

Reading Notes - Religion As A Cultural System - Clifford Geertz

In this chapter, Geertz looks to define religion through a cultural lens in an attempt to advance the anthropological study of religion. Geertz observes, and believes, that the anthropological study of religion is stagnant due to a narrow focus on "transcendent figures (p. 89)" such as Freud, Durkheim and Weber. Endeavoring to springboard off of the great theories of the past Geertz wants to explore the "cultural dimension of religious analysis (p. 89)."

In order to do this, Geertz has to further explain what he means by "culture" and "religion." Culture is defined as "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols," which are used by humans to "communicate, perpetuate and develop their attitudes toward life (p. 89)." Religion is then defined as a special system of symbols that does four different things. Religion:

1. Establishes powerful "moods and motivations (p. 90)" in people
2. Formulates a "general order of existence"
3. Makes these conceptions appear as fact
4. Makes these moods and motivations seem "uniquely realistic"

Geertz then explains some of the terms within his definitions before delving into an exposition of their origins. In order to explain why humans create these religious symbols, Geertz looks at the kinds of problems that religion solves for people - namely "the problem of meaning." Geertz also makes sure to differentiate the religious perspective from other human perspectives that deal with the same problems namely common-sensical, scientific and aesthetic.

Finally Geertz discusses how these religious beliefs and symbols gain their authority and seeming facticity using an anecdote about a Balinese practice to show that religious beliefs are grounded in actuality by ritual. Geertz concludes by framing his overall theory, asserting that culture is the basis from which social and psychological processes can be understood, but also raises culture above them by asserting that culture also shapes them (although it is not clear if he believes that they shape culture as well). Through a combination of cultural, social and psychological analysis, Geertz believes that the anthropological study of religion can advance.

Upon reflection I believe that Geertz' definition of religion is attempting to draw a line around what is religious and what is not. If you can apply Geertz' definition to "non-religious phenomena" it may only be because Geertz would define that phenomena as religious. When I think of modern things that are non-religious but that often fit into a religious definition, I often think of science or capitalism/ consumerism. Geertz spends a long time separating science from religion so I will see if there are any good reasons to think of Geertz' definition of religion, as capable of applying to non-religious phenomena.

There are plenty of things that do the 4 things that Geertz claims are essential characteristics of religious phenomena. Nationalism for example adheres to all of the standards that Geertz has laid out.