

## Weber and Geertz on the Meaning of Religion

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Clifford Geertz often cites Max Weber as the pioneering 'interpretive' social scientist. But the approaches of Weber and Geertz to interpretation differ sharply. Both associate interpretation with meaning, but they diverge on the nature of meaning, on the relationship between meaning and cause, and on the consequent relationship between interpretation and explanation. While both use 'meaning' not only as *intent* but also as significance, or *meaningfulness*, they diverge on the origin of meaningfulness, on the form meaningfulness takes and on the threats to meaningfulness.

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In the key statement from his programmatic essay, 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture', Clifford Geertz invokes Max Weber's *interpretive* approach to culture and consequent pursuit of *meaning*:

The concept of culture I espouse . . . is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. (Geertz 1973, p. 5)

The issue is not whether interpretation and meaning go hand in hand. The subject of interpretation is meaning, so that to interpret anything is to determine its meaning. The issue is what meaning is—a term that, together with interpretation, is used by social scientists and philosophers in an array of ways.<sup>1</sup>

### *Weber on Meanings and Causes*

For Weber, meanings are causes of human behaviour. They are not the only causes, but they are one variety of causes: mental causes. Like physical causes, meanings produce behaviour. Meanings are ideas, but not all ideas are meanings. Only ideas that take the form of intentions constitute meanings. The 'meaning' of human behaviour for Weber is its purpose.

On the place of meanings and physical causes in accounting for human behaviour, Weber is anything but doctrinaire. He allows for a gamut of causes, ranging from fully conscious, articulated intentions to only partly conscious and partly articulated ones to wholly unconscious ones to outright unintentional, physical causes. Most behaviour for him is a blurry mix of kinds of causes:

The line between meaningful action and merely reactive behaviour to which no subjective meaning is attached, cannot be sharply drawn empirically. A very considerable part of all sociologically relevant behaviour, especially purely traditional behaviour, is marginal between the two. In the case of some psychophysical processes, meaningful, i.e., subjectively understandable, action is not to be found at all; in others it is discernible only by the psychologist. (Weber 1968, I, pp. 4–5)

Even in intentional behaviour, the meaning is usually less than fully conscious:

In the great majority of cases actual action goes on in a state of inarticulate half-consciousness or actual unconsciousness of its subjective meaning. The actor is

more likely to 'be aware' of it in a vague sense than he is to 'know' what he is doing or be explicitly self-conscious about it. In most cases his action is governed by impulse or habit. Only occasionally and, in the uniform action of large numbers, often only in the case of a few individuals, is the subjective meaning of the action, whether rational or irrational, brought clearly into consciousness. (Weber 1968, I, pp. 21–2)

As open as Weber is to causes of all kinds, the subject matter of sociology is for him limited to human behaviour that is at least partly meaningful. Meaningful behaviour he calls 'action':

Sociology . . . is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences. We shall speak of 'action' insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to his behaviour—be it overt or covert, omission or acquiescence. (Weber 1968, I, p. 4)

Still, within sociology fall 'processes or conditions' that, while themselves meaningless because not 'related to action in the role of means or ends', provide 'the stimulus, favouring or hindering circumstances' that lead to meaningful behaviour:

It may be that the flooding of the Dollart [at the mouth of the Ems river near the Dutch-German border] in 1277 had historical significance as a stimulus to the beginning of certain migrations of considerable importance. Human mortality, indeed the organic life cycle from the helplessness of infancy to that of old age, is naturally of the very greatest sociological importance through the various ways in which human action has been oriented to these facts. (Weber 1968, I, p. 7)

Because there is nothing incompatible for Weber between meanings and physical causes, there is nothing incompatible for him between interpretation and explanation. Weber may be celebrated by those who espouse interpretation vis-à-vis explanation, but he himself happily explains as well as interprets human behaviour. In the first place he seeks to determine not merely what humans do but also why. In the second place he always accounts for human behaviour, including religious behaviour, in terms of physical causes as well as meanings. In the third place he locates meanings within, not outside, the category of causes per se. If an 'explanation' provides the 'cause' of human behaviour, then 'interpretation' for Weber is a subset of explanation. It provides part of an account of human behaviour.

### ***Geertz on Meanings and Causes***

Geertz's position is the opposite of Weber's. For Geertz, meanings are not causes. They are not merely mental causes but not causes at all. A cause, to be a cause, must be separate from the behaviour it effects. For Geertz, a meaning is inseparable from its corollary behaviour and is therefore not a cause. Rather than the *effect* of a meaning, behaviour for him is the *expression* of a meaning. Insofar as Geertz adheres to this technical definition of meaning, which he takes from Gilbert Ryle but which is also to be found in R. G. Collingwood and various Wittgensteinians like Peter Winch, meanings are incompatible with causes, mental or physical. Interpretation is therefore incompatible with explanation.

Yet it is far from clear that by 'meaning' Geertz is in fact stipulating anything so technical. As his own summary of Ryle's famous distinction between winking and twitching suggests, meaning for Geertz may be equivalent to sheer intent, so that meaningful behaviour may simply be intentional behaviour, just as for Weber.

Twitching would thus be meaningless behaviour because it is involuntary and therefore unintentional; winking would be meaningful behaviour because it is voluntary and therefore intentional. Writes Geertz of Ryle:

Consider, he [Ryle] says, two boys rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eyes. In one, this is an involuntary twitch; in the other, a conspiratorial signal to a friend. The two movements are, as movements, identical; from an I-am-a-camera, 'phenomenalistic' observation of them alone, one could not tell which was twitch and which was wink, or indeed whether both or either was twitch or wink. Yet the difference, however unphotographable, between a twitch and a wink is vast; as anyone unfortunate enough to have had the first taken for the second knows. The winker is communicating, and indeed communicating in a quite precise and special way: (1) deliberately, (2) to someone in particular, (3) to impart a particular message, (4) according to a socially established code, and (5) without cognizance of the rest of the company. (Geertz 1973, p. 6)<sup>2</sup>

Winking differs from twitching in being intentional behaviour.

To be sure, Geertz does note Ryle's crucial point that in winking the deed is inseparable from the intent: 'As Ryle points out, the winker has not done two things, contracted his eyelids and winked, while the twitcher has done only one, contracted his eyelids. Contracting your eyelids on purpose when there exists a public code in which so doing counts as a conspiratorial signal *is* winking' (Geertz 1973, p. 6). Winking involves not merely the intentional contracting of the eyelids but also a non-causal relationship between the intent and the contracting. To wink is not first to intend to contract one's eyelids and then to wink. It is to contract one's eyelids intentionally. One cannot describe the behaviour apart from the intent: one cannot characterize the behaviour as winking rather than twitching without including the intent in the characterisation of the behaviour. The intent defines the behaviour. Conversely, one cannot describe the intent apart from the behaviour: one cannot wink without contracting one's eyelids. The behaviour expresses the intent. Because the intent does not precede the behaviour, it cannot be the cause of the behaviour and is instead the meaning of the behaviour.

Yet Geertz, despite noting this point of Ryle's, may still be assuming that the only difference between meanings and causes is intent. If so, the difference between meanings and causes would amount to that between mental causes and physical ones, in which case Geertz would be saying the same as Weber and as many others like Talcott Parsons.<sup>3</sup> At best, Geertz is ambiguous. When, for example, he says that human beings have an innate need to make sense of life—'The drive to make sense out of experience, to give it form and order, is evidently as real and as pressing as the more familiar biological needs' (Geertz 1973, p. 140)—he *can* be taken as saying simply that humans engage in sense-making behaviour, which either *expresses* (so Collingwood and Winch) or *defines* (so, strictly, Ryle) the sense-making need of humans. But he can also be taken as saying that behaviour *effects* the need, which is its *cause*. The behaviour would thereby be the *fulfilment* of a need for sense, as for Weber and Parsons, rather than either the *expression* of humanity's sense-making nature, as for Collingwood and Winch, or the *whole* of humanity's sense-making nature, as for Ryle.

Indeed, what Geertz really likes about Ryle is less the logical nexus in an individual between thought and action than the empirical nexus in culture between thought and action. If Ryle's key point is that winking is not intent plus eye movement but instead intentional eye movement, Geertz's key point is that culture is intent plus behaviour. Culture for him is neither sheer intent, as for ethnoscientists and Lévi-Straussian

structuralists, nor sheer behaviour, as for Skinnerian (not, as Geertz wrongly calls them, 'radical') behaviourists, but instead intentional behaviour.

To use the terms that Geertz takes from Ryle, a description of sheer behaviour would be 'thin', whereas a description of the intent as well as the behaviour is 'thick'. But a description of the intent alone would also be thin. For all Geertz's concern with intent and therefore with meaning, he is at least as much concerned with behaviour. As he says against ethnoscientists, who equate culture with the rules for behaviour, '[T]o draw from such truths the conclusion that knowing how to wink is winking . . . is to betray as deep a confusion as, taking thin descriptions for thick, to identify winking with eyelid contractions' (Geertz 1973, p. 12). While he opposes both those who sever behaviour from intent and those who sever intent from behaviour, he especially takes to task those who ignore behaviour. Where for Weber behaviour without intent falls outside the bounds of sociology, for Geertz intent without behaviour falls outside the bounds of anthropology. By no coincidence, Geertz's ethnography focuses far more on practice than on belief, far more on what he calls 'ethos' than on what he calls 'world view'.

In Weber's terms, culture for Geertz is action—not behaviour alone but not intent alone either. The link between intent and behaviour demanded by Geertz may, then, be Weber's causal one. It need not be Ryle's non-causal one. What would count is that the social scientist finds both the intent and the behaviour. In Geertz's terms, sociology for Weber provides a thick description—not, as for Ryle, because it describes intent in the act of describing behaviour but simply because it describes both intent and behaviour.

For Geertz, thick description is identical with 'interpretation', which would thus seem to mean the same as for Weber. But in contrast to Weber, Geertz pits interpretation against explanation. Where for Weber explanation means cause per se and therefore includes meanings and so interpretation, for Geertz explanation is limited to physical causes and is therefore separate from meanings and so from interpretation. Geertz distinguishes interpretation from explanation not only when he follows Ryle but even when he does not. Even if meanings for Geertz are intentions logically distinct from the behaviour they produce, they are still not, as for Weber, causes, which for Geertz remain exclusively physical.

Because Geertz equates causes with physical causes, he faces far more difficulty than Weber in linking meanings to physical causes in accounting for human behaviour. He does insist that 'cultural analysis' not 'lose touch with the hard surfaces of life—with the political, economic, stratificatory realities within which men are everywhere contained—and with the biological and physical necessities on which those surfaces rest' (Geertz 1973, p. 30). He stresses that culture is the product of physical causes as well as of meanings, and he strongly objects to a conception of culture as a set of sheer ideas—in his terminology, as a sheer world view. For example, he says that Indonesian political ideas must be understood as 'having their existence not in some gauzy world of mental forms but in the concrete immediacy of partisan struggle' (Geertz 1972, p. 320). But he simultaneously says that the 'goal' of cultural analysis 'is an understanding of how it is that every people gets the politics it imagines' (Geertz 1972, p. 321)—as if imagination were enough to create politics. This kind of idealism is anathema to Weber, even the atypically idealist Weber of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

Geertz's touted distinction between interpretation and explanation rests on more than the difference between meanings and causes or on the difference between intentional and unintentional behaviour. Geertz also associates interpretation with the particular and explanation with the general. He advocates interpretation over explanation because he advocates focus on the particular over focus on the general:

[T]he notion that the essence of what it means to be human is most clearly revealed in those features of human culture that are universal rather than in those that are distinctive to this people or that is a prejudice we are not necessarily obliged to share. Is it in grasping such general facts—that man has everywhere some sort of ‘religion’—or in grasping the richness of this religious phenomenon or that—Balinese trance or Indian ritualism, Aztec human sacrifice or Zuñi rain-dancing—that we grasp him? Is the fact that ‘marriage’ is universal (if it is) as penetrating a comment on what we are as the facts concerning Himalayan polyandry, or those fantastic Australian marriage rules, or the elaborate bride-price systems of Bantu Africa? (Geertz 1973, p. 43)

Weber’s position is again the opposite of Geertz’s. For Weber, sociology not only seeks generalisations about human nature but, together with the other social sciences, provides the generalisations that explain particular cases:

We have taken for granted that sociology seeks to formulate type concepts and generalised uniformities of empirical process. This distinguishes it from history, which is oriented to the causal analysis and explanation of individual actions, structures, and personalities possessing cultural significance. . . . An important consideration in the formulation of sociological concepts and generalisations is the contribution that sociology can make toward the causal explanation of some historically and culturally important phenomenon. (Weber 1968, I, pp. 19–20)

Weber’s generalisations take the form of ‘pure’, or ‘ideal’, types, and he analyses particular cases by how closely they conform to their type. The ideal form of any action is one in which the intent is fully conscious in the mind of the actor—an ideal that, as noted, is rarely met in actual cases: ‘The ideal type of meaningful action where the meaning is fully conscious and explicit is a marginal case’ (Weber 1968, I, p. 22). In judging the particular by the general, Weber is obviously not, like Geertz, setting the particular against the general, let alone dismissing the general in favour of the particular.

Geertz is concerned with meaning not only as *intent* but also as *significance*—that is, with existential meaning, or meaningfulness. When, as quoted, he says, in the name of Weber, that the proper approach to culture is ‘not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning’, the meaning he is referring to is ‘the webs of significance he [man] himself has spun’ (Geertz 1973, p. 5). Here ‘meaning’ refers not to the *intent* that causes (or is expressed in or defined by) action but to the *effect* of the action. Here human behaviour is meaningful not merely because it is intentional but also because what is intended is the creation or reinforcement of meaningfulness. Since Geertz is not here referring to meaning as particular, it is misleading for him to contrast meaning to law. To minimize the confusion in Geertz’s varying usages, ‘meaning’ from here on, for Weber as well as for Geertz, will refer to existential meaning, or meaningfulness.

In their preoccupation with meaning and with the centrality of religion in providing it, Geertz and Weber are much akin. But they part company over the origin of the yearning for meaning and over the form meaning takes. For Weber, the yearning is the product of society. For Geertz, it is innate. For Weber, meaning takes the form of a theodicy. For Geertz, it takes other forms as well.

### ***Weber on the Origin and Form of Religious Meaning***

As a methodological individualist, Weber begins with the individual rather than, like the methodological holist Emile Durkheim, with society. Where for Durkheim society is

the given, for Weber individuals are. Where for Durkheim individuals are the product of society, for Weber society is the product of individuals.

Still, this distinction should not be overdrawn. For Weber, society not only exists but also influences individuals, who may be the direct agents of events but who do not act in a void. Individuals act in society, or at least Weber is interested in them only to the extent that they do. He defines the subject of sociology as not merely intentional behaviour—action—but intentional behaviour that takes into account the behaviour of others—*social* action: ‘Action is “social” insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course’ (Weber 1968, I, p. 4). Weber thus rules out as social and therefore the subject of sociological any religious behaviour that is ‘simply a matter of contemplation or of solitary prayer’. Similarly, an individual’s economic activity is for Weber social and so sociological ‘only if it takes account of the behaviour of someone else. Thus very generally it becomes social insofar as the actor assumes that others will respect his actual control over economic goods’ (Weber 1968, I, p. 22).

On the one hand individuals for Weber create religion and do so to serve individual ends. On the other hand society shapes the ends they seek. Yet the initial ends sought by individuals seem too natural to be the product of society: ‘The most elementary forms of behaviour motivated by religious or magical factors are oriented to *this* world. “That it may go well with thee . . . and that thou mayest prolong thy days upon the earth” (Deut. 4:40) expresses the reason for the performance of actions enjoined by religion or magic’ (Weber 1963, p. 1).

Magic, which for Weber (despite the quotation) is the first stage of religion rather than a separate category from religion, is the coercion of the divine for immediate, worldly ends: food, clothing, shelter and health. Magic presupposes little either theologically or sociologically. Gods are mere powers, and there is no organized pantheon. To practice his art, the magician need develop only practical techniques, not any metaphysical doctrines. Since the efficacy of magic depends only on the correct application of the technique and not on the willingness of a god, no conception of compliance with a god’s dictates and therefore no system of ethical or ritualistic obedience arises. Most of all, the magician is self-employed and is called upon anew each time his services are required. Even if he works his magic for the group and not just for individuals, the group amasses afresh each time, so that there is no continuity.

Not until there emerges a continuing clientele of worshipers—a congregation, or ‘cult’—do priests emerge in place of magicians:

It is more correct for our purpose . . . to set up as the crucial feature of the priesthood the specialisation of a particular group of persons in the continuous operation of a cultic enterprise, permanently associated with particular norms, places and times, and related to specific social groups. There can be no priesthood without a cult, although there may well be a cult without a specialised priesthood. (Weber 1963, p. 30)

Not until priests succeed magicians does metaphysics—a comprehensive explanation of the world—emerge in place of mere techniques. Likewise, not until priests replace magicians does ethics—ends achieved through obedience—emerge in place of coercion—ends achieved through techniques. The combination of metaphysics and ethics makes religion ‘rational’ rather than *ad hoc* and constitutes the stage of religion after magic: ‘The full development of both a metaphysical rationalisation and a religious ethic requires an independent and professionally trained priesthood, permanently

occupied with the cult and with the practical problems involved in the cure of souls' (Weber 1963, p. 30).

Finally, not until a cult emerges does the concept of a fixed god—singular, powerful, named, personal and involved—emerge in place of the magical concept of multiple, weak, nameless, impersonal and uninvolved fleeting powers:

Gods were not originally represented in human form. To be sure they came to possess the form of enduring beings, which is absolutely essential for them, only after the suppression of the purely naturalistic view still evident in the Vedas (e.g., that actual fire is a god, or is at least the body of a concrete god of fire) in favour of the view that a god, forever identical with himself, possesses all individual fires, controls them, or somehow incorporates them all within himself. This abstract conception becomes really secure only through the continuing activity of a 'cult' dedicated to one and the same god—through the god's connection with a continuing association of men, a community for which he has special significance as the enduring god. (Weber 1963, p. 10)

In rational religion, the conception of god may not *mirror* society, as it does for Durkheim, but the conception does presuppose something in society: a cult.

Only with the succession of magic by rational religion do the ends sought by adherents expand from physical ones to intangible, abstract ones, above all to meaning. For only in rational religion, with its comprehensive explanation of the world, prescribed means of securing long-term rewards and universal god permanently involved in human affairs, does there develop not so much a discrepancy between expectation and experience—there is a discrepancy whenever magic fails—as a desire to resolve that discrepancy systematically:

It is certainly true that not every religious ethic has crystallised a god of transcendental quality who created the universe out of nothing and directed it himself. . . . But the more the development tends toward the conception of a transcendental unitary god who is universal, the more there arises the problem of how the extraordinary power of such a god may be reconciled with the imperfection of the world that he has created and rules over. (Weber 1963, pp. 138–9)

That problem is the problem of meaning: the demand for a coherent explanation and, more, justification of experience. The experiences that, according to Weber, most need justifying are of 'the imperfection of the world'—that is, suffering. A sufficient explanation for the failure of magic is that the technique has been misapplied. But rational religion must explain the failure of the god to respond to the behaviour that that god has dictated. Because the god's failure means the failure to prevent or withhold suffering, the explanation sought is a theodicy (see Weber 1963, ch. 9). The theodicy ultimately involves the provision of salvation (see Weber 1963, chs. 9–12). Salvation can take physical as well as spiritual form and can therefore be as worldly as magic. But in contrast to magic, even worldly salvation is a long-term, not an immediate, end, and satisfies a desire for justice, or meaning, as well as for the worldly end.

Since all human beings for Weber recognize the discrepancy between their expectations and their experience, all harbour the potential desire for meaning. But its emergence depends on rational religion, the emergence of which itself depends on a particular kind of religious leader—a priest—whose emergence depends in turn on a particular kind of social organisation—a cult. The chief need fulfilled by 'higher' religion is therefore not innate. The need is created by the religion, itself the product of a certain form of social organisation.

Yet even if the need for meaning is the product of society, the primitive, magical need for food and other immediate ends still seems instinctive. Even it, however, proves to be the product of a particular kind of social organisation: one's class. For example, the religion of peasants, like that of 'primitives', is magical—not because a cult has yet to develop and therefore to alter their naturally worldly and *ad hoc* 'why', as in the case of primitives, but because the occupation of peasants makes or at least keeps their outlook worldly and *ad hoc*. For the goal of farming is necessarily not only physical but also short-term and unpredictable, so subject is it to the vagaries of the elements. The occupation of peasants precludes the development of rational religion and, with it, of the need for meaning:

The lot of peasants is so strongly tied to nature, so dependent on organic processes and natural events, and economically so little oriented to rational systematisation that in general the peasantry will become a carrier of [rational] religion only when it is threatened by enslavement or proletarianisation, either by domestic forces (financial, agrarian, or seigniorial) or by some external political power. (Weber 1963, p. 80)

Even in religions that themselves develop beyond a magical stage, the peasantry never advances: 'Thus, in the later development of Judaism and Christianity, the peasants never appeared as the carriers of rational ethical movements' (Weber 1963, p. 81).

Similarly, the religion of warrior lords is magical because the militaristic and aristocratic ethos of their vocation spurns as dishonourable any submission to either gods or humans:

The life pattern of a warrior has very little affinity with the notion of a beneficent providence, or with the systematic ethical demands of a transcendental god. Concepts like sin, salvation, and religious humility have not only seemed remote from all elite political classes, particularly the warrior nobles, but have indeed appeared reprehensible to its sense of honour. To accept a religion that works with such conceptions and to genuflect before any prophet or priest would appear plebeian and dishonourable to any martial hero or noble person, e.g., the Roman nobility of the age of Tacitus, or the Confucian mandarins. (Weber 1963, p. 85)

Furthermore, the prospect of death that the warrior faces daily stymies any interest in long-term rewards or even in justice and restricts religion to 'protection against evil magic or such ceremonial rites as are congruent with his caste, such as priestly prayers for victory or for a blissful death leading directly into the hero's heaven' (Weber 1963, p. 85). Other classes—the bureaucratic class, the commercial class, the lower middle class, artisans, slaves, proletarians and intellectuals—develop varieties of religion that likewise fit their positions.

As decisive a source of religion as social factors are for Weber, they are never the only cause, as they are for Durkheim. Weberian sociology is more modest than Durkheimian. Where Durkheim presumes to offer both necessary and sufficient causes of religion, Weber professes to provide only necessary causes. Thus he maintains that the emergence of a priesthood requires a cult but not that every cult produces a priesthood (see Weber 1963, p. 30). Nor does every cult produce the concept of a fixed god. While the vocation of peasants and warrior lords precludes the development of rational religion, the right vocation is not enough for rational religion to arise. Ideas as well as social conditions are necessary, and ideas are not the mere reflection of social conditions, as they are for Durkheim.



### ***Geertz on the Origin and Form of Religious Meaning***

Religion is no less collective an enterprise for Geertz than for Weber. In answer to ethnoscientists and Lévi-Straussian structuralists, Geertz declares repeatedly that culture resides not simply in one's head but in public. By 'public' he means not merely visible—culture evinced in behaviour as well as in intent—but also collective—culture coming from the group rather than from the individual. Geertz is concerned less with the logical nexus in an individual between intent and behaviour than with the collective origin of both intent and behaviour. An individual's intentional behaviour comes from the group, which inculcates, if not, say, sexual desire itself, then at least the occasion and manner of its manifestation in one's culture. For Geertz, culture is public rather than private, not merely public rather than invisible: 'Culture is public because meaning is. You can't wink (or burlesque one) without knowing what counts [publicly] as winking or how, physically, to contract your eyelids' (Geertz 1973, p. 12). As already quoted, 'Contracting your eyelids on purpose when there exists a public code in which so doing counts as a conspiratorial signal *is* winking' (Geertz 1973, p. 6). The subject of social science is not the raw individual but the individual as member of the group.

Like Weber, Geertz asserts that religion arises primarily to provide meaning: 'Whatever else religion may be, it is in part an attempt . . . to conserve the fund of general meanings in terms of which each individual interprets his experience and organises his conduct' (Geertz 1973, p. 127). But for Geertz, in contrast to Weber, every religion, not merely rational religion, arises to provide meaning. Where for Weber rational religion creates the need for meaning that it then strives to fulfil, for Geertz the need antedates religion. It presupposes no cult or class. It is found in every social organisation and is the need that religion fulfils wherever religion is found. Challenges to meaning are thus 'challenges with which any religion, however "primitive", which hopes to persist must attempt somehow to cope' (Geertz 1973, p. 100). Antithetically to Weber, the need for meaning is for Geertz innate.

For Weber, the challenge to meaning comes above all from suffering, which must be not only explained but also justified. Hence the key theological task of rational religion for Weber is the formulation of a theodicy. For Geertz, the challenge to meaning can come from other sources as well. Merely inexplicable experiences like death and dreams require only an explanation, not also a justification. By contrast, unendurable experiences must be not only explained but also borne. Geertz puts suffering, or most suffering, here. Only outright unjustifiable experiences need to be outright justified, not merely explained and borne. Geertz divides suffering into types and puts in his third category only unjustified suffering. Weber equates suffering with unjustified suffering and so would locate all suffering in Geertz's third category. For Geertz, all three kinds of experiences—'bafflement, suffering, and a sense of intractable ethical paradox'—are, '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 effectively within it' (Geertz 1973, p. 100).<sup>4</sup>

On the one hand religion, in attempting to cope with all three kinds of experiences, covers a far wider range of life for Geertz than for Weber. On the other hand Geertz, no more than Weber, considers religion the sole source of meaning, even if it is the best one. In fact, Geertz, unlike Weber, enumerates at least three other sources, or 'cultural systems': common sense, ideology and art (see Geertz 1973, ch. 8; 1983, chs 4–5).

Because culture for Geertz is practice and not mere belief, any cultural system, to provide meaning, must tell one not only what to believe about threatening experiences but also how to act in the wake of the beliefs. A cultural system must not only explain,

make bearable and justify threatening experiences but also prescribe behaviour in the light of its explanation, alleviation or justification. It must provide not only a conception of reality but also an accompanying way of life. Religion in particular, according to Geertz, provides not only a 'world view' but also an 'ethos', not only a 'model of' reality but also a 'model for' behaviour, not only a set of convictions but also a set of 'moods and motivations':

The Christian sees the Nazi movement against the background of The Fall which . . . places it in a moral, a cognitive, even an affective sense [i.e., world view]. An Azande sees the collapse of a granary upon a friend or relative against the background of a concrete and rather special notion of witchcraft and thus avoids the philosophical dilemmas as well as the psychological stress of indeterminism. . . . But more than gloss, such beliefs are also a template. They do not merely interpret social and psychological processes in cosmic terms—in which case they would be [merely] philosophical, not religious—but they shape them. In the doctrine of original sin is embedded also a recommended attitude toward life, a recurring mood, and a persisting set of motivations [i.e., ethos]. The Azande learns from witchcraft conceptions not just to understand apparent 'accidents' as not accidents at all, but to react to these spurious accidents with hatred for the agent who caused them and to proceed against him with appropriate resolution. (Geertz 1973, pp. 123–4)

The invocation of witchcraft not only explains and makes bearable the friend's or relative's death but also spurs revenge.

For Geertz, the prime threat to meaning comes less from the failure of belief—the failure to explain, make bearable or justify experience—than from the failure of practice—the failure to prescribe behaviour. Still more, the prime threat comes from the failure to harmonise belief with practice. A cultural system works only when it not merely provides both a conception of reality and a way of life but also meshes the two. In the Christian and Azande examples in the quotation the two are in sync, but Geertz himself stresses how often they are at odds (see Geertz 1968). When in sync, the two reinforce each other. In the case of religion the world view makes the ethos natural, and in turn the ethos provides a concrete, living manifestation of the world view:

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 the world view describes, 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. (Geertz 1973, pp. 89–90)

For Weber, the prime threat to meaning comes not from any hiatus between belief and practice but from a failure wholly within belief: the failure to justify suffering. The hiatus, if any, is between belief and experience. Certainly for Weber, no less than for Geertz, belief induces behaviour. Of the quest for salvation, which is tied to theodicy, he thus says that 'Our concern is essentially with the quest for salvation, whatever its form, insofar as it produced certain consequences for practical behaviour in the world' (Weber 1963, p. 149). But the threat to meaning does not come from the failure of Azande religion to tell one how to behave once one is taught that the cause of woes like the collapse of a granary upon a friend or relative is witchcraft. It comes from the failure of Azande religion to justify the collapse. It comes from the failure to say either why the victims got what they deserved—for which an acceptable reason would not be witchcraft—or how the victims or their survivors will be compensated.

For Geertz, the payoff of belief is behaviour. Belief is a guide to behaviour. Culture requires belief so that behaviour will make sense, but culture is behaviour foremost. For

Weber, the payoff of behaviour is belief. Behaviour is the justification for belief. Religion prescribes behaviour not merely because adherents need to know how to act but also because their behaviour validates their belief. Suffering is justified either when it is deserved or when it is rewarded. Where for Geertz one needs to know what to believe in order to know how to behave, for Weber one needs to know how to behave in order to know what to believe.

### Notes

- 1 On the variety of ways these terms are used, see Segal.
- 2 See Ryle, II, chs 36–7.
- 3 On the centrality of intent for Parsons see Parsons, pp. 43–51.
- 4 On this difference between Geertz and Weber, who conflates inexplicable and unjustifiable experiences with suffering, see Geertz 1973, pp. 104–6; 1968, p. 101.
- 5 But Weber, contrary to Geertz (1973, pp. 104–6), does not attribute the quest for meaning to suffering only. Mystics, who for Weber hail from the privileged class, seek meaning not to reconcile belief with experience but to deepen their belief and in turn their experience—their experience of life as a whole, not merely of suffering (see Weber 1963, pp. 124–5).

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