Clifford Geertz

RELIGION AS A CULTURAL SYSTEM

While affirming the functional importance of religion in human society, Clifford Geertz, in this splendidly written exposition on religion, goes beyond reductionist functional interpretations to elucidate the power of religious symbols as culturally conceived conceptualizations of the world and man's place in it. His fundamental assumption is that any religion, like the wider cultural system of which it is a part, affirms the very idea of what reality is all about, what it "means," and how one is to act within it. But change—the lack of interpretability—is what purely common-sense notions of the really real at the limits of man's analytical, emotional, and moral capacities. Religion denies that these problems of incomprehensibility, suffering, and evil are fundamental characteristics of the world through the culturally constituted concepts embodied in sacred symbols.

For Geertz a symbol means any object, act, event, quality, or relation that serves as a vehicle for a conception, the conception being the symbol's meaning. Cultural patterns are of course symbolic systems, religious symbols being those that induce and define dispositions in man. Geertz's aim is to demonstrate that sacred symbols deal with

buddhism, pain, and moral paradox by substantiating a people’s ethos and their world view. The ethos of the group is rendered intellectually more reasonable by religious belief and practice. If man’s denial of chaos results in a less effective basis because religious directives are sound, and the latter effective because they induce moods and motivations. They help make the group’s ethos intellectually reasonable.

The article, which must be read in its unbridged form for substantiation of many of the author’s premises, is of course both an interpretation of the role of symbolism and an appreciation of the importance of religion in transcending the chaos that threatens man.

The general analytical approach taken here is elaborated in other essays by Geertz, collected in his book, The Interpretation of Cultures (1973).

Any attempt to speak without speaking any particular language is not more hopeless than the attempt to have a religion that shall be no religion in particular... Thus every living and healthy religion has a marked adaptability; its power consists in its special and surprising message and in the bias that revelation gives to life. The virtues of order and the mysteries it proposes are another world to live in; and another world to live in—whether we expect ever to pass wholly over into it or not—is what we mean by having a religion.

—Santayana: Reason in Religion

(1903)

As we are to deal with meaning, let us begin with a paradox comes to be believed in as a function to synthesize a people’s ethos—the fact, 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 are and actually are, their most comprehensible 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 in the world-view described, 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 a way of life. This confrontation and mutual confirmation has two functional effects. On the one hand, it objectifies literal and aesthetic preferences by depicting them as the important conditioned by life implicit in a world with a particular structure, as more common sense given the unalterable shape of reality. On the other, it supports those 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 a particular style of life and a specific (if, most often, implicit) metaphysic, and in so doing sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other.

Phrasing aside, this much may perhaps be granted. The notion that religion tunes human actions to an envies cosmic order and projects images of cosmic order onto the plane of human experience is hardly novel. But it is hardly investigated otherwise, so that we have very little idea of how, in empirical terms, this particular miracle is accomplished. We just know that it is done, annual, weekly, daily, for some people almost beyond the reach of the special perspective of the endless and monumental literature to demonstrate it. But the theoretical framework which would enable us to provide an analytic account of an account of the sort we can provide for line segmentation, political succession, labor exchange or the socialization of the child, does not exist.

Let us, therefore, reduce our paradigm to a definition, for although it is notorious that definitions establish nothing in themselves they do, if they are carefully enough constructed, provide a useful orientation, or reorientation, of thought, such that an extended unpacking of them can be an effective way of developing and controlling a novel line of inquiry. They have the useful virtue of explicitness; they commit themselves in a way discursive prose, which, in this field especially, is always liable to subjective rhetoric for argument, does not. Without ado, then, a religion is (1) a system of symbols which (2) establishes a powerful pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceiving of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura.
of factuality that (t) he moods and motiva-
tions seen uniquely realistic.

... A SYSTEM OF SYMBOLS
WHICH ACTS TO . . .

Such a tremendous weight is being put on the term "symbol!" here that our first move must be to decide with some precision what we are going to mean by it. This is a no easy task, for, rather like "culture," "symbol" has been used to refer to a great variety of things, often a number of them at the same time. In some hands it is used for anything which signifies something else to someone: dark clouds are the symbolic precursors of an oncoming rain. In others it is used only for explicitly conventional signs of one sort or another: a red flag is a symbol of danger, a white of surrender. In others, it is confined to something which expresses in an oblique and figurative manner that which cannot be stated in a direct and literal one, so that there are symbols in poetry but not in science, and symbolic logic is nonexistent. Yet others, however, it is used for any object, act, event, quality or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception—the conception is the sym-

...
his mode of procedure is shaped by his physiology. But man, whose genes are silent on the building trades, needs also a conception of what it is to build a dam, a conception he can get only from some symbolic source—a blueprint, a textbook, or a string of speech-tations expressed in the symbolic, as when we construct a dam according to the specifications, or a program according to a set of conclusions drawn from a flow chart. Here, the theory is a model under whose guidance physical relations are organized: it is a model for "reality," for psychological and social systems, and for cultural models that we would not ordinarily refer to as "theor-ies," but rather as "doctrines," "philosophies," or "rhetoric": the case is in no way different. Unlike genes, and other non-symbolic information sources, which are only models for, not models of, culture patterns have an intrinsic double aspect they give meaning, i.e., objec-tively conceptual form, to social and psychologi-cal knowledge by shaping themselves to it by shaping its expression.

It is, in fact, this double aspect which sets true symbols off from other sorts of significative forms. Models (for are found, as the gene example suggests, through the whole world by nature, for wherever there is a communication of pattern such programs are, in simple logic, required. Among animals, imprint learning is perhaps the most striking example, because what such learning involves is the automatic presentation of an appropriate sequence of behavior by a model animal. In the presence of a learning animal which serves, equally automatically, to call out and stabilize a certain set of responses genetical-ly built into the learning animal. The commu-nicative dance of two bees, one of which has found nectar and the other of which seeks it, is another, somewhat different, more complexly coded, example. Czik has even suggested that the thin trickle of water which first finds its way down from a moun-tain spring to the sea and smooths a little channel for the greater volume of water which follows after it plays a sort of model for function. But models of linguistic, graphic, mechanical, natural, etc., processes which function not to provide sources of information in terms of which other pro cesses can be patterned, but to represent those patterned processes as such, to express their structure in an alternative medium—are much rarer and may perhaps be con- fined, among living animals, to man. The perception of the structural congruence be-tween one set of processes, activities, rela-tions, entities, etc., and another set for which it acts as a program, so that the program can be taken as a representation, or conception—a symbol—of the programmed, is the essence of human thought. The inter-transparency of models for and models of, of which sym-bolism is made, marks the same sort of dis-tinctive characteristic of our mentality.

2. . . . TO ESTABLISH POWERFUL, PERSIS-TIVE AND LONG-LASTING MOODS AND MOTIVATIONS IN MEN BY . . .

So far as religious symbols and symbol sys-tems are concerned this inter-transparency is clear. The endurance, courage, indepen-dence, perseverance and passionate willful-ness with which the Plains Indian practices the vision quest are the same flame-want virtues by which he attempts to live: while achieving a sense of revelation he stabilizes a sense of direction. The consciousness of defauliated obligation, sacred guilt and, when a confession is obtained, public shame to which [x] Marieu's seeks reassures him are the same sentiments that underlie the sort of duty ethic by which his property-conscious society is maintained: the gaining of an absolution involves the forging of a conscience. And the same self-discipline which rewards a 'Javanese mystic staring fixedly into the flame of a lamp with what he
takes to be an intimidation of divinity drilled him in that rigorous control of emotional expression which is necessary to a man who would follow a quietistic style of life. Whether one sees the conception of a personal guardian spirit, a family tutelary or an immaterial God as synoptic formulations of the character of reality or as templates for producing reality with such a character seems largely arbitrary, a matter of which aspect, the model of or the method for, one might choose to bring into focus. The concrete symbols involved—one or another mythological figure materializing in the wilderness, the skull of the deceased household head hanging censoriously in the rafters, or a disembodied 'voice in the stillness' soundlessly chanting enigmatic classical poetry—point in either direction. They both express the world's climate and shape it.

They shape it by inducing in the worshipper a certain distinctive set of dispositions which lend a chronic character to the flow of his activity and the quality of his experience. A disposition describes not an activity or an occurrence but a probability of an activity being performed or an occurrence occurring under certain circumstances: 'When a cow is said to be a ruminant, or a man is said to be a cigarette smoker, it is not being said that the cow is ruminating now or that the man is smoking a cigarette now.' To be a ruminant is to tend to ruminante from time to time, and to be a cigarette-smoker is to be in the habit of smoking cigarettes. 'Similarly, to be pious is not to be performing something we would call an act of piety, but to be liable to perform such acts.' So, too, with the Platonist Idea, the Manx's compunctionness or the Jainist's quiescence in which, their Cartesianism is unavowed, 'psychological fact' (both unobjectionable enough terms in themselves) is that it gets them out of any dim and inaccessible realm of private screened into that same well-lit world of observables in which resides the brightness of glass, the inflammability of paper and, to return to the metaphor, the dampness of England.

So far as religious activities are concerned (and learning a myth by heart is as much a religious activity as detaching one's finger at the knuckle), two somewhat different sets of dispositions are induced by them: moods and motivations.

The major difference between moods and motivations is that where the latter are, so to speak, vocational qualities, the former are merely scalar. Motives have a directional cast, they describe a certain overall course, gravitate toward certain, usually temporary, consummations. But moods vary only as to intensity; they go nowhere. They spring from certain circumstances but they are responsive to no ends. Like fog, they just settle and lift; like scents, diffuse and evaporate. When present they are involuntary; if one is sad everything and everybody seems sullen; if one is gay, everything and everybody seems splendid. Further, where motives persist for more or less extended periods of time, moods merely recur with greater or lesser frequency, coming and going for what are often quite unfathomable reasons. But—perhaps the most important difference, so far as we are concerned, between moods and motivations is that motivations are 'made meaningful' by reference to the ends toward which they are conceived to conduct, while moods are 'made meaningful' with reference to the conditions from which they are conceived to spring. We interpret motives in terms of their consummations, but we interpret moods in terms of their sources. We say that a person is industrious because he wishes to succeed, we say that a person is worried because he is conscious of the hanging threat of nuclear holocaust. And this is no less the case when the interpretations invoked are ultimate. Charity becomes Christian charity when it is enclosed in a conception of God's purpose, the assistenteegade Navajo finding his rationale in a belief that, as 'reality' operates, that though a man can be vain, boastful, chronic fearfulness finds its rationale in a conviction that, however 'really' operates, it is benefactoriously powerful and terribly dangerous.

... BY FORMULATING CONCEPTIONS OF A GENERAL ORDER OF EXISTENCE AND ... That the symbols or symbol systems which induce and define dispositions we set off as religious and those which place those dispositions in a cosmic framework are the same symbols ought to occasion no surprise. For what else do we mean by saying that a particular mood of awe is religious and not secular except that it springs from entertaining a conception of all-pervading vitality like mana and not from a visit to the Grand Canyon? Or that a particular case of asceti-

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except that it is directed toward the achievement of an unconditional end like nirvana and not a conditioned one like weight-reduction? If sacred symbols did not, at one and the same time, induce dispositions in human beings and form them however obligingly, fortuitously or unsystematically, generally to order, then the empirical differences of religious activity, or religious experience would not exist. A man can indeed be said to "believe" or to "belong" to a church, but he prides it with passion and plays it on Sunday: he must also see it as symbolic of some transcendental truths. And the pious boy gazing soulfully into the eyes of the pious priest in a William Steig cartoon and murmuring, "There is something about you. Ethel, which gives me a sort of religious feeling," is, like most adolescent confusions, confused. What any particular religion affirms about the fundamental nature of reality may be obscure, shallow or, all too often, perverse, but it must: if it is not to consist of the mere collection of received practices and conventional sentiments we usually refer to as moralism, affirm something. If one were to essay a minimal definition of religion today it would perhaps not be Tyler's famous "belief in spiritual beings," to which Goody, wearied of theoretical abstractions, has lately urged us to return, but rather what Salvador de Madariaga has called "the relatively modest dogma that God is not mad.

Usually, of course, religions affirm very much more than this: we believe, as James reminded us, that we can and will believe, everything if we only could. The thing we seem least able to tolerate is a threat to our power of conception, a suspicion that our ability to create, grasp and use symbols may fail or, rather, that to happen, man would be more helpless, as I have already pointed out, than the beasts. The extreme generality, distinctiveness and variability of man's innate (i.e., genetically programmed) response capacities means that without the assistance of cultural patterns he would be functionally incomplete, not merely a talented ape who had, like some under-privileged child, unfortu-nately been prevented from realizing his full potentialities, but a kind of formless monster we either sense of direction nor power of self-control, a chaos of spasmodic impulses and vague emotions. Man depends upon symbols and symbol-systems with a dependence so great as to be decisive for his creative viability and, as a result, his sensi-tivity to every remotest indication that they may prove unable to cope with one or another aspect of experience raises within him the gravest sort of anxiety.

There are at least three points where chaos—a tumult of events which lack not just interpretations but interpretability—threat-ens to break in upon man: at the limits of his analytic capacities, at the limits of his powers to recollect, and at the limits of his moral insight. Suffrage, suffering, and a sense of intractable ethical paradox are all, if they become intense enough or are sustained long enough, radical challenges to the proposition that life is comprehensible and that we can, by taking thought, orient ourselves effective-ly within it—challenges with which any reli-gion, however "primitive," which hopes to persist must attempt somehow to cope.

Of the three issues, it is the first which has been least investigated by modern social an-thropologists (though Evans-Pritchard's clas-sic discussion of why granaries fall on some Asante and not on others, is a notable ex-ception). Even to consider people's religious beliefs as attempts to bring anomalous events or experiences—death, dreams, mental fugues, volcanic eruptions or marital infidel-ity—within the circle of the at least potential-ly explicable seems to smack of Tyroleanism or worse. But it does appear to be a fact that at least some men—in all probability, most men—are unable to leave unclarified prob-lens of analysis merely unclarified, just to look at the stranger features of the world's landscape in dumb astonishment or bland apathy without trying to develop, however fantastic, inconsistent or simple-minded, some notions as to how such features might be explained with the help of perhaps some knowledge of science: philosophical speculation, myth) one has for making the empirical world, by plain thinking which cry out for explanation, tends to lead to a deep disquiet—a tendency rather more widespread and a disgust either or deeper than we have sometimes supposed since the pseudo-science view of religious belief was, as I have been suggesting, to some extent, for many of us, an attempt to substitute religions for belief that, as it has put it, God plays dice with the universe.

But this quest for lucidity and the rush of metaphysical anxiety that occurs when em-pirical phenomena threaten to remain intransigently opaque is found on much
humble intellectual levels. Certainly, I was struck in my own work, much more than I had at all expected to be by the degree to which my more anthropistically inclined informants behaved like true Tyroleans. They seemed to be constantly using their biclades to "explain" phenomena; or, more accurately, to convince themselves that the phenomena were explainable within the accepted scheme of things, for they commonly had only a minimal attachment to the particular soul possession, emotional disequilibrium, taboo infringement or bewitchment hypoth-
esis they advanced and were all too ready to abandon it for other, in the same genre, which struck them as more plausibly given the facts of the case. What they were not ready to do was abandon it for no other hypothesis at all; to leave events to them-
selves.

The second experiential challenge in whose face the meaningfulness of a particu-
lar pattern of life threat[es to] dissolve into a chaos of thingless names and nameless things—the problem of suffocation—has been rather more investigated, or at least de-
scribed, mainly because of the great amount of attention given in works on tribal religion, to what are perhaps its two main loci: illness and mourning. Yet for all the fascination interest in the emotional aura which sur-
rounds these extreme situations, there has been, with a few exceptions such as Lie-
hardt's recent discussion of Dinka divining, little conceptual advance over the sort of crude confidence type of theory set forth by Malinowski viz., that religion helps one to endure "situations of emotional stress" by "opening up escapes from such situations and such impasses as offer no empirical way out except by ritual and belief and into the do-
main of the supernatural." The inadegacy of this "theology of optimism," as Nadel rather dryly called it, is, of course, radical. Over its career religion has probably dis-
turbed men as much as it has cheered them; forced them into a head-spinning con-
frontation of the fact that they are born to trouble as often as it has enabled them to avoid such a confrontation by projecting them into a sort of infantile fairy-tale world where—Malinowski again—"the myth fail not or desire deceive." With the possible exception of Christian Science, there are few if any religious traditions a "great" or "little," in which the proposition that life hurts is not strenuously affirmed and in some it is virtu-
ally glorified.

As a religious problem, the problem of suffering is, paradoxically, not how to avoid
suffering but how to suffer, how to make of the pain of personal pain, worldly defeat or the helpless contemplation of death, ag-
ony something bearable, supportable—some-
thing, as we say, sufferable.

The problem of suffering passes easily into the problem of ev ill, for if suffering is severe enough it usually, though not always, seems morally undeserved as well, at least to the sufferer. But they are not, however, exactly the same thing—a fact I think Weber, too
influenced by the biases of a monothetic tradition in which, as the various aspects of human experience must be conceived to pro-
ceed from a single, voluntaristic source, man's pain reflects directly on God's good-
ness, did not fully recognize in his generaliz-
ing of the dilemmas of Christian theology Eastward. For where the problem of suffer-
ing is concerned with threats to our ability to put our "undisciplined squad of emotion" into some sort of orderly order, the problem of evil is concerned with threats to our ability to make sound moral judgments. What is involved in the problem of evil is not the adequacy of our symbolic resources to gov-
er our affective life, but the adequacy of those resources to provide a workable set of ethical criteria, normative guides to govern our action. The vexation here is the gap between "things as they are and as they ought to be if our conceptions of right and wrong make sense, the gap between what we deem various individuals deserve and what we see that they get—a phenomenon summed up in that profound quatrain:

The sin falls in the just
And the unjust falls;
But sin impiously upon the just,
Because the unjust has the just's umbrellas.

Or if this seems too florid an expression of an issue that, in somewhat different form, animates the Book of Job and the Baghavat Gita, the following classical Javaenese poem, known, sung, and repeatedly quoted in Java by virtually everyone over the age of six, puts the point—the discrepancy between moral prescriptions and material rewards, the seeming inconsistency of "is" and "ought"—rather more elegantly.

We have lived to see a time without order
In which everyone is confused in his mind.
One cannot bear to join in the madness.
But if he does not do so
He will not shine in the gold,
And will suffer as a result.

Yes, God; wrong is wrong.
Hopeless are those who have
Happier yet those who remember and have
deep insight.
The problem of evil, or perhaps one should say the problem about evil, is in essence the same sort of problem as or about happiness and the problem of or about suffering. The strange opacity of certain empirical events, the dumb sensuousness of intense or inexcusable pain, and the epiphenomenal unaccountability of gross injustice all raise the uncomfortable suspicion that perhaps the world, and hence man's life in the world, has no genuine order at all—no empirical regularity, no sequential form, no moral coherence. And the religious response to this suspicion is in each case the same: the formulation, by means of symbols, of an image of such a genuine order of the world which will account for, and even celebrate, the perceived ambiguities, puzzles and paradoxes in human experience. The effort is not to deny the undeniable—that there are unexplained events, that life hurts or that pain falls upon the just—but to devise that there are irreducible events, that life is unendurable and that justice is a mirage. The principles which constitute the moral order may indeed often elude men in the same way as fully satisfactory explanations of anomalous events or effective forms for the expression of feeling often elude them. What is important, to a religious man at least, is that this elusiveness he accounted for, that it be not the result of the fact that there are no such principles, explanations or forms, that life is absent and the attempt to make moral, intellectual or emotional sense out of experience is impossible.

The Problem of Meaning in each of its integrating aspects (how these aspects in fact interrelate in each particular case, what sort of interplay there is between the sense of analytic, emotional and moral impotence, seen to be one of the outstanding, and except for Weber untouched, problems for comparative research in this whole field) is a matter of affirming, or at least recognizing, the inescapability of ignorance, pain and illusion on the human plane while simultaneously denying that these irrationalities are characteristic of the world as a whole. And it is in terms of religious symbolism, a symbolism relating man's sphere of existence to a wider sphere within which it is conceived to rest, that both the affirmation and the denial are made.

4... AND CLOTHING THOSE CONCEPTIONS WITH SUCH AN AURA OF FACTUALITY THAT...

There arises here, however, a profounder question: how is it that this denial comes to be believed? how is it that the religious man moves from a troubled perception of experienced disorder to a more or less settled conviction of fundamental order? What does "belief" mean in a religious context? Of all these beliefs, surpassing attempts to conduct anthropological analysis of religion this is the one that has perhaps been most treatable and therefore, the one most often avoided, usually by relegating it to psychology, that raffish outcast discipline to which social anthropologists are forever consigning phenomena they are unable to deal with within the framework of a denatured Durkheimianism. But the problem will not go away, it is not "merely" psychological (nothing social is), and no anthropological theory of religion which fails to attack it is worthy of the name. We have been trying to stage Hamlet without the Prince quite long enough.

It seems to me that it is best to begin any approach to this issue with frank recognition that religious belief involves not a Bossian deduction from everyday experience—for then we should all be aggrieved—but rather a prior acceptance of authority which transcends that experience. The existence of justification, pain and moral paradox—of The Problem of Meaning—is one of the things that drive man toward belief in gods, devils, spirits, totemic principles or the spiritual efficacy of cannibalism (an ennobling sense of beauty by a dazzling perception of power) or others; but it is not the basis upon which these beliefs are based, but rather their most important factor of application.

In tribal religious authority lies in the person of the shaman, or shaman-like individual in the crustal society. The person is in the apodictic force of superexemplaristic experience: in charismatic reality the hypnotic attraction of an extraordinary personality. But the priority of the acceptance of all authoritative criterion in religious matters over the reason for which it is conceived to flow from that acceptance is not less complete than is spiritual or historic ones. The basic axiom underlying what we may perhaps call "the religious perspective" is everywhere the same: he who would know must first believe.

But to speak of "the religious perspective" is, by implication, to speak of one perspective among others. A perspective is a mode of seeing, in that extended sense of "see" in which it means "view," "appreciation," "understand" or "grasp." It is a particular way of looking at life, a particular manner of construing the world, as when we speak of an historical perspective, a scientific per-
spective, an aesthetic perspective, a com-
mon-sense perspective, or even the bizarre
perspective embodied in dreams and in hal-
lucinations. The question then comes down
to, first, what is "the religious perspective"
genetically considered, as differentiated from
other perspectives; and second, how do
men come to adopt it.

If we place the religious perspective against the background of three of the other
major perspectives in terms of which men con-
stitute the world—what the scientific and the aesthetic—its special character emerges more sharply. What dis-
tinguishes common-sense as a mode of "see-
ing" is, as Schutz [1962] has pointed out, a
simple acceptance of the world, its objects
and its processes as being just what they
seem to be—what is sometimes called naive
realism—and the pragmatic motive, the wish
to act upon that world so as to bend it to
one's practical purposes, to master it, or
so far as that proves impossible, to adjust to it.
The world of everyday life, itself, of course,
a cultural product, for it is framed in terms of
the symbolic conceptions of "stubborn fact"
shaped down from generation to generation,
is the established scene and given object of
our actions. Like Mt. Everest it is just there
and the thing to do with it, if one feels the
need to do anything with it at all, is to climb it.
In the scientific perspective it is precisely
this givenness which disappears (Schutz,
1962). Deliberate doubt and systematic inqui-
ry, the suspension of the pragmatic motive in
favor of disinterested observation, the at-
temp to analyze the world in terms of formal
concepts whose relationship to the informal
context of the world is no longer sens census become in-
creasingly problematic—these are the hall-
marks of the attempt to grasp the world sci entifically and as for the aesthetic per-
spective, which under the rubric of "the
aesthetic attitude" has been perhaps most
exquisitely examined. It involves a different
sort of suspension of naive realism and prac-
tical engagement, in that instead of questioning the credentials of everyday experience that experience is merely ignored in favor of an
imagined dwelling upon appearances, an en-
grossment in surfaces, an absorption in things, as we say, "in themselves". "The
function of artistic illusion is not 'real be-
lieve'... but the very opposite, disengage-
ment from belief—the contemplation of
sensory qualities and the separation of mean-
ings of 'here' that chair. 'That's my tele-
phone'... etc. The knowledge that what
is before us has no practical significance in
the world is what enables us to give attention to
its appearance as such" (Langer, 1953, p. 49).

And like the common-sensual and the sci en-
tific (or the historical, the philosophical
and the aesthetic), this perspective, this "way of seeing" is not the product of some mysterious
Cartesian chemistry, but is induced, mediat-
ed, and in fact created by means of symbols. It is the artist's skill which can produce the
curious quasi-objects—poems, dramas,
sculptures, symphonies—which, by existing
themselves from the solid world of common-
sense, take on the special sort of eloquence
only sheer appearance can possess.

The religious perspective differs from the
common-sensical in that, as already pointed
out, it moves beyond the realities of every-
day life to wider ones which correct and
complete them, and its defining concern is
not action upon those wider realities but
acceptance of them, faith in them. It differs
from the scientific perspective in that it ques-
tions the realities of everyday life not out of
an institutionalized scepticism which dis-
 solves the world's givenness into a web of
probabilistic hypotheses, but in terms of
what it takes to be wider, non-hypothetical
truths. Rather than detachment, its watch-
word is commitment; rather than analysis,
encounter. And it differs from art in that
instead of effecting a disengagement from
the whole question of factuality, deliberately
manufacturing an air of semblance and illu-
sión, it deepens the concern with fact and
seeks to create an aura of utter actuality. It is
this sense of the "really real" upon which the

Which brings us, at length, to ritual. For it is
in ritual—i.e., in organized behavior—where
this connection that religious conceptions are

vertical and that religious directives are
sound is somehow generated. It is in some
sort of ceremonial form—even if that form
be hardly more than the recitation of a myth,
the consolidation of a given order, the decora-
tion of a grave—that the moods and motiva-
tions which sacred symbols induce in men
and the general conceptions of the order of
existence which they formulate for men
meet and reinforce one another. In a ritual,
the world as lived and the world as imag-
ined, fused under the agency of a single set
of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same
world, producing thus that idiosyncratic transformation in one's sense of reality to which Sartreans refer in my epigraph. Whatever role divine intervention may or may not play in the creation of faith—and it is not the business of the scientist to pronounce upon such matters one way or the other—it is, primarily at least, out of the context of concrete acts of religious observance that religious conviction emerges on the scene.

However, though any religious ritual, no matter how apparently automatic or conventional (if it is truly automatic or merely conventional it is not religious), involves this symbolic fusion of ethos and world-view, it is mainly certain more elaborate and usually more public ones, in which a broad range of moods and motivations on the one hand and of metaphysical conceptions on the other are caught up, which shape the spiritual consciousness of a people. Employing a useful term introduced by Singer (1955) we may call these full-blown ceremonies "cultural performances" and note that they represent not only the point at which the dispositional and conceptual aspects of religious life converge for the believer, but also the point at which the interaction between them can be most readily examined by the detached observer.

Of course, all cultural performances are not religious performances, and the line between those that are, and artistic, or even political ones is often not so easy to draw in practice, for, like social forms, symbolic forms can serve multiple purposes. But the point is that, paraproaching slightly, Indians—and perhaps all peoples—seem to think of their religion "as encapsulated in these discrete practices which they (can) exhibit to visitors and to themselves" (Singer, 1955).

The mode of exhibition is however radically different for the two sorts of witnesses, a fact seemingly overlooked by those who would argue that "religion is a form of human art." Where for "visitors" religious performances can, in the nature of the case, only be presentiments of a particular religious perspective, and thus aesthetically appreciated or scientifically dissected, for participants they are in addition enactments, materializations, realizations of it—not only models of what they believe, but also models for the believing of it. In visceral, plastic dramas men attain their faith as they portray it.

5. THAT THE MOODS AND MOTIVATIONS SEEM UNICELY REALISTIC.

But no one, not even a saint, lives in the world religious symbols formulate all of the time, and the majority of men live in it only at moments. The everyday world of common-sense objects and practical acts is, as Schutz says, the paramount reality in human experience—paramount in the sense that it is the world in which we are most solidly rooted, whose inherent actuality we can hardly question (however much we may question certain portions of it), and from whose pressures and requirements we can not escape. A man, even large groups of men, may be aesthetically insensitive, religiously unconcerned and unequipped to pursue formal scientific analysis, but he cannot be completely lacking in common-sense and arrive. The dispositions which religious rituals induce thus have their most important impact—from a human point of view—outside the boundaries of the ritual itself as they reflect back to color the individual's conception of the established world of bare fact. The peculiar tone that marks the Platonic vision, the Manic confession or the Jewish ceremonial exercise pervades areas of the life of these peoples far beyond the immodestly religious, impressing upon them a distinctive reality in the sense both of a dominant mood and of a characteristic temperament. Religion is sociologically interesting not because, as vulgar positivism would have it, it describes the social order (which, insofar as it does, it does not only very obligingly but very incompletely), but because, like environment, political power, wealth, judicial obligation, personal affection, and a sense of beauty, it shapes the social order (which, insofar as it does, it does not only very obligingly but very incompletely).

The movement back and forth between the religious perspective and the common-sense perspective is seen in the occasionally evident empirical occurrences on the social scene. Hence again the question: How far are such apparent reflections of that experience in the midst of everyday life not precisely the same thing, and the failure to realize this has led to some confusion, most especially in connection with the so-called "primitive mentality" problem. Which is the difficulty here: the fact that the arts and Malinowski on the nature of "native thought," for example, arises from a lack of full recognition of this distinction; for where
the French philosopher was concerned with the view of reality savages adopted when taking a specifically religious perspective, the Polish-English ethnographer was con-
cerned with the specificity of the way in which the savages thought—"or as we would rather say, those two modes of symbolic for-
mulation—interested, so that whereas Loy"e- 
Bruhl's savages tended to live, despite his posth(m)al distinctions, in a world completed entirely of mystical encounters, Malinow-
ski's tended to live, despite his stress on the functional importance of a religion, in a 
world composed entirely of practical actions. They became reductionists (a stimulus is 
as much of a reductionist as a materialist) in spite of themselves because they failed to see 
man as moving more or less easily, and very 
frequently, between radically contrasting 
ways of looking at the world, ways which are 
not continuous with one another but separat-
ed by cultural gaps across which Kierke- 
gaardian leaps must be made to both direc-
tions.

Yet an anthropologist, the importance of 
religion lies in its capacity to serve, for an 
individual or for a group, as a source of 
general, yet distinctive conceptions of the 
world, the self and the relations between 
the two, and of what constitutes the world 
and of rooted, no less distinctive "mental" 
distinctions between the two which they would be philo-
osophical, the humane and the mundane. How far 
it does so (for in many societies religion's ef-
fects are quite circumscribed, or completely pervasive) how deeply it does so 
(for some men, and groups of men, seem to 
see their religion light), is often the crucial 
question of the social world goes, while others seem to 
apply their faith to each occasion, no matter how 
temporal; how effectively it does so (for the 
width of the gap between what religion rec-
ommends and what behavior actually does in 
much variable cross-culturally) all these are 
the crucial issues in the comparative sociology 
and psychology of religion. Even the degree 
which, religious systems themselves are 
developed seems to vary extremely widely, 
and not merely on a "simply social" or 
fundamental basis. In one society, the level of elaboration of symbolic formul 
are to reach extraordinary degrees of com-
plexity and systematic articulation; in 
another, no less developed socially, such for-
mulations may remain primitive in the true 
also a gloss upon the mundane world of 
social relationships and psychological 
events. It renders them gestable. 

But more than gloss, such beliefs are also 
template. They do not merely interpret the 
and psychological processes in cosmic 
terms—in which case they would be philo-
sophical, not religious—but they shape them. 
In the doctrine of original sin is embedded 
not accidents at all, but to 
reactions to these apparent accidents with hatred 
the agent who caused them and to pro-
cceed against him with appropriate resolution. 
Ess in addition to being a concept of truth, 
beauty and goodness, is also a preferred 
mode of experiencing, a kind of affective 
attachment, a variety of blind, instinctual, 
unshakable, uncritical. The moods and motiva-
tions a religious system produces casts a 
derivative, similar light over the solid features of a 
people's secular life. 

The tracing of the social and psychological role of religion is thus not so much a 
manner of finding correlations between specific rit-
ual acts and specific secular social ties— 
though these correlations do, of course, exist and are very 
worth continued investigation, especially if we can contrive something prov-
el to say about them. More, it is a matter of understanding how it is that man's 
meanings, and the resulting action, are produced. The dispositions these notions induce in 
them. In the very way of thinking of the social beings, the 
human and the mundane. How far 
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are to reach extraordinary degrees of com-
plexity and systematic articulation; in 
another, no less developed socially, such for-
mulations may remain primitive in the true
sense, barely more than categories of fragmentary beliefs and isolated images, of sacred phenomena and spiritual phenomena. One need only think of the Australians, the Bushmen, the Vedas, the Holy Bible, the Hinduism and the Romans, or even the Italians and the Poles, to see that degree of religious artlessness is not a constant even as between societies of similar complexity.

The anthropological study of religion is therefore a two-stage operation: first, an analysis of the system of meanings embodied in the symbols which make up the religion proper, and, second, the relating of these systems to social structural and psychological processes. My dissatisfaction with such much of contemporary social anthropological work in religion is not that it concerns itself with the second stage, but that it neglects the first, and in so doing takes for granted what most needs to be elucidated. To discuss the role of ancestor worship in regulating political unification, of sacrificial feasts in defining kinship obligations, of spirit worship in scheduling agricultural practices, of divination in reinforcing social control or of initiation rites in propelling personality maturation are in no sense unimportant endeavors, and I am not recommending they be abandoned for the kind of jeime cabalism into which symbolic analysis of ethnic faiths can so easily fall. But to attempt them with but the most general, commonsense view of what ancestor worship, animal sacrifice, spirit worship, divination, or initiation rites are as religious patterns seems to me not particularly promising. Only when we have a theoretical analysis of symbolic action comparable to that of the social and psychological action, will we be able to cope effectively with those aspects of social and psychological life in which religion (or art, or science, or ideology) plays a determinent role.