

Clifford Geertz: The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected essays.

Basic Books, inc. NY 1973

Chapter 4: Religion as a Cultural System.

Let us escape from “the dead hand of competence” and discover new methodologies.

“Culture is: 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 towards life.”

Sacred symbols function to synthesise a people’s ethos:

1. rendering it intellectually reasonable
2. emotionally convincing
3. experientially evident.

So “religion” is:

“a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”

So now, analysing each element of the above definition:

religion is a system of symbols which acts

symbol here meaning a vehicle for a conception and its meaning. Concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgements, longings, or beliefs. They then act as a blueprint for behaviour. Remember that human behaviour is not printed into our genes in the way the animal has a ‘model for’ its behaviour; and so we must learn, and so the system is of basic significance as a model of how we might live. They are models of culture (not for culture)

establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men

they shape the life of the worshipper by inculcating a certain set of dispositions. The concrete symbols express the world’s climate and shape it. Dispositions are both moods and motivations.

Motivations vs. moods: motives have a direction, moods go nowhere; motives persist, moods merely occur; motives and meaningful in view of their outcomes, moods are meaningful in view of how they were conceived (their source)

formulating conceptions of a general order of existence

I may be ‘religious’ about golf, but actually if it does not indicate for me what I take to be a transcendent truth then it is not truly “religious”.

Because man relies on symbols of meaning more than animals because he is not programmed then his highest function is conception. So anything which threatens the meaning framework is fearful. Our most important assets are our system of orientation. Chaos threatens especially our analytical capacity, our powers of endurance; our moral insight limitations. = bafflement, suffering, ethical paradox..

1. are we adrift in an absurd world?
2. suffering? Note that Christianity accepts that life hurts. The problem for religion is not how to avoid it but how to suffer it. To give the stricken person a vocabulary in terms of which to

grasp the distress. The gap between what is and what ought to be. So we affirm by means of a system of symbols, an image of genuine order.

Clothing those conceptions with such an aura of factuality

The religious person has a prior acceptance of an authority in the symbols of belief, and judges the facts in the light of that system. E.g. the authority of scripture. ;*[but are we not constantly experiential and critical of the system?]* “He who would know must first believe.” Common sense takes the world as we find it, religion interprets it as we go. Science adopts deliberate doubt; aesthetics adopts detached new eye.

Religion adopts not detachment but commitment and encounter.

Especially in ritual - consecrated behaviour - this sense is generated. Ritual fuses the world as seen and as imagined. Cultural performances shape the spiritual consciences by uniting actors and audience, crossing the threshold.

Moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic

Religion not only describes social order but shapes it. Ritual engulfs the person and that experience can be reflected in everyday life. There is nevertheless a transition to be made and paradoxical behaviour can be expected. The ritual ended, the person is changed, as is their perception of the world of things. Indeed those things may have to be changed to conform to the experience in the ritual.