

**“Call me a Fanatic”:
Spiritual Zeal, Scientific Scepticism and the Problems of “Belief”**

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ABSTRACT

Anthropologists have pointed to the politics at play in the uneven application of the term “belief” to describe different cultural representations of reality. They have observed that westerners sometimes reserve the term “belief” for the description of non-western epistemologies, while categorising their own perspectives, informed by theories of scientific empiricism for example, as “knowledge.” This is an important critique, so what to do when our non-western interlocutors insist on being called “believers?” This article considers the ideas of a Nigerian Pentecostal church who not only characterize their faith using the language of “belief,” but even aspire to be branded “fanatics” by outsiders. Drawing on the teachings of the church, striking congruences between the understandings of belief deployed by this group and by scholars of religion are brought to light, collapsing the distance between self-described African Christian “fanatics” and those who critically analyse them.

The Problem(s) at Hand

The use of the word “belief” has emerged as a popular alternative to terms like “religion” or “faith” in western discourses over the course of the past century, in part because it seems to capture the kinds of ideological or value judgments that elude the boundaries of traditional and established religious frameworks. The United Nations’ Declaration of Human Rights— an artefact of modern thinking par excellence—for example, states that all persons have the “right” to “manifest his religion or belief in teaching,

practice, worship and observance” (Article 18), as though “religion” and “belief” are the same kind of thing. Although issued in 1948 under quite different circumstances than we find ourselves in today, the influence of the document persists, and thus so does the prominence it grants to belief, for it often serves as a kind of morality yardstick for western educational, aid and diplomatic discourses. “Belief,” in short, all too often becomes interchangeable with “religion,” or is used as a convenient and more generic alternative.

For some time now, scholars of religion have drawn attention to the fact that this semantic habit emerges out of the western assumption that belief is the primary, indeed the determinant feature of religious life (for example, Fitzgerald 1997, 2003; Masuzawa 2005). This assumption had also been reflected in the field’s own classic definitions of religion, which typically foregrounded belief over its other dimensions and took abstractions like “belief,” and “religion,” as givens, in the first place. As a category, belief has since expanded beyond its religious remit to include commitments to secular moral ideologies as well. Vegetarianism is one such example of this; no longer simply denoting a meat-free diet, it has, for some, become a moral identity that merits the kinds of social protection that is typically afforded to religious identities. It is surely in part this conceptual plasticity that has allowed the term to prosper rather than recede in a context where Christianity itself is in decline, considering the term’s particular Christian pedigree (Asad 1993; Robbins 2007; Ruel 1982).

The other factor that has contributed to the resilience of “belief” is, in some ways, quite the reverse: this is the unforeseen expansion of Christianity, and especially Protestant evangelicalism outside of the West, over the last hundred years or so. Today, Christianity’s centre of gravity has shifted to the global South, and there is an entire scholarly field going by the name of “World Christianity” that is dedicated to tracking its movements and exploring its diverse cultural manifestations. It is in these places that the lexicon of “belief” in the Christian sense has received a new lease of life.

I offer these two initial observations—(a) that the category of “belief” is

secularized in the West when used self-referentially; and (b), that Christian affiliation in the global South is predominantly articulated in terms of “belief”—because of the predicaments they create for scholars of religion, who, rather ironically, have spent several decades trying to move away from the concept. Their note of caution has become so embedded in the field that some have suggested that “belief” ought to be abandoned entirely (famously, Needham 1972; and more recently, e.g. Rubenstein 2012; but this goes back even further in anthropology to, for example, Lienhardt 1961). I can personally attest to experiencing this distrustful attitude at work; an anonymous reviewer once suggested I remove any and all references to the term in an ethnographic account and replace them with examples of words uttered (what they “said” rather than what they “believed”).

There are many good reasons for these misgivings. For one thing, religious studies scholars have shown that a focus on belief has fostered an over emphasis on the cognitive or subjective dimensions of religious adherence at the expense of attention to its more material, social or political aspects. This was, in part, a consequence of the study of religions’ intellectual ancestry in Christian confessional theology, with its preoccupation with matters of doctrine, which the field remains keen to disentangle itself from. In the quest to redress this balance, research in the study of religions over the past few decades has undergone various “turns”—affective, material, ritual and so on (e.g., Bell 1992; Chidester 2018; Keane 2008; Rappaport 1999; Schaefer 2015).

Anthropologists have also pointed to the politics at play in the uneven application of the term “belief” to describe different cultural representations of reality. They have observed that westerners sometimes reserve “belief” for the description of non-western epistemologies, while categorising their own perspectives on reality, informed by theories of scientific empiricism for example, as “knowledge” (Lindquist and Coleman 2008; Needham 1972; Robbins 2007; Ruel 1982). This is also mirrored in the history of the discipline of anthropology itself; here, “the category of ‘religion’ has long stood for the general problem of apparently strange beliefs,” which as Webb Keane points out, is a legacy of its entanglement

in the European colonial project (Keane 2008, 111).

Ultimately, these habits are rooted in assumptions about what counts as “reality.” In most cultures, it is taken as a given that supernatural forces like deities, spirits and witchcraft are infused in the natural world. To put it more precisely, they are simply part of the same integrated reality. By contrast, the modern, western perspective tends to only recognize as “reality” the kinds of empirical phenomena that can be subject to measurement, experimentation, and calculation. As a result, they become objects of “knowledge,” and those which do not neatly fit this criterion become items of “belief”—more mystical, and less real (Needham 1972, 172–173; Pouillon 1982; cf. Lindquist and Coleman 2008). Bruno Latour has made this point in a characteristically poignant fashion:

Since the Moderns naturally have to come up with an explanation for the strangeness of a form of worship that cannot be justified objectively, they attribute to the savages a mental state that has internal rather than external references. As the wave of colonization advances, the world fills up with believers. A Modern is someone who believes that others believe. (Latour 2011, 43)

Because of these problems, belief has been denounced as not only a distortive concept which misapprehends the people and communities to whom it is applied, but also one that reflects and reinforces Christian and colonial ideological prejudices that are rooted in a range of category mistakes and problematic stereotypes about non-White peoples.

These critiques of “belief”—notwithstanding numerous others that I have not the space to rehash here—have, in sum, fostered much restraint surrounding its usage in the study of religions and especially in the anthropology of religion. Nevertheless, my two opening observations about the continued, even thriving social life of the concept of “belief” not only in the secular West, but also outside of it suggests that perhaps it is time for a critical reappraisal of the term. Parallel efforts in this vein are already well under way; anthropologists of Christianity, for example, have been pressed to develop new conceptual apparatus to make sense of the revival of the language of belief in recently converted Christian communities outside of the West, just when they had problematized the term

to the point of being ready to ditch it from their scholarly vocabulary, altogether (e.g., Chua 2011; Keller 2005; Kirsch 2004; Robbins 2003, 2007).

Here, I take up this invitation by offering some cursory reflections on the disconnect between the critical distance that scholars of religion have cultivated towards “belief,” and its ongoing currency in the I discourses of formerly colonized peoples, by considering a particular example that brings these issues into sharp relief. I have in mind a group of Nigerian Pentecostal Christians who not only describe their faith explicitly using the language of “belief,” but even aspire to be branded “fanatics” by outsiders on grounds of their unwavering commitments to beliefs that they boast are utterly “illogical.” I turn my attention to the treatment of belief we see at work in some of the sermons delivered by the leader of the church, which offers us a clue as to what is at stake in the usage and salience of this concept for this community.

I suggest that these African Christians have adopted the very epistemological antagonisms between “knowledge” and “belief,” or “seeing” and “believing,” that western, and especially colonial thought has constructed historically. However, by recasting African Christian belief as the seat of spiritual insight, they overturn rather than reinforce the power differential typically consolidated in this opposition. Belief becomes a term that carries epistemological authority, as it represents a set of deeper and more profound truths than those prized by secular scientific institutions. Finally, I move towards collapsing the distance between the self-described African Christian “fanatics” and those who critically analyse them, by pointing to ways that the parameters of “scientific knowledge”—at least, according to the modern, western framing—might be blurred a little.

A Megachurch with a Unique Reputation

Of all the Pentecostal congregations dominating the megachurch scene in southern Nigeria, Mountain of Fire and Miracles ministries (known as “MFM”), stands out for its unique reputation. The church was established in Lagos in 1989, providing an alternative to the Pentecostal Prosperity churches’ flamboyant aesthetic and optimistic pursuit of health and

wealth. These churches had soared in popularity in the region since the 1970s, the “Third Wave” of Pentecostal revival, but by the 1990s there emerged a renewed concern about demonic activity and altogether more foreboding sensibility among many evangelical Christians (not just those in Africa), about the spiritual condition of the world.

Mountain of Fire and Miracles responded to this anxiety by presenting a theology directed at exorcising the demonic spirits that are behind several cultural fronts, including African indigenous religions and Islam, for example, and none more so than western secularism. The church views the secular, liberal West as its primary spiritual and moral counterpoint, and a site of intense demonic activity. Church members often describe it as a place of great material riches in the fields of technology, medicine and so on—the home of scientific “knowledge”—yet also one of spiritual blindness or barrenness, as I have argued elsewhere (Richman 2021, 2022). The task of Christians, they say, is to take up the fight against the Devil and his legion of demons as “prayer warriors,” so that Christ can return and initiate the Kingdom of God on Earth. This is achieved through the ritual work of “deliverance,” which involves prolonged episodes of prayer and fasting and often culminate in demonic possession and expulsion. Overall, MFM promotes a more disciplinary, conservative, and ascetic approach to religious life and practice than many of the other Pentecostal churches in the region.

This is central to understanding its appeal. MFM’s trademark is a fixation with the transformative power of prayer, so much so that it hosts special meetings called “pray until something happens,” which involve continuous, uninterrupted prayers that make persistent demands of God to solve the petitioners’ problems. In keeping with the church’s characteristic use of militaristic language, they are typically known as “machine gun prayers,” because prayer is seen as a “weapon” that can be used to defeat the Devil, as well as to harass God into action (Richman 2020). Other prayers are addressed more directly at the negative spiritual forces they seek to eliminate: the church’s signature formula, which it is quite famous for, is “die!” as in “death to” witches and demons. Outside of the church, it is common to hear Nigerians chastise its prayer-style and say that the “death” chant is

easily confused with a curse. During my fieldwork, when I would tell Nigerians that I was doing research on MFM, they would often make a point of warning me about the church.¹ They would say that MFM goes “too far,” and that its obsession with fighting the Devil makes it lose sight of what can be pragmatically achieved in the world of the here and now.

Given the sting of these criticisms, one would be forgiven for assuming that the church is engaged in a never-ending public relations blitz to correct misperceptions and rectify its public image. After all, some of the differences between MFM and its counterparts are largely cosmetic, and their overall theological vision does not greatly differ from what is nowadays taught at other Nigerian Neo-Pentecostal churches. Nevertheless, rather than challenging this image, MFM’s reputational marginality has for members become something of a badge of pride. In a 2020 interview featured in the widely popular Nigerian daily newspaper, *Punch*, Dr Daniel Olukoya, the General Overseer and founder addressed the fact that, at least at the beginning, members of MFM were seen as “extremists,” “very strange,” and treated as “pariahs” (Okere 2020). At the same time, he also observed that it was this radicality that made them stand out; people had now come to “understand MFM to be the last resort when all else fails,” he said, and those responsible for levelling these critiques now themselves “employ the MFM prayer style.” Members usually echo this narrative. Amos, a well-dressed master’s student who had just moved from Lagos to the UK where we met, liked that at MFM they “don’t sugar coat it for you.” “At other churches,” he said, “you can do what you want. But it’s strict here and I like that. That’s what I need from a church.”

Mad Belief and the Life of Faith

The key to understanding why these Christians self-identify with, even revel in this public perception lies in large part in how they understand “belief,” and the importance they grant to it. In what follows, I am going to explore treatments of this concept from sermons delivered by Daniel Olukoya, the General Overseer, and discussions I had with church members

¹ I completed thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in branches of the church in Nigeria, the UK and the US in 2015, and 2017–2018.

about them. In the sermon, “The Madness of Faith,” Olukoya says:

If as a Christian, nobody has ever accused you of being a fanatic, it means that you are not yet serious with your Christian life. Anyone who is serious with his Christian life operates sometimes in a way that is not logical. If unbelievers call you a fanatic, you should rejoice for it means you are doing well. If the people of the world speak well of you, there is a problem... The life of faith goes beyond human logic and common sense. Abraham, the father of faith, would be described as a mad man if one looks at his faithfulness to God with human logic. The problem with most people is that they rely much on their brains and education, contrary to the case of men of God of old who were not as educated, yet they moved mountains for God because they believed His word in totality. When you come to God, you must forget whatever knowledge you have. (Olukoya 2011b)

Here, a series of parallels and contrasts are set up: on one side, there is knowledge; common sense; logic; education; brains, and so on. And on the other side sits belief; faith; madness and fanaticism. In this usage, and despite the Protestant-context, belief is not so much a cognitive stance derived from accepting a set of propositions and arguments, as it is a spiritual path in life that is steered by trust in God.

Accepting the logical truth of the Word of God is implicitly differentiated from the more important, ongoing, and all-encompassing process of “believing His word in totality.” Writing on evangelicals in the US, Omri Elisha makes a related observation, noting that for those Christians, belief also does not consistently “stress propositional assent” but is more akin to “broader theological ideals associated with faith,” where faith is a “lifelong spiritual journey of learning how to feel, act, and live in total accord with God’s will” (Elisha 2008, 57). In a similar vein, Thomas Kirsch suggests we can better understand the meaning of belief for Christians belonging to prophet-healing churches in southern Zambia by “shifting the focus from ‘belief’ as a stable and perpetual interior state” to “the practice of cyclically regenerating a condition of internalized ‘believing’” (Kirsch 2004, 700). These observations also speak to the treatment of belief at MFM, but here, a “life of faith” is further characterized as embodying the Word of God in such a radical way that makes the believer utterly illogical, and even appear insane. As such, the true Christian believer is

one who is a social outcast, dwelling on of the margins of society and perceived as strange by “most people.” “Knowledge” here is not the path to a life of faith, but instead seems to hinder or even distort it, as listeners are advised to “forget whatever knowledge” they have when they “come to God.”

In another sermon, Olukoya elaborates on this interpretation of faith by drawing on the story of the woman with the haemorrhage from Mark 5:25–34; here, he describes the kind of belief that was required for the healing as “simple” and “childlike,” and so devoid of “knowledge” or an academic education (Olukoya 2011a). The problem of “knowledge” is indeed a commonly heard refrain in the church; examining things “scientifically” and “logically” is constantly said to prevent people from exercising their faith (see also, for example, Olukoya 2009, 2011e, 2011c, 2011d). Proverbs 3:5, “trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not rely on your understanding” is often drawn on in support of this position.

“The madness of faith” sermon also introduces another contrast between faithful Christians, and “unbelievers,” or the “people of the world.” Here, we see an attempt to align the epistemic oppositions of “knowledge” and “belief” with another well-rehearsed antithesis; the secular world, and the faith of true Christians. The difference here, however, (and what I think makes this example interesting) is that these antitheses are not being advanced by westerners, but by those against whom they are typically leveraged. The realm of “belief” is represented as Africa, (or at least a particular imagining of it, i.e., a contemporary Christian Africa), and by Africans themselves. This is not a simple, uncritical internalization of colonialist-era hierarchies of epistemological value, or even a straightforward regurgitation of classic Pentecostal anti-intellectualism. More widely, the church upholds a theology of spiritual exceptionalism which maintains that Africa is the locus of divine blessing and endowed with the special task of global re-evangelization, as I have argued elsewhere (Richman 2022).

In these teachings on belief, Africa also becomes a place of spiritual insight, where “faith” and “belief” prevail over and against western secular “knowledge.”

In effect, the category of “belief” is rehabilitated, and the power differential embedded in these geographies is overturned. Through this subversion, true “belief” becomes in and of itself a kind of gnosis, a (superior) form of knowledge. It denotes the capacity to see what cannot be seen from the centre, the mainstream, or the seat of power—a shifting referent that most widely represents western epistemic dominance when viewed on a global scale, but can also represent other Nigerian places of worship (e.g. Pentecostal/African Independent/Catholic etc.,) on a local scale.

Believing is Seeing

Another argument made to support the claim that knowledge is of limited use when it comes to matters of faith emerges in discussions about the role of experience in generating and confirming one’s beliefs. At MFM, belief is thought to determine the nature and quality of experience. Consider the relationship between belief and experience in the following story, different iterations of which feature in Olukoya’s sermons and writings, and which was told to me numerous times by MFM members during my fieldwork: a scientist who did not believe in miracles came along to a crusade or revival service out of curiosity, where he was told miracles would happen. The service did not disappoint; many healings occurred, and many people were delivered. Nevertheless, nothing happened where the scientist was sitting. And so, the following day he decided to swap seats and chose a spot where miracles were witnessed on the night prior.

But the movements of God simply shifted around him, and so once again he did not see anything. Naturally, the scientist concluded that the service, MFM, and Christianity in general was a sham, and that miracles were not real. But what he did not realize was that it was his own pre-emptive scepticism and close-mindedness that precluded him from seeing anything in the first place. As a result, both the scientist and the believers left the revivals with their original—and opposing—beliefs only further reinforced (e.g. Olukoya 2011b).

In the story, the divergence in outlook between the scientist and the Christian worshippers is not down to the fact that one party places value

in experience, seeing truth to emerge from it, and the other does not. Nor is it because the believers accept the Word of God as “fact,” but the scientist does not, accepting instead an altogether different set of propositions. Rather, what is striking is that both the believers and the sceptic appeal to a kind of empirical method in qualifying their beliefs. Both claim on the grounds of experience—i.e., on empirical evidence—to have witnessed or not witnessed miracles.² The paradox of “belief” that the story gestures towards is that it is something that begets its own conclusions; it determines the kind of experience that a person has access to. As a result, just as the scientist “saw” nothing, a mere hoax because he believed it to be one, the Christians, in turn, “saw” miracles, as they believed they would.

At the same time, although seeing miracles might seem like something that happens to a person, the kind of belief that makes them possible in the first place cannot be taken as a given. Belief, Olukoya often cautions, is not merely a “feeling” that you either have or don’t have. Instead, it must be cultivated by performing a type of spiritual labour. In several bible study discussions, for example, we were taught about the importance of “activating your faith” by visualizing yourself flourishing in the way God intends for you, confessing your healing, and being obedient to God’s word by refusing to allow yourself to “analyse” your faith. The biblical figure of Joshua, for example, did the work of encircling Jericho and it was this that made God bring down the city walls (Joshua 5–6). In essence, activating your faith is the work of attuning your spiritual “antenna” so that it can become receptive to God’s grace. Grace is, after all, offered to everyone, Christians and “scientists,” but in order to receive it, you must consciously work to believe (see also Luhrmann 2012). In short, “seeing”—represented in the anecdote by witnessing a healing miracle—may feel like a passive experience, but it is conditional upon the presence of faith or “belief,” which is something that requires cultivation.

Overall, the argument that “belief” is a prerequisite to “sight” at MFM has a political dimension to it; it attempts to upend the axiom of the

² For an interesting set of observations about the empirical quality of both African traditional thought and western science, see Robin Horton’s classic essay on this topic (Horton 1967, especially p. 58).

western sceptical scientist, that “seeing is believing.” MFM’s claim is not simply that what one believes determines what one sees, but also that those who maintain the reverse are ignorant, or at least in denial, about how their own beliefs also determine what they see (or do not see) too. Whereas the Christian proudly proclaims his belief, boasting that he is not only a “believer” but even a “fanatic,” the sceptical scientist is under the illusion that he has no beliefs, and sees things for what they “really” are—when really, he possesses his own beliefs that he is largely oblivious to. He views his own doubt as a lack of belief, when it is more precisely a belief in “unbelief.” In short, “Seeing” is contingent upon “believing” something or other for us all, whether we recognize it or not.

Science, Knowledge and Method

All this might leave one with the impression that the church is anti-science and perhaps even that it is wary of medical interventions, preferring instead to put faith in “supernatural” or “miracle” healings. But this would be misleading, as the situation is far more complex (and sometimes quite contradictory). I will only go into this briefly for the sake of space. Anyone who has perused the church’s many forms of media communication would likely have noticed that they enjoy overtly appropriating scientific vocabulary: they refer to Satan’s “laboratory,” and call their bible study sessions, “spiritual hospital,” for example. Olukoya often teaches that “germs” are controlled by Satan, and that whilst healing, or deliverance, ultimately comes from God, God can also act through doctors to cure sickness. At a branch of MFM in Ibadan, Nigeria, where I did fieldwork, the church had a small medical clinic on site equipped with some supplies and staffed by volunteer medics wearing MFM-branded lab coats. They stepped in to offer immediate care if worshippers fell sick during services. During one sermon I attended, the pastor preached about how scientific research has demonstrated that prayer itself is an effective form of medicine. Indeed, “Doctor” Olukoya himself, as he is known, earned a PhD in Microbiology at the University of Reading and worked as an academic researcher in Lagos up until the early days of his ministry, a fact that is not lost on his members and readership.

More to the point, however, is that strictly speaking, it is not the scientific method but rather one particular construction of “science” that the church resists. This is a treatment of science that insists that the results of a carefully controlled experiment (what one can observe, or “see”) cannot be determined by the beliefs of the researcher conducting it. It is also a vision of “Science” (with a capital “S”) that is overconfident in the answers it obtains and leaves no room for God. By taking umbrage with science as it is represented institutionally, they are able to maintain that the scientific, empirical method is still compatible with belief in God and with miracles.

And they are, after all, not wrong in many of their observations. It is true, for example, that an optimistic outlook (what one might call “faith”) does improve the outcome of cancer patients. Whether prayer works in the way believers insist it does, by provoking God into intervening, or whether it affords the patient the drive and “faith” they need to get well—or whether in fact it works in both these ways at once—is something that might never be “known” through the methods of science. After all, its own criteria for knowledge does not admit the role of supernatural causality.

Indeed, understandings of science post-Enlightenment tend to admit the limitations of the empirical process of observation more readily, as well as take a more humble view of the role of observers themselves, with all their foibles and fallibilities (Feyerabend 2010; Kuhn 1996; Lakatos 1978). Emerging from quantum mechanics, for example, has been the recognition that the presence of an observer can determine the outcome of an experiment (such as in the double-split experiment), and this truth has been acknowledged more broadly across the scientific disciplines in recent years. In the social sciences, the labelling of a similar phenomenon known as epistemic “positionality” has recently come to the fore; the idea that who one is, and where one sits at the table (one’s “position”) affects what one sees and the kinds of knowledge available to you, in a way not dissimilar to how the scientist attending the revival’s beliefs also precluded him from making certain kinds of observations.

An especially relevant example for our discussion can be found in the anthropology of Christianity, which has also recently been acknowledging the ways that its own implicit assumptions about knowledge and the nature of reality determine the kinds of the inferences it can make about the peoples it studies. The “problem of belief,” as it has come to be known, denotes the seemingly large distance that separates anthropologist’s own, oftentimes secular beliefs from those held by their Christian interlocutors (Engelke 2002; Harding 1991; Kapferer 2001). In the wake of these discussions, Charles Stewart and others have suggested that secularism might even serve as an “impediment” to anthropological understandings of religion, for example (Stewart 2001). One outcome has been to develop forms of anthropology that are “theologically engaged” (Fountain and Lau 2013; Lemons 2018; Richman 2019; Robbins 2006, 2020). Some see this as an invitation to produce anthropological analyses that are better informed theologically; others, as a call to cultivate a kind of methodological openness to spiritual realities (Ewing 1994; Robbins 2007). Either way, that a lack of spiritual belief might serve as an imposition to not only experiencing, but truly understanding religious faith is something apparently recognized by both our Nigerian Pentecostal Christians as well as by practitioners of the seemingly “secular” science of anthropology.

Concluding Remarks

In response to some of the same conundrums about belief raised here, anthropologists Galina Lindquist and Simon Coleman have suggested we write “against belief,” rather than “with” it, in hope this will destabilize the category (Lindquist and Coleman 2008). But I wonder whether this still might set up too great a distance between unbelieving scholars and their believing Christian research subjects—people who share (at least parts of) our epistemic framework, and whose understandings of “belief” have been shaped by many of the same historical processes. For instance, for the African Christians I have discussed here, “belief” is reimagined as an instrument with which to assert epistemological superiority over and against those who have been known historically to use it as a stick to bash them with. It can be read as a challenge to western epistemic dominance on at least two fronts: it is an implicitly postcolonial

manoeuvre by a formerly colonized peoples, as well as a policy of Christian spiritual defiance towards those who claim to hold no beliefs. Belief's operations are politicized, rather than propositional. And its usage encodes a story of the term's historical entanglement in global epistemological politics, a politics that anthropology has itself participated in—first, as an arm of the colonial project, second, through its genealogical ties to Christianity (Cannell 2005) and third, with its contemporary secular assumptions.

Rather than writing “against” belief, then, perhaps the way forward is to write about belief, but to write about both ours’ and our interlocutors’ at the same time, side by side. That way, we can more fully recognize how our reasons for wishing to drop the term are directly linked to the reasons why others want to hold on to them. In essence, by thinking reflexively about our own beliefs, we can better understand the beliefs of others, and see more clearly what they hold in common instead of what sets them apart.

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