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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Examining Clifford Geertz's Cultural Approach to Semiotics of Religion

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Clifford Geertz, one of the most prominent ideologues of the interpretative approach to religion and culture, is recognized as one of the most influential cultural anthropologists of the twentieth century in America. Geertz's approach is considered one of the most significant in the postmodern era. This paper, utilizing a descriptive-analytical method and, in some cases, content analysis, provides a brief overview of the meaning of culture from Geertz's perspective and its characteristics. It also offers a comprehensive and accurate portrayal of his views on religion, demonstrating that, from Geertz's standpoint, religion is akin to a cultural system and is closely associated with culture in its meaning, features, and anthropological significance. In Geertz's thought, culture and religion are intertwined. He believes that to understand culture, one must delve into symbols; rituals and religious activities are considered symbols. He sees religion as an ancient aspect of the larger culture of society, where the presence of rituals and numerous beliefs renders it symbolic. One of the essential concepts in Geertz's thought is "meaning," primarily because meanings form a closely related system, which is culture itself. One of the most important effects of the cultural approach to religion is the understanding of religion from the perspective of the modern subject and the transition from it. As this methodology reveals the understanding of religion in the modern period, it serves as a starting point for postmodern methodology in the study of religions, positioning itself as a vanguard in the future of religious studies.

**Keywords:** Religion; Culture; Clifford Geertz; Meaning; Symbol; Interpretation.

## Introduction

Clifford Geertz is one of the most prominent proponents of the interpretive approach to religion and, more broadly, to culture. Geertz's efforts to apply understanding and interpretation to culture and cultural phenomena have made his work highly influential. His departure from the prevailing positivism in the social sciences to delve deeper into the internal mechanisms of cultures further solidified his impact.

Geertz's anthropology of religion emerges from his methodology in the realm of culture, grounded in sociological, anthropological, and philosophical foundations. His views, framed within cultural studies, bear implications that intertwine the anthropology of religion and culture. From Geertz's perspective, culture is a collection of meanings perceived through symbols and signs. His emphasis is on meaning; any cognition about culture should start with understanding its cultural meanings. Both religion and culture provide meaning to life and convey this meaning.

Given this, and considering that one facet of culturalism and symbolism posits a resemblance of culture to a text, Geertz utilizes ritual as a tool for adopting an interpretive approach, viewing it as a text for interpreting culture. In doing so, he treats Balinese culture and its cockfights as a given example, approaching it from this anthropological perspective.

He aims to demonstrate how ritual activities manifest as a symbolic system that addresses the issue of meaning in real human experiences. From Geertz's viewpoint, all individuals seek to attribute meaning to their lives; his method involves examining and observing these meanings through symbols. He views religion as a representation of culture and a component of the cultural system, suggesting that human understandings of religion originate from it. Religion, intertwined with popular understanding, art, empirical sciences, and ideology, constitutes a cultural system. To access the meanings embodied in symbols, he proposes an approach that moves from form to the governing meanings and concepts of symbolic forms, ultimately aiming to penetrate the essence of the symbol and the reality of culture.

Explaining the meaning of religion in Geertz's thought is essential given his definition of culture within his intellectual framework. He conceptualizes religion as a cultural system and connects it to the concept of culture, stating: "Now might be the time for social anthropology, especially the part examining religion, to recognize this reality" (Geertz, 1973: 89).

As Talal Asad interprets, it seems that Geertz "starts by observing that the anthropological study of religion is stagnant and suggests that it should be revitalized by resorting to the concept of culture" (Asad, 1983).

The importance and necessity of this research lie in the fact that the cultural approach to religion and the study of religion represents a postmodern perspective within the context of modern thought. This approach, while moving beyond positivism and acknowledging functionalism, aims to deepen understanding by emphasizing hermeneutic and phenomenological foundations. It seeks to expand knowledge of religion through the lens of the human subject. This shift can be seen as the beginning of a journey toward uncovering the truth and nature of religions throughout human history.

### **Culture from Geertz's Perspective**

In an overarching statement about the meaning of culture from Geertz's perspective, one can assert that culture refers to systems of meaning that become apparent through symbols. Thus, the manifestation of culture, consisting of symbols, patterns, and signs, is both interpretable and

explicable. The role of an anthropologist lies in interpreting and explaining these cultures in a way that penetrates the depths of the subject, representing the meanings of the symbols and patterns as the natives of that culture understand them. It can be said that the evolution of the meaning of culture: “once upon a time, not so very long ago, when the West was a good deal more sure of itself, of what it was, and what it wasn’t, the concept of culture had a firm design and a definite edge” (Geertz, 1995: 115).

However, “in the 1980s, a more fundamental shift became apparent, from the dominantly sociological orientation that had characterized social anthropology for most of the century to a fresh concern with problems of meaning and with ‘culture,’ which had been treated as a residual category by the comparative sociologists” (Kuper, 2004:1337).

In fact, “some social scientists would further restrict the term culture to just those parts of the social heritage that involve representations of things, excluding norms or procedural knowledge about how things should be done. Other social scientists would further restrict the definition of culture to symbolic meanings, that is, to those symbolic representations that are used to communicate interpretations of events” (Kuper, 2004: 278-279).

Meanwhile, Geertz, as one of the most important figures in the tradition of cultural anthropology, was renowned for his semiotic approach to culture and social action. Many of Geertz’s most powerful and explicit articulations of his position are embedded in his discussions of religion (Throop, 2013: 4).

As Geertz mentions in one of his most significant works on this topic (“The Interpretation of Cultures”), regarding the definition of culture: “So the cultural concept I favor has neither various meanings nor possesses unusual ambiguity; in my usage of this concept, this term denotes a pattern of embodied meanings in symbols that are historically transmitted; it also here implies a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by which people can communicate, perpetuate, and enhance their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (Geertz, 1973: 89).

He believes that the notion of culture as a learned behavior, a super organic force shaping our lives, and an evolving entity guided by inherent laws had begun to lose its force and persuasion (Geertz, 2012: 13).

He says, “I enjoy searching in specific cultural contexts and immersing myself in the depths of reasoning processes to access symbolic systems. This does not mean that I want to distance myself from the world, but rather to keep it in mind” (Geertz, 1983: 183). “According to Geertz, culture resides in the intersubjective field of public meaning” (Kuper, 2004: 278-279).

It can be said that if Geertz’s works are considered as an intellectual system, then the center of that system or perhaps its structure is only comprehensible by referring to the concept of culture (Alexander & Smith, 2011: 204).

An observation on his works confirms this issue: “Along with ‘Ideology as a Cultural System,’ Geertz included in *The Interpretation of Cultures* his essay ‘Religion as a Cultural

System'; the essays 'Common Sense as a Cultural System,' and 'Art as a Cultural System' would appear in his next collection, *Local Knowledge* (1983)" (Zorin, 2001, 27).

The principal components and characteristics of culture in Geertz's thought can be analyzed as follows: emphasis on meaning, symbols, and patterns; viewing culture as a text; and the importance of interpretation and analysis.

From Geertz's perspective, meaning is a central element of culture. Cultural phenomena are perceived as systems that imbue significance. Therefore, in his view, "culture is a universal phenomenon because meaning is also universal" (Geertz, 1973: 12). In fact, following Max Weber, Geertz asserts that his vision of an interpretive science, aimed at exploring the 'webs of significance' that constitute culture, is founded on the idea that culture is public, ideational, and yet non-mentalistic (Throop, 2013: 4).

Geertz also expressed a more formal definition of culture, defining it in part as "patterns of meaning" (Williams, 2005: 100).

Just as Geertz emphasizes the concept of meaning in his definition of culture, he also addresses the semantic properties when discussing unity, conflict, and cultural transformation. He believes that by identifying the factors responsible for cultural unity, conflict, and transformation, one can arrive at their meanings. He also believes that "but because meaning is always based on appearances, is always interpretive, and is never fixed or final" (Turner, 1986: 209).

He from this emphasis on the feature of meaning that paves the way to symbols. Geertz interprets cultural analysis through this semantic lens, believing that "meanings can be "stored" in symbols" (Geertz, 1973: 127). Through symbols, one must seek the underlying meanings.

Geertz says "Culture, is a complex interplay of symbols expressing meaning. Therefore, religion as a cultural system is also expressive of meaning, and an expression of man's search for meaning. This meaning, found in and expressed by religious symbols and cultural systems is demonstrative of mankind's quest to know and understand his world and his place in it" (Morgan, 1978: 9).

Another fundamental characteristic of culture is the presence of symbols and patterns. While symbols are deeply connected to the concept of meaning and serve as its expression and manifestation, they can also be regarded as one of the primary features of culture, as they exist in a bilateral relationship with meaning.

He says: "Systems of symbols, are also culture patterns) and they constitute extrinsic sources of information" (Asad, 1993: 92).

Geertz divides symbols into two categories: conscious and hidden. Understanding conscious symbols is relatively straightforward; for example, a country's flag can be seen as a symbol of its independence and identity. However, to comprehend the cultural meanings embedded in social actions, it is essential to understand hidden symbols. Geertz approaches the interpretation of these symbols using an interpretive method (see Geertz, 1988: 10-20).

In his analysis of the meaning of the symbol, Geertz identifies four interpretations and seeks to highlight his preferred definition through the fourth meaning. From his perspective, the term "symbol," like "culture," encompasses various meanings.

The first meaning describes a symbol as something that represents another thing; for instance, dark clouds are symbols of impending rain. The second meaning relates to common signs; for example, a red flag signifies danger, while a white flag symbolizes surrender. The third meaning involves using something to express another idea, not directly and literally, but indirectly and metaphorically. However, the final and desired meaning according to Geertz is when “this term is used for any action, event, or quality in a relationship that acts as a bearer of a concept; this concept is the 'meaning' of a symbol” ( Geertz, 1973: 91). He continues to mention that he intends to use this approach.

Sherry Ortner, a cultural anthropologist and distinguished professor of anthropology, describes Geertz's conception of the symbol as follows: “Societies use these symbols to express "Geertz's symbols are 'carriers of culture.' He argues that symbols should not be studied in isolation, but rather for what they reveal about culture. Geertz's main interest was how symbols create pathways through which the individuals in society see, feel, and think about the world” (Ortner, 1984: 129).

From Geertz's perspective, the everyday human world can be considered a cultural phenomenon filled with artifacts. He believes this world is imbued with symbols and patterns that are organized in meaningful ways, through which understanding can be sought.

Geertz argues that humans are deeply connected with symbols and symbolic systems. This connection extends from human behavior and actions to thought processes. Human behavior can be seen as a form of symbolic action, and understanding human behavior or culture is possible through its manifestation and the human factors involved.

Furthermore, Geertz posits that human thought is not merely a series of occurrences within a person's mind; it is intricately linked to meaningful symbols and cultural forms. In other words, human thought can be viewed as a reflection of symbolic forms and cultural components.

From his view, “in the eyes of symbolic action theorists (a smaller but bolder group to which I consider myself affiliated, with certain reservations), thinking is a purposeful construction of cultural forms. Some outdoor activities, such as plowing or peddling, provide as good examples of it as wishing and regretting do” (Geertz, 1973: 151).

Indeed, from Geertz's perspective, human thought is not merely an individual or personal matter; it is social, historical, and universal. Analyzing this issue allows for the interpretation of human thought from various aspects, such as its origins, functions, forms, applications, and objectives, all of which can be viewed as socio-historical phenomena. Ultimately, from Geertz's viewpoint, thought embodies a symbolic and cultural form, representing the deep connection humans have with symbols and symbolic systems. Reflecting on this meaning can enhance our understanding of culture.

One of the main features of culture in Geertz's view is that culture is like a text that needs to be interpreted “that approach involved historical imagination (*Verstehen*) which requires the scrutiny of texts (hermeneutics) and some phenomenological rather than any empirical method. Textualist studies have flourished since the mid-1980s, often blended with historical rethinking” (Kuper, 2004: 1038).

Thus, the text of culture must be read, analyzed, and interpreted to access its profound meanings. From Geertz's perspective, understanding culture as a text clarifies the roles of anthropologists and ethnographers. Ethnography, in its entirety, involves multiple acts of interpretation. According to Geertz, “interpretation” is not the unfounded opinion of an anthropologist about the motives and actions of another culture, but rather a conscious explanation of how those motives and actions are meaningful in a specific cultural context” (Moore, 2009: 315).

Naturally, if culture is viewed as a text that can be interpreted and analyzed, the task of the ethnographer and anthropologist centers on reading it, delving into its depths, and uncovering its meanings. Therefore, ethnography can be seen as a layered description. In this metaphor, Geertz illustrates that the reality faced by the ethnographer is filled with complexities, chaos, and ambiguities. Thus, the initial task of the ethnographer is to unravel these ambiguities and complexities to advance toward understanding and comprehension.

“Anthropological work has been overwhelmingly devoted to the analysis of culture traits, however, rather than to the study of cultures as articulated wholes. This has been due in great measure to the nature of earlier ethnological descriptions” (Benedict, 2009: preface).

For a more precise elucidation of “culture as text” through an inclusive approach, we will examine Geertz's perspective on Balinese culture and their cockfighting. In this context, viewing cockfighting as a text allows us to grasp its main characteristics. However, if we merely regard cockfighting as a form of entertainment, we hinder our cognitive goals. Cockfighting evokes a range of emotions, including anxiety, danger, linguistic fear, and the joy of victory. Yet, it is important to note that cockfighting is not solely about inducing these feelings. Reading the cockfight as a text, according to Geertz's belief, what is perceived is that “In cockfights, the Balinese people shape and discover their temperament and society” (Geertz, 1973: 451); and in the multiple representations and re-representations of cockfighting, they read and re-read it, discovering and finding themselves in it.

“Balinese life besides the stratification and the agonistic that receive such commentary. The ceremony consecrating a Brahmana priest, a matter of breath control, postural immobility, and vacant concentration upon the depths of being, displays a radically different, but to the Balinese equally real, property of social hierarchy—its reach toward the numinous transcendent. Set not in the matrix of the kinetic emotionality of animals, but in that of the static passionlessness of divine mentality, it expresses tranquility not disquiet. The mass festivals at the village temples, which mobilize the whole local population in elaborate hosting of visiting gods—songs, dances,



compliments, gifts—assert the spiritual unity of village mates against their status inequality and project a mood of amity and trust” (Geertz, 1972: 42).

One of the primary characteristics of culture from Geertz's perspective is interpretation and analysis. He views his anthropological approach as interpretative and defines cultural interpretation and analysis in the following way: In anthropological cultural analysis, one “searches for meaningful symbols and collections of meaningful symbols, such as the tangible tools of perception, emotion, and understanding, and articulates the rules that govern human experience, which play a role in shaping these rules. If available, an efficient theory of culture is achieved by constructing those patterns of thought that are directly observable” (Geertz, 1973: 408). Geertz also provides various insights regarding the conditions and intricacies of description, analysis, and interpretation. Among the most critical are the necessity to avoid extremes in interpretation, the imperative to delve deeply into the subject matter when describing it, the effort to align the theoretical concept of culture with its reality, and the importance of the anthropologist's understanding of the perspectives of the native inhabitants of that culture.

## Religion in Geertz's Thought

### *Definition of Religion in Geertz's Thought*

Based on Geertz's cultural approach to the semantics of religion and the preliminaries mentioned, it can be said that his cultural view of religion and the exploration of its meaning as a cultural system guided him to present a model of religion that encompasses the primary characteristics of culture. “For Geertz, religion formed a cultural “system” whose hallmark was coherence of meaning and integration of expressive symbols with the subjective meanings people imputed to them. One need not be as convinced as Geertz that culture forms a seamless web of meaning in order to find an interpretive and processual approach useful. One way to study the interpretive agency people use to create meaning through their religion is to focus on how individuals assemble and arrange cultural elements into coherent identities or attitudes” (Williams, 2005:102).

While pointing out the necessity of having a theoretical framework to perceive this model, he systematically defines religion as:

1. “A system of symbols which,
2. Acts to produce powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in humans,
3. By formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and,
4. Clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that,
5. The moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Geertz, 1973: 90).

Elaborating on the first point, Geertz refers to examples of symbols, including sacred symbols, viewing them as tangible formulations of concepts. These symbols are abstractions rooted in perceptible forms, serving as tangible representations of thoughts, approaches, judgments, desires, and events.

“Geertz sees his first task as the definition of symbol: “any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception-the conception is the symbol's ‘meaning’” (Talal, 1993: 91).

He resorts to Parsonian theory “creates a logical space for defining the essence of religion. By adopting it, Geertz moves away from a notion of symbols that are intrinsic to signifying and organizing practices, and back to a notion of symbols as meaning-carrying objects external to social conditions and states of the self (“social and psychological reality”) (Talal, 1993: 93).

In the context of the second point, Geertz refers to various moods and motivations, such as the feelings of worship, asceticism, independence, bravery, self-control, and passionate tenacity, in an effort to explain them. According to Geertz's opinion “Religious symbols produce two kinds of dispositions, moods and motivations: ‘motivations are ‘made meaningful’ with reference to the ends towards which they are conceived to conduce, whereas moods are ‘made meaningful’ with reference to the conditions from which they are conceived to spring’” (Talal, 1993: 97).

Regarding the third point, Geertz differentiates the core of a religious experience from a non-religious one by emphasizing a type of religious symbolism that connects human existence to a broader domain in which it is inscribed.

In the context of the fourth point, he compares the religious perspective with those of conventional reason, science, and aesthetics, elucidating the rationale and acceptance of the general religious concept as a reality.

Finally, he discusses the impact of religious rituals beyond their immediate context and how they reflect an individual's perception of pure reality. Highlighting the reciprocal relationship between the religious perspective and practical reason, he points to a transition from the semantic framework of religious concepts to the realm of sound reason. Ultimately, he explores the direction religion provides in our daily lives and examines the influence of religious systems on social structures (cf. Geertz, 1973: 89-90).

“At the core of this definition is the idea that religion consists of a set of interrelated symbols (elsewhere referred to as ‘sacred’ symbols) that fuse an ethos, i.e. a set of ‘powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations’, with a world view, i.e. a set of ‘conceptions of a general order of existence’” (Munson Jr., 1986:5).

According to what has been stated, Geertz views religion as a cultural system in which the characteristics of culture are tangibly present. In the section on recognizing the characteristics of religion, a more extensive discussion will elaborate on identifying the cultural components within religion from a cultural analysis perspective. So “Cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz proposes a definition of religion as a cultural system, which offers such a synthesis. Geertz seeks to incorporate a humanistic dimension to his definition of religion, while retaining the importance of scientific principles and methods of inquiry. He uses ethnographic observation to describe religious practices and thick description to explain the meaning of observed practices” (Barnett, 2007: 110).



Another significant point to consider when discussing the definition of religion from Geertz's perspective is the distinction between "pure religion" and "lived religion." It is important to differentiate these two concepts within Geertz's thought.

Additionally, Geertz approaches religion as a metaphysical ontology, rooted in real and pervasive entities, which gives rise to a series of strong imperatives within an orderly moral system. In Geertz's perspective, "Religion has never been merely supernatural. For most of the world's tribes, the forms, instruments, and objects of worship have been covered with a halo of profound moral seriousness. The sacred everywhere includes a perception of intrinsic binding force. Not only does it encourage parsimony, but it demands it. The sacred requires not only rational satisfaction from the religion but also emotional attachment to it. Whether conceptualized as mana or Brahma or as a divine incarnation, the sacred, representing something beyond the worldly, has vast and inescapable implications for guiding human behavior. Just as religion has never been only supernatural, it has never been just moral either. The idea is that the moral life of religion originates from its honest representation of the fundamental nature of reality. It feels that this "ought", which comes with a strong imperative, derives from an all-encompassing "is". In this manner, religion shows the most vital conditions for human action in the broadest domains of human existence" (Geertz, 1973: 126). Based on this view, religion guides humans not only in supernatural and ontological aspects but also in moral function, rational satisfaction, and emotional attachment.

In essence, Geertz's understanding of religion combines both the metaphysical and the moral, emphasizing its multidimensional role in shaping human existence. Religion, in his view, is not merely about belief in the supernatural; it encompasses how these beliefs manifest in moral actions, emotional attachments, and rational understanding. The "oughts" (moral imperatives) of religion are deeply connected to an overarching "is" (the nature of reality). Thus, religion offers a comprehensive framework that encapsulates both the essence of existence and directives for human behavior.

From this perspective, Geertz emphasizes the innate human need to make sense of our experiences and actions within broader, shared meanings. Religion provides a lens through which we interpret our experiences, giving structure and meaning to our lives. The values central to a religion and the broader existential framework within which they operate are intrinsically linked, reflecting both personal and collective interpretations of existence. This interconnectedness serves as a foundation for understanding and interpreting the world around us, providing purpose and direction to individual actions and collective behaviors.

When contemplating the essence of Islam and its related culture from Geertz's perspective, one might ask, using Geertz's phrasing: "What is Islam? A religion? A civilization? A social order? A way of life? A strand of world history? A set of spiritual attitudes that are only interconnected by mutual respect for Muhammad and the Quran? Every tradition that spans from Senegal and Tanzania through Egypt and Turkey to Iran, India, and Indonesia, expanding from the seventh to the twentieth century; has borrowed from Judaism, Byzantine Christianity,

Greek philosophy, Hinduism, Arab paganism, Spanish enlightenment, and ancient Iranian mysteries, has at least vivified six empires from Abbasid to Ottoman, and has been legal, mystical, rational, and hierarchical. It is not easily described, though often it has been" (Geertz, 2010: 71).

In response to these questions, and drawing on Geertz's preliminary definition of religion, one can also define Islam based on the five principal components mentioned. Moreover, in mentioning the life source of the religion, Geertz believes that the "vitality of a religion lies in its ability to sketch a transcendent order of existence in such a way that the mundane occurrences of day-to-day life recurrently seem to confirm it" (Geertz, 1971: 39). Thus, from this perspective, one can understand Islam within a cultural framework, aligned with Geertz's definition of religion. Like other religions, Islam provides an overarching framework of meanings and values that help individuals make sense of their everyday experiences in relation to a higher, transcendent order. It is a system that intricately interweaves beliefs, rituals, ethical norms, and a profound sense of community, reflecting both the universality of certain human concerns and the particularity of historical and cultural contexts.

Finally "In the concluding paragraph of 'Religion as a Cultural System', Geertz writes : 'The anthropological study of religion is therefore a two-stage operation : first, an analysis of the system of meanings embodied in the symbols which make up the religion proper, and second, the relating of these systems to socialstructural and psychological processes'" (Munson Jr, 1986: 13).

### ***Semiotics of Religion in Geertz Thought***

Given Geertz's conceptualization of religion and his cultural approach, we can highlight the most significant characteristics of religion in his thought. These characteristics identify the cultural elements within religion, which are emphasized inclusively. Based on the cultural dimension of religious analysis, they play a pivotal role in Geertz's framework. The main elements and characteristics of religion in Geertz's thought can be analyzed as follows:

#### ***a) Emphasis on Meaning***

One of the primary characteristics of religion from Geertz's perspective is its emphasis on meaning. It is as if the entirety of religion is encapsulated in meaning. Therefore, when pondering the question, "What are we talking about when we talk about religion?" the definitive answer is "We are talking about meaning" (Geertz, 2010: 223-224).

Geertz believes that "The interfacing of the disciplines of anthropology (systematics of culture) and theology (systematics of religion) is made possible by the utilization of the category of "meaning" as a hermeneutical key to the understanding of both religion and culture as meaning-systems" (Morgan, 1978: 2).

Also in religious studies "'the move toward meaning" has proved a proper revolution: sweeping, durable, turbulent, and consequential" (Geertz, 1995: 115).

Therefore “a shift toward hermeneutic thinking about it-as a mode of giving particular sense to particular things in particular places (things that happen, things that fail to, things that might)” (Geertz, 1983: 232).

Elaborating on this approach to religion, it can be said that this perspective is entirely grounded in meaning. Geertz perceives religion as a cultural system through which, via symbols and rituals, one can navigate the embedded meanings. According to Geertz, “This approach is neither introspective nor behavioral but semiotic; it is concerned with the meaning which sacred symbols relate to an individual under his being a member of a particular culture, not with the laws of their formation. And for such a purpose, religion, as a system of symbols, has to be considered as a whole. It cannot be reduced to its parts and still be understood” (Geertz, 2010: 95-96).

Also “Geertz has proposed that social scientists study meaning rather than behavior, seek understanding rather than causal laws, and reject mechanistic explanations of the natural science variety in favor of interpretive explanations. He has invited his colleagues to take seriously the possibilities of analogy and metaphor, to consider human activity as text and symbolic action as drama. In other words, he has asked social scientists to rework, if not abandon, their traditional assumptions about the nature of their intellectual enterprise” (Martin, 1993: 3).

Segal, in explaining the difference between Geertz's and Max Weber's perspectives on the orientation towards meaning and Geertz's emphasis on the presentation of meaning in every religion, says: "According to Geertz, unlike Weber, every religion, not just rational religion, emerges to provide meaning. Where Weber sees rational religion as creating a need for meaning and then striving to fulfill it, Geertz sees this need as a pre-existing religion. He does not presuppose any sect or class; it is found in every social system and necessitates that religion manifests wherever it is found; therefore, "challenges of meaning" are challenges that every religion, however "primitive" and hopeful of enduring, must somehow address. Unlike Weber, for Geertz, the need for meaning is innate (fundamental and inherent)” (Segal, 1999).

So in Geertz's view " Culture and religion are both symbol-systems which express humankind's quest for meaning. Therefore, any serious convergence of cultural and religious expressions necessarily centers around the experience of meaning, an experience which is multidimensional and expressed through symbols. Though culture is historically transmitted as patterns of meaning which are embodied in a "complex of symbols," Geertz contends that "meanings can only be 'stored' in symbols," and are not synonymous with the symbols themselves. Positivists attempt to equate "meanings" with symbols themselves, while functionalists attempt to equate the social "functions" of meaning-symbols with meanings themselves. Whereas culture and religion are convergent expressions of meaning, anthropology and theology are disciplines addressed to the systematics of meaning, and as noted above, the analysis of meaning will inevitably involve an analysis of the symbol as meaning bearer” (Morgan, 1978: 9-10).

### *b) Religion, Symbol, and Pattern*

Another fundamental aspect of religion is the symbol and pattern, especially religious symbols. “Geertz defines a symbol as ‘any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception’. Although this definition encompasses ‘events’ and ‘acts’ (as well as anything else that has meaning) Geertz insists, in ‘Religion as a Cultural System’ and his other early essays at any rate, that the symbolic facet of ‘social events’ should be carefully distinguished from their social and psychological ones” (Munson Jr, 1986: 1011 ).

As noted in Geertz's definition of religion, the first element is the symbol. Once again, considering this definition, we can delve into explaining the significance of symbols in Geertz's thought. From Geertz's perspective, religion is “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Geertz, 1973: 90).

So “Religious patterns such as those I have been discussing thus have a double aspect: they are frames of perception, symbolic screens through which experience is interpreted; and they are guides for action, blueprints for conduct” ( Geertz, 1971: 98).

It can be said that symbols, especially religious symbols as interpreted by Geertz—such as a cross that appears disturbingly in the air or is eagerly worn around the neck—are not only tangible formulations of concepts and meanings and concrete embodiments of thoughts, emotions, and beliefs, but they also create specific states and qualities in individuals based on those meanings (see Geertz, 1973: 91). For example, the mysterious gaze at the flame of a lamp in Java fosters self-discipline, with the reward being closeness to the divine (see Geertz, 1973: 95). In fact, according to Geertz, “when we say someone is religious, it means that they are stirred by religion; this is at least part of what we mean by this statement. Another part of the meaning of this statement is that if he is properly aroused, he has the readiness for states that we sometimes categorize under concepts such as “a sense of awe” or “majesty” or “a worshipful feeling”.

Geertz believes that “it is only this public view of symbols as ‘material vehicles of thought’ that can ensure the possibility for uncovering properties of cultural and personal systems through systematic empirical analysis” (Geertz, 1973: 362). In Geertz's view then, his perspective provides anthropology with a way in which to uncover “what is given, what the conceptual structure embodied in the symbolic forms through which persons are perceived actually is” ( Throop, 2013, 364 ).

Also about the phrase in the context of realizing concepts of a general order of existence, it must be said that these symbols (religious symbols), due to the relationship they have with their specific cosmic framework, lead to the distinction between a religious activity and a non-religious one. For example, according to Geertz, “We can say about a person that they have a religious feeling towards the game of golf, but this is not because they play golf with enthusiasm

and on Sundays, but because they consider this game as the symbolic aspect of a transcendent reality” (Geertz, 1973: 98).

Additionally, the symbols that evoke religious inclinations and those that situate them within their specific cosmic framework are unified.

Moreover, it can be said that religious symbols enable individuals to perceive the world with a sense of cosmic assurance and to express their feelings, thereby providing clarity.

In the context of making religious states and motivations realistic, it is important to note that not everyone, even saints, engages with religious symbols at all times. However, the inclinations these symbols evoke have their greatest impact outside the rituals themselves. For example, the influence of a Javanese person's mystical practices extends beyond strictly religious matters, transcending its religious semantic framework and influencing both religious and social systems (see Geertz, 1973, 118-123).

Consequently, in Geertz's terms, it can be said “The inclinations that religious rituals arouse have their greatest impact on people outside the boundaries of these rituals themselves because the individual's perception of the world, once established, reflects sheer reality” (Geertz, 1973: 119). In a general explanation of sacred and religious symbols from Geertz's perspective, it can be said that the function of sacred symbols is to compose the psyches of people (see Geertz, 1973, 89); and also “religious symbols formulate (often implicitly) a fundamental harmony between a particular style of life and a specific metaphysics, and in doing so, each maintains its authority borrowed from the other” (Geertz, 1973: 90). Sacred symbols, intertwined in a complete and organized form, can construct any type of social system (see Geertz, 1973:129) and represent good and evil, positive and negative values (see Geertz, 1973:130), and in their vast diversity, they represent the human outlook on life (see Geertz, 1973, 131). Therefore, according to Geertz, “Our most important claims are always symbols of our general orientation in nature, on earth, in society, and in the work we do: symbols of our worldview and our approach to life... In a primitive society, daily rituals are embedded in routine activities like eating, washing, and making fire ... because there is a constant need to revive tribal morale and understand its cosmic condition. In Christian Europe, the church forces people to comply (with rituals) daily and in some orders hourly, to execute the ultimate concepts even if they are not thinking about accepting them” (Geertz, 2010: 225-226).

#### *c) Religion as Cultural System akin to Text*

Another key characteristic of religion in Geertz's view is that it functions as a cultural system akin to a text that can and should be interpreted. Therefore, it must be read, analyzed, and interpreted to uncover the meanings it encompasses. From his perspective, every ritual—especially religious and spiritual rituals and ceremonies—can and should be approached as a text. By describing and analyzing these rituals, one can delve into the depths of the subject and the system of symbolic actions within it, ultimately reaching the meanings and worldviews they convey.

Thus, through the reading of the text of rituals and sacred symbols, one can access the ontology, cosmology, aesthetics, ethics, and other dimensions of a society. However, it should be noted that "rituals cannot be the place where "religious faith" is formed, but rather the place where it is (literally) performed and affirmed. Again, if we want to understand how this happens, we must not only exercise the rituals themselves, but also the entire spectrum of existing disciplinary and educational activities, the institutional forms of knowledge/theory and practice within which they are shaped, and the possibilities of achieving faith that are defined within them. In other words, from an anthropological perspective in interpretation and explanation, faith should primarily be understood as a description of commitment to prescribed actions and statements, and not as an understanding of a spiritual and mental state beyond them, which is said to be derived from traditions" (Asad, 1983). To further explain and understand this issue, one can consider Geertz's interpretations of various rituals and ceremonies.

Additionally, since religion is a cultural system, examining the relationship between religion and culture reveals that adherence to a religion can familiarize a person with its cultural foundations. In fact, religion often encompasses its cultural contexts. As Geertz notes about becoming Muslim and engaging with Arab culture: "I once described Islam as a religion designed for export and expansion, but what it exports is not just a belief and worldview but to some extent the bedrock from which that belief and worldview have grown. Despite Christianity's flexible divisions and adaptable heavenly texts, more so than Buddhism and without any initial center or fixed holy book, Islam carries its native color and appearance. Certainly, becoming Muslim does not mean becoming Arab; but it does mean entering into a complex, ongoing, and seriously bilateral relationship with Arab culture" (Geertz, 2010: 171).

In a sense, it can be said according to his view that "religion has generally been one of the primary mechanisms through which specific local cultures have historically projected themselves onto a larger global stage. Christianity, especially with the imperialistic evangelization of Christ's religion, gained momentum after the Reformation and brought European views and values to different parts of Asia and Africa, as well as to the New World. Buddhism, a flexible form of Hinduism, transferred aspects of South Asian perceptions to Southeast Asia, China, and even Japan; but Islam has been particularly effective in infusing the tone and temperament of the Near East into texts and contexts far removed from it, and what is more important, in maintaining and strengthening them after their spread" (Geertz, 2010: 170).

In fact, in this perspective, through religion, local cultures are propagated and preserved, continuing their existence on a broader, global level. Therefore, considering this meaning, religion can be understood as encompassing its cultural context, thus also serving as a guide to understanding culture.

#### *d) Description, Analysis, Interpretation*

Another of the primary characteristics of religion in Geertz's perspective is description, interpretation, and analysis... He believes: "Seeing man as a symbol-making, concept-forming, and meaning-seeking animal, in philosophy and social sciences, has opened up an interpretive



approach not only to the analysis of religion in its absolute sense but also to understanding the relationships between religion and values. It seems evident that continuing the interpretation of symbolic activities of religion, art, and ideology, which with some transformation, represent different phenomena from what they appear, is a necessity; this type of understanding attempts to provide an orientation for an organism that cannot live in a world it cannot understand. If, as Kenneth Burke has said, symbols are strategies for dealing with situations, then we must pay more attention to how humans define situations and how they adapt themselves to these situations. Such emphasis does not mean that we should separate beliefs and values from their psycho-biological and socio-cultural contexts and only deal with the realm of 'pure meaning,' but rather implies a greater emphasis on analyzing beliefs and values according to concepts that are constructed and developed to handle symbolic materials" (Geertz, 1973: 140-141). So the "utilization of the category of "meaning" as a hermeneutical key" (Morgan, 1978 :۲).

In analyzing Geertz's perspective, according to the writer of these lines, it can be said that Geertz's particular anthropological view - understanding humans as cultural and social beings whose existence is permeated by the main characteristics of culture, namely meaning and symbol, and in a sense, beings who seek meaning and create symbols - opens the door to an interpretive approach, especially in the field of religious studies. According to this view of humans, two other characteristics, culture and religion, become crystallized. Specifically, religion is seen as a text before the anthropologist that needs to be analyzed, interpreted, and described - of course, under the conditions that Geertz enumerates, conditions detailed in the section on culture. Additionally," When Geertz outright says that he is seeking not just interpretations, or "thick descriptions," but an "interpretive science". He" uses an ethnographic method in cultural anthropology to yield thick descriptions of the observed phenomena. Thick description conveys the idea that the central task of anthropology is interpretation" (Barnett, 2007: 110).

This method is known as thick and thin description method and in it "thick description means to explain these observations in terms of their context" (Barnett, 2007: 109).

Geertz, with his strong emphasis on interpretation, analysis, and description, identifies one of the challenges facing every religion as the occurrence of uninterpretable events within that religion. In explaining the methodology of Balinese religion, he states: "Although the Balinese religion is not methodologically organized, it is not entirely without order. This religion is full of a very distinct and consistent tone; a kind of very serious presentation that only an extensive description can express" (Geertz, 1973: 176).

In discussing the methodology of Balinese religion, Geertz points out that while it may not be very organized methodologically, it is characterized by a distinct and consistent tone. He uses the term "extensive description" to explain what can guide an anthropologist in representing Balinese religion. This observation is revealing for understanding the role of description in Geertz's thought; thus, extensive description and deep analysis are essential elements in examining religion, rituals, and ceremonies.

Moreover, after stating his famous definition of religion, Geertz considers his role as an anthropologist of religion to be one that expands the cultural dimension of "analyzing" religion (see Geertz, 1973: 89). Furthermore, in terms of Geertz's approach to religion and the importance of cultural description and analysis, it can be said that his approach is semantic, emphasizing the significance of concepts embodied in symbols and their flow in life. In such an approach, according to Geertz: "The goal of comparative religious study is (or at least should be) the scientific description of this viewpoint: the interpretation of the wide range of forms in which it appears; the discovery of the forces that create, change, or destroy these forms; and the assessment of their effects, as well as their diversity, on human behavior in everyday life" (Geertz, 1971: 95-96).

One of the most important goals of Geertz's interpretive method is to foster empathy with the natives and to understand each culture from the perspective of its inhabitants.; Because "The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong" (Geertz, 1972: 29).

Also "since anthropologists are concerned with 'the native's point of view' and work in small communities, observing everyday life and studying modes of thought or belief systems. Indeed, a number of historians practicing these approaches would describe themselves as historical anthropologists, and introduce their work with references to Evans-Pritchard, to Victor Turner or, most often, to Clifford Geertz" (Kuper, 2004: 631).

Considering this evidence, it appears that one of the primary characteristics of religion in Geertz's thought is description, analysis, and interpretation.

### **Importance and Place of Religion in Geertz's Interpretive Anthropology**

In this section, we address the significance and position of religion in Geertz's interpretive anthropology. Given that the primary task of an anthropologist is, naturally, to understand humans, we answer the question of what is the importance and position of religion in Geertz's anthropology. What is the relationship between religion and anthropology, and why do religion, rituals, and sacred symbols play such a crucial role in his anthropology?

To address these questions, we must acknowledge Geertz's position as one of the most important anthropologists and exegetical theologians. "Clifford Geertz is acclaimed today to be one of the most important theorists in the anthropology of religion. He has approached the subject-matter of religion from the perspective of a humanist seeking to come to an analytical understanding of the nature of culture as an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in a complex of symbol-systems. This approach, i.e., defining anthropology as a science of meaning-analysis, nurtures the study of culture as a meaning-system. Religion, too, says Geertz, is a cultural system and necessarily conveys meaning. Therefore, both culture and religion are meaning-systems and, we can conclude, both anthropology and theology attempt to analyze systematically these meaning-systems" (Morgan, 1978: 2).

In examining the place and importance of religion, particularly in Geertz's interpretive anthropology, we should first seek its significance in the reasons outlined for the importance of culture to anthropologists. "As a cultural anthropologist, Geertz defines religion as a cultural system. In other words, he examines religion in relation to the particular social context in and through which religious phenomena are manifest. He sought to develop "the cultural dimension of religious analysis." Geertz argues that individuals belong to a cultural group, which shares a system of concepts and symbols in terms of which individuals understand the fundamental nature of reality. By examining the cultural aspects of religion, Geertz is able to recognize the social functions of religion without utterly reducing religion to society's concerns" (Barnett, 2007: 67-68).

In Geertz's perspective, religion is a type of cultural system. However, from another angle based on his explanation, one can say: "The importance of religion lies in its ability, on the one hand, to act as a source of general and specific concepts about the world, the self, and their relationships (in terms of modeling something) for an individual or group, and on the other hand, to create deeply rooted and still distinct "mental" inclinations (as a model aspect for something) for the individual or group. It is from these cultural functions that the social and psychological functions of religion originate. Religious concepts extend beyond their specific supernatural realms to provide a framework for general thought, allowing them to give meaningful form to a wide range of intellectual, emotional, and ethical experiences" (Geertz, 1973: 123).

As mentioned, the pivotal significance of religion in anthropological studies from Geertz's perspective lies in its ability to provide a framework for general thought and to imbue meaning. Religious beliefs can be viewed as both a scale for interpreting psychological and social processes and a pattern for shaping and defining aspects of these processes.

Also in Geertz's opinion "the cultural dimensions of religious analysis" was elevated (Williams, 2005: 99).

Religion, like culture, is significant for anthropology in epistemological, teleological, and duty-based aspects. In the realm of epistemology, religion as a cultural system can serve as a gateway to understanding humanity, human societies, and human culture. Sacred rituals, religious symbols, and various forms of religious functioning provide a transparent representation of beliefs and values, becoming essential tools for anthropologists in their quest to understand humanity.

Furthermore, in the realm of teleology, if religion and sacred rituals are viewed as texts to be read, they can contribute to anthropological goals, including expanding the scope of human discourse and providing substantial descriptions—particularly the aim of Geertz's anthropology. This approach significantly aids in approximating the objectives of anthropology.

In terms of duty, religion as a text to be read holds particular importance in fulfilling the anthropological task from Geertz's perspective, which involves reading, describing, analyzing, and interpreting deeply.

However, when explaining the distinctive aspects and special importance of religion compared to other cultural domains, it can be said that religion, rituals, and sacred symbols—due to their strong integrative qualities and the depth of belief they foster—can provide more substantial, robust, and assertive outcomes for anthropologists in the field.

### **Analysis of Geertz's Cultural Approach in Semiotics of Religion**

“In the interpretive approach, human beings are not subjected to tests like in the positivist framework. There is no attempt to derive knowledge about humans through logical cause-and-effect relationships. Instead, this approach aims to interpret cultures and enhance our understanding of humanity” (Zarvani & Zarei: 2024).

“The origin of anthropology based on positivist epistemology is fundamentally different from that of interpretive anthropology, which is hermeneutic in nature and entails different methodological requirements” (Zarvani & Zarei: 2024).

Interpretive anthropologists hold a distinct view on the nature of social and human sciences, considering their scientific foundations to be different from empirical bases. As Geertz says “Whether this is making the social sciences less scientific or humanistic study more so (or, as I believe, altering our view, never very stable anyway, of what counts as science) is not altogether clear and perhaps not altogether important. But that it is changing the character of both is clear and important-and discomposing” (Geertz, 1983: 8).

“An interpretive anthropologist, in order to uncover the meanings behind symbols, employs their knowledge to reach an understanding of their own perceptions. In this perspective, humans are not mere objects among objects; rather, they are social beings with complex relationships situated in specific historical moments, encompassing all the sensitivities and intricacies of human existence. Science cannot adequately address such entities by establishing laws and examining cause-and-effect relationships for explanatory purposes. Instead, the anthropologist views the primitive person and their surrounding relationships as a text, seeking to understand something beyond mere appearances” (Zarvani & Zarei, 2024).

“According to the aforementioned points, a substantive and deep distinction emerges between the two types of approaches, highlighting the limitations anthropology faces when confined by positivist assumptions. The interpretive anthropology approach is seen as a way out of the dogmatism of its time” (Zarvani & Zarei, 2024).

In analyzing the effects of the interpretive and cultural approach to religion, it becomes evident that understanding religion within this framework is centered on modern subjectivity, developing within the context of contemporary thought. While it occupies a leading position, it also engages with postmodern phenomenological and hermeneutic perspectives. Therefore, the interpretive and cultural approach to religion is of special importance, guiding modern

humanity to reflect on our relationship with religion and the sacred. This crystallization of the cultural approach represents a transition from modern views, positioning us at the threshold of the future of religion. Additionally, the cultural approach seeks to transcend both positivism and functionalism while navigating the complexities associated with these paradigms.

In a sense, it can be said “in an attempt to blaze a humanistic path between positivism and functionalism, Geertz has put forth what is increasingly being considered the most useful definition of religion to-date in the social sciences” (Morgan, 1978: 5).

Also he “within his definitional construct Geertz stands head and shoulders above recent efforts to understand religion by the positivists and functionalists. With his efforts, the way is truly open for an honest dialogue between the social scientists and theologians” (Morgan, 1978: 84 ).

In this approach, religion is considered a form of culture. However, understanding religion solely through the lens of culture can lead to a reduction of its entire identity and truth to cultural factors, resulting in a subjective understanding. From this perspective, religion may not be seen as a sublime and sacred entity; rather, it is reduced to a mere object understood through the subjective lens of culture, with only some dimensions being analyzed.

Additionally, the interpretive approach to religion is grounded in philosophical principles and hermeneutic epistemology. By viewing culture as a text and emphasizing the inner aspects of human experience, this approach seeks to approximate the attitudes of the natives regarding religion and culture. This movement aligns with phenomenology and hermeneutics in the field of religious studies, focusing on the understanding of religion through the lens of the human subject. It reflects a subject-centered approach in an era of decline.

Geertz adopts an interpretivist stance toward culture and “social action, striving to integrate the practical, experiential, and interpretive aspects of his semiotics of culture” (Throop, 2013 : 7 ) . He perceives religion as a cultural system understood through a network of symbols that create enduring moods and motivations in humans. However, this perspective can overlook the sublime and sacred elements within religions, focusing instead on attributes like worship, piety, independence, courage, and self-discipline, which arise from human states and motivations. In the phenomenological and hermeneutic approach, there is an effort to understand these motivations within the cultural context and to engage with the views and thoughts of different religions.

Finally, regarding the effects and importance of the cultural approach to religion, it can be viewed within the context of modern thought, particularly as a culmination of the modern period associated with the decline of positivism. While it retains a functionalist perspective, it also seeks to move beyond that framework. Therefore, this approach appears poised to lead the way in future religious studies, offering insights that can illuminate our understanding of religion in the modern era and open new horizons for the future.

## Conclusion

Clifford Geertz, as one of the prominent cultural anthropologists, expands his perspective in interpretive anthropology based on his definitions of religion and culture. He places significant emphasis on symbols and meaning, highlighting the importance of fieldwork, understanding meaning, description, and interpretation. According to Geertz's semiotics of culture, the central axis of his perspective is the emphasis on uncovering implicit meanings in symbols and symbolic patterns, allowing culture to be read, interpreted, explicated, and analyzed like a text.

Geertz views religion as a cultural system, where the interpretation of its concepts and understanding of its principles falls under his overarching view of culture. This article emphasizes the continuous interplay between culture and religion in Geertz's thought, revealing that both share similar characteristics in his perspective.

In his concise definition of religion, which is rooted in his conception of culture, Geertz describes religion as a system of symbols and cultural meanings, where cultural features are defined and elaborated. The key elements of religion in Geertz's thought emphasize meaning, symbols, and patterns, allowing religion to be understood, interpreted, and analyzed in a cultural context, much like a text.

In discussing the importance and effects of the cultural approach to religion, understanding religion as a cultural system reflects its maturation within the central-subject modern era. This approach critiques the modern subject through hermeneutic principles and postmodern phenomenology while also challenging positivism. Consequently, exploring this framework can illuminate the methods of studying religion in the modern period and open new horizons for the future of religious studies. This topic is one of significant importance for future research and deserves careful consideration and analysis.

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## بررسی رویکرد فرهنگی کلیفورد گیرتز در معناشناسی دین

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### چکیده

کلیفورد گیرتز - از برجسته‌ترین نمایندگان رویکرد تفسیری به دین و فرهنگ - یکی از تأثیرگذارترین انسان‌شناسان فرهنگی قرن بیستم آمریکا است. رهیافت تفسیری گیرتز بر دین و فرهنگ از مهم‌ترین رویکردها در دوران پست مدرن به شمار می‌آید. مقاله حاضر با روش توصیفی-تحلیلی و در مواردی تحلیل محتوایی ضمن ارائه تصویری اجمالی از معنای فرهنگ از منظر گیرتز و شاخصه‌های آن به ارائه تصویری صحیح، جامع و کامل از آرای وی پیرامون دین پرداخته و نشان داده است که از منظر گیرتز دین به مثابه یک نظام فرهنگی است و در معنا، شاخصه‌ها و جایگاه و اهمیت انسان‌شناسانه نسبتی پیوسته با فرهنگ دارد. فرهنگ و دین در اندیشه گیرتز اموری به هم پیوسته و در نسبتی ناگسستی با یکدیگر هستند. گیرتز بر این باور است که برای فهم فرهنگ می‌بایست به سراغ نمادها رفت، اموری مثل مناسک و فعالیت‌های دینی از جمله نمادها محسوب می‌شوند. گیرتز دین را امری پیشینی و جزئی از فرهنگ جامعه می‌داند که وجود مناسک و اعتقادات فراوان آن را امری نمادین کرده است. یکی از مفاهیم مهم در اندیشه گیرتز معانی است به این دلیل که معانی در سازوکاری به هم پیوسته و مرتبط نظامی را تشکیل می‌دهند که این نظام همان فرهنگ است. معنا امری مخفی است که از طریق نمادها منتقل می‌شود.

**کلیدواژگان:** دین، فرهنگ، کلیفورد گیرتز، معنا، نماد، تفسیر.

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