



## Religion as a System of Symbols: An Interpretation

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### ABSTRACT

Some facets of anthropological understanding of religion as cultural symbols can be comprehended with the example provided by Clifford Geertz on the Balinese theatrical performance. He takes this example to elucidate how cultural performances, a term introduced by Singer, integrate the dispositional and conceptual aspects of religion. For the participants of these performances, Geertz observes these religious cultural recitals are a realization of their religion and their own life itself. This is especially apparent in how the performers and participants interact during the performance of the combat between “Rangda and Borang” symbolically a clash between malignant and comic. Here Geertz observes that participants join the performance as supporting actors, this happens when the participant enters another realm apart from their commonplace existence, here they are possessed by one or the other demons. The untranced here controls excessive activities of the possessed by throwing holy water or chanting spells. Geertz cautions that although one may understand its meaning from myths associated with it, here importance is given to the state of trance. The characters of Rangda the witch and Borang the comical monster and their compact not only represents certain things but also depicts it. These performances justify and accept the religious understanding of these symbols such as anger, fear, playfulness, etc. These state of trance and ritualistic performance urges believers to reflect upon their everyday reality. This is precisely where Geertz's major argument takes shape.

**Keywords:** Symbols, trance, culture, performance, ritual, social change.

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### INTRODUCTION

In the discipline of anthropology and sociology, religion has been a primary concern of study for many practitioners. If one were to only look at the works of eminent persons such as Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, or Bronislaw Malinowski for that matter, one can see their interest in understanding the dynamics of religion and religious life. Even Karl Marx has reckoned with religion in his work, although as an aside than as a direct analysis. Deriving from these scholars and moving beyond them, anthropologists like Clifford Geertz conceptualized religion in the framework of a cultural system. In this essay, we examine the study of religion as a system of symbols and how anthropologists have interpreted them this way.

The primary text being studied is Geertz's *Interpretation of Cultures*, in which he illustrates religion's relationship with symbols and the meanings that are ascribed to them. To make his argument, Geertz traces the patterns found in the Javanese symbolism of Slametan and how its meaning has evolved in the modern context. Geertz critically analyses how anthropologists for a long time have neglected the obvious empirical occurrence of back and forth between the religious and commonsense perspective. The confusion that emanated from this has led to concepts such as 'primitive mentality'. He argues that to understand religion culturally one needs to integrate the reality approach of the French and the common place perspective focused by the Polish-English researchers. Geertz study shows that man can move between the alternative realities, that is religion pure and religion applied, with ease. Such integrated understanding helps us dwell deeper into the meanings of metaphors used, for example Geertz explains how when W. Percy notes that a Borro says that 'he is a parakeet' this statement is true mythically but false scientifically, but nevertheless it has an underlying logical and ritualistic explanation. Thus, according to Geertz what makes religion socially powerful is the placing of proximate acts in ultimate contexts thus placing religious acts in a commonsensical world.

However, this approach is faced with challenges which Geertz recognized as the lack of ability to generalize these rituals and their cultural impact on the common-sense world and the methodological difficulty in neutrally writing about the psychological and social impact of certain religion. According to Geertz the importance of religion for an anthropologist is its capacity to serve individual or a group as a source of general yet distinctive conceptions of the world. It is thus from the model for and model of aspects that cultural functions flow leading to social and psychological ones. Thus, the religious explanations act as a template not only for explaining moral or effective aspects of occurrences but they also shape it. Geertz then observes that the moods and motivations of a religious orientation produces castes and

derivative light over the solid features of people's secular life. He gives the example of how Nazi Christians made sense of the reality they lived in.

As one of the forerunners of interpretive as well as symbolic anthropology, Geertz focuses his study on meaning and meaning making within the various aspects of religion. Hence, this paper assesses how he arrives at his broad definition of religion within this framework that contains five different elements. This article also analyzes the implications of this approach in a specific context, focusing on the symbols and rituals of the sacred groves found in the state of Kerala, India and illustrates how the erosion of symbols impacts the religious and ritualistic practices.

### **Religion as an object of study**

When discussing the sociological study of religion, it is imperative to bring to light a few early approaches. Among them, Emile Durkheim's concepts stand prominent. Durkheim's [1] elucidation of religion encompasses those aspects in society that are considered extraordinary and reverent. He argues that in every society there are concepts and ideas that are thought of as *sacred*, which are set apart, as opposed to the *profane*, which are ordinary. The former of the two is the building block for Durkheim's explanation of religion. Religion, according to him, is a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things" [1].

Durkheim saw this separation of the sacred from the profane as a fundamental aspect of all societies. The main activities of everyday life, such as going to work, carrying out household tasks, etc., are the profane part of life. These activities are held with no particular significance. On the other hand, some activities have been given a colour of additional importance and grandness beyond its material manifestation. An example of this is how many groves in the south Indian state of Kerala have been considered sacred, as they are believed to be resided by a variety of local deities. This sacredness is also transmitted to the performance of *Teyyam*, a dance enacted during important festivals where the performer is said to embody the deity. Within this fold, the grove, the performance, and the performer are all considered sacred. After the performance, the person enacting is no more sacred than anybody else. [2].

Apart from this, Durkheim also attempted to explain religion using the tools of structural functionalism. Here, he argued that religion has three major roles to play in the functioning of society. First among them is that religion acts as an agent of social cohesion. Secondly, Durkheim argues religion helps in building social control, that is, people in society behave in a moral sanctioned manner to respect the *sacred*. Thirdly, he argues that religion provides people in society with a sense of meaning. It is this aspect of meaning that plays a significant role in Geertz' conceptualization of religion, although it is Max Weber's explanation that he cites in his work.

In contrast to Durkheim, Weber looks at the individual over the societal when discussing religion and its meaning. In his work *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber (1905/2001) showed how the drive for meaning motivated individuals in Western society to move towards capitalism, as the protestant ethos sanctioned the accumulation of wealth as religiously justified, and even venerated. This way, Weber describes religion as a meaning making system. Starting from this point on meaning and its relation with symbols, Geertz brought together a model of understanding religion as a cultural system.

### **Religion as a system of symbols**

As stated earlier, the discussion of religion in the framework of symbols and meaning making cannot be taken forward without addressing the concepts by Clifford Geertz. Following the footsteps of scholars such as Edward Shils and Parsons, Geertz demarcated his analysis of religion within the cultural dimension. But first, it is important to understand what Geertz referred to as culture.

According to Geertz's [3] definition, culture refers to the "historically transmitted system of symbols", which entail within them a set of meanings that allow people to share, propagate and create knowledge and information about various aspects of everyday life. Geertz formulates culture as holding a collection of symbols whose behaviour is akin to the genetic transmission of biological data among living things. The symbols and its meanings are passed down from one generation to the next, gradually changing and adapting to circumstances along the way.

The result would be that culture would comprise within it various forms and systems of symbols. A system of symbols can be understood as a group of interrelated symbols with specific meanings that form a whole wider framework of meaning. Within this paradigm about culture that he establishes, Geertz [3] demonstrates the dynamics of religion as a system that creates and becomes a collection of symbols that perpetuates meaning. He argues that the purpose of sacred symbols, which religion comprises of, in society is to bring together a model of understanding reality. The symbols enforce a particular version of moral and aesthetic ideas as singular and indisputable by depicting them as completely in harmony with the actual and imagined experience of life.

For followers of Christianity, man is made in the image of God, and that is the symbolic and actual reality within which they exist. It is not simply a symbolic idea for the followers, but a deeply held truth about life. This reality is symbolized and propagated through the image of Jesus Christ, who is considered the literal son of God. Furthermore, symbols like water, wine and blood represent various meanings within the framework of Christendom.

But it is not enough for sacred symbols to simply exist. Geertz states that they are agents of action that motivate individuals in the society to participate in life in a particular way, by evoking sentiments of deep moral and aesthetic significance. In this way, the participation adds to the meaning of the symbols and the symbols provide meaning to the participants. Connecting these concepts together, Geertz defines religion through five distinct elements as “

- 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.” [3]

A simple breakdown of these elements would tell us more about what Geertz means by this definition. Religion, according to Geertz, is a cultural system entailing within it a set of symbols. These symbols are agents of action that hold meanings that together create a larger whole explaining reality and the general state of affairs in the society, which are felt as particularly accurate to the experience of the individuals. This stimulates a strong, enduring response among the people of the society, creating within them a variety of moods and motivations that are in turn sanctioned by the cultural system of symbols.

It is evident that Geertz is using Durkheim’s idea of the sacred to reach towards a symbolic interpretation of religion. The sacred symbols have the ability to explain not only the inexplicable aspects of reality, but also provide meaning to the mundanity of everyday life. As a result of this, the sacred symbols of a religion are given merit to a great amount of profundity and wide-ranging consequences.

With the legitimacy that this provides, religion is also able to dictate the moral values, codes and conduct within a given society. Geertz argues that the model of reality provided by the religion decides the priorities of the society, about what is ‘proper’ or ‘improper’, ‘just’ or ‘unjust’, ‘moral’ or ‘immoral’. Those with faith in the meanings that the sacred symbols provide live their life in almost complete congruence with the dictums that it prescribes. Religion thus creates a synthesis of what Geertz terms as *ethos* and *worldview*. One does not need to look beyond the boundaries of the Indian subcontinent for an example of this—in the Sanskrit tradition of Hinduism, the term for religion and lifestyle are the same: ‘*dharma*’.

Geertz for his part, took most of his example from the islands of Indonesia, especially Java, as it was his field of research. He showed how in Java, a place where Hinduism, Islamic and animistic elements intermingle to form the religious whole of the society, the *ethos* and *worldview* are symbolized in a variety of ways, across symbol systems.

The shadow-play, or *wajung*, is one particular example that Geertz highlights. Through plays that depict the epic tale of Mahabharata, *wajung* acts as a channel for metaphysical contemplation. It deals with the concept of *rasa*, which refers to both meaning and feeling, and its flow through the human psyche. Geertz claims that the Javanese religion prioritizes the restraint in emotions as a key element of *ethos* and *worldview*. This idea is propagated through the symbolic representation of *wajung*.

Another case that can be used for this study are the symbols in the rituals of the Ndembu ethnic group in Zambia, as described by British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner (1967/1970) in his work titled ‘The Forest of Symbols’. Turner illustrates how in any Ndembu ritual, one symbol holds a primary importance and depends on the character of the ritual. For the exact purpose of the ritual that marks the start of puberty for the female Ndembu child, the dominant symbol, as Turner calls it, is the Mudyi tree or the milk tree. This tree, which secretes a milky white liquid, represents the transition of the girl child becoming a woman and a future nurturer of children. Here too, the symbols act in a way that justifies the cultural and social norms of the Ndembu society. As a matrilineal tribe, Ndembu gives high importance is given to the girl child’s lineage and her growth into a woman outside the control of her mother.

### **Symbols, rituals, and social change**

While there is fairness in asserting that Geertz did not consider social conflict theory for his cultural interpretation of religions, it cannot be said that he altogether ignored aspects of social change and its relationship with religion. His analysis of the recent changes in the ritualistic traditions of the Javanese is in fact an appeal for the use of symbolic interpretation as a tool in studying social change.

In his analysis, Geertz attempted to explicate the codependency of culture and social structure, while also highlighting their distinctive nature as individual variables in society. All forms of festivals in Javanese tradition revolve around the ritual of *slametan*. It is a solemn, territorially bound event where the host invites the male head of the houses in his village and ceremonially addresses them regarding the purpose of the *slametan*. The people gathered participate piously and then quickly return to their homes carrying the food given to them. Geertz explains that the restraint in expressing emotions is a characteristic nature of all Javanese rituals.

However, in a particular case that Geertz studies, the norms of the ritual completely disintegrated. During the early to mid-twentieth century, Indonesia went through a series of socio-cultural changes that divided the population into separate communal groups, although they belong to the same fold of Javanese religiosity. Geertz argues that this division within the society—where one group aligns more to the Islamic symbolisms of the religion while the other prefers the Hinduistic-animistic side—created an atmosphere that was deeply in flux.

Modernization and urbanization, among other changes, allowed for rapid ideological changes, while the underlying structure and the system of symbols remained the same. Geertz argues that this dissonance, or mismatch between the cultural and the social, is a much more adequate diagnosis than any that structural functionalism or Milanowski's theories may provide.

Geertz thus passionately argues that anthropologists should not study functional, mythical or practical symbolic aspects in isolation but as a whole. This will help understand and manoeuvre over the lack of generality and analyse the system of meanings embodied in the symbols which make up the religious proper and the implication of them to the social structural and psychological process.

Sacred symbols apart from what is mentioned earlier in the essay relate to a people's picture of reality to their morality, their power comes from their ability to give to the actual a moral significance. Sacred symbols are "moral pictures" that synthesize one's moral outlook with one's view of the world or, in Geertz' terms, such symbols fuse world view and ethos. Here world view according to Geertz is people's perception of reality around them and the ethos, the attitude attached to it. Sacred symbols integrate the world views and moral outlooks a person beholds, their sense of "is" and "ought", their vision of what is really real in human existence and how we ought to live in accordance with this reality. According to Geertz, the power of sacred symbols also rests on their ability to make sense of experience. However, Geertz cautions us that its role may differ at various times, for various individuals, and in various cultures, religion, by fusing ethos and world view, gives a set of social values what they perhaps most need to be coercive: an appearance of objectivity. In sacred rituals and myths values are portrayed not as subjective human preferences but as imposed conditions for life implicit in a world with a particular structure.

The view of human beings as symbolizing, conceptualizing and meaning-seeking beings, says Geertz, opens up a whole new approach to the study of religion and understanding the relations between religion and morality. The drive to make sense of experience and to give it moral meanings is, Geertz asserts, just as real and pressing as our more familiar biological drives and economic interests. Religions along with art, ideology and common sense, says Geertz, "attempts to provide orientation for an organism which cannot live in a world it is unable to understand".

Geertz then moves to possible problems one may face in understanding religion as a symbol specially when faced with social change. As an example, he cites a Javanese funeral in a town which brings together the religious, cultural and the political unison and gives a sense that religion here is an agent of anomie but as a matter of fact it is not. Social change which is rapid in the Javanese society that he learned may lead to such misconceptions. Here, the social change in the kampong region from village to urban society is still underway, there also exists hostility between groups of traditionalists and fundamentalists that turns religious social change into a political one. For both Santris and Abangans the *samatan* (traditional practice) is fundamental and not wrong. But for Santris the *Modins* should preside over funerary rights as it has religious, here Islamic, significance. This political difference in the name of religion led to conflict at the funeral of a young boy whose uncle was an Abangan, and the *Modin* refused to preside over rituals due to political bias. It led to a stressful and confusing situation. Geertz argues that the basis of the tension is that tradition from folk to urban and from folk integrated Islam to a pure one as propagated by certain groups and their existence in a new Republican form of government. A kampong man is caught between his ultimate and proximate concepts and Geertz puts it. Geertz's analysis of the stressful situation summarizes the disruption in funeral rights as "an incongruity between the cultural framework of meaning and the patterning of social interaction". In other words when both religion and culture at the point of transition fails to make sense of reality.

In the final chapter of the book Geertz essentially argues that the Balinese have modernized Balinese religion for themselves. The religion has been converted 'internally' by the Balinese, and not by external forces. To explain this

Geertz elaborates how religion is rationalized while replacing traditional religions. Rational religions disenchant the world, and rational comprehension of the divine is achieved either through a legal-moral code as seen in Middle-Eastern religions and mysticism as seen in East Asian ones, in effect bridging the gap between man and god. To understand this Geertz brings in Weber's understanding of traditional and rational religion where meanings are sought locally and universally, respectively. Geertz also notes that the modernization of religion lets the Balinese maintain their civilization.

The traditional Balinese religion is characterized by a metaphysical nonchalance. Three elements provide an explicit order to religion the first being the temple system (a God visits the temple every calendar year) the second being the sanctification of social inequality with ceremonies which reinforce ascendancy of nobility, priests are thought to be "full-brothers" of rulers and the spiritual contrast between priests and ordinary men and thirdly the cult of witches and death. The Balinese seem to have rationalized their religion to fit modern times rather than converting to other religions by internal conversion. The steps towards its modernization and thus rationalization includes increased debates and questions around religion, making religious texts publicly accessible and institutionalizing them through modern means of government. This chapter is important in order to make sense of the disruption that we discussed earlier in the Javanese culture and the fact that religious structures and the society they exist in are not stagnant units. These changes may not have affected certain underlying aspects of the religion or culture of the society but they are changes nevertheless.

Asad opposes Geertz's universalist definition of religion.[4] Geertz goes on to clarify systems of symbols as "cultural patterns" that constitute "extrinsic sources of information". These symbols then create in the worshiper a set of "dispositions which lend a chronic character to the flow of his activity and the quality of his experience". As Asad questions, "Can we predict a distinctive set of dispositions for a Christian worshiper in a modern industrial society? Or conversely, can we use this set of dispositions to determine that this worshiper is not a Christian? Clearly, responses to these questions is "no". In the following section, Asad defends his position that the response here is "no" because it is not just worship but the social, historical, political and economic institutions in which the believer lives out his belief. He also questions whether symbols must produce dispositions; if a symbol (like the cross in Christianity) does not produce some sort of religious "disposition", then is the symbol still religious?

One of Asad's most powerful points is that Geertz's view of religious belief as a state of mind and not activity in the world is strictly a Christian, "privatized" one. Geertz's view is definitely that of the West that has divided knowledge from belief (science vs. religion), but that division doesn't hold true in a universal sense. It definitely doesn't hold true in Islam. As Asad notes, it wouldn't hold true for a 12<sup>th</sup> century Christian either. In this portion of his discussion, Asad focuses strongly on the medieval Christian church and the move post-Reformation/Enlightenment that separated scientific knowledge from religious knowledge--and science won. He makes the point that Geertz's view of "perspectives" (described by Asad as "optional flavor") does not apply to science and religion in modern society. In today's society (WEst) religion is now optional, but science is not.

As Asad concludes his essay, he asks if religious symbols are seen as "vehicles for meaning", then how can meaning be established independently of the "form of life in which they are used? If symbols are "signatures of sacred text", how can we know what they mean unless we consider the social disciplines by which the correct reading of these texts is secured? Asad concludes that no religious symbol can be understood independent of the historical relationships with non-religious symbols. He does not argue that the meanings of religious symbols are to be found in social phenomena, but he does claim that the authoritative status of these symbols are the products of historically distinctive forces.

Moving to another major study in viewing religion as a symbol, Turner defines a symbol as "the smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific properties of ritual behaviour". These can include objects, activities, relationships, gestures and special units. He also provides an Oxford definition of a symbol as "a thing regarded by the general consent as naturally typifying or representing or recalling something by possession of analogous qualities of by association in fact or thought". Turner's structural functionalist orientation is heavily influenced by Durkheim and Gluckman which is apparent in his approaches.

According to Turner since symbols are multivocal their analysis must include three classes of observations namely external form and observable characteristics, interpretations offered by specialists and laymen and significant contexts largely worked out by anthropologists. Turner uses the example of the Mudyi tree in Ndembu society to elaborate the approaches to understand symbols. He observes in the ritual a young girl (novice) "is wrapped in a blanket and laid at the foot of the mudyi sapling" tree has white milky sap that appears in beads on the surface of the tree, nicknamed "milk tree" for this reason. He then notes the interpretations of the laymen, the Ndembu women call the tree the "senior" of the ritual, and say that "the milk tree stands for human breast milk and for the breasts that supply it". The ritual is performed at puberty. Also called "tree of mother and her child" it is equal to "social tie of profound significance. Stress harmonizing and cohesive properties of the tree symbol, value on dependence. Tree stands for matriliney, which is, on a deeper level,

the entire structure of Ndembu society. One Ndembu chief understood this and described the Mudyi tree as their “flag”. Also, the “tree is shorthand for the process of instruction in tribal matters”. And lastly with his skills as an anthropologist he analyses that the tree rituals can “represent aspects of differentiation & even opposition” stands more strongly for Ndembu women than for the whole society “distinguishes women as a social category and indicates their solidarity” can be a scene of opposition as well as cohesion, as mother/daughter relationship is strained and changed during the ritual.

The prominence in Turner's approach to religion as symbols is in the differentiation in symbols and signs where symbols is the representation of the unknown. Another major contribution of Turner is the two concepts of dominant and instrumental symbols where dominant symbols are an amalgamation of several ones and are self-evidently true and directly refers to external conventions. Instrumental ones play role only in specific rituals. According to Turner the symbols are polarized in their sensory function that arouses emotions and desires and ideological functions that deal with norms and morality and controls the behaviour of the group.

Turner summarizes the Ndembu symbols which he studies as references to basic needs of social existence and shared values that are the basis of life in the community. Turner also emphasizes on the role of the anthropologist as mentioned earlier and what are the possibilities for the them. The techniques and concepts of the anthropologist allow competent analysis of interrelations between the data in the ideological pole of meaning ,they can also analyse social behaviour that has to do with the total dominant symbol ,but they cannot discriminate between the sources of unconscious feeling/wishing, select what objects serve as symbols, or account for certain aspects of behaviour associated with symbols and they must according to him focus on the group dynamics and the collective phenomena.

According to Turner interpretation of observed emotions is fundamental in the analysis of symbols on rituals. It is especially true for the rituals he studies in the Ndembu community. The inherent conflicts in the profane world is explicitly portrayed in the ritual performances and spoken off in the real world. The ritual performance invokes emotion and checks into reality and re-enforces ideal behaviour. Also, in the Ndembu rituals Turner observes that some meanings of the symbol are not applied during a particular ritual or all meanings are implied at the same time and a well-trained anthropologist like the laymen of the same community can understand these interconnections between one ritual and the other, the colours and symbols and which meaning to apply and which not to apply.

### **An Analysis of the Symbolic Value of Sacred Groves in Contemporary Kerala**

Along the lines of Geertz's Javanese analysis, an attempt is made in this paper to understand the impact of social changes in the symbolic relevance of the sacred groves in Kerala. As mentioned earlier in the essay, the sacred groves, which are known as *kaavu* in Kerala, are considered as the abode for the local deities. These deities vary from village to village and grove to grove.

Until the modern era, the *kaavu* was protected and held with high importance. But in the post-colonial era, the *kaavu* and its rituals are slowly moving away from its Dravidian roots of Hinduism towards the Sanskritic model. In 2016, Catrien Notermans, Albertina Nugteren and Suma Sunny conducted a study in the sacred groves of Kerala which showed that there was a growing adoption of traditional temples over the old *kaavu* format of worship.

This has had a variety of consequences. For one thing, the symbolic value of the *kaavu* has diminished. Due to economic, social, and cultural changes in the state during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the *kaavu* are often cut down and emptied; the deity is then ritually relocated. The slow erosion of the *kaavu* is not due to any lack of religiosity in the population, but is caused by it. [5]

The growing Sanskritization of local religious worship resulted in sanctioning the slow removal of the *kaavu* and the system of symbols it carries. It is replaced with the Sanskritic model. This is evident in the fact that there are efforts to change the names of the deities and to replace the rituals of Teyyam connected to the *kaavu* [5]. Thus, it can be said that the ideological shifts in the population is forcing the symbols of the culture to change, and in turn it sanctions the popular *ethos* and *worldview* of the society. Just as religion as a system of symbols may affect the *Weltanschauung* of the people, the people's *Weltanschauung* changes the system of symbols.

### **CRITICISMS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS**

There are a few limitations to Geertz's approach of cultural interpretation in understanding religion. To begin with, his analysis does not focus on the valid assertions made about by social conflict theorists about religion, that it acts as a buffer against an uprising from the marginalized sections of the society. There is a minimal discussion of class in Geertz's arguments.

The relative difference of interpretation among different classes when dealing with symbols and meanings is an important dimension to be explored in the cultural aspect of religion. Talal Asad[4] rightly points out that even Geertz' definition of culture lacks the essence of material conditions and the way knowledge is influenced by it.

Asad, in his criticism, also argues that Geertz' approach is inherently Christian and hence biased. Geertz's analysis presumes that humans are inherently seeking out meaning in life. While this may be true within the framework of European regions and its relationship with religion and mythology, meanings and meaning-making may not be the primary form of religiosity in other cultures.

From what has been discussed so far, we can assess that Geertz' conceptualization of religion as a system of symbols, while flawed, provides us with a variety of opportunities. There is value in his assertion that static functionalism is not an adequate method to study the impact of social change in religious symbols. Whether the better alternative is Geertz's symbolic interpretation of religion as a cultural system is open to debate.

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