

The Enchantments of Secular Belief

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“If we didn’t believe in the impossible, we’d never get anything done.”¹ This is what Betty Kaisiepo told me on October 2, 1998 in the Netherlands, as we lingered in a café in the heart of Delft. A handsome woman in her fifties, dressed in a raincoat and heels, Betty had met me at the station and led me on a brief walking tour that took us past the town hall, where she served on the city council. I had come to the Netherlands to test the waters for a project focusing on the production of ethnic identity among exiles from western New Guinea, which, like the rest of Indonesia, had once been a Dutch colony. I was six months into my first tenure track job, having just completed my dissertation, which focused on Biak, the distant island where Betty was from.

When Betty was born, Biak was part of Netherlands New Guinea; now it belonged to an Indonesian province. Although the Indonesians had changed the province's name several times, from West Irian to Irian Jaya to, more recently, Papua, West Papuan exiles, like Betty and her family, persisted in calling their homeland West Papua, the name given to it by the Dutch in the early 1960s, shortly before the Netherlands was forced to relinquish the territory to Indonesia. In addition to asking Biak friends and acquaintances for advice on the new project, I had come bearing information from a recent trip to the province, whose inhabitants were calling for

independence from Indonesia. As the daughter of a prominent West Papuan politician, a man whom the Dutch had groomed as a potential president of the ill-fated nation, Betty had spent her childhood in New Guinea. But when the Indonesians took over in 1963, beginning what many Papuans have experienced as a new period of colonization, her family had fled to the Netherlands. Betty had lived much of her adult life in Delft, where I had met her at her father's house the year before. Betty was in many respects the ideal interlocutor – interested in my new project, eager to hear of my recent visit, happy to see me again.

Our conversation had just turned to a demonstration that occurred on Biak in July 1998 when a young civil servant and his supporters raised the West Papuan flag in the center of the district capital (see Rutherford 2001). Friends in Biak had told me that the demonstrators had believed that Kofi Annan and a shipload of U.N. peacekeepers were coming to free them from Indonesian rule. I had heard that the demonstration included references to Koreri, a messianic movement that had recurred on Biak throughout the colonial period. I mentioned this to Betty, and she nodded approvingly. Not only was it true that the demonstrators had drawn on Koreri; they had been right to do so. To repeat: “If we didn't believe in the impossible, we'd never get anything done.”

In this paper, I want to take Betty's words as a starting point to explore an almost embarrassing topic, given recent trends in anthropology. "Don't believe in belief," Bruno Latour (1999) has warned us in condemning social scientists for overlooking the agency of non-human actors. Belief is part of the vocabulary of scholars eager to unmask the

fetishism of those they study. Fetishists believe in the agency of things that don't have it: this is the syndrome such scholars diagnose. According to Latour, the idea of belief, as opposed to action, does violence to people's dependence on objects that are at once constructed and real, like religious idols and scientific "facts." Talal Asad (1993, 2003) has issued much the same decree against a vocabulary that foregrounds mental states (see also Scott and Hirschkind 2006). Like the very notion of religion upon which it relies, belief is a secular category. It was born of the disciplinary regimes of modernity, which carved society into distinct spheres. The liberal state relegated religion to the private domain. Belief came to appear as an interiorized state of consciousness, something that rights bearing subjects were allowed to "have" as long as they didn't impose it on others. According to Asad, this idea of belief does violence to traditions aimed at cultivating not ideas, but embodied dispositions realized in action in the world (see also van der Veer 1996, Mahmood 2005, Hirschkind 2006, Keane 2007).

Despite these warnings, I want to bring belief into focus. In doing so, I hope to illuminate not only a dimension of Biak practice, but also a "minor tradition" of secular thought (cf. Connelly 2006). That is, I hope to identify a tendency within secular accounts of people's encounters with the world and one another that complicates the story told by Asad by undermining the dichotomies -- action and thought, body and mind -- that Asad risks reproducing even as he seeks to leave them behind. I shall do this by attending to unexpected resonances between Betty's remarks and some old and new depictions of secular belief, including the writings of John Locke and David Hume and the National Public Radio series, "This I Believe." Locke and Hume, like their

successors, sought to restrict the proper object of “faith,” another term for “belief,” to the domain of personal conscience in order to isolate a “rational” form of human knowledge that provided a secular basis for political order. But at the same time, they insinuated at the very heart of reason something like the faith that other parts of their texts seemed to dismiss. This is also true of the contributors to “This I Believe,” as we will see.

In exploring this aspect of these secular texts, my point is not simply to show that they are internally inconsistent. Rather, I hope to contribute to an ongoing anthropological conversation (see, e.g., Mauss 2001 [1904], Durkheim 1995 [1912], Lévi-Strauss 1987 [1950], Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937], Needham 1972, Crapanzano 2004). Belief is a notoriously difficult concept to define, as Rodney Needham pointed out many decades ago. It is, as Hume put it, “an act of mind that has never yet been explain’d by any philosopher,” let alone anthropologist (in Needham 1972: 52). For heuristic purposes, I take as my starting point the relationship between belief and impossibility suggested not only by my Biak informant, Betty, but also by Tertullian, the early Christian who famously declared “I believe because it is absurd” (Ibid.: 64). In speaking of “belief,” one implies, on the one hand, the uncertain nature of outcomes and entities, and, on the other, the vividness with which they nevertheless come to mind. Impossibility, or Tertullian’s “absurdity,” is a constitutive component of the most firmly held belief. While loose, this provisional definition has the virtue of bringing my project into dialogue with a range of suggestive research. Anthropologists have shed light on the role of belief, hope, and other forms of expectation in the practices of people ranging from Azande witch-doctors to American fundamentalists, Fijian Methodists, and Islamic

bankers (see Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937], Harding 2000, Miyazaki 2004, Maurer 2005). By extending this line of inquiry to seemingly non-religious texts and contexts, I hope to enlarge our understanding of what secular belief – or, more specifically, secular *appeals* to belief – might mean or do. We anthropologists need to stop worrying about the relationship between belief and action and start seeing belief *as* action. We need to start attending to practices of belief. And we need to undo the division between belief and knowledge that we still often implicitly presume. This approach to belief will enable us to grasp what’s at stake when people like Betty make explicit something that might otherwise be taken for granted: the embodied “acts of mind” on which their other practices rest.

Betty is nothing if not an activist. Her embrace of Koreri movement beliefs, which incorporate Christian themes, brings to mind recent social theorists of the left who have found a place for the theological at the heart of progressive politics (Badiou (2003), Agamben (2005) and Žižek (2000, 2001); see also Derrida 1992a, 1998; Vattimo 1999). But Betty was not just talking about the coming revolution in West Papua. Rather, she supported her stance on Koreri by referring to the most banal of activities: traveling to conferences, running errands – and, she made a point of insisting, pointing in my direction, finishing a dissertation and getting a job. Her comments spoke to the place of belief in secular politics, epistemology, and everyday life – mine, no less than hers. Betty brought my life and hers into focus together: my task in this paper calls for reflexivity of a peculiarly emphatic sort. The record of my conversation with Betty is available to me in two versions. The first version, from my field notes, uses Betty’s

assertion that one must believe in the impossible in order to get things done to shed light on Biak ways, ranging from the messianic to the mundane. In the second version, from my memory, Betty answered the question I had secretly wanted to ask without asking – did she *herself* believe in Koreri? – in a fashion that rang disturbingly true. “I believe in the impossible,” I can still hear Betty saying – “and so do you.” This version leads me to take seriously some descriptions of belief that critics of the secular might be tempted to dismiss. With help from Locke, Hume, and the National Public Radio series, “This I Believe,” I attempt to make sense of why Betty’s words rang so true and stuck so tightly in my mind, despite the knee jerk reaction that prevented me from writing them down. But first, let’s turn to Biak. What gets done in Biak through the practice of belief?

Version I: Doing the Impossible in Biak

This passage is from my fieldnotes. I reconstructed Betty’s words from verbatim quotes I jotted down at the time.

I mentioned how it seemed there were elements of Koreri involved in the demonstration. [Betty] agreed. But this wasn’t just irrationality, she also agreed. Rather, it has long been the secret to Biak success – to achieve anything, you have to have an unrealistic idea of your capacities. You have to be willing to face danger and uncertainty. This has long been a Biak strength – to go out and get something new. (Field notes, 10.2.98, Delft)

My field notes locate this interview with Betty in the context of my dissertation research. I didn’t explicitly ask Betty whether she believed in Koreri; rather, using a tried and true field method, I present some hearsay and await a response. Betty’s reaction was

illuminating. Long a staple in the “cargo cult” literature, the Koreri movement featured no shortage of, to put it bluntly, weird shit. The movement was awash in the sort of “bizarre” and “barbarous rites” and “strange myths” that Durkheim (1995[1912]: 2) called on sociologists to “reach beneath” in their quest for the “true reasons” behind religion (see Lanterneri 1963, Worsely 1968, Kamma 1972).² Participants in the movement heeded the call of prophets who promised that Manarmakeri, literally the “Itchy Old Man,” was about to return to Biak from the Land of the Foreigners. The “secret” underlying Koreri was that this Biak ancestor was the true source of foreign knowledge, wealth, and power. In the aftermath of missionization, this claim took the form of an assertion that Manarmakeri was really Jesus Christ. Manarmakeri’s impending arrival found confirmation in signs and wonders of all sorts: visions, speaking in tongues, invulnerability to firearms (Rutherford 2003: 200). The 1998 flag raising incident mobilized elements from a long history of Koreri uprisings. Like the largest uprising, which occurred at the start of World War II, the 1998 flag raising featured a leader who promised his followers protection from bullets. Just as the World War II uprising was crushed by Japanese soldiers, the flag raising ended when soldiers opened fire.

What Betty did in her comments was to draw connections between the seemingly extravagant sense of self-confidence felt by the demonstrators and the everyday feats of bravery that punctuate Biak lives. We sometimes imagine belief as a stabilizing force that cements people’s commitment to the status quo. (Think, alas, of Barack Obama’s unfortunate remarks on laid-off auto workers “clinging” to evangelical faith (see

FOXNews.com 2008). By contrast, in Biak, appeals to belief feed a habitual openness to uncertainty that allows novelty to emerge. I have previously argued that one can understand Koreri's recurrence by placing the movement in the context of a broader set of practices that take the foreign as a source of identity, value, and power (Rutherford 2003). The importance of the foreign finds expression in the way Biaks describe valued forms of personhood. Betty herself represents a good example of this. Her relatives on Biak called her and me by the same term, *bin amber*, or "female foreigner," the feminine version of a word used for high status Biaks such as teachers and civil servants, as well as for Westerners and non-Papuan Indonesians. Mothers described their care for their children as aimed at the production of "foreigners": men and women who would travel to the Land of the Foreigners in order to bring back something of value to their kin. In the past, Biaks ventured to the Moluccan sultanate of Tidore, a key source of cloves and nutmeg during the seventeenth and eighteenth century spice trade. There, they acquired trade goods and *barak*, an invisible form of spiritual potency, which they rubbed onto their children's faces to imbue them with the ability to raid distant lands. At the time of my fieldwork, the Land of the Foreigners was located in modern settings, like the provincial university, a government office in Jakarta, or, indeed, the Delft town hall.

In my previous work, I relate these practices to a longer history of Biak responses to Dutch colonialism and the post-colonial Indonesian state. By insisting on the "foreignness" (and yet local roots) of Christianity and the national media and bureaucracy, Biaks were able to participate in Indonesian institutions without viewing themselves in conventionally national terms. This valorization of the foreign, indeed,

accounts for why Betty, despite her years abroad, remained such an excellent informant on things Biak. Biaks were able to migrate and even acculturate, as this “female foreigner” and her family had done, while remaining important inhabitants of a Biak world. Koreri – and the eruptions of West Papuan nationalism that have punctuated Biak’s more recent history – occurred at moments when Biaks seemed close to identifying with the perspectives of outsiders. At times when Biaks were coming to recognize something new about themselves, they anticipated a collapse of the boundary that defined the Land of the Foreigners, an apocalyptic merging of the local and the foreign that would spell the end of their world.

My analysis of Biaks' ability to evade integration into the Indonesian nation rested on the premise that one cannot assume that "foreignness" is simply given. This category took shape in a range of activities: from ceremonial exchange to quotidian acts of kindness, from singing and dancing to the speeches Biaks made at public gatherings, small and large. Insistently inscribing a border between the local and the distant, Biaks created the value of the foreign in the acts of framing through which they simultaneously sought recognition as valued persons. These practices enabled Biaks to subvert the disciplinary power of the region’s colonial and postcolonial rulers. In valuing foreign things, they rejected foreign perspectives. The more Biaks pursued the foreign, the more they kept it at bay.

In insisting on the tendency of Biaks to have an "unrealistic idea of their capacities," Betty dissected the agency associated with this pursuit of the foreign. Again, here's a passage from my notes:

Betty used herself as an example. When an international women's congress was being held in Peking, Betty decided to go. She was able to acquire a UN passport, but no one would guarantee her safety. It was well known that China would be full of Indonesian spies -- and she might not even be allowed in the country at all. People here advised her not to try it. But she thought that the Papuans had to be represented. She boarded the ship. When she got out of her cab, who was there to greet her but Winnie Mandela. The South African leader gave her a big hug. "My sister!"

The same was true during the women's congress in Nairobi. Betty was involved in a demonstration against Indonesia -- I think her sisters went too -- in any case, a sizeable group was involved. The Indonesian delegation came by with a car and tried to drive them off the road. [DR: The women were on foot and presumably blocking traffic.] The women stood firm. At one point, Betty draped the [DR: West Papuan] flag over the windshield, so that the driver couldn't see. Luckily, he was a Kenyan and not an Indonesian, so the incident ended there.³ But the Indonesian delegation was sent home early as a result. (Field notes, October 2, 1998)

Betty followed up these anecdotes with a more mundane example:

Say a group of Biaks were sitting at this table. Instead of going through the door to pick up their food, one might say, "hey, why not the wall!" Then the group would get up and try to break through the wall. This is the attitude that was at work in the demonstration -- and others like it. Biaks are brave enough to think that bullets won't hurt them. When things work out successfully, they know that God has intervened. (Field notes, October 2, 1998)

When we relate Betty's comments to her status as a "female foreigner" -- Winnie Mandela's sister, no less -- their significance becomes evident. Like gift exchange or singing, believing in the impossible is a practice that accomplishes an act of framing through which Biaks become recognized as valued persons, at least amongst themselves.

It makes sense that this “female foreigner” would top off her story of daring trips to distant places with the image of Biaks walking through walls. It also makes sense that Koreri prophets and their followers would take this logic to an extreme at moments when the state’s grip seemed to tighten and Biaks felt compelled to identify more fully with the perspectives of outsiders. Their feats bore witness to the power that would erupt when Manarmakeri, the ancestral hero whom Biaks viewed as the real source of foreignness, returned. The right question to ask concerning Koreri is what its followers got done by believing in the impossible. An even better question to ask is what *Betty* got done by describing certain actions as demanding such a belief. The short answer would be prestige, authority, and a subtle subversion of dominant regimes. It will be worth keeping in mind what Betty accomplished through this act of framing when we turn to some rather different cases in which belief in the impossible takes center stage.

So far, so good. Belief is a way of getting things done. For Biaks, epistemology – that is, assertions about the limits of what one can know – contributed to the creation of a boundary between “lands.” Stories of a person’s achievements in the Land of the Foreigners provide evidence of his or her extraordinary capacities. But at the same time, the assumption that this person has to have an “unrealistic idea of his or her capacities” to brave the voyage marks off the destination as a zone of danger and uncertainty, a place where ordinary rules do not apply. But, remember, Betty was also talking about me. Again: “I believe in the impossible – and so do you!” The second version of this encounter forces us to interrogate the relationship between belief and getting things done in locations closer to our scholarly homes. Let’s begin with two authors who were

pioneers of the secular tradition and champions of liberal forms of rule: John Locke and David Hume (see Bauman and Briggs 2003).⁴

Version 2: Doing the Impossible in Locke and Hume

Please note that in turning to the work of Locke and Hume, I am making no claims about the genealogy of anthropological thinking. Rather, I simply want briefly to follow some turns of thought taken by these two authors. Their main virtue is that they pose questions that today's scholars rarely ask. I have a few words to say about John Locke, but I will dwell at greater length on his successor and critic, David Hume. I can only speak briefly to the historical context of their work. Reinhart Koselleck has argued that with the emergence of the absolutist settlement in the aftermath of the European wars of religion, new institutional sites of discourse and practice came into existence. These took the form of "secret societies" like the Masons, whose members tested out utopian ideals, and the "republic of letters" (Warner 1990) that took shape within a public sphere born of print (see Koselleck 1988).⁵ As the prefaces to *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1997 [1689]) and *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1988 [1748]) suggest, both Locke and Hume viewed philosophizing as a pleasurable diversion that could nonetheless be turned towards political ends.

Like Betty, Locke and Hume engage in acts of framing that bring the impossible into view. In this case, it is not the Land of the Foreigners but philosophy that emerges as a realm in which people attempt extraordinary feats. Locke's massive tome originated in

1673 when “five or six friends meeting in my chamber, and discoursing on a subject very remote from this, found themselves quickly at a stand, by the difficulties that arose on every side” (Locke 1997 [1689]: 8). (One of Locke’s letters reports that this subject concerned “the principles of morality and revealed religion” [Locke 1997 (1689): 750]; given all the book’s references to inebriation, it is tempting to imagine this conversation as occurring over beer!) “[I]t came into my thoughts, that we took a wrong course; and that, before we set ourselves upon inquiries of that nature, it was necessary to examine our own abilities, and see what objects our understandings were, or were not fitted to deal with” (Ibid.). Locke set down some “hasty and undigested thoughts” and the essay “thus begun by chance; was continued by entreaty; written in incoherent parcels; and, after long periods of neglect, resumed again, as my humor or occasions permitted” before Locke’s retirement gave him the leisure to bring it “into that order thou now seest it” (Ibid.). Locke describes composing the essay as an enjoyable lark, but its implications for Locke’s anonymous political writings are clearly traceable. In the course of defining how we arrive at “clear and distinct ideas,” Locke provides a charter and gauge for the exercise of public reason in liberal forms of governance (see Bauman and Briggs 2003). In doing so, Locke cautions against appeals to “revealed religion,” wherever Scripture fails to yield “clear and distinct ideas.”

On the face of it, Locke would take issue with Betty's assertion that “believing in the impossible” is the only way to get things done. This is Locke’s response to Tertullian’s paradox, which I mentioned above: “I believe because it is impossible,” might in a good man, pass for a sally of zeal; but would prove a very ill rule for men to

choose their opinions, or religion by” (Locke 1997 [1689]: 614).⁶ But this warning is misleading; in fact, one finds a belief in the impossible at the very heart of Locke’s epistemology. Locke’s epistemology rests on the presumption that there is an unbridgeable gap between the world as we experience it and the world as it really is.⁷ We can’t walk through walls, but neither can our eyes capture the powers that make them appear to us with the color that they do. Ultimately, the only guarantee underlying the knowledge we gain from our senses is “Nature” – or more precisely the “infinite wise contriver” – who “hath fitted our senses, faculties, and organs, to the convenience of life, and the business we have to do here” (Locke 1997 [1689]: 273).⁸ Our survival requires that we act on the basis of an “unrealistic idea of our capacities”: our faith in our senses, which lead us to think we can know an ultimately unknowable world. In making this argument, Locke himself acts on the basis of an “unrealistic idea of his capacities.” He posits something that he cannot establish through his senses, that is, the existence of an ultimately unknowable God.

To borrow Betty’s terms, Locke’s epistemology implicitly rests on a belief in the impossible that helps us get self-preservation done.⁹ Hume, a generation later, treats this problem more explicitly. Like Locke, Hume justifies his system with an appeal to Nature and Nature’s God (see Deleuze 1991 [1953]: 30). Nature provides human beings with certain capacities and “principles of human nature” that are adaptive to our survival. But Hume is more tolerant of faith, suggesting that the very conceit that one could prove the Bible true is an offense to the Creator. “Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of [the Christian Religion’s] veracity; and whoever is moved by *Faith* to assent to it, is

conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience” (Hume 1988 [1748]: 118). This tolerance goes along with Hume’s insistence on the central role of “belief” – and other “passions” – in reason.¹⁰ Look in Locke’s index, and you find “belief” only in the section where Locke opposes knowledge to faith. Look in Hume’s index, and you find “belief” all over the book.

The most revealing passages come in the midst of Hume’s analysis of causality. Against Locke, Hume argues that there is no such thing as a “cause.” Rather, this “power” is something we attribute to the objects of our perception based on our experience of a repeated conjunction between events.¹¹ The very first man to see one billiard ball hit another had no reason to think that the second ball would move. The inference that one thing causes another is not the outcome of a logical process of thought; rather, it is born of what Hume calls “habit” or “custom,” the repeated association of impressions and ideas that automatically leads us to expect, say, “tock” to follow “tick.” Our “belief” in the power of a cause – and Hume explicitly uses the term, “belief” – is an outcome of our experience of our own internal tendencies, the “principles of human nature” that guide the mind’s operation. “Belief” is a way of “doing” something called inference, which in turn is critical to the practices through which humans “get things done.” Science, technology, morality, and government all depend on the same tendency “so necessary,” Hume notes, “to the subsistence of our species” (1988 [1748]: 53).

Belief and getting things done: here they are together in a site far removed from

Biak. But what about impossibility? It's here in Hume, too. Embedded within the belief in causality is a belief in temporal continuity, which also has no logical basis.

[A]ll inferences from experience suppose, as their foundation, that the future will resemble the past, and that similar powers will be conjoined with similar sensible qualities. If there be any suspicion that the course of nature may change, and that the past may be no rule for the future, all experience becomes useless, and can give rise to no inference or conclusion. It is impossible, therefore, that any arguments from experience can prove this resemblance of the past to the future; since all these arguments are founded on the supposition of that resemblance. (Hume 1988 [1748]: 39)

Translation: experience can teach us everything except that experience teaches, and without believing that experience teaches, we can learn nothing at all.¹² The belief that undergirds all inferences is so foundational that it is all but devoid of content. It is not the belief that something in particular will happen. Rather, it is the belief that the future will prove faithful to the past, rather than veering off in directions that make a mockery of all our predictions and pursuits. Hume goes on:

My practice, you say, refutes my doubts. But you mistake the purport of my question. As an agent, I am quite satisfied in this point; but as a philosopher, who has some share of curiosity, I will not say skepticism, I want to learn the foundation of this inference. No reading, no enquiry has yet been able to remove my difficulty, or give me satisfaction in a matter of such importance. Can I do better than propose the difficulty to the public, even though, perhaps, I have small hopes of obtaining a solution? We shall at least, by this means, be sensible of our ignorance, if we do not augment our knowledge. (Hume 1988 [1748]: 39)

Two things happen here. First, Hume suggests that what he is doing *is* a practice: the public practice of philosophy, which attempts its own impossible feats.¹³ Second, Hume sets himself up to accede to a totalizing perspective of a sort familiar from the history of

theology, from Augustine on. Hume insists on the limits of human abilities. Then he crosses these limits by appealing to Nature – and practice – to absorb any doubts that his speculations might have spawned (see Deleuze 1991 [1953]; see also Wittgenstein). There is no such thing as a cause, he tells us, radically unsettling our belief that one thing leads to another. This claim would also seem to undermine Hume’s own effort to explain what it is that makes humans tick. But then, that Super Cause, known by Hume’s contemporaries as “Providence,” intervenes to save the day, ensuring that it will all turn out fine in the end. Faith in the impossible – in his capacity to infer the purposes of an unknowable totality – helps Hume square the circle within an empiricist epistemology. Nature provides humans with “principles” adaptive to their survival. As Hume put it in his discussion of Christian faith, the real miracle is that the believer believes.¹⁴

Again, so far, so good. So far, so secular. For both Locke and Hume, belief nestles in the most “interior” of spaces: in private faith, to be sure, but also in the metaphysical presuppositions that provide the tacit underpinning of human action and knowledge in the world. For Hume in particular, thinking is doing – an impassioned kind of doing – and the body, in all its fallibility and fragility, is the understanding’s ultimate guarantor. I’m not suggesting that we buy Hume’s argument in toto – or even in part – merely that we linger on the food for thought that this argument provides. After all, Hume is not alone. The semiotician, Charles Saunders Peirce, who referred to himself as “saturated, through and through, with the spirit of the physical sciences,” defined truth as “the state of perfect knowledge or fixed belief” (quoted in Tomas 1957: vii, xi).¹⁵ In fact, Peirce depicted science as a practice of “Charity, Faith, and Hope,” undertaken by a

transhistorical community of investigators collaborating over an infinitely long haul (1957: 69). This much is familiar from the philosophy of science. But what do we as anthropologists make of a secular account that places belief at the heart of inference? We may think that secularism has exiled belief to the private realm of conscience – but could it possibly linger in the heart of practices of reasoning that have a more public character?

Arguably, we examine those beliefs that make it possible to make claims about the world only under the most extraordinary circumstances. Most of us spend little time worrying whether our hand is really in front of our face; what Wittgenstein (1969: 18e) called “the game of doubting” is only played in particular places and times. The conditions of philosophizing would certainly qualify; but what Veena Das (2007) calls “critical events” could also bring these beliefs into view (see also Carsten 2007, Das and Leonard 2007). Just as gifts give us friends as readily as friends give us gifts, one could argue that such an exposure might serve a performative function: it can conjure up its own conditions of possibility. Talk of belief creates extraordinary conditions, just as extraordinary conditions create a context for talk of belief. What I have learned from my Biak consultants suggests this is the case. But to continue exploring this problem, I turn now to the National Public Radio series, “This I Believe.”

Secularism on the Radio

Conceived in March 2003, but inspired by a McCarthy era program of the same name, “This I Believe” showcases a version of belief perfectly suited to secularism. The

series invites famous and accomplished individuals, along with “average citizens” to “write a few hundred words expressing the core principles that guide your life – your personal credo” (Allison and Gediman 2006: 1). If the use of the term, “personal,” were not enough, consider the guidelines provided to potential participants.

Frame your beliefs in positive terms. Refrain from dwelling on what you do not believe. Avoid restatement of doctrine. Focus on the personal, the “I” of the title, not the subtly sermonizing “We.” While you may hold many beliefs, write mainly of one. Aim for truth without accusation, patriotism without political cant, and faith beyond religious dogma. (Allison and Gediman 2006: 3)

Talal Asad would rest his case that the notion of belief presumes a secular division of spheres. Here is a personal, secular, potentially plural, and politically safe form of belief. We are far from the "active belief" practiced in places where public expressions of doctrine contribute to the reform of society (see Agrama n.d.; Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2006). We are close to the liberal tradition, as Studs Terkel makes clear in his forward to a collection of essays from the series, which follows a quote from Edmund R. Murrow, the host of the original version of “This I Believe,” with a citation from “the most eloquent visionary of the American Revolution,” Thomas Paine (Allison and Gediman 2006). (A fan of the French Revolution, Paine advocated Deism and criticized Christianity; his books included *The Age of Reason* and *Common Sense*.) We are also close to the territory of talk radio and “American Idol,” grounded in the contemporary American penchant for confessional self-expression and amateur celebrity. *The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women*, the volume’s subtitle reads; anyone can be “remarkable,” the phrase suggests.¹⁶ In a book of essays from the series, a former telemarketer’s contribution, “Be Cool to the Pizza Dude,” rubs shoulders with

Albert Einstein's "An Ideal of Service to Our Fellow Men." Of course, the authors represented in the series belong to a rather narrow market segment. One finds Unitarians and former Baptists, but no practicing Evangelicals. A striking number of the "average citizens" featured turn out to be forty-something academics. (Like, well, me. We forty-something academics are peculiarly suited to the task of cramming the "lessons of a life" into a five minute segment.) But what I find striking about this secular exercise in earnestness is the way in which epistemological problems of the sort faced by Locke and Hume occasionally surface in the essays – sometimes with quite remarkable results.¹⁷

All the authors write in the context described by Ian Hacking in his study of the relationship between the emergence of statistics and the rise of modern forms of governmentality (1990, see also Hacking 1975). The "avalanche of numbers" produced by modern states has led scientists, philosophers, and the public at large to conceptualize reality in probabilistic terms (see also Hacking 1975). Statistical questions occupy much of the chattering classes' waking attention. Should I stop drinking from plastic bottles? Will smog give my kid asthma? If I publish in this journal, how likely am I to be read? Essays touching on what Hacking calls the "taming of chance" are common in the series. So are essays alluding to gambling. Studs Turkel's forward to the collection, for example, ends with a riff on the afterlife.

I secretly envy those who believe in the hereafter and with it the idea that they may once again meet dear ones. They cannot prove beyond a reasonable doubt that there is such a place. Neither can I disprove it. I cannot find the bookmaker willing to take my bet on it. How will one who guesses right be able to collect his winnings? So speaking on behalf of the bookies of the world, all bets are off. (Allison and Gediman 2006: xix)

This essay calls to mind Blaise Pascal's description of the wager, a thought experiment designed to give unbelievers a reason to believe. Given that the rewards are infinite – believers win an eternity in heaven and avoid spending an eternity in hell – it is always worth it to bet on faith, even if the odds of God actually existing are minute. Pascal was an early theorist of probability. It seems worth noting how Turkel situates belief in the afterlife in the context of a world whose randomness has been domesticated by science and the normal curve.

Then there is the magician and comedian, Penn Jillette, riffing on God in an essay broadcast in the series:

I believe that there is no god. I'm beyond Atheism. Atheism is not believing in god. Not believing in god is easy, you can't prove a negative, so there's no work to do. You can't prove that there isn't an elephant inside the trunk of my car. You sure? How about now? Maybe he was just hiding before. Check again. Did I mention that my personal heartfelt definition of the word "elephant" includes mystery, order, goodness, love, and a spare tire? (Allison and Gediman 2006: 129)

Jillette confirms the difficulty of believing that there is no god through a classically Humean operation: through an example revealing the non-falsifiability of matters of fact. Far from undermining belief, Jillette confirms its value through this appeal to the epistemological problem of proof. Like Hume, Jillette shows that the garden variety belief involved in inference is "miraculous." He also believes in the "miracle" that is belief. In the end, the magician mobilizes "moral reasoning" in the interest of morality. "Believing there's no god means I can't really be forgiven except by kindness and faulty

memories. That's good; it makes me want to be more thoughtful. I have to try to treat people right the first time around" (Allison and Gediman 2006: 130). Jillette's essay and the passage by Turkel illustrate some familiar ways in which belief and knowledge come together in the series. But the series features one essay that maps these secular categories in a somewhat less predictable way.

"This I Believe" announced the tag line as I stood in my kitchen, early in the morning. I resisted the urge to turn the radio down. But the first line caught my attention. "Tonight I'll say, 'Have a great day,' and 'I love you' to my husband, who is 11 time zones away in Iraq" (Herz 2007). Although I waited for a distilled life lesson of the sort delivered by all the other essays I had heard, what followed violated my expectations. The prediction voiced in the opening utterance – "I'll talk to my husband later" – turned out to *be* the belief. The rest of the essay took the form of a list of all the things that the author, Becky Herz, a recreational supervisor in Sacramento, would do between the phone call she expected to receive tonight and the phone call she hoped to receive tomorrow: fall asleep next to her newborn daughter, have her morning coffee, change diapers, do laundry, visit her employees, walk her dogs. "When people say, 'Looks like you have your hands full,' I'll smile and acknowledge that it's true, but I make the best of it because I believe that my husband will call me tomorrow" (Herz 2007).

The essay reached its climax.

If there is a letter addressed to me from the military, I'll open it because I believe that my husband will call me tomorrow. If there is a knock at the door, I'll answer it, because I believe that my husband will call me tomorrow. And when he does, I'll talk to him and tell him again that I love him. I'll be able to hang up the phone, keeping my fear at bay, because I believe – *I must believe* – that my husband will call me tomorrow. (Herz 2007)

A confession: I was moved by Herz's words, albeit for reasons of which I am suspicious. In the past few years, support for the war has eroded as the American body count has grown. This is all well and good, but I am suspicious of a politics that foregrounds the loss of American lives, while leaving the death of others unremarked.¹⁸ And yet, I was also intrigued. The essay presented as "belief" what might otherwise seem like common sense: Herz's prediction that the future will resemble the past. The essay seems to focus on a belief with a specific content – that Herz's husband will call her tomorrow. But this belief in turn rests on a more foundational belief akin to that unsettled by Hume, as Herz's recital of quotidian activities suggests. Falling asleep, having coffee, changing diapers, doing laundry, visiting employees, walking her dog: the elements in this list are the stuff of "habit" or "custom." They are experiences that, under normal conditions, someone like Herz might expect to recur with the seeming inevitability of the tock that follows tick. In calling this expectation into question, Becky Herz, like Betty Kaisiepo, joins the personal and the political with the epistemological. But what is at stake is not the boundary between the local and the foreign but American support for the war, which is shown, in an ironic doubling of the logic of terror, to have injected trauma into everyday life. If Hume is correct, "getting things done" always entails overcoming a deep-seated uncertainty: all human action presumes faith in the continuity of past and future. A belief that Hume presents as imperative for all actors

appears in Herz's essay as idiosyncratic – as the predicate of an “I,” not a “subtly sermonizing we.” At the same time, even though a “personal credo” should be voluntary, Herz uses the term “must,” in an utterance that verges on desperation. She implies that the grim statistics on U.S. casualties in Iraq make it impossible for her to take for granted that the “course of nature” will not change.

Herz’s belief is both functional – a constitutive dimension of action – and miraculous. This, I believe, is why Herz’s essay is so effective in stirring sentiment against the war. As Herz narrates the day to come, the practice of belief that enables her to inhabit a world created through her interactions with significant others juts disturbingly into view. With the war, the social skeleton of everyday life suddenly appears as a fragile web spun of the filaments of “unrealistic ideas.” (Think of how much more fragile this web must seem to citizens of Iraq.) Without an “unrealistic idea of her capacities,” Herz, in the words of Hume, would “never have been able to adapt means to ends, to employ (her) natural powers, either to the pursuing of good or the avoiding of evil. Those, who delight in the discovery and contemplation of final causes, have here ample subject to employ their wonder and imagination” (Hume 1988 [1748]: 53). Here, in the miracle of practice, lay the enchantments of secular belief.

Conclusion

John Locke, David Hume, Betty Kaisiepo, Becky Herz: all must believe in the impossible to get things done. This is not to say that their practices of belief were mere

strategies in the pursuit of pre-existing interests. If my research on Biak is any indication, appeals to belief create a space where surprising new interests can emerge. We impoverish our analyses when we presume that belief is something people “cling to” when more promising avenues for advancement are blocked. What about anthropology’s own wonder and imagination? How should we conceptualize anthropological practices of belief, their myriad objects, their relation to getting things done? Not an easy question to answer, for these beliefs are of necessity deeply embedded in our scholarly practices. Unlike Betty, we are not quick to admit that our practices require us to act as if we think we can walk through walls. Yet, in the very act of ethnography, anthropologists embrace a belief in the impossible. We are like Betty and Becky in our insistence on illuminating the taken for granted assumptions that give consistency to everyday life. We are like Locke and Hume in making what might otherwise appear as knowledge into a matter of belief. To make a claim about a cultural practice, discourse, or disciplinary regime is to assert a belief that the habitual will continue to happen – but it is also to raise the specter that it might not. This tacit claim is not only disturbing; like Biak appeals to belief, anthropological perspectives on the world lead us to expect the unexpected. This effect does not simply stem from anthropology’s power to unsettle the everyday, but also from its method, which entails the impossible belief that one can assume another’s point of view.

When questions of belief emerge, anthropologists almost always tend to dodge them. But even anthropologists inspired by Asad cannot help but believe: to engage in that conduct that is thought, carried out in the company of real or imagined others, as a

component of other embodied acts. Take Charles Hirschkind's excellent monograph, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*. Belief does not appear in Hirschkind's index, and he only uses the word in order to deny its relevance. What he claims to be analyzing is never "private belief," but something more public and socially consequential than a "personal credo" could ever be. In listening to cassette sermons, Hirschkind's Egyptian informants cultivated dispositions that they did not see as separable from moral conduct, but rather as a constitutive dimension of pious acts. Hirschkind offers an extended discussion of theorists of the sensorium who offer insight into the "sensitive listening" that he encountered in Cairo, only to pull up short when an imagined interlocutor calls him to task for "universalizing." Here is Hirschkind:

Some readers might object that the analysis of cassette listening I am suggesting here rests on a generic model of human perception, one of questionable universality. This is not my argument. As I have shown, the practice of sermon listening is informed by those Islamic traditions of ethical cultivation that highlight the role of affective, kinesthetic, and gestural modalities of bodily experience within processes of ethical learning – traditions, in other words, that take the sensorium as an object of pedagogy and ethical attunement. My recourse to such theorists as Marcel Jousse and Brian Masumi, in this regard, is to sharpen our appreciation of certain aspects of these traditions rarely attended to by scholars of ethics – not to demonstrate the universal validity of the perceptual models these thinkers articulate.¹⁹ (Hirschkind 2006: 83-84)

Hirschkind responds to the imagined interlocutor with a familiar plea for cultural specificity. In essence, Hirschkind asks himself "do I believe?" and answers with a disavowal. But he could just as easily have turned to the lessons he learned from his informants for a possible answer to this question. No less than the Islamic tradition of ethical cultivation that Hirschkind studied, the learning involved in ethnography entails the cultivation of "active belief." In imagining himself into the sensorium inhabited by

his informants, Hirschkind quite admirably attempted something that he arguably lacked the capacity to do. In the very act of ethnography, anthropologists practice an active belief in the impossible. An impossible gesture of identification – the adoption of unfamiliar dispositions – lies at the heart of ethnographic practice. The same holds for the acts of interdisciplinary poaching anthropologists indulge in when they venture into the neighborhood of, say, John Locke or David Hume. At the heart of ethnography also lies an impossible – yet unavoidable – assumption that we share with those we study: our belief that we can read the future off the past.

Those who read ethnographies must also cultivate an active belief in the impossible. Consider another passage, in which Hirschkind explains Massumi's notion of affect and shows its relevance for understanding the force of cassette sermons by reporting on his own experience as he writes.

Affects are part of the presubjective interface of the body with the sensory world it inhabits, a linkage registered at the level of the visceral, the proprioceptive, and other sites where memory lodges itself in the body. (While I write these words at an outdoor café, a bird lands on the table in front of me. I casually watch the staccato motions it makes with its head. Each of these jerky movements rebounds off of my neck and upper body as a sort of shock wave. Now imagine a similar pulsation, though one carrying ethical potential, say the “shock wave” that accompanies a reaction of moral disgust.) (Hirschkind 2006: 82)

“Now imagine.” With these words, Hirschkind calls on his readers to believe. On the most basic level, he invites them to adhere to the conventions of what we might call, following Derrida (1992b), the “strange institution” of ethnographic literature: they must suspend disbelief and insert themselves into the scene that Hirschkind describes. More

specifically, he calls on them to envision a world in which what Massumi claims about affect could hold true. In commanding their attention, Hirschkind asks his readers to believe that the insights contained in his book are of broad enough relevance to travel elsewhere, as singular as his field site might seem. Those who read an ethnography must be willing to entertain the premise that what they are learning about one neighborhood, city, or country can help them understand others, that what an ethnographer tells them about December can cast light on what might happen in June, that what can happen to an author in an outdoor café can also happen to a cassette listener in a Cairo cab.

Of course, the problem doesn't end here, and one could go further in scrutinizing the many practices of belief implicit in ethnographic research, writing, and reading. These would have to include ethnographers' implicit claims concerning the relevance and representativeness of the evidence we adduce. One could also go further in detailing how "impossibility" serves as a resource, as much as a limit. Bruno Latour (1999) has argued that our actions always surprise us – that outcomes always exceed our expectations – given our embeddedness in networks of human and non-human agents. If this is true, then a lack of fit between our capacities and the tasks we undertake is key to our ability to create something new – indeed, to create anything at all.²⁰

Perhaps most refreshingly, one could go further in exploring the new readings of the anthropological literature that become possible when we overcome our aversion and start attending to belief as a form of practice. In *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*, Evans-Pritchard did not hesitate to use the term "belief"; nor did he deny the

intractability of the question that witchcraft seemed to answer: termites notwithstanding, he himself had no way of knowing why a given granary fell on particular heads. In the course of fieldwork, Evans-Pritchard found himself making the Azande solution to this puzzle into his own.

If I wanted to go hunting or on a journey, for instance, no one would willingly accompany me unless I was able to produce a verdict of the poison oracle that all would be well, that witchcraft did not threaten our project; and if one goes on arranging one's affairs, organizing one's life in harmony with the lives of one's hosts, whose companionship one seeks and without which one would sink into disoriented craziness, one must eventually give way, or at any rate partially give way. If one must act as though one believed, one ends up in believing, or half-believing as one acts. (1976: 244)²¹

Ethnographic believing? Or is it half believing? There's a topic for another paper. My goal today is merely to start a conversation. It may be wrong to believe in secular belief, yet it also may be unavoidable. Just because something is impossible, that doesn't mean it isn't critical for getting things – all sorts of things – done.²²

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¹ Betty spoke in Indonesian, although I remember our conversation that day as including English and Biak, as well. The term in Biak would have been *kiar*. Here's the definition from van Hasselt and van Hasselt 1947: 121: "Kiar – Hopen. Vertrouwen. Zie: kakiar. Mal.: harap; pertjaja; Wid.: tiar, sanetia; B. dial.: kiar." Needham includes a long discussion of the Indonesian term, *percaya*, which derives from Sanskrit, and speculates as to whether it might not have displaced an Austronesian cognate that covered some of the same meanings.

² The movement involved the sort of "bizarre" and "barbarous rites" and "strange myths" that Durkheim (1995[1912]: 2) called on sociologists to "reach beneath" in their quest for the "true reasons" behind religion.

³ Presumably had the driver been Indonesian, he would have recognized the flag's significance and continued to try to run the women down.

⁴ The prefaces to *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1997 [1689]) and *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1988 [1748]) are suggestive in this regard. Locke's massive tome, for instance, originated in 1673 when "five or six friends meeting in my chamber, and discoursing on a subject very remote from this," – the "principles of morality and revealed religion," it turns out – found themselves quickly at a stand, by the difficulties that arose on every side" (Locke 1997 [1689]: 8, 750). "[I]t came into my thoughts, that we took a wrong course; and that, before we set ourselves upon inquiries of that nature, it was necessary to examine our own abilities, and see what objects our understandings were, or were not fitted to deal with" (Ibid.). Locke set down some "hasty and undigested thoughts" and the essay "thus begun by chance; was continued by entreaty; written in incoherent parcels; and, after long periods of neglect, resumed again, as my humor or occasions permitted" (Ibid.). Locke describes composing the essay as an enjoyable lark, but its implications for Locke's anonymous political writings are clearly traceable. In the course of defining how we arrive at "clear and distinct ideas," Locke provides a charter and gauge for the exercise of public reason in liberal forms of governance (see Bauman and Briggs 2003). In doing so, Locke cautions against appeals to "revealed religion," wherever Scripture fails to yield "clear and distinct ideas."

⁵ I cannot begin to offer an adequate contextualization of the works I mention here; but if I were going to situate them historically, I would draw on Koselleck's account in *Critique and Crisis* as well as Trouillot 1991.

⁶ This remark ends a passage criticizing "this crying up of *faith*, in opposition to *reason*" as the source of "those absurdities, that fill almost all the religions which possess and divide mankind." Ibid.

⁷ Locke famously grounds knowledge in perception, the objects of which he organizes into primary, secondary, and tertiary qualities. Angels, Locke points out, endowed with senses of a different and superior sort, would perceive things that our own senses conceal (Locke 1997 [1689]: 275-6).

And here give me leave to propose an extravagant conjecture of mine, *viz.*, that since we have some reason (if there be any credit to be given to the report of things, that our philosophy cannot account for,) to imagine, that spirits can assume to themselves bodies of different bulk, figure, and conformation of parts. Whether one great advantage some of them have over us, may not lie in this, that they can so frame, and shape to themselves organs of sensation or perception, as to suit them to their present design, and the circumstances of the object they would consider. For how much would that man exceed all others in knowledge, who had but the faculty to alter the structure of his eyes, that one sense, as to make it capable of all the several degrees of vision, which the assistance of glasses (casually at first light on) has taught us to conceive? What wonders would he discover, who could so fit his eye to all sorts of objects, as to see, when he pleased, the figure and motion of the minute particles in the blood, and other juices of animals as distinctly as he does, at other times, the shape and motion of the animals themselves. But to us, in our present state, unalterable organs, so contrived, as to discover the figure and motion of the minute parts of bodies, whereon depend those sensible qualities we now observe in them, would, perhaps, be of no advantage. God has, no doubt, made us so, as is best for us in our present condition. He hath fitted us for the neighbourhood of the bodies that surround us, and we have to do with: and though we cannot, by the faculties we have, attain to a perfect knowledge of things; yet they will serve us well enough for those ends above mentioned, which are our great concernment. I beg my reader's pardon, for laying before him so wild a fancy, concerning the ways of perception in beings above us: but how extravagant soever it be, I doubt whether we can imagine anything about the knowledge of angels, but after this manner, some way or other, in proportion to what we find and observe in ourselves. And thought we cannot but allow, that the infinite power and wisdom we have; yet our thoughts can go no further than our own, so impossible it is for us to enlarge our very guesses beyond the ideas received from our own sensation and reflection. The supposition at least, that angels to sometimes assume bodies, needs not startle us, sine some of the most ancient, and more learned Fathers of the Church, seemed to believe, that they had bodies: and this is certain, that their state and way of existence, is unknown to us. Locke 1997 [1689]: 275-6.

⁸ Thus Locke recalls a contemporary stream of Protestant theology that assigned humans the right and duty to follow the “impulse to self-preservation.” See Milbank 1993: 14.

⁹ It would be an interesting project to investigate the relationship between Protestant theologies stressing not just man’s right to self preservation, but his duty to preserve the body given him by God and the emergence of secular notions of sovereignty depicting “bare life” as the object of the exercise of power. See Milbank 1993, Foucault 1977, Agamben 2005.

¹⁰ Hume even goes so far as to claim that reason is itself a passion: “a general calm determination...founded on some distant view or reflection.” See Hume 1962 [1738] in Deleuze 1991 [1953]: 30.

¹¹ Hume’s analysis of this attribution turns on his account of the imagination, which he viewed as a field inhabited by “impressions” and the “ideas” they spawn (see Hume 1988 [1748]: 21; see also Hume 1962 [1738]).¹¹ When two events repeatedly co-occur, a groove of sorts is left in the imagination, which leads the fancy to run in a certain direction whenever the first event in the series recurs.

¹² By this point in the text, it is easy to understand those who have criticized Hume for locking the “mind in a vat” (Latour 1999).

¹³ *An Enquiry* represents a conversation with a certain public; in a similar fashion, Hume wrote an anonymous defense of *A Treatise of Human Nature* defending his argument against critics from what he called the “republic of letters” (see Hume 1962 [1738]: 335).

¹⁴ “Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of [the Christian Religion’s] veracity; and whoever is moved by *Faith* to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.” See Hume 1988 [1748]: 118.

¹⁵ Tomas (1957: viii) notes that, for Peirce, “belief is a habit, i.e., a readiness or disposition to respond in certain kinds of ways on certain kinds of occasions.”

¹⁶ *The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women*, the collections subtitle reads; anyone can be “remarkable,” the phrase suggests.

¹⁷ As Ian Hacking’s (1990) genealogy of statistics would lead us to expect, these beliefs emerge in the context of a reality that the “avalanche of numbers” inaugurated by the emergence of modern governmentality has led us to conceptualize in probabilistic terms. See also Hacking 1975.

¹⁸ I am also suspicious of the mobilization of notions of trauma that has supported the War on Terror from the start.

¹⁹ Hirschkind continues. “I should also point out, however, that the theoretical accounts of sensory experience I have drawn upon have clear filiations as far back as Greek harmonic and vibrational theories, theories that also shaped the development of Islamic traditions of philosophical and mystical inquiry (see Carruthers 1990; Chittick 1989). Ibid.

²⁰ Here I draw on Latour (1999), who describes the “slight surprise of action” inherent in the fact that the outcomes of our efforts always exceed our expectation, given our dependence on networks of human and non-human agents. My analysis here has in many ways confirmed his formulations, at the same time it calls into question his critique of belief.

²¹ Here is the entire quotation:

In their culture, in the set of ideas I then lived in, I accepted them; in a kind of way I believed them...I had to act as though I trusted the Zande oracles and therefore to give assent to their dogma of witchcraft, whatever reservations I might have. If I wanted to go hunting or on a journey, for instance, no one would willingly accompany me unless I was able to produce a verdict of the poison oracle that all would be well, that witchcraft did not threaten our project; and if one goes on arranging one's affairs, organizing one's life in harmony with the lives of one's hosts, whose companionship one seeks and without which one would sink into disoriented craziness, one must eventually give way, or at any rate partially give way. If one must act as though one believed, one ends up in believing, or half-believing as one acts. (1976: 244).

Jim Siegel's recent revisitation of the issues raised by Evans Pritchard also troubles the distinction between us and them. "I do not want to discount the market entirely [as a force accounting for the witch killings Siegel analyzes]...But we cannot find the exact source of this power. Witchcraft here was not a metaphor for something that we as analysts could name but they, the witch hunters, could not. Something amorphous and unnamable" – that is, unnamable to Siegel, as well as to his informants – "was at work" (2006: 131). Siegel doesn't cite Hume, preferring as his interlocutors Lévi-Strauss, Mauss, Derrida, and Blanchot in relating the force of magic to the force of signification and the sense of internal alterity it spawns. Yet the force of the singular, that which exceeds our power to abstract, that witchcraft accusations seek to master appears in much the same form as the singular instances that, according to Hume, we master with the "fiction" of a cause. It would take another paper to connect all the dots in such an argument. My aim is simply to suggest that a range of anthropologists have traveled the pathway through belief and action that I sketch out there. Those inspired by Peirce, who, as I have noted, insisted that thought is conduct, undertaken in the company of real or imagined others, are not the first to have suggested, however, tacitly, that to believe is to act in a way that fuels further action in the world.

²² Interestingly, this was the conclusion of Soviet theorists on the topic, as well. Sonja Luehrmann provided me with the following note in an email on April 17, 2007:

Dear Danilyn,

in thinking about your SAR talk, I remembered my surprise a few years ago when I looked up the entry on "belief" ("Glaube," can also mean "faith" in English) in a GDR dictionary of Marxist-Leninist philosophy I have at home. Most entries in that dictionary start out by giving a history of a given term in philosophy, only to announce that all philosophical discussion of the term has been hopelessly misguided by bourgeois idealism, and that the works of Marx and Engels provide the definitive solution to all the obfuscation. I expected the same with "belief," imagining that it could very easily be blasted as a bourgeois-idealist concept. But the entry is quite different, and somehow resonates with your talk. I translate it below - enjoy.

best, Sonja

Belief: to hold something to be true that has not been or cannot be proven, or to take something to be correct, although the reasons for it are insufficient or unknown. B. is often mistakenly identified with religious b., which holds the assumption of supernatural, mysterious beings and their efficacy to be true (--- > religion). But this identification is unjustified, because there are forms of b. which have nothing to do with religion. They can play an important orienting and mobilizing role in practical action as well as in theoretical thought. People ground their everyday thought and action in particular knowledge and experience, but they also assume facts and situations to be true and correct which go beyond their knowledge and experience, i.e., they believe that things are such. Of the same kind is the b. of progressive forces in the necessity and correctness of their struggle, the b. in their strength and their eventual victory. The socialist consciousness and self-consciousness of the working class also contains an element of

revolutionary, optimistic b., subordinate to knowledge, in the correctness of its path in the fight for the liquidation of exploitative capitalist society and the construction of socialism, a b. in their own strength and the capacity to overcome problems. Today this revolutionary, optimistic b. is an important factor in the struggle for peace and in the further shaping of developed socialist society.

(Alfred Kosing, Wörterbuch der marxistisch-leninistischen Philosophie. Berlin: Dietz, 1987 [revised edition, first edition published 1966], p. 224)