

WRAP Exams · wrapexams.com

Prelims PYQ, Mains model answers, and copy evaluation. Write to the desk for this paper, a doubt, or the AI waitlist.

ask@wrapexams.com · +91 85951 84903 · wrapexams.com

Q3(b)

How did Clifford Geertz look at religion. Differentiate between anthropological and psychological approaches to the study of religion.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Anthropology GS 1 · 15 marks · Symbolic and interpretive theories (Turner, Schneider and Geertz)

(h) Symbolic and interpretive theories (Turner, Schneider and Geertz)

Core demand of the question

- How did Clifford Geertz look at religion?
- Differentiate between anthropological and psychological approaches to the study of religion
- Write at 15-mark length

Revision summary

Geertz defined **religion as a cultural system** of symbols that found moods and motivations in a factual-feeling order.

Thick description of public ritual is his method, as in Bali and Java.

Anthropological approaches treat the sacred as social, from **Durkheim** to **Evans-Pritchard** and Turner.

Psychological approaches treat experience, projection, and mental architecture, from James and Freud onward.

Tylor's animism is intellectualist psychology in anthropological dress.

Geertz sides with public meaning, not with private psyche as the starting point.

Introduction

Clifford Geertz treated religion as a public system of symbols, not as a private feeling. That stance is anthropological, and it differs from psychological approaches that start inside the mind.

Body

Geertz on religion

- In the essay **Religion as a Cultural System**, collected in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Geertz defines religion as a system of symbols that establishes powerful moods and motivations by clothing a picture of order with an aura of factuality.
- Those moods then seem uniquely realistic, which is why a ritual is not a metaphor the believer sees through.
- **Thick description is the method: the ethnographer reads the public code, as in a Javanese or Balinese rite, the way Geertz read the Balinese cockfight as a story people tell themselves.**

- Models of reality and models for action meet in sacred symbols, so cosmology and ethics are one enacted web.
- Geertz is close to **Max Weber** on meaning and far from a search for the origin of gods in a single psychic error.

Anthropological approaches

- **Anthropology treats religion as social and public:** **Émile Durkheim** in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* made the sacred a figure of the group, illustrated by Australian totemism.
- **Bronislaw Malinowski** at the Trobriands treated magic and ritual as practical anxiety-management in gardening and canoe travel, still a social institution.
- **E. E. Evans-Pritchard** on **Nuer** religion and Azande witchcraft showed coherent local thought, not childish mentality.
- **Victor Turner** on **Ndembu** ritual treated symbols as operators in social drama, which complements Geertz's textual reading.
- The unit is the rite, the congregation, the symbol, and the local cosmos.

Psychological approaches

- **Psychology starts with the individual mind:** **William James** in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* classified conversion, saintliness, and mysticism as personal states.
- **Sigmund Freud** in *Totem and Taboo* and later *The Future of an Illusion* read gods as projections of the father and ritual as compulsion.
- Culture-and-personality work, and later cognitive anthropology of modules and hyperactive agency, also explain belief from mental architecture first.
- **E. B. Tylor's** intellectualist animism is a borderline case: it is a theory of error in the mind, even though Tylor wrote as an anthropologist.

The difference

- Anthropology asks what a symbol does in public life and how a group holds a cosmos.
- Psychology asks what a belief does in a nervous system or a biography.
- Geertz insisted that meaning is public, which is why a wink is not a twitch, and why religion is not exhausted by private emotion.

Flow diagram

Geertz -> Public symbols
 Public symbols -> Moods and cosmos
 Anthropological -> Durkheim Turner Evans-Pritchard
 Psychological -> James Freud cognition
 Geertz -> Anthropological

Conclusion

Geertz looked at **religion as a cultural system** of symbols that make a cosmos feel uniquely real. Anthropological approaches read that public web; psychological approaches read inner states, and the two can meet only after each has kept its unit of study.

Facts & figures

Religion as a Cultural System

Geertz's definition of religion as symbols, moods, motivations, and an aura of factuality.

Thick description

Interpretive method that recovers the public code of an action, not extra adjectives.

Durkheim

The sacred is the social group in totemic form; religion is not a private invention.

William James

Classic psychological study of personal religious experience, conversion, and mysticism.

Evans-Pritchard

Nuer religion and Azande witchcraft as coherent public thought systems.

WRAP Exams · Write. Read. Analyse. Practice. · <https://wrapexams.com/upsc/mains-answers/anthropology-gs-1/2023/how-did-clifford-geertz-look-at-religion-differentiate-between-anthropological-and-psychological-approaches-to-the-study-of-religion/> · ask@wrapexams.com · wrapexams.com