

## Unit 13

# Clifford Geertz: Cultural Analysis

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### Learning Objectives

After you have read this unit you should be able to:

- outline the interpretive approach;
- provide a definition of religion;
- discuss the meaning of symbol; and
- explain faith in religious symbols.

## 13.1 Introduction

Clifford James Geertz is Professor Emeritus of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton (U.S.A.), where he has been on faculty since 1970. He is well known for moving away from the scientific study of social phenomena, as was promoted by Émile Durkheim and later A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, and introducing a more metaphorical and literary style to the field of anthropology. For him, anthropology is a 'literary enterprise', a kind of writing, which shares many similarities with literature, history, and philosophy (Inglis 2000).

## 13.2 The Interpretive Approach

Born in San Francisco (California) on 23 August 1926, Geertz served in the navy from 1943 to 1945, and then studied at Antioch College, where he majored in English, and then studied philosophy. After receiving the degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1950, Geertz studied anthropology at Harvard, from where he obtained his doctorate in Human Relations in 1956. From the Massachusetts, he moved to Stanford (1958-9), the University of California (Berkeley), the University of Chicago (1960-70), and then to the Institute of Advanced Study, where he has been ever since, with joint appointments at Oxford University (1978-9) and Princeton University (1975-). An author of twelve books, and the editor and co-editor of numerous others, Geertz has conducted his fieldwork in Java, Bali, Celebes, and Sumatra in Indonesia, as well as in Morocco. In May 2000, he was honoured at a conference held at Sefrou in Morocco, a country where he had done his fieldwork. Geertz found this gesture highly gratifying, for he thought

that 'anthropologists are not always welcomed back to the site of their field studies'.

Geertz is known for his interpretive approach (or what some call 'symbolic anthropology'), according to which the major task of anthropology is to 'make sense' of cultural systems. He has applied this approach for understanding various aspects of social reality (such as kinship, ideology, modes of livelihood, social change, distribution of power), but he is best known for his focus on the meaning of religious symbols and for his extensive ethnographic studies of religion in complex societies. Among his most significant publications that deal with religion are *The Religion of Java* (1960), *Islam Observed* (1968), *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), and *Local Knowledge* (1983). One of his oft-consulted essays on religion is 'Religion as a Cultural System', which was originally published in 1966 in a volume titled *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* that Michael Banton had edited and was later included in his collection of essays, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

### Criticism of Approaches

Geertz opens his essay 'Religion as a Cultural System' with an observation that the 'anthropological study of religion is in fact in a state of general stagnation'. To explain this, he makes a distinction between the anthropological works on religion that were done before and after the First World War and those that were done after the Second World War. He finds that the former made significant advancement, but the latter were rather sterile. No major theoretical advance has been made in the work produced after the Second World War, except for a repetitious rendering of the ideas of the founders of anthropology and certain empirical enrichments supporting or disputing those ideas. Secondly, this work has always looked at the writings of the scholars from sociology, anthropology, and psychology, particularly the works of Durkheim, Max Weber, Sigmund Freud, and Bronislaw Malinowski. None of them has considered the writings from other disciplines like philosophy, history, law, literature, or the so-called 'harder sciences'. In fact, the founders of both sociology and anthropology had closely read these disciplines for ideas and inspiration.

#### Box 13.1 Four Contributions

For a breakthrough of ideas in the study of religion, the point is not that we abandon the thoughts of our founders. Geertz says that four of their contributions have indeed enriched us, viz. Durkheim's distinction between sacred and profane, Weber's method of understanding social action from the point of view of the individual, Freud's parallel between personal rituals and collective ones, and Malinowski's distinction between religion and common sense. But they should be treated as starting points, and we have to go beyond them, placing them in the broader context of contemporary thoughts. At this juncture, Geertz sets out his agenda, choosing the direction in which he would like to contribute to the anthropology of religion.

The path Geertz chooses is to develop the cultural dimension of religious analysis. He thinks that the concept of culture has suffered a great deal because of the multiple meanings it has been given. When it becomes a 'put-it-in-all' concept, an 'umbrella concept', that is everything that human beings have made and thought is 'cultural', its analytical power is weakened. Thus, there is an urgent need to arrive at a definition of culture which is unambiguous and does not have multiple referents. In his essay titled 'Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture', he espouses a view of culture for which he is indebted to Weber. For Weber, man is an

animal who gives meaning to his actions. Man has spun around him the 'webs of significance', in which he is caught, which give him meaning. Culture, for Geertz, refers to these 'webs of significance'. The oft-quoted definition of culture that he has offered reads as follows:

[Culture] denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.

Our job as anthropologists is to discover the meaning of actions of people in different societies. Our approach, Geertz says, is not to discover laws as experimental scientists do, but to 'interpret' human actions, to understand their meaning. In other words, the concept of culture for Geertz is 'essentially semiotic.'

### 13.3 The Definition of Religion

Geertz begins with Durkheim's idea of sacred, which defines religion and sets it apart from other institutions that deal with 'profanity'. The idea of sacred is represented through symbols (material as well as non-material). Religious symbols function to "synthesize a people's ethos" and their world view. In other words, the sacred symbols condition the people's thought, tone and tenor of their life, their moral and aesthetic styles, the way in which they construct and order the universe around them, and the meaning they attribute to their existence. Religious symbols have power derived from some specific metaphysics or philosophy, which also presents to people a specific cosmic (or 'supernatural') order. Religion endeavours to adjust the human actions to the cosmic order and the images of the latter are 'projected onto the plane of human experience.'

That out of their collective imagination human beings have created a cosmic order - sacred and transcendental - which they think constantly influences them is not a new idea. Earlier theories have drawn up a relationship between the cosmic order and human actions. But, Geertz says, this has hardly been investigated from the point of view of how this is actually accomplished. What we know is that it is accomplished in communities annually, weekly, or daily - cosmic order is brought onto the human and the human order is transcended, with people feeling the power of the sacred cosmic order and feeling rejuvenated with new energy and force. The envisaged meaninglessness of life, which may otherwise bother people and make them anxious, is overcome - the cosmic order created with sacred symbols makes the life profoundly meaningful, mirth-giving, and worth-living. Geertz notes that the theoretical framework which would provide an analytical account of the relationship between the cosmic order and human experiences does not as yet exist in sociological studies of religion as they do in other studies, for example, of lineage segmentation, socialization, political succession, etc.

In order to reach such a framework, Geertz attempts a definition of religion. Notwithstanding the idea that definitions establish nothing, Geertz thinks that if they are carefully constructed, they can 'provide a useful orientation, or reorientation, of thought'. They can guide an analytical enquiry with the explicitness they are expected to have. With these introductory remarks, Geertz offers a definition of religion that, as we said previously, is one of the most oft-cited definitions. Religion is, according to Geertz,

- 1) a system of symbols which acts to

- 2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by
- 3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and
- 4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that
- 5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

Let us discuss this definition in detail, for it is central to Geertz's understanding of religion.

### 13.4 The Meaning of Symbol

As we see, the first concept to be explicated is that of the symbol. Religion is a system of symbols, but it does not imply that it is the only thing that deals with symbols. For Geertz, it is in fact culture which is a system (or complex) of symbols, and religion being a part of culture is 'symbolic'. But there is a difference between the religious symbols (which are sacred) and the symbols that comprise other realms of society. Like the concept of culture, symbol 'has been used to refer to a great variety of things'. It is a multi-meaning concept. From the forest of different meanings that the term symbol has been given, Geertz identifies the meaning he wishes to adopt for his study.

Symbol is used for any object, act, event, quality, or relation which represents an idea. It acts as a 'vehicle for a conception', which is the meaning of the symbol. The number six is as much a symbol as is the Cross. Symbols are 'tangible formulations of notions'. They are 'abstractions from experiences fixed in tangible forms.' Following Kenneth Burke's example of the difference between 'building a house' and 'drawing up a plan for building a house', Geertz distinguishes the symbolic dimension of social events from empirical totalities. In the examples given above, the former ('building a house') is the empirical totality, whereas the latter ('plan of the house') is the symbolic dimension.

#### Box 13.2 Instinct and Environment

Cultural patterns, Geertz says, are 'extrinsic sources of information', which means that they 'lie outside the boundaries of the individual organism'. Here, Geertz is referring to the same old distinction that anthropologists make between 'what is innate (instinctive) to human beings' and what they 'acquire from their external environment': in other words, culture does not have a bio-genetic base, is learned, shared among people, and transmitted socially from one generation to the next. What is transmitted over generations is the 'symbolic source', for it is in this that the entire knowledge is stored. Culture does not only act as a 'model for' but also 'model of' behaviour. While behaving according to the cultural demands, people also realize the shortcomings, the lacunae, of their culture, which they change. Culture is immensely modifiable.

### 13.5 Religion as a System of Symbols

In his other essay 'Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols', Geertz writes:

It is a cluster of sacred symbols, woven into some sort of ordered whole, which makes up a religious system. For those who are committed to it, such a religious system seems to mediate genuine knowledge, knowledge of the essential conditions in terms of which life must, of necessity, be lived.

Religion provides the blueprint of social existence. In many societies, religious symbols are uncritically held; they are beyond the pale of any skeptical enquiry. Here, Geertz says that those individuals who do not subscribe to the norms that the symbols formulate are regarded as 'stupid, insensitive, unlearned.' Giving an example from Java, where he had done his fieldwork, he says that small children, simpletons, boors, and the immoral people are regarded as 'not yet Javanese', which actually means 'not yet human'. Among them, the same word is used for 'science' and 'religion', which advises them to conduct their social life properly as dictated by the set of norms and values.

Religious symbols are extremely powerful. They inspire in human beings states that transcend them. Geertz gives the example of a Javanese mystic, who stares fixedly into the flame of a lamp, because such a practice instills in him self-discipline and control of emotional expression, which is essential for leading a style of life that is expected of a mystic. Or, to take another example, in a state of overwhelming emotions, a man in distress, cries inconsolably before the idol of a personal guardian spirit, seeking its favour, thinking that the true and candid display of one's mental condition is essential for divine intervention. States of this type induce in the believer or worshipper a certain set of dispositions that shape the quality of his experience. Geertz thinks that religion induces in people two sorts of disposition, respectively called moods and motivations.

Geertz discusses both these concepts. By motivation is meant, in his words, a 'persisting tendency, a chronic inclination to perform certain sorts of acts and experience certain sorts of feeling in certain sorts of situations.' The acts, experiences, and situations are widely heterogeneous as the two examples given above show. Motivations are not acts, i.e. pieces of intentional behaviour; they are also not feelings. They are 'liabilities to perform particular classes of act or have particular classes of feeling.'

#### Action and Reflection 13.1

Describe a religions symbol to your friends and ask them to give examples to elucidate tyour answer. Put down your findings in a notebook.

Motivations are distinguished from moods. Geertz notes that motivations have 'vectorial qualities', whilst moods are 'scalar'. Motives move in a particular direction, but moods 'go nowhere', they only vary in intensity. For example, the moods that sacred symbols induce, in different situations, range from exultation to melancholy, from a boisterous display of joy to listlessness, from self-confidence to self-pity. Moods result from certain circumstances but they do not respond to any ends. Geertz writes: 'Like fogs, they just settle and lift; like scents, suffuse and evaporate.' Thus, motivations are meaningful with respect to the ends they are supposed to achieve, whereas moods are meaningful with reference to the conditions from which they spring.

### 13.6 Chaos and World View

How do we know that a particular set of symbols happens to be religious, not secular, in nature? It is to be understood in terms of its purported goals. Geertz helps us to understand this with the help of some examples. A particular mood of awe will be interpreted as religious when it is inspired by a conception of an all-pervading supernatural force, rather than a visit to a Great Mall. Similarly, fasting is religious when the idea of a sacred month or day motivates it rather than the perennial desire to shed off excess weight. Religion comes into existence when its symbols formulate

the ideas of order, in fact a transcendental order. To quote Geertz: 'A man can indeed be said to be "religious" about golf, but not merely if he pursues it with passion and plays it on Sundays: he must also see it as symbolic of some transcendent truths.'

Why does the idea of the transcendental truth - morally higher, supreme and superior - come into existence? Why do human beings need the religious symbols at all times and at all places? That religion is a cultural universal is indisputable. The key to this question's answer, Geertz thinks, lies in the observations of S. Langer in his book titled *Philosophy in a New Key*. Langer writes: '[Man] can adapt himself somehow to anything his imagination can cope with; but he cannot deal with Chaos.' Defining chaos as 'a tumult of events which lack not just interpretation but *interpretability*', Geertz thinks that there are at least three points when human beings encounter such situation, a situation of chaos which brings them to the limits of their powers of endurance and analytical abilities. These three points are of bafflement, suffering, and a sense of difficult ethical paradox, and in case they are not managed, they may lead to a chaos which breaks in upon human beings.

### Religious Paradoxes

Geertz thinks that of the three points that may drive human beings to chaos, it is the issue of bafflement that has been least investigated, with perhaps the sole exception of Sir E.E. Evans-Pritchard's work among the Azande. The truth is that human beings do not wish to leave the situations that cause bafflement unexplained, notwithstanding how simplistic (and overarching) their explanations and clarifications are. In his fieldwork, Geertz found that the Javanese were constantly using their beliefs to explain phenomena, howsoever eerie and strange they might be. By this process they were also convincing themselves that all events and phenomena were 'explainable within the accepted scheme of things', and they should not be left to themselves. Once, in Java, a peculiarly large umbrella-shaped mushroom (what is known as toadstool) grew in the house of a carpenter. Everyone from far and wide came to see it, and each visitor had an explanation for it, irrespective of the 'rightness' or 'suitability' of the explanation. The point is that the toadstool had important implications, for it challenged the people's cognitive ability, their understanding of the world, and people would never like to succumb to these challenges. They would come out with an explanation regardless of its veracity.

The second challenge to the meaningfulness of life is the problem of suffering. It has been investigated more than the issue of bafflement because the two main aspects of tribal religion, which anthropologists have studied in a detailed manner, are illness and mourning, and both of them involve a lot of suffering. The problem of suffering is not concerned with the subject of avoiding it. Paradoxically, it is concerned with 'how to suffer', how to bear physical pain, personal loss, defeats and betrayals, and the agony and pathos of one's nears and dears, without a wince. Suffering is to be 'suffered', so to say, for it is divinely ordained - god loves those who suffer. Suffering is not punitive; it is not a punishment; it is to be interpreted as one's *test* that the divinity periodically conducts. Religion provides people with the method and ideology to bear and withstand sufferings.

The discussion of the problem of suffering leads Geertz to the issue of ethical paradox. If a man is unflinchingly devoted to divine commands and subscribes conscientiously to the righteous way of life, then he should not suffer. Why should god 'subject a man to hell' if he does not deviate from divine instructions? But the truth is that sufferings descend on all, whether

or not they have been adhering to the right path. And, proceeding logically, one would say that it should shake the faith of people in divinity. But that does not happen. Religion renders 'satisfactory' answers to the presence of evil in society. It makes ethical paradoxes meaningful - why the righteous suffer, why simple fellows are deceived, why morally upright people are defamed, why do the honest die in penury, or, in other words, why 'rain falls on the just'?

All the three problems, though different, have a basic similarity. They intend to destroy the purported meaningfulness of the world by showing that there is 'no empirical regularity' (with bafflement all around), 'no emotional form' (with all suffering at one point or the other), and 'no moral coherence' (with ambivalences and paradoxes that evil causes). But what religion does at the face of these problems is to formulate, by means of symbols, the images of a 'genuine order of the world which will account for, and even celebrate, the perceived ambiguities, puzzles, and paradoxes in human experience'. Religion does not deny the presence of equivocalness in human life, but what it denies is that human events are unexplainable, life is unendurable, and justice is nonexistent. Religious symbols assert, time and again, with no grain of doubt that all events, unexceptionally, are explicable; life can be led peacefully in spite of sufferings; and justice never eludes the righteous. Religion both affirms and denies, by submitting that human life cannot escape from pain, ignorance, and injustice, but these states are ephemeral, they are fleeting, like passing whiffs. That they can be eminently transcended is the message of religious symbolism.

### 13.7 Belief and Faith in Religious Symbols

This leads us to a profound question: Why do people believe in religion? Geertz notes that this question is often avoided in anthropology, and is often relegated to a psychological enquiry. People come to believe in religion because of their socialization. Right from the beginning they are told of the moral worthiness and supremacy of certain beliefs, which solve their problems and lay to rest their doubts, and in course of time they are transmitted to the posterity. Underlying all this is the existence of some authority that defines what is 'worshipful' (worthy of faith and worship), and why it should be worshiped. Beneath every system of religious symbolism there is a system of authority which legitimizes and protects it. For example, in tribal religions, authority lies in the traditional imagery; in the mystical ones in the force of the supernatural experience, the experience of one-ness; and in charismatic ones in the attractive hold of an extraordinary person. Even revelations have the immediate authority of the person through whom they are communicated, besides of course the final authority of the divinity which selects a person through whom the 'truth' is revealed. Irrespective of its nature, the authority gives its people what may be called the 'religious perspective'. In other words, one who comes to 'know' must first *believe* in what he comes to know. Religion is 'real for the believers'; for the non-believers (and the faithless), it may be nothing more than mumbo-jumbo, a congregation of irrationalities.

Defining the term 'perspective' as a 'mode of seeing', Geertz states that the 'religious perspective' is one of the several perspectives that human beings have to look at and analyze the world inside and around them. He distinguishes the 'religious perspective' from the common-sensical, the aesthetic, and the scientific perspectives. The religious perspective differs from common sense because it moves 'beyond the realities of everyday life to wider ones which correct and complete them'. Religion does not act upon the 'wider realities', but accepts them, and develops faith in

them. With respect to the scientific, religious perspective relies upon commitment for wider realities, rather than subjecting them to a dispassionate analysis. And it differs from art because it does not disengage itself from the question of facts as art does, but considers the things - the wider reality - with which it is concerned as 'real', 'factual'.

An important component of religion through which it establishes relations with the wider realities is ritual, which Geertz defines as 'consecrated behaviour'. Through ritual performance, the veracity, the truthfulness, of religious conceptions is reinforced. The idea that religious directions are sound is also generated through rituals. They also produce the moods and motivations to keep religion intact. Here, one may notice that for Geertz also, as it has been for other anthropologists and sociologists, religious symbols comprise the aspects of both beliefs and rituals.

### Action and Reflection 13.2

Describe a ritual performance of your choice to other students. Ask them whether it is related to religious conceptions of reality.

Individuals believe in the existence of powers beyond them. They have myths, beliefs, stories, fictions about the origin of these powers. They also know that the powers will influence their lives when some form of communication (through rituals) is established with them. But, this does not imply that people live in the world of religious symbols they have created for all of the time. In fact, most men live in it only at moments. The everyday world of common-sense objects and practical acts is the reality of paramount importance for human beings. Against this background, what religious rituals do is to 'colour the individual's conception of the established world of bare fact'. In other words, religion does not describe the world, and if at all it does, it does it obliquely and incompletely. What it actually does is: It *shapes* the world of human beings, giving it a new meaning.

One of the most common occurrences men face is their constant shift from their day-to-day life to the world of ritual performances. When men perform rituals, they are transported to a world that engulfs them almost totally. In this, their beliefs appear 'pale', a 'remembered reflection of that experience'. So, while speaking of beliefs and rituals, we must keep a distinction between them, for their respective individual impacts on people differ greatly. Failure to keep this distinction has led to confusion, leading some to argue about the presence of a 'primitive mentality' and some to say that what science does in some societies is what religion does in some others. Actually, they are talking about different realms of religion, which though related have different implications for the experiences of people.

For the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, religion is viewed as a system of ideas and practices that offers a particular conception of the world that people inhabit. Geertz writes:

Religious concepts spread beyond their specifically metaphysical contexts to provide a framework of general ideas in terms of which a wide range of experience - intellectual, emotional, moral - can be given meaningful form.

From this conception - the world as it emerges culturally - follow the social and psychological aspects of religion. Indubitably, these different aspects are interrelated in practice, but they can be separated for the purpose of analysis, and scholars from different disciplines can pick up different aspects of religion for study.



## 13.8 Conclusion

One of the central points in Geertz's thesis is that religious beliefs do not merely interpret social and psychological processes in cosmic terms, they also shape them. Religions differ in terms of the complexity with which they do it. The complexity of religion is not dependent upon the scale of evolution of a society. It is incorrect to believe that socially differentiated and complex societies have complex religious system; the opposite might be quite true. Geertz submits that the anthropology of religion recommends two operations in its study: first, an analysis of meanings embodied in symbols that constitute the religious system; and second, relating the system of meaning with the other aspects of social structure and psychological processes. Geertz's objection to the contemporary anthropology of religion is not that it is solely concerned with the second aspect - that is, relating religion to the other parts of society, and examining the contribution one part makes to the other - but that it has totally ignored the first - that is, trying to understand the symbolic dimension of religion. His submission is not that what the contemporary anthropologists of religion are doing is wrong, but they are only providing a partial understanding of the phenomenon. Moreover, their understanding becomes woefully repetitive because the categories in which they are explained are almost taken-for-granted types, say, for instance, the idea of social integration. So, rites of passage produce solidarity in society in much the same way as does the totemic worship. That is why, Geertz notes at the outset of his study of religion that there is stagnation in the sociological studies of religious phenomena. This stagnation can be overcome by infusing religious studies with a symbolic analysis. Notwithstanding the criticisms of Geertz's approach (see, Asad 1983), his idea that religion is a system of symbols and the job of anthropologists and sociologists is to understand the contextual meaning of these symbols has made a breakthrough in the study of religion.

## 13.9 Further Reading

Clifford Geertz 1973 *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Selected Essays. London: Fontana Press

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