

Critical Terms for Religious Studies

Edited by
Mark C. Taylor

EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD

Donald S. Lopez, Jr., Tomoko Masuzawa, Jack Miles,
Jonathan Z. Smith, David Tracy, Edith Wyschogrod

The University of Chicago Press
Chicago & London

1998

Belief

Donald S. Lopez, Jr.

In the Castello Sforzesco in Milan, there is a painting by Giovanni Battista Moroni (1529/30–78) entitled “Martirio di San Pietro da Verona.” It depicts a key moment in the martyrdom of Peter of Verona, better known as Peter Martyr, the Dominican saint sometimes depicted in Italian Renaissance painting with a bloody wound in the crown of his shaven monk’s pate, sometimes with the cleaver that made the wound still embedded in his skull. In the painting, one blow has already been delivered by Peter’s persecutor, for he has been felled to his knees. His head bears the wound of the first blow and the executioner stands poised with raised cleaver, ready to deliver the fatal blow—the blow that will deliver Peter into sanctity, for above the scene fly two cherubs, one bearing a crown, the other a lily. The viewer’s eye is drawn from the wound in Peter’s head to his finger, with which he has just performed his final act. On the ground he has written in his own blood (and in perfect block letters) a single word, CREDO, “I believe.”

This statement, so simple and so familiar, has a long and complicated history in Christian theology, in philosophy, and in writing about religion. The accumulated weight of this discourse has resulted in the generally unquestioned assumption that adherents of a given religion, any religion, understand that adherence in terms of belief. Indeed, belief (rather than ritual, for example) seems to have been the pivot around which Christians have told their own history. And with the dominance of Christian Europe in the nineteenth century, Christians have also described what came to be known as the “world religions” from the perspective of belief. Scholars of religion and anthropologists have almost invariably defined religion in terms of *belief* or perhaps *beliefs and practices*, those deeds motivated by belief. And through complicated patterns of influence, the representatives of non-Christian religions have come to speak of themselves in terms of belief. “Belief” is, or has become, perhaps the most common term we use to describe religion to one another, despite Max Müller’s observation of a century ago, “[T]hat the idea of believing, as different from seeing, knowing, denying, or doubting, was not so easily elaborated, is best shown by the fact that we look for it in vain in the dictionaries of many uncivilized races” (Müller 1897, 2:448).

After a very brief survey of some of the philosophical questions surrounding the term, this essay will focus on two historical cases, one in medieval Europe, one in colonial Sri Lanka, in which the term “belief” has figured prominently. In the first case, belief served as a substitute, an elusive interior state that masked a host of far more material circumstances. In the second case, belief served as

a concave mirror placed rather forcibly before an Asian subject, enlarging the periphery and shrinking the center.

The English word "belief" can be traced back to the Old High German *gilouben*, meaning to hold dear, cherish, trust in. The Germanic *laub* is related to the Indo-European *leubb-*, meaning love or desire: hence, the English "libidinous," "love," "believe"; the Latin *lubet* (he is pleased by); the Italian *libito* (will, desire); the German *lieb* (dear), *lieben* (to love), *loben* (to praise), *glauben* (to believe) (see Needham 1972, 41-3). The multivalence of the root is perhaps exceeded only by the multivalence of the term derived from it, belief. It seems possible, for example, to believe what one knows to be untrue ("I believe for every drop of rain that falls, a flower grows.") and not to believe what one knows to be true ("I can't believe I ate the whole thing.").

In the discussions that preceded the choice of terms for this volume, one of the editors argued for the inclusion of the small words that nonetheless prove the most problematic: the "and" of "Religion and Nature" or "Religion and Literature"; the "of" of "Philosophy of Religion" or "Psychology of Religion." To that list one might add the "in" that occurs in such disparate statements as "I believe in you," spoken as encouragement; "I do believe in spooks," spoken by the Cowardly Lion in the film version of *The Wizard of Oz*; and "I believe in one God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible," spoken at the beginning of the Nicene Creed.

In the philosophical and religious European traditions, belief has rarely been discussed alone but is most often paired with another term to which it stands in a relationship of weakness or strength. When one looks up belief in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, one is directed to "Knowledge and Belief." When one looks up belief in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, one finds the instruction: "See Doubt." In other resources, belief is regarded merely as a weak synonym for a more potent term; for example, under "Belief" in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, one is advised to "see Faith."

Hume, who pondered belief perhaps more than any philosopher prior to the present century, described it in 1739 as "one of the greatest mysteries of philosophy: tho' no one has so much as suspected, that there is any difficulty in explaining it" (1967, 628). In philosophical literature, belief has often been portrayed as a mental state of assent to a proposition already contained in the mind, although the nature of this assent has been much debated. For Hume, belief is "nothing but a more vivid and intense conception of any idea" (119-20). Belief is often portrayed as weaker than knowledge, since one may believe something that is either factually true or false, whereas knowledge only knows what is true. In Kant's terms in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, belief is a judgment that is subjectively sufficient but objectively insufficient (1968, 648-50). Thus, knowledge has sometimes been defined as "justified true belief," a view challenged by Plato in the *Theaetetus*. Philosophers have also considered the relation, if any, between belief and action.

subject, enlarging the

Old High German *gi-*nanic *laub* is related to *ice*, the English "libidinal by); the Italian *libito* (*to praise*), *glauben* (*to praise*). The root is perhaps from it, belief. It seems untrue ("I believe for believe what one knows

for this volume, one of that nonetheless prove ure" or "Religion and Psychology of Religion." disparate statements as eve in spooks," spoken of Oz; and "I believe in of all things visible and

s, belief has rarely been m to which it stands in ; up belief in the *Ency-* and Belief." When one ls the instruction: "See : a weak synonym for a *New Catholic Encyclope-*

philosopher prior to the latest mysteries of phi- here is any difficulty in : lief has often been por- contained in the mind, ed. For Hume, belief is idea" (119–20). Belief may believe something nly knows what is true. a judgment that is sub- –50). Thus, knowledge ew challenged by Plato elation, if any, between

In Christian theology, belief has generally been discussed in relation to questions of the existence of God and of miracles, notably the Resurrection. There have, of course, been many attempts to demonstrate that the existence of God can be philosophically proven, or if not proven, that belief in God is at least reasonable. The most famous instance of the latter is Pascal's "wager" (1962, 200–205), in which he argues that if God exists, his existence is incomprehensible; it is impossible to know with certainty whether or not God exists. If God does exist, the consequences of belief and disbelief are profound, both for the present and for eternity. To believe that God exists, therefore, is the prudent and reasonable course, in which nothing is lost and everything may be gained.

Accepting Pascal's premise that God is ultimately unknowable, some philosophers and theologians have argued that religious belief is qualitatively different from other forms of belief because it is an assent to that which can never be justified by conventional means. Religious belief is, furthermore, often resistant to contrary evidence and oblivious to negative consequences. Tertullian's paradox is *Credo quia absurdum*, "I believe because it is absurd." Aquinas argued that belief (or faith) is superior to reason because it is an assent to a transcendent truth, and that by definition, to believe (*credere*) is to believe in what is true; if its object is not true, it cannot be faith (*fides*) (see Smith 63).

Scholars of religion have also considered the causal relation, if any, between belief and knowledge of the truth. Some see belief as a preliminary stage of knowledge that under the proper circumstances can evolve into knowledge. Others, such as William James, ascribe more autonomy to belief: proof is not essential for belief but is rather something derived from belief for the consumption of others. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James asserts:

The truth is that in the metaphysical and religious sphere, articulate reasons are cogent for us only when our inarticulate feelings of reality have already been impressed in favor of the same conclusion. Then, indeed, our intuitions and our reason work together, and great world-ruling systems, like that of the Buddhist or of the Christian philosophy, may grow up. Our impulsive belief is here always what sets up the original body of truth, and our articulately verbalized philosophy is but its shadowy translation into formulas. The unreasoned and immediate assurance is the deep thing in us, the reasoned argument is but the surface exhibition. (1961, 74–5)

Belief, then, is the primary state for James, intuitive and fundamental, upon which the secondary structures of theology are built. Without the foundation of belief already in place, reasoned arguments have little persuasive power. This was also the view of Wittgenstein, whose comments on belief are found throughout the published records of his lectures and conversations. In his *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* (1980, vol. 1, pars. 62–64), for example, he asks, "How does such an expression as 'I believe . . .' ever come to be used? Did a phenome-

non, that of belief, suddenly get noticed? Did we observe ourselves and discover this phenomenon in that way? Did we observe ourselves and other men and so discover the phenomenon of belief?" For Wittgenstein as well, religious belief seems unlike other forms of belief because it cannot be supported by ordinary forms of evidence: "The point is that if there were evidence, this would in fact destroy the whole business" (1966, 56). Thus, statements of belief are not to be judged by the criteria used for other types of utterances but by a different kind of meaning as use, the use provided not in semantics but in the practice of one's life.

Near the end of his study of the term "belief" in philosophy and social anthropology, Rodney Needham (1972) concludes:

The concept of belief certainly seemed, by the great reliance placed upon it in the western tradition, to have an essential and irrefragable significance, formulated over centuries of theological exegesis, philosophical analysis, and its numerous applications in common discourse. Yet the deeper and more minutely we go into the meaning of 'belief', the harder it is to concede it any discrete character or any empirical value as an index to the inner life of men. (234)

This is not to say, however, that the notion of belief is not without its historical effects, that belief is not an index of the outer life. To consider the more outward expressions of belief, let us return to the painting of Peter Martyr. When we read the martyrologies, we learn that the artist seems to have captured him not after having written the last word of his testament but the first. We learn that the man poised with the cleaver, dressed so stylishly in Italian velvets, is a Cathar, a Manichean, an advocate of the famous dualist school which held that there are two gods, a good god of spirit and an evil god of matter. And we learn that the Cathar may not have been depicted by the artist in the last instant before the fatal blow but that he might have paused, perhaps out of curiosity about what else Peter would write. According to some accounts, Peter did not simply write *Credo*, "I believe," but *Credo in deum*, "I believe in God." More rarely, it is reported that he wrote *Credo in unum deum*, "I believe in one God." It may have been this adjective that incited the Cathar, a dualist, to strike the fatal blow.

The account of Peter's life in the martyrologies tells us that he was born in Verona circa 1206, the son of Cathar parents, but was sent to a Christian school where he learned to say the Apostles' Creed, which, of course, begins, "I believe in God, the father almighty, creator of heaven and earth." This apparently caused his family consternation, for the Cathars believed that an evil god had made the world. At the urging of St. Dominic, Peter joined the Order of Friars Preachers (the Dominicans) in 1221 and devoted himself to the purpose for which the order had been founded, the battle against heresy: opinions that had been rejected by the church. The most prominent heresy in the thirteenth century was that of the Cathari ("the pure," also known as the Albigensians). Perhaps in-

ourselves and discover
and other men and so
as well, religious belief
supported by ordinary
ence, this would in fact
ts of belief are not to be
but by a different kind
but in the practice of

ilosophy and social an-

he great reliance
essential and irref-
heological exege-
tions in common
into the meaning
e character or any
(234)

ot without its historical
sider the more outward
r Martyr. When we read
captured him not after
: We learn that the man
ets, is a Cathar, a Mani-
held that there are two
we learn that the Cathar
nt before the fatal blow
y about what else Peter
: simply write *Credo*, "I
rarely, it is reported that
" It may have been this
atal blow.

us that he was born in
nt to a Christian school
urse, begins, "I believe
' This apparently caused
evil god had made the
rder of Friars Preachers
purpose for which the
ions that had been re-
: thirteenth century was
nigensians). Perhaps in-

fluenced by doctrines brought from Eastern Europe by traders and returning crusaders, the Cathars held that the material world, including the body, is the creation of the evil god. They thus rejected involvement with the world, abstaining from marriage and food that resulted from procreation (meat, eggs, dairy products). Although they considered themselves Christians, the Cathars rejected the doctrines of the virgin birth, physical resurrection, and sacraments. The practice of severe asceticism, which was entailed in their doctrine, was not demanded of all but was limited to a select group of virtuosi known as "the perfecti." They lived their lives in sharp contrast to the opulence and wealth characteristic of the Roman Catholic clergy, to whom the Cathars responded with scorn. In 1218, the Catholic monk Pierre des Vaux de Cernay described the Cathars' challenges to the beliefs of Roman Catholics:

They said that almost all the Church of Rome was a den of thieves, and that it was the harlot of which we read in the Apocalypse. They so far annulled the sacraments of the Church, as publicly to teach that the water of baptism was just the same as river water, and that the Host of the most holy body of Christ did not differ from common bread, instilling into the ears of the simple this blasphemy, that the body of Christ, even though it had been as great as the Alps, would have long ago been consumed by those who have eaten of it. (Peters 1980, 124)

By the end of the twelfth century, the Cathars were regarded as the most dangerous of heretics, those who held a doctrine in defiance of papally defined orthodoxy.

A manual for inquisitors from 1248 names the heretic's crime in terms of belief: "We, the inquisitors . . . adjudge (so and so), named above, to be a heretic, because he believed in the errors of heretics and is proved still to believe them and because, when examined or when convicted and confessing, he flatly refused to be recalled and to give full obedience to the mandates of the Church" (Peters 1980, 205). The penalty, however, was something much more material:

We cause the goods of heretics, the condemned and the imprisoned as well, to be confiscated, and we insist that this be done, as we are duty bound to do. . . . And if justice is well done in respect of the condemned and those who relapse, if their property is surely confiscated, and if prisoners are adequately provided with necessities, the Lord will gloriously and wonderfully be made manifest in the fruit of the Inquisition. (206)

Peter of Verona had already made a name for himself as a fiery preacher against the Cathars, and had been one of the first called to the new profession of inquisitor by Pope Gregory IX. He had led the holy work of combating heresy in Milan, where a number of heretics were burned in 1231. In 1244, his impassioned

preaching in Florence inspired the formation of a military order dedicated to the protection of the Dominicans and the inquisition. Peter played a leading role in the inquisition in northern Italy, zealously attacking the faith of his family and persecuting those who professed it. His mission led to the imprisonment and confiscation of the property of many Cathars. Two of his victims, Venetian nobles, are said to have hired assassins to avenge their losses. They attacked Peter and his attendant in a lonely forest on 6 April 1252. As the story is told, the assassin Carino first struck Peter in the head before pursuing his attendant. He returned to find Peter still alive. According to one version, he was reciting the Apostles' Creed. (The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists the Apostles' Creed as one of the archaic meanings of "belief." Thus, from 1377, "I . . . sat softly adown and seide my belieue.") According to another version, he was writing its first words on the ground in his blood. Carino dispatched him by plunging a dagger into his chest. Peter was canonized by Innocent IV in the following year ("the most speedy creation of a saint on record" [Lea 1888, 216]) shortly after the pope issued his famous bull *Ad extirpanda*, which ordered that heretics be executed five days after arrest and which permitted the use of torture in the courts of the inquisition. Peter Martyr became the first martyr of the Dominicans and the patron saint of the inquisition.

The death of Peter Martyr is depicted both in painting and in hagiography as an enactment of belief. Peter, who believes in one God, is martyred by Cathars, who believe in two. But, as we have seen, his CREDO is written in blood, on the ground, in a specific time, and in a specific place; the words "I believe" seem to obscure the historical circumstances of his death. Indeed, the available evidence suggests that he was not a martyr and that he did not die for his beliefs. According to Roman Catholic doctrine, martyrs are those who die witnessing their faith in Christ at the hands of persecutors of the church. But Peter's death, as others have noted, was an assassination rather than a martyrdom, with the witness to his faith provided only by the addendum in blood, a tradition doubted in *Butler's Lives of the Saints*. Peter was murdered not for his beliefs but for his deeds, specifically for the confiscation of the property of two Cathar noblemen. Yet so powerful is the ideology of belief that "martyr" has virtually become his surname. Furthermore, the conflict that led to the inquisition in northern Italy seems not to have been so much about belief as about who would control the Lombard League, the pope or the Holy Roman Emperor. That the inquisition only succeeded after the death of Frederic II suggests the conflict was certainly between two gods, but that these gods were not the two gods of the absolutist Cathars. If the motivations were finally political, so were the effects, with the contents of men's and women's minds serving as the pretext to justify the taking of property and the taking of lives. Of one who had died before being condemned, the manual for inquisitors declared that "his bones be exhumed from the cemetery, if they can be distinguished from others, and burned in detestation of so heinous an offense" (Peters 1980, 206).

In this case of belief, then, one is distinguished from others not by sounds

my thinking

by order dedicated to the
played a leading role in
the faith of his family and
to the imprisonment and
of his victims, Venetian
sses. They attacked Peter
As the story is told, the
rsuing his attendant. He
sion, he was reciting the
the Apostles' Creed as one
, "I . . . sat softly adown
1, he was writing its first
him by plunging a dagger
the following year ("the
3, 216]) shortly after the
ered that heretics be exe-
cise of torture in the courts
yr of the Dominicans and

ing and in hagiography as
d, is martyred by Cathars,
is written in blood, on the
words "I believe" seem to
ed, the available evidence
die for his beliefs. Accord-
o die witnessing their faith
ut Peter's death, as others
rdom, with the witness to
dition doubted in *Butler's*
iefs but for his deeds, spe-
har noblemen. Yet so pow-
ally become his surname.
n northern Italy seems not
ould control the Lombard
it the inquisition only suc-
fflict was certainly between
s of the absolutist Cathars.
ffects, with the contents of
stify the taking of property
re being condemned, the
humed from the cemetery,
in detestation of so heinous

from others not by sounds

produced by the tongue and actions performed by the body but by the invisible content of the mind. Once the presence of error is inferred in the other's mind, his or her body is subject to punishment, even if the person's deeds remain unobjectionable. When a bishop asked a knight why the Waldensian schismatics had not been expelled and shunned, he answered, "We cannot do that, for we were raised with them, and we have relatives among them, and we see that they lead honest and decent lives." The Catholic chronicler of this exchange observed, "Thus does falsity in the appearance of a good life lead people away from the truth" (Peters 1980, 107). The lesson of Peter's martyrdom, then, may be that the safer course is to allow belief to remain the nebulous mental phenomenon Hume found it to be, left unmanifest in word or deed. The more famous painting of Peter Martyr is that by Fra Angelico, which shows him standing upright and facing the viewer, with an ax in his head, a dagger in his chest, and his finger to his lips.

Three centuries after Peter's death, Catholic monks had again set out to preach the gospel, not to combat heresy but to convert the infidel, the unbelievers. The accounts of the Christian missions, both Catholic and Protestant, suggest, however, that belief, portrayed as an inner state, was again employed as a surrogate for more visible concerns. In 1596, a Spanish merchant vessel foundered off the coast of Japan and its cargo was seized by the shogun. Both Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries demanded the confiscated cargo, and a bitter dispute developed ending in the execution (by crucifixion) of six Franciscans, three Jesuits, and seventeen laymen. That group is known as The Twenty-six Martyrs.

Such cases suggest that when Pascal placed his wager some decades later, the concerns of this life were as much at stake in the wager of belief as were the concerns of the life everlasting. Still, in the seventeenth century the options for the European remained either belief or unbelief in the Christian God; other religions lacked the full revelation of God's truth. By the end of the nineteenth century, the situation was rather different. William James wrote in 1896:

It is evident that unless there be some pre-existing tendency to believe in masses and holy water, the option offered by Pascal is not a living option. Certainly no Turk ever took to masses and holy water on its account; and even to us Protestants these means of salvation seem such foregone impossibilities that Pascal's logic, invoked for them specifically, leaves us unmoved. As well might the Mahdi write to us, saying, "I am the Expected One whom God has created in his effulgence. You shall be infinitely happy if you confess me; otherwise you shall be cut off from the light of the sun. Weigh, then, your infinite gain if I am genuine against your finite sacrifice if I am not!" (James 1956, 6)

For James, then, belief, at least for the modern man, has little to do with logic. A Turk (the quintessential infidel) would not be persuaded to convert to Christianity by Pascal's argument, just as an American Protestant would not be persuaded

to convert to Islam based on claims by the Mahdi (for late nineteenth-century America, the equivalent of the Ayatollah Khomeini). James's point is, in part, a point about history and culture, that what may be compelling in one time and place may not be in a different era or in a different part of the world. It is also an acknowledgment that the question no longer involves simply belief or unbelief in the one true faith; it is a recognition of other traditions called "religions" or even "world religions." His assumption remains, nonetheless, that each of these religions is above all a set of truth claims, a system of belief.

But before dispensing with Pascal's wager altogether, we may wish to pause to explore the notion of belief as wager. Roman emperors are said to have wagered with God for victory in battle, and Venetian doges built cathedrals in return for salvation from the plague. The contractual nature of belief has been explored by a more recent Catholic thinker, Michel de Certeau. The believer, in a position of inferiority in relation to the object of belief (we speak of belief being owed and credence being given), gives something away in the hope of getting something back, not now, but sometime in the future. "The 'believer' abandons a present advantage, or some of its claims, to give credit to the receiver" (de Certeau 1985, 193). It is this element of time, this deferral into the future, that characterizes the relation between subject and object in belief, and differentiates believing from the simultaneity of subject and object characteristic of knowing or seeing. In belief, the benefit accrues to the believer only with the passage of time; belief, in other words, is an "expectational practice" (195). In order for the contractual relation to be maintained, there must be the expectation of some return on the initial investment, a surety of some salvation, and this in turn depends on the presumption of the ability of the object of belief to guarantee the loan. The object of belief is thus present in its promise but absent in the fact that the debt is not yet repaid (201). In the case of the painting of Peter Martyr, the artist offers an image of Peter Martyr representing his belief, inscribed on the ground in his blood. The contract between Peter and his God is a familiar one: by dying for his belief, he will be delivered into the eternal presence of God. The angels are already hovering above; the return on his investment will not be deferred much longer. But as we have seen, other economies of exchange are also at work. Peter has invested notions of belief and heresy in the purposes of the church against the Cathars, who have repaid the debt of their heresy, their deficit of right belief, with their property and their lives. But each contract has produced another contract: Peter's disposition of the property of the Cathars produced their contract with the assassins, and Peter paid for the property with his life.

But de Certeau seems to assume that the believer's entry into the contract is somehow free, and is never compelled by the foreign. The notion of belief, however, is neither natural nor universal. It might be described as an ideology, not so much in the sense of false consciousness but as an idea that arises from a specific set of material interests. In the case of Peter Martyr, the interests were those of the Roman Catholic Church in northern Italy. But belief can also be

late nineteenth-century
nes's point is, in part, a
pelling in one time and
of the world. It is also an
simply belief or unbelief
ns called "religions" or
reless, that each of these
ief.

; we may wish to pause
ors are said to have wa-
es built cathedrals in re-
ature of belief has been
Certeau. The believer, in
(we speak of belief being
y in the hope of getting
The 'believer' abandons
dit to the receiver" (de
rral into the future, that
belief, and differentiates
haracteristic of knowing
only with the passage of
ice" (195). In order for
the expectation of some
vation, and this in turn
ct of belief to guarantee
ise but absent in the fact
ainting of Peter Martyr,
s belief, inscribed on the
is God is a familiar one:
al presence of God. The
vestment will not be de-
nies of exchange are also
y in the purposes of the
their heresy, their deficit
ch contract has produced
of the Cathars produced
property with his life.

entry into the contract is
he notion of belief, how-
ibed as an ideology, not
idea that arises from a
artyr, the interests were
y. But belief can also be

introduced into domains where it was not previously present, and for reasons that appear less material than those of medieval Europe.

We turn, then, to Sri Lanka in the late nineteenth century (when it was called Ceylon). Our concern is not to compare Buddhist and Christian beliefs or theories of belief, nor to consider how Christian beliefs may have influenced Buddhists. Instead, we shall examine a case in which the ideology of belief, the idea that a religion must have beliefs in order to be a religion, was introduced to Ceylon by an American Civil War veteran, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), who in 1881 published *The Buddhist Catechism*.

Colonel Olcott was the founder, with Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, of the Theosophical Society. By 1878 Blavatsky and Olcott had shifted their emphasis away from the investigation of psychic phenomena toward the broader promotion of a universal brotherhood of humanity, claiming affinities between Theosophy and the wisdom of the East, specifically Hinduism and Buddhism. With the aim of establishing links with Asian teachers, they traveled to India, arriving in Bombay in 1879 and proceeding to Ceylon the next year. Although they both took the vows of lay Buddhists, Blavatsky's interest in Buddhism remained peripheral to her Theosophy. Olcott, however, enthusiastically embraced his new faith, being careful to note that he was a "regular Buddhist" rather than a "debased modern" Buddhist; he described "the shocking ignorance of the Sinhalese about Buddhism" (Prothero 1996, 100). "Our Buddhism was that of the Master-Adept Gautama Buddha, which was identically the Wisdom Religion of the Aryan Upanishads, and the soul of the ancient world-faiths" (96). Olcott took it as his task to restore true Buddhism to Ceylon and to counter the efforts of the Christian missionaries on the island. In order to accomplish this aim, he adopted many of their techniques, founding the Buddhist Theosophical Society to disseminate Buddhist knowledge (and later assisting in the founding of the Young Men's Buddhist Association) and publishing in 1881 *The Buddhist Catechism* "on the lines of the similar elementary hand-books so effectively used among the Western Christian sects" (101). Olcott, who had earlier professed his ignorance of Buddhism, took on the task of writing the catechism himself. In the preface to the thirty-sixth edition he wrote, "It has always seemed incongruous that an American making no claims at all to scholarship, should be looked to by the Sinhalese [Ceylonese] nation to help them teach the Dharma to their children, and as I believe I have said in an earlier edition, I only consented to write the *Buddhist Catechism* after I found that no Bhikku [monk] would undertake it" (1947, xii). That no such monk was forthcoming suggests more about Olcott's assumptions about Buddhism than it does about any deficiencies in the Sinhalese clergy.

It is a remarkable work, opening with a certificate from H. Sunangala, a prominent Sinhalese monk and a leading figure in the Buddhist revival of the late nineteenth century who declares, "I hereby certify that I have carefully examined the Sinhalese version of the catechism prepared by Colonel H. S. Olcott, and that the same is in agreement with the Canon of the Southern Buddhist Church.

I recommend the work to teachers in Buddhist schools, and to all others who may wish to impart to beginners about the essential features of our religion." It should be noted that there is no such thing as the "Southern Buddhist Church" and that many scholars reject the notion of a "canon" in the case of Buddhism. The catechism comprises 384 questions and answers, organized under five headings: The Life of the Buddha, The Dharma or Doctrine, The Sangha, The Rise and Spread of Buddhism, and Buddhism and Science. Here is a typical passage:

118. Q. *Why does ignorance cause suffering?*

A. Because it makes us prize what is not worth prizing, grieve for what we should not grieve, consider real what is not real but only illusionary, and pass our lives in pursuit of worthless objects, neglecting what is in reality most valuable.

119. Q. *And what is that which is most valuable?*

A. To know the whole secret of man's existence and destiny, so that we may estimate at no more than their actual value this life and its relations; and so that we may live in a way to ensure the greatest happiness and the least suffering for our fellow-men and ourselves.

120. Q. *What is the light that can dispel this ignorance of ours and remove our sorrows?*

A. The knowledge of the "Four Noble Truths", as BUDDHA called them. (Olcott 1947, 27)

Despite the evocation of the preamble to the United States Constitution in passages like this, much of the content of the *Catechism* seems quite accurate, even natural, to those who have studied Buddhism in the West and who remember from "Introduction to World Religions" that the Buddha taught the four noble truths (and the eightfold path). The ease with which we read without pause through passages like this is testimony to the success of this work, and those upon which it relies, to represent Buddhism as above all a system of beliefs. Few Buddhists over the course of Asian history would have been able to recite the four noble truths and the eightfold path, yet this is precisely what the *Catechism* trains the children of Ceylon to do.

Olcott did not learn to read Buddhist texts in Pali, relying instead on translations available to him in English. He claimed to have read "15,000 pages of Buddhist teaching" in preparing for his task. The translators from whom he drew, notably Thomas W. Rhys Davids, are never far away. ("165. Q. *In the whole text of the three Pitakas how many words are there?* A. Dr. Rhys Davids estimates them at 1,752,800" [p. 39]). In addition to relying on the translators' information, he also assumed their view of Buddhism as a moral philosophy ("170. Q. *If we were to try to represent the whole spirit of the Buddha's doctrine in one word, which word should we choose?* A. Justice" [pp. 40-41]) that had been corrupted over the centuries by the introduction of popular superstitions ("186. Q. *Are charms, incantations, the observance of lucky hours, and devil dancing a part of*

Buddhism? A. They are positively repugnant to its fundamental principles. They are surviving relics of fetishism and pantheistic and other foreign religions" [pp. 44–45]. . . . 191. Q. *When such perversions are discovered, what should be the true Buddhist's earnest desire?* A. The true Buddhist should be ever ready and anxious to see the false purged away from the true, and to assist, if he can" [p. 47]).

In the *Catechism*, then, Olcott seems determined to restore to Ceylon the spirit of true Buddhism, which appears to be largely defined as a set of beliefs best expounded in negative terms or, more specifically, as that which is non-Roman Catholic:

187. Q. *What striking contrasts are there between Buddhism and what may properly be called "religions"?*

A. Among others, these: It teaches the highest goodness without creating a God; a continuity of life without adhering to the superstitious and selfish doctrine of an eternal, metaphysical soul-substance that goes out of the body; a happiness without an objective heaven; a method of salvation without a vicarious Savior; redemption by one-self as the Redeemer, and without rites, prayers, penances, priests or intercessory saints; and a *summum bonum*, i.e., Nirvana, attainable in this life and in this world by leading a pure, unselfish life of wisdom and compassion to all beings. (p. 45)

Even with his deference to Sinhalese chauvinism ("318. Q. *In which country have we reason to believe the sacred books of primitive Buddhism have been best preserved and least corrupted?* A. Ceylon" [p. 82]), it seems ludicrous to imagine Sinhalese school children learning to answer the question ("305. Q. *Through what Western religious brotherhoods did the Buddha Dharma mingle itself with Western thought?* A. Through the sects of the Therapeuts of Egypt and the Essenes of Palestine" [p. 79]). Indeed, a much shorter version was produced for children by another Theosophist, C. W. Leadbeater in 1902. Still, Olcott's version was printed in some forty editions in twenty languages, and is still in use in schools in Sri Lanka.

Olcott's activities in Ceylon appear not so much as attempts to beat the Christian missionaries at their own game but as the inevitable consequences of an ideology of belief, that is, an assumption deriving from the history of Christianity that religion is above all an interior state of assent to certain truths. In Victorian Europe and America, the Buddha was seen as the greatest philosopher of India's Aryan past, and his teachings were regarded as a complete philosophical and psychological system based on reason and restraint; opposed to ritual, superstition, and sacerdotalism; and demonstrating how the individual could live a moral life without the trappings of institutional religion. This Buddhism was to be found in texts, rather than in the lives of modern Buddhists of Ceylon, who in Olcott's view had deviated from the original teachings. Olcott (and his Western infor-

ments) therefore could portray Buddhism as a set of propositions, propositions that Olcott himself (unlike most of his informants) assented to, that is, "believed in." It was then necessary that there be strategies for the propagation of that belief. Thus, he composed *The Buddhist Catechism*, he founded the Buddhist Theosophical Society, and through it he established Buddhist secondary schools and Sunday schools.

But his fundraising efforts for the Buddhist Theosophical Society initially proved unsuccessful, endangering his propagation of Buddhist belief. In response, he briefly shifted his focus from belief to practice. When he learned that Catholic missionaries were making claims about the healing powers of a shrine, he implored Buddhist monks to perform faith healings in order to demonstrate the truth of the Buddha's teachings. None volunteered. Olcott himself then decided to employ his knowledge of mesmerism (while publicly crediting the Buddha) to effect cures. Through word of mouth and public testimonials, Olcott gained a reputation as a healer, and his efforts at fundraising began to meet with success (Prothero 1996, 107-8).

Returning to his vision of Buddhism as belief, Olcott set out on the grander mission of healing the schism he perceived between "the Northern and Southern Churches," that is, between the Buddhists of Ceylon and Burma (Southern) and those of China and Japan (Northern). Such a division has been rejected by scholars for its simplification of the already problematic (although at least Buddhist) categories of Hinayana and Mahayana. But Olcott believed that a great rift had occurred in Buddhism 2,300 years earlier and that if he could simply have representatives of the Buddhist nations agree to a list of "fourteen items of belief" (he also referred to them as "Fundamental Buddhist Beliefs"), then it might be possible to create a "United Buddhist World." He participated in the design of a Buddhist flag that could "serve the same purpose as that of the cross does for Christianity" (Prothero 1996, 116). Olcott traveled to Burma and Japan, where he negotiated with Buddhist leaders until he could find language to which they could assent. He also implored them to send missionaries to spread the Dharma. In the end, however, Olcott's beliefs led to another schism. He incurred the wrath of Sinhalese Buddhist leaders when he mocked their belief in the authenticity of the precious tooth relic of the Buddha at Kandy by stating that it was in fact a piece of deer horn. Shortly thereafter, H. Sumangala, the monk who had certified the authenticity of the *Catechism*, found seventeen answers that were "opposed to orthodox views of the Southern Church" and withdrew his certification (Sumangala 1906, 57).

Concerning the *Catechism* Olcott's biographer writes, "[B]efore Olcott, no Sinhalese Buddhist had thought to reduce Buddhism to its belief and then to compress those beliefs into a simple question-and-answer format, as Olcott did, in his celebrated *The Buddhist Catechism*" (Prothero 1996, 10). This brief survey of belief has suggested that it may be better not to seek to imagine what a person had or had not thought but rather to examine what he or she did. The fact that

positions, propositions
ted to, that is, "believed
the propagation of that
e founded the Buddhist
ldhist secondary schools

ophical Society initially
Buddhist belief. In re-
e. When he learned that
aling powers of a shrine,
in order to demonstrate
ed. Olcott himself then
le publicly crediting the
iblic testimonials, Olcott
sing began to meet with

t set out on the grander
: Northern and Southern
d Burma (Southern) and
s been rejected by schol-
rough at least Buddhist)
eved that a great rift had
e could simply have rep-
ourteen items of belief"

Beliefs"), then it might
articipated in the design
as that of the cross does
ed to Burma and Japan,
d find language to which
issionaries to spread the
another schism. He in-
he mocked their belief
ldha at Kandy by stating
fter, H. Sumangala, the
ism, found seventeen an-
hern Church" and with-

es, "[B]efore Olcott, no
to its belief and then to
er format, as Olcott did,
96, 10). This brief survey
to imagine what a person
or she did. The fact that

no Sinhalese Buddhist had produced a text that reduced Buddhism to its belief suggests that the category of belief is not so easily transferred from one society to another, and that those who seek to do so are subject to the consequences of their deed. Sumangala stated that Olcott's attack on the tooth relic was something "we could only expect from an enemy of our religion" (1906, 58).

Colonel Olcott, acting as the uninvited agent of Sinhalese Buddhists at the end of the nineteenth century, entered into a contract on their behalf, not with God but with the ideology of belief itself. He invested his efforts in belief, hoping that in the end his investment would be repaid with the restoration of true Buddhism to Ceylon. The enemy, for Colonel Olcott, were the European and American missionaries who wanted to convert the Sinhalese to Christianity, causing them no longer to believe in Buddhism. By entering into a contract with belief, the Sinhalese were promised a certain salvation, the salvation of not losing the beliefs that they never knew they had. The result, however, was that Olcott was rejected by many of those he had sought to save. In the meantime, the movement that he founded, Theosophy, which he regarded as the true science, has come to be regarded as a quaint remnant of a bygone age. It has, in short, become a belief, in de Certeau's sense of mental occurrences in the mind of someone else, "known as 'beliefs' precisely because we do not believe them any longer" (de Certeau 1985, 196). That is, the view of belief as an inner state, as an assent to a proposition, can only occur with a loss, when the believer has terminated the contract with the believed, leaving the object of belief as a lonely component of someone else's religion, either of another time or of another place.

Belief appears as a universal category because of the universalist claims of the tradition in which it has become most central, Christianity. Other religions have made universalist claims, but Christianity was allied with political power, which made it possible to transport its belief to all corners of the globe (if not the universe), making belief the measure of what religion is understood to be. Belief, then, or perhaps the demand that there be belief, is implicated both in the activities of Christian missionaries and in the "native" efforts (and those of their invited and uninvited surrogates) to counter them. The question that remains, however, is what the Sinhalese gave up by giving credit to belief. What are the costs of seeing oneself in that mirror?

All of this leads to the conclusion that the statement, "I believe in . . .," is sensible only when there are others who "do not"; it is an agonistic affirmation of something that cannot be submitted to ordinary rules of verification. The very impossibility of verification has historically functioned as a means of establishing a community against "the world," hinting at a counterfactual reality to which only the believers have access. When the world has threatened to destroy that community, as in the case of Jews and Shi'a Muslims at certain moments in their histories, dissimulation has been permitted. Thus, a statement of belief is a convention appropriate to a specific situation, sanctioned by a history and a community. As Wittgenstein notes, "the expression of belief . . . is just a sentence;—

and the sentence has sense only as a member of a system of language; as one expression within a calculus" (1958, 42). It is only when we extend that language, that calculus, to include the historical circumstances of the statement that the multiple meanings of the statement become clear, even when it is written in blood.

The problem, then, is not whether belief exists—this is difficult to determine—but whether religion must be represented as something that derives from belief, as something with external manifestations that can ultimately be traced back to an inner assent to a cognitive proposition, as a state of mind that produces practice. As we have seen, in thirteenth-century Italy the inquisition hunted and punished heretics in the name of belief. There, even when it appears with such priority, belief is the afterthought, belatedly depicted as having existed inside someone else's head. In the nineteenth century, Colonel Olcott and other foreigners created a world religion called Buddhism in the name of belief. Its role in turning other traditions, including the Christian, into world religions remains to be investigated. A century after Colonel Olcott, we continue to speak of the "world view" of this or that religion, demonstrating that, even though we may no longer believe in God, we still believe in belief.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- Certeau, Michel de. 1985. "What We Do When We Believe." In *On Signs*, edited by Marshall Blonsky.
- Hume, David. 1967. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge.
- Lambert, Malcolm. 1992. *Medieval Heresy: Popular Movements from the Gregorian Reform to the Reformation*.
- Needham, Rodney. 1972. *Belief, Language, and Experience*.
- Peters, Edward, ed. 1980. *Heresy and Authority in Medieval Europe: Documents in Translation*.
- Quine, W. V., and J. S. Julian. 1970. *The Web of Belief*.
- Smith, Barbara Herrnstein. 1997. *Belief and Resistance: Dynamics of Contemporary Intellectual Controversy*.
- Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. 1977. *Belief and History*.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1966. *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, compiled by Yorick Smythies, Rush Rhees, and James Taylor; edited by Cyril Barrett.

REFERENCES

- Certeau, Michel de. 1985. "What We Do When We Believe." In *On Signs*, edited by Marshall Blonsky. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Hume, David. 1967. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge. London: Oxford University Press.

- James, William. 1956. *"The Will to Believe" and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. New York: Dover Publications.
- . 1961. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Collier Books.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1968. *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Norman Kemp Smith. New York: Macmillan.
- Lambert, Malcolm. 1992. *Medieval Heresy: Popular Movements from the Gregorian Reform to the Reformation*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lea, Henry Charles. 1888. *A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages*. 3 vols. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Müller, Friedrich Max. 1897. *Contributions to the Science of Mythology*. 2 vols. London: Longmans Green.
- Needham, Rodney. 1972. *Belief, Language, and Experience*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Olcott, Henry Steel. 1947. *The Buddhist Catechism*. 44th ed. Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing House.
- Pascal, Blaise. 1962. *Pensées*, translated by Martin Turnell. London: Harvill Press.
- Peters, Edward, ed. 1980. *Heresy and Authority in Medieval Europe: Documents in Translation*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Prothero, Stephen. 1996. *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Quine, W. V., and J. S. Julian. 1970. *The Web of Belief*. New York: Random House.
- Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. 1977. *Belief and History*. Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Press.
- Sumangala, H. 1906. "High Priest Sumangala and the Theosophical Society." *The Maha Bodhi* [Calcutta] 14 (April).
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1958. *The Blue and Brown Books*. New York: Harper and Row.
- . 1966. *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, edited by Cyril Barrett. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- . 1980. *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe; edited by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright. Vol. 1. Oxford: Blackwell.