

## **Leaving something to be desired: Geertz on religious development in *Islam Observed*.**

Sen McGlinn

At the beginning of *Islam Observed*, Geertz avoids a definition of religion or a discussion of the various definitions proposed in the comparative study of religion, saying:

The problem is not one of constructing definitions of religion ... it is a matter of discovering just what sorts of beliefs and practices support what sorts of faith under what sorts of conditions. (1)

Implicitly, religion is defined as beliefs and practices that support faith. By 'faith' here, he means 'the shapes of religious experience' (ibid). That is, he is looking for the connection between public religion and individual perceptions of reality, and should be criticized in terms of the question he is asking. He is not looking for connections between ideologies and social mechanisms on the one hand and the religious symbol-system on the other hand. Morris's comment that he "never fully explored the social forces that produced the religious beliefs and practices" is unfair, first because a full exploration is impossible, second because Geertz does in fact relate beliefs and practices to the social structures and history of Morocco and three different classes and areas of Java, and third because it amounts to no more than saying that Geertz has not chosen as his central question the question Morris would have chosen.

Given his shyness about definitions of religion, it is not easy to see what Geertz's research question means. Unless we know what he means by 'religious experience', how can we know whether he has identified the beliefs and practices that support it?

At the end of *Islam Observed*, he again eschews the possibility of a hard definition of religion, saying "We look not for a universal property -- "sacredness" or "belief in the supernatural," for example -- that divides religious phenomena off from nonreligious ones with Cartesian sharpness, but for a system of concepts that can sum up a set of inexact similarities" but he is prepared to go some way towards the definition of a religion:

The heart of ... the religious perspective, is, so I would like to argue, ... not the doctrine that a divine presence broods over the world ... Rather, it is the conviction that the values one holds are grounded in the inherent structure of reality, that between way one ought to live and the way things really are

there is an unbreakable inner connection. What sacred symbols do for those to whom they are sacred is to formulate and image of the world's construction and a program for human conduct that are mere reflexes of one another." (96-97)

It appears that we have a closer definition of 'faith', as 'the conviction that the values one holds are grounded in the inherent structure of reality'. Despite his previous disavowal, he does in fact seem to have presented a Cartesian criterion distinguishing the religious perspective from others. But how in fact does this differ from the scientific and common-sense perspectives? Clearly the link between world-view and ethos is not unique to religion, it is precisely what is meant by a 'world-view' or, in Geertz's terms, a perspective. The common-sense perspective as Geertz describes it takes it for granted that a common-sense view does present us with reality, and it also shows, in common-sense terms, how one should behave. This is why he thinks that religions springs from the perception of the insufficiency of common sense (94-5).

Likewise the scientific perspective purports to present a picture of the inherent structure of reality -- that it is coherent, impersonal and rationally explicable. And science also claims that coherence, impersonality (in the form of objectivity) and rationality are good values. Geertz's definition confuses the 'force' of the conviction with its type, and has in any case shown that the force of religious conviction varies between religions and between societies (111--112). Moreover Geertz says that 'culture' has the same quality of providing conceptions of the world and directing conduct (95-6). As a defining characteristic for religion, coherence is not very satisfactory, but Geertz present others.

Religion, or specifically Islams, he says, render "life less outrageous to plain reason and less contrary to common sense. It renders the strange familiar, the paradoxical logical, the anomalous, given the recognized, if eccentric ways of Allah, natural" (101). This sounds suspiciously like the 'God of the gaps' of Christian theology. His own observation point to the objection made to this conception of religion in Christian theology: science also explains the ways of the world to man, explaining what common sense cannot. Geertz says:

The awareness that everyday experiences can be set in a broader and more meaningful context by resort to symbols which picture reality in terms of general laws inductively established ... has spread ... Even a century ago religious beliefs were about the only means available for plugging leaks in

the hand-crafted dike of common sense. Today even the humblest peasant .. knows that that is no longer so.

If religion is what makes life less outrageous, perhaps he means that religion is just bad science, or even worse, an unscientific explanation of the world that provides illusory comfort until real science emerges. Earlier in the same essay, Geertz had clearly placed religion and commonsense as two alternative ways of rendering life intelligible (91). On his own evidence then, this is characteristic shared by religion, science and commonsense.

Geertz also claims that "the major characteristic of religious beliefs as opposed to other sorts of beliefs ... is that they are regarded as being not conclusions from experience ... but as being prior to it." (98) As it is formulated, this is not true. The believing individual is aware that his or her beliefs come from experience, since one is not born with them and other do not share them. They have been gained, by direct revelation, by conversion, by experience or from teachers. Religious beliefs *are* thought to reflect a reality which is prior to and outside the individual, which may be what Geertz means, but again this is not a distinctive characteristic of religion. The same can be said of scientific law and common sense. In the case of science, the laws are specifically prior to existence: without the laws of physics there can be no big bang.

Another proposed characteristic of religion is that it is 'an institution inherently dedicated to what is fixed in life' (56). This is not to say that it does not change, but that it seeks to appear not to have 'really' changed. At whatever point it may find itself, it locates itself by reference to, and not too far from, a unique and given reference point. But so do the hard sciences: the positions that are now held, and the physical and institutional frameworks are now being used, are justified by reference to realities, physical laws and what is logically required to explore teach and exploit them. 'Physicists have always said' is not an authority-claim in physics, it is the opening gambit of what will certainly be a refutation. Scientific argument cannot be based on a historical tradition of authorities, religious argument may be. If this is the criterion, religion is again bad science.

Another proposed characteristic is that "it is in the nature of faith, even the most unworldly and least ethical, to claim effective sovereignty over human behaviour." (110) This would seem indeed to distinguish religion from science, although perhaps not from commonsense. While there is coherence between the scientific view of reality as rational and orderly and the prescribed method of doing science, the connection to other aspects of life is much weaker. 'Doing science'

may tend to support a rational perspective in life for its participants, in the same way participation in rituals supports a religious perspective, but there is also an accepted limitation to the scope of science as such. It can provide no answers on questions of morals and meaningfulness. Is religion distinctive because it inherently has an all-embracing scope? To formulate it like this is immediately to point out the problem: Geertz himself says that the scope of Islam in Morocco is much more limited than in Indonesia (111). "In Morocco," he says "...devoutness takes the form of an almost deliberate segregation of what one learns from experience and what one receives from tradition." He also says that experienced religion occupies only a small part of the lives of even religious people (107-111). "When men turn to everyday living they see things in everyday terms." (110). There are situations in which religion has claimed sovereignty over all of life. The scripturalists whom he describes, and the Islamist movement of later decades, are examples. However these movements present a programme for the possibility that Islam could be a religion sovereign over every aspect of life. This is not evidence that it is actually possible. Messianic movements may in fact be all-embracing, for a short time, but can only ensure their own continuity by allowing their everyday, economic and political affairs to be governed by the 'varieties of human understanding' that are appropriate to each of these spheres.

We come closer to Geertz's concept of religion by noting the phrase 'What sacred symbols do ...' in the definition cited above. Elsewhere he has described religion as "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." ('Religion as a cultural system' 1973, 90, cited Hofstee 76-7). Clearly it is not the power, pervasiveness, motivation and Factuality that is unique to religion, on the one hand because the same could be said of the commitment of scientists to science, modernists to modernity or artists to the aesthetic, and on the other hand because Geertz observes that the power of religious symbols to achieve these effects is fading (16-17, 102) but he does not conclude that the symbols are less religious.

Perhaps we can reformulate this and say that religion is distinctive in that it seeks to achieve a coherent world-view and ethos, or to create powerful and long-lasting motivation, *through the use of symbols*, rather than rational argumentation. The coherence of the scientific and common-sense world-views does not rest to the same extent on the use of symbols and participation in symbolic acts. However Geertz seems to use a definition of culture as also being a structure of symbols and their interpretations (90) or as a system of significations communicated using

symbols in terms of which subjective life is ordered and outward behaviour guided (95). Is Geertz saying no more about religion than that it is one sub-set of culture, without being able to say which sub-set because he has eschewed definitions in terms of 'ultimate concern', 'sacredness' and 'belief in the supernatural'? (96-7). He does seem close to accepting a Weberian definition of religion a part of a culture, as a system of symbols that formulate an image of the world and an ethos which address 'the problem of meaning. (101) It is not clear why he rejects definitions in terms of ultimate concern or sacredness but does not find 'meaning' to be equally problematical.

Or is religion not some distinct part of culture, but the articulation of the society? We have seen that he says that one key characteristic of the religious perspective is a coherence between the views one holds, the inherent structure of reality, and how one ought to live. He also says (97) that societies have world views and ethics, and "it is the office of religious symbols ... to link these in such a way that they mutually confirm one another." (97) This is not the same thing: rather than religion itself having a world-view and ethos, religion is the symbols that function within a society to link its world-view and ethos in such a way that it appears that both are necessarily true. "Seen from out-side the religious perspective, this sort of hanging a picture from a nail driven into its frame appears as a kind of sleight of hand. Seen from inside, it appears a simple fact." (97) This would appear to make 'secular society' a contradiction in terms, and to deny the possibility of a non-believer being 'on the inside' of a society. It may be a fair approximation of the actual state of affairs in Morocco and Indonesia at that time, but if we want to investigate "the varieties of human understanding ... the diverse ways in which ... all men attempt to render their lives intelligible" (91), we will need to work with a concept of religion that is generalisable.

Geertz's set himself the task of "discovering just what sorts of beliefs and practices support what sorts of faith under what sorts of conditions." (1) He has attempted to do this without a definition of religion and without attributing any universal property such as 'sacredness' to it (96-7). His essays illustrate again the inadequacy of scientific definitions of religion without reference to religious categories. He comes closest to a satisfactory definition of religion using the category of 'the problem of meaning', but this seems to be possible only because he has not realised that this is not hermeneutical meaning but a transcendent category, 'meaningfulness'. Without a theory to begin with, he necessarily falls back on a common-sense definition of religion. As he notes himself, a commonsense

approach leaves something to be desired (94).

It is striking that he has tried to give a sensitive picture of the changes in the subjective experience of faith in the two cultures over the previous 50 years or so, but has not detailed changes in beliefs and practices. By beliefs and practices he means mainly participation in religious rituals (106-7). He says himself that beliefs have not changed significantly (17), and so far as one can tell from his account neither secularisation nor scripturalism have resulted from, or even led to, changes in ritual practice (e.g., 51-2). The unstated answer to his research question would seem to be that there is no necessary relationships between particular sorts of beliefs and practices and particular sorts of faith. It is not changing beliefs and practices that have led to changes in faith, but changes in the circumstances facing individuals in these societies.

## **Bibliography**

Bakker, J.W.A., *Enough Profundities Already!: A reconstruction of Geertz's Interpretive Anthropology*, Thesis, University of Utrecht, 1988, publ. ISOR, Utrecht 1988.

Bakker, J.W., Y.B. Kuiper, J. Miedema (eds) *Antropologie Tussen Wetenschap en Kunst: Essays over Clifford Geertz*. Amsterdam, VU Uitgeverij, 1987.

Geertz, Clifford, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1968.

Geertz, Clifford, *After the Fact: Two countries, four decades, one anthropologist*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1995.

Hofstee, Wim, 'The Interpretation of Religion: Some remarks on the work of Clifford Geertz' in H.G. Hubbeling and H.G. Kippenberg (eds) *On Symbolic Representation of Religion*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1986

Morris, Brian, *anthropological studies of Religion: an introductory text*, Cambridge University Press, 1987.