

# Intellectualist and Symbolist accounts of religious beliefs and practice

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## Introduction

An account of the relation between belief and practice is inseparable from a general theory of religion and religious discourse. Rejection of the one time popular, but now more or less defunct, non-realist position of people like D.Z. Phillips (1965, 1970), Don Cupitt (1980, 1985), and indeed Wittgenstein (1972), leaves contemporary theorists in anthropology and the “history of religions” with basically the vastly different “literalist” and “symbolist” analyses of religion (i.e. its ritual and discourse, belief and practice) from which to choose.<sup>1</sup> “Literalism” and “symbolism” are the theoretical frameworks in which their inquiry must explicitly or implicitly be set.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that historians of religion are rarely explicit about their theoretical commitments, that many fail to recognise their implicit commitments, and that “theory” frequently appears as, and is increasingly recognised to be, exactly what it is—namely, ‘history of religions’ (triumphant) nemesis—in no way changes the situation. Of course, some historians of religion still follow fideistic philosophers and anthropologists of the 1960s and 70s who claim that understanding and interpretation require participation, and that interpretation from the “outside,” is theoretically impossible and not just practically problematic. Ordinarily, when historians of religion and others in religious studies adopt such views they are theoretically grounded in an attenuated sense, if at all.<sup>3</sup>

This paper critically appraises John Skorupski’s (1976) influential defence of Intellectualism. I shall argue that his dismissal of symbolist approaches is more theoretically radical than he recognises. It rejects outright some of the very foundations and staples of contemporary anthropology in, for example, Durkheim (1965). His brief and sketchy armchair argument for the complete rejection of the symbolist approach is examined. What this analysis reveals is that Skorupski’s defence of intellectualism is set, and can only be set, in the context of a problematically naive understanding of the nature and function of religion.

An accurate and sufficiently detailed account of the intellectualist and symbolist positions has to be given before Skorupski’s positive thesis can be examined. Since I know of no better summary exposition of these than Skorupski’s, I begin by closely following it. I do, however, claim that Skorupski seriously misrepresents the symbolist position and its adherents’ theoretical commitments. His criticism and rejection of

the symbolist approach in favour of intellectualism is based on such misunderstanding.

Although the symbolist/intellectualist debate is no longer in the forefront of theoretical anthropology, the problem of interpreting and understanding the meaning and function of ritual, and the relationship between belief and practice, is still of concern. Since interpreting ritual is crucial to understanding religious belief and practice from theoretical, descriptive and practical perspectives, explaining various aspects of ritual remains a significant part of the history of religions.

It is remarkable that recent prominent analyses of ritual in religious studies (Lawson and McCauley 1990, 1993) seem oblivious to the nature, meaning, and function of ritual, as well as to the history or scope of anthropological analyses of ritual. The symbolist/intellectualist debate about the interpretation of ritual by no means tells the entire story of ritual, but it is an important part of that story, and it highlights radically different explanations of ritual. The question of whether, and when, to interpret ritual symbolically or literally is still central, and will always be central, to the history of religions, and (I dare say) to anthropology.

This essay is not, however, about contemporary anthropological approaches to the study of ritual, let alone the history of theory about ritual. It is an examination of two fundamentally different analyses of the nature of ritual in terms of quite different accounts of the nature and function of religion. Nevertheless, from both a religious studies (especially a history of religions) and an anthropological point of view, the issue of whether, and when, to interpret ritual from some type of symbolist as opposed to literalist position, is as pertinent now as it was when anthropologists discussed it in earnest. Contrary to what might first appear to be the case, intellectualist and symbolist analyses are not always incompatible, and perhaps not even generally incompatible. It is plausible to see them as complementary.

The concerns of contemporary anthropology about ritual and religion have clearly shifted. But as I see it, this does nothing to render the intellectualist/symbolist debate, or the more general question of the meaning of ritual, moot. Whether explicit or implicit, contemporary discussion of ritual presupposes some account of the meaning of ritual, and often the accounts given do not stray too far from the traditional symbolist accounts of social (Durkheimian) or cultural (Geertzian) anthropology.<sup>4</sup> Dirks (1994: 483, 501) says, "Ritual is not only principally about order, it is often the domain in which our sociological conception of society is properly realised. In this view, social relations are displayed and renewed and the hierarchical forms underlying social relations confirmed and strengthened by ritual .... even in the heart of anthropology, ritual now seems to be as much about contest and struggle as about power and order." Symbolists (*qua* symbolists) could happily live with that. It is a far cry, as we shall see, from the intellectualism that Skorupski (35) mistakenly claims anthropologists ordinarily accept.

Ritual continues to play an important role in contemporary anthropology's focus on practice and how ritual as a form of practice "reproduces the system," although the focus of "the newer practice approaches... place greater emphasis on

the practices of ordinary living” (Ortner: 398). Furthermore, the view of American symbolic anthropologists of the sixties and seventies “that ritual was one of the primary matrices for the reproduction of consciousness,” while not universally accepted (nothing is) remains a staple view of contemporary anthropology.

## I. The Positions Explained

### (a) *Intellectualism and Literalism*

“Intellectualism” gives an account of the origin and persistence of “traditional” religion, religion in cultures “insulated from the explosion of scientific knowledge, [and] the resulting leap in men’s ability, to control their natural environment” (Skorupski: 2). Both “literalism” and “intellectualism” distinguish between traditional and modern religion, and as Skorupski presents it, intellectualism is basically the pre-eminent form of a slightly more inclusive “literalism.”

On the intellectualist view traditional religion pre-eminently takes the form of a cosmology whose basic explanatory category is that of *agency*; its pantheon of gods and spirits ... can be invoked to explain why this rather than that event occurred; and it affords a means by which men, through influencing the will of the gods, can themselves hope to influence the course of events. Modern religion, on the other hand, has relinquished the explanation and control of nature to science, and restricts itself to other functions ... which religion has either always had or has gradually acquired. Religious--and also magical--activities in traditional societies ... are ... intended ways of bringing about desired events or avoiding feared ones; and the ideas which give them point are to be taken literally as cosmological in character. What is more--and here we come to the distinctive feature of the intellectualist view--the explanation ... of this cosmological emphasis is taken to be that traditional religious thought originates and persists as an attempt ... to explain and control the natural environment. (2)

Intellectualism [develops] a complete pattern of explanation ... a theory ... whose domain of reference goes beyond what is given in experience ... traditional systems of thought originate and persist as ... ‘transcendental hypotheses.’ (12)

In describing the conception of religion and magic outlined below as “intellectualist,” Skorupski follows established usage. According to Skorupski, (244n.1) I.C. Jarvie and “particularly” W.R.G. Horton “would be willing to go farthest along the intellectualist path described.” Earlier intellectualists include E.B. Tylor and J.G. Frazer. Intellectualism distinguishes between magic and religion in “primitive” societies but sees them as functioning similarly. Thus, they talk about “magico-religious” beliefs. For convenience, I refer to the “religious” rather than the “magico-religious.”

The intellectualist approach gives a *literal* as opposed to symbolic account of

the meaning of religious belief and practice. Religious beliefs literally refer to and are about gods or the world, and religious practice is explained instrumentally by those beliefs. But literalism does not entail intellectualism. One can be a literalist and reject the “distinctive intellectualist thesis”—its account of the origin and persistence of religious beliefs in terms of explanation and control. (This account of the origin of religion is basically compatible with Hume’s and Freud’s among others.)

Skorupski (9) explains the intellectualist programme (e.g., E.B. Tylor and J.G. Frazer) as having four stages. “Why do people in certain cultures perform certain types of *actions*? The answer ... [imputes] *beliefs* to the actors, which ... give an understandable rationale for doing them. How do the actors first acquire these beliefs? ... by being socialised into them. Why do these beliefs go on being held? ... [because of] attitudinal and structural blocks to their falsification. Finally, Stage IV ... How did these beliefs originate in the first place? ... out of a need to understand and control the natural environment—a function which they still fulfil.” Stage IV, contains the “distinctive intellectualist thesis,” which is not entailed by I-III. Skorupski (11) calls “the broader consensus” which leaves open the question of origin in Stage IV “*literalism*.” Intellectualism entails literalism but not vice versa. Nevertheless, most of the intellectualist programme is accepted by literalists, and Skorupski describes the “obvious economy and elegance in going on to” accept the “distinctive intellectualist thesis” once literalism is accepted. He describes intellectualism as “logically complete”; “... if one grants the sequence in which its questions are raised, one must all also grant that they are all the questions at this level of enquiry” (9-10).

Skorupski (10-11) continues: “one can perfectly well accept (a) that traditional religious beliefs are to be interpreted at face value as beliefs about the *natural* world ... (b) that they are deployed for the purposes of [explanation and control] ... and yet still believe [c] that these goals are not the only ones to be grasped if traditional religious thought is to be understood—that there are important needs and preoccupations, significantly different from the activist, this-worldly ones of explanation and control, which from the first shape and form the content of religious thought.” Along with (a) and (b) the intellectualist can accept [c], that religion is concerned with other “needs and preoccupations” [i.e., other than explaining and controlling the natural environment] that must be “grasped” if religion is to be understood. Intellectualism’s distinctive thesis does not involve a denial that traditional religion has additional functions and concerns—ones in common perhaps with modern religion. The programme would be patently implausible if it did deny this. The psycho-sociological explanations of religion that literalists and intellectualists give do not generally deny but account for religion’s others concerns.

If intellectualism fails, it is not because it lacks a sufficiently broad notion of how religion functions. Instead, it fails either because its thesis about the origin of religion is wrong, or because *literalism* is an essential part of it. It is the literalist aspect of intellectualism that “symbolist” approaches claim is fundamentally mistaken. It is not intellectualism but literalism that is basically opposed to the

symbolist approach to explaining religious belief and practice.

(b) *Symbolism*

“Symbolists” explain religious belief and practice as symbolically representing social relations and other ideas in their cultures. The representations serve various purposes such as contributing to a society’s cohesiveness by helping to legitimise the political and social *status quo*. They do so through the affective influence of these representative rituals. Symbolists believe, “(1) that ritual *actions* in some sense express the social order, though ritual beliefs are posterior rationalisations, not necessarily themselves symbolic; (2) that ritual ... functions in the *maintenance* of the social order; and (3) the Durkheimian thesis, that ritual actions and beliefs belong to a system of symbolic discourse, the true *referents* of which are to be found in the social order” (Skorupski: 24). There is almost no agreement between symbolism and intellectualism.

The symbolist approach ... sees a difference between science and religion or magic as forms of life--a difference in the concerns, even the logic, of the two kinds of activity ... beliefs and rituals ... constitute a symbolic system which describes the pattern of social relations in the society ... it distinguishes between the literal meaning of religious and magical discourse and the perhaps overtly intended meaning of religious or magical actions on the one hand, and their symbolic meaning ... Explaining ... ritual ... is a matter of coming to understand what is conveyed, in the performance of such rituals, of the system of social relationships, actual and ideal, in that society. It consists of ‘decoding ritual messages’ by ... relating them to social structures; it has little to do with searching for the causes which produced the overt, surface form of ritual beliefs. (Skorupski: 18)

For the symbolist religion is not a system of thought and action comparable to scientific theory-- albeit mistaken. Since the symbolist denies that traditional religion can be understood as pseudoscience, she cannot claim that modern religion is to be distinguished from traditional religion in relinquishing the goals of explanation and control to real science. (Although the symbolist denies that religion can be understood as a means of explaining and controlling nature, most symbolists allow that religion sometimes functions to explain and control.)

Skorupski (11-13) further contrasts the symbolist and literalist as follows:

Whereas the literalist emphasis is unambiguously on explaining magico-religious *actions* in terms of the beliefs which give them their point, and then going on to a further and independent explanation of the beliefs, our alternative theorist ... suggest[s] that it is the ‘rite’ which needs to be seen as ‘prior’ to ‘the belief’ ... [T]he unit of significance is the *action* ... behaviour whose meaning needs to be understood by grasping the purposes and ideas expressed in it ... Whether or not it [the symbolist] grants that there *is* a level at which rituals ... are instrumental it claims that at the level at which understanding of them is to be sought they are not instrumental at all; they must be grasped as symbolic ... if

the beliefs which form the background of ritual ... are ... more than mere rationalisations -- if, that is, their link with ritual actions is to be preserved as the deeper level of significance -- then they too must be understood as symbolically or metaphorically expressed.<sup>5</sup>

Although it may seem plausible to suppose the symbolist analysis of a particular belief/ritual complex correct in some cases and a literalist account right in others, Skorupski appears to deny that the symbolist approach (e.g., Durkheim's) is ever the right one.

## II. Skorupski's Account Examined

Durkheim's thesis is that "the domain symbolically represented in ritual practice and belief is social reality" (Skorupski: 23). Skorupski claims "the Durkheimian thesis results from combining positivism with an anthropocentric conception of religion" (31). Even if Skorupski is correct in claiming that Durkheim's basic thesis involves a commitment to positivism, this is not true of the symbolist approach *per se*. Social anthropologists with no such commitment (e.g., Clifford Geertz) accept Durkheim's thesis, in some cases, on empirical grounds. I doubt Durkheim's thesis is based on positivism to the extent Skorupski claims it is, despite the support he finds in what Durkheim says about the "science of religion" and its need to analyse only what is observable. Apart from a commitment he may have to positivism, Durkheim defends his theory on empirical grounds.

Skorupski distinguishes between anthropocentric and cosmocentric symbolist analysis, and rejects them both. Anthropocentric symbolists claim that primitive religions' "symbolically expressed subject" is society. For cosmocentric symbolists "what was symbolised ... were natural forces and natural phenomena" (66; cf. 53-67). He thinks symbolist theories can be correct only if they do not conflict with literalist explanations. He says (51-52), "So long as the symbolist level of ritual and belief could be thought of as standing in some empirical relationship to the actions and expressed beliefs of the people studied, whether historically, unconsciously, or as an unreflectively misconstrued level of meaning, it was possible, in principle to see what kind of relevance the symbolist approach had to the project of explaining *why it is* that people have magical or religious beliefs and institutions." For some reason Skorupski does not think a symbolist account of the *function* of ritual can count as an explanation of "why it is" that people have religious beliefs. In Geertz's (1973) account, *or Durkheim's*, the function of religion does explain this. At any rate, the symbolist level of ritual *usually is* thought of as standing in an empirical relationship to the actions expressed (e.g., Durkheim or Freud).

Consider Skorupski's (34-35) principal argument for rejecting the symbolist approach.

If the symbolist account is the right one ... then to talk of gods and spirits is to

make symbolic reference to social groups ... When a man says 'The crown is mighty in the land, I fear it,' he is making not a literal reference to the crown, but a symbolically expressed reference ... the object of his fear is not the crown, but the powers of the institution of monarchy... The Durkheimian thesis invites us to assimilate religious discourse to such examples as this, so that religious emotions and attitudes are emotions and attitudes towards gods and spirits *only* in the sense in which the fear is fear of the crown. If it is right in this, then pointing that fact out should make no fundamental difference to the beliefs and feelings of the religious. But Durkheim is clearly correct in thinking that acceptance of his account by religious believers could not, to put it minimally, fail to affect religious life.

Skorupski claims that if Durkheim's analysis is correct "then pointing that fact out should make no fundamental difference to the beliefs and feelings of the religious." He gives no argument to support his claim, and contrary to Skorupski's view it is clear why it *should* make a fundamental difference and why Durkheim recognises this. For Durkheim, the symbolically expressed reference in the case of the crown is crucially different, from that in religious discourse. The fact that they are both cases of "symbolically expressed reference" is not a reason to equate them. In the case of the "crown" the speaker is aware of the symbol. Her beliefs and feelings will not be affected by a literal account of what she actually fears--and she may be able to explain it herself. But in the case of the believer the symbolically expressed reference is something the believer is not aware of in the same way. Durkheim does not think that ritual participants can give an account of the symbolic referents of their rituals. If believers did therefore accept Durkheim's account, there is reason to suppose their beliefs and feelings would change. Beliefs and feelings about the social groups to which religious discourse makes symbolic reference are not at all the same as beliefs and feelings about those groups when (and if) they are referred to literally. Durkheim certainly does not deny this.

Thus, it is wrong to claim "that religious emotions and attitudes are emotions and attitudes towards gods and spirits *only* in the sense in which the fear is fear of the crown," and Skorupski's simple argument fails. Symbolist analyses cannot be dismissed in all cases for the reason he gives. In the end, what Skorupski is objecting to is a rarefied version of the symbolist approach--one that few, if any, symbolists hold. Furthermore, the extent to which symbolists accept aspects of literalism is not taken by them to undermine what they see as a fundamentally symbolist approach.

In defending literalism against the "symbolist approach" Skorupski is not suggesting there is no need to interpret symbols. Analysis of symbols is part of an acceptable literalist approach. Aspects of ritual, ceremony, and some kinds of interaction between people are neither possible nor understandable without symbolisation.

When anthropologists, studying various cultures from widely differing theoretical perspectives, have given a descriptive analysis of how magico-religious beliefs

are actually understood by people within those traditions, the account that invariably emerges is 'literalist'... *Within this framework there is usually a great deal of explicit symbolism and allegory ... but the symbolism is religious ... it is given its meaning by the framework of literally accepted transcendental belief--and not sociological.* (35, my emphasis)

Although thought and action ... are linked, the idea that a degree of sensitivity to symbolism is especially necessary in the understanding of ritual behaviour *can* legitimately be separated from an ultimately philosophical concern with what basic categories--literalist or symbolist, realist or anti-realist--are appropriate for the understanding of traditional modes of thought ... rituals might turn out to have a dimension of symbolic meaning consistent with a realist and literalist approach to the framework of ideas which informs them. (70)

Of course, as Skorupski realises, symbolists like Durkheim do not deny people give literalist accounts of their beliefs. They simply claim this does not show that the literalist explanations believers give are the correct ones.

However, Skorupski fails to recognise that symbolists *need not and do not* deny that *along with* explicit symbolism and allegory, the domain they claim is symbolically represented in ritual practice and belief (i.e. social reality) is *also*, as Skorupski says, "given its meaning by the framework of literally accepted transcendental belief." But on empirical and theoretical grounds, they disagree that its meaning is not also fundamentally sociological while set in the framework of literally accepted transcendental belief. Symbolists claim that the domain symbolically represented in ritual practice and belief is basically sociological (i.e., social reality). But this in no way entails that symbolists must deny that such a domain is "given its meaning by the framework of literally accepted transcendental belief"--or in the context of such a framework. Instead symbolists stress that just such an interpretive framework, along with empirical observation and theory, is essential to giving the accounts of social reality they claim are symbolically represented in ritual practice and belief.

Despite his stress on the significance of symbol for understanding religion, Skorupski rejects the symbolist approach in *toto*--an approach that has been a staple of anthropological analysis since Durkheim. The literalist approach he defends leaves plenty of room for symbols but not an inch for symbolists.

### **III. Conclusion: Skorupski, Contemporary Anthropology, and Religion**

Contrast Skorupski's view with that of Geertz who takes symbolists, at least sometimes, to be *incontrovertibly* and *indubitably* correct. Geertz (88) says, "Yet one more meticulous case in point for such well-established propositions as that



ancestor worship supports the jural authority of elders, that initiation rites are means for the establishment of sexual identity and adult status, that ritual groupings reflect political oppositions, or that myths provide charters for social institutions and rationalisations of social privilege, may well convince a great many people ... that anthropologists are, like theologians, firmly dedicated to proving the indubitable.”<sup>66</sup> I take it that what Geertz refers to here as “indubitable” includes, in some instances at last, the Durkheimian thesis “that ritual actions and beliefs belong to a system of symbolic discourse, the true *referents* of which are to be found in the social order” (Skorupski:24).

I am quoting Geertz somewhat out of context here. Geertz is expressing doubts as to the ability of anthropology to “regenerate itself” by more variations on such well-established themes, such as the proposition that ancestor worship supports the authority of the elders. He regards these as truisms and sees them as indubitable and established beyond question. In context, his point is that such truisms are not going to do anything to further anthropological knowledge. I understand why either variations on such themes, or utilising such truisms to further understand and interpret aspects of ritual and other religious practice cannot further anthropological *theory*, but I fail to see why they cannot produce anthropological knowledge. Indeed, I do not see how they can fail to produce such knowledge. However, the quotation clearly reveals that Geertz subscribes to a (cultural) version of what is referred to throughout as a “symbolist” position. And not only does he subscribe to such a symbolist position, but regards it as indubitably correct. Furthermore, despite contemporary anthropology’s relative lack of concern with the symbolist/literalist debate, contemporary anthropology basically agrees with Geertz on this particular point (cf. Dirks; Ortner). What this claim to the “indubitability” of some version of the symbolist position does is to highlight the extraordinarily radical nature of Skorupski’s defence of “intellectualism.” He is, after all, rejecting what Geertz, Dirks, Ortner, and others, see as indubitable. His view is a throwback to the naive “error view” of religion.

I am not putting Geertz’s remark forward as an argument from authority against Skorupski’s rejection of the symbolist thesis. Nevertheless, while it does not prove Skorupski wrong in rejecting the symbolist approach, social theorists, social anthropologists, philosophers, and those in comparative religion (i.e. Skorupski’s audience) should be wary of a thesis that wholly excludes interpretations that many anthropologists, etc. with various theoretical perspectives that are often grounded in wide ranges of empirical investigation regard as conclusively established. Skorupski’s exclusive reliance on literalism and complete rejection of the symbolist approach is an extremely marginal position in the context of theoretical anthropology.

Skorupski’s mistake lies somewhere in the following. He claims (35) that “When anthropologists, studying various cultures from widely differing theoretical perspectives, have given a descriptive analysis of how magico-religious beliefs are actually understood by people within those traditions, the account that invariably emerges is ‘literalist’ ... and not sociological.” Of course such an account--a

“descriptive” account--is going to be “literalist” rather than, for example, Durkheimian. It is hard to imagine it any other way. After all, the people being studied are not sociologists. But from the fact that such an account of a peoples’ self-understanding is more or less literalist, Skorupski concludes--on no discernible theoretical basis and no empirical grounds whatsoever--that the literalist account rather than the symbolist one must be correct. It is not a descriptive analysis but an interpretive one that is at issue. Furthermore, as the above quotation from Skorupski indicates, he mistakenly suggests that his own literalist and anti-symbolist position is one anthropologists overwhelmingly (i.e. “invariably”) agree with. But as Geertz’s remarks point out, exactly the opposite is the case. At least on this very general point, Geertz’s view is supported by contemporary anthropologists such as Dirks and Ortner. (For a critique of Geertz’s interpretive approach see Martin.)

### (a) Geertz and the Function of Religion

A Geertzian would accept the first three stages of the intellectualist programme as providing explanations only in certain cases; and these explanations would never be regarded as adequate without a wider account of religion’s nature and function. Geertz could only partly accept the intellectualist account of the origin of religion. Along with non-reductionistic intellectualists and literalists, the Geertzian will insist “that there are important needs and preoccupations ... different from ... this-worldly ones of explanation and control, which from the first shape ... religious thought.” Geertz dismisses the “pseudo-science view of religious belief,” while allowing that beliefs often do explain religious actions.<sup>7</sup> A Geertzian accepts some literalist explanations.

Geertz’s account of religion is very different from, and much broader than, either the intellectualist’s or symbolist’s. Religion is concerned with various threats to “our powers of conception.” Explaining and controlling nature is only one significant aspect of man’s attempt to contain “chaos.” Geertz (99) says, “The thing we seem least able to tolerate is a threat to our powers of conception ... without the assistance of cultural patterns he [man] would be functionally incomplete ... a kind of formless monster with neither sense of direction nor power of self-control, a chaos of spasmodic impulses and vague emotions. Man depends upon symbols and symbol systems with a dependence so great as to be decisive for his creatural viability and, as a result ... even the remotest indication that they may prove unable to cope with one or another aspect of experience raises within him the gravest sort of anxiety.”

The intellectualist’s distinction between traditional and modern religion must be seen by Geertz as a naive oversimplification. The role that traditional religion once had of explaining and controlling nature may be relinquished to science by modern religion. But for Geertz, this role is just part of the *function*, more broadly construed, that religion and culture *necessarily* retain even in the modern world. The distinction between traditional and modern religion should not obscure the fact

that according to Geertz religion retains the same basic functions it always had; that of enabling people to cope with anomie by establishing a sense of order without which people (literally) could not be people.

Though religion is no longer instrumental in controlling nature, it must function to address the “three points where chaos ... threatens to break in upon man: at the limits of his analytic capacities, at the limits of his powers of endurance, and at the limits of his moral insight” (Geertz:100). Geertz’s account implies religion is universal. *Everyone*--atheist, theist, whatever--must “formulate conceptions of the general order of existence” and address the problem of “meaning” (i.e. avoid chaos). They must do so by means of a cultural system to which symbolisation is essential. In Geertz’s terms this makes everyone “religious.” And in the context of his theory, this is not a trivialisation of the term “religious” but its most important sense.

Geertz’s theory denies that religion can be understood as the literalist (e.g., Skorupski) claims it should be. This is so even though religion as Geertz sees it is a way of explaining and controlling both nature and other aspects of life, and even though he grants that literalist explanations of belief and action are often right. The idea of “explaining and controlling” is part of religion according to Geertz. But even as applied to nature this function is not interpreted in the strict “instrumentalist” manner literalism describes. Literalism is superficial and reductionistic on a Geertzian account, because it acknowledges only a small part of the cultural dimension of religion. It basically ignores all but one aspect of the significance of symbols; and it fails to distinguish the distinctive “religious perspective” or worldview from the scientific and other types. As a way of construing the world, the religious perspective differs from the scientific, the common-sensical, and the aesthetic. It “differs from ... the scientific perspective in that it questions the realities of everyday life not out of institutionalised scepticism ... but in terms of what it takes to be wider nonhypothetical truths. Rather than detachment, its watchword is commitment; rather than analysis, encounter” (Geertz:111-112). Although in a Geertzian account it is not possible to see religion as being in much the same business as scientific theory, it is possible to sometimes see science as a religion. Science is a strategy for interpreting and controlling the world, and it can enable one to believe and feel that one is living in accord with reality. In Geertz’s account this is how everyone wants to live--and how everyone *must* live.<sup>8</sup>

## **(b) Skorupski and the Function of Religion**

It is worth speculating on what Skorupski’s view of the Geertzian position might be. This is best evident in his brief remarks on functionalism.<sup>9</sup>

Anthropologists writing from a functionalist perspective have given painstaking accounts of how religious beliefs can support and legitimate social positions ... But no one has ever explained how any of these acutely observed effects of magico-religious beliefs are relevant to explaining the origins or persistence of

magic and religion in society. At best one might fall back on the familiar observation that beliefs which justify attitudes, opinions, or a way of life which one wants to retain are harder to reject and easier to accept than others. In this sense, functionalism does not propose a theory of magic or religion; since this fact is now generally recognized, and since my interest is specifically in such theories, I have sharpened the distinction between accounts of the social functions of ritual and the symbolist approach as such. (24)

Skorupski claims that because functionalism gives no account of the “origin and persistence” of religion it “does not propose a theory of religion.” This claim is baffling.

The functionalist *explains* how the effects of religious beliefs are relevant to accounting for their origin and persistence in terms of their function. They originate and persist *because* of their functional role. (Similarly, in explaining how religious beliefs function, Freud, for example, is giving an explanation of their origin and persistence.) Why does Skorupski think that “the familiar observation that beliefs which justify ... a way of life which one wants to retain” does not explain (in part) the origin of those beliefs? If it does not explain this, what does it explain? In a Geertzian view, or the view of cultural or social anthropology generally, this observation takes account of an important group of factors that any plausible intellectualism must regard as relevant.

Skorupski’s distinction between the “social functions of ritual and the symbolist approach as such” is valid. Neither intellectualism nor literalism deny social functions of ritual, and one can be a functionalist without being a symbolist (though not vice versa).<sup>10</sup> However, in cases in which a symbolist analysis is the correct one (if any), could a ritual’s social function be recognised without accepting the symbolist analysis? Neither the ritual nor its function could be understood apart from the symbolist analysis. Skorupski (23) says, “As I have presented it, this thesis [i.e. the Durkheimian thesis] concerns the meaning of religious discourse as distinct from the social function of religious practice.” But could the function of a practice be understood apart from the meaning of its related discourse? Indeed, is it possible to understand the meaning of religious discourse as distinct from the social function of religious practice? Neither seem possible on a Durkheimian account.<sup>11</sup>

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## Notes

1. Non-realists claim that such discourse is not about what it appears to be about. This analysis of religious discourse, is also an analysis of religion. John Hick (1989) says the non-realist “understands [religious discourse] throughout as referring, not to realities alleged to exist independently of ourselves, but to our own moral and spiritual states. Thus to say that God exists is not to affirm the reality of ... a person without a body (i.e. a spirit) who is eternal ... That ‘God exists’ means that there are human beings who use the concept of God and for whom it is the presiding idea in their form of life” (198-209).

The non-realist interpretation has its roots in Wittgenstein. Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1972); D.Z. Phillips (1965, 1970); Peter Winch (1958, 1977); Don Cupitt, (1980). The Wittgensteinian analysis has been out of fashion for over twenty years but still has contemporary adherents. It is puzzling that such an obviously implausible view could have exerted the influence it did. For a critique of the position see Levine 1994; 291-297. A recent approach to the study of religious ritual that appears to be unconcerned with, if not to eschew, both literalist and symbolic approaches is Lawson and McCauley’s (1990, cf. 1993) “cognitive approach.” See Levine (1997a) for a critique and their response.

2. Cf. John Skorupski (1976). Skorupski explains how Cupitt’s Wittgensteinian approach to the meaning of religious discourse differs from the symbolist or literalist approach. See Don Cupitt 1985: 153. Cupitt’s non-realist position is not a “symbolist” one as Skorupski (15-16, cf. 13-17) defines it.

the symbolist ... [shares] with the literalist ... the classical view that a unified semantic account can be given of all sentences in the traditional religious believer’s language ... the meaning of a sentence is determined by the meaning of its constituent expressions ... The Wittgensteinian’s criticism of this should ... be clear. He approves the symbolist’s stress on looking to the emotional and social context in which ritual performances are made, and ritual actions performed, for a grasp of what is conveyed in them; but on his view this approach should be extended to include the very meaning of what is said in such contexts; the symbolist goes wrong in recovering the (‘literal’) meaning of ritual statements by projecting the meaning of their constituent expressions from the function which these have in other areas of discourse.

3. Such views are frequently based on a confusion or conflation of the academic study of religion with a religious agenda. This is no idle issue. It involves the role of religion, or the religious, in religious studies—and so the nature of religious studies itself. See Byrne, Jaffee, Levine and Wiebe in *The Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 9 (1997) issue on “Religion and Method in the Study of Religion.”

4. For a sampling of issues about ritual that have been and are being discussed in contemporary anthropology see Nicholas Dirks. For an account of anthropological theories of religion in a more historical context see Morris.

5. Skorupski (12-13) notes, “a metaphorically or symbolically expressed thought is a thought expressed in a form which normally *does* have a literal meaning; what makes it symbolic or metaphorical is just that (i) the literal meaning (if any) of the sentence is not the meaning to

be understood, and (ii) the literal meaning of the words must be grasped if one is to 'decode' the meaning which *is* to be understood." He describes (36) ways in which the distinction between the "explicitly literal and the symbolic level" is made. "Religious discourse and action (a) may be unconsciously symbolic, (b) may turn out to be symbolic when its logic is properly surveyed and construed, (c) may have been originally symbolic and then become literalised, or (d) may be symbolic in the interpretation of the observer, but not in that of the actor."

6. Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," chapter 4 in Geertz 1973: 87-125. Also see chapter 5, "Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols," 126-141. Although Geertz was primarily influenced by Max Weber ("via Talcott Parsons," Ortner: 374) rather than Durkheim, he accepts aspects of Durkheim's symbolist approach. However, his own "cultural" approach is broader than Durkheim's and, I think, incompatible with much of it. Geertz, (89) "following Parsons and Shils" develops "the cultural dimension of religious analysis ... [Culture] denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life." As Geertz explains it (112-114), ritual is essential to culture. It has both symbolic-expressive and instrumental functions. His account of ritual cannot be accommodated wholly within intellectualism. "In a ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world ... [T]hough any religious ritual ... involves this symbolic fusion of ethos and world view, it is mainly certain more elaborate and usually more public ones, ones in which a broad range of moods and motivations on the one hand, and metaphysical conceptions on the other are caught up, which shape the spiritual consciousness of a people ... 'cultural performances' ... represent not only the point at which the dispositional and conceptual aspects of religious life converge for the believer, but also the point at which the interaction between them can most readily be examined by the detached observer ... religious performances ... for participants ... are ... not only models of what they believe, but also models *for* the believing of it. In these plastic dramas men attain their faith as they portray it."

7. Cf. Geertz: 87-88, 99-102. "Even to consider people's religious beliefs as attempts to bring anomalous events ... within the circle of the at least potentially explicable seems to smack of Tyloreanism or worse. But ... some men ... are unable to leave unclarified problems of analysis merely unclarified ... Any chronic failure of one's explanatory apparatus ... tends to lead to a deep disquiet--a tendency rather more widespread and a disquiet rather deeper than we have sometimes supposed since the pseudoscience view of religious belief was, quite rightfully, disposed ... I was struck ... by the degree to which my more animistically inclined informants behaved like true Tyloreans. They seem to be constantly using their beliefs to 'explain' phenomena; or more accurately, to convince themselves that the phenomena were explainable..." (100-101).

8. 8. Cf. Ortner 1994: 404n3,4. "If culture itself has been an elusive phenomena. One may say that Geertz has pursued the most elusive part of it, the ethos ... this, among other things, accounts for his continuing and broad-based appeal. Perhaps the majority of students who go into anthropology, and certainly the majority of non-anthropologists who are fascinated by our field, are drawn to it because they have been struck ... by the 'otherness' of another culture, which we would call its ethos. Geertz's work provides one of the very few handles for grasping that otherness ... [Geertz] is primarily concerned with what might be called

Meaning, with a capital M—the purpose, or point, or larger significance of things.”

9. Cf. Skorupski: 245n.15. This is his only reference to Geertz.

10. After Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown, social anthropologists came to hold the [different] view that there is an inverse relationship between functional and symbolist approaches to religion. However, it is unlikely that one can be a symbolist without being a functionalist. The relationship between functionalist and symbolist analyses of religion is complex. It characterises important aspects of changing anthropological views of religion, symbolism, and, indeed, of social anthropology itself since Durkheim. Don Gardner (1996) says, “To the extent that the functions of religion were emphasised, the specificities of its content were downplayed ... to the extent that one took the symbolic representational aspects of religion seriously, the social functional role of religion could only be maintained by more and more ingenious feats of explanatory agility (e.g. Max Gluckman on rituals of rebellion etc) or quietly dropped from the main body of analysis to be brought back in an indisputable axiom at the end. [Although] it has been the symbolist claims of Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown which have proved the most fruitful, the functionalist perspective on social life has not been abandoned altogether. However, there had been a shift from function to meaning, and to the extent that the function of religion has remained part of the anthropological characterisation of it this is because meaning itself has come to be seen in functional terms. Durkheim held that religion was functional because of its symbolic nature. The functional nature of religion was tied to its capacity to represent the social order and reproduce it. Later British anthropologists, such as Evans-Pritchard, Leach, Turner, Douglas, Lienhardt and their associates, have widened the scope they are prepared to give to the symbolic powers of religion. They have done so in different ways and with different degrees of commitment to the original Durkheimian perspective. But all of these would see the symbolic, expressive, communicative aspects of religion as its most central feature.” (The quotation is paraphrased in places.)

11. My thanks to Russell McCutcheon and Robert for suggestions that substantially improved this paper.