

Clifford Geertz's Account of Culture as a Resource for Theology

Robin Koning

Abstract: Culture is a major category of analysis in contemporary theology, as in all of the humanities. In clarifying the idea of culture, a number of theologians, particularly those engaged in the theology of inculturation and postliberal theologians like Frei and Lindbeck, have drawn on the work of cultural anthropologist, Clifford Geertz (1926-2006). This article outlines Geertz's definition of culture and his proposals for how culture is best studied, especially through his concepts of local knowledge, thick description and culture as text. It then offers suggestions as to why his approach, which sees culture in terms of meanings embodied in symbols, may be of use for theology.

CULTURE IS A MAJOR CATEGORY OF ANALYSIS in contemporary theology. Bernard Lonergan puts culture into his very definition of theology's role: "A theology mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix."¹ Of course, as Bevans points out, good theology, like good pastoral practice, has always been contextual.² But in recent decades, the Church has become more critically reflective about what this means.³

Because culture is not a special category peculiar to theology but a general category shared with other disciplines,⁴ theologians often turn to these other disciplines, especially anthropology, to help define the culture concept.⁵ One anthropologist whom theologians of

1. Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972) xi.

2. Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, ed. Robert J Schreiter, Faith and Cultures Series (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1998) 3-4.

3. Bevans reviews a number of reasons for this shift, some external and some internal to theology (*Models of Contextual Theology*, 5-10).

4. Lonergan, *Method*, 282.

5. Kathryn Tanner examines the ways various understandings of culture shape theology's agenda in *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, ed. Kathryn Tanner

inculturation have drawn upon is Clifford Geertz, who died in 2006 and is recognised as a key figure in the reconfiguration of the culture concept in recent decades.⁶ Theologians of the Yale School have also made use of Geertz's approach to articulate their accounts of Christian faith⁷, with George Lindbeck acknowledging that his cultural-linguistic theory of religion is adapted from Geertz.⁸

In this article, I briefly outline Geertz's career. I then examine in some detail his approach to the study of culture, encapsulated in the ways he speaks of local knowledge, thick description, and culture as text. I conclude by offering some reasons for his usefulness to theology.

A. GEERTZ'S SIGNIFICANCE

After early studies in literature and philosophy, Clifford Geertz came into anthropology as a graduate student at Harvard. At the time, two of the doyens of anthropology in the United States, Clyde Kluckhohn (1905-1960) and Alfred L. Kroeber (1876-1960), were attempting to compile all the definitions of "culture" that had appeared in the

and Paul Lakeland, *Guides to Theological Inquiry Series* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

6. Sherry B. Ortner, "Introduction", in Sherry B. Ortner (ed.), *The Fate of 'Culture': Geertz and Beyond* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 1. Among the theologians of inculturation who have drawn upon Geertz's work are the following: Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Earthing the Gospel: An Inculturation Handbook for the Pastoral Worker* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1990) 28; Marcello de Carvalho Azevedo, *Inculturation and the Challenges of Modernity*, ed. Ary A. Roest Crolius, *Inculturation: Working Papers on Living Faith and Cultures*, vol. I (Rome: Centre 'Cultures and Religions' – Pontifical Gregorian University, 1982) 8-9; Ary A. Roest Crolius, "Inculturation and the Meaning of Culture", *Gregorianum* 61 (1980) 266; Mariasusai Dhavamony, *Christian Theology of Inculturation*, *Documenta Missionalia*, vol. 24 (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, 1997) 25-26; Michael Paul Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998) 15-16; Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1981) 56; David Nazar, "Inculturation: Meaning and Method" (Doctor of Philosophy and Doctor of Theology, Saint Paul University, 1989) 17-21; Robert J Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1985) 53-56; Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1988) 4-5; Carl F. Starkloff, "Inculturation and Cultural Systems", *Theological Studies* 55 (1994) 66-81, 274-294; Andrew Tallon (ed.), *A Theology of the in-Between: The Value of Syncretic Process*, *Marquette Studies in Theology*, vol. 33 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2002) 65-67; Shagbaor F. Wegh, *Understanding and Practising Inculturation* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Caltop Publications, 1997) 8.

7. Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 12-13, 26-27; George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (eds.), *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 100, 146-147; George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984) 20; George A. Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. James J. Buckley (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003) 198.

8. Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, 198.

literature from the infancy of scientific anthropology in the mid-1800s.⁹ Geertz was asked to offer suggestions on their work. In this way he was brought into immediate engagement with what he describes as anthropology's "problematic", the concept of culture. In fact, he sees his own career as paralleling the vicissitudes of the word "culture": "In its ups and downs, its drift towards and away from clarity and popularity over the next half century, can be seen both anthropology's lumbering, arrhythmic line of march, and my own."¹⁰

Alongside his ethnographic studies, based primarily on fieldwork in Java, Morocco and Bali, Geertz was always interested in methodological issues, with the early fruits of his ponderings appearing in two collections of essays, *The Interpretation of Cultures (IC)* and *Local Knowledge (LK)*.¹¹ At the same time, he was a prolific writer of articles, reviews, and prefaces for books, as well as speeches to sundry audiences in which he applied his fertile mind to a range of fields outside of the traditional purview of anthropology.¹² Thus Geertz has had considerable cross-disciplinary influence, extending into the other social sciences and into virtually all areas of the humanities,¹³ so much so that he has been called the "ambassador from anthropology".¹⁴

Geertz proposed an interpretive approach to the study of culture, one that saw the need for anthropology to seek to discover the meanings at play in human social life through a hermeneutical reading of the symbolic mediations of meaning. Of course, this was not an entirely new approach, reclaiming as it did the earlier traditions of Dilthey and Weber. Nor was Geertz the only proponent of such an interpretive approach, with David Schneider and Victor Turner,

9. Alfred L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963).

10. Clifford Geertz, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) 12.

11. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (USA: Basic Books, 1983). See also his later works, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1988); *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); *Available Light*.

12. For a comprehensive bibliography, see the HyperGeertz Catalogue at <http://www.iwp.uni-linz.ac.at/lxe/sektktf/GG/HyperGeertz.html>; Internet; accessed 4 February 2010.

13. Between them, three works devoted to analyses of Geertz and his impact drew contributions from the fields of sociology, religious studies, political science, history, economic history, literature and, of course, anthropology itself. William G. Doty, "The Hermeneutical Ethnography of Clifford Geertz," in *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 71.1 (1988); Gerhard Fröhlich and Ingo Mörth (eds.), *Symbolische Anthropologie der Moderne: Kulturanalysen nach Clifford Geertz* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1998); Sherry B. Ortner (ed.), *The Fate of 'Culture': Geertz and Beyond* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

14. Quoted, without reference, in William H. Sewell, Jr., "Geertz, Cultural Systems, and History: From Synchrony to Transformation", in Ortner, *The Fate of 'Culture': Geertz and Beyond*, 35.

amongst others, advancing their own forms of symbolic anthropology.¹⁵ But Geertz was a powerful figure in the vanguard of this new approach, one whose rhetorical skills presented it in an engaging manner, whose ethnographic insights testified to the value of his approach, and whose consistent application of his methodology over a long period of time ensured its ongoing influence. So important was his role in this shift that it has been named the “Geertzian revolution”.¹⁶

B. GEERTZ ON CULTURE

Early in his career, Geertz proposed the following definition of culture¹⁷:

...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.¹⁸

This rather complex definition can be simplified once we note the rhetorical repetition, with the second clause effectively paralleling the first:

Historically transmitted	Inherited
Pattern	System
Meanings	Conceptions
Embodied	Expressed
Symbols	Symbolic forms

In this definition, we find already the key elements of Geertz’s approach to culture. Firstly, in terms of *content*, culture has to do with

15. Sherry B. Ortner, “Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26.1 (1984) 128-129.

16. Ortner, “Introduction”, 2. Three monographs have studied Geertz’s influence: Jan Willem Alexander Bakker, *Enough Profundities Already! A Reconstruction of Geertz’s Interpretive Anthropology* (Utrecht: Interdisciplinair Sociaal-Wetenschappelijk Onderzoeksinstituut Rijksuniversiteit, 1988); Volker Gottowik, *Konstruktionen Des Anderen: Clifford Geertz Und Die Krise Der Ethnographischen Repräsentation* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1997); Kenneth A. Rice, *Geertz and Culture* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1980). There has also been an intellectual biography, Fred Inglis, *Clifford Geertz: Culture, Custom and Ethics*, Key Contemporary Thinkers (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000) and a recent evaluation of his work by some of Geertz’s colleagues, Richard A. Shweder and Byron Good (eds.), *Clifford Geertz by His Colleagues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

17. In speaking of Geertz’s definition of culture, I do not deny the diversity of usages of the term “culture” in his work as correctly pointed out in Rice, *Geertz and Culture*, 239-250. But I do affirm the high degree of coherence in Geertz’s usage, a coherence of which Rice’s own one-paragraph summary (p. 238) is evidence.

18. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 89.

meanings and symbols. Secondly, in terms of *form*, this content is arranged into a system of some sort, a pattern. Thirdly, in terms of *function*, culture enables humans to form meaning in their lives. Moreover, human cultural knowledge about and attitudes towards life are “communicated” from one generation to the next, enabling them to be “perpetuated” – i.e., “historically transmitted” by the present generation and “inherited” by the next. But culture is not just historical in the sense that its meanings are transmitted through history – which could imply a static view of culture as simply self-replicating. Rather, culture is also historical in the sense that its meanings can “develop”, so that culture can be transformed as it is transmitted.

Geertz sees culture, then, as a system of meanings embodied in symbols. Based on this understanding, his early work represented what Sherry Ortner describes as a “refiguring” of anthropology around the idea of meaning.¹⁹ This movement towards meaning, in which Geertz was a major player, positioned anthropology in a more central location within intellectual life, as noted above, and for two main reasons. Firstly, it revived anthropology by providing an alternative to the scientism of the social sciences of the time, showing that scientific techniques alone could offer only an imperfect account of human social life. Secondly, by highlighting the shared ways of thinking between the social sciences and the humanities, it made clear the relevance of anthropology to other disciplines in the humanities.²⁰

The positive impetus for this realignment was Geertz’s concern to embrace the developing study of symbols and symbol systems. In 1964 he noted how anthropology, over the 150 or so years of its history as an academic discipline, had engaged with nearly every major intellectual movement or field of methodological innovation, with the exception, to that point, of symbol theory. Not that anthropology used no interpretive techniques, but it usually restricted interpretation to particular aspects of culture, such as poetry, drama, dance, and the arts. It tended to draw a strong distinction between what was considered aesthetic, symbolic or figurative, on the one hand, and what was considered practical, real, or literal, on the other.²¹ Geertz wished to extend to every aspect of culture the methods used in these former areas, methods which paid attention to “how symbols symbolize, how they function to mediate meanings”.²² For him, the study of culture would necessarily be interpretive: “The concept of culture I espouse...is essentially a semiotic one.”²³

19. Ortner, “Thick Resistance: Death and the Cultural Construction of Agency in Himalayan Mountaineering”, in *The Fate of ‘Culture’: Geertz and Beyond*, 137.

20. Ortner, “Introduction”.

21. Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 135-36.

22. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 208-209.

23. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 5.

HOW NOT TO STUDY CULTURE: CLARIFICATION BY CONTRAST

Besides his desire to embrace semiotics, Geertz also had a more negative impetus towards developing his own approach, namely his desire to distance himself from ways of studying culture that he considered inadequate. He was particularly concerned with approaches that effectively reduced culture to other aspects of human social life rather than studying it as a relatively autonomous reality. He proposes three such alternative views of culture and its study.²⁴ The first reduces culture to “the brute pattern of behavioral events we observe in fact to occur in some identifiable community”. The second is the reist position, by which culture is excised from any connection with social relations or interactions and examined as “a self-contained ‘super-organic’ reality with forces and purposes of its own”; it is reified, made into an independent object or thing, disembodied from social reality. The third, proposed in reaction to these two, sees culture as located in the human mind and heart.²⁵

The reductionist position is often in Geertz’s sights. His particular target is not always clear, but Ortner and Roseberry both point to the cultural ecology, cultural evolution, and materialist schools of the 1950s and 1960s, associated with the names of Julian Steward, Leslie White, and Marvin Harris respectively, as major foci for the wrath of the symbolic theorists and interpretivists.²⁶ Certainly, Geertz seems particularly concerned with any kind of functionalism, using the term to cover any mechanistic theory that seeks to understand social phenomena in terms of their functions or effects, without concern for underlying cultural beliefs.²⁷ Since social action involves meaning, it is not simply a matter of “pulls and pushes”, and cannot be adequately studied by “hard-edged social science”, under which umbrella he includes functionalist anthropology.²⁸ In relation to anthropological studies of religion in particular, he notes the inadequacies of two functionalist approaches. The first, often associated with Radcliffe-Brown, sees religion as functioning to reinforce the social ties between individuals in a society. By symbolising underlying social values, any recounting of myth or enactment of ritual strengthens the social

24. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 10-13.

25. These three positions correlate roughly with divisions between alternative approaches made elsewhere in Geertz. The first and the third seem to correspond respectively to the alternatives of functionalism and psychologism (*Interpretation of Cultures*, 453). The first and the second refer, respectively, to “the two big citadels...on the plain of anthropology” which Inglis sees Geertz as circumventing during his career – namely, Marxism and Structuralism (Inglis, *Clifford Geertz*, 147).

26. Ortner, “Theory in Anthropology”, 132-34; William Roseberry, “Balinese Cockfights and the Seduction of Anthropology”, *Social Research* 49.4 (1982) 1014-1016.

27. Ortner, “Thick Resistance”, 137.

28. Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 233.

structure. The second approach, often associated with Malinowski, focuses not so much on how religion functions in the life of the social group, but rather in the life of the individual, satisfying the individual's "cognitive and affective demands for a stable, comprehensible, and coercible world."²⁹ He discovered the inadequacy of these approaches as he pursued his doctoral fieldwork on Javanese religion, finding he could attain more subtle analyses by examining symbolic structures as "carriers of meaning and bestowers of significance".³⁰

As Geertz was devising his new approach, Claude Lévi-Strauss was also hard at work outlining his structuralist agenda. Lévi-Strauss shared a number of Geertz's concerns – to counter the inadequacies of functionalism, to maintain a critical basis for ethnography, and to enter more fully into the analysis of symbols and meaning.³¹ There was much that Geertz admired of the French anthropologist's work. He recognised Lévi-Strauss' lasting achievement in making anthropology into an intellectual discipline with links to more general intellectual currents,³² and called the "construction of an entire discourse realm from a standing start...a stunning achievement, altogether worthy of the attention it has received."³³

The influence of an approach which shared so many of his own concerns challenged Geertz to delineate very clearly the ways in which his interpretivism differed from Lévi-Strauss' – how culturalism differed from structuralism. He did so by showing how, while rightly arguing against a functionalism that reduces the cultural to the level of social or psychological function, structuralism goes to another extreme, making culture into an object in its own right, quite independent of social behaviours. As humans construct their culture, structuralism argues, they do not create absolutely, but combine elements from a fixed repertory of ideas, forming a closed conceptual system with no necessary reference to the outside world.³⁴ "Culture is most effectively treated, the argument goes, purely as a symbolic system..., by isolating its elements, specifying the internal relationships among those elements, and then characterizing the whole system in some general way."³⁵ The search for the actual meanings at work in a social setting is replaced by meanings assigned by inherent principles of order, or

29. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 142-43.

30. Geertz, "Passage and Accident", 15.

31. For these three emphases in relation to Lévi-Strauss, see David Kronenfield and Henry W. Decker, "Structuralism", *Annual Review of Anthropology* 8 (1979) 534-35.

32. Richard Handler, "An Interview with Clifford Geertz", *Current Anthropology* 32.5 (1991) 609.

33. Geertz, *Works and Lives*, 127.

34. Inglis, *Clifford Geertz*, 139.

35. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 17.

universal properties of the human mind, or an *a priori* world-view.³⁶ Geertz calls this approach idealist and claims that it reifies culture.³⁷

The third approach from which Geertz distinguishes his own account stands in reaction to these first two. Rather than reducing the cultural to the social, as the functionalists tended to do, or ignoring the social altogether, as the functionalists tended to do, this approach saw culture as located in human hearts and minds, in human interiority.³⁸ Thus Geertz noted a third factor in the social drama, "the pattern of motivational integration within the individual which we usually call personality structure".³⁹ While personality is an important factor in its own right, problems arise if one reduces everything to this one element, seeing culture as simply "composed of psychological structures by means of which individuals or groups...guide their behavior".⁴⁰ In this kind of reductionist analysis, culture is about what you need to know or believe to function successfully in a particular society, and the study of culture involves finding the correct algorithm for how to behave as a native.⁴¹ Geertz claims that this view would equate a Moroccan trade pact with certain psychological characteristics necessary for the pact, such as a desire for what is being traded, and a willingness to cut a lamb's throat. But the pact itself is not these psychological traits. While grounded in the psychological, it is a reality at the level of meaning and symbol, a cultural reality.⁴²

Geertz's own approach seeks to avoid the pitfalls he sees in these other three accounts of culture. He recognises the need to relate the cultural to the social and psychological, without reducing it to either. Culture is both influenced by these processes and influences them, serving as both model of and model for these processes.⁴³ Geertz is particularly aware of the danger of divorcing the cultural and the social, so that one or other needs to take the full weight of an analysis. The end result is a loss of explanatory power – an inability to account for a situation in which there is no neat fit between cultural patterns and social organisation, as is often the case in changing historical

36. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 20.

37. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 11, 12.

38. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 11-12.

39. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 145.

40. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 11.

41. Gottowik notes how this view suggests a criterion for the adequacy of an ethnographic account - that the better description is the one which enables the reader to behave adequately in the culture described. Gottowik, *Konstruktionen Des Anderen: Clifford Geertz Und Die Krise Der Ethnographischen Repräsentation*, 61.

42. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 11-12. Bakker returns a number of times to Geertz's view of these interrelationships in terms of culture as the primary focus of anthropology, of its interdependence with other realms, such as the social and the psychological, and of its relative autonomy with respect to these realms; Bakker, *Enough Profundities Already*, 20-21, 33-34, 105-107.

43. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 93-94

circumstances. His solution is to treat the cultural and social aspects of a people's reality "as independently variable yet mutually interdependent factors".⁴⁴ Much less developed in Geertz's work, though, is an account of how the psychological aspect interacts with the cultural and social.⁴⁵ I shall return to this point in a subsequent article looking at various critiques of Geertz's approach. For now, having seen the alternatives approaches he regarded as inadequate, I shall turn to an account of Geertz's own methodology for the study of culture.

HOW TO STUDY CULTURE

One way to gain an understanding of Geertz's methodology for the study of culture is to look at three important concepts he employs at different points of his career: local knowledge, thick description, and the analogy between culture and a text.

a. Local Knowledge

A key aspect of Geertz's approach to the study of culture is captured by the title of his second anthology of essays, *Local Knowledge*. The term can be taken in two ways, both of them pertinent to Geertz's approach. Firstly, it can be taken to refer to the level at which anthropology operates: that ethnography should not focus on grand, comparative schemata or overarching evolutionary accounts embracing all cultures, but on detailed knowledge of particular cultures. Geertz's definition does not presume that cultures are necessarily defined geographically. But whatever the focus of study – a geographically distinct people, an ethnic group dispersed across the world, a global religious symbol – he insists on paying close attention to particularities, to the circumstantial. He strongly resists any attempt to come to a situation with so much theory or so many expectations derived from experience in another culture that one fails to take seriously the peculiarities of each context. Hence his concern with Lévi-Strauss' focus on universal structures understood to be common to all cultures, or indeed with any approach beginning from *a priori* principles. Anthropologists commit themselves to the concrete, the particular, the

44. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 144.

45. For example, at one point, Geertz notes both the social and psychological forms of reductionism; he speaks only of social reductionism in the remainder of that analysis. And while he quotes Peter Sorokin's inclusion of the personality system together with the social and cultural systems as three interrelated but irreducible elements of any concrete system of social action, when he goes on to apply this approach to a case study, he states quite clearly that he will be attempting to examine the cultural aspects and the social aspects – leaving aside, without explanation, the psychological personality aspects (*Interpretation of Cultures*, 145-46).

microscopic – they are the “miniaturists of the social sciences”.⁴⁶ To be sure, general knowledge can be discovered, but only by passing through, rather than hovering over, a “dense thicket of particulars”.⁴⁷ A key criterion of the value of a cultural interpretation is how well-grounded it is in the actual social context in which the culture is situated.⁴⁸

This is not to say that Geertz sees no value in cross-cultural comparisons. In fact, the juxtaposition of elements from different cultural settings is one of his trademarks.⁴⁹ But in doing so he does not seek easy generalisations or the smoothing over of differences. He decries the reduction of the richness of particular meanings to “a drab parade of generalities”.⁵⁰ Ethnographic comparisons, properly chosen, should highlight nuances, drawing attention to features which do not exist in one or other setting, or which exist in different ways in each situation. One makes “specific inquiries into specific differences”, getting a feel for how the land lies by developing “circumstantial comparisons”.⁵¹ Even in the absence of overt comparisons, he is aware that one implicitly yet inevitably compares the mindset of the culture one is studying with one’s own mindset, which, though always a possible source of bias, can also help one to raise further questions for inquiry by directing attention to aspects of the local culture that the locals might take for granted.⁵²

In comparing two cultures, Geertz is not interested in surface similarities but in ensuring that the full distinctiveness of each culture is maintained, while at the same time allowing the two to shed light on one another so that each becomes less enigmatic and better understood.⁵³ This strong emphasis on cultural particularity, held in tension with the possibility of meaningful comparison, results in what Rosaldo calls a “near paradox”, and what Geertz himself speaks of in the language of paradox, calling it the comparison of incomparables.⁵⁴ Perhaps an example would help clarify what he intends. In comparing Morocco and Indonesia, Geertz sees no point in simply asserting that Islam is the major religion in each country; in fact, he sees some danger

46. Geertz, *Islam Observed*, 4.

47. Geertz, *Islam Observed*, 22.

48. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 325-26.

49. Renato Rosaldo, “A Note on Geertz as a Cultural Essayist”, in Sherry B. Ortner (ed.), *The Fate of ‘Culture’: Geertz and Beyond* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 32-34.

50. Geertz, *Negara*, 103.

51. Clifford Geertz, “The World in Pieces: Culture and Politics at the End of the Century,” in *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) 223.

52. Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 181.

53. Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 233.

54. Rosaldo, “Geertz as Cultural Essayist”, 32; Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 234; Geertz, *After the Fact*, 49.

in this, for it papers over the distinctiveness of each one's form of Islam. Though people in both places would claim to hold an Islamic conception of life, it turns out to be rather different in each case:

On the Indonesian side, inwardness, imperturbability, patience, poise, sensibility, aestheticism, elitism, and an almost obsessive self-effacement, the radical dissolution of individuality; on the Moroccan side, activism, fervor, impetuosity, nerve, toughness, moralism, populism, and an almost obsessive self-assertion, the radical intensification of individuality.⁵⁵

Nonetheless, once these distinctive features have been described and understood, in part through the contrast between them, similarities at another level can be noted. In this case, Geertz traces similar patterns of response to the secularising movements of the preceding 150 years, including the scripturalist movement which led to an ideologising of religion in each case.⁵⁶

Still within this first meaning of local knowledge lies another emphasis in Geertz's work – his awareness of the importance of contextualising any cultural element within the culture as a whole.⁵⁷ A cultural symbol or ritual or action can remain opaque to our understanding even when it has been described in detail and all of its particularity noted. We need to look to the local context and find ways in which the symbol is actually connected with other aspects of the culture or of the social setting – the ways in which people have situated things in a comprehensible, meaningful, intelligible frame.⁵⁸ Geertz sets this forth as a general procedure:

Practically, two approaches, two sorts of understanding, must converge if one is to interpret a culture: a description of particular symbolic forms (a ritual gesture, an hieratic statue) as defined expressions; and a contextualization of such forms within the whole structure of meaning of which they are a part and in terms of which they get their definition. This is, of course, nothing but the by-now-familiar trajectory of the hermeneutic circle: a dialectical tacking between the parts which comprise the whole and the whole which motivates the parts, in such a way as to bring parts and whole simultaneously into view.⁵⁹

This concern for the whole structure of meaning of which a cultural element is a part leads us to our second meaning of local knowledge for Geertz. Here it refers to what the anthropologist sets out to study –

55. Geertz, *Islam Observed*, 34.

56. Geertz, *Islam Observed*, 104-105.

57. Rosaldo, "Geertz as Cultural Essayist", 31-32.

58. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 26, 30.

59. Geertz, *Negara*, 103. For a similar statement about dialectical tacking, see *Local Knowledge*, 69.

the cultural knowledge of the locals, i.e., the way in which they view the world.⁶⁰ It is precisely that whole structure of meaning, what Geertz calls their “imaginative universe”, which ethnographers seek to grasp.⁶¹ This is another aspect of Geertz’s differentiation of his approach from that of Lévi-Strauss. Where structuralism seeks to understand a culture in terms of universal paradigms, Geertz is ever attentive to the particular ways in which particular peoples understand their particular worlds. He describes this approach as “actor-oriented” – that is, our concern is with “the constructions [peoples] place upon what they live through, the formulae they use to define what happens to them[,]... the interpretations to which [they] subject their experience”.⁶² Thick description, a term I shall elucidate further below, seeks to set down “the meaning particular social actions have for the actors whose actions they are”.⁶³ This is “the native’s point of view”, key constituents of which are those “experience-near” concepts which the local people “naturally and effortlessly use to define what [they] see, feel, think, imagine, and so on”. These are to be distinguished from the “experience-distant” concepts of the academic specialists, used to advance the scientific or philosophical aims of their realm of discourse.⁶⁴

If local knowledge, in both these senses, is what is sought, Geertz presents, in theory and in his practice, a number of particular means for attaining this aim. One is the semantic analysis of native concepts – examining the local language to uncover the kinds of concepts they most highly value and utilise.⁶⁵ Geertz draws much fruit from such an analysis of notions of personhood in Java, Bali and Morocco,⁶⁶ of the language used in economic transactions in the Moroccan bazaar,⁶⁷ and of legal terminology in various cultures.⁶⁸ Another method Geertz uses to gaining local knowledge is the examination of what Bakker calls “collective interaction” – “specific occasions where a number of people interact with each other in a shared and limited space being involved in the same activity..., though not necessarily...as one, collective actor”.⁶⁹ Examples are Geertz’s studies of the collective interactions of

60. Vincent P. Pecora, “The Limits of Local Knowledge”, in H. Aram Veesser (ed.), *The New Historicism* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 246.

61. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 13.

62. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 15.

63. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 27.

64. Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 57.

65. Bakker, *Enough Profundities Already*, 51-53.

66. Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 59-68.

67. Clifford Geertz, “Suq: The Bazaar Economy in Sefrou”, in Clifford Geertz, Hildred Geertz, and Lawrence Rosen (eds.), *Meaning and Order in Moroccan Society: Three Essays in Cultural Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 197-233.

68. Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 184-215.

69. Bakker, *Enough Profundities Already*, 49.

the Moroccan bazaar,⁷⁰ a problematic funeral,⁷¹ a cremation ritual in the pre-colonial Balinese state,⁷² and the meetings that followed a protest against irregularities in a local election in a Javanese town.⁷³ In all of these, Geertz is able to elucidate important cultural meanings as revealed in the various interactions of different actors. Bakker also notes an important subcategory here – that of recurrent events with a persisting form, such as the cockfight, or dramatic performances (the depiction of the battle between *Rangda* and *Barong*,⁷⁴ or the *wajang* puppet plays⁷⁵), or the *slametan*, a Javanese communal feast.⁷⁶ These serve to some degree as “self-interpretations”, revealing to the participants in a culture some of the important meanings of that culture.⁷⁷

b. Thick Description

The move described above, from simple description of a cultural element to situating it within the webs of meanings which form the culture, is what Geertz means by thick description. He borrows the idea from Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle. Ryle uses various examples or thought-experiments to explain the difference between a thin description and a thick one. A thin description is superficial, the sort of thing one might capture on film. It is unable to distinguish, for example, between a practice golf shot and one played in an actual game,⁷⁸ or between the same sentence spoken as a lie, as a translation from a sentence in another language, or by an actor in a play.⁷⁹ A fuller, thick description takes into account the intentions of the agents. A key example for Ryle, made famous by Geertz, is that of the wink and the twitch.⁸⁰ Thin descriptions of the two would be identical – the rapid closing and re-opening of one eyelid. Yet a full, thick description would need to take into account the fact that the twitch is unintentional, while the wink is intentional, so that they have very different meanings. One can go on, as Ryle does, to complicate the thought experiment further, with reference to someone parodying a

70. Geertz, “Suq”, 197-233.

71. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 173-84.

72. Geertz uses this example twice: *Local Knowledge*, 37-39; *Negara*, 98-102.

73. Clifford Geertz, *The Social History of an Indonesian Town* (Cambridge MA: The M.I.T. Press, 1965) 153-210.

74. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 114-118.

75. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 132-140.

76. Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 11-15.

77. Bakker, *Enough Profundities Already*, 50-51.

78. Gilbert Ryle, “Thinking and Reflecting”, in *Collected Papers: Volume II: Collected Essays 1929-1968* (London: Hutchinson, 1971) 474-75.

79. Gilbert Ryle, “The Thinking of Thoughts: What Is ‘Le Penseur’ Doing?”, in *Collected Papers: Volume II*, 484-85.

80. Ryle, “The Thinking of Thoughts”, 480-83.

wink, or beyond that, rehearsing the parody of a wink. Thin descriptions of all these actions would be identical. But all four – the twitch, the wink, the parody, and the rehearsal of the parody – would suggest very different thick descriptions, since thick description takes into account not just external actions but also human intentions. Each adds another layer of complexity to the previous one, so that by the time we get to the rehearsal of a parody of a wink, we have a many-layered sandwich, with only the bottom slice being the thin description and all the layers needing to be taken into account for a thick description.⁸¹

Geertz applies this basic understanding of thick description to cultural anthropology. It cannot be content to remain on the surface of the cultures it studies but must embrace both description and interpretation.⁸² The ethnographer cannot simply count the number of pigs in the various households in a village, see whether married couples generally live with the man's tribe or the woman's, or ask whether the chieftom is a hereditary position. While these determinations provide useful data, and may require various insights at their own level of description, anthropology proper looks for more. It does not seek scientific laws in a range of hard data, but rather meanings in human social action and life; culture is not a power to which social processes can be causally attributed, but a context within which they can be intelligibly described.⁸³ Ethnography is defined by the kind of intellectual effort it is, that is, an "elaborate venture in...thick description," which takes us beyond the mere transcribing of texts, taking of genealogies and keeping of a diary. All of these are "I-am-a-camera" types of thin description.⁸⁴ For Geertz, the anthropological kind of intellectual effort moves beyond this to the sort of account in which the phenomenon can be "intelligibly – that is, thickly – described".⁸⁵ In fact, for Geertz, "ethnography is thick description".⁸⁶ This kind of research is about finding one's feet in an unfamiliar context and then formulating the basis on which one imagines one has found them⁸⁷ – grasping complex conceptual structures, and then rendering them.⁸⁸ Thick descriptions seek to illuminate the meaning of social actions for the actors.⁸⁹ Geertz is after construal, explication,⁹⁰ grasp – i.e., determining what the import of some cultural element is,

81. Ryle, "The Thinking of Thoughts", 482.

82. Bakker, *Enough Profundities Already*, 27.

83. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 5, 14.

84. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 6.

85. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 14.

86. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 9-10; italics added.

87. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 13.

88. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 10.

89. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 27.

90. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 5, 9.

what is being said.⁹¹ An ethnographic analysis is worthwhile to the degree that it clarifies what is going on in a situation, reducing the puzzlement.⁹²

These varied ways of formulating what thick description means reinforce one another and build up a picture of what the anthropological enterprise amounts to for Geertz. In the face of such a wealth of clear statements, it is surprising to find in the very same essay a significant element of confusion, and precisely in relation to the meaning of thick description. The major evidence of this confusion is the one, concrete ethnographic example that Geertz offers as a way of illuminating what thick description means in anthropology. It is an informant's account of an event occurring in the early twentieth century, in the early days of French rule in Morocco, an account reported to Geertz during his fieldwork there in 1968. For Geertz, it manifests how apt Ryle's account of winks and twitches is for anthropology, presenting as it does "an image only too exact of the sort of piled-up structures of inference and implication through which [ethnographers are] continually trying to pick [their] way".⁹³ While the account represents "ethnographic description of...the most elemental sort", Geertz sees it as "extraordinarily 'thick'".⁹⁴

And therein lies the problem. For when we actually read the text, we find nothing of the explication, the grasp of import, the interpretation, the uncovering of conceptual structures, that Geertz has led us to understand to be the defining elements of thick description. Let's look at just one paragraph, which gives us a feel for the whole. The scene occurs after a man's house has been attacked, his two Jewish visitors have been killed, and his goods stolen:

He [Cohen] went up to the fort, then, to have his wounds dressed, and complained to the local commandant, one Captain Dumari, saying he wanted his *'ar* – i.e., four or five times the value of the merchandise stolen from him. The robbers were from a tribe which had not yet submitted to French authority and were in open rebellion against it, and he wanted authorization to go with his *mezrag*-holder, the Marmusha tribal *sheikh*, to collect the indemnity that, under traditional rules, he had coming to him. Captain Dumari couldn't officially give him permission to do this, because of the French prohibition of the *mezrag* relationship, but he gave him verbal authorization, saying, "If you get killed, it's your problem."⁹⁵

91. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 10.

92. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 16. Geertz also refers to this kind of analysis as "close reading" (*Interpretation of Cultures*, 453).

93. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 7.

94. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 9.

95. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 8.

In this paragraph, typical of the whole account, we have a fairly thin description. It is pretty much an “I-am-a-camera” type account which relates, with minimal embellishment, what happened to Cohen, who said what to whom, and who did what. Yet Geertz suggests that even at this factual, hard rock base, we are already explicating.⁹⁶ There is an element of truth in this claim insofar as no observer is perfectly attentive to the data at hand and no two observers will write of it in exactly the same terms. In recording any event, we choose what to include, we express ourselves in our own particular idiom, and we may fail to notice aspects of what is going on because of bias. We may also offer more explicit interpretive comments along the way, as this writer does by giving a definitions of *‘ar*. But even taking these sorts of factors into account, the above passage remains far from the kind of explication that Geertz speaks of in all the varied ways in which he outlines thick description, as noted above. There is little illumination of the meaning of the action for the actors, little reduction of puzzlement, little clarification of what is going on, little sense of how one might find one’s feet in the setting described. There is no hint of that level of anthropological analysis which Geertz carries out so powerfully in his analysis of the cockfight, the kind of analysis which involves “sorting out the structures of signification...and determining their social ground and import”,⁹⁷ taking us to the heart of the matter.⁹⁸

As he moves on from his presentation of the Cohen story, Geertz seems to be aware of this distinction. Having called the account “extraordinarily ‘thick’” in itself, he also points to thicker depths of analysis which are called for. He tells us that sorting out the structures of significance in this case would begin with the distinction of the different frames of interpretation represented by the Jewish, Berber, and French cultures, and would move on to show how their interaction led to the situation he has described.⁹⁹ Thus, while Geertz claims that the distinction between description and explanation is relative in any science, and even more relative when it is transmuted into the interpretive sciences,¹⁰⁰ he does seem to recognise such a distinction – between the text and the sorting out of its significance, between the account of the theft and sheep raid, on the one hand, and the attempt at “figuring out what all that rigmarole with the sheep is about” on the other.¹⁰¹ And as we saw in the previous section, in *Negara*, published some seven years later, he speaks quite consciously of “two sorts of understanding” in the act of interpretation – description of particular

96. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 9.

97. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 9.

98. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 18.

99. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 9.

100. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 27.

101. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 18.

symbolic forms, and their contextualisation in the whole structure of meaning so that they can be comprehended.¹⁰²

The term “thick description”, then, is used of two different realities by Geertz – the kind of account he offers of Cohen’s story, and that which would analyse the meaning of that story in terms of social farce and confusion of tongues. At the very least, these lie on the far ends of the same spectrum. The usage of thick description to refer to the simple, largely descriptive account goes against the whole thrust of his paper. Rather than referring to interpretation, thick description here refers to a highly detailed, phenomenological description of a social action or cultural form. This is what he calls a “protracted” description, one strong on details: for example, Geertz notes that a really good ethnographer would have noted the kind of sheep involved. This sort of description is the condition of the possibility of good interpretation, presenting the mind “with bodied stuff on which to feed”. It is the kind of material which results from “long-term...and almost obsessively fine-comb field study in confined contexts”.¹⁰³ It inscribes accounts which can be reconsulted at future times.¹⁰⁴ It is the kind of “descriptive interpretation” which Geertz sets in contrast to “theoretical formulations”.¹⁰⁵

By this analysis of Geertz’s usage, thick description embraces both an initial, detailed account of the cultural situation and context, and the further efforts to understand what has been described. These two usages highlight, in fact, two key aspects of his work summed up in the titles of his two major anthologies. Calling the Cohen story extraordinarily thick description points to the sort of detailed phenomenology he commends under the rubric of “local knowledge”, while calling the unpacking of the conceptual structures of such stories thick description points to the important level of understanding of meanings embodied in symbols he commends under the rubric of the interpretation of cultures.

c. Culture as Text

At one point, Geertz identifies thick description with inscription,¹⁰⁶ a key concept in his view of culture as a text to be interpreted. To this analogy for culture I now turn.

Geertz names Paul Ricoeur among the philosophers – alongside Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Gadamer – whose work has penetrated the social sciences and influenced them away from a purely

102. Geertz, *Negara*, 103.

103. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 23

104. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 19.

105. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 30.

106. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 27.

technological conception of their role.¹⁰⁷ It is primarily from Ricoeur that Geertz receives the notion of treating a cultural system or phenomenon as a text to be interpreted. This metaphor seems to appear first for Geertz in "Deep Play", originally published in 1972. He speaks of the Balinese cockfight, as we noted above, as a self-interpretation – "a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves".¹⁰⁸ Thus, it can be understood by seeing it on the analogy of a text – as opposed to an organism to be dissected, a symptom to be diagnosed, a code to be deciphered, or a system to be ordered.¹⁰⁹ Like a text, a cultural form is a means of saying something about something, a phrase Geertz takes from Aristotle (via Ricoeur).¹¹⁰ And if a culture is like a text, the understanding of a culture is similar to the understanding of a text in that both require a hermeneutic approach to discover what is being said. Ricoeur sees this as an expansion of Freud's treatment of psychotherapeutic analysis as interpretation – the substitution of an intelligible text for the initially unintelligible one of the dream. It is also in line with Freud's understanding that the principles of textual interpretation can be applied, not just to dreams or neurotic symptoms, but to any set of signs, such as art, ritual, myth, or belief.¹¹¹

In relation to the cockfight, using the text analogy involves seeing how this gaming ritual might use emotion for cognitive purposes – how the emotions displayed in the cockfight build up Balinese society and the individuals within it.¹¹² The cultural text displays what would happen, what life would be like, if it were art. It functions in a way similar to the way *Macbeth* might function for those steeped in Western culture – it enables those engaged in the text to see a dimension of their own subjectivity.¹¹³ And by manifesting to the Balinese their own subjectivity, it also helps create and maintain that subjectivity.¹¹⁴ Thus, to use a concept Geertz employs elsewhere,¹¹⁵ the cockfight is an

107. Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 3-4. Ricoeur repays the compliment, acknowledging his debt to Geertz in helping him articulate his understanding of symbol and of the phenomenology of social existence, in Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 1:57-58, 261 n.17. Ricoeur also devotes a lecture in another series to Geertz's treatment of ideology, in Paul Ricoeur, "Geertz", in George H. Taylor (ed.), *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 254-66.

108. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 448.

109. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 448.

110. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 448 n.36. The reference is to Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970) 20-28.

111. Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 25-26.

112. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 449.

113. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 450. Geertz also compares the function of the cockfight to that of *King Lear* or *Crime and Punishment* for other peoples (p. 443).

114. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 451.

115. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 93-94.

example of a symbolic system serving as both model *of* reality and model *for* reality. By the end of "Deep Play", culture-as-text has become not just a helpful way of approaching the study of culture, but almost a definition, by way of metaphor, of culture itself: "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."¹¹⁶

The metaphor of text appears next in the essay, "Thick Description". Geertz refers again to Ricoeur, this time drawing on his 1971 paper, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text".¹¹⁷ Here the philosopher reflects on the distinction between speech and written text, and how this might be applied to meaningful action as a text-analogue. In any speech act, there is a difference between the speaking and what he calls the "said" of speaking – between the speech event, precisely as event, and its meaning. This meaning might be "inscribed" by being written in a text.¹¹⁸ So, analogously, in any meaningful action, there is a difference between the event itself and the meaning of the event, which can be detached from the event and fixed in history.¹¹⁹ This fixation of meaning happens when a social action or event "leaves its mark" on its time, "inscribing" itself in a manner analogous to that in which a speech event is inscribed in writing.¹²⁰ The action develops consequences of its own in history, to some extent independent of the agent of the action. Of course, in complex social actions, it can be very difficult, as any historian knows, to ascribe consequences in any precise way to the actions of particular agents. Nevertheless, Ricoeur states, action does leave its mark, its trace, when it contributes to the emergence of patterns or of lasting effects, when human deeds become institutions, broadly defined.¹²¹ As Gulick puts it, "Social action is autonomous, a publicly available, historical record with an importance which transcends its relevance to its initial situation."¹²²

In various parts of "Thick Description" Geertz concurs with this basic parallel as outlined by Ricoeur. After all, it is the same parallel he himself has used in "Deep Play", and the one he draws upon some years later in "Blurred Genres".¹²³ The agent is the cultural group, the

116. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 452.

117. Paul Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text", *Social Research* 38.3 (1971) 529-62. Geertz refers to this work at Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 19. He does not offer a citation, but the quotation he uses is from page 532.

118. Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text", 531-32.

119. Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text", 537-543.

120. Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text", 540-541.

121. Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text", 542-543.

122. Walter B. Gulick, "Reconnecting Geertz's Middle World", in *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 71.1 (1988):136.

123. Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 31.

text is some cultural symbol or form into which the cultural group has invested meaning, and the reader is the anthropologist. "Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of 'construct a reading of') a manuscript...written...in transient examples of shaped behaviour."¹²⁴ The ethnographer, the "reader", needs to pay attention to social expressions, social behaviour, social discourse, symbolic acts, since it is here that meaning has been inscribed by people within the culture.¹²⁵ The specifically cultural question to be asked of social behaviour is what its import is – what it is that is being said by the actors in this social action.¹²⁶ At this level, Geertz is simply applying Ricoeur's suggestion about the understanding of social action to anthropology in particular: the cultural group "inscribes" a cultural meaning in a cultural symbol which is then "read" by the ethnographer.

So far, so clear. But while Geertz goes along with Ricoeur's parallel in some places, at the very point at which he actually quotes Ricoeur, he heads in a different direction. (This is perhaps what he means when he says that the whole idea of the inscription of action is borrowed from Ricoeur and is "somewhat twisted".)¹²⁷ For here he takes up Ricoeur's concept of inscription, not to look at the inscription of social action in a cultural form, a text analogue, but its inscription, by the anthropologist, in various written accounts, actual texts. It is no longer about a cultural symbol fixing the meanings of a cultural group in lasting ways, in a way analogous to the fixing of the meaning of a speech act in a text. Now it is about actual texts – texts written by the ethnographer, to fix the "said" of social discourse in lasting form and rescue it from the "perishing occasions" of the social action.¹²⁸ Geertz has moved out of the realm of analogy, shifting from culture as analogous to a text to ethnography as actually a text.¹²⁹ To put it another way, in "Deep Play", the text was the cockfight itself; but here, the text is the essay, "Deep Play".

Moreover, even this second sense of inscription is not univocal. This is not surprising since, as noted above, Geertz equates inscription with thick description, and we have noticed the two levels of meaning for

124. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 10, cf. 17.

125. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 5, 17, 26.

126. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 10.

127. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 19. Gulick points out further ways in which Geertz is dependent on Ricoeur, beyond his explicit references – for example, Geertz's contention that ethnography is about guessing at meanings and validating those guesses (Gulick, "Reconnecting", 134-35).

128. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 20. Here we find a close parallel to Lonergan's distinction between the history that is written about, that happens, and the history that is written, where the latter seeks to express knowledge of the former (Lonergan, *Method*, 175).

129. Bakker also notes these two meanings of inscription in Geertz (Bakker, *Enough Profundities Already*, 55).

that term. Here, too, in relation to the inscription of social action in an ethnographer's texts, Geertz points to two different sorts of texts. Firstly, there is the simple inscription of what happened in a social discourse, equivalent to the descriptive sense of thick description noted above:

The ethnographer 'inscribes' social discourse; *he writes it down*. In so doing, he turns it from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted. The sheikh is long dead, killed in the process of being, as the French called it, 'pacified'; 'Captain Dumari,' his pacifier, lives, retired to his souvenirs, in the south of France; and Cohen went last year, part refugee, part pilgrim, part dying patriarch, 'home' to Israel. But what they, in my extended sense, 'said' to one another on an Atlas plateau sixty years ago is – very far from perfectly – preserved for study.¹³⁰

As we saw earlier, in this particular case what is inscribed in Geertz's transcript from Cohen, what is preserved for study, is a fairly thin description of what occurred on that Atlas plateau.

Secondly, the term "inscription", like its correlate thick description, embraces more than a simple account of what was said or done or seen. For what we inscribe is the thought, the gist, the meaning of the speaking, of the speech event. The ethnographer writes, and what he or she writes is not just observation, but a mix of observation, recording and analysis. We write, not "raw social discourse", but what our informants have led us into understanding. This involves guessing at meanings, and so is more than a simple account of what happened.¹³¹ This view of inscription is confirmed later, when Geertz equates it with uncovering the conceptual structures that inform social actions and setting down the meaning of those actions for the actors¹³² – what he elsewhere calls grasping the structures and then rendering them.¹³³

Geertz's account of culture-as-text, therefore, is not univocal throughout his work. In "Deep Play" and "Blurred Genres" it is clear that he is referring to the way people inscribe meaning in symbolic forms and suggesting that this process is analogous to the inscription of the meaning of speech in a written text. In "Thick Description" he follows this same usage in some passages. But there he also speaks of the process of inscription as the work of the anthropologist interpreting the symbolic form in his or her written work. He shifts from the text as the cultural element being written about to the text as

130. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 19.

131. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 19-20.

132. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 27.

133. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 10.

what is actually written. Moreover, within this second meaning, Geertz sometimes sees this text as a basic description of social behaviours and events, with little interpretation, as in the account of the Cohen incident – a record to be consulted and perhaps interpreted later. At other times, though, the ethnographic text is a full-fledged interpretive work, as in his analysis of the cockfight. These two kinds of texts represent two meanings he gives to the terms inscription and thick description.¹³⁴

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR THEOLOGY

On the basis of this account, we can see the strength of Geertz as a dialogue partner for theology within anthropology.

Firstly, Geertz's approach is firmly grounded in an anthropological understanding of culture, sensitive to the diversity of cultures, to the importance of the local and the particular. Such an emphasis is a helpful reminder for theologians seeking to operate consistently from an empirical view of culture and not to slip back into a classicist view.¹³⁵ Implicitly, it provides a critique of any simplistic equation of the Gospel with the cultural forms in which it has been inculturated to date and represents a challenge to us to operate from historical consciousness. For, as Lonergan points out, a grasp of the empirical notion of culture "leads to a grasp of what is meant by a person's historicity".¹³⁶

Secondly, Geertz highlights the pervasiveness of the shared meanings and symbols of a culture – the way in which they affect every aspect of life, from the arts to cockfights, from political rallies to literature, from funerals to slogans. Theology, perhaps especially in its pastoral aspects, needs to take seriously the ways in which the meanings of individuals are pervasively shaped, in ways conscious and unconscious, by the collective meanings of the cultural groupings in which they are immersed. As hinted at earlier, Geertz puts so much emphasis on the cultural factor in human life that he pays no attention to interiority; in fact, he denies the possibility of an adequate account of human mental or interior life.¹³⁷ While this represents one area of his work which is problematic for theology, it does not detract from the

134. Bakker, in his comments on Geertz's use of Ricoeur, also notes this unclarity (Bakker, *Enough Profundities Already*, 147-48, n.9).

135. For the shift from a classicist to an empirical view of culture, see Lonergan, *Method*, xi, 301-302. For a more extended treatment, see Bernard Lonergan, "The Transition from a Classicist World-View to Historical-Mindedness", in William F. J. Ryan and Bernard J. Tyrrell (eds.), *A Second Collection* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974) 1-9.

136. Bernard Lonergan, "Revolution in Catholic Theology", in *A Second Collection*, 233.

137. Geertz scoffs at "ghostly happenings in the head" (*Interpretation of Cultures*, 214), "unobservable mental stuff" (*Negara*, 135), the idea of some "secret grotto in the head" (*Interpretation of Cultures*, 362), and the idea that thought consists of "happenings in the head" (*Interpretation of Cultures*, 77-78).

value of his strong account of the pervasiveness and power of cultural forces. It is precisely the awareness of this pervasiveness and power that resulted in the classic call of Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* for the evangelisation not simply of individuals but of cultures.¹³⁸

Thirdly, we noted at the outset Lonergan's definition of theology as mediating "between a cultural matrix and the significance and the role of religion in that matrix".¹³⁹ By this account, theology will need to be able to understand both the cultural matrix itself and the particular place of religion within that matrix, and here cultural anthropology can be an ally. Any religion has cultural dimensions; precisely as a religion, there are communal aspects beyond the personal religious experiences of its devotees. As Lonergan notes elsewhere, religion "by its word...enters the world mediated by meaning"¹⁴⁰ and this is precisely the world of cultural meanings. Any anthropological methodology drawn upon to aid the mediating role of theology will not only need to embrace a view of culture which puts meaning front and centre, which Geertz's clearly does, but will also need to see religion as a significant element of many cultural matrices. On this point, too, Geertz fits the bill. Though not a believer himself,¹⁴¹ he took religion seriously in his anthropology. As we saw earlier, he argued against anthropologies which sought to explain religion simply in terms of its social or psychological functions. Moreover, his essay "Religion as a Cultural System"¹⁴² is recognised as offering one of modern anthropology's strongest attempts to compose a definition of religion, making him one of the most talked about theoreticians of religion in the latter part of the twentieth century.¹⁴³

138. Paul VI, "Evangelii Nuntiandi", in *The Teachings of Pope Paul VI*, 1975 (Vatican City: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 1975) #20.

139. Lonergan, *Method*, xi.

140. Lonergan, *Method*, 112.

141. Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968) 99.

142. Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *Interpretation of Cultures*, 87-125.

143. Michael Lambek, "Opening Frameworks: Introduction", in Michael Lambek (ed.), *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, Blackwell Anthologies in Social and Cultural Anthropology (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2002) 19-20. Two of Geertz's ethnographic studies, *The Religion of Java* (New York: The Free Press, 1960) and *Islam Observed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), focus on religion, as do a number of his essays besides the major one already noted, "Religion as a Cultural System". See, for example, "Religious Belief and Economic Behavior in a Central Javanese Town: Some Preliminary Considerations", *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 4 (1955-56) 134-58; "Modernization in a Muslim Society: The Indonesian Case", in Robert N. Bellah (ed.), *Religion and Progress in Modern Asia* (New York: The Free Press, 1965) 93-108; "Religion: Anthropological Study", in David L. Sills (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: The Macmillan Company and the Free Press, 1968) 398-406; "Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols", *Interpretation of Cultures*, 126-41; "'Internal Conversion' in Contemporary Bali", *Interpretation of Cultures*, 170-89; "Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example", *Interpretation of Cultures*, 142-69; "Mysteries of Islam", *The New York Review of Books* (1975) 18, 20, 22, 24, 26; "Conjuring with Islam", *The*

Finally, perhaps the most important potential impact of Geertz's approach on theology is in the actual analyses of cultural elements which it facilitates. His interpretive and semiotic method seeks to enter deeply into social phenomena and customs so as to discern the meanings embodied in them. Reaching this level of meaning is essential for genuine inculturation, of which Pedro Arrupe's definition remains classic:

[I]nculturation is the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular local cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question (this alone would be no more than a superficial adaptation) but becomes a principle that animates, directs, and unifies a culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about 'a new creation'.¹⁴⁴

Understandings of inculturation which see it as more than a "superficial adaptation" of the Gospel will seek to reach the level of meaning that Geertz sees as central to the anthropologist's task, a task for which he provides helpful tools. His whole approach is about interpreting, about sorting out meanings and signification, about offering thick descriptions which help us interpret cultural texts and arrive at the local knowledge contained therein.

One example of such interpretation may highlight its value. The footprint (*tjina*) is a common motif in contemporary Western Desert Aboriginal art.¹⁴⁵ A superficial inculturation, hardly worthy of the name, might note the use of this motif in local artwork and ensure that it is used in paintings of Christian scenes so that the art has an Aboriginal "flavour". To go deeper than this, one needs to raise the question of meaning: to ask how this motif connects with other cultural meanings and symbols and how it sits within the whole matrix of cultural realities, so that each of these sheds light on the others. This is exactly the approach suggested by Geertz when he speaks of "tacking between" the part and the whole, as we noted earlier, and in his insistence, in relation to the analysis of art as a cultural system, that art be studied in relation to other cultural concerns which "art may serve, or reflect, or challenge, or describe, but does not itself create".¹⁴⁶ Using this approach, I have elsewhere examined the *tjina* motif and drawn attention to various cultural meanings linked to footprints in Western Desert cultures: the significance of the Land being marked, including

New York Review of Books (1982) 25-28; "The Pinch of Destiny: Religion as Experience, Meaning, Identity, Power", in *Available Light*, 167-86.

144. Pedro Arrupe, "Letter to the Whole Society on Inculturation", *Studies in the International Apostolate of Jesuits* 7.1 (1978) 2.

145. Robin Koning, "Walking the Land: Inculturation and Footprints in the Western Desert of Australia", *Toronto Journal of Theology* 21.1 (2005) 91-103.

146. Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 96.

its marking by footprints; the uniqueness of footprints and the way Western Desert people see them as intimately connected to the person who made them; and the importance of the theme of journey for Desert people who were traditionally nomads.¹⁴⁷ I go on to suggest ways in which this awareness of the importance of footprints might inform the way in which one presents the Gospel to these cultures. As I note in that article, these are merely suggestions which would need to be tried out in the context being discussed. But the point here is that a theoretical analysis aided by Geertz's work can open up a range of cultural insights to be brought to such testing.

My sympathetic presentation of Geertz's approach to culture is not meant to suggest there is nothing problematic in his work, either on its own terms or on theology's terms. In a subsequent article, I will address some of the critiques that have been raised about Geertz's work, highlighting the difficulties surrounding any account of culture that seeks to be both interpretive and empirical. Here, though, I have simply systematised the various strands of Geertz's approach to make his work more accessible, and have sought to show why his methodology has caught the attention of numerous theologians seeking to take culture seriously within theology, and might continue to be of value for that analysis of culture which is a key part of contemporary theology.

147. Koning, "Walking the Land", 98.