

Is Scientology A Religion?

by

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I. PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND

As a sociologist with a specialization in the study of religion, I have been asked to address the question "Is Scientology a religion?" In answering that question, I am not pronouncing on the truth or falsity of Scientology. Rather, I am considering whether Scientology meets the criteria commonly used to define a religion. These criteria are not entirely clear-cut: various writers have offered different definitions. These range all the way from that of W.G. Runciman,¹ who uses the term as synonymous with "ideology," to that of Werner Cohn,² who argues that the English word "religion" is so complex and so culture-specific that it is inappropriate to use it with reference to any aspect of non-Western or non-Christianized cultures.

Most scholars in this field would nevertheless agree that a religion is a system of beliefs and practices with a supernatural, sacred or transcendent point of reference. Consistent with this starting point, it is possible to identify various characteristics found in most, if not all, recognized religions. The more fully a particular system of beliefs and practices displays these characteristics, the more unequivocally one can regard it as a religion.

In identifying the characteristics typically found in religions, I shall make use of the framework put forward by Ninian Smart, one of the leading scholars of the world's religions.³ As I have used the broad features of this framework in some of my previous writings,⁴ it is not being adopted merely for the purposes of the present study.

I am not a Scientologist. In formulating my conclusions, I have made a detailed study of Scientology publications, as well as observing activities at the Church of Scientology in Sydney and interviewing some of the participants. I am also familiar with various sociological studies of Scientology in other parts of the world.

The main Scientology publications I have studied are the following, arranged in order of their dates of first publication:

- Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health (1950)
- Dianetics: The Evolution of a Science (1950)
- Science of Survival (1951)
- Advanced Procedure and Axioms (1951)
- Scientology: A History of Man (1952)
- Scientology 8-80 (1952)
- Scientology 8-8008 (1952)
- The Phoenix Lectures (presented 1954, published 1968)
- The Creation of Human Ability (1955)
- Scientology: The Fundamentals of Thought (1956)
- Have You Lived Before This Life? (1960, revised and expanded 1977)
- Introduction to Scientology Ethics (1968, revised and updated 1989)
- Scientology 0-8: The Book of Basics (1970)
- The Background and Ceremonies of the Church of Scientology (1970)
- Mission into Time (1973, an expanded version of A Test of Whole Track Recall, 1968)
- The Way to Happiness (1981)
- Understanding the E-Meter (1982, revised 1988)
- What is Scientology? (1992)

The Scientology Handbook, based on the works of L. Ron Hubbard (1994)

The Church of Scientology, 40th Anniversary (1994)

All of the above publications have official standing within the Church of Scientology, nearly all being writings of L. Ron Hubbard. Those which are not wholly authored by Hubbard draw heavily on his work. Quotations or references given below are to the latest available edition in English.

II. DIMENSIONS OF RELIGION

In *The Religious Experience of Mankind* (1st edition 1969, 2nd edition 1976, 3rd edition 1984), Ninian Smart argued that a religion typically has six aspects or dimensions. In his most recent overview, entitled *The World's Religions: Old Traditions and Modern Transformations* (1989), he again used these six dimensions and added a seventh. These dimensions are:

II.I.THE PRACTICAL AND RITUAL DIMENSION

Religions typically have particular practices in which people engage. The form of these practices varies greatly and may include such activities as worship, preaching, prayer, meditation, confession, sacrifice, offerings, rites of passage and other sacred ceremonies. Sometimes these practices are quite elaborate and publicly visible, as in the eucharistic liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church or the sacred ceremonies of Australian aboriginal religions. Sometimes they are much less elaborate and less publicly visible, as in the forms of meditation practised in Buddhism or the private prayer which is part of various religious traditions. In using the word "ritual" to describe such activities one does not necessarily imply that there is a precisely specified form which the practices must take, nor does one necessarily imply that people undertake these activities simply out of habit. In many forms of ritual there is both an outer (or visible) and inner (or non-visible) aspect.

II.II.THE EXPERIENTIAL DIMENSION

Just as the forms of religious practice vary, so too do the religious experiences which people claim to have had. The Buddha spoke of the enlightenment he experienced through meditation. Various Hebrew

prophets and the prophet Muhammad spoke of the revelatory experiences that were the basis of their religious teachings. Some religious experiences which have been reported are quite dramatic, such as the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus, the experience of ecstasy associated with shamanism in central and northern regions of Asia, and the phenomenon of spirit possession in parts of Eurasia, Africa and the Pacific. Other reported religious experiences may be less dramatic but they are nevertheless regarded as real and significant by those experiencing them. Examples of the latter are experiences of sacred awe, divine illumination, enlightenment, a brilliant emptiness within, an assurance of salvation, etc.

II.III.THE NARRATIVE OR MYTHIC DIMENSION

In very many religions, there are narratives. These narratives may be about the activities of God, gods or other spiritual entities, about the career of a sacred teacher, about the experiences of a religious collectivity, and so on. The narratives in the Jewish and Christian scriptures about the creation of the world, about the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses and about God's leading the people of Israel out of Egypt fit into this category, as do the accounts given in Australian aboriginal religion of the activities of sacred beings in shaping the contours of the land. So, too, do the narratives in Islam about the life of the prophet Muhammad and in Buddhism about the experiences of Gautama (the Buddha). Smart emphasizes that he uses the term "mythic" in a purely technical sense to refer to a narrative which has religious significance. He does not imply that the narrative is necessarily false. In most preliterate cultures, religious beliefs are expressed primarily in narrative form, these narratives being transmitted orally.

II.IV.THE DOCTRINAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL DIMENSION

In literate cultures especially, doctrines in more or less systematic propositional form may result from reflection on what was initially cast in narrative form; alternatively or in addition, these doctrines may be derived at least partly from more general philosophical sources. The content of these beliefs or doctrines varies greatly from one religion to another, ranging, for example, from the doctrine of the Trinity in Christianity to the teachings of Hinduism about the continuous cycle of death and rebirth to which every creature is subject, from the 99 names for the one God in Islam to Buddha's teaching of the Four Noble Truths about the nature of suffering, the cause of suffering, the possibility of a cessation of suffering, and the way that leads to this outcome. In some religions such as Hinduism,

Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, there are scriptures in which religious narratives and/or doctrines are recorded.

II.V.THE ETHICAL DIMENSION

Smart states that "throughout history we find that religions usually incorporate a code of ethics" (The Religious Experience of Mankind, 3rd edition, p.9). In Buddhism, for example, it is taught that one's actions should be controlled by the Five Precepts -- refrain from killing, from stealing, from lying, from wrongful sexual acts and from intoxicants. Judaism has the Torah (law) which contains not only the Ten Commandments but also many other moral, as well as ritual, prescriptions. Likewise Islam has the Shari'a (law) prescribing various moral and ritual duties. In Christianity, Jesus summed up his ethical teaching in the commandment "love your neighbour as yourself." At least in some measure, the ethical dimension of a religion may tie in with parts of its doctrinal and mythic dimensions. For example, the Buddha's injunction to refrain from intoxicants is consistent with his perception that such substances would obstruct self-awareness. The Christian teaching on love toward others is consistent with narratives of Christ's own behaviour and with the doctrine that God is love. And the stern moral prescriptions in the Shari'a are consistent with Islamic teaching that each person will ultimately be subject to God's judgment.

II.VI.THE SOCIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL DIMENSION

While it is possible, in principle, for an individual to have her or his own unique religious beliefs and to engage in her or his own religious practices without necessarily associating with other religious believers, most religions have some form of social organization. Especially in some small-scale societies, the social institutions in which religious practices take place may be identical with those in which other activities, such as economic activities, take place. In other societies, there are specialized religious institutions, such as organized denominations in Christianity, monastic orders in Buddhism, and congregations of the faithful in Judaism or Islam. Even within the same broad religious tradition, such as Christianity, there may be more than one model of religious organization -- ranging, for example, from the formalized and hierarchical system of the Church of Rome to the more egalitarian and informal system in some Protestant churches. Many, but not all, religions have specialized religious functionaries such as gurus, monks, priests, imams, 'ulema, rabbis, ministers, shamans, etc.

II.VII.THE MATERIAL DIMENSION

In his recent book, Smart adds a seventh dimension of religion, the material dimension, in recognition of the fact that there are often specific religious artifacts, places, buildings, emblems, etc. The relative importance of these varies from religion to religion. In some small-scale societies, for instance, there are no specific religious buildings; on the other hand there may be parts of the natural environment which are invested with religious significance, such as sacred sites in Australian aboriginal religions, and Mount Fuji in traditional Japanese folk religion. Temples, mosques or churches constitute parts of the material dimension in Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam and Christianity. In various religions there are also sacred or symbolic objects such as totems, relics, emblems, sacramental elements, and the like. It is important to note that although all, or nearly all, of the above dimensions are present in each of the major world religions, the emphasis on any particular dimension can vary from one religion to another, and even from one subtradition to another within the same broad religion. As Smart observes:

There are religious movements or manifestations where one or other of the dimensions is so weak as to be virtually absent: nonliterate small-scale societies do not have much means of expressing the doctrinal dimension; Buddhist modernists, concentrating on meditation, ethics and philosophy, pay scant regard to the narrative dimension of Buddhism; some newly formed groups may not have evolved anything much in the way of the material dimension.

Also there are so many people who are not formally part of any social religious grouping, but have their own particular worldviews and practices, that we can observe in society atoms of religion which do not possess any well-formed social dimension. (Ninian Smart, *The World's Religions: Old Traditions and Modern Transformations*, p. 21)

III. ANALYSING SCIENTOLOGY

In this section, an analysis of Scientology will be made in relation to the above dimensions. For convenience in exposition, the order in which the dimensions will be considered is not exactly the same as that adopted above.

III.I. THE DOCTRINAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL DIMENSION

The Scientology Handbook (page i) states that:

"The essential tenets of Scientology are these: You are an immortal spiritual being. Your experience extends well beyond a single lifetime. And your capabilities are unlimited, even if not presently realized."

In these words, Scientology posits the existence of an entity which bears significant similarity to what in various other religions is termed a soul or a spirit. To avoid confusions with previous conceptions of the soul, Scientology terms this entity a thetan, from the Greek letter theta (*), a symbol for thought or life. The thetan is not a thing, nor is it the mind. It is the creator of things. It is the person himself -- the persisting identity which is the individual. The thetan is said to be immortal and to be capable of accomplishing anything, including the creation of mass, energy, space and time (The Scientology Handbook, p. xxiii; Scientology: The Fundamentals of Thought, p. 75).

III.II.THE NARRATIVE OR MYTHIC DIMENSION

A narrative or mythic dimension is evident in L. Ron Hubbard's writings on the origins of the physical universe, composed of matter, energy, space and time (MEST). According to Hubbard, "Life is a game consisting of freedom and restrictions" (Scientology 8-8008, p. 141); in order to have a game, thetans created MEST, which imposed some restrictions upon them. Thetans then became progressively entangled in the MEST they had created, losing awareness of their unlimited abilities. The objective of Scientology is to enable the thetan to rediscover these unlimited abilities. This involves the erasure of the contents of what is termed the "reactive mind" -- that part of the mind which records what is happening when one is wholly or partly unconscious but suffering physical or emotional trauma, as for example after an accident or while under anaesthesia. Perceptions of everything said or done in one's vicinity at such traumatic times are, according to Scientology, recorded in the reactive mind as engrams.

Hubbard taught that engrams can have accumulated not merely during one's present lifetime but also in past lives. In *Have You Lived Before This Life?* he stated (p. 1) that "the existence of past lives is proven in Scientology" and he presented various narratives from people recounting

events from past lives. In the foreword to *Scientology: A History of Man* he wrote that (p.1) "this is a cold-blooded and factual account of your last sixty trillion years." He also reported (p. 3) that when he limited auditing to a person's current lifetime the beneficial results for people suffering from mental and physical illness were slow and mediocre, whereas when he audited the "whole track," including past lifetimes, the results were swift and spectacular. In *Mission into Time* (originally published under the title *A Test of Whole Track Recall*) he told of the time when he was a sailor in Carthage about 200 BC. Furthermore, he stated (p. 69) that "I know with certainty where I was and who I was in the last 80 trillion years." He also claimed to have discovered from auditing his whole track that there have been repetitive types of society and, for example, that:

III.III.THE PRACTICAL AND RITUAL DIMENSION

At the heart of Scientology are certain distinctive religious practices, a central one of which is termed auditing, or processing. This practice involves a one-to-one relationship between an officially designated auditor (a minister or minister-in-training in the Church of Scientology) and a person seeking the benefit of auditing. The aim of the auditor is to help the other person (termed a preclear) discover and erase the debilitating imprints (engrams) left from past experiences. In an auditing session, which typically lasts up to two and a half hours, the auditor asks a structured series of questions, acknowledging the answer given by the preclear to each question before the next question is asked. As part of this process, the auditor uses an electropsychometer (E-Meter) to help identify areas of spiritual distress or difficulty. There are various auditing processes, each designed to help preclears improve their ability to confront and handle part of their existence. When one particular area of a person's existence has been satisfactorily dealt with in this way, the auditing process moves on to another area. The ultimate objective, which requires many auditing sessions, is to achieve new states of being called Clear and Operating Thetan, about which more will be said under the heading of the experiential dimension.

Although auditing in Scientology has some resemblances to practices of confession and pastoral counselling in some other religions, it also has its own distinctive characteristics and procedures, as well as its own particular interpretation of the spiritual significance of those procedures. Scientologists claim that such auditing has an efficacy not found elsewhere. According to an official publication:

III.IV.THE EXPERIENTIAL DIMENSION

As already noted, a primary objective of Scientology is to enable individuals to achieve the state of Clear. This involves erasing all engrams and thus eliminating the "reactive mind." According to Scientology, becoming Clear restores and strengthens one's individuality and creativity, one's inherent goodness and decency. The accounts given in *What is Scientology?* (pp. 307-309) by persons who have attained the state of Clear are as effusive as the accounts given by evangelical Christians of the transformation of their lives as a result of an encounter with Christ. Scientologists claim that the state of Clear was not possible before the advent of Scientology:

The state of Clear has never existed before. No matter how able a being may have been, no matter what powers he possessed, no matter his strengths, the reactive mind was there, hidden and eventually dragging him down again.

III.V.THE ETHICAL DIMENSION

Scientology also teaches that progress along The Bridge both requires and enables the attainment of high moral and ethical standards. Thus, in his *Introduction to Scientology Ethics*, Hubbard claimed (p. 9) that an important breakthrough in Scientology was the development of "the basic technology of ethics."

Hubbard used the term "morals" to refer to a collectively agreed code of good conduct (p. 24), whereas he defined ethics as "the actions an individual takes on himself in order to accomplish optimum survival for himself and others on all [eight] dynamics" (p. 17). Hubbard stressed the rationality of ethical behaviour: "Ethics actually consists of rationality toward the highest level of survival." (p. 15); "If a moral code were thoroughly reasonable, it could, at the same time, be considered thoroughly ethical. But only at this highest level could the two be called the same" (p. 25).

III.VI.THE SOCIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL DIMENSION

Class V organizations make up the third tier in the structure. They are authorized to offer auditing and training up to the level of Clear. They supervise the activities of field auditors and missions, and provide basic training for ministers, as well as being centres for other types of ritual and community service mentioned under previous headings. Class V organizations provide the core of the day-to-day ministries offered by the Church of Scientology.

In four major centres around the world there are higher level churches which offer more advanced Scientology auditing and training services. Persons participating in these programs typically do so on an intensive, full-time basis, very often with the expectation of continuing to serve as ministers within the Church of Scientology after returning to the local Scientology churches from which they have come.

III.VII.THE MATERIAL DIMENSION

Like mosques in Islam, churches in Christianity and temples in Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism, the churches of Scientology are typically marked by specific religious symbols, most notably by two overlapping triangles intertwined with the letter S, standing for Scientology. The triangles symbolize fundamental elements in the doctrines of Scientology. The corners of one triangle stand for Affinity, Reality and Communication which, according to Hubbard's teaching, jointly bring about understanding. The corners of the other triangle stand for Knowledge, Responsibility and Control, which are deemed to be necessary in all areas of one's life.

Another common symbol of Scientology is a sunburst cross, which is similar to the cross found in Christianity but with four additional points coming from the centre. The eight points of the Scientology cross represent the eight dynamics listed above. This cross is commonly worn by ministers of the Church of Scientology.

IV.CONCLUSION

The above analysis shows that the seven dimensions of religion identified by Smart are all present in Scientology. It also shows that although Scientology has its own distinctive characteristics, many of its beliefs and practices are similar to, or analogues of, those found in one or more other

recognized religions.

The question as to whether Scientology is a religion has also been considered in the High Court of Australia (*The Church of the New Faith v. The Commissioner for Payroll Tax*, Australian Law Journal Reports 57 [1983]: 785ff.). The unanimous opinion of that Court was that Scientology is a religion. In their judgments in that particular case, Justices Mason and Brennan used two criteria of religion: "(i) belief in a supernatural Being, Thing or Principle; and (ii) the acceptance of canons of conduct in order to give effect to that belief" (Australian Law Journal Reports 57 [1983]: 785). Justices Wilson and Deane used four criteria as aids in determining whether a particular system of ideas and practices constituted a religion:

(i) that the particular collection of ideas and/or practices involved belief in the supernatural, that is, belief that reality extended beyond that which was capable of perception by the senses; (ii) that the ideas related to man's nature and place in the universe and his relation to things supernatural; (iii) that the ideas were accepted by adherents as requiring or encouraging them to observe particular standards or codes of conduct or to participate in particular practices having supernatural significance; (iv) that, however loosely knit and varying in beliefs and practices adherents might be, they constituted an identifiable group or identifiable groups. (Australian Law Journal Reports 57 [1983]: 785)

One or more of the Justices in this case specifically considered the fact that there have been additions to the beliefs and practices of Scientology since it was first formulated, that Scientology does not insist that its adherents should discard other religious affiliations, and that there is a strong commercial emphasis in Scientology's practices.

The Justices concluded that none of these facts disqualified Scientology from being recognized as a religion; indeed, similar statements of fact could be made about some other recognized religions at various points in their history.

For the reasons given in the preceding analysis, I consider that Scientology is rightly regarded as a religion. As well as having the salient generic characteristics that typify recognized religions, Scientology has its own distinctive features--particular beliefs and practices that mark it out as a different religion rather than a non-religion.

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Endnotes:

1. W.G. Runciman, "The Sociological Explanation of 'Religious' Beliefs," *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 10 (1969): 149-191.
2. Werner Cohn, "Is Religion Universal? Problems of Definition," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 2 (1962):25-33.
3. Smart was Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Lancaster (in Britain) from 1967 to 1982. He has been a Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara since 1976, and is currently the J. F. Rowney Professor of Comparative Religions there.
4. For example, Alan W. Black and Peter E. Glasner, eds. *Practice and Belief: Studies in the Sociology of Australian Religion*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1983.