



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Knowledge and Belief

Prof Bettina E. Schmidt

Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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The Problem of Belief when Studying Religion

- Part 1: recap of this module
- Part 2: insider – outsider debate in study of religion (with reflection on core reading)



Core Reading

- Engelke, Matthew. (2002). The Problem of Belief: Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner on 'The Inner Life'. *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 18, No. 6, pp. 3-8.
- The article reflects on two famous British anthropologists and the problem of belief in studying religions.

To Recap: During this Module...

- You were introduced to the study of religions, culture and philosophy across periods and subjects
- You gained an understanding of the academic study of religion and philosophy
- And an understanding and knowledge of disciplinary fields related to religion, culture and philosophy

For instance

- You were introduced to Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism and Islam
- You got familiar with some philosophical debates on belief and knowledge (including the debate about God from a philosophical angle)
- And we discussed the belief in miracles and spirits

Starting point was that

- Knowledge is based on facts
 - Experience
 - Education
 - Common knowledge
- Belief is something that might not be true nor based on facts
 - e.g., belief in God or belief in spirits

Part 2: Insider – Outsider Problem

- How do we study religions?
- Is someone who believes in (any) religion better equipped to study religion?



Rudolf Otto (1869-1937)

- Systematic Lutheran theologian at the University of Marburg, Germany
- Known for the book *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational* (1917)



Otto argues that ...

- religion arises "out of ... not just the experience of religiously outstanding individuals, but by experiences which are potentially within the reach of each and every one of us" (Thrower, p. 49).

- Otto describes religious experience as *Mysterium tremendum et fascinas*
- => "the personal encounter with the *numinous* whose overpowering and fundamentally ineffable character renders mere human existence contingent and small."

Religion as Unique

- Otto insisted that religious experience is unique from other forms of experiences and feelings
- And that we need specific tools for its understanding.
- Otto even disqualified scholars who never had such an experience from its study

Critique against Otto

- -> Otto takes religion "out of the realm of social scientific analysis as a construct that is part of culture. Religion becomes something separate from other human constructs; it is based on its own faculty, and thus can only be understood in its own terms." (Kunin p. 63)

Matthew Engelke (2002) on the Problem of Belief

- Article about the place of belief in research
- Fieldwork research in Zimbabwe among members of the Johane Masowe Church, an independent Christian church specialising on spiritual healing, eradicating witchcraft and possession by the Holy Spirit
- -> led to a reflection about fieldwork methods and religious beliefs

Engelke writes that ...

- “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.” (Engelke 2002: 3)

- Research – careful balance between two positions:
 - One needs to understand the native's point of view
 - But one also needs to remain objective
- “Ethnographers must strike a balance of being 'inside' and 'outside' in order to find an appropriate tone.” (Engelke 2002: 3)

Sir Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973)

- Professor for anthropology at Oxford University
- Famous for many books, among them *Witchcraft, Magic and Oracles among the Azande* (1937)



Witchcraft, Magic and Oracles among the Azande (1937)

- Explains the internal logic of the Azande way of thinking, in particular their understanding of witchcraft
 - “In my own culture, in the climate of thought I was born into and brought up in and have been conditioned by, I rejected, and reject, Zande notions of witchcraft. In their culture, in the set of ideas I then lived in, I accepted them; in a kind of way I believed them ... If one must act as though one believed, one ends in believing, or half-believing as one acts.” (cited in Bowie, p. 17)

- Reflecting on the work of the anthropologist Edward Evans Evans-Pritchard, Engelke writes:
- "Belief is a subjective, and therefore personal, experience. But subjectivity makes under-standing religion as simply a 'social fact' difficult." (Engelke 2002: 3)

Why does it matter?

- Academic enterprise
 - Importance of rigour, supportive evidence for every claim
 - Everything we write has be supported by evidence (i.e., references when writing essays)
- But we also need to acknowledge our subjectivity

Study of Religions

- Diversity (or multiplicity) of beliefs
- Not just the so-called World Religions such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism
- But also vernacular forms of religions
- And many variations of religions
 - e.g., Christianity in Mexico is different from Christianity in Wales

Final Activity

- Watch the short YouTube clip about *Santa Muerte*, a Mexican veneration of a (new) saint that is growing rapidly in numbers and spreading through the Americas. The clip shows a ceremony that took place in Queens, New York City. When watching consider whether this is a Christian belief.
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