

VIEWPOINT

BELIEVING IN BELIEF: GIBBON, LATOUR AND THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF RELIGION*

I

Social historians usually grapple with religion within a specific historical and cultural context bounded by place and period: we might study the spread of early Islam, the Reformation, radical Christian sects in early America, the rise of charismatic Christianity in postcolonial Africa, and so forth. We thus tend not to concern ourselves with overarching questions of definition, but to engage with the experiences of people and the wider dynamics that prompt or constrain them, framed by a somewhat accepted conceptual setting. Nonetheless, there have been occasions on which historians have noted and indeed contributed to a long-standing discussion within anthropology and religious studies over the problem of defining ‘religion’; that is, whether any transhistorical and transcultural phenomena can be said to constitute a comparable core of ‘religion’ for all societies, or whether ‘religion’ is always a conceptual frame arising from a Western Christian perspective that brings with it some unintended assumptions about its overall ambit and its

* This article began its life as an inaugural lecture at Cambridge delivered in 2018, and I benefited considerably from the reaction of various colleagues and friends. In further revising the piece, I am deeply indebted to conversations (real and virtual) with Andrew Preston, Ethan Shagan and Joseph Streeter. A revised version was presented in Nuremberg in 2019, and I am very grateful to Anselm Schubert for his discussion; it was also subject to extensive interrogation at the History departmental seminar at Johns Hopkins University in 2021, and I am similarly grateful to colleagues there for their various thoughts and comments, in particular Jean Hébrard and Anne Lester.

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inner dynamics.¹ In an important and influential intervention, the anthropologist Talal Asad, reflecting in part on the nature of medieval Christianity, emphasized that one should not take modern ‘privatized’ Western Christianity as the paradigmatic example of what constitutes ‘religion’, and argued that one must attend to how power, in a given historical-social context, is innately intertwined with how religion (in a particular form) is constructed and constituted.² One of the most recent engagements with this area, by a scholar of early Christianity, similarly argues the case that religion as we now understand it, as a private and interiorized experience, is a modern construct with little analytical purchase for understanding the pre-modern world.³ Yet the word itself proves hard to relinquish, so embedded is it in our studies; we can scarify it with quotation marks, ‘religion’, but may have to accept that it is a piece of mental furniture we cannot do without, one we might at best retain with a sense of provisionality, open to revision and refinement.⁴

This article suggests that there is a component part of the discussion around religion to which social historians could and should pay greater attention (here, once again, catching up on longer-standing discussion among our anthropologist colleagues): the issue of what we mean by ‘belief’. It is a term upon which we frequently rely, and indeed often qualify (‘her fervent belief’, ‘lacking in any firm belief’, ‘a true believer’) as part of our means of explaining particular events or behaviours;

¹ In a very wide field, see, for example, Jonathan Z. Smith, “‘Religion’ and “Religious Studies”: No Difference at All”, *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, lxxi, 2–3 (1988); Derek R. Peterson and Darren Walhof (eds.), *The Invention of Religion: Rethinking Belief in Politics and History* (New Brunswick, 2002). For a key early engagement by a social historian, see Patrick Collinson, ‘Religion, Society, and the Historian’, *Journal of Religious History*, xxiii, 2 (1999). For an overview of the issues for historians, see Christine Caldwell Ames, ‘Medieval Religious, Religions, Religion’, *History Compass*, x, 4 (2012).

² Talal Asad, ‘Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz’, *Man*, new ser., xviii, 2 (1983), revised in Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore, 1993). It is important to note that Asad’s understanding of power as a discursive field is fundamentally Foucauldian, and not reducible to issues of hierarchy and domination.

³ Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven, 2013).

⁴ Thus, see *ibid.*, 154–9. See similarly, in an otherwise rather problematic critique, Ivan Strenski, ‘Talal Asad’s “Religion” Trouble and a Way Out’, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, xxii, 2 (2010).

and it is also another term which we tend not to question. At its worst, this can lead the historian to treat belief either as simply the successful propagation of a theological programme to a group of followers or (its crudely materialist mirror state) as a form of false consciousness, an unreflective, pathological credulity, most often associated with ‘the masses’. Often it is also treated as if it were a kind of binary state or quality, fixed in one particular position for any given historical individual, either present or absent within their character. For the most part we simply take it for granted as one of the facets of human society that helps us to craft a wider explanation for why people do things and why stuff happens: a classic ‘black box’, known to us simply in terms of inputs and outputs.⁵

However, as noted, the nature of belief is something with which anthropologists and others have long grappled. While scholarly reflection goes back at least to William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), Rodney Needham’s *Belief, Language and Experience* (1972) is a fundamental point of reference for more recent discussion.⁶ Needham, engaging with Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophical reflections on what it means to say one ‘believes’ something, argued that ‘belief’ was not a translatable concept across cultures, and that there was no means by which an anthropologist could get beyond the linguistic expression of apparent beliefs to any clear ‘inner state’.⁷ It should be noted that Wittgenstein was specifically interested not in what we will have to call, however problematically, ‘religious belief’ but in how all kinds of ‘belief’ words operate more generally in the language games that he saw

⁵ The black-box metaphor has mainly been used in social studies of science, but clearly has a wider applicability regarding how we construct our arguments and analyses. For an influential early example, see Trevor J. Pinch and Wiebe E. Bijker, ‘The Social Construction of Facts and Artefacts: or, How the Sociology of Science and the Sociology of Technology Might Benefit Each Other’, *Social Studies of Science*, xiv, 3 (1984).

⁶ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London, 1902), particularly lectures 3, 8, 9; Rodney Needham, *Belief, Language and Experience* (Oxford, 1972).

⁷ Needham, *Belief, Language and Experience*; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, i, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, ii, ed. G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, trans. C. G. Luckhardt and M. A. E. Aue (Oxford, 1980). Joseph Streeter has convincingly argued that Needham systematically misunderstood and indeed essentially reversed Wittgenstein’s position: Joseph Streeter, ‘Should We Worry about Belief?’, *Anthropological Theory*, xx, 2 (2020).

as constitutive of our experience of the world. Although Needham's starting point was the impossibility, when talking with a Penan tribesperson, of formulating a comprehensible phrase along the lines of 'I believe in god' or 'a god' (the deities being so obviously present that it would be something like saying 'I believe in that house'), across the course of his book he similarly presents the issue as fundamentally about culture in general, not specifically that which we might mark out as 'religion'.⁸ His work has subsequently prompted a number of anthropologists to advise abandoning the concept of belief, and to refrain from ascribing 'beliefs', in the sense of interiorly held governing conceptions, to their native informants, on the grounds that 'belief' is another non-translatable Western concept. Others have demurred, arguing that external actions offer sufficient warrant for talking about 'beliefs', in the sense of commonly held propositional tenets, without having to worry about inaccessible 'interior psychological states'.⁹

When focused more specifically on religion, subsequent discussions have led some to draw a distinction — possibly helpful at least heuristically — between 'belief that' and 'belief in'; that is, between recognition of and adherence to propositional tenets of faith ('belief that') and what we might provisionally gloss as a spiritual trust in or transformative allegiance to something or someone ('belief in').¹⁰ Central to these discussions is a desire not simply to assume that 'belief' implies (as is understood to be the case in modern Western Christianity in particular) an interior cognitive state, but to entertain the possibility of seeing belief as 'a constituting activity in the world', innately connected to other aspects of material, cultural and emotional existence.¹¹

⁸ Both 'religion' and 'belief' can in each instance be assumed to retain scare quotes throughout the article, but after this paragraph we will avoid cluttering the pages by actually inserting them except where they are particularly needed for clarity.

⁹ Martin Southwold, 'Religious Belief', *Man*, new ser., xiv, 4 (1979). For a very nuanced discussion, which emphasizes the importance of not conceiving any cultural system as static and the importance of considering the experience of religious conversion, see Joel Robbins, 'Continuity Thinking and the Problem of Christian Culture: Belief, Time, and the Anthropology of Christianity', *Current Anthropology*, xlviii, 1 (2007).

¹⁰ Noted in Malcolm Ruel, 'Christians as Believers', in J. Davis (ed.), *Religious Organization and Religious Experience* (London, 1982).

¹¹ Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 47.

It should be noted that some historians have previously asked what the term ‘belief’ might mean in a previous age or culture. For example, some decades ago both Jean Wirth and Jean-Claude Schmitt suggested that in the European Middle Ages we might see Christian authorities’ understanding of belief to be essentially as a form of allegiance, homologically similar (or perhaps even directly affiliated) with the strong social bonds understood to pertain to ‘feudal’ relations between king and lords, or lords and their subordinates. Thus, believers subjugate their will and judgement to a higher power, and unbelievers (*infideles* in Latin) are those who are unfaithful, breaking trust with God and their superiors: all of this, it should be noted, in terms of how belief is conceptualized by Christian authority.¹² Around the same time, the scholar of religious studies Wilfred Cantwell Smith, via rather thinner and more problematic historical research, took a similar but more expansive line, arguing that the propositional content of religious belief was not important to pre-modern Christianity; if taken to an extreme, a fairly bizarre proposition for anyone who has actually studied such periods, but one which has spurred further anthropological reflection.¹³

More recently and more productively, Ian Forrest has considered both Christian conceptualizations of belief and the social dynamics of trustworthiness in a model of social-historical inquiry.¹⁴ Addressing a greater span of time and with

¹² Jean Wirth, ‘La Naissance du concept de croyance (XII^e–XVII^e siècles)’, *Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance*, xlv, 1 (1983); Jean-Claude Schmitt, ‘Du bon usage du “Credo”’, in *Faire croire: modalités de la diffusion et de la réception des messages religieux du XII^e au XV^e siècle* (Rome, 1981). In his later work, Schmitt clearly does not limit his analytical sense of belief to this framework, and indeed presents a nuanced sense of belief as active, ongoing and potentially fragile, a view which has influenced my own discussion here. See, for example, Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages: The Living and the Dead in Medieval Society*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago, 1998), 7: ‘Belief is a never-completed activity, one that is precarious, always questioned, and inseparable from recurrences of doubt’.

¹³ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Belief and History* (Charlottesville, 1977); Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton, 1979); discussed and elaborated in Walter Van Herck, ‘Wilfred Cantwell Smith on the History of “Religion” and “Belief”’, in Stijn Latré, Walter Van Herck and Guido Vanheeswijck (eds.), *Radical Secularization? An Inquiry into the Religious Roots of Secular Culture* (New York, 2015). See, however, trenchant comment by Streeter (‘Should We Worry about Belief?’, 153 n. 12), pointing out that Smith’s position would make the considerable Christian concern over heresy in late antiquity utterly inexplicable.

¹⁴ Ian Forrest, *Trustworthy Men: How Inequality and Faith Made the Medieval Church* (Princeton, 2018), ch. 1.

considerable elan and analytical nuance, Ethan Shagan has proposed that the Reformation brought a fundamental shift in the understanding and thus nature of belief in western Europe, as Protestantism swept away, among other things, the medieval concept of 'implicit belief' (the idea that the majority of lay people believed well enough, *impliciter*, if they conformed outwardly and could recite the Creed, Paternoster and Ave Maria) and made belief into a particularly demanding and interiorized act. The tensions contained therein, however, led to a subsequent softening in later centuries, giving us eventually the predominant modern sense of belief as what Shagan calls 'sovereign judgement'.¹⁵ While the earlier attempts by Wirth and Schmitt primarily focused their historical attention on how belief has been discussed in the abstract by authority, Shagan is interested in how we should see belief changing for ordinary people, though his project still ultimately retains a focus on the *concept* of belief (necessary, no doubt, for the pursuit of his *longue durée* study and its wider implications), rather than pursuing a sustained analysis of the nature of the acts, manifestations, feelings, experiences of ordinary people that are understood to constitute 'belief' (though these latter are probably what matter most to social historians).

In what follows this article explores how, as a social historian (and in my own case, a social historian of the Christian Middle Ages), one might consider belief. It does so via specific examples drawn from my research into Christianity in southern France from the eleventh to the fourteenth century, and with reference to two influential later authors, chosen because they help to identify fundamental elements of debate, and because both at points discuss their own personal experiences of Christian belief: the eighteenth-century writer Edward Gibbon and the contemporary French theorist Bruno Latour. Gibbon has bequeathed to us a particular way of looking at religious credulity as the opposite of Reason and thus as a threat to civilization, a view which tends to recur in current debate. He was not unique in his perspective on early Christianity, but the narrative frame and accompanying ideas about religion he passed on have been markedly influential, and thus he also

¹⁵ Ethan H. Shagan, *The Birth of Modern Belief: Faith and Judgment from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment* (Princeton, 2018).

stands in for a wider intellectual inheritance in the West. Latour, meanwhile, has become a key theorist in recent years for archaeologists, social scientists and some historians: an anthropologist and philosopher who has studied the construction of scientific knowledge in the laboratory, describing this as arising from a network of actors which included non-human elements such as equipment and the organisms of study.¹⁶ Across his work he has repeatedly argued that ‘we have never been modern’ in the ways in which we imagine ourselves to be: that the claims of modernity to have transcended earlier, primitive forms of knowledge involve misrecognition of both other cultures and contemporary Western society.¹⁷ In recent years Latour has written provocatively about religion from the perspective of his own Catholic faith, partly as an implicit engagement with other anthropological argument, but largely as a means of addressing the recurrent notion of conflict between Science and Religion. Latour has repeatedly argued that we ‘moderns’ mistakenly ‘believe in belief’, believe in other people’s *credulity* that is, as a simplistic account of faith as automatic, unreflective and absolute; and he suggests that we need a better understanding of what people do when they engage in religion, or, as he puts it, when they give voice to ‘religious speech’.

II

We shall return to these conceptual issues below, but I want to begin with a story from the central Middle Ages, one which allows us to think about the nature of medieval Christianity and the belief it involves. The story comes from the ‘*Translatio et miraculi Sancti Viviani*’, an eleventh-century manuscript, albeit one purporting to recount deeds performed over a hundred years earlier. Haigmar, abbot of a monastery at Figeac in southern France, had determined that what his foundation needed for its glory and protection was some holy relics. Consequently, when he was on a visit to the distant town of Saintes, he had one of his men pretend to be possessed by a demon and thus gain access to the shrine of the local saint,

¹⁶ Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Milton Keynes, 1987); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford, 2005).

¹⁷ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA, 1993).

Vivian, a bishop from the early centuries of the Church. Once within the shrine, the abbot's other men shouted out that the town was under attack by Norman raiders, prompting the locals to rush out to defend themselves. The men of Figeac then broke into the unguarded tomb and stole the saint's bones, carrying them back east to their own lands. As they arrived home in their diocese, the abbot sent messengers to tell the people of the region to congregate, to witness this great *translatio* (the 'translation', or reburial, of holy bones). This prompted 'an infinite multitude of clergy and people, carrying candles and crosses, to come to that place, and . . . with great rejoicing and jubilant hymns the relics of the saints were borne by them and made to be carried to the appointed locale'. As they thus processed, a miracle occurred along the way: a little old lady who had long been blind had her sight restored. The manuscript records that once the bones had been deposited in the monastery, further healing miracles took place; and, moreover, that later, on important occasions, the relics were taken in procession to other public places in a *maiestas* (a highly decorated reliquary bust in the personified form of the saint), where they sometimes performed additional wonders.¹⁸

This is not a tremendously unusual tale. Even the theft of the saint's bones is something we find paralleled in other narratives of the same period.¹⁹ The worship of saints, their ability to perform miracles (most of all, healing miracles) and their public presence drawing great crowds of the faithful, are all familiar. The notably personified reliquary busts are a particular feature of southern French piety in this period, but, of course, shrines, reliquaries and statues of saints are found throughout medieval Christianity, saints being invoked both by individuals as miraculous intercessors and by monastic and civic communities as more constant protectors.²⁰

¹⁸ 'Translatio et miraculi Sancti Viviani Episcopi in coenobium Figiacense et ejusdem ibidem miracula ex cod. Parisino lat. 2627', *Analecta Bollandiana*, viii (1889), 258–61.

¹⁹ Patrick J. Geary, *Furta sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages*, revised edn (Princeton, 1991). The incident described here is briefly mentioned in chapter 4 (St Vivian designated by his alternative name of St Bibanus).

²⁰ Within a vast literature, see, for example, Diana Webb, *Patrons and Defenders: The Saints in the Italian City-States* (London, 1996); Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton, 2013), particularly chs. 7 and 9.

The combination of saintly image, communal worship and a collective investment in the miraculous could be seen as one of the defining features of pre-Reformation Christianity. Gibbon, writing about the Church in late antiquity, suggested that the people of the time had an ‘unresisting softness of temper’ which led ‘the most credulous . . . to enter into a society which asserted an actual claim of miraculous powers. The primitive Christians perpetually trod on mystic ground, and their minds were exercised by the habits of believing the most extraordinary events’.²¹ Here, we should note, Gibbon was not only emphasizing the predominance of Christian doctrine (‘belief that’) but asserting something about the *mode* of believing (‘belief in’). From these beginnings, he claimed, the medieval Church further amplified this ‘superstitious’ foundation of faith: ‘the fabric of superstition which [the bishops] had erected . . . defied the feeble efforts of reason’ until later ages came to challenge its truths in the name of reform.²² During the Middle Ages, fed by the ‘savage fanaticism’ of the crusades, ‘The active spirit of the Latins [that is, western European Christians] preyed on the vitals of their reason and religion; and, if the ninth and tenth centuries were the times of darkness, the thirteenth and fourteenth were the age of absurdity and fable’.²³

Gibbon was famously dismayed by medieval Christianity. An early convert to, and then away from, Catholicism, he saw the ‘superstitious’ appeal of the faith as a fundamental element in the Roman empire’s ‘fall’.²⁴ He was by no means the only writer of the eighteenth century to present us with a disapproving account of the medieval past; but his particular vision of credulous religion as antithetical to the forces of civilization, rooted in an incapacity of Reason, has been notably effective in shaping a modern notion of faith. ‘Religion is on the rise, as are the numbers of believers in astrology and conspiracy theories, and average IQ is falling’, all of this showing we are ‘on the cusp of a new dark ages’; this from a contributor to the *London Review of Books* in 2017, the implicit intellectual debt passing

²¹ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury, 7 vols. (London, 1896–14), ii, 299.

²² *Ibid.*, iii, 87.

²³ *Ibid.*, xi, 41.

²⁴ For a nuanced account of Gibbon’s relation with religious belief, see B. W. Young, ‘“Scepticism in Excess”: Gibbon and Eighteenth-Century Christianity’, *Historical Journal*, xli, 1 (1998).

unnoticed.²⁵ The point about this conception of religion is the emphasis it places upon unquestioning, burgeoning credulity, a strong example of ‘believing in belief’.

Nonetheless, some of the same features that appalled Gibbon have been seen more positively by other modern commentators. For them, the idea of a medieval ‘age of faith’ is both a comfort and a reminder of what the modern world has lost: not a foolishly superstitious age, but one open to a directness of religious experience and shared culture that modernity cannot sustain.²⁶ Recent among this number, if somewhat allusive in his medievalist references, is Bruno Latour. In a short and rather extraordinary book he published in French in 2002, translated subsequently as *Rejoicing: or, The Torment of Religious Speech*, Latour grapples with what religious expression actually is, concerned in particular to distinguish it in its very nature from scientific language and practice (a field he has studied in considerable detail).²⁷ Inter alia, in his tormented attempts to communicate a form of faith that does not have to fight with science, he turns to the medieval: to ‘the little church of Montcombroux, built in the year 1000’ where he tries to recite the words of the Catholic Creed: ‘to recite the same words in the silence of a country church as those words which, a thousand years earlier, stirred the Bourbonnais peasants who had come to protect their harvests during Rogation time’.²⁸ In ‘ancient times’ (by which we can probably take him to mean both pagan antiquity and the Middle Ages) Latour suggests that there was no meaningful distinction between those who believed and those who did not: ‘The presence of divinities was obvious in the air or the soil. They formed the common fabric of people’s lives, the primary material of all rituals, the indisputable reference point of all existence, the ordinary fodder of all conversation’.²⁹

²⁵ Nick Richardson, ‘From a Distant Solar System’, *London Review of Books*, xxxix, 24 (14 Dec. 2017).

²⁶ For another recent example, see Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA, 2012). Compare comments in Sarah Shortall, ‘Lost in Translation: Religion and the Writing of History’, *Modern Intellectual History*, xiii, 1 (2016).

²⁷ Bruno Latour, *Jubiler: ou, Les Tourments de la parole religieuse* (Paris, 2002), trans. Julie Rose as *Rejoicing: or, The Torments of Religious Speech* (Cambridge, 2013).

²⁸ Latour, *Rejoicing*, trans. Rose, 11–12.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

The initial point is to notice how much Latour shares with Gibbon, albeit with the scale of values inverted, that in a simpler age, less protected from the brute exigencies of existence, people had a more direct and unmediated link to faith: that which was for Gibbon a ‘softness of temper’ rendering them credulously impressionable, but which for Latour is a sign of a shared experience in the common fabric of life. In such an age of faith, ‘belief that’ and ‘belief in’ are seamlessly conjoined.

Thus two parallel modern investments in ‘the medieval’. But let us at this moment return to the ‘*Translatio et miraculi Sancti Viviani*’, and a further passage in the story which may complicate our sense of medieval belief. It occurs at the point in the narrative when the relics were processing with full pomp through the countryside, on their way to Figeac. Two peasants, a husband and wife, were working in the fields. The ‘little old woman’ (*muliercula*), seeing the opulence of the people, hearing the harmony of the music, said to her husband: ‘For a little while, dearest one, cease from this labour, because a great tumult of people singing praising songs is carrying the relics of saints down that road; we ought to hurry to that, with all devotion’. But the husband was unimpressed. ‘Get back quickly to your work’, he said. ‘What you’re seeing is probably just the bones of some dead person or other, gathered together to be venerated by the stupid beliefs (*opinio*) of the people’.³⁰

It is important to note, for those who have not previously encountered examples of medieval scepticism and doubt, that this peasant husband is by no means a solitary figure. He turns up in this particular narrative because his unbelief is subsequently punished by the saint he has insulted: he is afflicted by seizures which shake him violently from ‘his teeth to his toenails’ (*dentibus ac unguis lamiando*), until brought to the shrine to be cured, at which point he repents. So he ends up as a believer. But he quite

³⁰ ‘*Translatio et miraculi Sancti Viviani*’, 261: ‘*Rustici enim cujusdam muliercula ut tantam vidit populorum opulentiam tantamque harmoniae audivit symphoniam, ad virum suum agriculturam exercentem festina cucurrit. Cui, jam paene properando exanimata, intulit: “Cessa paululum, carissime, ab hoc labore, quia ingens turba sanctarum reliquiarum monimenta per illum callem defert cum laudum modulamine: ad quas etiam et nos properare oportet summa devotione”*. Cujus monita ille bestius indigne ferens, iturum sese non solum denegavit, sed etiam convicia ingerendo sanctas reliquias irrisit: “Revertere, inquam, velociter ad tua utilia; quoniam illud quod conspicias, fortasse ossa sunt alicujus mortui, quae collecta in unum stulta venerator opinio populi”’.

clearly figures before that as one who does *not* believe: who, *contra* Latour, sees that there is a choice to be made about whether something is or is not present, and who apparently lacks the ‘softness of temper’, *contra* Gibbon, to be literally ‘impressed’ by the beliefs of others. As Susan Reynolds pointed out some decades ago, many saints’ lives and miracle collections include such doubters and scoffers; and, as other historians, myself included, have gone on to demonstrate from a variety of sources, one can continue to multiply examples, finding not only those who do not believe in saints, but those who do not believe in the Eucharist, in hell, in the afterlife in general, in the Resurrection, in God’s creation of the world, in the immortality of the soul.³¹

What, then, does the fact of medieval unbelievers do to our received ideas about religion? My own project has not been to search out medieval ‘atheists’ as heroic precursors to the later champions of Reason. Christianity clearly mattered greatly in the medieval period, and the challenge presented by people like this disgruntled peasant was not one of a unified and self-conscious discourse seeking to topple religion. There is no reason, in this sense, to attempt to claim the Middle Ages as ‘modern’.³² What

³¹ Susan Reynolds, ‘Social Mentalities and the Case of Medieval Scepticism’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., i (1991). Within a growing field of discussion one may note: A. Murray, ‘Piety and Impiety in Thirteenth-Century Italy’, in G. J. Cuming and Derek Baker (eds.), *Popular Belief and Practice, Studies in Church History*, 8 (Cambridge, 1972); Alexander Murray, ‘The Epicureans’, in Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (eds.), *Intellectuals and Writers in Fourteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, 1986); John Edwards, ‘Religious Faith and Doubt in Late Medieval Spain: Soria, circa 1450–1500’, *Past and Present*, no. 120 (Aug. 1988); John H. Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe* (London, 2005); John H. Arnold, ‘The Materiality of Unbelief in Late Medieval England’, in Sophie Page (ed.), *The Unorthodox Imagination in Late Medieval Britain* (Manchester, 2010); Dorothea Weltecke, ‘Beyond Religion: On the Lack of Belief during the Central and Late Middle Ages’, in Heike Bock, Jörg Feuchter and Michi Knecht (eds.), *Religion and its Other: Secular and Sacred Concepts and Practices in Interaction* (Frankfurt, 2008); Dorothea Weltecke, ‘Der Narr spricht: es ist kein Gott’: *Atheismus, Unglauben und Glaubenszweifel vom 12. Jahrhundert bis zur Neuzeit* (Frankfurt, 2010); Dorothea Weltecke, ‘Doubts and the Absence of Faith’, in John H. Arnold (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Christianity* (Oxford, 2014); Frances Andrews, Charlotte Methuen and Andrew Spicer (eds.), *Doubting Christianity: The Church and Doubt*, *Studies in Church History*, 52 (Cambridge, 2016). Other recent studies have addressed scepticism and doubt in regard to medieval philosophy and intellectual culture: see, for example, Sabina Flanagan, *Doubt in an Age of Faith: Uncertainty in the Long Twelfth Century* (Turnhout, 2008); Dallas D. Denery II, Kantik Ghosh and Nicolette Zeeman (eds.), *Uncertain Knowledge: Scepticism, Relativism, and Doubt in the Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 2014).

³² In this sense, while the presence of medieval unbelievers clearly gives the lie to Lucien Febvre’s influential claim that unbelief was literally ‘unthinkable’ in the

is interesting, though, is how the presence of unbelievers may help us to think, as social historians, about what belief might *be*: how it operates, what it does, the particular power that it possesses, but understood also in terms of its clear fragility, particularly where the challenge of adhering to a particular tenet of faith ('belief that') may disrupt a wider sense of engagement and affirmation ('belief in'). And if we approach religious belief as a range of possibilities and contexts — following Latour's injunction not to 'believe in belief' in the sense of assuming credulity but actually to enquire into the phenomenon — we can then see what this might do to our modern discussions over religion.

Let us return for a moment to Gibbon. We have inherited from him, and from other writers of a similar period, a grand narrative of religion in which the Middle Ages function as the unquestioning, unreasoning age of faith. Empirically, as noted, this does not stand up. But it is worth considering further how Gibbon understood religious belief to have come about in this period. Influenced by the reflections of David Hume in particular, Gibbon thought that 'primitive' peoples produced religious beliefs out of an atavistic need to negotiate with the frightening aspects of the natural world.³³ Because darkness, thunder, fire and so forth were threatening, they needed to be propitiated, by which process they became gods, with objects made into fetishes that could be duly worshipped. This 'primitive' superstition lived on in Christianity, harnessed by the priestly class. Early Christians 'felt, or they fancied, that on every side they were incessantly assaulted by dæmons, comforted by visions, instructed by prophecy, and surprisingly delivered from danger, sickness, and from death itself, by the supplications of the church'.³⁴ Religion is a comfort which arises from a want of Reason and knowledge. (Of course, some version of this account

(n. 32 cont.)

pre-modern past, it does not dismantle a more subtle sense of Febvre's argument, namely that unbelief did not cohere into an alternative discourse that could influence intellectual thought in the period (a position echoed more recently by Weltecke): Lucien Febvre, *Le Problème de l'incroyance au XVI^e siècle: la religion de Rabelais* (Paris, 1947). On this, see David Wootton, 'Lucien Febvre and the Problem of Unbelief in the Early Modern Period', *Journal of Modern History*, lx, 4 (1988).

³³ David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion* (1757); Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ii.

³⁴ Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ii, 299.

continues today in the work of the so-called New Atheists such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett.)

This is precisely where Latour comes in. He is both a researcher into science who understands its power and importance (even as he views it anthropologically as a knowledge built from networks of interaction), and a practising Catholic who sees value in his own faith. In trying to accommodate both science and religion, he explicitly rejects the route taken by the late Stephen Jay Gould, who argued that the two address different fields, different *magisteria*.³⁵ Latour argues instead that one must think about science and religion as being two fundamentally different modes of speech. Science, he argues, is about the transfer of information, about bringing that which is distant up close for examination. The mistaken 'belief in belief' (belief in credulity) rests upon assuming that religion is doing the same thing, but badly: that, as for the frightened primitive Christians (as in Gibbon's view of the early Church), religion falsely promises a reassuring knowledge of a distant reality (that a storm is an angry god, for example, but who can be propitiated by sacrifice) and promises a reassuring knowledge of a false reality: an afterlife. But, Latour argues, this is not really what religion does: religious speech is not about bringing close that which is distant, but instead seeks to make fully present that which is already near and immanent, namely care for others and for oneself.

To distinguish these different kinds of speech he gives the example of a couple, the woman asking the man, 'Do you love me?' and the man responding, 'Yes, you know I do, I told you so last year, and here is a tape-recording of that event to prove it'. This is speech as a conduit of information, of bringing what is temporally distant into the present; but we may recognize that such a response probably does not 'work' in the way the man had hoped it might.³⁶ Latour notes that 'What lovers call their love, that love capable of lasting and growing deeper, always materializes for them in the fragility of a risky speech act that forces them to keep on raising the stakes'.³⁷

³⁵ Stephen Jay Gould, 'Non-Overlapping *Magisteria*', *Natural History*, cvi, 1 (1997).

³⁶ Latour, *Rejoicing*, trans. Rose, 25 and *passim*.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 51. A useful gloss on Latour's argument regarding belief is given in Adam S. Miller, *Speculative Grace: Bruno Latour and Object-Oriented Theology* (New York, 2013), 123–6.

Now, it should be noted that Latour is engaged in a sort of reformist project.³⁸ He is able to ditch any problematic ideological legacies of his Catholicism — any aspects of ‘belief that’ — by insisting on a current and future focus.³⁹ It is not clear how much propositional content remains in Latour’s theology, and in fact from my unaligned atheist perspective, his version of Catholicism looks curiously close to evangelical Pentecostalism, centred very much on a personal connection to the Holy Spirit. In short, his project here is far distant from a historian’s inquiry. Indeed, fundamental to his argument is the reinvigoration of religious speech in the present moment, framed by a sense that in modernity such speech acts have lost the ease of past times. ‘I’m well aware that no form of collective life exists any longer, or any commonly accepted language game that would allow us to magnify sufficiently the experience of love . . . The way along which the faithful multitudes once passed has become . . . invisible’.⁴⁰ We are back here, in Latour’s imagination, with those who flocked to see the relics of St Vivian carried triumphantly to Figeac: with those who witnessed miracles and wonders. And in that deeply nostalgic medievalism, we may note that Bruno Latour has always been modern.

So, while I am in part critiquing Latour, not least for his recurrent turn to a traditional and unreflective view of Christian history, I am also interested in some of the analytical tools which he proffers in his attempt to revivify his religion. First is his insistence that we need to realize that within religion (as in fact within his account of science) things that are *constructed* (produced by humans interacting with each other and interacting with non-human elements) are nonetheless *real*. That

³⁸ Thus, for example, Latour, *Rejoicing*, trans. Rose, 118: ‘This form of [religious] utterance is difficult in itself but only to the extent that it must always be revived to begin its work of designating, purifying, resurrecting and redressing its interlocutors once again’. The broader reformist aspects of his work, directed towards transforming life within the Anthropocene, are more apparent in Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA, 2013), and its accompanying website, <<http://modesofexistence.org>> (accessed 15 Feb. 2022). See also comments on the slightly cult-like reception of his work in Charles Turner, ‘On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods: About Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*’, *European Journal of Sociology*, liii, 3 (2012), 427.

³⁹ This critique is made very eloquently in Anke Bernau, ‘Bruno Latour and the Loving Assumptions of [REL]’, *Romanic Review*, cxi, 1 (2020).

⁴⁰ Latour, *Rejoicing*, trans. Rose, 126.

things are ‘made’ by cultural interaction and activity does not mean they are insubstantial; they still work, they still do things. This is a point he makes eloquently and persuasively in a discussion of religious fetishes: that they are made by people for their acts of worship does not render them insubstantial, unreal, somehow fake. Rather, the very involvement and investment of the makers in their objects of devotion is a part of their faith.⁴¹ As a means of understanding the role of something like the reliquary statues in southern France in the central Middle Ages, this is a potentially useful insight.

The second tool is his description of religious belief as that which ‘materializes . . . in the fragility of a risky speech act’. By ‘speech act’ Latour is gesturing to an inheritance in linguistic and philosophical thought begun by J. L. Austin in the 1950s. Austin argued that some kinds of verbal statement are not about communicating information, and cannot usefully be judged ‘true or false’, but are instead constitutive of an action; in the right circumstances they are ‘performative’ in that they *do* the thing that they *say* (for example, ‘I name this ship the *QE2*’ or ‘I do solemnly swear to . . .’).⁴² For Latour, religious speech is also thus ‘performative’: it does, or rather attempts to do, the thing which it says.

Latour is not by any means the first person to suggest that we might see aspects of religion as performative. Some version of the idea of belief enacted through expression has been floated in anthropologically informed religious studies in the last few decades, a few explicitly drawing on Austin’s theory of performativity.⁴³ However, most of these analyses have focused

⁴¹ Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (Durham, NC, 2010). Both this book and *Rejoicing* are briefly reprised in Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, chs. 6, 11. It should be noted that various anthropologists have looked somewhat askance at his account of the encounter between Portuguese ‘whites’ and coastal Guinea ‘blacks’ that frames this discussion of the fetish: see, for example, Turner, ‘On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods’, 426–7.

⁴² J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford, 1962).

⁴³ For example, Peter G. Stromberg, *Language and Self-Transformation: A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative* (Cambridge, 1993); Bosco B. Bae, ‘Believing Selves and Cognitive Dissonance: Connecting Individual and Society via “Belief”’, *Religions*, vii, 7 (2016); Abby Day and Gordon Lynch, ‘Introduction: Belief as Cultural Performance’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, xxviii, 2 (2013); Francesca E. S. Montemaggi, ‘Belief, Trust, and Relationality: A Simmelian Approach for the Study of Faith’, *Religion*, xlvii, 2 (2017); Lynne Taylor, ‘Our Doing Becomes Us: Performativity, Spiritual Practices and Becoming Christian’, *Practical Theology*, xii (2019). Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe*, 231,

on what one might see as the particular cases of either conversion or spiritual healing: religious events, which in some sense sit alongside the very long-standing discussion of transformative ritual, and where the analysis is predicated on the basic assumption that they ‘work’ for their participants. What is particularly useful and insightful in Latour is his emphasis upon the ‘fragility’ of religious speech acts. If we want to understand belief not as default credibility, a hegemonic template or even something like brainwashing, but as something which, as a broader consideration of any period would suggest, sometimes prompts some people to action (whether physical action or speech or bearing witness to a certain identity), we are strongly assisted by the sense of a speech act which makes a bid for a successful performance *but which might fail*. We can see how this puts something at stake; we have seen it both succeed and fail in the story of the peasant couple observing St Vivian’s relics. The point being twofold: that we are reminded not to believe in credulity — not to assume that ‘belief’ is a permanent, unvarying, zombie-like state that all believers occupy — and we are given a sense of where its power lies: in the possibility of failure, in the effort required to sustain something which reaches beyond the present moment (whether understood as individual and interiorized, or as more collective and publicly enacted).⁴⁴

And from this perspective we can return, and with the tools of social history, to consider an important element of J. L. Austin’s original analysis, namely that the context of the performative

(n. 43 cont.)

briefly suggests (but without further exploration) that ‘belief was performative, in the linguistic as much as the theatrical sense: that the words and deeds involved in faith were not signs “of” belief that resided elsewhere but were the very citation and production of belief itself’.

⁴⁴ The dynamic of ‘putting something at stake’ might be seen as having a structural similarity to the ‘ruptures’ which Michel de Certeau posited as a central component of Christian spirituality. De Certeau evokes what one might call the constantly surprising absent presence of Christ, the gap between spiritual experience and the specific language available to the believer, and above all the sense of yearning for or reaching towards something ‘Other’: Michel de Certeau, *La Faiblesse de croire* (Paris, 1987), particularly 39–46. Compare Forrest, *Trustworthy Men*, 16–17. However, de Certeau’s framing of these issues is inflected by his particular interest in mysticism and in psychoanalytic theory, and his notion of ‘rupture’ is imagined ultimately as something which reaches beyond the given orthodoxy of a particular period: see Bernard McGinn, ‘The Future of Past Spiritual Traditions’, *Spiritus*, xv, 1 (2015), particularly 3–4. What I am aiming to evoke is something which also embraces more quotidian and obedient experiences.

speech act has a bearing on its success or failure. Austin's contexts were primarily linguistic and essentially understood contemporaneously with the speech act itself; as historians, we may want to consider what broader antecedent resources and demands may also affect context.⁴⁵ In that sense, we may have a way of thinking about belief as something other than a simple 'on' or 'off' binary, and of thinking truly historically about belief as something which may be understood to be changing as the contexts that permit such belief change.

III

To explore this a little less abstractly, let us turn again to southern France in the central Middle Ages, to the landscape within which the reliquary of St Vivian was carried, and to the people who might have come to worship, or who might, like the peasant husband, have scoffed and turned away. Let us begin in the period that produced that narrative and its collection of miracles, the eleventh century. What speech acts of belief might ordinary people have made in such a period? The evidence is extremely limited: in documents from this time and place, ordinary people almost only ever appear, like the peasant couple, as characters in narratives produced by clerics, or as the presumed recipients of instruction. Collections of miracle stories, like those for St Vivian, provide a small range of examples where the people themselves are represented as being more active: we find, for example, peasants gathering at the shrine of St Foy in Conques on the eve of her feast, singing her praises in the vernacular; great crowds congregating at one of the so-called Peace of God assemblies where a host of relics were paraded; a peasant at the shrine of St Isarn, petitioning for supernatural vengeance on a local official who had stolen his cow; a knight called Ugo who came to the shrine of St Vivian to pray, apparently without any particular petition but purely as an act of worship.⁴⁶ All involve at least some verbal acts directed

⁴⁵ For similar thoughts in what is still a very linguistic (and Latourian) approach, see François Cooren, *Action and Agency in Dialogue: Passion, Incarnation and Ventriloquism* (Amsterdam, 2010).

⁴⁶ *The Book of Sainte Foy*, ed. and trans. Pamela Sheingorn (Philadelphia, 1995), 137–9 (2.12); Richard Landes, 'Between Aristocracy and Heresy: Popular Participation in the Limousin Peace of God', in Thomas Head and Richard Landes (eds.), *The Peace of God: Social Violence and Religious Response in France*

(cont. on p. 254)

towards a saint, and beyond the saint to God; but all also involve — and perhaps rest as much upon — embodied actions, the *doing* of belief: collective singing through a night's vigil, the prostration in supplication before a shrine, being part of a collective group of worship or, in contrast, taking a quiet moment alone before a statue of a saint. In each case, in different ways people put themselves into an act of worship in which they venture a hope, whether specific and close by (the return of a cow) or much more general (eventual salvation). Something is put at stake by the doing as well as the saying. And the activities are often also about the reproduction of community and identity (both individual and collective).

Latour's particular framing of speech — his illustrative metaphor of the couple talking to one another of their love, his meditative reflections on saying the Creed to himself — offers another sign that he has always been modern: it figures religion as primarily private, individual and verbal. But if we are interested in understanding how belief comes about in past times, we need to widen our focus a bit. We could helpfully think not only of speech acts, but of what we might term 'belief acts'; that is, to consider things done as well as things said, where the doing is not a sign of belief that somehow exists elsewhere but is constitutive in itself of belief. We can then consider belief not as some purely separate and intellectually abstracted act of cognition but as something embodied and situated in a particular moment. And if, as historians, we can think about belief as including embodied action, there is a further potential, to connect belief to other key areas of recent academic discussion in the field, notably the history of the senses and the history of emotions. By treating belief as performative, in an embodied as well as a linguistic sense, we can thus think about the affective experience of belief. This may present a way to pursue the more elusive aspects of 'belief in', beyond the relatively more confirmatory aspects of 'belief that'. That is, it is probably permissible to assume, where evidence exists for the cultural transmission of the relevant ideas, that, in the abstract, many people would recognize and subscribe to specific tenets of faith, to 'belief that' statements such as, for example, 'The saints

(n. 46 cont.)

around the Year 1000 (Ithaca, 1992); *Acta Sanctorum*, Septembris VI (Antwerp, 1757), col. 742; 'Translatio et miraculi Sancti Viviani', 268–9.

are the very special dead who can intercede with God for our benefit'. But only when something specific then rests upon such a tenet (something being put at stake always necessarily occurring within a specific social situation such as, for example, abandoning one's agricultural labour and joining in a collective act of worship) do 'belief that' and 'belief in' start to conjoin.⁴⁷

Encounters with saints, while important to medieval Christianity, were always extra-ordinary, the large-scale assemblies and processions notably so. The more normal (though by no means universal) experience in southern France at this time of attendance at Sunday Mass in a local church would have meant people hearing prayers and chants in Latin. People may also have experienced some form of preaching in the vernacular, though prior to the thirteenth century we do not really have much evidence of that. But they would have been involved in acts of belief: we could see the fact of attendance itself as potentially such an act. In southern France, most eleventh- and early twelfth-century local churches were very dark, having only one or two slit windows, and really small, with a nave that might measure only 5 metres wide and 10 metres long.⁴⁸ Even given that everyone was probably standing rather than sitting, for a variety of communities it is unlikely that everybody could actually fit inside such a church at one time; and where they did, their sensory experience would be dominated by proximity to fellow humans. Remembering our scoffing peasant husband, and knowing that evidence from the later Middle Ages clearly shows that non-attendance at church was far from uncommon, it becomes evident that we are better served by seeing a medieval lay person's attendance at Mass in this period as an active choice rather than a default inevitability.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ One can again note both a similarity with and difference from de Certeau, in his emphasis upon *praxis* and belief; in de Certeau's case again, however, *praxis* is seen as being something more profound whence a new experience of belief may emerge: de Certeau, *La Faiblesse de croire*, 218–24; compare Graham Ward, 'The Weakness of Believing: A Dialogue with de Certeau', *Culture, Theory and Critique*, lii, 2–3 (2011), 242.

⁴⁸ Geneviève Durand, 'Les Églises rurales du premier âge roman dans le Rouergue méridional', *Archéologie du Midi Médiéval*, vii (1989); Elisabeth Zadora-Rio, 'Archéologies des églises et des cimetières ruraux en Languedoc: un point de vue d'"Outre Loire"', *Archéologie du Midi Médiéval*, xxviii (2010).

⁴⁹ For non-attendance in the medieval church, see Arnold, 'Materiality of Unbelief in Late Medieval England', 83–4.

The point can certainly be made if we turn to a particular remote church, the hermitage of Saint-Guilhem-de-Combret, which sits on the flanks of the Canigou mountains in the far south-west of what is now France. There was a small community of priests living there, about three hours' walk from the nearest village of Montferrer (which gained its own church in the twelfth century). The choice to attend is thus clear. This church had a wrought-iron bell that remarkably still survives, not quite 30 centimetres in height and width, simply made and probably not tremendously resonant; responding to the ringing of this bell was another active choice: another belief act, one might say.⁵⁰ From this particular tiny church there also survives a twelfth-century manuscript of a Carolingian sacramentary, a liturgical book which provided the priest with all the words, but not the biblical readings, necessary for Mass, and for some other sacramental rites. This manuscript offers further glimpses of the acts and embodied experiences that attendance at Mass there might have involved. It includes the blessing, in Latin, of the candles that were essential both spiritually and practically, with the priest directed to make the sign of the cross as he spoke the key words 'sanctificatum' and 'benedictum', as well as instructions indicating the point during the Mass when he should light the candles, figuring them as a sacrifice to God.⁵¹ Quite amazingly, there is a further surviving twelfth-century manuscript from the same small church, namely a *mixtum* (a book which combined the missal, breviary and some other liturgical materials), which reminds us that those attending Mass would hear singing. The precise meaning of the sung passages would not be easily understood by a congregation unversed in Latin, but perhaps the 'alleluia', as it came around on repeated occasions, would have caught the ear, and in so catching, would invite an affective response: another potential belief act.⁵²

⁵⁰ The bell is described in more detail at <<http://www.pop.culture.gouv.fr/notice/palissy/PM66001362>> (accessed 15 Feb. 2022).

⁵¹ Perpignan, Médiathèque Municipale, MS 4, fo. 2^r. The manuscript (described as a *missel*) has been digitized by the library: <<https://mediatheque-patrimoine.perpignan.fr/view.php?titn=0339027&men=3&lg=FR>> (accessed 15 Feb. 2022).

⁵² Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS Nouvelles Acquisitions Latine 557, for example, at fos. 6^r, 8^v. The manuscript has been digitized on the Gallica website: <<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10546776k/f1.image.r=nal%20557>> (accessed 15 Feb. 2022).

If we move forward to a later part of the twelfth century, and shift about 330 kilometres west, to the town of Morlaàs, we catch a further glimpse of the potential belief acts of the ordinary laity in a testamentary document written by the local priest, Bernard de Belsta, sometime between 1135 and 1140. In it he describes how he built the church of St André with the help of his neighbours. He was its first chaplain, and, nearing death, he appears to have wanted to set out some of the important customary aspects, such as he had been able to establish during his incumbency, regarding the church's financial relationship with the nearby monastery of St Foy in Morlaàs. Among other things he noted that whatever people brought as oblations on the day after Easter, 'namely bread, coins, candles', must be handed over to the monks that same day, thus implicitly recognizing their financial lordship; but in the process he spelled out that the laity should give these things to the altar, at the prompting of the priest, and that it was the priest or his representative who actually received them from the congregation.⁵³ Thus, there seems to have been an implicit recognition that the parishioners must be allowed to feel they were giving to the local church itself, the church that they helped to found.

Bernard de Belsta could be seen as demonstrating here a concern over how to ensure that the act of donation succeeded as an act of belief; he wished, we might say, to maximize the conditions of felicity for that performative act. 'Conditions of felicity' is Latour's phrase, borrowed from J. L. Austin's original account of how a performative utterance might succeed or fail, and for both theorists these conditions were both linguistic (the correct pronunciation within a recognized field of discourse) and structural (the right person in the right place at the right time speaking these words). I am further suggesting, as with the parishioners' Easter gifts, that these acts were not only verbal but embodied, sensory and emotional as much as cognitive. Bestowing a simple candle or coin for lamp oil upon such a church should have felt like an act which reached beyond 'duty'

⁵³ 'Cartulaire de Sainte Foi de Morlaas', ed. L. Cadier, *Bulletin de la Société des Sciences, Lettres et Arts de Pau*, 2nd ser., xiii (1883-4), 344 (no. 35): 'ut quicquid insequenti die post Pascha, a fidelibus populis altari vel sepulcro, ammonitione capellani, oblatum fuerit, scilicet panem, nummos, candelas, capellanus vel ejus missus accipiat, et eadem die, fratres Sancte Fidis et familiam diligenter atque festive procuret'.

to something more fundamentally communal and meaningful; could have brought with it the myriad theological associations of bringing light into the darkness; and would surely sometimes have encouraged a feeling of very active participation for the lay donor, however humble, because of the obvious importance and necessity of that light.⁵⁴

IV

In stretching the idea of ‘the performative’ to belief acts, several points can be made regarding the conditions of felicity. One is that we might think not so much in terms of a binary success or failure of belief, but of a range of potentials activated by a range of possible conditions. In later medieval Europe, an underlying base for such conditions was the ingrained practices and habits which, even if initially taught to Christian children, were so regularly enacted within communities that they might be seen as a form of *habitus*, as Pierre Bourdieu theorized it: the bodily acts (such as joining one’s hands in prayer, walking in procession) and mental imagery (Christ as king, the cross) that were so familiarly present that they largely ‘went without saying’.⁵⁵ But what I am trying to grapple with here, via the notion of performativity, should be seen as something beyond that habitual context: moments of specific engagement that, even if only in a quite modest fashion, reached towards something beyond the utterly quotidian. While the conditions of possibility could thus be seen as emerging from *habitus*, it is more fruitful to analyse moments when qualities are put in play which invite or engender a more engaged response: whether through sensory input (the elaboration of liturgy, visual adornment of churches, a particular preaching performance) or through a degree of consciously required agency (spontaneous almsgiving, a more effortful journeying to a particular place of worship, active engagement with individual prayer). ‘Belief’ understood in this sense might be seen as not simply either present or absent, but

⁵⁴ On the long-standing importance of lights in churches, see now Paul Fouracre, *Eternal Light and Earthly Concerns: Belief and the Shaping of Medieval Society* (Manchester, 2021).

⁵⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, 1977). Bourdieu did not himself apply this to religion, which he tended to see more in terms of a functionalist ideology: see Terry Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion: Imposing Faith and Legitimacy* (London, 2007).

felt to a degree of intensity, *understood* in regard to varied levels of explicit propositional content, and *related* to other contexts and occasions which themselves sat within a range of varied conditional experiences. Being part of a large-scale ritual procession or prostrating oneself alone before a statue of a saint implied similar propositional tenets regarding supernatural power ('belief that'), but surely operated in rather differing dynamics regarding the strength, intensity and implications of the belief they engendered ('belief in').

Secondly, the conditions of felicity are also conditions of possibility, differing according to the available resources, prompts or demands that the potential believer might experience. Thus, for example, in the sacramentary from Saint-Guilhem-de-Combret the priests would repeatedly encounter a rather pleasing image of the crucifixion that it contains: a simple depiction of Christ on the cross with Mary on one side and (probably) St Peter, holding a book, on the other.⁵⁶ But at the time, such a visual experience would be rare for a lay audience as they did not themselves have access to any liturgical books, and the evidence suggests that such small churches did not yet have much internal adornment. More likely for them would be quotidian encounters with unadorned crosses, where Christ was not directly represented: one within the church on the altar during Mass, but also various stone or wooden wayside crosses, which were a common feature of the wider landscape and which acted as waymarks or boundary markers as well as a potential focus for worship.⁵⁷ Thus, while visual imagery could stir both priest and people to reflect upon Christ's sacrifice, the visual materials they would come upon were, at the very least, framed rather differently; and perhaps the cross imagery which people most often encountered, while certainly enabling an act of belief, did not prompt it quite so insistently as a more ornate, adorned image might.

⁵⁶ Perpignan, Médiathèque Municipale, MS 4, fo. 18^v.

⁵⁷ Gabriel Le Bras, 'Sur l'histoire des croix rurales', in Gabriel Le Bras, *Études de sociologie religieuse*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1955–6), i; Achim Timmermann, *Memory and Redemption: Public Monuments and the Making of Late Medieval Landscape* (Turnhout, 2017). Timmermann suggests a more recurrent devotional potential to wayside crosses than I am proposing here: see the discussion in John H. Arnold, 'Belief and the Senses for the Medieval Laity', in Éric Palazzo (ed.), *Les Cinq Sens au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 2016).

The third and most important point is that if we are thinking about the conditions of felicity and possibility as historians rather than anthropologists, we will note change over time. This article has focused thus far on the contexts of belief acts for the ordinary laity in southern France in the eleventh and early twelfth century. But change was coming to this region.⁵⁸ Within the twelfth century, there was an efflorescence of possibilities: the reformed monasticism of the Cistercians, the building of civic hospitals and leper houses, the arrival of the Hospitallers and the Templars, all of which allowed, among other things, more varied opportunities for donation, and for belief acts focused propositionally more on the notion of apostolic poverty than on that of sacral power. The twelfth century saw, across Europe, a growing population, the building of new towns, an acceleration of commerce and fungible wealth. One effect was a wave of church building in the south, mostly maintaining the same basic architectural style as those we have already met, but on a somewhat larger scale, sometimes with side aisles, implying the opportunity for housing the whole community at worship. The combination of churches and orders facilitated further elaboration: in 1159 we find a priest called Deodat negotiating with the local Cistercian monastery at Silvanès, making an agreement on behalf of his parishioners to surrender a portion of the tithe, in return for which the monks agreed to supply the church with three bells — bells which were almost certainly cast rather than beaten, thus resonant, able to broadcast a more complex voice and appeal into the locality.⁵⁹ Bells were increasingly used not only to summon people to church, but to provide another prompt for a belief act to those laity who had not attended: the major bells were to be rung during the Mass at the moment of consecration of the Host, and from the late twelfth century onwards we find texts calling upon lay people to kneel and adore wherever they were at that moment: a new condition of possibility and felicity for a belief act not technologically possible in an earlier age.⁶⁰ One could make a

⁵⁸ The discussion here adumbrates a lengthier treatment: John H. Arnold, *The Making of Lay Religion in Southern France, c.1000–1350* (Oxford, forthcoming).

⁵⁹ P.-A. Verlaquet (ed.), *Cartulaire de l'abbaye de Silvanès* (Rodez, 1910), 64 (no. 76).

⁶⁰ See John H. Arnold and Caroline Goodson, 'Resounding Community: The History and Meaning of Medieval Church Bells', *Viator*, xliii, 1 (2012), 121–4.

similar point about the Cistercian church at Silvanès itself, and others like it: for lay people in its locality, or those willing to journey there, it offered a different, larger architectural form which admitted more light and air, and with greater visual adornment and greater liturgical elaboration, providing, among other things, further contrast with the more limited and muted local churches.

This greater range of contexts could be seen as largely affording more opportunities for voluntary belief acts, for *choosing* to participate by worship, donation, contemplation. But as we enter the thirteenth century, in southern France we also see the growth of belief as something *demande*d, the conditions of felicity more clearly involving an element of power. From the point of view of the Catholic Church, southern France in the latter part of the twelfth century was a hotbed of heresy. For their lay supporters, the attraction of the heretical sects of Cathars and Waldensians was almost certainly in large part the very public way in which they performed apostolic piety, and their presence facilitated further occasions for worship and donation, essentially in a continuum with the wider orthodox landscape.⁶¹ The Church's reaction was to launch a crusade against the south, which ultimately culminated in the Capetian kings gaining control of the region, and, after the cessation of the crusade in 1229, to initiate repeated 'inquisitions into heretical wickedness' that presented a large number of ordinary lay people with an utterly new context in which they were to give voice to their belief.

We shall return to inquisition in a moment, but let us note first some of the other changed conditions of possibility that these conflicts brought with them. One was yet more church building, in the new style we now call Gothic, providing local churches and other religious buildings with soaring vertical lines and large windows, making much greater use of light: an architecture that, in the case of Albi's massive mid-thirteenth-century cathedral, might be said to announce a conjunction of faith with power.⁶² As more light entered churches, so too, it seems, did more

⁶¹ Within a vast and rather troubled literature, see Christine Caldwell Ames, *Medieval Heresies: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam* (Cambridge, 2015), ch. 3.

⁶² See comments in Jean-Louis Biget, 'La Brique contre l'hérésie: le gothique toulousain', *Revue du Tarn*, 3rd ser., clxxxix (2003).

images and imagery, including ornamented and adorned crosses and painted figures of saints. Another was southern French bishops' particular adaptation of wider religious reforms. At the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, the Catholic Church famously enjoined annual individual confession upon all Christians (something which should probably be seen as an extension of 'best practice' rather than a total innovation). In southern France, this was amplified: confession was to be made three times a year by all the laity, and their names were to be recorded by their parish priest so that any who omitted this practice (and thus were perhaps hiding heretical thoughts) could be identified.⁶³ Thus, a key belief act — the speaking forth of one's deeds in recognition of sins committed, and in the hope of gaining penance and repentance — became literally regularized, placed 'under a rule'.

What then of inquisition? For a period in the 1240s, its reach was extraordinarily broad: we have the surviving records of interrogation or sentencing for over six thousand people from the region, and we know that these records are only a portion of the original archive. These first inquisitors were more interested in asking about things done than things said, though contemporary legal consultations indicate that some degree of doing could be taken to indicate or indeed constitute believing.⁶⁴ Many of these early interrogations were extremely brief and it was not at all the case that every person questioned ended up being punished. But it did mean that every person questioned was confronted with a particular sense of 'belief' as a matter of choice, allegiance and obedience. 'Did you believe in the heretics or their errors? Did you believe that they were good men and that you could be saved in their hands?' asked the inquisitors. The variety of responses is further instructive regarding how we might see belief. During interrogations in the late thirteenth century, Pierre de Laurac confessed that he had believed in the heretics from when he first saw them preaching 'until the time of his confession to Brother Pons de Poget'. Bona de Puy believed that they were 'true men and friends of God' from the time

⁶³ Council of Toulouse, 1229, canon 13, in *Heresy and Inquisition in France, 1200–1300*, ed. and trans. John H. Arnold and Peter Biller (Manchester, 2016), 194–5.

⁶⁴ See John H. Arnold, *Inquisition and Power: Catharism and the Confessing Subject in Medieval Languedoc* (Philadelphia, 2001), 39–45.

when ‘she first heard their words and admonitions, until the time when she was captured for heresy’. Fabrissa Vital believed ‘from a year before the last grape harvest until the day of her citation [by the inquisitor], because all of the aforesaid things [in her confession] took place from that time’.⁶⁵ One might take these as statements of allegiance (‘I believed in the heretics until a more powerful inquisitor told me to stop’) but they also appear to be statements of possibility: ‘I believed in the heretics when I could do those acts that constituted such belief; upon citation or capture and submission, I could no longer perform such acts’, and thus belief ends (although in some cases perhaps only temporarily, as we remember those who ‘relapsed’ into heresy and were subsequently burned).

In the early fourteenth century, the inquisition conducted by Jacques Fournier, bishop of Pamiers (later to become Pope Benedict XII), focused much more specifically upon belief in the sense of ideas and thoughts, and people’s relationship to them: ‘belief that’ explicitly related to ‘belief in’.⁶⁶ Here a careful reading of witness records can provide considerable nuance regarding the process of believing. To focus briefly on just one: Pierre Maury, a lowly Pyrenean shepherd questioned by Fournier in 1323, was closely connected to the small group of Cathar ‘Good Men’ present in the Pyrenean villages of the Sabarthès. Anyone familiar with Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s famous microhistory *Montaillou* (based on the Fournier registers) will recall the extent of Maury’s involvement: he knew most of the heretics intimately, and his life was bound up with theirs in a variety of ways.⁶⁷ Maury’s deposition is one of the lengthiest, providing extraordinary detail, and at its conclusion, the inquisitor confronted the shepherd with sixty-two ‘articles’ of heretical belief extracted from his evidence and the evidence of others, to which he had to respond.

Asked whether he had heard the heretics say a certain thing, and whether he had believed them, he presented lengthy and detailed answers. On a number of topics, having provided an

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁶⁶ On Fournier, see Irene Bueno, *Defining Heresy: Inquisition, Theology, and Papal Policy in the Time of Jacques Fournier* (Leiden, 2015); see particularly, on his questioning regarding belief, 104–18.

⁶⁷ Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: village occitain, de 1294 à 1324* (Paris, 1975), particularly 118–32.

example of the heretics expounding a certain belief, for example that there were two gods, one good and one bad, he simply confessed that he believed what they had said. One wonders in such cases what import this had for him: did his ‘belief that’ imply ‘belief in’? (One notes that for Maury, as for most lay adherents of the group, the theological notion of two gods had no immediate practical implication or requirement.)⁶⁸ But for various questions, Maury presented more complex and nuanced answers. Explaining, for example, that the Good Men held that only they could say the Paternoster, because in their theology God was only ‘the Father’ to those who had been purified by their rituals, Maury noted that ‘he did not believe the heretics on this point; on the contrary, he often said the Paternoster’. On the matter of baptism, Maury said that the heretics had claimed that everyone, including babies, was damned unless they had received their blessing, and he ‘initially believed this, but after he returned to [his village], he believed that all Christians, whatever bad they had done, would be saved, whether they were heretics or Catholics’. Had he heard from the heretics that one should not worship the crucifix nor make the sign of the cross? He had heard them say that signing the cross was a worthless gesture, but he never believed this, and once, when he wished to drink from a spring, he made the sign of the cross over it despite their words. And perhaps most interestingly, in regard to the Eucharist, which the heretics ridiculed on the grounds that, if made present in every consecrated Host, Christ’s body would have been eaten up by now even if it were as big as a mountain: ‘When he was with the heretics he believed [that Christ was not present], but afterwards when he went to church and saw the people greatly adoring the consecrated Host, he sometimes believed that it *was* the body of Christ’.⁶⁹

There is very much more that one could say about Pierre Maury’s beliefs and his negotiation of faith, but let us for now take this point: that what Latour would call ‘the conditions of

⁶⁸ For a possible parallel, see reflections on the complexity of native people’s relationship to the (supernatural) ‘beliefs’ they report, in David Graeber, ‘Radical Alterity Is Just Another Way of Saying “Reality”: A Reply to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, v, 2 (2012), particularly 10–14, 27–31.

⁶⁹ *Le Registre d’inquisition de Jacques Fournier, évêque de Pamiers (1318–1325)*, ed. Jean Duvernoy, 3 vols. (Toulouse, 1965), iii, 218, 221–2, 224, 229, 234. The entirety of his deposition covers 110–252.

felicity' are not fixed but variable. When with the heretics, deriding the Eucharist, he believed in an absence; amid his neighbours at the culmination of the Mass, he believed in a presence. Both were belief acts, both were constituted in their moment of possibility.

Let us return briefly to Edward Gibbon and thence to Bruno Latour, both also giving account of their own attempts to believe. Here is Gibbon's account of his conversion, from his autobiography:

To my present feelings it seems incredible that I should ever believe that I believed in transubstantiation. But my conqueror [a fellow Catholic student] oppressed me with the sacramental words *Hoc est corpus meum* and dashed against each other the figurative half-meanings of the Protestant sects; every objection was resolved into omnipotence; and after repeating, at St Mary's [the university church], the Athanasian Creed, I humbly acquiesced in the mystery of the real presence.⁷⁰

And now Latour, talking about his contemplation of Fra Angelico's mid-fifteenth-century fresco in San Marco of the four Marys contemplating Christ's empty tomb, with an angel instructing them, a devout friar (possibly St Dominic) kneeling at the edge of the frame, and Christ in majesty hovering above and behind the main scene:

What's going on in this utterly familiar illustration of a theme that's been revisited over and over again? A monk, in prayer . . . The painter must have put him there so that his figure will help me make the transition by implicating me in this curious story in which no protagonist sees anything directly: neither the women, nor the angel, nor even the monk — nor me as a result. Yet I'm the only one to see, behind everyone else, the painted apparition of Christ. But that's just it, it's only painted . . . What do I see? . . . it's not back down there in the past that the meaning must be sought, but now, for me, here.⁷¹

Both authors are relating moments of belief: of *doing* belief. Both involve 'conditions of felicity': Gibbon's intellectual encounter and subsequent surrender, enacted through his recitation of the Creed in the ritual space of the communal church in Oxford; Latour's slow contemplation and active interpretation of a painting, fantasized as a connection back to that medieval past in which the presence of God was 'taken for granted' but

⁷⁰ Edward Gibbon, *Autobiography*, ed. Lord Sheffield (London, [1907]), 47–8.

⁷¹ Latour, *Rejoicing*, trans. Rose, 107. The image is reproduced online at <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Resurrection_of_Christ_and_Women_at_the_Tomb_by_Fra_Angelico_\(San_Marco_cell_8\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Resurrection_of_Christ_and_Women_at_the_Tomb_by_Fra_Angelico_(San_Marco_cell_8).jpg)> (accessed 15 Feb. 2022).

experienced in the modern mode of a habitué of the art gallery, and fashioned into a belief act for Latour's personal take on Catholicism. Belief is present, but transitory, abandoned under a later intellectual dispensation by Gibbon, lapsing under the effort of holding onto the meaning he seeks 'now, here' in the modern world for Latour.

The importance of context, and the sense of belief as something being done repeatedly, but equally capable of being undone, links together Latour, Gibbon and the fourteenth-century shepherd Pierre Maury. But at the same time, the frames of their belief — the conditions within which they can or must 'believe' — are very different. Gibbon makes an intellectual choice in the context of debate, among other intellectual choices. Latour's rather solitary acts of belief — singular contemplation of a picture, a rather lonely recitation of the Creed — are framed by the sceptical modernity he cannot really disavow, even as he reaches emotionally back towards a Middle Ages which, he fantasizes, never had to deal with such a challenge. And Pierre Maury, in that Middle Ages, experiences the various persuasive tugs of neighbours, preachers, heretics and liturgical ritual, and finally the uncompromising and categorizing questions of the inquisitor and his written record, where belief is inked into permanence and subsequent sentence.

V

To conclude: in expanding Latour's account of belief, and discussing belief acts, this article may have done no more than place a known landscape under a fresh description, though nonetheless a useful one in several ways. Where that 'belief' involves explicit propositional content, it may help us to see that such tenets of faith are made manifest (are 'believed') in contexts and actions that can also fail, as when seeing others flock to worship a saint's bones or when viewing the elevation of the Host during Mass.⁷² That failure, we might say, is precisely the condition of possibility for their success.

Moreover, it suggests that the contexts within which belief acts take place are structural, but also sensory, emotional and

⁷² See similarly Garma's response to Robbins: Carlos Garma, 'Continuity Thinking', *Current Anthropology*, xlviii (2007), 21–2.

affective.⁷³ Indeed, it might be charged that I am largely equating ‘belief’ with ‘affect’. I don’t mean to eradicate the propositional element of belief — the ‘belief that’ element which could be seen as cognitive rather than affective (although those should not be seen as clearly dichotomous terms) — but to argue that, for the social historian at least, it is when it spurs further activity that the content comes to matter. ‘Believing’ in this sense could be said not simply to be knowing or accepting a proposition, but to be about something else then occurring.⁷⁴ Thinking of this in terms of affect allows us perhaps a little more analytical purchase on both individuals and communities.

Finally, the contexts within which belief acts take place also vary, both across social context and across time. As Talal Asad has long reminded us, beliefs operate within wider regimes of (spiritual) truth and legitimizing power, and these are not static. Moreover, the resources and materials by which belief acts can be enacted vary by situation (status, wealth, gender) and, again, vary over time. ‘Belief’ is in this sense a set of changing possibilities, with a history. This sense of a history to belief differs from Gibbon’s developmental account of progress, and from Latour’s sentimental nostalgia for a lost past, and perhaps can give us a more useful way of understanding how religious belief operates, or operated, both then and now, within medieval Catholicism and perhaps within other faiths. It seems to me, as a modern left-wing atheist intellectual interested in thinking about religion, society and politics, that it is helpful not to assume that religion operates as a programme of propositional content that believers simply embrace because of their ‘softness of temper’. Here, I am with Latour in his rejection of ‘believing in belief’. To

⁷³ On the importance of seeing what I am calling ‘belief acts’ as embodied, see Thomas J. Csordas, ‘Somatic Modes of Attention’, *Cultural Anthropology*, viii, 2 (1993); Thomas J. Csordas, ‘Asymptote of the Ineffable: Embodiment, Alterity, and the Theory of Religion’, *Current Anthropology*, xlv, 2 (2004). Drawing on Csordas, the point about emotion is emphasized also by Jon P. Mitchell and Hildi J. Mitchell, ‘For Belief: Embodiment and Immanence in Catholicism and Mormonism’, *Social Analysis*, lii, 1 (2008).

⁷⁴ For a potential parallel, note the discussion of African Christians who move between different denominations, in each case asserting the importance of ‘believing’ (in the sense of committing to, and putting oneself into) each act of belief — in this case, importantly, in regard to spiritual healing — when engaging with it: Thomas G. Kirsch, ‘Restaging the Will to Believe: Religious Pluralism, Anti-Syncretism, and the Problem of Belief’, *American Anthropologist*, cvi, 4 (2004).

see that the medieval past (which even Latour fantasizes as a simple age of faith) may in fact have been more complicated — may have involved more effort in its acts of belief, may have seen belief change over time, may even have contained occasions of unbelief — might help us to move beyond the narrative we have inherited from Gibbon and others.

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