still regularly invoked, these approaches contrast with attempts to see beliefs and believing as a matter of specific sets of actions or situations, that is, approaching believing as a type of social practice rather than a (true or false) linguistic statement or mental conviction.<sup>23</sup>

To indulge an autobiographical example, I originally thought to study religion because I was interested in how most people – that is, folks not schooled in the language and history of philosophy – made sense of their lives and worlds. I have not been heavily invested in any particular formulation of this focus, just in the general human project implied, which has to include how readily people get by without giving much attention to making any larger sense of things. It was clear to me growing up among the natives of Long Island in the 1950s and 60s – indeed, it was a striking

*A Sociology of Religion* [New York: Doubleday, 1967], 19); and Clifford Geertz's arguments about religions as a system (“Religion as a Cultural System,” in Michael Banton (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* [London: Tavistock, 1966], reprinted in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* [New York: Basic Books, 1973], 87–125); and, a bit more distant, Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralism (e.g., *The Savage Mind* [University of Chicago Press, 1966]).

<sup>21</sup> It is interesting that theorists talk about coherence as something projected, while believers and would-be believers almost always talk of it as something found. For another discussion of coherence, also see Nancy K. Frankenberry and Hans H. Penner, “Clifford Geertz's Long-Lasting Moods, Motivations, and Metaphysical Conceptions,” *Journal of Religion* (1999): 617–40, especially 626.

<sup>22</sup> My evidence here is simply personal conversation with clergy, primarily, though not exclusively, in the Christian, Jewish, and Buddhist traditions.

<sup>23</sup> Needham suggests this direction, belief as social action, although he does not develop it; anthropology has done a better job at grasping this stance than religious studies, although at the cost of the relativism for which anthropology is so often accused.

feature of the religious attitudes there – just how little coherence religion actually seemed to provide or was even expected to provide. Later, in the 1970s, coherence became a more explicitly stated expectation, but, as before, religiosity within the spectrum of conventional lifestyles seemed to hinge on internalizing a complex array of compartmentalizations and disassociations.

On Long Island, and in other places I have come to know well, what is thought of as religion by the natives is more a matter of loosely packaged sets of behaviors – what we can also call “bundles of behaviors” or “habits of action.”<sup>24</sup> For Long Islanders, these packaged sets of distinct behaviors were used to deal with such events as death, serious illness, perverse misfortune, and occasionally life-crises like birth, marriage, or divorce, as well as, naturally, the ritual life of defined communities gathered at the church, synagogue, house meeting, prayer circle, or meditation group. In actual fact, family, jobs, and personal projects of service to others were more obvious overarching systems of meaning; religion appeared to be invoked simply to support them. Long Islanders’ delineation and expectations of religion are not the same as those of other places that could be described. Yet neither are these other places so different that we cannot articulate similarities and differences. The commonality that allows for such articulations is the “principle of charity” defined by Davidson, a particularly felicitous if provocative basis for any new take on interpretation.<sup>25</sup>

#### THE CHINESE “BELIEVE”

In even the most sophisticated literature on Chinese religion and culture, it is readily stated that the Chinese believe in spirits. Some Chinese will say something like that, too, as I learned at a shamanic exorcism down the block from where I lived in Taipei. After the bloodied shaman was through with his spectral combat, and everyone was relaxing, the apartment owner complained that she had heard there were no ghosts in America, which seemed so unfair since large numbers of them kept bothering people in Taiwan. Analogously, there is the eloquent essay by the early twentieth-century sociologist, Fei Xiaotong, entitled “The World Without Ghosts,” where he recounts growing up surrounded by ghosts

<sup>24</sup> These two phrases are used by Maurice Bloch and Richard Rorty, respectively. See Maurice Bloch, “Language, Anthropology and Cognitive Science,” *Man* 26:2 (1991): 183–98; and Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 1999), xxix.

<sup>25</sup> Davidson expands W. V. Quine’s use of this idea, see *Inquiries into Truth*, 136, n. 16.

who were as real to him as his many relatives.<sup>26</sup> Fei used the ghost theme to set up a thoughtful contrast between Chinese and American cultures. As beliefs go, believing in spirits is not a particularly strange example, and we are very accustomed to the holistic construction known as Chinese religion, which can make such beliefs coherent among themselves and understandable as a type of meaningful truth.

Yet if the Chinese “believe” in spirits in anything like the way my Long Island community believed in papal authority, or even the way Christian colleagues believe in a central doctrine like the divinity of Jesus Christ, then the statement that the Chinese believe in ancestral spirits is, at best, a very vague generalization that ignores everything interesting.<sup>27</sup> It ignores the great differences from one person to another, awareness of the possibility of other positions, the individualized inner juggling and tensions, as well as pragmatic non-judgments and refusals to engage. Most language about belief, and about Chinese religion in general, leaves little room for these features and certainly does not begin to account for them.<sup>28</sup>

There are, as you would imagine, *many* Chinese positions on spirits. Just a sampling of the most famous and familiar ones can demonstrate the complexity of believing, at least in regard to this one topic in Chinese history. In the fifth century BCE, for example, the sage Mo Tzu argued that the degeneration of civilization since the sage-kings was due to only one thing, doubt about the existence of ghosts and spirits. Those who say “of course there are no spirits,” he argued, bewilder the people and bring disorder to the empire. In fact, he continued, people can know that spirits exist in exactly the same way that they know anything exists – through reliable testimony, the consensus of textual sources that have proven their authority in other matters, and personal experience by the senses.<sup>29</sup> Several centuries later, the Han dynasty writer, Wang Ch’ung, made the opposite argument in order to refute Taoist teachings. With

<sup>26</sup> Fei Xiaotong, “The World Without Ghosts,” in R. David Arkush and Leo O. Lee (eds.), *Land Without Ghosts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 175–81.

<sup>27</sup> The purpose of such sweeping generalizations, so rarely noticed as such, may be to establish a contrast that creates “Chinese-ness,” even for Fei Xiaotong. See “Acting Ritually: Evidence from the Social Life of Chinese Rites” in Richard Fenn (ed.), *Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion* (London: Blackwell, 2001), 371–87.

<sup>28</sup> For a provocative engagement of related issues, see Maurice E. F. Bloch, *How We Think They Think: Anthropological Approaches to Cognition, Memory, and Literacy* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998).

<sup>29</sup> Mo Tzu, “On Ghosts,” in Victor Mair (ed.), *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 31–39. These are, of course, exactly the reasons that I “believe” in nuclear physics, space travel, many medical treatments, or the usefulness of “talking things out” in a marriage – to name just a few common examples.

what has been characterized by later readers as admirable rationalism, Wang argued that “man is a creature. His rank may be ever so high . . . but his nature does not differ from other creatures. There is no creature who does not die” and soon become dust.<sup>30</sup> Hence, for Wang Ch’ung, there can be no ghosts, spirits, or gods. In the medieval period, Han Yü (768–824 CE) admonished the emperor for his public attentions to the “bone of the Buddha” in an essay that became well known among the literati.<sup>31</sup> More widespread were the ubiquitous tales of the supernatural, such as those collected by Hung Mai in the twelfth century, which all turned on the moment when someone who did not believe in spirits personally experienced their intervention and came to realize the truth of their existence.<sup>32</sup>

Any village or urban neighborhood in China, Taiwan, or Hong Kong also yields a wide spectrum of positions on spirits. What is important about the variety, I think, is the evidence that individuals are very aware of the number of possible opinions and thus have located their own position – if it is clear enough to be called that – as a matter of some choice and deliberation. These people know that others hold different ideas, that many reject the whole thing, that people may act contradictorily, or some feign belief for self-serving reasons. There is little to suggest that a belief in spirits comes with the culture or is any one sort of belief. There is, in other words, very little systematic coherence.

As interpreters of texts and cultures, scholars of religion know that a Chinese text preaching filiality to one’s ancestral spirits cannot be taken as descriptive of the actual state of cultural affairs in China, any more than a Long Island sermon about loving the poor can be taken as descriptive of Catholic life as it is really lived there. It is much more accurate, and certainly more interesting, to read admonishments and affirmations as argumentative practices, perhaps involving some complex sharing of ideals, but not as representations of a static or coherent situation.

If we argue that a person’s options are still culturally limited in the forms and degrees of belief possible, clearly the limit is much further

<sup>30</sup> Wang Ch’ung, “Taoist Untruths,” in Mair, *The Columbia Anthology*, 62–77, esp. 65–66.

<sup>31</sup> Han Yü, “Memorial on the Bone of the Buddha,” in various anthologies, including William Theodore de Bary, Wing-Isit Chan, and Burton Watson, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 372–74.

<sup>32</sup> See Robert Hymes, “Truth, Falsity, and Pretense in Sung China,” unpublished paper, which engages a debate in circles that study Chinese philosophy and religion (notably, Chad Hanson, *A Taoist Theory of Chinese Thought* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1992] and A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao* [Chicago: Open Court, 1989]) about whether “Chinese religion” is actually concerned with “truth” or not.

out or more blurred than we usually acknowledge. Of course, Chinese culture is extremely diverse, and even by the medieval period it had seen a great deal of cultural trafficking. Perhaps this plurality influenced the boundaries of what could be thought in the culture, let alone what constituted belief and its systemic coherence. A possible counter-example dealing with a relatively more isolated society is suggested by Renato Rosaldo's account of headhunting among the Ilongot.<sup>33</sup> He implies little or no debate, doubt, or discussion among the Ilongot about the efficacy, and meaningfulness, of headhunting; but he does note discussions of its necessity and periods when young men did not take heads prior to marriage. If there is no evidence of various shades of conviction and degrees of involvement in headhunting practices, then that would seem to be an unusual situation warranting study as such.

#### RELIGION

All native statements about belief can be seen as concerned with the nature (classifying and boundaries) of religion in the sense that people on Long Island and in Beijing are constantly asking themselves what to believe, how much to believe it, and with what specific investments or commitments. This is true not just for so-called religious ideas, of course, but also for personal affairs or economic and political matters. People regularly ask questions that deal with what we might call the cultural boundaries and definition of religion. There are some familiar examples, such as the famous Rites Controversy provoked by the Jesuits in seventeenth-century China, which revolved around the question whether ancestor worship was religion as such and had to be abandoned by converts, or

<sup>33</sup> Rosaldo tried to explore the practice without the usual judgments of the time by attempting to see the rationality of headhunting and by looking to find aspects of his own experience illuminated by his encounter with Ilongot culture. See his *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989; 1993). In *Ilongot Headhunting 1883–1974*, particularly 55, Rosaldo describes the Ilongot concept of history and Ilongot unwillingness to accept the veracity of stories of the past, as well as the lack of any uniformity to their accounts. "In general," Rosaldo writes, "Ilongots are unlikely to accept as true any narrative about events they neither saw for themselves nor heard about from an eyewitness" (55). Of course, in this passage Rosaldo is assessing attitudes toward stories and explanations, not toward activities that are considered (by whom?) central to the culture, like headhunting. In terms of comparative ethics, one approach to all the other problems of cultural comparison and objectivity, Rosaldo has addressed the "ethics" of Ilongot headhunting. In "Of Headhunters and Soldiers: Separating Cultural and Ethical Relativism," *Santa Clara Magazine* 42:2 (Fall 2000): 18–21, Rosaldo argues that the acceptance of cultural differences, even extreme ones, does not lead to an acceptance of the chaos of ethical relativism.

whether it was an aspect of customary etiquette and no more threatening to converts than the bow given in greeting.<sup>34</sup> Of course, this was a more critical question for the foreign missionaries than for most, though not all, Chinese. A careful ethnography by Margery Wolf details the extended deliberations in a small village in Taiwan over the question of whether a particular woman was a shaman-to-be called by the spirits or a batty and unsympathetic outsider to be shunned.<sup>35</sup> Drawing on more recent examples, members of the recently outlawed group, the Falundafa (Falungong), to some extent like other *qigong* societies in China since the 1960s, have had to decide to what extent their practices are religious or simply therapeutic physical exercises that do not threaten other religious affiliations or fall under government control of religion. For various political reasons and agendas, their deliberations and articulated positions are carefully calibrated to keep the line between religion and therapeutic exercise more unclear than clear.<sup>36</sup>

When a coherently organized systemization of beliefs is proposed by a Chinese source, then a very specific argument is being made about the way things really are. The creation of a broadly designed system of coherence is a particular rhetorical project, one undertaken indigenously as well as by outside scholars. And the difference between the practices of these two groups is, perhaps, one of the many distinctions that should lose its importance in our analyses.<sup>37</sup> For example, coherence is an important part of the argument made by a subset of Chinese texts known as morality books (*shanshu*), which emerged in twelfth-century China among the opportunities of easy wood-block printing, inexpensive paper, and manageable distribution; they are still produced and circulated today. These texts are explicitly engaged in an enormous polemical effort to provide a totally comprehensive and coherent understanding of the workings of the world, both visible and invisible, in terms of universal and inexorable laws of cosmic retribution – despite evidence available to all that appears to contradict such a system. In this project, these morality books reinterpret a wide variety of local and regional practices in terms

<sup>34</sup> On the rites controversy, see David E. Mungello, ed., *The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning* (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1994); Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Viking, 1984) and *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990); and Lionel M. Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

<sup>35</sup> See Margery Wolf, “The Woman Who Didn’t Become a Shaman,” in *A Thrice Told Tale* (Stanford University Press, 1992), 93–126.

<sup>36</sup> Catherine Bell, “Exercise, Ritual, and Political Dissent: The Falun Gong,” untitled volume, ed. Christoph Wulf, Surkamp, forthcoming, 2003.

<sup>37</sup> For an example of what this might look like as analysis, see Susan Friend Harding’s *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2000).

of a system said to underlie the otherwise incoherent or incomplete cosmologies attributed to Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and folk religion.<sup>38</sup> As such, this project often echoes scholarly studies that present a coherent overview, at least more coherent than the last scholarly attempt, of a definable cultural tradition, although such overviews can be found particularly unhelpful come a real encounter with some aspect of the said tradition.

As a type of test of the hypothesis I am proposing, one can look again at a well-known example of an underlying and apparently determinative cultural structure, namely, Arthur Wolf's ethnographic account of the different grades of spirit currency burned to ghosts, ancestors, and gods – coarse yellow paper, paper with a silver appliqué, and finer paper with a gold appliqué, respectively. Although focusing on one part of Taiwanese rural society, Wolf argued that this system of paper types demonstrates a more basic and wider cultural understanding of the organization of the cosmos, one “that mirrors the social landscape of its adherents.”<sup>39</sup> His ethnography is often cited as evidence of a latent structure in Chinese folk practice, in reference to which a particular belief, such as the existence of ancestral spirits, makes sense to people and accounts for a variety of related actions. However, it is equally persuasive, and correct, to argue that Wolf represented this practice as more coherent and routine than it really was or is. Extended ethnographic observation adds so many qualifications and regional differences that the original assertion can be regarded, at best, as heavily generalized, that is, as much suggestive as descriptive.<sup>40</sup>

Several sociological studies have attempted to assess the degree of coherence among the beliefs to which people are willing to attest, and their results reinforce each other: there is surprisingly little coherence among people's formulated beliefs and it decreases as one moves from more educated and articulate people, comfortable with narrative or

<sup>38</sup> What is most striking about these texts is not their cosmic message, but their juxtaposition of esoteric talismanic properties with mass distribution. See Catherine Bell, “Printing and Religion in China: Some Evidence from the *Taishang ganying pian*,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 20 (Fall 1992): 173–86 and “‘A Precious Raft to Save the World’: The Interaction of Scriptural Traditions and Printing in a Chinese Morality Book,” *Late Imperial China* 17:1 (June 1996): 58–200.

<sup>39</sup> Arthur P. Wolf, “Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors,” in *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society* (Stanford University Press, 1974), 131–92, particularly 131.

<sup>40</sup> I develop this argument, citing the conflicting ethnographic studies, with regard to the “universal” Chinese practice of domestic ancestor worship in Bell, “Performance,” in Mark Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms in the Study of Religion* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 205–24.



abstract categories, to the less-educated, who are not as apt to use them.<sup>41</sup> Two of these studies also inquired into the “meaning” of various ritual practices and found little consensus among the explanations given, even when people were asked about ritual features that had well-known, even memorized, doctrinal explanations associated with them. Instead of these formalized and accessible explanations of belief, which informants could volunteer when pressed, people routinely preferred to use their own, fairly personal “takes,” which used very loosely related ideas and claimed to be rooted in experience.

My own research into ritual activity tends to make me think of beliefs not as something prior to or separate from action, that is, not as something mental, cognitive, or linguistic in opposition to the physical or active. If there are habits of the body, there can be habits of thought and expression as well as speech and self-presentation. They are all social activities. While I use terms like “religion” – albeit with all the historical qualifications and hesitations shared by others – when talking about Chinese materials, the language of belief seems *more* distorting, in particular, by specifically imposing a false sense of coherence, conviction, systemization, and meaning. We cannot appeal to “belief” to describe how people exist within their cultures; yet without “belief,” it is not clear what we mean by “religion.” If it seems easier to talk about Chinese religion, rather than Chinese beliefs, it may be simply because one is more comfortable today attributing a working coherence among cultural phenomena rather than implying the illusion and falsity of specific ideas.

This problem brings up an interesting association, namely, the strange fortunes of what would seem to be a particularly Chinese “bundle of behaviors,” the prognostications of feng shui (wind and water), which are ubiquitous in California and becoming familiar elsewhere in the United States. Going beyond the dabbling of “new-agers” or the concerns of transplanted Chinese, feng shui is also being used by all sorts of serious people as a type of back-up system of cosmic control and insurance. It is possible that one day we may compare its global spread to such other cultural practices as food spicing and tea drinking. A similar phenomenon

<sup>41</sup> See David K. Jordan, “The jaw of Shigaang (Taiwan): An Essay in Folk Interpretation,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 35:2 (1976): 81–107; Peter Converse, “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics,” in David Apter (ed.), *Ideology and Discontent* (New York: Free Press, 1964), 206–61; and Peter Stromberg, “Consensus and Variation in the Interpretation of Religious Symbolism: A Swedish Example,” *American Ethnologist* 8 (1981): 544–59.

can be seen in the enduring popularity of the Asian martial arts, especially *taiqi*, begun in the late 1970s and early 80s, or Japanese Zen meditation, begun in the 1930s. Feng shui, *taiqi*, and *zazen* are closely tied to ritual postures considered very basic to Chinese and Japanese culture, yet they have been readily translated to the more pluralist sections of American society. The viable translatability and subsequent longevity of these sets of practices indicate the existence of something not readily caught in either universals or particulars, something both more durable and mutable and much less hindered by incoherence with other sets of practice.

In short, such packaged sets of behaviors blur “religion” as such. As a feature of a global society and culture, the translatability of feng shui, *taiqi*, and *zazen* is evidence of cultural properties going in many directions – perhaps too many for our notions of religion and culture to track. In the end, religion may vanish as any sort of empirical entity in one place, only to emerge in another, as attested by the growing numbers of Christian evangelicals in Beijing as well as the government officials trying to control them with a stretched classification schema. To appreciate these issues is to be more fully historical in our understanding and use of theoretical categories.

Feng shui is not particularly illuminated by being regarded as a belief or part of a more comprehensive religion, terms that return to the defining polarities of universalism and particularism. Nor do the activities of members of the Falundafa fit traditional theories of religion, although they do evoke many older models in Chinese history. Theorists do not need to stop using the terms belief and religion, but their historical freight must be made part of them. And theorists do not need to stop theorizing, of course – after all, it is a distinct cultural practice to seek universal explanations and doing so must be as legitimate as offering incense to one’s ancestors – as long as no one gets hurt. But the coherence or incoherence of practices can be explored on a more realistic footing if scholarship can let go of the transcendent status still clutched by Shweder and the quest for a logically prior theory of interpretation still sought by Davidson. Without the panorama provided by these perspectives, we will have to spend a lot more time figuring out how to situate ourselves, but the alternatives do not seem to take us very far either.