The problem of belief

Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner on ‘the inner life’

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Between 1993 and 1999 I spent 17 months in Zimbabwe studying the Johane Masowe Church, an African religious movement with roots in the Makoni District stretching back to the early 1930s. Like most other African independent churches, the Masowe Church lays great stress on spiritual healing, the eradication of witchcraft, and possession by the Holy Spirit (see Sundkler 1961, Comaroff 1985, Hoehler-Fatton 1996, Muller 1999). During the course of my fieldwork there were a number of instances in which these ‘other-worldly’ activities forced me to think about the connection between fieldwork methods and religious beliefs.

As for any anthropologist, questions about how I was conducting research as a participant-observer and whether or not I was coming up with fruitful results provided a constant source of worry. The religious practices of the Masowe seemed to throw up a particularly nasty epistemological hurdle in this regard. I found it difficult, for instance, to understand what was ‘happening’ when I saw church prophets fight witchcraft by exorcising evil spirits from possessed congregants, as I did several times a week, and how, exactly, I should position myself at such moments. I would wonder if I could only comprehend these phenomena if I shared, in some sense, a belief in the supernatural. This is, of course, an age-old question for anthropologists of religion, and raises something I will call ‘the problem of belief’.

The problem of belief

Belief – to say nothing of religion – is a thorny concept, in part, as Katherine Ewing (1994) suggests, because it can collapse the distance between the anthropologist and the people he or she studies.1 If an anthropologist holds the same religious beliefs as ‘the natives’ – or even, some might say, any at all – the implicit concern of the discipline is that he or she might be surrendering too much anthropological authority. But if there is no attempt to understand the native’s point of view, the anthropologist will have failed as a researcher. Ethnographers must strike a balance between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ in order to find an appropriate tone; to paraphrase Geertz (1976:223), someone who studies witchcraft should sound neither like a witch nor like a geometer. In dealing with this quandary, most anthropologists accordingly treat religious belief as an ethnographic concern, because it helps them maintain ‘professional’ distance. But as Ewing argues, belief remains an ‘embarrassing possibility’ that stems from ‘a refusal to acknowledge that the subjects of one’s research might actually know something about the human condition that is personally valid for the anthropologist’ (1994:571; see also Harding 1987). The problem of belief, then, is the problem of remaining at the proper remove from ‘natives’ inner lives’ (Geertz 1976:236).

Durkheim’s discussions of belief in The elementary forms of the religious life still shape enquiries in the anthropology of religion. These discussions have lent comfort and support to those of us who do, in fact, find belief a problem in the way I have defined it here. Durkheim defined religious beliefs as ‘states of opinion [that] consist in representations’ (1965:15). In doing so, he reinforced his classic model of the relationship between the individual and the collective in social organization. ‘For the collective force’, he wrote, ‘is not entirely outside of us; it does not act upon us wholly from without; but rather, since society cannot exist except in and through individual consciousness, this force must also penetrate us and organize itself within us’ (1965:240). For many anthropologists who study religion, this is precisely why belief is problematic. Belief is a subjective, and therefore personal, experience. But subjectivity makes understanding religion as simply a ‘social fact’ difficult.

In his recent study of witchcraft in Soweto, Adam Ashforth (2000) deals with the problem of belief at length. Ashforth does not engage the scholarly literature directly; instead, his work takes a more prosaic approach. Ashforth’s book is a portrait of his friend Madumo, a young Sowetan man who claims to have been bewitched by his family. Madumo suffers from poor health, he has no job, and, by the time Ashforth finds him on one visit to South Africa, he has managed to alienate almost everyone who ever cared for him. In the process of trying to cure these witchcraft-induced ills, Madumo submits to the strict regime of a witch doctor’s medicine and to the spiritual counsel of a Zionist prophet, with the aim of escaping and ejecting the evil spirits and creatures that plague him.

Ashforth’s narrative does not read like most social scientific work on witchcraft (it has the feel of a novel) and perhaps because of this he is able to capture the complexities and ambiguities of what it means to believe in the supernatural in a way that many anthropological accounts cannot. Ashforth states quite bluntly that he himself does not believe in ‘invisible forces or beings that shape the lives and destinies of the living’ (2000:249). But neither does he claim that they do not exist – exist, that is, as physical manifestations. Rather he says, ‘the secrecy of witchcraft can never be penetrated’ (2000:254). In this instance and others (e.g. Favret-Saada 1980, Stoller and Olkes 1987, E. Turner et al. 1992), the problem of belief is raised and left open, and the ethnography, I think, is richer for it.2

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1. Malcolm Ruel has also discussed belief at length, and has raised the provocative point – to which I shall return – that it is a largely Christian concern, a concept that ‘is [not] central to all religions in the same way as it is to Christianity’ (1997:57).
2. Benjamin Ray (2000) offers a similar discussion of these issues in the work of Paul Stoller and Edith Turner.
3. Further analysis of Evans-Pritchard and Turner’s work might well ask if there is any necessary correlation between their conversions and their approaches to the ‘inner life’.


I would like to address this problematic from a slightly different angle by focusing on the methods of E.E. Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner. Both Evans-Pritchard and Turner are central figures in the anthropology of religion. Evans-Pritchard’s concern with the ‘rationality’ of belief in Zande witchcraft and the Nuer concept of kwoth is of course well known, as is Turner’s work, with his wife Edith, on religious symbolism in their interpretations of Ndembu ritual and Christian pilgrimage. When it comes to the problem of belief, however, I do not think their works have received the attention they deserve. I have no intention of resolving the problem in this paper; when discussing methods, I am not sure anthropologists can resolve anything at all. Nor will I address the problem from a theological standpoint (as both Evans-Pritchard and Turner did, albeit in a somewhat roundabout manner). My aim here is to add some grist to the mill for anthropologists studying religion as they reflect on method when reading in the history of the discipline. In doing so, I would like to suggest how Evans-Pritchard and Turner worked against what Ewing calls the ‘reductive atheism’ (1994:572) that often characterizes the main currents in the anthropology of religion influenced by Durkheim. Each had strong religious convictions themselves (both were converts to Catholicism), and each tried to fold their ‘inner lives’ into the work of their anthropology. For Evans-Pritchard and Turner belief became an element of method.
Evans-Pritchard
At least since Evans-Pritchard’s famous encounter with ‘the light of witchcraft’ in Zaniland, one evening in the late 1920s as he was taking his usual ‘nocturnal stroll’ (1976:11), anthropologists have asked themselves how belief in the spiritual world affects interpretive frameworks – both their own and those of others (e.g. Horton 1967; cf. Gable 1995, E. Turner 1996). Evans-Pritchard tried to show how the supposedly ‘irrational’ beliefs of the Azande followed a logic that made perfect sense in their terms, and that witchcraft could be understood through the anthropological lens as an idiom for explaining misfortune. In line with this argument, he concluded at first that the light he saw on that unusual evening ‘was possibly a handful of grass lit by someone on his way to defecate’ (1976:11). It could be explained away, in other words, without recourse to the supernatural. But this is a question he left open. What is interesting in this case is that Evans-Pritchard brought another variable into the picture, noting, in fact, that a relative of Tupoi, his Zande neighbour, died the day after Evans-Pritchard saw the light and that this ‘accorded well with Zande ideas’ about the night-time workings of witchcraft. In what is otherwise a very precise ethnography – as Geertz once said, with Evans-Pritchard ‘what you see is what you get, deep reading is not encouraged’ (1988:61) – this is an important moment of interpretive ambiguity.

Following in Durkheim’s footsteps, many anthropologists treat incidents and encounters like Evans-Pritchard’s as ‘social facts’ and leave it at that. Even Evans-Pritchard himself argued, in *Theories of primitive religion*, that:

> there is no possibility of [the anthropologist] knowing whether the spiritual beings of primitive religions or of any others have any existence or not, and since that is the case he cannot take the question into consideration. The beliefs are for him sociological facts, not theological facts, and his sole concern is with their relation to each other and to other social facts. His problems are scientific, not metaphysical or ontological. (1965:17)

Historians of anthropology have clearly documented this emphasis on the sociological facts of religion within British social anthropology, leading from A.R. Radcliffe-Brown back to Durkheim (Stocking 1984, 1995; Kuper 1983). In reference to Evans-Pritchard’s place in this lineage, however, J.A. Barnes has shown that he was ‘never fully committed’ (1987:458) to any particular theoretical position. Moreover, Barnes argues that Evans-Pritchard was reticent when it came to acknowledging his intellectual forbears (see also Douglas 1980). These claims are supported by the evidence of *Theories*. In a way Evans-Pritchard did identify himself with the Durkheimian tradition (1965:54-77; see also Gellner 1986:69, cited in Barnes 1987:466). Yet Evans-Pritchard was critical of Durkheim’s work and also, particularly after his well-known Maret Lecture at Oxford in 1950, of the influence of Radcliffe-Brown’s understanding of anthropology as an ahistorical science (Kuper 1983, Barnes 1987). Because he organized his enquiry around the search for the origins of religion, Durkheim’s conclusions were, according to Evans-Pritchard, ‘little more than conjecture’ (1965:73). They were full of what he called, following Rudyard Kipling, ‘just-so stories’. They were neither scientific nor anthropological. ‘To my mind’, Evans-Pritchard wrote, it is extraordinary that anyone could have thought it worth while to speculate about what might have been the origin of some custom or belief, when there is absolutely no means of discovering, in the absence of historical evidence, what was its origin. (1965:101)

Evans-Pritchard aims this criticism not only at Durkheim, but also at Comte, Saint-Simon, Lang and Tylor. The problem in the approaches of these ancestral figures lay in the abstract goals of their science. For Evans-Pritchard, anthropology as a science ‘deals with relations, not with origins and essences’ (1965:111). This is an important distinction for method. What we might term the ‘science of relations’ is necessarily tied to what the anthropologist observes. Fieldwork, in other words, must form the backbone of any anthropological examination of religion, which is why the search for origins is a vain pursuit. Fieldwork is essential because it focuses on empirical activities, and this is how anthropologists can best understand religion as a social fact. Yet the field is also the place where the problem of belief arises most powerfully for the anthropologist of religion.

At numerous points in Evans-Pritchard’s work, the integrity of his empirical observations as a scientist broke down. There are moments when his anthropological enquiries take on a theological tinge – the kind of metaphysical problems he sometimes said should be left alone, most famously at the end of *Nuer religion*, where he claimed to have reached the point where ‘the theologian takes over from the anthropologist’ (1956:322). His encounter with the ‘light of witchcraft’, is one of the most notable moments in which he left open the question of his expert authority. Another moment can be found at the end of *Theories*. In my opinion it is a more interesting example of the quandary because he is addressing a theory of method, rather than a particular instance in which that method is used.

Throughout *Theories* Evans-Pritchard’s critique of the corpus of anthropological work on religion is based largely on method. For all of their insights, Durkheim, Tylor and other 19th-century social theorists fall short of truly under-
standing what religion is all about because they did not conduct fieldwork. What we feel towards the end of this short book, then, is that experience has been cheated. We recognize, as does Evans-Pritchard, that fieldwork provides a kind of experience – a kind of proximity to the sociological facts of religion. Yet in the penultimate paragraph of the text, just as Evans-Pritchard has finished extolling the virtues of fieldwork, he tells us it is not enough. Religion enters on a personal level. For the religious anthropologist of religion, the social fact of its existence takes on added meaning. Evans-Pritchard stopped just short of saying a background as a believer gives the anthropologist a privileged understanding, but he turned to the work of Wilhelm Schmidt to make the point for him. ‘On this point’, Evans-Pritchard wrote, 

I find myself in agreement with Schmidt… ‘If religion is essentially of the inner life, it follows that it can truly be grasped only from within. But beyond a doubt, this can be better done by one in whose inward consciousness an experience of religion plays a part. There is but too much danger that the other [non-believer] will talk of religion as a blind man might of colours, or one totally devoid of ear, of a beautiful musical composition.’ (1965:121)

Not only does Evans-Pritchard critique armchair anthropologists, he critiques his atheist colleagues. In the study of religion, one’s own ‘inner life’ provides a privileged position from which to view the social world.

Given Evans-Pritchard’s argument, I think it is appropriate to say something about his own ‘inner life’. During the Second World War, Evans-Pritchard converted to Catholicism (Beidelman 1991, Lienhardt 1974, Barnes 1987). Toward the end of his life – and I would argue that the last few passages in *Theories* represent a key instance – this is something he addressed more and more openly. Those who knew him have described him as a devoted Catholic but not a ‘good’ one: ‘his undoubted faith was accompanied, if never disturbed, by a sharp apprehension of the possibilities of unbelief, a sympathy for cynics’ (Lienhardt 1974:303). He was also, perhaps because of his training, open to other religious traditions. Barnes’ memoir gives us a sense of this:

In the last few years of his life [Evans-Pritchard] became interested in mysticism and, in a remarkable paper read to a student audience, argued in almost lyrical language that, in some important sense, mystics of all religious persuasions, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and Jewish as well as Christian, experience the same transcendental reality… Evans-Pritchard commented to [Meyer] Forster, who was in the audience, that, ‘It must have been apparent to you, if not to them, that this is my inner life…’ (1987:480)

This catholicity is also evident in a short reflection on fieldwork published in the year that Evans-Pritchard died, in which he wrote: ‘I would say that I learnt more about the nature of God and our human predicament from the Nuer than I ever learnt at home’ (1973:5). For Evans-Pritchard, scientific enquiry is linked to religious practice through the concern for relations – a concern which can only be understood if it is in some sense shared. In Evans-Pritchard’s mind, it is this type of ‘religious unity’, as much as the general experience of fieldwork, that leads an anthropologist to any fruitful understanding of religion.

Incorporating religion-as-belief into the ‘scientific’ study of religion is not without its problems. As J. Samuel Preus argues, ‘religion and the study of religion enjoy no privileged status’, and to claim otherwise – from the position of inner belief – is ‘self-serving’ (1987:xix). Yet it seems to me that at the end of *Theories* Evans-Pritchard was attempting, in the face of his discipline’s empiricism, to add some humanistic texture – ‘even of art’, according to his friend and colleague Godfrey Lienhardt (1974:301) – to the scientific discourse of anthropology. He wanted to call into question, if only momentarily, the sway of Durkheim’s atheism. He left this argument unfinished, but it is one that other anthropologists have taken up with vigour. Of these, Victor Turner is particularly interesting and provides the second of our examples.

**Victor Turner**

Like Evans-Pritchard, Turner owed a good deal to Durkheim. As a student in Max Gluckman’s ‘Manchester School’ (see Webiner 1984), Turner came to emphasize the dynamics between process and structure in the tradition of Marx and Durkheim. Turner’s work on ritual, and particularly on *communitas* (1977), can be traced to Durkheim’s treatment of collective effervescence in *The elementary forms*. Durkheim’s argument that effervescence is a moment of religious creativity had a deep impact on Turner. At the start of *The drums of affliction*, Turner states that religious ritual ‘actually creates, or re-creates, the categories through which men perceive reality’ (1968:6). Indeed, *Drums*, which is Turner’s most thorough treatment of healing cults among the Ndembu, is written in a distinctly sociological vein with an emphasis on the connections between the individual and the collective in religious representations. For example, Turner argues in his treatment of curing rites: ‘it would seem that the needs of the biopsychical organism and the needs of society, in many respects opposed, come to terms with one another in the master symbols of Ndembu society’ (1968:19). But in the short monograph *Chihamba, the white spirit*, Turner takes Evans-Pritchard’s concern with the religious convictions of the anthropologist a step further, and he takes
Durkheim to task for his sociological reductionism. In Chihamba, Turner sounds more like the German romantics than the French sociologists. His emphasis is on the ineffable in religious experience, which did not fit easily into either Marxian or Durkheimian paradigms (Babcock and MacAloon 1987, Kapferer 1996; cf. Bloch 1986).

Chihamba is an Ndembu cult of affliction, one of the most influential and puzzling that Victor and Edith Turner studied during their fieldwork in Northern Rhodesia in the early 1950s (see Engelke [forthcoming]). Adept in the Chihamba cult forge strong ties of friendship while working through their misfortunes. In the process, they try to relate themselves and their lives to Kavula, something akin to a high god, whose essence is captured symbolically in the character of whiteness – white substances, white objects, etc. ‘Whiteness’, Turner argued, ‘represents pure act-of-being’ in Ndembu cosmology (1962:82). The goal of Chihamba, as religious ritual, is ‘to break through the habitual patterns formed by secular custom, rational thinking and common sense, to a condition where the pure act-of-being is directly apprehended’ (1962:85-86). The ritual, in other words, is meant to put the initiands in direct contact with the spiritual centre of their existence. As Turner describes it, this is an affective breakthrough.
And yet this is not a simple rehashing of collective effervescence. In *Chihamba* and other works Turner did indeed primarily want to show how ritual was creative, not a means of confirming the social status quo (see especially Turner 1977). But in part what is interesting in Turner’s monograph on the white spirit is the appeal to humanistic disciplines he made on behalf of his scientific enquiry, and how he used this appeal to close the distance between himself and the Ndembu on a spiritual level. It is in *Chihamba*, in fact, that we find the most persuasive evidence of Turner’s interest in literature and theology as tools for shaping his anthropological method. Indeed, Turner took as much – if not more – from Herman Melville and the Gospels as he did from Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown. He was at times passionately critical of the social scientific tradition. Moving beyond Evans-Pritchard’s argument that religious belief can be best understood by the religious scholar, Turner claimed that the academic study of religion will always, ultimately, fail. ‘Religion is not determined by anything other than itself’ Turner argued (1962:92), and it cannot be reduced to an anthropological account. ‘In studying religious symbols’, he wrote,

the product of humble vision, we must ourselves be humble if we are to glimpse, if not fully comprehend, the spiritual truths represented by them. In this realm of data only innocence can hope to attain understanding. That is the reason the attempts of such scholars and philosophers as Fraser and Durkheim to explain away religious phenomena have been so obviously unsuccessful. Like Captain Ahab [in *Moby Dick*], such scholars seek to destroy that which centrally menaces and wounds their self-sufficiency, i.e., the belief in a Deity, and like Ahab they suffer shipwreck without transfixing the quick of their intended victim. (1962:92)

These are strong words, based like those of Evans-Pritchard upon the assumption that religious belief carries with it a certain privilege to understand religious experience – that one’s inner life provides a key to explaining the inner lives of others. After *Chihamba*, Turner always made clear his firm belief that poets and prophets could offer rich insights into social life from which anthropologists ought to draw. He called this ‘the humanistic coefficient’ (1974:33), and argued that a poet’s sense of spirituality (William Blake was his favourite) should inform any good study of religion (cf. Bloch 1986).

From the standpoint of intellectual biography, it is worth mentioning that Turner wrote *Chihamba* shortly after his conversion to Catholicism in 1957. It was also soon after his and Edith’s fourth child, Lucy, died as a newborn. Turner was, in other words, wrestling with the contingencies of life as he articulated his anthropological analysis. As Edith Turner described it to me,

*Perhaps that was not the point. Perhaps the point was to suggest that the study of religion, even in the tradition of scholarship indebted to Durkheim, often retains something ineffable. ☿*

It is also worth mentioning that Turner pulled back from this repudiation of the academic study of religion in his later work – something Edith Turner sharply criticized in her husband (E. Turner et al. 1992; see also Engelke 2000). Consider, for example, this description of Ndembu diviners in *Drums*, which is cast in a much less fervent (if still open-ended) tone than we find in *Chihamba*.

The diviner is a ratifying individual. But the premises from which he deduces consequences may be non-rational ones. He does not try to ‘go behind’ his beliefs in supernatural beings and forces… He treats as self-evident truths what social anthropologists and depth psychologists would try to reduce to rational terms. These scholars, in their professional role at any rate, do not concede that spirits and witches have existence. For most of them these entities are themselves ‘symbols’ for endopsychic or social drives and forces, which they set themselves the task of discovering. (1968:43–44)

As I argue elsewhere (Engelke [forthcoming]), and as Edith Turner’s recollections above suggest, it was the divide between professional and personal that came to vex Turner in his later years, and he did his best to break it down through his own religious investments. In *Drums* we can trace this recognition in passages like the one just cited. It is also evident in his and Edith Turner’s work on Christian pilgrimage in Mexico and Ireland, conducted in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which resulted in the publication of a seminal text, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*. Pilgrimage ‘research’ became a convenient way for Turner to blur the distinctions between his personal and professional life (Turner and Turner 1978). He could trek to Knock Shrine or visit Lourdes as an anthropologist and a native (i.e. a pious Catholic), with little thought, justifiably or not, for his ‘professional duty’ of maintaining distance.

**Conclusion**

In these brief accounts of Evans-Pritchard and Turner, I have tried to show how their writings suggest that belief is an element in their methods. Religious conviction became a tool in their anthropological projects, a way of bridging the distance between themselves and ‘the other’. It may well have been an ‘embarrassing possibility’, to return to Ewing’s insight, but we can see how they seized upon the recognition that their anthropological subjects had something to say to them about ‘the inner life’.

As I have already suggested in passing, we can find shortcomings in this approach. To claim a perspective on ‘the inside’ of religious belief begs the question of what is valuable about being ‘outside’ of it, a question that every anthropologist deals with at some level as a participant-observer. Moreover, we might ask with Ruel (1997) if their understanding of belief and the ‘inner life’ is a specifically Christian – or even Catholic – viewpoint. These are important considerations.

But when we read their work we should also take note of the moments when they slipped out of a clearly ‘professional’ frame and treated such considerations as a mixture of personal and intellectual challenges – when belief, in other words, became method. This may not have resolved all of their anthropological concerns, but then again perhaps that was not the point. Perhaps the point was to suggest that the study of religion, even in the tradition of scholarship indebted to Durkheim, often retains something ineffable.