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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Adventures in "belief": Hearing an old concept in a new key

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Abstract

The well-worn critique of "belief" as inadequate for understanding ritual motivation and practice has become a truism in need of reevaluation. For groups who foreground the establishment of truth in ritual practice, "belief" is a useful analytic term that brings together propositions and commitment to the relationships and systems articulating those propositions. Spiritualism is a religious movement in which mediums attempt to communicate between the spirits of deceased people and their loved ones. As Spiritualist mediums see it, their main job is to provide "proof of survival"—evidence that they are really in touch with the spirit world. In doing so, they "serve Spirit," working on behalf of those in the spirit world. Drawing on Bakhtin's treatment of dialogism and architectonics, I urge a rethinking of "belief" as a never-completed project worked on intersubjectively. This approach to belief not only makes sense for analysis of groups who insist on the importance of truth claims but also liberates the term for use outside of Christian and self-consciously modern contexts, as Bakhtinian dialogism is grounded in a model of the utterance and interactivity in general and not in any specific utterance or pattern of interaction.

KEYWORDS
belief, religion, ritual, Spiritualism, Australia

Resumen

La desgastada crítica de la "creencia" como inadecuada para entender la motivación y la práctica ritual se ha convertido en una obviedad necesaria de ser reevaluada. Para los grupos que ponen de relieve el establecimiento de la verdad en la práctica ritual, la "creencia" es un térmico analítico útil que articula proposiciones y compromiso con las relaciones y sistemas que articulan esas proposiciones. El espiritismo es un movimiento religioso en el cual los médiums intentan comunicar los espíritus de las personas fallecidas y sus seres queridos. Como los médiums espiritistas lo ven, su trabajo principal es dar una "prueba de supervivencia" –evidencia de que ellos están realmente en contacto con el mundo espiritual-. Al hacerlo, ellos "sirven al espíritu," trabajando en nombre de aquellos en el mundo espiritual. Basados en el tratamiento de Bakhtin de dialogismo

y la arquitectura insto a repensar la "creencia" como un proyecto nunca completado trabajado intersubjetivamente. Esta aproximación a la creencia no sólo tiene sentido para los análisis de grupos que insisten en la importancia de afirmaciones de la verdad, sino también libera el término para su uso por fuera de contextos cristianos y autoconscientemente modernos, en la medida que el dialogismo Bakhtiniano está sustentado en un modelo de expresión e interactividad en general, y no en una expresión o patrón de interacción específica. [creencia, religión, ritual, espiritismo, Australia]

Résumé

La critique éculée voulant que les "croyances" (foi, conviction) soient inadéquates pour comprendre les motivations et pratiques rituelles est devenu un cliché qui se doit d'être réévalué. Dans les groupes où il est convenu que les paroles dites lors des rituels sont empreintes de vérité, les "croyances" représentent un cadre analytique adéquat permettant de mettre en relation les propositions avec le dévouement envers les relations et les systèmes articulant ces propositions. Le spiritualisme est un mouvement religieux dans lequel les médiums tentent d'établir la communication entre avec les esprits des morts et leurs proches. Pour les médiums spiritualistes, la tâche principale consiste à démontrer qu'ils sont réellement en contact avec le monde des esprits et qu'ils peuvent fournir une "preuve de survie." Se faisant, ils "servent les Esprits," c'est-à-dire qu'ils travaillent pour le compte du monde des esprits. En me basant sur les notions de dialogisme et d'architectonique telles que définies par Bakhtin, je suggère de réinventer la notion de "croyance" et de la conceptualiser plutôt comme un projet intersubjectif inachevé. Comme le dialogisme Bakhtinien tire ses racines dans les paroles et l'interactivité en général, et non pas dans les paroles spécifiques ou les modèles d'interaction, cette approche de la croyance est appropriée non seulement pour l'analyse des groupes insistant sur l'importance d'identifier ce qui est vrai, mais la rend aussi applicable pour des groupes à l'extérieur de contextes sciemment modernes et Chrétiens. [Croyances, religion, rituel, Spiritualisme, Australie]

It is now half a century since Rodney Needham (1972, 188) argued that "belief" is an English-language term for a distinctly Christian category and, as such, "does not belong to 'the common behaviour of mankind.'" A decade later, Malcolm Ruel (1982) analyzed changing understandings of belief in Christian history and, like Needham, found the term's applicability outside Christian contexts problematic. A particularly well-known critique from the 1990s was Talal Asad's (1993) attack on Clifford Geertz's ([1966] 1973) definition of religion as distinctly modern and Christian for its grounding in belief.

More-recent work has added nuance to these critiques. For example, Galina Lindquist and Simon Coleman (2008), urging reflexive and skeptical use of the term, have suggested that thinking "against" belief is more productive than thinking with it. A key intervention is the work of Joel Robbins (2007). Drawing on the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Robbins observes that belief-as-proposition ("belief that") makes no claim to commitment and always carries a suggestion of alternatives, whereas belief-as-commitment ("belief in") suggests trust and certainty. Robbins agrees with Smith's description of a long-term historical shift in which the primary English-language meaning of "belief" has changed from commitment to proposition. Along with this shift came a more-recent one in which the believing subject moved from usually being grammatically first person ("I believe, we believe") to also being third person ("she believes, they believe"). This later formulation of belief, Robbins (2007, 14) observes, generates "the kinds of statements on which much anthropological discussion of culture is based" (see also Pouillon, [1982] 2016; Robbins, 2020; Ruel, 1982, 12–13; Smith, 1979, [1977] 1998).[1]

Robbins (2007) argues that approaching "belief" as proposition is not well suited to anthropology. It perpetuates static models of culture through false systematization and illusory completeness. Indeed, he writes, it does not even give traction for understanding modern Christianity, despite arguably being the product of modern Christian thinking. Several scholars have underscored this point, such as Alice Street (2010, 274), who affirms

that "propositional theories of belief … are inadequate to the task of describing the dynamic and variant contours of religious action," and Brian Howell (2007), who identifies "commitment" as the thing he shared with his Filipino Christian interlocutors that non-Christian anthropologists could not share.

As a result, Danilyn Rutherford (2009) writes, an effective "no-fly zone" has been established around the term "belief" in anthropology. Reflecting this situation, recent anthropological research does not take the opportunity to retheorize the term, even when examining what, by any plain-language account, would be called belief(s). A notable example is the study of conspiracy theories. In Didier Fassin's (2021, 130, 131, 136) Eric Wolf Lecture, he characterizes conspiracy theories as "a systematic search for an explanation of adversity" and "part of an interpretive web of persecutorial themes," and ends up sounding very much like Clifford Geertz modified by Talal Asad when he concludes that conspiracy theories are "wars fought over meaning." Similarly, Theodoros Rakopoulos (2022, 46, 47) argues that any understanding of conspiracy theories must take account of their authors' work as theory-builders, creating "active cosmology." He observes that both anthropologists and conspiracists engage in a "search for 'evidence' and formation of communities towards that pursuit." Analyzing conspiracy theories in terms of explanations, interpretations, cosmology, and the formation of like-minded communities can surely prompt fresh consideration of how "belief" matters as much as ever for some of our anthropological interlocutors, whether "religious" or not, and thus for anthropological theory. Although the work of Fassin, Rakopoulos, and other anthropologists grappling with conspiracy theories (e.g., Mathur, 2015) is critically engaged and insightful, the chance to refresh "belief" analytically has not yet been taken up effectively.[2]

In contexts where belief-as-proposition matters to people, analysis of it in relation to belief-as-commitment can be a productive anthropological approach. One prominent example is the work of Tanya Luhrmann with British neopagans and American evangelical Christians. In her study of British witches and magicians, Luhrmann (1989) analyzed various psychological techniques that practitioners used to identify evidence of magic's existence and efficacy. In her work with evangelical Christians in southern California, she analyzed how one learns to speak with God, training oneself to communicate through prayer and cultivate the sense that God responds (Luhrmann 2012). In both groups, people want to discover truths about how the world operates: to evaluate propositions and build systemic knowledge from these truths. In doing so, members of these groups make commitments that are at once psychological, social, ethical, and, I argue, aesthetic.[3]

The work of Robbins, Luhrmann, Lindquist, and Coleman, and scholars in dialogue with them, suggests that rethinking "belief" is preferable to sidelining it. Although treating belief primarily in terms of propositional assent is analytically useless in some cases—and it makes no sense to treat belief as inherently false knowledge—anthropologists might step back to consider the term from another angle. When belief-as-proposition does emerge as an object of ritual focus, how does it articulate with senses of belief-as-commitment? I will focus on the dialogical relationship between belief-as-proposition and belief-as-commitment in the religious movement known as Spiritualism, in which mediums attempt to communicate with the spirits of dead people. In "demonstrations"—the work of connecting spirits of the dead with living people who recognize their characters—Spiritualist mediums seek to create architectonic wholes. They join the search for truth with a commitment to "serve Spirit," or people in the spirit world, trusting that the spirits of the deceased want to—and will—communicate with the living. My approach might seem at first to be suspiciously old-fashioned—a reheating of Geertzian models of the ritual fusion of "models of" and "models for" (Geertz [1966] 1973). In drawing on Bakhtinian models of dialogue and aesthetics, I am attempting to provide a more comprehensive and detailed understanding of how working toward "belief" can drive ritual practice without achieving wholeness. From a related but slightly different theoretical angle, to believe is to maintain "prospective momentum," as Hirokazu Miyazaki (2004) writes of "hope." A medium's work—the cultivation of belief—might be fulfilling but it is never fulfilled.

ARCHITECTONICS OF BELIEF

As Timothy Larsen (2014) has shown, key figures in the development of the anthropology of religion in British social anthropology held deep concerns about religious truth. Scholars such as Tylor and Frazer saw anthropology and religion as opposed forms of knowledge and concluded that a key task for anthropology was to undermine religious claims. But later authors, including Evans-Pritchard, Mary Douglas, and Victor and Edith Turner, placed religious (and specifically Roman Catholic) understandings at the heart of their work and, as they saw it, good anthropology. Evans-Pritchard wrote of Nuer spirits as personages of a single God. Douglas embraced theology tightly, revising her famous work on taboo to deemphasize pigs' qualities and emphasize God's qualities. Victor Turner also read and cited theology, and Edith Turner followed her own ethnographic path into religious mysticism.[4]

A normative sense of belief underlay the work of these influential anthropologists. The fact that their beliefs about belief were shaped by Christian traditions reinforces Asad's critique of Geertz. Unacknowledged (or ignored) Christian commitments slip into general theory and, voilá, both "belief" and "religion" emerge as categories that make good sense to modern Christians while obscuring what goes on in diverse kinds of Christianity and overlooking many practices we might consider religious that do not articulate truth claims.[5] Following Asad, then, one might examine the ways in which discipline, practice, and reliance foster subjects that are physically and psychologically prone to assent to a set of truths ("Kneel and you will believe," per Pascal).

The problem with kneeling and believing, however, is that there is a preexisting relationship to propositional truth. One kneels and believes because one already has a sense of what one might believe in. This belief may be potential or virtual, but it is not only created in the moment of

kneeling. Yet to say that belief gives rise to disciplined practice can overstate the case in the other direction. If an ethnographic context foregrounds belief-as-proposition, it makes no sense to throw out the baby of ethnography with the bathwater of critique. Rather, it is more analytically effective to frame belief as working toward wholes in which truth claims and commitments speak to each other. Treating belief in this way means it will have different dynamics in different cases. It can "go wrong" in many ways, breaking with the image of belief articulated by a larger community. It can "go weird," threatening to dissolve any possibility of wholeness when seemingly unnecessary, complicating, or transformative material is produced by processes of believing. Mutations in belief—and mutations in practice—have a productive aspect, creating reservoirs of difference that can be relied upon for articulating novel concepts and techniques when standard ones fail.[6]

These reservoirs of difference can be explored through Bakhtin's (1981, 1984, 1986) model of dialogism. Belief, like any dialogical dynamic, brings together multiple voices within any utterance. Whenever one speaks, one responds to previous utterances and anticipates future responses; every speaker speaks within "a world of others' words" (Bakhtin, 1986, 143). Expanding beyond the utterance (and the novel), all social categories and all existence are ultimately dialogical (Holquist, 1990a, esp. chapter 2). The process of believing is dialogical because it involves both response and anticipation. This is not a dialectical process resolved in a final synthesis but a process of continual transformation.

For Bakhtin, "architectonics" concerns the relationship of parts to wholes. As his key interlocutor Michael Holquist (1990b, xxviii) observes, "Architectonics is the key to Bakhtin's philosophical anthropology because at the heart of all human action is the problem of achieving wholeness of one kind or another out of parts of different kinds." Within architectonics, "aesthetics" concerns "consummation," a "shaping or finishing-off" (xxiv). It is a process of completion, not simply an appreciation of form. Questions of aesthetics entail "fundamental questions of epistemology, ethics, and, indeed, ontology" (xix).

> In dialogism wholeness, or consummation, is always to be understood as a relative term: in Bakhtin, consummation is almost literally in the eye of the beholder in so far as it is always a function of a particular point of view. When invoking the term "consummation," one should always keep in mind questions about position: "consummated by whom for whom?" "consummated where?" and "consummated when?" Consummated wholes may be various kinds. But it should be kept in mind that for Bakhtin—the thinker who sought to make loopholes into (almost) metaphysical categories—their wholeness can never be absolute. (Holquist, 1990a, 150; emphasis removed)

The point that belief (or culture, language, religion, etc.) is never a final and fully shared "thing" is obviously true. But pressing the point too firmly can obscure the fact that belief and its kin are processes in which people use the category to work toward a unity *of* the category. All subjects—themselves dialogic creations—work to create finished wholes out of disparate and ever-changing parts. Belief is one of these whole-making projects. It is an aesthetic pursuit, the work of putting things together in terms of a complete system, even when that system is never complete and the work never ends.

The distinctive logic of belief is its relationship of proposition and commitment. In the case of Spiritualist mediumship, to which I now turn, the proposition is that human personalities continue to exist after physical death and want to communicate with the physically living. Mediums' commitment is to "serve Spirit," working to prove that there is life after death and, in doing so, helping others to make spiritual progress.

SPIRITUALISM

Spiritualism emerged in the mid-nineteenth century in the "burned-over district" of Upstate New York, a time and place of intense religious innovation.[7] Many early Spiritualists remained Christians, arguing that the new truths being revealed by mediums were not so new, after all: Doesn't the Bible speak positively of communication with spirit figures like angels? Conservative Christians usually criticized and ridiculed Spiritualism, however, and over the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Spiritualists increasingly defined their movement as distinct from Christianity. The congregation with which I have conducted research, the Canberra Spiritualist Association, does not identify as Christian.

Historically, Spiritualist mediums have turned from practicing mostly "physical mediumship" to practicing mostly "mental mediumship." In physical mediumship, spirits are seen and heard communicating in tangible ways: knocking on walls in response to questions, making tables tip and dance, appearing in photographs as misty faces behind oblivious and stone-faced portrait sitters, and so forth. In mental mediumship, mediums sense signs that they believe come from spirit sources—visions, sounds, tastes, smells, bodily sensations, intuitions—and describe these signs to listeners. In describing these signs, mediums expect that listeners will recognize enough of them to assemble a mosaic of a personality, someone they knew who is now physically deceased. The expression and recognition of these signs is thus meant to prove that human personalities survive physical death. Once a character in the spirit world is recognized, the medium usually passes along a message of love and encouragement from the deceased to the living. Both physical and mental mediumship are still practiced, but mental mediumship has become more prominent, partly because many physical mediums have been caught in fraud over the decades.

Both physical and mental mediumship are grounded in a belief that can be described, ironically, as anti-"belief." Mediums insist that they provide "proof of survival," or evidence of life after death. A famed twentieth-century British medium, Maurice Barbanell ([1959] 1967, 159), wrote

that Spiritualism is "a religious science, and a scientific religion," adding: "Survival [after death] can be scientifically proved." From this perspective, "belief" is indeed a weak concept and a misleading term for what Spiritualist mediums think they are doing. He tells the illustrative story of an Anglican canon (priest) who said that "he was prepared to pay one hundred pounds if the after-life could be proved to him." Barbanell replied, "Surely, as a canon, you believe it and require no evidence." To this the priest said, "Yes, I used to believe it … but I am not so sure now. I have lost my wife and I would like to *know*" (142; emphasis in original).

The priest's distinction, endorsed by Barbanell, between false belief and true knowledge is exactly what can tie analysis in unproductive knots, so it might seem foolhardy to write about "belief" at all. Yet, as I show below, in mental mediumship there is both confidence in and dependence on the significance of propositional truth. Whether one calls the content toward which these propositions swing like a magnetic needle "belief," "knowledge," or "faith" does not matter analytically. What matters is the way the treatment of propositional truth is brought into dialogue with commitment to the relationships and systems articulating that claim to truth.

Especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, eminent scientific investigators tested mediums' claims. With physical mediumship, tests tended to involve binding mediums tightly so they (theoretically) could not move their hands and feet to create the mysterious effects characteristic of séance rooms. With mental mediumship, tests tended to involve asking sitters if the medium was accurately describing people and events known only to the sitters themselves. For example, James Hyslop sat four times with the medium Leonora Piper, who famously impressed William James with her skills. During these sittings, Piper mentioned 205 events, of which Hyslop judged 152 to be true, 37 to be unverifiable, and 16 to be false (Blum, 2007, 245). On its surface, this seems like an impressive rate of success. But investigators noted several problems with this kind of test. For one thing, the cause of Mrs. Piper's success was unknown. Although it could be proven that she did not know her sitters personally and had not investigated their backgrounds, it was still not clear where her information came from if it was not sheer luck or a sitter's suggestibility. Was she communicating with people in the spirit world? Was she a skilled telepath (mind reader)? Or was she just a person with exceptionally fine observation skills? For another thing, even William James acknowledged that most messages from the spirit world were marked by "extreme triviality" (quoted in Blum, 2007, 182). Reputable scientists like Alfred Russel Wallace, William Crookes, and Oliver Lodge, who staked their reputations on the reality of mediums' claims, were often dismayed by what they saw as scientific close-mindedness. "You ask for facts & proofs on our side," Wallace wrote testily to James in late 1886, "but offer only suspicions on yours" (quoted in Blum, 2007, 120).

In using the term "belief" to analyze Spiritualist ritual practice, I realize I am entering a maze of possible misinterpretation. I will try to find a way forward ethnographically. I conducted research with the Canberra Spiritualist Association (CSA), primarily between 2017 and 2019. CSA services feature mental mediumship. During the period of research, services were held every first, third, and fifth Sunday of the month, with a summer break between mid-December and mid-January. These services were open to the public and held at a community center in Pearce, a suburb in Canberra's south. The average attendance was between 17 and 18, with women outnumbering men two to one. At each service, a medium—usually a woman, sometimes but not always a member of the CSA—gave a speech on a spiritual topic and also gave the "demonstration" in which contact is made with the spirits of deceased persons.

The demonstration is the ritual high point of a CSA service. At its most effective, a demonstration is intellectually provocative, emotionally engrossing, and sometimes even funny, as many mediums have good senses of humor. The main goal of a demonstration is to provide evidence of what is called "proof of survival." This means a medium should give details about a deceased person whom they did not know in life—for example, what this person looked like, where they lived, how they died, their basic character traits, and so forth. Sometimes the medium identifies an audience member she wants to work with ("I think I'm coming to you"), and sometimes she broadcasts the description and waits for an audience member to indicate that they know who it is. In the demonstration at a typical service during the main period of fieldwork, the medium would give around five or six different readings.

In demonstrations, the medium and audience members work together to build a description and understanding of who the person in the spirit world is. The medium offers signs she has sensed. Audience members verify or reject them accordingly, or say that they are not sure. A medium does not typically change her voice qualities or vocabulary as she "brings through" different spirit characters, but retains a casual conversational tone throughout. In a mild way, a medium's demonstration is an interrogation session in which the truth of spiritual presence is meant to be proven. When medium and audience member seem to agree on who the deceased person is, the medium then delivers a message from dead to living.[8]

Perhaps the most notable feature of Spiritualist mediumship is its openness to failure. But this is a particular kind of failure, and an appropriate understanding of the analytical power of "belief" depends on recognizing what it is that fails. Mediums get many details wrong, and this is considered acceptable, even necessary, because although mediums are skilled interlocutors with the invisible world, communicating with the dead is never entirely straightforward. The dead are believed to live at a different level of energetic existence, sometimes identified as the astral plane. When they communicate with the living, they do so through the disparate sensations mediums receive, some of which must be assembled into a basis for dialogue with audience members. Excerpts from two demonstrations will show how a sense of propositional belief is indispensable to the ritual mechanics of Spiritualist mediumship.

Example 1: The Consistent Success

The first example comes from a CSA service in August 2017.[9] The day's medium, Sarah Jeffery, is an active promoter of Spiritualism in Australia, and in August 2019 she became president of the association. In the following excerpt, she identifies a particular audience member with whom she thinks a person in the spirit world wants to communicate. She explains that she will "move [her] mind" and turns her attention to one section of the audience, "going to come to this area." She then addresses one woman in particular: "Can I just have your name?" The audience member says her name ("Vee"). Sarah tells Vee and a woman near her to "please both listen, because I just feel that I'm just around here," then says she feels she is connected with the spirit of a man who was a father. She asks Vee if her father is "within the world of Spirit," that is, deceased. Vee responds, "Yes, yes," and the reading begins to develop from there.

Sarah: He is. I do think I'm going to work with you, Vee, but Patty [the other woman she thought might be the recipient], just listen in while I build the link with dad. I feel quite a … I wanna say sturdy man, Vee. I want to—I feel strong with him, but I feel strong in body and I feel strong in personality. I almost want to stand up bigger and stronger. Do you understand?

Vee: Yes.

Sarah: I want to hear the "yeses"—

Vee: Yes.

Sarah: —so that the rest of them [meaning, other audience members] know, and that builds the spirit world's confidence that you're getting this, all right? Would you understand, I want to put dad in gumboots? So I must have him out on the land or in the garden. Do you understand that?

Vee: Yes.

Sarah: Okay. He was a man who liked time on his own.

Vee: Yes.

Sarah: Because I know that I go out with him, to the outside. He must have done some work on fences. Do you understand fixing fences?

Vee: Yes.

Sarah: Because I know that I walk quite a distance with him to do the work, to do the fences… . Vee, did he also have the ability to distinguish birds?

Vee: He was interested, yes, [inaudible].

Sarah: He was interested in birds?

Vee: Yeah.

Sarah: Because I just feel I want to hear the different sounds of the birds with him, and that it's—. [A quick exchange, inaudible on the recording, follows in which Vee says something softly and Sarah seems to repeat it. I checked later with Vee, who was not able to verify what was said]. You're not supposed to tell me that, I'm supposed to get it to you—

Vee: Sorry.

Sarah: … that's all right, that's all right. 'Cause I know that as I bring him close, I just want to get the sounds of the birds, and I want to either know the difference or I want to mimic them, okay. I wanna mimic the birds as he's outside. I'm very much drawn to his stomach, Vee … I'm not a nurse, I don't do clinical things, but do you understand that I feel that there would have been concerns around his belly and what was going on inside his belly?

Vee: Yes.

Sarah: Yes. Because he just brings me that sense that I want to come to my tummy. And I feel that I would have got distended in the stomach. Do you understand that? And I would have got—

Vee: Yes.

Sarah: Yes… . There's very much a practical, pragmatic sense to him: there's no use crying over spilt milk. "It is what it is." I know that he comes around you today to remind you of that. And what is—oh, goosebumps—and what is going on around you at the moment, you can apply "It is what it is." Do you understand?

Vee: Yes.

Sarah: Even though he's communicating beautifully, he's actually not a man of many words.

Vee: Mm, true, yes.

Sarah: Understand? Because as much as I feel him—"I've done my bit, I've said what I need to say, life is life, you'll be okay."

Vee: Yeah.

Sarah: He's good, and off he goes. I know that I want to put my arms around you, Vee, from dad, because as much as he may not have expressed himself in that way to you, he loves you dearly.

Vee: Thank you.

This example is notable for the rhythm of Sarah's questions and Vee's affirmations. All of the information Sarah offers about Vee's father is accepted by her. Because Sarah did not know Vee before this moment, and presumably never met her father, this is a kind of gold-standard reading for Spiritualist mediumship.

There are pragmatic features of the interaction that deserve attention, including Sarah's instruction to Vee to speak louder, her admonition that Vee should not feed her any details ("You're not supposed to tell me that, I'm supposed to get it to you"), and her side comment that she is getting goosebumps. My purpose in presenting the transcript here, however, is simply to show what a successful reading sounds like, because most readings do not go this smoothly.

Example 2: The Difficult Reading

The next example comes from a CSA service in October 2017. The day's medium, Jessica, had demonstrated at the CSA before but was not as experienced as Sarah. She began the reading by indicating that she heard music and was in contact with the spirit of an older man, a flashy dresser: "he doesn't look like Elvis Presley, but he's that kind of dressed and that kind of apparel. He has a black suit on, shoes that are, like, his toes are back here and they've got big pointy bits out the front, which … are black and polished. He's got a white shirt on and a thin tie, black tie. I almost, almost wanna say it's got [a] keyboard on it, but I don't think he's gone quite that far."

She continued:

Jessica: He is a piano player… . He absolutely adores music… . He passed in his eighties. He's showing me himself sitting in a retirement home, as opposed to—not a village, but an actual retirement home. He's in a leather chair by a window, large window which has a garden outside. And he's got, as a leather—like a La-Z-Boy chair, but he's got his feet on the ground and he's tapping away with his right hand. So he's right-handed, as well, I believe. So he's tapping away on his knee. He has—it's a light tan, middle brown color, this La-Z-Boy, and he has a crocheted blanket but it's over the back of the chair. It's like he's sort of leaning on it. It's not covering his knees or anything like that. And he says, [inaudible] "I'm not putting that on." … So, he … doesn't see himself as quite the older gentleman he is. Does that resonate with anyone? Nope? Okay. Let's see—

Wanda: Jessica, I've worked a little bit in the aged care, disability area. That's all I've got. It might be someone—

Jessica: Okay.

Wanda: —in that time, but I can't place it at all.

Jessica: Okay … we'll see what else he's got to say. He's saying, we're both going to be working for our money this afternoon. [Laughs.] Sorry. He is in Australia, I believe it is 'round New South Wales. He's showing me, I could see New South Wales on the map, as opposed to ACT [the Australian Capital Territory, where Canberra is located]. So, he's come to say, "I know someone." So I'm just gonna ask him if someone knows him. I'm gonna get a better idea. It's a girl, so, so one of you ladies knows her [Jessica indicates two women in the front row; "her" is a slip of the tongue, as she clearly means "him"]… . He lived a happy life, a contented life. He wasn't—his wife, two boys, he had two boys. They weren't excessively wealthy, but they had enough to live on, and they were quite content with that. Is that bringing anything to you?

Unidentified woman [possibly Wanda]: Nuh uh.

Jessica: Okay. And no one else? Okay. He passed around ten to fifteen years ago. He—when he was younger … he had black hair, and it was slicked back, Brylcreem, with Brylcreem… . He said he'd never, never forgot a tune, and the music was exceptionally important. Just—I don't appear to be with you, Wanda, sorry.

Wanda: No, no, it's all right, [inaudible], yeah. Sounds like an amazing person.

Jessica: [Laughs.] He was happy. Okay. If no one else at this place is going to—and I can't get any more information … at the moment. So I'm just gonna thank him for coming, and bring someone else in. [Seven-second pause.] Okay. I've got a lady with me who's showing herself to be in her seventies… . She has gray hair, but it's curled.

Unlike the first example, this reading receives no positive responses. Jessica begins with a broadcast approach in which she describes the character of a deceased person and waits to see who will recognize it. The character is a vivid one: a stylish old musician with Brylcreemed hair and polished shoes, someone who did not consider himself old even when he was. But no one knows who he is. Jessica finishes the reading by pragmatically ushering the man on his way in the spirit world.

As a demonstration intended to provide evidence of life after death, this event does not seem to succeed. Jessica's signs are not taken up by the audience as evidence because no one can fit them all together to recognize the man. But the belief that deceased people can and do communicate with the living is the warrant for the event, and it is not itself being tested. Indeed, Wanda, the helpful audience member, tries to think of someone

she could have known when she worked at an aged-care facility, because she has no doubt that this man really exists in the spirit world. Note how she says sympathetically that he "sounds like an amazing person."

In both of the cases discussed above, different as they are, the same "thing" is being tested: mediums' abilities to communicate successfully between the dead and living, the astral plane and the physical world. Those so inclined can count successes versus failures and, as in the case of James Hyslop listening to Leonora Piper, judge the medium to be 74.146341463 percent accurate. The specificity of numbers sounds funny, especially because it becomes evident in watching mediums' demonstrations that a good or effective reading for one listener might not be good or effective for another. (I once heard a reading given to a man that I felt he would not find convincing—or might even consider problematic due to its stereotypes—but after the service, he told me he had found it "very, very accurate.") Your good medium is potentially my bad medium, and vice versa. But failure in individual cases is held to point to larger truths. As with shamanism in the analyses of Jane Atkinson (1989) and Edward Schieffelin (1996; for an extreme example, see Wolf, 1990), magic-workers for Luhrmann (1989), and evangelical Christians seeking extraordinary experiences per Luhrmann (2012) and Bialecki (2017), ritual performance traditions keep open the possibility that religious actors will struggle at their craft and run the risk of audience rejection, but this does not mean that audiences lose belief in the reality and efficacy of the practice itself.[10]

COMMITTING TO BELIEF

In a discussion of the interaction of belief and practice, the sociologist Christian Smith (2017, 45) asserts that "it is not that people first think or comprehend something religious and subsequently undertake a practice" (cf. Luhrmann, 1989, 309–10). Although his wider discussion is well balanced, here he suggests that practice is ultimately more significant than belief. This is problematic for several reasons. For one, artificially separating belief and practice overlooks the ways belief *is* practice (Rutherford, 2009). For another, the situation he negatively imagines is, in fact, what Spiritualist mediums and their audiences do. They "comprehend something religious" and then "undertake a practice" related to it. This is what a demonstration is: a testing of what one knows. When a reading does not go smoothly, the doubt and uncertainty is focused on the medium's performance and, sometimes, the audience's responsiveness. *The medium was having a difficult day. There was not much energy from the audience to help her out. She received real signs from the spirit world, but might not have expressed them clearly, and perhaps the audience was not paying enough attention.* The underlying proposition of any medium's demonstration, no matter how it turns out, is that human personalities continue to exist after physical death and want to communicate with the living. This is a belief, which does not mean that it is true or false, or that the details will be agreed upon by everyone in the room, or that debate and creative revision are not possible. Rather, it means that mediums follow the premise and develop the implications in dialogue with audiences—including, as they understand it, audiences in the spirit world.

For mediums, belief-as-proposition entails a commitment to "serve Spirit." For example, on the first night of the 20-session CSA mediumship course in 2017, Norman Ivory, the association's president at the time, told the class of budding mediums that "we're here actually to serve Spirit." "Spirit" is a term sometimes equated by Spiritualists with God and described in terms of energy and love. Philosophically, Spirit is what unites everyone and everything in existence and is inherent to our being. Grammatically, Spirit is often referred to as "they" or "them," as in the lesson in the CSA's mediumship coursebook that "you are representing spirit when doing mediumship, and it would be most irresponsible to represent them in an unethical manner" (Ivory and Ivory, 2017, 10).[11] In this sense, to serve Spirit means to work on behalf of people in the spirit world. "Spirit" is also sometimes used as shorthand for the spirit world itself, loosely akin to "heaven," as people who have died physically are said to be "in Spirit."

When I interviewed Sarah Jeffery in December 2018, she brought belief-as-proposition and belief-as-commitment together in a revealing way. She described her frustration at well-meaning Spiritualists who took a "politically correct," "love and light" approach in which all beliefs are equal. "It's just a bit wimpy, isn't it?" she asked rhetorically. "It's a bit wimpy to go, 'No, I don't want to offend you. Believe whatever you want to believe.'" She continued:

> Now, all my beliefs may not align completely with Spiritualism. But when I am in a Spiritualist church or I am in a Spiritualist association, the only thing you'll hear coming from my mouth is Spiritualist values. Spiritualism. Recognition of pioneers. Because at the minimum, the pioneers deserve that. The people who have gone before us. At the minimum, the spirit world deserves that. I know I'm going to pop my clogs one day, Matt, and I'm going to get over to the other side and I don't want anyone chest-poking me. I don't want anyone saying "Well, Sarah, you said you were a medium. You said you believed in Spiritualist values. But you were too weak to own it."

Sarah, a former Army officer, was frustrated by Spiritualism's disorganized troops and problems of belief. In this part of the interview, I had not asked specifically about belief—I had asked about the national distinctiveness of Australian Spiritualism—but in response, Sarah found it useful to distinguish belief-as-proposition and belief-as-commitment. She acknowledged that she held "beliefs" (propositions) that did not align with some Spiritualist teachings, but that did not mean she was not a Spiritualist. Although she did not elaborate, the discussion could have gone in any number of directions here—for example, whether one believes in reincarnation or free will, or what types of extra-human spirits exist—but for Sarah, these kinds of beliefs were only part of what mattered. The other part that mattered was belief in Spiritualism as a movement centered on mediumship and commitment to making it succeed, recognizing that mediums are able to give demonstrations today thanks to the work of nineteenth-century

mediums. Or, as she put it, "I can turn up to the CSA on a Sunday and proclaim that I talk to the spirit world and not be wheeled off to a loony bin, and not be put to death." Commitment to Spirit—serving Spirit—means commitment to mediumship, and being a medium means trusting in the reality of the spirit world and the possibility of spirit communication, then proving this reality and possibility to others.[12]

Mediums and audience members work together dialogically to join propositions with commitments: Your deceased loved ones are here, ready and eager to communicate, so we should communicate with them. Communication with people in the spirit world helps everyone involved. It validates the medium's work, brings comfort to the living who miss the deceased, and helps the deceased stay in touch and share their love with the living. Belief in life after death is not framed as a matter of faith by most Spiritualists, but as something that needs to be proven. As with most attempts at proof, things can go wrong, knocked off course when the dialogue between medium and audience fails to develop a recognizable verbal portrait of someone deceased. Yet the well-worn track of belief as an aesthetic pursuit keeps directing people's energies. Belief is an attempt to create a total and final reality, one in which truth and commitment are brought together. The work is never finished, but it never stops, either.

Because Spiritualism has a Christian intellectual genealogy, Spiritualists might not seem to be the ideal group to study if one is trying to rehabilitate "belief" as an analytic term. Following Asad, it seems obvious that Christian-influenced moderns would believe in belief. After all, it's partly what defines them as Christian-influenced moderns. Yet I suggest that the argument I am making here is applicable in many different contexts, including nonreligious ones, because Bakhtinian dialogism is grounded in a model of the utterance and interactivity in general, not in any specific utterance or particular pattern of interaction.[13] When belief-as-proposition matters to our ethnographic interlocutors, it is analytically useful to consider how propositions articulate dialogically with commitments. Bringing together proposition and commitment is never a predetermined or determinative process, and people everywhere work toward completion that can never be absolute. Approaching belief in this way can help us escape the "no-fly zone" established around "belief" in anthropology and lead us to consider it anew in "a more generous, adventurous fashion," as Rutherford (2009) suggests.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Compare Sperber (1982) for a cognitive approach distinguishing propositionality and semi-propositionality, and Mitchell (1997) for an analysis of semiotic, practical, and emotional cognition in belief.

[2] In an influential edited volume on conspiracy and suspicion, Harry G. West and Todd Sanders (2003, 12–16) do draw on anthropological discussions of belief. However, their theoretical agenda is to engage (then-current) work on globalization and alternative modernities, and to pose the question of why discourse about transparency and conspiracy has blossomed at the same time, rather than to rethink belief.

[3] In the conclusion to her 2012 monograph, Luhrmann (2012, 325) handles "belief" with special care. After more than three hundred pages of closely examined techniques and emotions, she comes to the end and writes that "through the process of this journey, in my own way I have come to know God. I do not know what to make of this knowing." She explains that she can now follow an "emotional logic" in Christianity based on the idea of unconditional love. In this revelatory paragraph, Luhrmann begins with knowledge—knowing God, and not knowing what to make of such knowing—and then mentions belief. She understands unconditional love to be "(as my spiritual director put it) like believing—really, deeply, believing; believing 'in my heart'—that I did not need to lose those ten pounds I always thought I needed to lose before I would be truly lovable" (325). Here is a complex dynamic only Luhrmann herself, presumably, can unpack; but it does tie together propositions about God (God exists; God is knowable; God is love) and implications of commitment (I belong to the community of those who know God is love).

[4] See also Engelke (2002) on how both Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner treated belief as a method.

[5] Two features of Christianity lend themselves to analyses of both belief-as-proposition and belief-as-commitment. One is creeds. As Ruel (1982) wrote, creeds have long served in Christianity (with different emphases at different historical moments) both to instruct and to commit: to teach truths and thereby build the body of the church in agreement. Webb Keane (2008, S123) observes that a creed "appears to be merely a proposition. But it has performative force. . . . It asserts the speaker's alignment with the claims ('Jesus is the Son of God' is true about the world, and I hold that it is true)." Indeed, creeds foster a kind of triple alignment: agreement with a proposition, making the agreement public, and joining others in doing so (Keane, 2007, 67–72; see also Rutherford, 2009). Pouillon ([1982] 2016, 487), who attends to "paradoxical" meanings of French *croire* (to believe), notes that belief as proposition and commitment come together not only in religious creeds but also in political and scientific contexts in which "one goes from the trust to the statement that it allows one to take as established fact." He offers the vivid example of writing "$E=mc^2$," which we know is true because we trust Einstein knew what he was talking about. Pouillon goes on to note that trust need not rely on intellectual authority as such, and a particular "representation" is believable because it seems obvious—something self-evident which does not need an Einstein to figure out.

The other feature is Christianity's evangelical impulse. In a broad sense, much evangelism requires communicating the message that other people are thinking incorrectly about the world. Belief-as-proposition involves making claims about how the universe is put together, and can lead to the related claim that in coming to think in new ways a person affirms membership in a group with correct knowledge of the universal order, trusting in this group and committing to that order. Propositional claims can be ritualized in negative terms, as when iconoclastic missionaries make a point of desecrating sacred sites in order to prove the truth of Christianity—a truth joined to power, as Asad would insist, but no less a claim to truth for that relationship. I note in passing that Bloch's (1986, 182) claim that "rituals cannot form a true argument, because they imply no alternative" misses the point in cases like these. Ritual iconoclasm is indeed an argument, one in which a proposition is asserted and truth claims contested.

[6] The ideas and phrases in the previous two paragraphs have been written in dialogue with Jon Bialecki, whose work on "virtual Christianity" and the production of surprise and miraculous signs for the "divinization of change" in the Vineyard evangelical movement resonate with the argument I am attempting to develop here (see Bialecki 2012, 2017). N.b., Bialecki draws on Deleuzean theory and terminology, whereas I am using Bakhtin, but both authors address the relationship between potentiality and actuality, continual processes of bringing-into-being.

[7] General histories of Spiritualism include Podmore (1902) and Brandon (1983). Several influential works trace the movement's connections with progressive causes including women's empowerment (e.g., Braude 1989; Owen 1989; McGarry 2008; Moore 1977, chapter 4). Others emphasize Spiritualism's articulation with new forms of technology, especially telegraphy and photography; useful starting points in this literature include Peters (1999), Sconce (2000), and Galvan (2010), with distinctive anthropological contributions from Paul Manning (2018, 2021) on historical Spiritualism's ideology and infrastructure of communication. Scientific testing of mediums' claims is well described by Oppenheim (1985) and Blum (2007). The ethnography of Spiritualism is less well developed than the history of it, but see Gillen (1981), Kalvig (2017), Skultans (1974), Tomlinson (2019), Wilson (2013), Yerby (2017)..

[8] The message is always gentle and uplifting. These are not scary spirits. (If the spirit "coming through" had a difficult relationship with the audience member, sometimes he or she offers apologies.) N.b., in deep trance mediumship, mediums' voice qualities change, but deep trance is not typically practiced in CSA services.

[9] In the transcripts that follow, the people identified as Patty, Jessica, and Wanda are pseudonymous. Ellipses indicate deleted text. I have deleted some insignificant repetitions without marking the deletion (for example, writing "I, I do think" as "I do think").

[10] As Pelkmans (2013, 4) writes, "doubt and belief should not be seen as opposites, but rather as co-constitutive parts. Doubt highlights fragility and instability, but the act of doubting also entails a quest for an 'essence.' In order to understand this complex relationship it is necessary to capture the doubting moment" (see also Bialecki 2017, chapter 7).

[11] Although this source does not capitalize "Spirit," I do so to highlight the term's centrality in Spiritualist belief.

[12] Conversely, Mary Margaret Steedly observes how the distinction between belief-as-proposition and belief-as-commitment caused her confusion during her early days of research with spirit mediums in northern Sumatra. When interlocutors asked her if she "believed in spirits," she was too polite to say no, and offered, in her own words, "some unconvincing platitude about cultural relativism and local truths." People consistently surprised her by replying that they did not believe in spirits, either—and then going on to tell her about family and neighbors who had encountered them. At first, Steedly was puzzled by what seemed to be an inherently paradoxical position, and tried to reconcile it as politeness in the first instance (not disagreeing with her) and practicality in the second (seeking "to explore . . . the troublesome, marvelous things that spirits and gurus do in the world"). She then realized that the key to understanding these claims was the Indonesian term *percaya* (or in the Karo language, *tek*), which includes both senses of belief. She explains:

> Asking whether I percaya/tek the spirits might mean "Do you believe in spirits?" but it could also mean "Do you *believe* spirits?" Do you *trust* them? Many Karo Christians believe in spirits and gurus, but whether they trust them is another matter altogether. Non-Christians, including spirit mediums, are even less likely to trust uncritically the actions and pronouncements of the spirits. In this sense, my uncertain answer, given for all the wrong reasons, was in fact the right reply to questions about the spirit world: Who knows? Who *ever* knows? (Steedly, 1993, 34–35)

[13] Another way to retheorize belief is to retheorize an expanded category of religion—that is, not to delink belief and religion but to grow them together. In this regard, it is notable that the religious studies scholar Kathryn Lofton characterizes American consumer culture as inherently religious due to its cultivation of commitment. For Lofton (2017, 6), being religious means in part "enshrining certain commitments stronger than almost any other acts of social participation." These commitments might well come from a sense of what is propositionally true—knowledge that is really accurate. Indeed, in her analysis of the firm Goldman Sachs, she describes how its employees (as wholehearted Latourian Moderns) insist on facts, facts, only facts. "Like many organizations, religious, educational, and otherwise," Lofton observes:

> Goldman begins its work with the simple supposition that you should know everything possible about what you want to understand. And, like many organizations, sectarian orders, and corporations, it imagines that once you know all you need to know, you'll likely *choose it*. Whether you're engaging a priest at a Hindu temple or an agent at a Scientology center, you'll find that a defining feature of things we designate as religion is their total confidence of the totality of their world knowledge. . . . The idea is that if you knew everything about Scientology, you wouldn't be only a little committed; if you understood everything they can explain, you'd be all in, and make it yours. (255)

When the global financial crisis wrought its devastation, Goldman Sachs leaders were called to account for their actions before the US Congress and here, too, Lofton recognizes religious belief at work. The company's head of research, Steven Strongin, suggested that the crisis came from a "loss of faith in the balance sheets of all financial firms," inspiring Lofton to rephrase his words as doctrine: "At some point, what an institution does ceases to matter. What matters is what you believe about what it, the institution, can do. [Strongin] suggests that institutions can't be institutions unless we are somehow . . . latched onto them, believing in them" (280).

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