PART I

THE FRAMEWORK OF BELIEF

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The intellectualist programme

I am concerned with two – on the face of it, sharply opposed –
approaches to religion. In this chapter I set out the first of these
– 'intellectualism'; some philosophical issues which bear on it are
discussed in the appendix. The other of the two approaches is
the subject of the remaining chapters of Part I.

The initial conception

For the intellectualist the contrasted concepts of *tradition* and
modernity mark out a systematic and deep-running difference
between forms of religion – a difference in the aims, interests and
felt rewards of religious life. When we speak of the 'traditional'
culture of, for example, an African village or township, we are
thinking of that culture just in so far as (among other things) it
has been insulated from the explosion of scientific knowledge,
the resulting leap in men's ability to control their natural en-
vironment and its consequences. Related to these differences,
and contributing with them to the complex distinction between
'traditional' and 'modern', is the contrast between contemporary
religion in the West and the religious thought traditional in such
a village or township. So intellectualism starts with a claimed
contrast between traditional and modern religion – the contrast-
ing characteristics of which must then be set out, and will in turn
require contrasting explanations. What will also be required, of
course, is some account, consistent with these differences, of why

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we group traditional and modern religion together as forms of *religion*.

On the intellectualist view,[1] traditional religion pre-eminently takes the form of a cosmology whose basic explanatory category is that of *agency*: its pantheon of gods and spirits, whose actions have consequences in the perceptible world, can be invoked to explain why this rather than that event occurred; and it affords a means by which men, through influencing the will of the gods, can themselves hope to influence the course of events. Modern religion, on the other hand, has relinquished the explanation and control of nature to science, and restricts itself to other functions – here the account is rather broadly sketched – which religion has either always had or has gradually acquired. Religious – and also magical – activities in traditional societies, then, are to be taken by and large to be intended ways of bringing about desired events or avoiding feared ones; and the ideas which give them point are again to be taken literally as cosmological in character. What is more – and here we come to the distinctive feature of the intellectualist view – the explanation (at least in its main outline) of this cosmological emphasis is taken to be that traditional religious thought originates and persists as an attempt – not self-consciously experimental, but nevertheless to some degree re-sponsive to experience – to explain and control the natural environment. Other aspects and preoccupations of religious life are then to be understood as building on the emotional and moral possibilities opened up by a cosmology based on the fun-damental notion of personal agency.

Four stages of explanation

The sequence of explanation which this approach implies can be set out in more detail. Proponents and opponents are agreed in regarding it as the development of a tradition which Evans-Pritchard called the 'English' or 'intellectualist' interpretation of religion and magic.[2] For present purposes we need go no further back than the writings of Frazer and Tylor, though a proper intellectual history would refer to many other names (Spencer, Jevons and Comte, for example).[3] What these two writers have in common in the first place is something that looks like no more

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than an innocuous methodological platitude. " It is, I think ", said
Tylor (1866: 86), "a principle to be held fast in studying the early
history of our race, that we ought always to look for practical and
intelligible motives for the habits and opinions we find existing
in the world." But when the implications which Tylor took this
dictum to have are spelt out, they lead into an outlined pro-
gramme of questions and blocked-out answers which in turn raise
further questions and in this way dictate the direction in which
explanation will go. The programme falls naturally into four
stages.

The first of these, Stage I, starts with the question: Why do
people in traditional cultures perform magical and religious
actions? They perform them, said Tylor and Frazer, because they
believe them to be means of bringing about ends which they seek.
This they believe because – in the case of magic – they suppose
that there are spells, actions and objects which, properly spoken,
performed and used, will produce effects on weather, crops,
game, the psycho-physical or spiritual condition of others or of
oneself and so on; and because – in the case of religion – they
suppose that there are spirits and gods, normally not perceived,
but usually not in principle imperceptible. who are able to in-
fluence men's lives and their environment in favourable or
unfavourable response to their behaviour – of which the spirits
and gods are taken to be aware.

In many societies, people see themselves as members of a
greater community to which some at least of these spiritual beings
also belong; so that the complex web of reciprocal obligations
which binds together the members of a community is thought
of as woven also between, say, men, ancestor-spirits and gods.
Hence men may perform religious rites, in accordance with the
hierarchical obligations of such a community, as they perform
ceremonious or formal actions in accordance with the hier-
archical obligations of their human society. But within this
ceremonial framework they also perform actions which they
may conceive to be, for example, the striking of a bargain or an
exchange of gifts with spirits or gods who have the power to
influence their lives for good or ill – whether these are thought
of as belonging to the wider spiritual community which so many
religions postulate, or as being outside it.

This all naturally leads to the next question, with which Stage

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II of the programme is concerned, namely: Why are these
beliefs, which inform magical and religious behaviour, accepted?
Why do people think spells and 'medicines' are efficacious? Why
do they believe in the existence of unperceived beings who have
goals, intelligence, the power to influence natural events and
some sort of interest in human affairs? Here the intellectualist's
uncontroversial first answer is that the believer grows up in a
culture in which such beliefs are socially legitimate, and is socia-
lised into them, just as we grow up in a culture in which it is
accepted that the earth is round and moves round the sun, and
are taught to believe it. And just as the number of people in our
society who would accept the truth of, for example, the general
theory of relativity exceeds the number who can understand (let
alone explain) it, so people brought up to accept cosmological
doctrines, religious or magical, may take them to be true even
when they do not themselves claim fully to understand them.
Obviously this answer is in itself only a first step. It does not
explain how these beliefs, accepted in society, originated. Nor
does it explain why they persist. The question of how accepted
beliefs and attitudes actually change lies at the heart of any
contrast between 'traditional' and 'modern', or 'closed' and
'open', societies. It is however a truism that in every society
beliefs can fail to be retained not merely as a result of incomplete
transmission, or because inefficient transmission allows their char-
acter to be gradually metamorphosed through an accretion of
misinterpretations – 'channel noise' – but also as a consequence
of positive rejection.

Hence there arises the question with which Stage III of the
intellectualist programme is concerned: Why do people *go on*
believing the religious and magical doctrines which give point to
their rites? The answer which Tylor gave to this question was to
be an influential one. Some of his reasons depend on the assump-
tion that magicians have often been tricksters, carrying out
conscious deceits. But he grants that "magic has not its origins
in fraud, and seems seldom practised as an utter imposture"
(Tylor 1891, 1: 134). There is then still a question as to why "honest
but unscientific people" should continue "practising occult
science in good faith" (p. 135). Among various other reasons he
gives (such as the indefiniteness of predictions, the self-fulfilling
power of prophecies, the fact that apparent successes always

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make a greater impact than failures do, and so on), four are worthy of note.[4] In the first place, magico-religious rites are often combined with techniques, such as planting seed, which effectively bring about the desired results. Then, on other occasions they are performed to bring about events, e.g. successive stages in nature-cycles, which would have occurred in any case. In the third place, where a detectable failure does occur, it can be ascribed to an improper performance of the rite. And fourthly, it is not supposed by the traditional thinker that results are fully determined by the rite. They are, rather, a function of a number of factors of which the ritual performance is only one. Other magical forces or spiritual agencies may always intervene. So where the rite fails to bring off a desired effect it is always possible to speculate that one or other of them *has* done so, even if one accepts the efficacy, *ceteris paribus*, of the rite.

These four points all concern what may be called blocks to falsifiability: each one describes a way in which facts and theories lose their potential for coming into direct opposition. There is no need to ascribe magico-religious believers' failure to see the falsity of their beliefs to illogicality: a good reasoner, supplied with a negated consequent, can only reason back contrapositively to the negation of the whole antecedent – if the antecedent is conjunctive in form, logic tells him nothing about which conjunct to reject.

This kind of account was taken up and greatly expanded by Evans-Pritchard in his *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, where he supplied the reader with twenty-two reasons why Azande fail to see the falsity of their 'mystical' beliefs. Again, these reasons are in effect offered in explanation of why a normal, rational person, brought up to accept the beliefs legitimated in Zande culture, could well never get to the point of rejecting them – why, as he says, the Azande "do not perceive the futility of their magic".[5]

There is an important difference among Tylor's four points. (It is reflected also in Evans-Pritchard's account.) The first two concern the traditional believer's *attitude* to the magical and religious beliefs received in his culture. The second two stem from the logical structure of those systems of beliefs themselves (see appendix). The first two blocks to falsifiability would be removed by an experimental approach: seed could be planted

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without accompanying prayers, sacrifices or spells; the frequency
with which rain follows rain-making ceremonies could be com-
pared with its natural incidence.[6] The 'could' here is of course
a logical and not a psychological or sociological 'could'. it is
precisely the absence of the attitudes associated with self-critical
attempts at falsification of one's beliefs which the intellectualist
perspective presents as a key characteristic marking off the
'closed' from the 'open predicament'. That the idea of making
some sharp distinction between 'practical' (empirical) techniques
and such 'mystical' (theory-laden) practices as divination, prayer,
sacrifice or spell, of stripping the latter from the former and of
making them separate objects of critical scrutiny, is not within
the psychological and social limits of the *traditional* Zande's world
– this the intellectualist may accept, assert and indeed build up
into his notion of a traditional world. Thus he can accept that
Zande 'mystical' beliefs are not *hypotheses*, in as much as a hypo-
thesis is a belief held with a certain detached attitude – although,
as we shall shortly see, he does claim them to be hypotheses or
theories in the sense that they originally stem from and are
actually put to the service of explanatory objectives.[7]

Tylor pointed to 'conservatism' and 'unreflectiveness' as two
'indices' of 'savagery'. Obviously the point needs to be worked
out with some subtlety before it can be built into the distinction
between tradition and modernity. It cannot be taken as just an
aggregative remark about individual psychologies because,
among other things, the testing of socially shared beliefs in
modern societies is itself subject to a division of labour. Most of
us, for example, no more test the efficacy of aspirin tablets than
Azande do that of their medicines. It is true that we often have
a general idea of what kinds of statistical test would be appro-
priate, but we take it on trust that they have been carried out
– or at least that the analgesic efficacy of aspirin can be deduced
from a general theory concerning its chemical composition which
is itself well tested. This dimension of trust is not involved in
Zande acceptance of magical substances – the testimony on which
they rely concerns no statistical tests but expresses word-of-mouth
recommendations conveying the kind of personal experience
with which one person in our society might press some tablets
on another.

Someone who wanted to carry out for himself the experiments

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required to test aspirin properly would need to have access to technical resources, and preferably to a social organisation of a certain type and complexity which would allow him to recruit volunteer guinea-pigs – neither of which Azande have. Having established his results, he could give them a degree of permanence and publicity impossible in an oral culture by writing them down. Hence the technical and social preconditions of a 'scientific' approach – i.e. of detailed, recorded experimentation which, by being recorded, becomes shared knowledge, publicly recoverable and capable of being checked – are, or rather, were, absent in Zande society.

Reflections of this kind, however, take us only so far. They show that the contrast of 'traditional' and 'modern' is a contrast of institutions as well as attitudes, but not that it is *merely* a contrast of institutional preconditions. Although I am clearly talking of a continuum here, all the evidence indicates that there are differences in the degree to which inherited beliefs, attitudes and so on are, and are expected to be, questioned in traditional and modern cultures, differences striking enough to serve as the basis of the distinction itself. Traditional cultures are not full of would-be investigators frustrated by a lack of equipment, techniques and recruitable personnel. In placing such differences at the centre of analysis, and connecting them with the persistence of magical and religious beliefs, the intellectualist approach (though these points are still not exclusive to that approach) seems to be on firm ground.

The next step would be to map the ground out in more detail. For example, anthropologists often stress the lively scepticism which some of their informants display towards some medicine men as opposed to others, towards some supposed medicines as opposed to others and so on. The scepticism finds its place within a framework of traditionally legitimated ideas. Again we are often told of old men who have the time to think about such things and develop their own speculative elaborations on this traditional core of beliefs. "Vansina recalls affectionately three very independent thinkers he encountered among the Bushong, who liked to expound their personal philosophies to him. One old man had come to the conclusion that there was no reality, that all experience is a shifting illusion. The second had developed a numerological type of metaphysics, and the last had

evolved a cosmological scheme of great complexity which no-one understood but himself" (Douglas 1970a: 108). The phenomenon of a received core of beliefs coexisting with localised scepticism on the one hand and idiosyncratic speculative elaborations of a metaphysical or cosmological kind on the other is no less familiar in our own society. But the question for the anthropologist becomes: Under what conditions might localised scepticism about particular diviners develop into the rejection of a traditionally institutionalised technique of divination, or a personal cosmology become incorporated into the shared set of accepted beliefs? Outbreaks of mass enthusiasm such as the cargo cults or witch-finding movements, their occasions and the permanent traces they leave on the core of received beliefs, also deserve attention here.[8]

The proposed distinctions between 'traditional' and 'modern' discussed above, and initially suggested by Tylor's first two blocks to falsifiability, will be examined in chapter 12. The potential relativist implications of Tylor's other two blocks to falsifiability are considered in the appendix. But we must now round off the intellectualist's programme with its last stage, Stage IV.

The question here is: How do people come to adopt magico-religious beliefs in the first place? Again Tylor and Frazer agree on the outlines of an answer: such beliefs are hypotheses, per-fectly reasonable given the accumulation of knowledge and tech-niques and the types of social organisation in the societies from which they emerge. Tylor, as Evans-Pritchard says (1965: 26),

wished to show that primitive religion was rational, that it arose from observations, however inadequate, and from logical deductions from them, however faulty; that it constituted a crude natural philosophy. In his treatment of magic...he likewise stressed the rational element...It also is based on genuine observation, and rests on classification of similarities, the first essential process in human knowledge.

"Crude and false as that philosophy may seem to us," says Frazer (1911, 2: 420–2; 1957: 347–8),

it would be unjust to deny it the merit of logical consistency...The flaw – and it is a fatal one – of the system lies not in its reasoning, but in its premises; in its conception of the nature of life, not in any irrelevancy of the conclusions which it draws from that conception. But to stigmatise these principles as ridiculous because we can easily detect their falseness would be ungrateful as well as unphilosophical...reflection and enquiry should satisfy us that to our predecessors we are indebted for much of

what we thought most our own, and that their errors are not wilful
extravagances or the ravings of insanity, but simply hypotheses,
justifiable as such at the time they were propounded, but which a fuller
experience has proved inadequate.

To recapitulate in bare logical outline so far: The question in
Stage I, which initiated the intellecualist's programme, was: Why
do people in certain cultures perform certain types of *actions*?
The answer here took the form of imputing *beliefs* to the actors,
which, if held, would give an understandable rationale for doing
them. This then raised question II: How do the actors first
acquire these beliefs? The answer was, by being socialised into
them. Complementary to this was question III: Why do these
beliefs go on being held? The answer was to point to certain
attitudinal and structural blocks to their falsification. Finally,
Stage IV posed the remaining question: How did these beliefs
originate in the first place? The answer was, out of a need to
understand and control the natural environment – a function
which they still fulfil.

Some general features of intellectualism

I have spelt out the structure of intellectualism at what may have
seemed tedious length. Only when this is done does its plausibility
become clear: it is easy enough, for example, by conflating stages
II and IV of its programme, to make it look like a ludicrously
rationalistic form of extreme cognitive individualism. But the
main reason for mapping out the logic of the intellectualist's
approach with some care is that I shall be interested in determin-
ing at what points other approaches (sketched out in a pre-
liminary way in the rest of this chapter) diverge from it, in
the character of these divergences and, finally, in the degree to
which intellectualism can assimilate the more detailed material,
concerning 'ritual', to be analysed in Part II.

Some points about intellectualism are already clear. Notice first
that it is logically complete. Of course it is not *substantially* com-
plete. On the contrary, all the interesting descriptive and theore-
tical sociological detail remains to be filled in: what form
magical and religious beliefs do take, how they are held (with
what attitudes, under what sanctions and so on) and how these

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things vary from culture to culture; why beliefs of *these* rather
than other particular forms should emerge in *these* conditions out
of the 'explanatory quest'. This is to say that the programme I
have outlined is no more than that. But *as* a research programme
aimed at explaining, in psycho-sociological terms, a cross-cultural
pattern of action and belief, it is exhaustive, in the sense that if
one grants the sequence in which its questions are raised, one
must also grant that they are all the questions at this level of
enquiry: further questions that could be asked either fall within
the four stages or take one off the level of psycho-sociological
explanation altogether. *Given* the sequence of enquiry, all the
questions have been listed, and for each question the form of an
answer has been blocked out. One thing to be asked of any alter-
native to the intellectualist programme, therefore, is whether
its set of questions and answers is also in this sense complete. Of
course the questions may not be the same ones, since the intellec-
tualist's are dictated by his sequence of enquiry, which is in turn
determined for him by the first step he takes from his starting
point – in the observation of religious and magical practices. The
correctness of this first step has been questioned, as we shall see
in a moment. But the question then focusses on whether or not
the objector can give us a programme of questions and sketches
towards answers which is equally coherent in its structure.

One question in particular which I shall often come back
to when considering quite different accounts of the nature of
magico-religious beliefs, actions and institutions in a culture, and
their synchronic relations, is whether these alternative accounts
can be supplemented by any plausible diachronic story. The
synchronic part of the intellectualist's account, as given in stages
I–III, is not just consistent with its diachronic part as given in
Stage IV, but seems to build up a definite momentum towards
it. If one accepts the general approach of I–III there is an
obvious economy and elegance in going on along the lines of IV.
This rounding-off is not *entailed*, however, by I–III; it is indeed
the last step, IV, which constitutes the distinctive intellectualist
thesis. Writers like Evans-Pritchard, who could not be called
intellectualists, follow the general lines of the first three stages
I have described. More generally, one can perfectly well accept
(*a*) that traditional religious beliefs are to be interpreted at face
value as beliefs about the *natural* world and its underlying