



THE RELIGIOUS
NATURE
of
SCIENTOLOGY

Geoffrey Parrinder, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus
Comparative Study of Religions
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CONTENTS

I.	Introduction	1
II.	The Place of God in Scientology Belief	2
III.	Ceremonies and Their Meaning	3
IV.	The Religious Nature of Scientology Beliefs	4
V.	Conclusion	4

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I. Introduction

I must make it clear that I am not a Scientologist. On the contrary, I am an ordained Methodist Minister of over 40 years¹ standing. I have no brief for the beliefs and practices of Scientology and might be critical of some of them. But I am concerned with religious freedom, which is essential to a democratic society.

In 1971 I was approached by representatives of Scientology, since my interest in the meaning of religion was known from my writings and my position as Professor of the Comparative Study of Religions in the University of London. I examined literature sent to me and I thought it well to gain firsthand information by meeting representatives of the movement several times and visiting their British headquarters.

Saint Hill Manor, East Grinstead, is an old enlarged building with adequate but not very extensive grounds. My visit had been arranged but, as often happens, I arrived half an hour early and was able to wander round on my own for some time. From rumours about the Scientologists, I half imagined that there would be a guard at the entrance, or even guard dogs, but everything was open and I drove unnoticed into the car park. Then I went into buildings where students

1. Professor Parrinder wrote this paper in 1977.

were at work, saw class rooms open, and finally entered the chapel which was like many a Free Church building.

Pictures of Ron Hubbard were in many places and texts on the walls almost indicated his presence, such as “Don’t rush, you might run into Ron”. When the choir entered the chapel some striking words occurred in their processional hymn: “This man alone, made the way known”. There sounds the voice of religious dogmatism. It may be that, like the Buddha, Ron Hubbard will be invested with supernatural authority and even become a deity, in function if not in theory. But there are other articles of faith which run counter to this tendency. The Sunday afternoon service was crowded, with people of all ages, who were cheerful and responsive. Mr. Justice Ashworth noted that “The minister confronts the people and says hello to them” but this is common in churches of various denominations. The minister wore a clerical collar and a sort of cross or ankh, but these are trappings of religion, not its substance. There were hymns, a time of quiet which included a prayer, and a sermon which mentioned God several times.

II. The Place of God in Scientology Belief

The place of God in the beliefs of Scientology does not appear to be dominant, as it is in Christianity, Judaism and Islam, but it is clearly present. In the book *The Scientology Religion*, the chapter on Doctrine and Practice defines its mission as “to help the individual become aware of himself as an immortal being and to help himself achieve and attain the basic truths with regard to himself, his relationship to others ... and the Supreme Being”. Here and in the form of Customary Service it is stated that “we want to erase his sin so that he can be good enough to recognise God”, and “Man’s best evidence of God is the God that he finds within himself”. It is recognised that teaching about God within, and reincarnation, link Scientology to Eastern and Indian forms of religious thought. So it states the goal of “individual salvation in harmony with other life forms, the physical universe, and, ultimately, the Supreme Being. It is in this Eastern tradition that we find the background of Scientology”.

God is spoken of as the Eighth Dynamic, the highest level of reality which one attains when the Seventh Dynamic, the spiritual universe, is “reached in its entirety”. God and the spiritual universe is also “classified as theta universe”, and theta or thetan is described as “spirit” and the “person himself”. There is a constant insistence on man as a spiritual entity, and rejection of materialistic explanations of human origins. Man is immortal, he has lived countless lives, and he can rise up to God. This is admittedly similar to some Indian religious beliefs and it is important in the claim of Scientology to be a religion.

III. Ceremonies and Their Meaning

A marriage ceremony, which may popularly be thought of as religious and to be conducted in church, is not primarily religious. It is a secular contract, between two consenting parties and before two witnesses. The early church realised this and followed the state practice for many centuries, though often with a church blessing later. Only the post-Reformation Council of Trent decreed that Christian marriage must be performed in a church and by a priest. Modern Protestants, and missionaries, who have tried to impose a church marriage on converts, have been following the decrees of Trent. Even if marriage is held to be a sacrament, a priest and a church are not essential to its validity in Christian theology. The celebrants of the sacrament are the husband and wife who minister vows to each other and this may be done religiously anywhere.

Many countries which have a Christian tradition yet insist on marriage ceremonies being conducted by a secular authority, a registrar, magistrate or mayor. Even where there is an established church, marriages may be performed in other chapels or by a registrar. It is not therefore to the marriage service of Scientology that we should look for evidence of religious belief and practice.

The two most significant services are christening, or naming of children, and burial of the dead. Beliefs associated with the two go deep into our nature and history, and they shape the most common sacraments of mankind. Scientology believes in the *thetan*, its own word for the immortal soul, derived from the eighth letter of the Greek alphabet, *theta*, and perhaps considering its symbolical oval shape. The service says that “the main purpose of a naming ceremony is to help get the thetan oriented. He has recently taken over his new body”. The thetan is introduced to his body, his parents and his godparents. Plainly there is here a spiritual and not a materialistic ceremony.

Similarly the funeral service of Scientology makes spiritual claims. The soul is helped on to a future life: “Go now, dear (deceased) and live once more, in happier time and place”. Belief in some kind of spiritual nature in man, which survives death, is perhaps the oldest and most prevalent religious belief of mankind. There is probably no tribe or people that has not held one form or other of belief in life after death, and the presence of such a belief is a very clear sign of religion.

The ancient Egyptians (not the moderns who are Muslims) believed in souls and gods, and were religious, as are the Buddhists who strictly may be said to believe in neither, at least in a Western sense. But both had religious rituals, to which Scientology deliberately approximates.

IV. The Religious Nature of Scientology Beliefs

If Scientology is compared with secular organisations the religious nature of some of its beliefs soon becomes clear, even if it has not yet developed a complex theology. It is quite different from political societies which have no specific interest in immortal souls. Similarly it differs from social clubs, like the Oddfellows or the Loyal United Order of Anglo-Saxons. It is more akin to Freemasonry which has beliefs in God, the divine Architect, and in spiritual beings. But Freemasons have often said that their organisation is not a religion. In much of Europe, at least until recently, Freemasonry was strongly anticlerical, a sort of irreligious religion. But in Great Britain and the United States Freemasons have often also been members of established churches and have wished to show that they do not follow a rival religion, but rather a moral code and a support of true religion.

Further brief reference may be made to ancient and modern religious movements. The Jains of India believe in many souls but not in God, yet they are counted as a religion. The Buddhists believe neither in a supreme God nor in a describable soul, though there are differences between theory and practice, but they are one of the major world and missionary religions. Many Hindu thinkers of Vedanta are non-dualists, believing that human and divine are one, since the individual soul *is* the universal soul. This is not God, in the Christian or Western legal sense, yet Hinduism is a major religion. In modern times Indian Neo Vedanta has had a wide influence in Europe and America, for its teachings have differed both from the rigid dogma of most Western religion and also from the materialism of much modern science.

Scientology appears to have adopted from the outset and as a basic doctrine a spiritual attitude to life. The Founder and Aims declare that the purpose is to free man from the bondage that “sought to reduce him to the status of cells, brain and body, a ‘scientific’ lie which has caused untold damage to man and which, unless corrected, will eventually result in total annihilation”.

And again, “that man is primarily a spirit, immortal and basically indestructible”.

V. Conclusion

The statement on Doctrine and Practice in *The Scientology Religion* begins with a brief affirmation of its spiritual nature and proceeds at once to consider the background of the movement, with special sections on Hinduism and Buddhism. Clearly the Founder and later workers have been affected by their reading of these Asian religions, and in this they reflect widespread trends of modern thought. For over a century the influence of Asian,

particularly Indian, ideas has been powerful in Europe and America, and this must affect the understanding of religion. Religion is concerned with the spiritual nature of man, and with the object of his worship, whether God or Absolute or Buddha. As Scientology develops it may emphasise more the place of the Supreme Being, as not only the goal but the source and the sustaining power of all man's endeavour. As it is, the pervasive teaching of the spiritual nature of man and his indestructible inner essence is in accordance with much in some of the major religions of the world.

GEOFFREY PARRINDER

1977

Geoffrey Parrinder

When he wrote “The Religious Nature of Scientology,” Geoffrey Parrinder was Professor of the Comparative Study of Religions at the University of London. He is now Professor Emeritus of Comparative Study of Religions. He is also a Fellow of Kings College, London, and a Methodist Minister for 60 years. He is the author of more than 40 books on world religions with translations in 12 languages. He has edited an encyclopedia and dictionary on the world’s religions.





