

# CLIFFORD GEERTZ ON DEFINING CULTURE AND RELIGION (Anthropology of Religion Study)

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## Abstract

Religion is academically multi-interpretable to define. So many experts and many approaches have defined religion, they come from theologians, philosophers and scientists give their ideas in religious concern. Nevertheless, we will take our focus to define religion in perspective of social sciences. In this perspective, there are some of approaches to talk religion, such as the essence of religion, definition of religion, description of religion, the function of religion. We tried to describe the definition of religion according to the functionalist approach.

One of the most impressive and influential of the functionalist approach is Clifford Geertz, an anthropologist who has become well-known within the religious studies for the insightfulness of his proposal that religion is a "cultural system". Geertz has caught attention of thoughtful people in many fields with series of the striking critical essays that addressed some of the most important theoretical issues in modern anthropology. This writing below will present his idea on defining culture and religion; consist of the introduction that is including of his basic of knowledge, some of the principle theories, his proposal of the cultural systems and some scholars' criticism to his definition of religion.

## Key words

Anthropology, Culture, Perspective, Religion, Science, System

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## A. The Introduction

To understand Geertz's position among theorists of religion, we must notice first his background in anthropology, where perhaps the most important fact is that he was educated neither in Durkheim's Paris nor Evans-Pritchard's Oxford but at Harvard University in the United States. His Idea on both culture and religion were thus developed under two main influences: a strong and independent American tradition of anthropology and perspective on social science he encountered while he was studying at Harvard under the prominent theorist Talcott Parsons.<sup>1</sup> Talcott parson's reworking and fusing

of Weberian and Durkheimian themes was so comprehensive, detailed, and painstaking, that he inspired Geertz to take up the same or related investigatory causes.

Since the turn of twentieth century, a truly professional style of research in anthropology had been established in the United States under the German immigrant scholars, such as Franz Boas (1858-1942), his younger contemporaries Alfred Louis Kroeber (1876-1960) and Robert Lowie (1883-1957). And Ruth Benedict, a remarkable and talented student of Kroeber and Boas, in *Pattern of Culture*, Benedict explained that culture was the key to understanding even individual human personality traits. When he was still being a student, Geertz seemed to have absorbed of the main ideas of Boas, Kroeber and Benedict quite naturally into his own anthropological perspective. He fully endorsed

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<sup>1</sup>Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, Oxford University, New York, 1996, p. 236.

the American commitment to particular studies; they were much to be preferred over the bad science of general theories built on poorly gathered evidence.

Anthropology, Geertz heartily agreed, must be ethnography before it can be anything else. Its focus must fall on specific places and peoples, so that general conclusions come, if at all, only from these closely studied single instances. Further, he embraced the American view that the objects of anthropologist's inquiries are "culture", not "societies". In the American view, one tended to argue that individual behavior is expression of culture, while defining culture merely as the way in which individuals have learned to behave.<sup>2</sup> This statement looks it is not very enlightening. If the concept of culture was to serve as useful guide for scientific research, it should refer to something objective, not to elusive or difficult to be understood. In addressing this difficulty, Geertz found help in the work of Talcott Parson.

Talcott Parson seemed to have affected Geertz in two ways, because Parsons himself had been influenced by Max Weber. In brief, Weber had shown how to understand a culture. Corresponding to this is the idea that cultures are products of human action; they come about because humans do things in accord with certain ideals, attitudes, and values. Consequently, only when we understand the meaning of an action to the people who engage in it can we really grasp and explain what is going on. Another way, Talcott Parson had shown where to find a culture. For him, a culture was not just a set of elusive emotions or changeable impression inside individual minds; it was some thing real and permanent - some thing objective - which has an effect on private emotions but maintains an existence apart from them.<sup>3</sup> Geertz clearly shares this idea of culture as an objective system of symbols. We will know these basic of knowledge will influence into

two of Geertz's theorithical essays: in his Interpretative anthropology in general, and it specifically to religion.

## B. Interpretation of the Culture

Geertz had ever written a new essay on the title "Thick description: toward an interpretative theory of culture". In it, he points out first that although the term of "culture" has tended to mean many different things to previous anthropologists, the key feature of the word is the idea of "meaning" or "significance". Man he says, quoting Max Weber, is "an animal suspended in webs of significance he him self has spun."<sup>4</sup>

We should therefore understand that the culture of any society is just this shared context of meanings. Or, to use Geertz own words, "culture consists of socially established structures of meaning in terms of which people do such things as signal conspiracies and join them or perceive and answer them".<sup>5</sup> For instance, the simple case that Muslim goes to the mosque and pilgrimage to the Mecca. The task of anthropologist is to discern meanings, to discover the intentions behind what people do the significance for all life and thought of their rituals, structures, and beliefs.

A culture is not something physical, but it is there - objectively there - nonetheless. And it is the one thing that, more than any other, anthropologist must try to reconstruct when they study a community or people of any place or time. So, in Geertz's view, Cultural analysis is, for the interpretative anthropologist as for every other careful theorist, always a matter of "guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusion".<sup>6</sup>

## C. Religion as Cultural System

Interpretative anthropology is matter of seeking out the system of meaning and values through which people live their lives, then it become reasoning point for anthropologist to

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 238-240.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 240.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 241.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 242.

take attention to the religious tradition or religion. It is like Geertz who did his fieldwork to study "The Religion of Java", in this matter the first of his career is applauded. Geertz came to know in depth through his immersion in their language and culture. He has well known within religious studies for his proposal that religion is a "cultural system".

The pathway to religion is culture, and culture, in Geertz's formulation, is a concept to which he adheres has neither multiple referents nor, so far as he can see, any unusual ambiguity: it denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about an attitudes toward life.<sup>7</sup> It is within this context that Geertz proceeds to describe the function of religious symbols, or, in his language, how "sacred symbols function within the cultural context." In his work, he criticizes the attitudes and assumptions of other anthropologists who just examine the role of religion within selected cultures and societies, always concentrating on customs, rites, and beliefs and so on. He proposes that the same can be achieved by concentrating the role of sacred symbols in transmitting meanings in dynamic cultural context.<sup>8</sup> The notion that religion tunes human action to describe cosmic order and projects images of cosmic order onto the plane of human experience. Geertz defined religion is:

*(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive and long lasting moods and motivation in men by (3) formulating conceptions of general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions such an aura of*

*factuality that (5) the moods and motivation seem uniquely realistic.*<sup>9</sup>

This statement is the main ideas of his essay on the title "Religion as cultural system", because in the rest of his essay, Geertz actually tell us the service of breaking down his account (which serves as both definition and theory) by explaining in detail each of its elements.

We can start with the first, "a system of symbols which acts to" Geertz means just about anything that carries and conveys to people an idea: an object of sacred symbol. Then, he explains the function of sacred symbols is to synthesize a people's ethos - the tone, character and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood - , and their world view - the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order. In religious belief and practice a group's ethos is rendered intellectually reasonable by being shown to represent a way of life ideally adapted to the actual state of affairs the world view describes. While the world view is rendered emotionally convincing by being presented as an image of an actual state of affairs peculiarly well-arranged to accommodate such way of life. This confrontation and mutual confirmation has two fundamental effects. On the one hand, it objectivizes moral and aesthetic preferences by depicting them as the imposed condition of life implicit in world with particular structure, as mere common sense given the unalterable shape of reality. On the other hand, it supports these received beliefs about the world's body by invoking deeply felt moral and aesthetic sentiments as experiential evidence for their truth. Religious symbols formulate a basic congruence between particular style and specific (if, most often, implicit) metaphysic, and in so doing sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, New York, 1973, p. 89.

<sup>8</sup>Walter H. Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline*, Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, 1995), p.180.

<sup>9</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures....* , p. 90.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 90.

Secondly that these symbols "*establish powerful, pervasive and long lasting mood and motivation,*" we can abbreviate this by saying that religion makes people feel things and also want to do things. Motivations have goals and they are guided by enduring set of values- what matters to people, what they think is good and right. His motivation here is matter of morals, of choosing for himself the good over the evil. For instance, Muslim hoping to visit Mecca will also arrange things so as to reach their goal which is to attain the morally good experience of being in the space that is sacred to their traditions.

Thirdly, "*conceptions of general order of existence*", by this, Geertz means that religion tries to give ultimate explanation of the world. Its intent is to provide an ultimate meaning, a great ordering purpose to the world.

Fourthly "*clothes these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that*" and Fifthly, "*the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic*". In simpler term, this means that religion marks out sphere of life that has special status. What separates it from other cultural systems where it symbols claim to put us in touch with what is "really real" – with things that matter to people more than anything else.

In Geertz's view, religion looks as a cultural fact in its own right, not as mere expression of social needs or economic tensions (though these are certainly noticed). Through its symbols, ideas, rituals, and customs, Geertz find the influence of religion to be present in every corner of Javan life. His study is microscopically detailed, so closely tied to particulars of Javan culture, and so careful to avoid generalizations that he might well have used it as the very model for the kind of "thick description" anthropology we have just seen him recommended.<sup>11</sup> In this view, understanding of the cultural system is gained by inspection; that is, by probing meaning that is publicly accessible. Geertz wants the subject to be able to stand on its own feet, as it were.

<sup>11</sup>Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories* ..... , p. 243.

It is necessary, in this respect, that religion be approached as an integral element within society or culture – but other anthropologists have accomplished this. It is important, too, that integral element of religion be identified and their workings and functions described.<sup>12</sup>

In conclude, that anthropological study of religion is two stage operation: first, an analysis of the system of meanings embodied in the religious symbolism. And second, the relating of these systems to social- structural and psychological processes.

#### D. Number of Criticisms in Geertz's Definition of Religion.

A number of criticisms have been explored by Talad Asad in review article on the essay, the title "*anthropological conceptions of religion: reflections on geertz*". Some of critics as follows:

First, in suggesting that religious symbols induce certain psychological dispositions - suggestion similar to Radcliffe-Brown's theory of sentiments - Geertz not only assumes a one-to-one relationship between beliefs and specific dispositions but ignores "social and economic institutions in general, within which individual biographies are lived out".

Second, in equating the two level of discourse (symbols that induce dispositions and those that place those dispositions in a cosmic frame work), Geertz, Asad suggests, assumes a theological standpoint, ignoring the "discursive processes" by which meanings are constructed.

Third, in separating religion from science, common sense and aesthetics, Geertz gives religion a distinctive perspective and a universal and unique function: to establish meaning. The issue as to whether religion is true, illogical, an illusion or false consciousness is there fore by passed, and it is of interest that in his essay on ideology Geertz not only does not consider religion as a form of ideology but argue for genuinely nonevaluative conception of ideology. Such a

<sup>12</sup>Walter H. Capps, *Religious Studies*..... , p. 182.

standpoint somewhat contradicts his suggestion as to the social function of science vis-à-vis ideologies, namely to understand them - what they are, how they work, what gives rise to them - and to criticize them.

Fourth, there is no suggestion in Geertz's essay that religion is ever affected by experiences in the common-sense world, for he always starts from the notion of religious culture-symbolic structure-which is sui generis, and largely divorced from socioeconomic processes and power. In Geertz' essay, Asad suggests there is a "hiatus" between the cultural system and the social reality, and failure to explore the historical conditions necessary for the existence of particular religious practices and discourses.<sup>13</sup>

In my mind, what Asad criticized is a limited critique. In that, Asad does not take into account Geertz's substantive studies. One wonders what criticisms Asad would have made of Marx's definition of religion. During the 1950s Geertz like many of his contemporaries was clearly dissatisfied with the static, ahistorical implications of functionalist theory, whether of the sociological (Radcliffe-Brown) or socio-psychological (Malinowski) variety. The relationship between cultural forms and social organization was neither derivative nor simply one of "mirror image", Geertz, in his essay "Ritual and Social Change", explored the possibility of a more dynamic functionalist theory. He argues that distinction between culture and the social system, and between meaning and function, implies two forms of integration.

In attempting to understand religion within a specific sociopolitical context, Geertz certainly provides a more dynamic approach to religion than what indicated by anthropologists who have not been influenced by Weberian sociology - Douglas and Turner

for example.<sup>14</sup> His studies of the religious systems of Java and Bali, in fact, indicate the absorbed influence of Weber, and though Geertz accepts the notion of his own approach is one of cultural hermeneutics, these studies go beyond that of simply interpreting the religious symbolism.

### E. The Conclusion

By proposing of theory of interpretation of the culture, and his proposing religion is as "cultural system", and his field experienced studies to the religious tradition, Geertz advocates two contrasting approach to study of religion.

One is the semantic or hermeneutic approach, which suggests that religion is concerned with meanings, functioning to give unity to experience and overcome the "felt inadequacies of commonsense ideas".

The other approach that Geertz advocates is comparative and scientific; it involves, he writes, the description of the wide variety of forms in which religion appears, "the uncovering of the forces which bring this forms into existence, change them or destroy them; and the assessment of their influence upon the behavior of men in everyday life".\*\*\*

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<sup>13</sup>Brian Morris, *Anthropological Studies of Religion: an Introductory Text*, Cambridge University press, Melbourne, 1987, p. 314-315.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.316.

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