Introduction

BELIEF HAS A HISTORY: it changes over time. Countless historians have studied the content of religious belief, but the category itself—what it meant to believe—has stubbornly resisted historical analysis, even as it has been pondered by philosophers and theologians, and even as related categories like "truth" and "fact" have become robust objects of historical study. This resistance is not an accident. Secular historians of Christianity have needed a stable object called "belief" whose decline could be measured, while pious historians of Christianity have needed a stable object called "belief" to certify the identity of believers across time and space. They have thus conspired to treat belief as a default condition, indivisible and irreducible, with iterations rather than history. This book argues, by contrast, that belief changed. Between the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment, successive revolutions in religious knowledge refashioned what it meant to believe, dissolving old certainties and producing a distinctively modern space of belief. The transformation of belief, rather than the rise of unbelief, propelled Western thought into modernity.

The resulting configuration has shaped the conditions of religion in a secular age.

An illustrative example, suggesting that belief itself rather than its supposed eclipse might be worthy of investigation, can be found in a remarkable debate that occurred on the banks of the Rhine River in the summer of 1538. The instigator was a Dutchman named David Joris, a glass painter by profession but by vocation an Anabaptist preacher, a scion of the most radical branch of the Reformation. Three years earlier, the Anabaptists had suffered a devastating defeat when their stronghold at Münster was sacked and the mangled bodies of their leaders were exhibited in iron cages. In response to this debacle, Joris declared himself a prophet, the "Third David," whose divine visions would lead the scattered Anabaptists into a spiritual age. After recruiting the Anabaptists at Oldenburg, Joris traveled to Strasbourg to appeal to the followers of the imprisoned Anabaptist leader Melchior Hoffman. In a three-day conference, transcribed so that the manuscript could be smuggled to Hoffman in jail, Joris attempted to win their allegiance.[1] But remarkably, rather than offering examples of his prophecies or other reasons why they ought to believe him, Joris repeatedly told the Melchiorites, "If you will first believe me, then I will speak to you."[2] That is, he refused to give them any account of his revelations until *after* they had agreed to believe him, because without belief there can be no understanding.

Not so fast, said the Melchiorite spokesman Jan Pont: "All faith stands on truth and reason. Therefore prove your pretensions, then we will believe." Joris responded angrily: "You know that a child never understands his elders. For this reason, how can I give the judgment, of those things about which I must speak, to you?"[3] The next day, Pont's uncertainty had grown into blunt skepticism: "We must become convinced by you with reasonable proofs, or otherwise we would make use-

less disciples for you. Surely you do not desire that we believe you without reasonable proofs, for that belief has no endurance."[4] But Joris would not budge: "If you will now believe me and give yourselves to fulfill it, then you could understand the spirit, without which you cannot understand me. But how can you understand me, when you refuse to believe me?"[5] Or again, Joris told them, "You do not hear or believe me, instead you desire to understand everything, as if you had the wisdom." To which Peter van Geyen responded, "Should I believe that you have more wisdom simply because you say so? This is an amazing faith to me, that we should believe such. If so, we should previously also have believed others who spoke in this way from the spirit's inspiration. We had as little proof."[6]

From a modern perspective, Joris comes across as a carnival con man, appealing to the hearts of people whose minds he cannot win. The notion that one can believe first and understand later, without even knowing what one is believing, violates our whole sense of what belief is. But Joris actually speaks for a long tradition: belief belongs to humble vessels who accept God's truth from authorized sources, not to the proud who think that they can judge for themselves. Belief, in this model, is not judgment based upon evidence but rather trust that your own reason and experience are wrong. So, the position of the Melchiorites in this debate, while so natural and normal to modern sensibilities, was actually a powerful solvent. Their demand for "proof," and their awkward realization that they needed some reason to believe one revelation over another, were steps down a slippery slope from inspired belief to the belief of the world.

As this story suggests, the explosion of religious conflict in the sixteenth century made belief an urgent problem in the Christian West. But a central argument of this book is that the Reformation was *not* an engine of modernity; on the contrary,

modern belief developed in reaction against the religion of Luther and Calvin as much as against the Council of Trent. As we shall see, despite their theological differences, Protestants, Catholics, and Anabaptists in the sixteenth century participated in a common project to make belief *hard*. Facing unprecedented religious competition, and desperate to preserve for Christian belief a special epistemic prestige, the rival churches redefined belief as a privileged condition, a rarefied status unavailable to many or even most people. This was the first revolution in religious knowledge, a project of exclusion and discipline that arrayed communities of believers against a world now understood to be saturated with unbelief. But this revolution soon generated a powerful backlash as dissidents on both sides of the Reformation rejected its stark logic. To do so, they loosened belief, shattering the partition wall between Christian belief and secular ways of knowing. This was the second revolution in religious knowledge, the birth of modern belief, perhaps no less important a rupture in Western thought than the scientific revolution with which it occasionally intersected.

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So, then, what is this thing called "modern belief" whose emergence requires a history? The question at first appears misguided. An uncharitable reader might respond with the very assumption this book is intended to refute: belief does not have a history, belief is just belief, so its modernity is beside the point. But even a sympathetic reader, willing to grant belief a history, might respond that no single version of belief can possibly represent modernity: just as belief changes over time, so it means different things to different people. This is a reasonable concern, which presents an opportunity to explain some of the stakes of this book.

Rather than approaching the question with analytical rigor, let me begin by way of familiar experience. In modern, Western society, we are routinely asked if we believe in God. A June 2016 Gallup poll found that some 89 percent of Americans do.[7] Is it even remotely possible that all those people who tell the pollster they believe in God mean the same thing by that claim? Not at all. Belief can mean absolute certainty, or vague probability. Belief can subsist wholly in the mind, or it can require stirrings of the heart or actions of the body. Belief can rely on reason, or belief can reject reason. So, given that even a moment's reflection reveals that "believing" can mean many different things, when the pollster asks, "Do you believe in God?" why does no one ever respond, "What do you mean, *believe*?" In mosques, synagogues, and churches, people think a great deal about the precise nature of their religious belief; in more secular contexts, people labor to locate themselves in the no man's land between agnosticism and atheism. Yet, despite this complexity, people tend to treat different species of belief as commensurate with one another. A characteristic of Western modernity is to act as if belief were simple.

Just as routinely, we are asked whether we believe in global warming, and whether we believe in ghosts, just to name two examples of the myriad propositions placed before the judgment of modern, liberal subjects. Every day, in ordinary conversation, we are asked whether we believe things seen and unseen, banal and extraordinary, scientific, social, religious, ethical, and political, without differentiation or any sense that these might be qualitatively different operations. "Belief" can signify the unassailable heart of the zealot, the concerned participation of the citizen, or the fickle passions of the consumer. Vastly different and sometimes contradictory sorts of claims hide within the thick folds of this little word. So, is believing in God the same kind of thing as believing in ghosts or global

warming? Well, maybe or maybe not. But once again, why does no one ask, "What do you mean, *believe*?"

My answer, in brief, is that in the modern West belief has effectively become a synonym for opinion or judgment: a space of autonomy rather than a prescription for its exercise. And because opinion or judgment is so essential to modern societies, to ask "What do you mean, *believe*?" would abdicate the sovereignty of liberal subjects to decide for themselves what their belief is. In a society of autonomous, deracinated individuals, our beliefs locate us in the world. Beliefs identify us as consumers, voters, and voluntary participants in civil society, making us legible in a vast, multidimensional matrix of free choice. To demand criteria for belief, to challenge the notion that all kinds of judgment or opinion are basically commensurate, would threaten an important mechanism by which post-Enlightenment subjects engage with the world. And this, in a nutshell, is what I mean by "modern belief": the sense that belief is synonymous with private judgment, and therefore modern subjects believe or disbelieve according to their own conception of whether a given proposition is credible. I shall refer to this condition with the shorthand "sovereign judgment."[8]

Now, as a matter of practice, some version of "rationalism" is at the heart of how many people would claim to make their judgments, about religion as well as other things: they consider the evidence for and against a claim. And yet, while "reason" may be a conventional component of modern belief, modern subjects are sovereign over the criteria of judgment as well as judgment itself, and their reasons are answerable to no one. People who believe whatever a charismatic leader tells them, for instance, or who refuse to listen to new evidence that might change their minds, are not acting in accordance with most understandings of rationalism; but they would still claim to be using their judgment as sovereign finders of fact.[9]

The point is that modern belief is not a particular epistemic regime, it is rather a space in which epistemic controversy is managed. In modern belief, people do not all believe the same way—far from it!—but acting as if they do becomes a way of defending their own right of judgment. The willingness not to interrogate the belief-talk of others underwrites the formation and functioning of a modern society which is in some sense the sum of all our divergent beliefs. Hence, when the pollster asks if they believe in God, global warming, and ghosts, modern subjects respond with their own private judgment based upon whatever criteria they find most probative. Their commonality lies in agreeing to the nature of the space itself: anyone is free to disagree with them, and to present what they regard as better evidence, but no one may deny belief-status to other people, or tell them their subjectivity does not rise to the level of believing.[10]

Whether this formation is better understood as a structural consensus or the soft domination of liberalism is, of course, a matter of perspective: modern belief enables some sorts of freedoms while precluding others. Much has been written about how the modern category of "religion" asserts the rationality of Christian and particularly Protestant values against the alleged backwardness of Islam and other non-Christian "religions."[11] This book is in one sense a deep history of that configuration, showing how the Enlightenment authorized religion by limiting its claims. But, as we shall see, modern belief emerged in the seventeenth century as a critique of sectarian exclusivity, an emancipation rather than a limitation; that it has produced intolerance in the centuries since is not the least of its ironies and represents only one small part of its cultural work.

I hope this understanding of modern belief corresponds to the intuitions of my readers. It also happens to accord with one of the first philosophers of the modern condition, G.W.F. Hegel, who wrote, "The principle of the modern world at large

is freedom of subjectivity."[12] As Hegel explained it, "The right of the subject's particularity to find satisfaction, or—to put it differently—the right of subjective freedom, is the pivotal and focal point in the difference between antiquity and the modern age."[13] This conception of modern subjective right—"The right to recognize nothing that I do not perceive as rational is the highest right of the subject"—maps closely onto modern belief, and Hegel praised its ability to actualize our highest moral selves.[14] But he also feared that, at its worst and when misapprehended, freedom of subjectivity meant that "the concepts of truth and the laws of ethics are reduced to mere opinions and subjective conditions, and the most criminal principles—since they, too, are convictions—are accorded the same status as those laws."[15]

Hegel's worry about relativism, although not his celebration of freedom, is echoed by the historian Brad Gregory, whose 2012 book *The Unintended Reformation* blamed Protestantism for the emergence of what he called "hyperpluralism": the descent of the world into a cacophony of competing truth-claims with no criteria to choose between them.[16] According to Gregory, hyperpluralism developed from the medieval philosophy of "univocity," the notion that God shares characteristics with creation and therefore might be interpreted using the tools of the world.[17] But, according to Gregory, hyperpluralism proliferated with Protestantism's doctrine of *sola scriptura*, the notion that the Bible authenticates itself through the Holy Spirit rather than being authenticated or interpreted by any ultimate religious authority on earth. Having thus concluded that there is no final arbiter of meaning in the world, Gregory writes, the Reformation inevitably fragmented, and it is still fragmenting, to the point that today every individual, with authority over their own ethical system and understanding of the world, is a Reformation unto themselves.

Quite apart from the fact that Catholics have been making versions of this argument since before the ink was dry on Luther's Ninety-Five Theses, there is considerable irony in Gregory's agreement with Hegel and the secular academic tradition. Far from being a new discovery, hyperpluralism—with or without the pejorative tone—is a commonplace of scholarship on the effects of the Reformation. As early as 1959, for instance, Reinhart Koselleck noted, "The Reformation and the subsequent split in religious authority had thrown man back upon his conscience, and a conscience lacking outside support degenerates into the idol of self-righteousness . . . Instead of being a *causa pacis*, the authority of conscience in its subjective plurality is a downright *causa belli civilis*."[18] The literary historian Joanna Picciotto has described it more recently:

> We are all familiar with the story: by putting so much pressure on the category of belief, reformers turned articles of faith into objects of critical reflection and debate, setting into motion a tortuous, bloody, and still unfinished historical process enabling the emergence of a secular sphere of toleration . . . As a consequence of these developments, Western civilization is now characterized by a degree of ideological diversity and social atomization that would be considered intolerable by the generations that lived before secularism's triumph.[19]

From the perspective of the history of belief, however, a different picture emerges. What is most decisively new in modernity is not diversity of judgment—unanimity is always a rare bird—but rather that all the different judgments people make should be accounted beliefs at all. The category of belief itself has evolved into a new kind of epistemological space that properly admits plurality and competition, so that diversity, which in the old dispensation represented a crisis or

absence of belief, in the new dispensation signifies belief itself. In modernity, belief is the space in which rival claims subsist as commensurate alternatives, rather than the space in which one claim triumphs over others.

Gregory's lament that the modern world lacks "any shared or even convergent view about what 'we' think is true or right or good" thus fails to take into account a second-order agreement about the condition of belief itself.[20] Modern belief represents a new form of order rather than simply a descent into chaos, because while of course people today believe vastly different things, they generally accept the epistemic status of one another's beliefs *as* beliefs. They argue about whether given beliefs are justified, warranted, true, or good, whereas premodern Christians routinely denied that other people's claims were beliefs at all. This is not merely a semantic shift, it is about access to a fundamental marker of sovereign personhood, creating the conditions for peace in a diverse society.[21]

The Reformation did not inaugurate this change. As we shall see, the Protestant doctrine of interpretation did not open belief to private judgment; instead it introduced an alternative authoritarianism based upon the supremacy of a believing minority over an unbelieving world. The Reformation and Counter-Reformation thus participated in parallel projects of religious discipline: while Catholics disciplined populations to believe, Protestants disciplined populations of unbelievers. Modern belief did not emerge from either of these models, but rather in reaction against the stark regime they jointly created.

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There are a few excellent histories of belief upon which the present study builds. Perhaps the greatest is *Did the Greeks*

Believe in Their Myths? by Paul Veyne, who argued that normal epistemic belief did not apply to Greek mythology because "the content of myth was situated in a noble and platonic temporality": myths were "accepted as true in the sense that they were not doubted, but they were not accepted the way that everyday reality is."[22] Malcolm Ruel briefly outlined six stages of historical development of Christian belief: from a form of trust, to a factual conviction, to an initiatory doctrine, to a corporately declared orthodoxy, to an inwardly organized experience, to a common value.[23] Paul Ricoeur identified three modalities of belief in the history of philosophy: the Platonic idea of belief as opinion, the Cartesian idea of belief as judgment or consent, and the Christian idea of belief as faith.[24] Jean Wirth explored what he called the "birth of the concept of belief," especially the differentiation of cognitive assent from faith.[25] More recently, Susan Schreiner's *Are You Alone Wise?* identified many of the pathologies that attached to the early modern insistence that true belief was by definition certain.[26] Glenn Most's *Doubting Thomas* explored the problem that religious belief ought not to rely on the evidence of the senses.[27] Steven Justice and George Hoffman both explored, in different ways, how unbelief was at times constitutive of, or implicated in, the construction of belief.[28]

These and other fine studies are dwarfed by the enormous scholarship on the alleged decline of belief in the West. The literature on atheism, skepticism, and doubt is truly vast, and quite apart from its size, it sits at the center of the project of modern history, tacitly denying that belief can have a history beyond its fall. Against this emphasis on unbelief, there are, of course, innumerable histories of particular beliefs and belief systems. But to a remarkable extent, these, too, are written as if belief were an empty vessel waiting to be filled with content, stubbornly denying that the category itself has a history.

This is not, I think, because belief appears so natural and self-evident that scholars have not felt the need to provide it with a history. Recent decades have seen an explosion of fascinating histories of related (and no less seemingly natural) categories. Just to recommend a few examples, Steven Shapin's *A Social History of Truth* and Richard Green's *A Crisis of Truth* historicize one epistemological category, while Mary Poovey's *A History of the Modern Fact* and Barbara Shapiro's *A Culture of Fact* historicize another; Stuart Clark's *Vanities of the Eye* explores the early modern crisis in the reliability of sensory knowledge; Craig Muldrew's *The Economy of Obligation* explores the evolving concept of credit; Valentin Groebner's *Who Are You?* explores the emergence of reliable knowledge of individual personhood.[29] More broadly, historicizing supposedly natural categories, sometimes under the heading *Begriffsgeschichte* or "conceptual history," has been at the heart of our discipline since the 1980s.[30] So why is there so little history of belief?

One answer must surely involve the privileged status of religion: within the "knowledge problem," belief remains the most sacred of cows. Most historians of Christianity are practitioners of Christianity, if only because, just as so many historians of science have advanced degrees in science, the ability to make sense of highly technical subjects requires special training. Scholars who are not already invested in these recondite fields typically seek specialties with lower entry barriers than theology or physics. But while historians of science are not also running laboratories, many historians of Christianity are, if no longer typically members of the clergy, then at least still concerned about their Christian identity and spiritual estate. Perhaps it should not be surprising, then, that while historians of science have systematically challenged the foundational categories and transcendent presumptions of science, historians of Christianity have not followed suit. While

most historians of science do not still believe in early modern science, many historians of Christianity still believe in early modern Christianity.

Moreover, writing a history of belief necessarily challenges any notion that belief itself is ineffable or timeless. It therefore presents at least an implicit challenge to certain versions of Christian orthodoxy—perhaps not orthodoxies to which most historians would adhere, but ones that they may be concerned about offending. Yet this should be no impediment. When Christian belief appears in the historical record, it collapses onto the mundane: there is no separate language with which to describe the inexpressible, hence it emerges from our sources in terms historians can comprehend, like any other human category. Ever since the Epistle to the Hebrews defined faith as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen," Christianity has been haunted by its reliance upon material signifiers—substance, evidence—to explain the spiritual. Thus, what makes the historical study of belief possible also makes it potentially unsettling to Christian presumptions. To "take belief seriously," that clarion call of historians of religion, requires confronting all the surprising ways that the purportedly transcendent changes over time. Even the very assertion that Christian belief is categorically different from other kinds of knowledge has evolved as a result of its paradoxical intersection with profane ways of knowing. No wonder "belief" has so little history.

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An excursus may be useful here concerning the word "belief," especially in relation to another word, "faith."

I want to stress from the outset that this is not a book about a word, it is a book about a *problem*. My central concern is

with what we might call "religious knowledge," particularly the problem of what sort of knowledge that might be. When I ask, "What did it mean to believe?" I am asking about the changing relationship between religion and epistemology: what was religious knowledge, and how did it relate to other things people thought? My attention to this configuration is not intended to foreclose other articulations of the problem.[31] But what interests me are the complexities that emerged whenever the epistemic qualities of belief were activated. The prominence of doctrinal content is often described as one of Christianity's distinctive features among world religions; this book studies the challenges posed by that peculiar emphasis and suggests that they were central to the intellectual development of the modern West.

But, of course, the word belief is ineluctably tied to another word, faith. Faith can certainly refer to epistemic claims, so it is of interest here, but while in English belief almost always involves the problem of knowledge, faith only sometimes does.[32] Faith can also refer to the spiritual state in which knowledge is received, as when Augustine distinguished *fides quae creditur* from *fides qua creditur*—the faith which is believed, and the faith *by* which it is believed.[33] In the Middle Ages, furthermore, faith could mean loyally commending oneself to the protection of another person; this sociopolitical meaning bled into the religious, in the sense that a faithful Christian was someone loyal to the Church.[34] Faith could also refer more broadly to social trust, like the fidelity of a spouse. And while belief usually made claims about the present, faith often implied a trust in some future outcome. To historicize belief, then, is not the same thing as historicizing faith, even if there is significant overlap between them—indeed their relationship, and the question of when faith did indeed imply knowledge, is part of what must be historicized.[35]

Different contexts pose different challenges. In ancient Greek, where there were not separate words for belief and faith, the most famous description of the semantic field I am considering occurs in Plato's *Republic*, when Socrates asks Glaucon to imagine an unequally divided line: the smaller segment represents *doxa*, usually translated as opinion, while the larger segment represents *episteme*, or knowledge. Doxa is then further divided into *eikasia*, or imagination, and *pistis*, or belief. So pistis functioned as a subset of opinion concerning the lower world of sensible things. Elsewhere, in the dialogue *Theaetetus* and more famously in the *Meno*, Plato proposed that knowledge is *orthos doxa*—right opinion—when *logos* can be provided to justify it, suggesting the famous axiom that knowledge is justified true belief; unlike mere belief, which can so easily be misled, knowledge is constitutively bound to the truth.[36] But this epistemological framework, with its more or less derogatory view of pistis, was not the end of the story. A different framework could be found in the Greek rhetorical tradition, where pistis could mean evidence or proof, but it could also mean an argument using proof (in this sense there were three species of *pisteis*: arguments from *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*), and it could mean the state of mind induced by proof, in other words, belief.[37]

Despite its importance to philosophy and rhetoric, pistis was not a central term in classical Greek religion, nor in the Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Bible.[38] Christians thus invented, as Teresa Morgan shows, employing all their practical knowledge of social trust, distinguishing between salutary pistis in a master or friend, and perilous pistis in hearsay or discourse.[39] Some have argued that the Christian concept of faith developed from the Greek rhetorical concept of persuasion (*peithō*), etymologically linked to pistis; but the "persuasion" of the New Testament is usually

persuasion *without* evidence and argument, rather than persuasion *from* evidence and argument, making it more of a response to the classical concept than an elaboration of it.[40] Only in Acts 17:31, when Paul submits Christ's resurrection as "assurance" [pistis] of Christian doctrine, does the word function as evidence; here, as David Marno has argued, Paul had just arrived in Greece and was offering the Greeks a bit of their own rhetoric.[41] Elsewhere, the New Testament radically distinguished pistis from proof. The classic definition in Hebrews 11:1—"*Pistis* is the substance [*hypostasis*] of things hoped for, the evidence [*elenchus*] of things not seen"— ironically suggests that in the invisible realm pistis must function without proof at all. As Jesus said to Doubting Thomas, "Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed [*pisteusantes*]."

In German, as in Greek, the words belief and faith are not ordinarily distinguished: the noun *der Glaube* is both belief and faith, while the verb *sie glaubt* is usually translated "she believes" simply because we have no term "she faiths." So, for instance, when in 1534 the radical spiritualist Sebastian Franck offered the paradox *Der Glauben glaubt im Unglauben*—belief believes in unbelief—should we understand this as a statement about knowledge or fidelity? We cannot know for certain; but the ambiguity itself was often productive of the very problem we are pondering. Consider translations of Martin Luther's *Small Catechism* from German into Latin. One key passage was, in English translation, "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ."[42] In the original German, both iterations of "believe" are forms of the verb *glaube*. When two translations into Latin appeared almost simultaneously in 1529, one of them, by an unknown translator, used *credere* for both iterations of "believe"; this version quickly passed into oblivion. But the other translation

by Johann Sauermann, which was approved by Luther himself and saw more than sixty editions before the end of the century, translated the first "believe" with credere and the second with *fidere*. Luther and his translator chose this alternative, which means "to trust" or "to rely," to make a theological point: what is missing from human assent to divine propositions is trust.[43]

Latin has its own problems. As in English, the verb credere (to believe) has a different root than the noun *fides* (faith). This maps more or less neatly onto French, Spanish, and other romance languages. The problem, however, is that classical Latin did not quite use a noun corresponding directly to the verb credere: that is, it had the verb "to believe" but not really the nouns "belief" and "beliefs." I say "not really" because there were important partial exceptions. Of course, rough synonyms were employed—*assensus*, *opinio*, *persuasio*—whose different roots suggested different connotations. More importantly, there was the noun *credulitas*. But while its antonym, *incredulitas*, corresponds closely to our word "unbelief," credulitas was not usually used to mean belief. In the Vulgate Bible, the word incredulitas appears more than thirty times, but the noun credulitas is absent: the Greek pistis is instead translated mechanically by fides, much to the aggravation of the early sixteenth-century translator Erasmus, who thought credulitas or *fiducia* was often better suited.[44] The closest the Vulgate comes to using credulitas is the adjectival variant *credulus*, which appears only once and does not refer to religious belief at all: in Genesis 39:19, Potiphar is too *credulus* to his wife's malicious accusation against Joseph. More generally, in the Christian tradition, credulitas usually means "credulity" in the negative sense, often applied to superstition. Even when used in a positive sense, it typically connotes simplicity; it is not the positive content of Christian belief so much as the guileless condition of the humble Christian before God.

Another Latin candidate for belief is *credendum*, or its plural *credenda*, a gerundive form of the verb credere which we might translate as "a thing to be believed." Credenda is sometimes used to mean doctrine, the positive content or "beliefs" of Christianity. But beliefs is not a very good translation, because the gerundive in Latin carries connotations of requirement or necessity: credenda are things that *ought* to be believed or *must* be believed. The word corresponds grammatically to *agenda*, things to be done, and as every department chair knows, what is on the agenda is not necessarily what happens. A better translation would be dogma, or rules of faith. No one would use credenda for things that they happened to believe as individuals, or to distinguish one set of beliefs from another; credenda were instead the intellective requirements of Christianity upon Christians.[45]

The things we call beliefs could be organized under the medieval Latin *credentia*, a twelfth-century neologism which could mean doctrine, but also meant letters of commercial credit or safe conduct. But much more often, as in the Vulgate Bible, beliefs were simply represented in Latin by the term fides: what Augustine termed *fides quae creditur*, the faith which is believed. The trick, then, is figuring out when fides particularly concerned knowledge. Luckily, it was common for Christian writers to authorize us to hear belief-talk by using the verb credere to describe what they meant. So, just to give one example, the Italian Jesuit Roberto Bellarmino argued that the phrase "one faith, one baptism" in Ephesians 4:5 refers to the "object of faith," that is, "what we all believe," rather than to trust; here Bellarmino was self-consciously repudiating the theological interpretation that had led Martin Luther's authorized translator to replace credere with fidere in his *Small Catechism*.[46]

I do not describe these lexical problems because I have solved them. Rather, the problems themselves demonstrate

my fundamental point that belief is not the natural or simple category it is usually presumed to be. It is instead a constantly changing space where the nature of religious knowledge is contested and constructed.

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If historians have not much contemplated the meaning of belief, other academic disciplines have. Considering two of those disciplines—anthropology and philosophy—suggests what might be gained by a properly historical account.

Anthropology, like history, "includes countless descriptions of the content of people's beliefs, but . . . only a handful of critical examinations of the concept." But more so than in history, those critical examinations have had significant impact.[47] Rodney Needham's foundational *Belief, Language, and Experience* (1972) urged banishing the term belief from ethnography altogether, on the grounds that it is an untranslatable Christian construct which ipso facto judges other cultures according to Western norms. Needham's work proved influential, especially forcing open the alleged dichotomy between propositional belief and embodied practice.[48] Thus, a lively debate in recent years has considered whether and how anthropologists might legitimately re-deploy the concept of belief, given both its lexical unavoidability and a postcolonial modernity in which ethnographic subjects all over the world apply the exogenous European concept of belief to themselves.[49]

One unintended consequence of this debate is a tendency among anthropologists to carefully define what belief *is* in order to avoid using it insensitively, with the perverse effect of naturalizing the very thing they seek to problematize. Either anthropologists declare that belief *is* a cognitive commitment to a clear set of doctrinal propositions, so they can

avoid foisting it upon cultures with other priorities; or they declare that belief *is* a nonliteral social or ethical commitment embodied in symbolism and practice, so they can transport it across boundaries; or they reject both these alternatives and invent sui generis versions of belief that authorize their own cross-cultural comparisons.[50] From an historian's perspective, these various interpretive gambits are generally plausible, in that each could find support in the Christian tradition where the Western concept of belief developed. Yet each would also encounter opposition in that tradition, and to take any of them for granted creates normativity rather than challenging it.[51]

The most influential contributor to this debate is Talal Asad, whose *Genealogies of Religion* extended Needham's critique of belief to the concept of religion more broadly. Asad argued that there can be no transcultural definition of religion, because the project to create one, the desire to design an abstract category of religion that transcends particular contexts, is already inherently Western. As Asad put it, the idea that "religion is essentially a matter of symbolic meanings . . . and that it must not be confused with any of its particular historical or cultural forms, is in fact a view that has a specific Christian history."[52] The heart of that history was the transformation of Christianity from a medieval religion of outward public participation and social discipline into a modern religion of inward conscience: "The only legitimate space allowed to Christianity by post-Enlightenment society [is] the right to individual belief . . . The suggestion that religion has a universal function in belief is one indication of how marginal religion has become in modern industrial society."[53] It is this post-Enlightenment, internal, propositional version of religion, Asad argues, against which other religions are measured and found wanting.

As a critique of religion, Asad's reasoning is powerful. But note the work that belief does in his model: it stands as

a proxy for that turn inward. The work of history, for Asad, was to raise belief onto a pedestal from which it gazes condescendingly at the world; but belief itself does not change in his model, it merely emerges. Thus, in order to create a genealogy of religion, Asad denies belief a history, participating in the broader tendency to essentialize the category. Like the scholars he criticizes, he treats belief as a coherent and stable epistemological object which one might either find or not find in a culture, rather than as a changing cultural space in which epistemology is negotiated.

By offering a history of belief rather than a genealogy of religion, this book will thus challenge some stubborn assumptions. What is desperately in need of critique is the very notion that belief has a fixed, universally viable meaning. Indeed, one argument of this book is that modern belief, as it developed historically in opposition to narrow and normative definitions of believing, in many ways prefigured the Asadian critical project. Just as Asad contends that "religion" normatively universalizes from an exclusive category, rendering other instantiations of religion incomplete, so modern belief developed in opposition to a categorical exclusivity that had left most people unable to believe. This is not simply to note a similarity, but to suggest more ambitiously that the historical transformation of Christian belief from fixed orthodoxy to human judgment, opening the category of belief to different ways of knowing, was the intellectual stuff of which modern critique is made. Crucial to my argument is that the kind of judgment at stake in the emergence of modern belief was *not* the Kantian version so deplored by critics of Enlightenment—the universalizing power of reason—but rather something more like subjective assessment. This formulation, while hardly innocent of discursive power, is not quite so obviously an attempt to control discourse itself.[54]

If we turn from anthropology to philosophy, a different disciplinary practice unfolds. Analytic philosophers generally begin with an "intuition" about what belief is, then trace that intuition forward to its logical conclusions, seeing where its consequences clash with other intuitions. Their goal is not transcendent truth but rather clarity of thought, exposing inconsistencies and helping to understand what is entailed by the positions we hold. Thus, it is informative to notice when the intuitions with which philosophers begin—the common ground shared by a wide range of thinkers, designed to appeal to the common sense of their readers—would *not* have been widely shared before the seventeenth century. Let me offer three examples.[55]

First, an important concern in modern philosophy is what "justifies" a belief. Most philosophers would hold that a belief is justified if the available evidence makes it likely: for any proposition p, the greater the evidence of it being true, the greater our justification for believing it. If it turns out that p is false, then our belief was untrue, but it was not unjustified if a large preponderance of evidence supported it. This intuition produces the sorts of problems philosophers love. So, for instance, consider the lottery paradox, available in many forms: I have bought a ticket for a lottery with a thousand tickets, the winner has been chosen, but I have not yet heard who has won. Given the vanishingly small odds of winning, I am *justified* in believing that I have lost. But by the same logic, I am justified in believing that each ticket has lost, and this is an impossibility, because one of the tickets has won.[56]

For a variety of reasons, this would not have made much sense before the seventeenth century. Statistical and probabilistic reasoning was embryonic if not nonexistent: not only had its mathematics not been elaborated, but the whole project of finding evidence in uncertainty was referred to divine

providence rather than probability.[57] To put it another way, calculating likelihoods is poorly aligned with understanding God's eternal will. But more broadly, weighing or assessing a preponderance of evidence—at least in religion, the central issue in medieval discussions of belief—ordinarily would not have been accounted as belief at all; instead, it would have been understood as *opinion*. According to Thomas Aquinas, an opinion is an "act of the intellect inclined to one alternative while retaining respect for the other."[58] Religious belief did *not* retain respect for the alternative, but rather was by definition firm and certain. In this sense, Aquinas and his tradition suggest that *there can be no such thing* as "justified belief" in the modern sense of justification: if you hold the proposition p in proportion to the evidence for p, you either have knowledge (if the evidence is incontrovertible) or opinion (if the evidence is merely strong) but never belief.

Second, a fundamental debate in the philosophy of mind asks whether belief is voluntary: can you choose to believe? Bernard Williams, in his celebrated essay "Deciding to Believe," argued that belief is involuntary because by definition "beliefs aim at truth." Other philosophers, following in the tradition of John Henry Newman and William James, have responded that voluntarism remains compatible with the intuition that "beliefs aim at truth." Robert Nozick, for instance, inserted a practical component: beliefs do not *only* aim at truth, they also aim to benefit the believer. So, for instance, parents can decide to believe that their child is innocent, against the evidence presented in a courtroom, insofar as for them, as opposed to the jurors, the practical benefits outweigh the epistemic costs. In another version, Andrew Reisner asserts that the mere fact that "beliefs aim at truth" does not necessarily make belief involuntary, because there are conditions where having a belief will *cause* that belief to be true. William James

had said something like this in the nineteenth century when he offered the example of believing that someone likes you: believing it helps them like you, so the unlikelihood of its prior truth need not prohibit believing it.[59]

All of this is very clever, but again its suppositions are relentlessly modern. While Christians in previous eras might have agreed that "beliefs aim at truth," the idea that this could therefore shape an argument about voluntarism would have made little sense. Augustine of Hippo famously argued that "to believe is to think with assent": an act of *will* is required to turn thought into belief, so all belief is in some meaningful sense voluntary. But this did not imply voluntarism in the modern sense, because the will (*voluntas*) was presumed to be fallen. If the will is in some sense disabled—"we are not able not to sin" as Augustine put it—then "voluntary" does not mean free choice.[60] In an Augustinian thought-world, you might well aim at truth by choosing to believe something false, because the will is so clouded and divorced from reason.

Third, another classic philosophical problem is "Moore's paradox." G. E. Moore identified a difference between applying the verb "believe" to yourself and applying it to others. For some reason, intuition tells us it is nonsensical to say, "It is raining, but I do not believe it is raining," while it is reasonable to say, in the third person, "It is raining, but *she* does not believe it is raining." Moore's explanation was that the assertion "It is raining" carries an implicit belief-claim, so the words "It is raining" really mean "I believe it is raining"; the first-person sentence therefore contains a direct contradiction while the third-person sentence does not. Ludwig Wittgenstein, however, noticed that more was going on in Moore's paradox: the verb "to believe" means different things in the first-person present tense because we are thinkers who can notice ourselves in the act of thinking. When I say, "I believe that p," I

am potentially saying something about myself as much as I am saying something about the world: Wittgenstein sardonically described a man who asks if there is a fire in the next room, and when given the answer, "I believe there is," he replies, "Don't be irrelevant. I asked you about the fire, not about your state of mind!"[61] Moore's paradox has therefore progressed through modern philosophy as a way of analyzing the fragmented subject, for whom "I believe that *p*" knits together a series of potentially distinct dispositions and claims.[62]

But Moore's paradox would not have appeared so paradoxical before the rise of modern belief, because the statement "*P*, but I do not believe that *p*" would not have been intuitively nonsensical. We shall encounter many people claiming to know a thing is true without believing it, or even believing and not believing at the same time. One example is William Shakespeare's Sonnet 138: "When my love swears that she is made of truth / I do believe her, though I know she lies."[63] But more important examples concern the proposition "God is." Medieval and early modern Christians often took it for granted that everyone *knows* God is, but many do not *believe* God is, because belief was a more demanding epistemic condition. "Belief" was also taken to have distinct carnal and spiritual meanings. When the Bible says, "Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble" (James 2:19), that did not mean that devils believe the same way Christians believe: they use different faculties, and their beliefs are directed toward different ends. This is what philosophers call "nonstandard semantics," but it is only nonstandard today.[64]

More examples could be offered of modern assumptions about belief that appear incompatible with earlier understandings. But I do not want to belabor the point; this analysis should already be sufficient to the task of denaturalizing the

intuitions of the modern philosophy of mind. My project is not to argue against these philosophers, who battle valiantly for clarity against the dark forces of muddle, but to suggest that modern muddles evolved from different muddles past.

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This is a history of ideas. I am concerned in these pages not with the ordinary pious business of believing, but with sites where Christians indulged in second-order thinking about what it meant to believe.[65] This is therefore *not* a history of belief as it was lived and practiced, a limitation that carries costs: I study belief outside its natural habitat, and among literate elites rather than the ordinary Europeans who must often have challenged their prescriptions. But the benefit of my approach is to escape the pious presumption that belief is simply the positive content of religion, equally and unproblematically present in every action or claim. This is crucial, because once we accept that the concept of belief has a history, we can see how it functioned as an axis of inclusion and exclusion, a framework through which some voices were authorized while others were silenced. By isolating belief as an intellectual problem, we can track the shifting claims that religious doctrine made upon the mind and upon the world.

This inevitably raises the question of whether this book is really a history of belief at all, or merely a history of belief-talk: does belief change over time, or is it only the way people describe belief that changes? At some level this is a philosophical question, beyond the cognizance of historians. We have direct evidence only for ink deposited on paper, not for processes of mind. But a partial solution is suggested by historians of the emotions, who argue that emotions are shaped by the cultural conditions in which they are experienced. If, for

instance, there was a fad for emotional intensity and copious weeping in eighteenth-century Europe, does that mean that people's emotions changed? At the very least, it means that the way people *experienced* their emotions changed, and emotions are experiences of mental processes as much as the processes themselves. So it is with belief. If the Protestant Reformation unleashed new ways of describing belief, does that mean that Protestants believed differently? Well, certainly the way they *experienced* their belief changed, and belief is, at least in part, an experience of believing by self-conscious subjects.[66]

As these provisos suggest, *The Birth of Modern Belief* is an essay with an argument rather than an exhaustive survey of its vast subject, and this compression has required some hard choices. First, while I burrow down into details at many points, there are also places where I have been content to settle for generalities, letting an example or two stand for a more complex reality. In trying to achieve explanatory power, tracing the arc of my story across half a millennium, I have inevitably sacrificed some measure of analytical control. My hope is that the broad claims of this book will be sufficiently compelling to encourage others to nuance them. Second, while parts of this book map the terrain of belief broadly, other parts are unabashedly teleological, describing the emergence of new ideas because of their long-term historical importance. I do not feel the need to repeat endlessly the truism that the rise of one thing does not entail the fall of everything else; readers should take it for granted that change happens slowly and un-evenly. But I believe that the purpose of history as a discipline is to explain change over time, hence my emphasis on strands of thought that signal the most significant transformations. Third, the range of this book is shaped by my own expertise, and I hope my specialist knowledge in some areas compen-sates for limitations elsewhere. This is a history of Christianity,

not of Judaism, Islam, or other religions that played important roles in the West and have their own overlapping modernities.[67] In terms of subject matter, I focus on belief in God and formal doctrines, touching only occasionally on witchcraft, magic, and spirits.[68] Geographically, Britain plays an oversized role, followed by France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, and Italy. I hope that my argument would not be significantly altered by a different focus, but that is for others to determine.

A brief description of the argument is now in order. By the later Middle Ages, the category of belief possessed an elaborate topography in the Latin West. Belief did not necessarily entail knowledge-claims, because believing could adhere in baptism. Likewise, the doctrine of "implicit faith" meant that, by believing that everything the Church said was true, Christians could be said to believe a series of doctrines they neither knew nor understood. But atop these foundations, which made every nominal Christian in some sense a believer, there were many other kinds of belief as well, from the doctrinal belief that underlay rationalist theology, to the mystical belief of direct experience of God, to the rarefied belief that came from saving faith.

This framework came crashing down in the Reformation, as Protestants, Anabaptists, and Catholics all drew dark lines around belief. Protestants made the most difficult version the only one that mattered: no longer broad and complex, belief was narrowed and simplified, available only to a godly minority. Anabaptists went further, limiting belief to the perfection of the elect or even declaring belief too rarefied to subsist in a fallen world. Catholics responded by reducing belief to a form of obedience, putting belief into the hands of authority. Christians of all stripes adopted extreme positions, either borrowed selectively from the past or invented out of whole cloth,

to weaponize belief within the emergent confessional struggle. The result was a crisis in which Christians confronted the daunting challenge of believing.

So in the seventeenth century, Christians contested the logic of the confessional era, constructing broader and more inclusive understandings of what it meant to believe. What united these new perspectives against their medieval as much as their confessional predecessors was a common emphasis on sovereign judgment. Religious knowledge was redefined beyond the control of authority, justified in the world rather than outside of it, much like opinion or natural knowledge. Thus, the Christian category of belief became commensurate with belief in science, society, and the self, resulting in an epochal displacement of belief onto the secular.

My largest argument, then, is that Western modernity is characterized not by a decline of belief but by its boundless proliferation: today belief is everywhere, but in forms that would not have been recognized as belief in previous eras. This proliferation of belief does not imply that religion remained the cornerstone of Western civilization; on the contrary, modern belief was the sharp edge that perforated Christianity, breaching the wall that had separated religion from profane ways of knowing.[69] This is, I hope, a considerable revision of the ordinary view that in modernity religion has been relegated to a separate, private sphere. Secularization in the West was not about the segregation of belief from the world, but the promiscuous opening of belief to the world.

Finally, while this is a book about belief, it is not *only* about belief. Precisely because belief changes over time, it can never be disaggregated from the culture it inhabits. It is no coincidence, for instance, that the Middle Ages toggled between versions of belief that were easy and versions that were hard, befitting a Christian society in which everyone was

presumptively a believer, and yet no one could be understood to believe so successfully that they transcended the control of the Church. It is no coincidence that in the early modern era, as all foundations of knowledge seemed to be undermined, belief became a way of asserting exclusive possession of rare and valuable truths. And it is no coincidence that in a modern, liberal society designed around choice and competition, belief is presumed to be individual and free, so that religious belief is imagined essentially like any other sort of preference, permeable to incentives and market pressures, subject to social-scientific analysis. The category of belief, in the aggregate, is a distillation of social relations, epistemology, doctrine, and values, forming a window onto the thought-worlds of the past. Karl Marx claimed that he wrote about the commodity because it was the smallest unit of analysis that contains the whole social universe. Likewise, belief is the smallest unit of analysis through which Western society has expressed what it means to be an authentic and complete human subject, the subject who speaks the words *I believe.*