Geertz, Turner and Durkheim: religion simply put; if only it could be so simple!

For Clifford Geertz a religion is:

(1) A system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) 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.¹

When seeking to understand the key differences and similarities between Geertz and Durkheim, we must start with Durkheim’s question: “how would experiences like these not leave him with the conviction that two heterogeneous and incommensurable worlds exist in fact?”² The experiences which Durkheim is talking about are the completely separate, but linked, expression of the sacred and the profane, in the corroboree which is that of the sacred and the remaining time spent in the profane. The question of ‘how would these not’ is best answered by noting that Durkheim chose to study the primitive precisely because the occurrence and the relation between the sacred and profane was so clearly marked in aboriginal society:

Thus, the pious life of the Australian moves between successive phases—one of utter colorlessness, one of hyperexcitement—and social life oscillates to the same rhythm.

This brings out the link between the two phases. Among the peoples called civilized, on

the other hand, the relative continuity between them partially masks their interrelations.3

Moreover, Durkheim studies the primitive to gain an understanding, not of the primitive as such, but as a method to understand modern ‘civilized’ society in which the sacred and profane are more intertwined or overlapping whilst still remaining in their intertwinedness a separation between the sacred and the profane. We should here add a complication; that of the difference between the participant and the viewer. This is because the participant does not see the two worlds of sacred and profane, of corroboree and non-corroboree, as two worlds, but as the one world; which at one time is the sacred world and which is the other world at the other times, it is only the viewer who actually sees both worlds as two worlds and separate. Durkheim, as a viewer, makes these ‘worlds’—the sacred and the profane—separate in time (they occur at different times) and even perhaps separate in space (they occur in different locations); whereas Geertz’s point is that these two worlds are one and the same in occurrence, and he endeavours to show how these two are intertwined yet separate, and we should see that this intertwined nature of the sacred and the profane is more evident in modern society. That is to say that there is no sacred without the profane and no profane without the sacred. So for Geertz, we are talking more of a perspective shift of the viewer who can notice the two phases when the viewer is shifted to that of an outside perspective.

The question, “how would experiences like these not leave him with the conviction that two heterogeneous and incommensurable worlds exist in fact?” receives its answer in Geertz. Geertz (in effect) elaborates on Durkheim’s notion of “relative continuity” between the sacred and profane which “partially masks their interrelations”. This brings us to Geertz and his claim that it is symbols which mask the interrelations, of the sacred to the profane, by “clothing these conceptions” of the general, sacred order, with the aura of factuality and profaneness and also that the profane is taken

as commensurable with the sacred, the general order of existence, by the symbols which “establish” this connection. They are intertwined and feed off of one another.

The Christian conception of the trinity of God is what Geertz is attempting to say in his bumbling manner. The structure that allows one to see a connection of God the Father to that of God the Son (Jesus) by the intermediary ‘double switch’ of the mediating value, the Holy Spirit, is here useful to understand and simplify Geertz for a (more) general readership. How is it that God the Father (or in Geertzian, the General Order of Existence) is not only related, but comes to be seen as the same as God the Son (Geertz’s long-lasting moods and motivations in men); or to run it contrariwise, and ask how does God the Son/Christ (the general order of existence) come to be seen as the same as God the Father (the long-lasting moods and motivations in men)? Well, the only way this works is to recognise the mediator, the Holy Spirit, (in Geertzianese, the system of symbols which act and which also clothes not only the moods and motivations in the garb of the general order, but also, clothes the general order in the garb of the moods and motivations) that is, which is in both God the Father and in God the Son equally, identically. The Holy Spirit does not have any internal constitution, it does not contain anything, it is an empty vehicle\(^4\), an empty signifier that, instead, bounces between things and concepts and equates\(^5\) them. The Father shares the Holy Spirit with the Son, just as the Son shares the Holy Spirit with the Father; moreover, the Father comes to be known as the Father because of his relation to the Son, and the Son comes to be known as the Son in his relation, the mediator, the Holy Spirit, the Geertzian symbol, to his Father. Each is therefore equally in each other, that is, the Father has exactly the same ‘Son-ness’ as the Son has ‘Father-ness’, and in this, this difference is what the one and the other share and have thereby an identity in that which sets

---

\(^4\)“any object, act, event, quality or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception—the conception is the symbol’s “meaning”” Geertz (2002) p 206.

\(^5\) It gives the “perception of the structural congruence” Geertz (2002) p 208.
them apart, which is what they share. It is, simply put, an identity-in-difference, which is Geertz’s symbol that ‘acts’. What we are talking about is Hegel’s dictum:

*in its own self* everything is in its selfsameness different from itself and self-contradictory, and that in its difference, in its contradiction, it is self-identical, and is in its own self this movement of transition of one of these categories into the other, and for this reason, that each is in its own self the opposite of itself.\(^6\)

Hegel based his idea that “in its difference, in its contradiction, it is self-identical” on the apparent paradox of the Christian trinity, and found that it was, as Mark C. Taylor noted, quite logical. That ‘each is in its own self the opposite of itself’ is the fundamental constituent of identity, and becomes explicitly religious when the opposite, which we draw or cast ourselves up against, is regarded as the sacred, or god. So using this Hegelian rereading of Geertz, a kind of more Geertz than Geertz, I will point to the differences between Geertz and Turner.

Turner is similar to Geertz in that the structure he proposes is Trinitarian: “all rites of passage or “transition” are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or *limen*, signifying “threshold” in Latin), and aggregation”\(^7\). The similarity lies in the fact of the first phase of separation being understood in relation, via the threshold, to the third phase of aggregation. The threshold phase of liminality is modelled after the Hegelian mediating value, or the Christian Holy Spirit, or the Geertzian system of symbols that act as vehicles but have no inherent meaning in and of themselves, they are for Turner “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between”\(^8\). Aggregation is only known as aggregation in its opposite, that of non-aggregation, ‘in its difference, in its contradiction, it is self-identical’. Likewise for the non-aggregation, which is only known as non-aggregation once the movement has been made which then retrospectively creates the non-aggregated state as ‘non-aggregated’. That is,

---


\(^8\) Turner (1969) p 95.
prior to the switch that occurs via the liminal phase, the non-aggregated phase would just be what had always been, it only comes to be known as ‘non-aggregation’ after the fact, once a new state of aggregation has been returned to, which is the original-plus. Turner differs from Geertz in that Turner does not necessarily invoke a concept of a vertical shift of gears; he seems to treat ‘the ritual process’ as a literal rite of passage following Arnold van Gennep. None the less, Turner’s ideas do cohere with an explicitly theological bent if we want them to. Observe. If we say that God the Father, the Old Testament God, is what he is then he literally is what he ‘is’; he is, but is beyond all recognition of what it is that he is: “And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM” (Exodus 3:14). So thereby God became human in the Christ which is the liminal moment, with all the inversions, such as the Christ dying the criminals death—which is an inversion of the lawgiver, the judge, to being judged and sentenced and having the sentence being carried out. The Christ is nice to people, he cares—which is an inversion of the Old Testament ‘arsehole’ god of the book of Job: “Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said…Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me. Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if thou hast understanding…Who hath divided a watercourse for the overflowing of waters, or a way for the lightning of thunder; To cause it to rain on the earth, where no man is; on the wilderness, wherein there is no man.” (Job 38:1, 3-4, 25-26). Moreover, that God became human in the Christ was also so that God could know himself, that is, God could know himself as God because the Christ was human, so ‘in its difference’ as human which is the contra position, God could know God-self for the first time. The phase of aggregation began when God died on the cross, we got God-plus. God was no longer this jealous teenager whom did not even know himself, but rather we got the Holy Spirit, which is the community of believers whom share in Christ in our sharing of ourselves, in our community of humans with God mediating the space between us out of great love.