

BRIEF ANALYSES OF THE RELIGIOUS NATURE OF SCIENTOLOGY



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United States
10 May 1981

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12 August 1979

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Introduction

Emerging in the early 1950s, the Scientology religion since its inception has drawn much interest over the years from religious scholars around the world.

This booklet contains four brief analyses from the hundreds of existing studies published on Scientology. They were written in the years 1978 to 1981. Their authors represent unique perspectives and geographical and philosophical diversity.

A SHORT STUDY OF THE SCIENTOLOGY RELIGION

J. GORDON MELTON, PH.D.

Dr. Melton wrote in 1981:

I am the Director of the Institute for the Study of American Religion located in Evanston, Illinois; a research facility for the study of the small religious groups in the United States. I have been the Director of this facility for the past 10 years.

I am an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church, having been ordained in 1968; and I am the Pastor of the Emanuel United Methodist Church in Evanston, Illinois, and have held this position for three and one-half years.

I am a member of The Society for Scientific Study of Religion and The American Association of Church History.

I have received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Birmingham Southern College; I have studied at and received a Master of Divinity degree from Garrett Theological Seminary, associated with the United Methodist Church; and I have received a Ph.D. in the History and Literature of Religions from Northwestern University (1975).

I am the author of some seven books, and was one of the editors of *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, and the author of the *Directory of Religious Bodies in the United States*.

For the past 16 years, in addition to my pastor duties and responsibilities as Director of the Institute for the Study of American Religion, I have been researching and have completed the writing of *The Encyclopedia of American Religions*, a comprehensive reference work which examines nearly 1,200 American religions and describes the

history, practices and beliefs of each. To my knowledge, this is the first such work of this magnitude since 1936.

I have examined Scientology in my capacity as both a minister of the United Methodist Church and as the Director of the Institute for the Study of American Religion. Based upon my extensive experience as a scholar of religious movements; my studies of the doctrines, beliefs and practices of the Church of Scientology, my visits to several Scientology Churches (including the Church of Scientology of Missouri), and my lengthy visits with several ministers of the Church of Scientology, I find it to be a religion in the fullest sense of the word. It has a well-thought-out doctrine, including a belief in a Supreme Being, a belief in the freedom of the spirit and the immortality of the spirit; a system of worship and liturgy, an extensive pastoral counseling program and an out-reach ministry of service to the community that embodies the doctrines and beliefs of the Church. Such a full program is rarely attained by a new religion in its first generation. My examination of the Church includes personal attendance at a Scientology wedding ceremony as well as attendance at the Sunday church service. The rituals of the Church, including its worship, weddings, christenings and funerals, are spelled out in the *Ceremonies of the Founding Church of Scientology* and in the *Background and Ceremonies of the Church of Scientology*. They follow traditional patterns and are led by the minister of the Church.

The Church of Scientology does espouse a belief in and devotion to and worship of a “Supreme Being” as well as a belief in the immortality of the spirit and that man is a spiritual being. This is evident in the total life of the group—the program the Church has set up, in its beliefs and practices, and in its literature, including the books above mentioned.

Its beliefs, worship and relationship to God or a Supreme Being is further evidenced in the Church’s program of pastoral care, group worship, its community life and program of spiritual growth.

The Church deals with the basic religious questions of where did we come from, why are we here and where are we going.

The Church of Scientology regularly holds its Sunday worship service which, though nor the main focal point of the week as in the Methodist Church, nevertheless provides the community worship for the group.

The Church regularly propagates its beliefs through the traditional channels of liturgy, dissemination of its religious publications and in its community programs.

The Church of Scientology is very much a religion in the fullest sense of the word.

J. GORDON MELTON

May 10, 1981

J. Gordon Melton is the founder and director of the Institute for the Study of American Religion in Santa Barbara, California. He has led a program of research on many diverse American religions, with special attention to the new religious movements which have become so prominent in America since 1965. He is the author/editor of more than 20 books, including the Encyclopedia of American Religions (4th ed., 1994), The Cult Experience, the New Age Encyclopedia, Religious Leaders of America, and most recently, the Encyclopedia of African American Religion. Dr. Melton is an elder in the United Methodist Church and has served with the department of Religious Studies of the University of California.



SCIENTOLOGY A NEW RELIGION

SAMUEL S. HILL, PH.D.

Dr. Hill wrote in 1979:

I am a professional scholar in the field of religious movements in the United States of America, as evidenced in the following ways:

- a. I hold a Ph.D. degree in religion from Duke University;
- b. I have been a professor of religion for 20 years, with one year at Stetson University, 12 at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and at the University of Florida since 1972;
- c. I have published three books and numerous articles on the subject;
- d. I teach regularly in this area.

Within the past year and a half I have made something of a specialty of studying the Church of Scientology and consider that I am professionally competent to assess its character and nature.

Two judgments pervade all my assessments of it. The first is that it is a new, young, premature religious organization which must be looked at as still emerging, still developing, still finding its way—characteristics which hold true for all new religions. The second is that it has much more in common with such Eastern religions as Hinduism and Buddhism than it does with the two western biblical faiths, Christianity and Judaism. It is essential that Scientology be judged by its own standards, which are closer to Oriental than to Western ones, rather than through the imposition of

western categories. Whether it fits western values, claims and assumptions is irrelevant to whether it is a religion or not.

I conclude that Scientology measures up to the definition of religions, in that it, like them all, has the four standard components:

- a. *Creed*. It teaches the vital existence of an ultimately spiritual dimension of reality.
- b. *Code*. It lives with a strong ethical sense, highlighting values and discriminating between good and bad, right and wrong.
- c. *Cult*. (In the sense of a worshipping group.) It seeks systematically to relate people to the spiritual dimension of reality, to Ultimate Reality, the Supreme Being, or God.
- d. *Community*. It has a clear sense of group identity and is an organized religious community.

These four components are typically regarded as constituting a religious movement anywhere.

Accordingly, it is a bona fide religion, with its own beliefs and practices. Basically, Scientology is a theory of knowledge or a way of understanding by which parishioners know what the Supreme Being is and how to participate in it for the improvement of personal and social health. Through this kind of knowing or understanding or worship, the person realizes himself or herself, achieves self-awareness and is in healing relationship with God. In this process of arriving at true spiritual freedom, one's life is cleared of barriers and obstacles to that freedom and made whole and happy as intended. In this respect it is quite like Hinduism and Buddhism.

Scientology acknowledges the reality of Ultimate Reality or God. "God" is less a personal "Supreme Being" here than an "Ultimate Reality", the way things ultimately and most purely are, hence the route to the fullness of life intended for and available to all people. Through the employment of revelation which often takes the form of techniques, people may achieve relatedness to and participation in the Supreme Being. In these respects, Scientology is more Eastern than Western, and more Buddhism than Hinduism. It aims for enlightenment through relatedness to the ways things really, ultimately are.

The principal mode of religious experience and worship is pastoral counselling. This consists of the application of Scientology by a minister of the Church to a parishioner. This is the principal means by which the person is enlightened, is related to the Supreme Being. There are public services; however they are less basic in Scientology's understanding than is pastoral counselling. In this counselling the actual relating to God occurs.

Scientology as a religion does not insist on religious monism; for example, one is permitted to practice both Scientology and something else, say Roman Catholicism. Here too it falls more into an eastern style, in tolerating a pluralism of loyalties and involvements. In actual practice, however, only a few Scientologists also practice another religion. Scientology has evolved from "Dianetics", a theory and technique for realizing a wholesome life, to a church, during the past 29 years. My speculation is that, as the evolution further ripens, there is apt to be less encouragement to hold on to two faiths, and still less exercising of that option. In other words, I see it as a religion becoming increasingly more conscious of itself as a religion.

The term "an applied religious philosophy" describes Scientology rather well—but only if the term is freed from a dominating western religious framework. What the term means, on the positive side is:

- a. Scientology is religious, because it provides knowledge and means for being related to the Supreme Being;
- b. It stresses results (hence: "applied") such as greater self-insight, understanding, health and happiness.

On the other side, by using "philosophy" it points to an outlook, a perspective, rather than an elaborated theology about a personal God based on historical events (as is the case with the biblical faiths).

By all known American standards, legal, practical, and religious, I judge the Church of Scientology to be what its name denotes, a true religious organization.

SAMUEL S. HILL

August 12, 1979

At the time he wrote this, Dr. Hill was Professor of Religion at the University of Florida.



IS SCIENTOLOGY A RELIGION?

GARY D. BOUMA, PH.D.

I have been asked for my professional opinion on the question:

Is Scientology a religion? I have the following professional qualifications relevant to this issue:

B.A. Calvin College (Greek and Philosophy)

B.D. Princeton Theological Seminary (Church and Society)

M.A. Cornell University (Sociology)

Ph.D. Cornell University (Sociology of Religion)

I have been active in the scholarly study of religion for over a decade during which I have published extensively in the field, chaired symposia on the definition of religion, and lectured on the sociology of religion at Dalhousie University, Michigan State University and Monash University.

I have read various books about Scientology and visited the church in Victoria. On the basis of these documents and that visit it is my professional opinion that the Church of Scientology can reasonably be categorized a religion. Permit me to elaborate.

While there is some debate in the study of religion concerning the definition of religion, all of the competing definitions would include without debate the Church of Scientology, its beliefs and practices, as a religion. The debates in the field center on the utility of applying the term religion to groups holding to meaning systems that do not have a clearly specified meaning system which is anchored in and articulated around a basic commitment to a supernatural being, principle or entity. Since Scientology's credo

clearly centers on and flows from such a commitment there would be no doubt among sociologists of religion that in Scientology they are dealing with a religion.

Emile Durkheim, one of the founding fathers of the Sociology of Religion, defined religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things... which unite into one, single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them.”

Gerhard Lenski, in his influential study “The Religious Factor,” defines religion as “... a system of beliefs about the nature of the force(s) ultimately shaping man’s destiny, and the practices associated with, shared by members of a group.”

If one were to use these definitions of religion, one would surely conclude that Scientology is a religion.

GARY D. BOUMA

October 30, 1979

At the time he wrote this, Dr. Bouma was on the faculty of the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Monash University, Clayton, Victoria, Australia.

THE RELIGIOUS STATUS OF SCIENTOLOGY

IRVING HEXHAM, PH.D.

Dr. Hexham wrote in 1978:

I have been asked my professional opinion on the status of Scientology as a religion. I have studied materials of the church, spoken with members of the church and read books about Scientology. As a result of this work, I am now in a position to comment on the status of Scientology as a religion.

I ought perhaps to say something about myself to enable anyone who may read this to judge the validity of my conclusions.

I am an evangelical Christian and obtained my undergraduate degree in Religious Studies from the University of Lancaster where I studied with Professor Ninian Smart. Following this I did research in the history of religions at the University of Bristol with the Rev. F. B. Welbourn. As a graduate student I concentrated my work on the interaction between religion and society, studying for my M.A. on new religious movements in Britain and for my doctorate the relationship between Calvinism and Afrikaner nationalism in South Africa. Since completing graduate work, I have maintained an interest in religion in Southern Africa and in new religious movements in Western society. At present I hold the post of Assistant Professor of the Philosophy of Religion at Regent College in Vancouver. Regent College is a post-graduate theological school firmly committed to the Christian religion.

One of the main problems in discussing the religious nature of any movement is the question of the definition of religion. Although scholars offer many different definitions of religion they can, very broadly, be divided into two main types. There are those definitions which define religion in terms of a cultic organization and there are those

definitions which define religion in terms of a way of life. To assess the religious nature of Scientology I began by using the definition given by Professor Ninian Smart, who is one of the world's leading authorities in the fields of religious studies. This definition was given at a colloquium at the University of Lancaster in December 1969 and is to be found in Professor Smart's paper entitled "Meaning in and the Meaning of Religion." At the end of section one of his paper, paragraph reference 2.60, Professor Smart gives the following definition:

A set of institutionalized rituals identified with a tradition and expressing and/or evoking sacral sentiments directed at a divine or transdivine focus seen in the context of the human phenomenological environment and at least partially described by myths or by myths and doctrines.

On the basis of this definition and what I have learned about Scientology it seems clear that both the teaching and practice of the Church of Scientology in British Columbia qualify Scientology to be defined as a religion. It also seems clear to me that Scientology can be classified as a religion in terms of definitions which would see religion as a total way of life. In this regard I would refer you to another colloquium paper delivered at the University of Lancaster in 1969 by the Rev. F. B. Welbourn. The title of this paper is "Towards Eliminating the Concept of Religion." In this paper the Rev. Welbourn argues very strongly for an understanding of religion as a total way of life and not simply as a cultic activity. In terms of his definition there would be no difficulty whatsoever in recognizing Scientology as a religion.

In conclusion I would like to add that my position on the religious nature of Scientology is similar to that of Dr. Roy Wallis. Like myself, he believes Scientology to be a genuine expression of religious faith. But like myself, he would be critical of particular beliefs and practices of the Church of Scientology. This statement may be qualified by the fact that I would also be critical of many other religious movements.

IRVING HEXHAM

Feb. 6, 1978

When he wrote this paper, Dr. Hexham was Assistant Professor of Philosophy of Religion, Regent College, Vancouver, B.C., Canada.

