

A Critical Analysis of Clifford Geertz's Thought in Religion as a Cultural System

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Inputted : July 2, 2026

Revised : July 29, 2026

Accepted: August 28, 2026

Published: August 29, 2026

Abstract

This paper offers a critical analysis of Clifford Geertz's seminal essay Religion as a Cultural System (1966), which introduced an interpretive paradigm into the study of religion. Geertz defines religion as a system of symbols that shapes durable moods and motivations in human beings by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with an aura of factuality, thereby linking a religious worldview to a religious ethos. This analysis argues that Geertz's theory constitutes a major turning point in the anthropology of religion by placing meaning, rather than social function or psychological need, at the centre of religious phenomena. At the same time, the theory has been criticised for being overly descriptive, for neglecting questions of power, and for paying insufficient attention to historical change. The paper concludes that Geertz's interpretive approach remains valuable for understanding religion as a cultural system, particularly when read alongside contemporary critical perspectives on power, history, and discourse

Keywords: Clifford Geertz, religion, symbols, cultural system, interpretive anthropology.

Citation:

Setiawan, T., Hanan, A., Truna, D. S., & Rosyad, R. (2026). A critical analysis of Clifford Geertz's thought in *Religion as a cultural system*. *MSJ: Majority Science Journal*, 4(3), 157–165. <https://doi.org/10.61942/msj.v4i3.635>

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1. Introduction

The study of religion in anthropology has undergone significant theoretical development, particularly in the way religion is understood and interpreted. Earlier approaches to religion were largely dominated by functionalist and psychological perspectives. Émile Durkheim, for example, understood religion primarily in terms of its function in maintaining social cohesion, while Sigmund Freud approached religion as a manifestation of psychological needs and desires. Although these perspectives made important contributions to the study of religion, they tended to explain religious beliefs and practices from external analytical frameworks, giving relatively limited attention to the meanings that religious actors themselves attach to their experiences, beliefs, and practices.

A significant shift in the anthropological study of religion emerged through the work of Clifford Geertz, particularly his influential essay *Religion as a Cultural System*, first published in 1966 and later included in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Geertz, 1973). Geertz proposed that religion should not merely be understood as a social institution or psychological phenomenon, but as a cultural system consisting of symbols through which human beings establish meanings, understand reality, and orient their actions. From this perspective, religious symbols play a central role in shaping both a particular understanding of reality and a corresponding way of living. Religion therefore becomes an interpretive phenomenon that must be understood within the cultural context in which it is practiced.

Geertz's interpretive approach is particularly important because it places meaning at the centre of the analysis of religion. Through the concept of thick description, Geertz argues that cultural practices cannot be adequately understood simply by describing observable behaviour; they must also be interpreted in relation to the meanings that practitioners assign to those practices. In his formulation, religion functions as a system of symbols that establishes powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations by presenting a conception of the general order of existence and making that conception appear uniquely realistic. This understanding connects religious belief with two central concepts in Geertz's framework: worldview, which refers to people's conception of reality, and ethos, which refers to the emotional and moral tone through which that reality is experienced and expressed in everyday life.

Geertz's formulation subsequently became one of the most influential interpretive approaches in the anthropology of religion. His work also provided an alternative to theories that primarily explained religion through social structure, social integration, or psychological processes. Peter L. Berger, for instance, examined religion through its role in constructing and legitimising social reality in *The Sacred Canopy* (Berger, 1967), while Daniel L. Pals (1996) placed Geertz's work within a broader intellectual history of theories of religion. These contributions demonstrate the continuing significance of meaning, culture, and interpretation in understanding religious life. Nevertheless, Geertz's approach has also generated substantial theoretical criticism, particularly concerning its treatment of power, history, and the social conditions through which religious meanings are produced.

One of the most significant critiques was advanced by Talal Asad (1993), who questioned Geertz's tendency to treat religion primarily as a symbolic and cultural system. From Asad's perspective, religious meanings cannot be separated from historical formations, institutional practices, disciplinary processes, and relations of power. This critique raises an important question concerning whether religion can be adequately understood through interpretation of symbols alone or whether such interpretation must also account for the historical and political contexts in which those symbols acquire meaning. The tension between Geertz's interpretive approach and Asad's genealogical critique therefore provides an important theoretical space for reassessing both the strengths and limitations of Geertz's contribution to the study of religion.

This theoretical debate becomes particularly relevant when Geertz's ideas are considered in relation to contemporary religious studies and the Indonesian context. Indonesia provides a significant setting for examining religion as a cultural system because religious beliefs and practices are continuously expressed through diverse local traditions, social institutions, rituals, symbols, and everyday cultural practices. At the same time, these religious

expressions are shaped by historical processes, social transformations, and relations of power. Consequently, Geertz's emphasis on symbolic meaning remains valuable for understanding how religious communities construct and experience their worlds, while the critiques developed after Geertz encourage researchers to examine the historical and power relations underlying those meanings.

Despite the extensive influence of Geertz's interpretive theory, there remains a need for a more critical and contextual examination of his contribution by placing his ideas in dialogue with contemporary perspectives on history, power, and postcoloniality. Existing discussions have established the importance of Geertz's symbolic approach, while critiques such as Asad's have highlighted its limitations; however, the relationship between these perspectives remains productive for reassessing the continuing relevance of Geertz's theory. Therefore, this study critically examines Clifford Geertz's conception of religion as a cultural system by analysing the relationship between symbols, worldview, and ethos, identifying the strengths and limitations of his interpretive approach, and assessing its relevance to contemporary religious studies, particularly in the Indonesian context. In doing so, the study seeks not only to reaffirm the significance of Geertz's contribution but also to demonstrate the theoretical boundaries and possibilities of his approach when confronted with contemporary critical perspectives on religion, culture, history, and power..

2. Method

2.1 Type and Approach

This study adopts a qualitative approach based on library research. This design was chosen because the object of analysis is a body of text and theoretical argument found in Clifford Geertz's work, particularly the essay *Religion as a Cultural System*. A qualitative approach allows the key concepts, arguments, and theoretical implications of Geertz's thought to be explored in depth.

2.2 Data Sources

The primary source for this study is Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures*, published by Basic Books, New York, in 1973 (Geertz, 1973), which contains the essay *Religion as a Cultural System* that forms the main focus of the analysis. A further primary source is *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*, published by the University of Chicago Press in 1968 (Geertz, 1968).

Secondary sources include major critical engagements with Geertz's work, namely Talal Asad's *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Asad, 1993), Peter L. Berger's *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Berger, 1967), Bruce Lincoln's *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (Lincoln, 2003), and Daniel L. Pals's *Seven Theories of Religion* (Pals, 1996).

2.3 Data Collection Technique

Data were collected through documentary study, involving a close reading of Geertz's own writings together with the relevant secondary literature. This process included identifying the key concepts in Geertz's thought, recording the central arguments of *Religion as a Cultural System*, compiling the main lines of critique directed at Geertz from various theoretical perspectives, and documenting illustrative applications of Geertz's theory in the study of religion.

2.4 Data Analysis Technique

The analysis proceeds in three stages. The first stage is conceptual analysis, aimed at identifying and clarifying the key concepts in Geertz's thought, including the symbol system, worldview, ethos, and thick description, in order to establish a clear picture of Geertz's theoretical framework.

The second stage is critical analysis, which evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of Geertz's argument. This critique focuses on epistemological and methodological questions as

well as the theoretical implications of the interpretive approach, drawing on the work of critics such as Talal Asad and Bruce Lincoln, among others.

The third stage is contextual analysis, examining the relevance of Geertz's theory to the study of religion today, with particular attention to Indonesia. This stage uses a comparative approach to consider how Geertz's concepts can be applied to the understanding of local religious practice

3. Results and Discussion

Result

3.1 Religion as a Symbol System

For Geertz, religion is a system of symbols that acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations 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 (Geertz, 1973). This definition makes clear that religion does more than regulate behaviour: it supplies meaning and an interpretive structure through which reality itself is apprehended.

Interpretive anthropology is, in essence, a way of reading the systems of meaning and value through which a society conducts its life, and it is therefore unsurprising that any interpretive study of a culture is drawn, sooner or later, to the question of religion. Geertz found confirmation of this in his own early fieldwork, published as *The Religion of Java* (1960), still regarded as one of the finest ethnographies in the American anthropological tradition (Geertz, 1960).

In that book, Geertz traces in careful detail the intricate relationship between Islamic tradition, Hindu tradition, and local Javanese belief in what is known as the Abangan variant of Javanese religion. He treats religion as a cultural fact in its own right within Javanese culture, rather than reducing it to an expression of social or economic need — even though he acknowledges that such needs are often also present.

Religious symbols such as ritual, myth, and doctrine function as media through which meaning is communicated, linking human experience to a wider cosmic order. In this respect, Geertz explicitly rejects the view that religion is simply an instrument of social integration or a mechanism of moral control; religion, for Geertz, is above all a system for making sense of existence (Geertz, 1973).

3.2 Symbol Systems and Cultural Meaning

Through his attention to symbols, ideas, and custom, Geertz shows how religion permeates virtually every corner of Javanese social life. His analysis is notable for its density of ethnographic detail and its close attunement to the particularities of Javanese culture. Culture itself he defines as "a pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (Geertz, 1973).

Because a single culture contains a variety of attitudes, sensibilities, and forms of knowledge, it also contains a variety of cultural systems that give expression to them. Art, common sense, ideology, and politics can each function as a distinct cultural system in the same way that religion does.

3.3 Religion as a Cultural System: Two Key Dimensions

What, then, does it mean to treat religion as a cultural system? Geertz answers this question through two key dimensions.

First, by a "system of symbols" Geertz means anything that carries an idea to someone — an object, such as a prayer wheel for a Buddhist; an event, such as the crucifixion of Jesus for a Christian; a ritual, such as the Bar Mitzvah that marks a Jewish boy's coming of age; or a wordless act, such as a gesture of compassion or reverence. As noted above, the crucial point is that such ideas and symbols are not purely private: they are public property, existing outside any single individual (Geertz, 1973).

Second, when it is said that these symbols "establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations," this can be summarised as the claim that religion moves people to feel and to act in particular ways. This power derives from the fact that religion attempts to offer an account of the world. Its concern is not with the ordinary business of everyday life — sport, entertainment, fashion, or art — but with ultimate meaning, a definitive purpose underlying existence as a whole (Geertz, 1973). It is widely understood that when religion loses its coherence, the wider fabric of social life is thrown into disorder.

3.4 The Relationship between Worldview and Ethos

At the heart of religion, for Geertz, lie conceptions of how the world is ordered together with a set of motivations and dispositions oriented by a moral ideal. Geertz identifies two principal functions of religion: the formation of a worldview and the formation of an ethos (Geertz, 1973). Worldview describes "how the world works" from a religious point of view, while ethos prescribes "how people ought to act" within it.

Religion works to bring these two elements into alignment. In Islam, for instance, belief in a just God gives rise to a social ethos grounded in fairness and moral responsibility. It is precisely this dialectical relationship between worldview and ethos that allows religion to function as a system of meaning uniting belief and action.

What distinguishes religion from other cultural systems is that its symbols convey a sense that something is "uniquely real" — something believers take to matter more than anything else. In religious ritual, participants are said to be seized by a sense of this compelling reality, and in that moment their feelings and motivations align exactly with their worldview (Geertz, 1973).

3.5 The Interpretive Approach and the Method of Thick Description

Geertz's interpretive approach seeks to grasp the symbolic meaning of religious practice through dense, layered description, or thick description. This approach refuses to reduce religion to a mere social symptom, treating it instead as a cultural text that calls for interpretation (Geertz, 1973).

On this view, the scholar's task is not to explain religion causally but to interpret the meaning it carries. This orientation has had a profound influence on modern anthropology and has opened the way to a more contextual understanding of religion.

For this reason, Geertz argues, there is little alternative but to adopt the method that the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle called thick description — an account of not merely what actually happens, but of how the people involved understand what is happening. For Geertz, ethnography and anthropology more generally are, at their core, exercises in this kind of dense description whose central task is to search out meaning: to discover what lies behind the totality of a people's rituals, structures, and beliefs (Geertz, 1973).

Ryle illustrates the point with the example of two boys, one of whom experiences an involuntary twitch of the eyelid while the other deliberately winks at a companion. Described at the level of physical movement — what Geertz calls thin description — the two events are indistinguishable. Yet once their meaning is traced further, a clear difference emerges: the first movement carries no significance, whereas the second is dense with intended meaning. Thick description, by attending to this layer of meaning, reveals just how different the second boy's wink is from the first boy's twitch. It is in this sense, Geertz argues, that ethnography and anthropology in general are always engaged in the work of thick description (Geertz, 1973).

Discussion

Geertz's interpretive approach offers several important strengths for the study of religion, particularly by placing meaning at the centre of religious phenomena rather than primarily focusing on their social or psychological functions. This perspective gives greater attention to the experiences and interpretations of religious actors themselves, or what may be understood as the insider perspective, while avoiding the reductionism often associated with functionalist and structuralist approaches. His

methodological emphasis on thick description further enables researchers to develop a deeper and more contextual understanding of religious practices by interpreting them within the cultural worlds in which they occur. By conceptualising religion as a cultural system and, in an analytical sense, as a text that requires interpretation, Geertz established an important foundation for hermeneutic approaches within the academic study of religion (Geertz, 1973). His formulation of the relationship between worldview and ethos also provides a useful analytical framework for examining how religious beliefs and conceptions of reality influence patterns of conduct, morality, identity, and social action among believers. Another important strength of Geertz's approach is its relatively non-normative orientation. Rather than determining the truth or falsity of a particular religious belief, Geertz seeks to understand how religious symbols and practices produce and sustain meaning for their adherents. Such an orientation contributes to a more academically objective approach to the study of religion by distinguishing the analytical task of understanding religious meaning from the theological task of evaluating religious truth claims (Pals, 1996).

Despite these significant contributions, Geertz's interpretive approach has also attracted substantial theoretical criticism, particularly regarding its treatment of power, history, social structure, and the position of the researcher. One of the most influential critiques comes from Talal Asad (1993), who argues that Geertz's emphasis on symbols and meaning does not sufficiently address the power relations through which religious concepts and practices are produced, regulated, and maintained. From Asad's perspective, religious symbols cannot be understood independently of political, institutional, and historical processes because particular interpretations of religion may support or challenge existing structures of authority and power. Asad also questions the tendency to present Geertz's definition of religion as universally applicable, arguing that the modern category of "religion" itself has a particular historical genealogy and therefore cannot simply be assumed to have the same meaning across different cultural contexts. This criticism is particularly important for anthropological studies conducted outside Western contexts because it encourages researchers to examine how categories used to describe religion are themselves historically and culturally constructed.

Beyond the question of power, Geertz's approach has also been criticised for placing greater emphasis on interpretation and description than on explaining the broader social dynamics underlying religious phenomena. Thick description can provide a detailed account of how people understand their religious practices, but it may be less capable of explaining the economic, political, institutional, and structural forces that shape those practices and contribute to religious transformation. Consequently, although Geertz's approach is highly effective in revealing the meanings embedded in cultural practices, its explanatory capacity may become limited when researchers seek to account for processes of social and religious change. A related limitation concerns the historical dimension of religion. Geertz's analysis tends to focus on religion as a cultural system of meaning within a particular social context, while giving comparatively less attention to the historical processes through which religious traditions are transformed, contested, and reinterpreted. Religion, however, is not a static cultural system; it continuously changes in response to political developments, social transformations, institutional dynamics, and encounters with other cultural traditions (Lincoln, 2003). The interpretive approach therefore becomes more comprehensive when symbolic analysis is combined with historical analysis.

Another challenge concerns the empirical operationalisation of Geertz's central concept of meaning. Because meaning is approached as something contextual, subjective, and interpretive, it can be difficult to establish clear criteria for measuring or validating interpretations derived from thick description. This raises methodological questions concerning how researchers can distinguish between meanings genuinely articulated by religious actors and meanings constructed by the researcher through interpretation. The issue is closely related to an epistemological concern regarding the position of the ethnographer. Although Geertz emphasises the importance of understanding cultural meanings from within their social contexts, his approach has been criticised for not sufficiently problematising the researcher's own positionality, cultural assumptions, and potential biases in interpreting another community. The ethnographer is not a completely neutral observer, and the production of ethnographic knowledge inevitably involves processes of selection, translation, interpretation, and representation. Consequently, the application of Geertzian interpretation requires reflexivity concerning who produces knowledge, from which position, and with what conceptual assumptions.

Nevertheless, these limitations do not eliminate the relevance of Geertz's theory, particularly for understanding religious life in Indonesia. Indonesia represents a particularly productive context for applying an interpretive approach because religious life is expressed through diverse combinations of beliefs, rituals, symbols, traditions, social relationships, and local cultural practices. Geertz's approach enables researchers to examine such phenomena not simply as manifestations of religious doctrine but as cultural practices through which communities construct, experience, and communicate religious meanings. His earlier study of Indonesian society, particularly *The Religion of Java* (Geertz, 1960), demonstrated the analytical potential of examining religion in relation to broader cultural and social structures. His work consequently provides an important starting point for understanding the relationship between religion and local culture, although the categories and typologies developed in his analysis must be approached critically and contextually.

Within the study of Islam in Indonesia, Geertz's framework creates an analytical space for bringing normative religious teachings into dialogue with the cultural practices through which those teachings are interpreted and experienced. Indonesian Islam cannot be understood exclusively through normative or textual sources because Islamic teachings are also expressed through diverse social and cultural practices. Rituals and communal traditions such as *kenduri*, *tahlilan*, and *slametan*, for example, may be examined as systems of symbols through which communities express religious identity, solidarity, morality, and conceptions of the relationship between human beings, society, and the sacred. From a Geertzian perspective, the analytical significance of such practices lies not merely in determining whether they possess direct textual foundations in classical Islamic sources, but in understanding the meanings that practitioners themselves attach to them and the ways those meanings shape everyday religious life. At the same time, such an analysis must remain attentive to internal debates, differences in interpretation, and relations of authority within Muslim communities.

Geertz's classification of *santri*, *abangan*, and *priyayi* in *The Religion of Java* also illustrates both the contribution and the limitations of his approach. Although the typology has been criticised for simplifying the complexity of Indonesian Muslim identities and for potentially presenting social categories as more clearly bounded than they are in practice, it nevertheless demonstrates Geertz's broader attempt to understand religious expression in relation to social and cultural environments.

Contemporary Indonesian society, which is characterised by increasing mobility, pluralisation, globalisation, and digitalisation, further demonstrates the need to reconsider religious identity as something continuously interpreted and negotiated within changing cultural contexts. In this regard, Geertz's concepts of worldview and ethos remain potentially useful for examining how individuals and communities construct religious narratives and identities, including through social media and other forms of digital public space. Religious symbols that once circulated primarily through physical rituals and local communities can now be reproduced, contested, and reinterpreted within digitally mediated environments, creating new contexts in which religious meanings are constructed and communicated.

The continuing relevance of Geertz's theory, therefore, does not necessarily require its application in isolation from other theoretical perspectives. Rather, its analytical potential can be strengthened by placing interpretive anthropology in dialogue with contemporary critical theories that address dimensions insufficiently developed in Geertz's original formulation. Asad's genealogical approach, for instance, can complement Geertz's attention to meaning by foregrounding the historical formation of religious concepts and the relations of power through which religious practices are regulated and reproduced (Asad, 1993). Postcolonial perspectives can further challenge assumptions concerning the universality of Western-derived categories of religion and encourage greater attention to the unequal historical relations through which knowledge about non-Western religious traditions has been produced. Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice can extend Geertzian interpretation by directing attention to habitus, cultural capital, social fields, and the material conditions within which religious practices are produced and reproduced. Gender-sensitive and subaltern perspectives can also enrich the analysis by examining how religious symbols and practices may simultaneously provide resources for identity and agency while reproducing forms of gender inequality or marginalisation.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that Geertz's interpretive approach remains theoretically valuable but should not be treated as a complete or universally sufficient explanation of religious phenomena. Its greatest contribution lies in demonstrating that religion cannot be adequately understood without taking seriously the meanings through which believers interpret their world and organise their lives. Its principal limitation lies in the relative lack of attention to the historical, political, material, and power relations within which those meanings are produced and contested. Bringing Geertz into dialogue with critical approaches such as those of Asad, Bourdieu, postcolonial theory, and gender and subaltern studies consequently allows the study of religion to move beyond a purely symbolic interpretation toward a more comprehensive understanding that connects meaning with history, power, practice, and social transformation. In the Indonesian context, such an integrated approach is particularly valuable because religious life emerges through continuous interaction between Islamic teachings, local cultural traditions, social structures, historical experiences, and contemporary forms of communication.

4. Conclusions and Suggestions

Based on the findings and discussion presented above, several conclusions can be drawn.

Through Religion as a Cultural System, Clifford Geertz introduced a new paradigm for the study of religion by foregrounding the dimensions of meaning and symbol within culture. Religion, on this account, is a system of symbols that shapes the moods and motivations of believers through a structure of meaning embedded in culture — a definition that places meaning, rather than social or psychological function alone, at the centre of religious phenomena.

The dialectical relationship between worldview and ethos in Geertz's framework shows how religion aligns beliefs about reality with norms of conduct. Religion does not merely explain how the world works; it also indicates how people ought to act within it. It is precisely this integration of worldview and ethos that allows religion to function as a comprehensive system of meaning.

The strengths of Geertz's interpretive approach lie in its regard for the insider perspective, its deep and contextual method of thick description, and its non-normative analytical framework. At the same time, the approach carries significant weaknesses: limited attention to power and politics, a tendency toward description rather than analysis, a thin historical perspective, and difficulties of empirical operationalisation.

Geertz's theory retains considerable relevance for the contemporary study of religion in Indonesia. His interpretive approach helps illuminate the symbolic and expressive diversity of Indonesian religious practice, opens a dialogue between normative theology and cultural anthropology, and provides an analytical framework for understanding variations in Islamic expression shaped by local context. In an age of globalisation and digitalisation, the same approach remains useful for analysing how religious symbols are transformed within social media and digital public space.

The theoretical implication of this study is that Geertz's interpretive approach needs to be integrated with contemporary critical theory to yield a more comprehensive analysis. Talal Asad's genealogical approach, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice, and postcolonial perspectives can each help address the limitations of Geertz's analysis by attending to power, history, and the contestation of meaning within religious practice.

The practical implication is that the study of religion in Indonesia should adopt a multidimensional approach that combines textual, contextual, and critical analysis. Understanding religion cannot be confined to its normative-theological dimension alone; it must also encompass its cultural-symbolic and socio-political dimensions. This is essential for producing a more holistic and contextually grounded understanding of religious phenomena within Indonesia's plural and complex society.

This study is limited in scope: the analysis is confined to Geertz's principal writings and does not include original fieldwork to test the application of his theory in empirical settings. Its focus on theoretical questions also means that the practical application of Geertz's approach in field research is not examined in detail.

Future research would benefit from ethnographic studies that apply the method of thick description to local religious practice in Indonesia. Comparative research examining Geertz's approach alongside other critical approaches to the same religious phenomena would also help to enrich methodological understanding. Finally, research into the relevance and adaptation of Geertz's theory for the study of digital religion and social media could open new perspectives on the transformation of religious practice in the contemporary era.

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