

## **What, How, and Why: The Geertzian Definition of Religion and Neurotheological Project on Meta and Megatheology.**

**Witold P. Wolny**

Department of History and Philosophy  
The University of Virginia's College at Wise  
1 College Ave, Darden Hall 105  
Wise, VA, 24293, USA

### **Abstract**

*The discussion about the nature and essence of religion has been recently revitalized. Due to the magnitude and extent of this return, Geertz called it a "seismic event". However, in spite of an impressive development in research on religion, there is still no common agreement about its definition and content. Common definitions are mainly responding to the questions "what" religion is, "why" it is there and "how" it works rather on the phenomenological level. The Humans Sciences (including theology) – have always jealously looked at the natural sciences and their methods in order to clarify the blurriness of concepts and simplify the unnecessary sophistication of theoretical discourse. Recent studies on the neurology of religious beliefs, together with Geertzian' definition and analysis of religion bring new inspirations for what has been labeled as Mega and Metatheology.*

The discussion about the nature and essence of religion has been recently revitalized, after its spectacular comeback in the socio-political arena of contemporary world. Due to the magnitude and extent of this return, Geertz called it a "seismic event". Once again the essential role that our beliefs play in the formation of our individual world-views has been confirmed. On the academic side, this implies two things: the end of the Secularization Theory, and the necessity of a new theory of religion or at least a new global approach to the religious phenomenon. Of course the starting point for this enterprise would be defining this term. However, during the twentieth century, in spite of an impressive development in anthropological research on religion, there was no common agreement about its definition and content. Two main currents or tendencies became visible. For many scholars, the most complete and influential definition is the one by Clifford Geertz, while others prefer to follow definitions rooted in Durkheim's dichotomy between the sacred and the profane. If Durkheim's approach is both inspirational and useful, the definition of Clifford Geertz is the most quoted and one of the most comprehensive. In his definition, Geertz refers to a religion as "system of symbols".

These systems are cultural models and make up an "intrinsic source of information" for the formation of social and psychological processes. The nucleus of the Geertzian definition resides in its third proposition. As a system of symbols, religion establishes *moods and motivations by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence*. This is precisely what distinguishes a mood of wonder when you see the Grand Canyon from a feeling of religious awe in the face of a vitality that penetrates everything in a mysterious way, as in a case of *mana* or any other experience of the *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans*. In a similar manner there is a difference between a motivation to live an ascetic life for religious reasons, and a motivation to live and ascetic life in order to lose a few pounds. Religious symbols generate conceptions of a general order of existence, but not in a systematic manner, or not explicitly. In other words, it can be an intuition. Certain religious feelings or ritualistic behaviors that are present in a passion, entertainment, sports, fashion or human relationship (love, of course) – could be seen sometimes as substitutes for religion, but they are only imitations of religion, because they do not symbolize transcendental truths, nor do they formulate conceptions of a general order of reality, of nature and the universe. Even if quite often these religious affirmations are obscure, naïve or simply wrong, they still are bearers of worldviews and ultimate truths.

It's here where Geertz sees the difference between his position and Taylor's definition, which identifies religious phenomenon by belief in spirits. The basic difference between Geertzian approach and many others that are based on the mantra "a belief in something spiritual" - is that Geertz' spotlight is not on beliefs but on functionality, in a capacity of formulating conceptions, and this is not a requirement exclusively for religion, but for human identity as well.

Without this capacity or possibility to formulate conceptions of a general order of existence the human being wouldn't be even a gifted simian, but a monster without meaning and direction, without self-control over emotions, he/she only would be guided by chaotic impulses. We could describe this idea of Geertz by saying that "in the beginning there was a conception" – this would probably be the famous "point of humanization" of Teilhard de Chardin, the moment when the human being was born, emerging from chaos- in the course of evolutionary biological fine-tuning,- to self-creation and a symbolic re-creation of the surrounding world. This creation of the human being, because it is conceptual, is also dynamic and sustained by a symbolic system. It is a virtual reality (in the sense described by Žižek) that is imposed or projected by man onto reality, or kind of a "contact lens" by means of which the man perceives all the reality. The fragility of this "subjectivity that objectifies" depends on three factors, "three points where chaos – a tumult of events which lack not just interpretations but interpretability – threatens to break in upon man: at the limits of his analytical capacities, at the limits of his powers of endurance, and at the limits of his moral insight." (Geertz, 1973) Intellectual discomfort, physical and psychological suffering, ethical problems that seem impossible to amend – if they are intense enough and prolonged, question the purpose and meaning of life and the possibility of its comprehension.

These are, of course, questions that concern directly every religion, and if a religion is incapable of putting in order that which produces this conceptual or emotional chaos, then probably will be disregarded or replaced. However, not only religious persons need to protect their world view from these three dangers. An intellectual discomfort doesn't have to be the result of conflict between science and religion nor the product of intellectual tension within religious dogma or whole system. As an example, Geertz talks about a deep intellectual dissatisfaction that Bertrand Russell had with some mathematical axioms while the question of God did not produce in him any anxiety. Einstein was profoundly disappointed with some results of quantum mechanics, because he could not believe that *God plays dice with the universe*. There are many other examples within and outside religion, - it seems like it's impossible for the human being to leave facts without interpreting them, without finding a feasible explanation; even if this explanation sometimes is very odd. This is preferable to chaos leading to intellectual and emotional discomfort. Another risk of disintegration into chaos may be the result of suffering.

Geertz follows here Bronislaw Malinowski who pointed out that religion helps to overcome situations of emotional stress by opening up escapes through rites and beliefs. In addition, in religions the predicament of Job in many ways is reproduced: the contrast between moral condition and reality, between what "is" with what "should be". The existence of evil, unjust and absurd suffering, and eventually death, - all these problems have to be answered, even if the answer doesn't erase the drama generated by "what is" instead of "what should be". Hence, it looks like whenever there is a religion, there is also a symbolic system that connects factual reality with transcendental milieu. But not just that – religious conceptions have to be clothed in an aura of factuality, in other words, the human being for some reason has to believe that these conceptions are real. The main problem here is how is it possible, "how is it that the religious man moves from a troubled perception of experienced disorder to a more or less settled conviction of fundamental order?" (Geertz, 1973, 109). A common response based on a psychological analysis is that these religious constructions are responses to inner psychological needs (like anxiety induced by suffering or different existential fears). However Geertz sustains that if everyday experiences are a source for religious beliefs, everybody would be agnostic.

On the contrary, the consequence of a prior acceptance of supernatural authority transforms experience and harmonizes it with the global religious world view. It is true that sometimes an experience of suffering or an awe or moral paradoxes can lead to spiritual sentiments; however they cannot constitute a solid base for beliefs. A myth or a revelation or a charismatic preacher has to be accepted as authoritative. Consequently, a religious symbolic system could be integrated into a world view transforming it entirely so that world view would obtain a new religious perspective, a new mood of perception, apprehension and understanding. It is not a detachment from reality in the refuge of a virtual sacred world – it's rather an experience of finding a deeper reason, meaning, sense and a superior order that makes reality even "more real". The core of the religious perspective is precisely the conviction of the "really real" which intensifies and transforms everyday life by inserting it into a new symbolic system with its conceptions and rituals. Here is the aura of factuality of the Geertzian definition: religious perspective makes reality deeper and clothes it in new conceptions and meanings. It's not just about adding to the world "here" another one "out there", it's about discovering "the other" world as "present here".

The purpose of a symbolic system in the Geertzian definition is not just to create moods and motivations but to make them seem uniquely realistic. This component of the definition is – according the Geertz - particularly important, and nobody has exposed it with precision. These religious moods and motivations do not have to be always detectable. No one, not even a saint or mystics, can live in the world of religious symbols all the time. There is always a world of common sense, of everyday practical, physiological, material and immediate things. One can be insensitive to aesthetics, oblivious or indifferent to religious feelings and ideas, or inept in science, but one cannot totally disregard common sense and survive. For a religious person, the tangible world of common sense becomes impregnated, colored by the religious world view which gives a distinctive style to society, to the individual and social life. For that reason there are two simultaneous spheres: the one of the religious perspective and the other of common sense.

The movement that oscillates between these two perspectives is “one of the most obvious empirical evidences on the social scene, though, again, one of the most neglected by social anthropologists, virtually all of whom have seen it happen countless times” (Geertz, 1973, 119) According to the author, anthropologists usually describe religion as something homogeneous and characteristic of each individual, similar to his/her kinship position, occupational role or place of residence. However religion does something peculiar: by means of rites it can transport the person into another mode of existence, into the “sacred ambience” and, afterwards, this experience remains only as a pale reflection in midst of everyday life. This is the originality of the Geertzian analysis: awareness of the fact that human beings do not melt or fuse perspectives of the religious and the “ordinary” world but rather oscillate between them, jump from one to the other. It is similar to the moment of falling asleep or to the moment when the theater curtain goes up and marks the transition to the stage-world, or when we laugh after hearing a good joke that transforms the real world into the “other” where silly or unreal things happen. Geertz insists on the importance of introducing this idea into studies on religion because: “one of the main methodological problems in writing about religion scientifically is to put aside at once the tone of the village atheist and that of the village preacher, as well as their more sophisticated equivalents, so that the social and psychological implications of particular religious beliefs can emerge in a clear and neutral light.” (Geertz 1973, 123). This suggestion of taking a different position or perspective when science study religion is not new: William James, Rudolf Otto, and many phenomenologists advocated something similar.

However this claim for a “clear and neutral light” has recently received a new and surprising ally - unforeseen at the time Geertz wrote his masterpiece “Religion as a Cultural System” - new theories incorporating biological models and data provided by the experimental sciences, in particular Neurology and Genetics. This biological-cognitive perspective has re-energized naturalistic theories of religion, although this time without declaring a holistic explanation of the religious phenomenon along the lines of their XIX century predecessors. The problem with the Geertzian definition – and any other definition elaborated from the human sciences – is that it is based on empirical methodology (observation-deduction) rather than positivistic methodology used by the natural sciences. Consequently, these definitions are mainly responding to the questions “what” religion is, “why” it is there and “how” it works rather than on the phenomenological level. In our case,

“what” – system of symbols

“why” - to establish a powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in human beings

“how” - 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. However, this is not the kind of language that the “hard sciences” speak. The scientific answers would respond in the following way: “what” - function of human brain, related to the consciousness “why” – to provide an evolutionary advantage “how” - by human species pre-disposed genetically towards religious behaviors, by using hyper-excited, aroused or dysfunctional states of the human brain that provide religious-like experiences and ideas. The Humans Sciences (including theology) – have always jealously looked at the natural sciences and their methods in order to clarify the blurriness of concepts and simplify the unnecessary sophistication of theoretical discourse. Another important temptation has been to bring on the Holy Grail of a holistic and definitive grand theory of religion. Nevertheless whenever the Humans Sciences succeeded in introducing the empirical-experimental approach into religion studies, they were accused of falling into scientific reductionism. However today, from both sites: from religion and science, are being raised voices in favor of – what Nancey Murphy (winner the American Academy of Religion award for her book *Theology in the Age of Science*) has called non-reductive physicalism.

From the scientists side there is also a new *mise-en-scène* - they do not necessarily disregard religious experiences and explanations as not relevant or complementary to the “hard” science. Recent studies on the neurology of religious beliefs discovered what parts of the human brain are involved in religious activities and beliefs. The question is how the human brain generates all the “classical” elements of religious phenomenon, and why in this way and in no other, namely why human beings are religious. Newberg and d’Aquili point out that all religious essentials, like rites or myths have neurological bases, and they describe the neurological mechanisms behind religious experiences. One of the main functions of the human brain is selecting and ordering all data that comes through different sensorial and inner experiences. The main enemy is chaos, disorder or the incapacity to classify the incoming data as good or bad for the system, useful, dangerous, or threatening to its integrity. There is a basic vital importance in such a capacity to build up one coherent world view – this simply makes predictions possible and facilitates a better adaptation to the environment. Hence, religion, as any cultural symbolic system provides a framework for the ultimate order of the human universe. However, what makes religion different from a cultural system is the fact that its convictions are based on a special kind of brain experience that the human brain classifies as radically real. This experience cannot be acquired via ordinary channels by which such an experience of the “real reality” is usually acquired, - namely through sensorial data or logical deductions.

Newberg and d’Aquili called this occurrence the experience of the Absolute Unitary Being (AUB). Scientific experiments show that such an experience corresponds to a discrete activity of the brain that can be mapped using a sophisticated method of brain scanning. This experience of AUB happens for example during deep meditation. Sara Lazar’s study shows that there is even a physiological base for such an experience; her research team discovered an association between meditation and increased cortical thickness. (Lazar, 2005). Andrew Newberg says: “Our minds are drawn by the intuition of this deeper reality, this utter sense of oneness, where suffering vanishes and all desires are at peace. As long as our brain are arranged the way they are, as long as our minds are capable of sensing this deeper reality, spirituality will continue to shape the human experience, and God, however we define that majestic, mysterious concept, will not go away.” ( Newberg and d’Aquili, 2001) This is entirely a scientific hypothesis, quite unexpected after more than a century of the positivist paradigm.

One of the consequences of bringing religion into the scientific lab is that science has to seriously take into account religious phenomenon in its complexity and start making journeys inside the religious world. Newberg and d’Aquili put forward the idea of establishing a new kind of religious analysis, called Metatheology. This constitutes a symbolic turning point for the traditionally uneasy, yet at times antagonistic, religion-science relationship. D’Aquili and Newberg go even farther and suggest the creation of a new Megatheology as the direct beneficiary of contemporary neurology. Metatheology contains general principles that describe a theological system and the norms of its creation. Metatheology explains the structure of religious phenomenon using a neurological analysis of brain architecture and its “cognitive operators”. These cognitive operators make possible the creation of all basic elements of religion, namely myths, theologies and rites. Metatheology explains the structure of religion; megatheology is another derivation of Neurology which aspire to determine the contents that can (or should) be incorporated by all world religions. Moreover: metatheology could suggest a new specific theology for a future universal religion. Its universality is not biased historically or culturally. The novelty is that science not only tolerates religion but claims to be its main inspiration. The essential argument for such a claim is the discovery of singular states of the human brain that occur during certain religious practices (rites, ascetic practices or mystic experiences)

These conditions of the brain have a common denominator: they are hyperlucid unitary states. (D’Aquili&Newberg, 1999). These states are common to all religious experiences and in the past were described with complex, symbolic apparatus proper to given historical and cultural circumstances. Neurology could examine, using advanced methods of brain scanning, what happens during these hyperlucid states of consciousness, what is their physiology, where the neural flux transits and how the anatomical mechanism of our brain function. These brain scanners closed the debate about authenticity of these experiences. The extreme modality of the hyperlucid unitary states is the experience of the Absolute Unitary Being (AUB). What is particularly interesting is that our brain reacts to this experience as something entirely and radically real, at least as real as the tree we see in front of us, the music we hear or the evidence of the existence we experience.

Nevertheless even if the experience of AUB is declared by our brain as radically real, the question of objectivity still remains because these experiences are also radically subjective.

In the words of Scott Atran, the problem may be summarized in the question: “Why are Mickey Mouse and Marx different from God?” (Atran 2002) For d’Aquili y Newberg, the singularity of religious experience has to do with its phenomenological peculiarity, its absolute conviction and its re-discovery of the real as a consequence of this experience. The question is why the human brain is totally certain about the reality of the AUB, if this certainty does not relate to something real. The radicalism of religious experience of AUB has nothing to do with faith in Mickey Mouse or in Marx, because the real is not just “projected into” the AUB but this experience transforms the way of perceiving reality.

For D’Aquili and Newberg the idea of subjective and objective is being originated in the experience of the “pure consciousness of the real”, namely actual reality emerges from this experience. In this sense, the experience of AUB is more radical than anything else, because it is a simple consciousness without forms. Its effect could be the configuration of a religion, when this experience becomes formalized and expressed in a figure of god. There is also the possibility of a neutral configuration, when there is no god or its equivalent like in classic Buddhism. Megatheology is based on this “pure and simple” awareness of AUB, one that could be called “the previous nature of God” and represents the total and infinite conscious potentiality, the *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans* in its deepest meaning.

Critics of neurotheology go in two directions: one is about its general character and another is about one particular aspect. A representative of the first group is Scott Atran who says that neurotheology does not take into account the progress of Cognitive Psychology and Anthropology and criticizes the usage of the theory of cognitive operators without sufficient support of data. (Atran, 2002, 186)

John A. Teske argues that the coherent picture of human spirituality apart from neurology should contain different levels including biology, history, psychology and narrative mythology.

Teske argues that the human spirit is generated, inserted or supervenient to nature.

In this sense, neurology is necessary but insufficient to understand spirituality. (Teske 2006) In the other group are those who point out and criticize one particular aspect. Kart E. Peters notices that to the three goals of the Metatheology - “how and why” myths, rites and theology - should be added one more, namely morality. Peters points out the absence of moral duty as an essential aspect of religious experience. He also suggests that the alternative to Megatheology could be evolutionary theology as a combination of Biological and Cultural Anthropology. There are also those who look for genuine religious experiences as a biopsychological framework for neurotheology and evolutionary theology. For Michael Winkelman all the elements of neurotheology are present in shamanism. (Winkelman 2004). Finally there are those who criticize neurology for its marriage with theology and instead they prefer to remain in a position of empirical reductionism.

Maximo Pilgliucci, uses Ockham’s razor as an argument against neurotheology. He also criticizes neurotheology for not being a theology since it says nothing about the nature of God that should be the main and constitutive objective of every theology. (Pilgliucci, 2002).

I am not going to discuss these critics, since this is not relevant for the purpose of this presentation.

What is, in my opinion, the “black side of the moon” in Newberg and d’Aquili’s project, although exceptionally interesting and inspirational – is lack of phenomenological explanation about the essence and characteristics of religious experience; in other words – what is exactly that what science mean by “religious experiences”, what kind of abstract realities and structures are hidden behind this umbrella term.

Geertz and his elegant conceptual apparatus could provide such a necessary disclosure.

Geertzian definition and analysis of religion is an excellent base and useful philosophical starting point for more developments and discussions on Meta/Mega-theology. The divorce between science and religion throughout the history has been caused by what causes any divorce: the lack of mutual understanding that implies empathy, and as a consequence, has caused a progressive impossibility for an authentic dialogue.

But there is a chance they can reconcile for mutual benefit. Religion and the Natural sciences may finally reach the point where one won’t be accused of being naive and irrational, and the other of being insensitive to more subtle yet still fundamental realities and phenomena. Friedrich Nietzsche defined the marriage as the will of two to create the one who is more than those who created it. This is my best wish for the future of Mega and Metatheology.

## **References**

1. Atran, S., (2002), *In Gods We Trust. The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion*. Oxford University Press.
2. Newberg, A., D'Aquili, E. (1999), *The Mystical Mind: Probing the Biology of Religious Experience*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis.
3. Newberg, A., D'Aquili, E. (2001), *Why God Won't Go Away. Brain Science and the Biology of Belief*, Ballantine Books, New York.
4. Geertz, C. (2000), *Available Light. Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
5. Geertz, C. (1973), *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, Basic Books.
6. Lazar S. W. and others (2000), *Functional brain mapping of the relaxation response and meditation*, NeuroReport, Vol. II No 7, 15 May 2000.
7. Malinowski, B. (1960), *The Scientific Theory of Culture*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1960.
8. Murphy, N. (1993), *Theology in the Age of Science*, Cornell University Press.
9. Pigliucci, M. (2002), *Denying Evolution: Creationism, Scientism, and the Nature of Science*. Sinauer.
10. Otto, R. (2006). *The Idea of the Holy*, Oxford University Press, 1923.
11. Teske, J.A. (2006). *Neuromythology: Brains and Stories*. Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science, 41 (March): 173-200.
12. James, W. (1929), *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York, Random House, 1929.
13. Zizek, S. (2007), *The Reality of the Virtual*, DVD, Olive Films.