

**Belief Matters:
Reconceptualizing Belief and Its Use**

2 April 2009
Columbia University
New York City

Featured speakers include:

Michael Taussig, Professor of Anthropology, Columbia University
Author of *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (1980), *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (1993), *The Magic of the State* (1997)

and

Penny Edgell, Professor of Sociology, University of Minnesota
Author of *Congregations in Conflict* (1999), *Religion and Family in a Changing Society* (2005), and "Atheists As 'Other': Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society" (*American Sociological Review*, 2006)

Hosted by the Columbia University Religion Graduate Students Association

In recent decades, sociologically- and anthropologically-minded scholars of religion have attempted to shift scholarly attention away from belief and doctrine to rituals, practices, identities, and institutions. This shift in focus has stemmed from a recognition that "lived religion" is multi-layered, ambiguous, and less systematic than belief-centered paradigms imply, as well as from an awareness that such paradigms fit some traditions and methodologies better than others.

The turn away from belief-as-doctrine has helped scholars see religion as a dynamic phenomenon that exists beyond the confines of peoples' heads. At the same time, however, has this shift kept scholars from examining other ways in which belief and believing remain central to how people conceptualize what religion is and how it operates in the world? By reexamining what it means to "believe," this conference explores if and how belief matters.

We invite paper submissions (400-500 words) related to any of the following themes:

Belief vs. Practice

Papers on this theme might sharpen the critique of belief-centered paradigms, or defend their importance. Are ritual and practice better ways of conceiving religion and identity? Should belief play a role in studies of religious practice? Papers might address the ambiguous (and sometimes seemingly inconsistent) relationship between belief and behavior.

Belief in People and Places

Papers on this theme might focus on the notion of believing *in* something--as opposed to believing *that* something is true. Objects of belief may include charismatic leaders, saints (hagiography), and sacred places (e.g., pilgrimage sites).

Ways of Believing

Papers on this theme might focus on cultural, historical, and sectarian differences or developments in what it means to believe. Papers may examine, for example, post-enlightenment developments in western notions of belief and believing, the role of law in structuring acceptable ways of believing and belonging, or issues

relating to how groups and individuals conceive and present their "beliefs"--including varying uses of such terms as "spiritual" and "religious." Papers might address atheism, science, or nationalism as alternative modes of belief.

Conflict, Cosmopolitanism, and Social Reform

Papers might address the rhetoric about belief and believing that governments and political and humanitarian groups use to justify or engender support for their policies or actions. How have groups in various cultural contexts situated their own beliefs or those of others in relation to "universal" human rights? How have social reformers in various historical contexts used language about beliefs in tactical ways?

Counting Believers

Papers on this theme might discuss questions about the role of belief in determining community membership--both from the perspective of practitioners and scholars. Papers might focus not just on modern communities (who, for example, count as "evangelical Christians"?) but also on communities from the distant past (who, for example, count as "early Christians"?).

Belief and Science

Scientific critiques of "religion" often frame their critiques in general terms but in fact focus their criticism on certain beliefs or modes of belief. How do alternate ways of thinking about belief unsettle conventional oppositions between religious belief and science?

Belief and Ethics

How does belief and believing inform decisions regarding right and wrong conduct in the world?

Submission Information

Deadline: Monday, December 1st

Email 400-500 word paper proposal and a brief bio to:
columbia.religion@gmail.com

Final papers should be 9-12 double-spaced pages in length
(presenters will have approximately 20-25 minutes to speak)

Conference Co-chairs

Patton Burchett
Daniel Vaca