

SCIENTOLOGY,  
SOCIAL SCIENCE  
*and the*  
DEFINITION  
OF RELIGION



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My remarks are addressed to the question of whether Scientology would be defined as a religion according to the criteria conventionally used by social scientists specialising in the analysis of what they consider to be religious phenomena.

There is considerable diversity among the conceptualisations and definitions of religion employed by social scientists. The choice of conceptualisation and definition reflects both a wide variety of underlying assumptions about the nature of social reality and variations in the purpose of conceptualising or defining religion. Given the generally instrumental (and distinct from appreciative or evaluative) character of social scientific understanding, it is not surprising that concepts and definitions are judged not in terms of their truth or falsity but, rather, in terms of their relative usefulness. In particular, their differential capacity to set a given phenomenon clearly apart from other phenomena in such a way that the differences can be shown to reveal significant facts about them is the main measure of the usefulness of competing definitions and conceptualisations.

Definitions<sup>1</sup> may vary, then, with the purposes in hand, but this does not mean that there is total relativity or anarchy. There are two broad types of definitions of religion in use among

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<sup>1</sup> For stylistic reasons I shall no longer mention "conceptualisation", but it does constitute a separable analytic process which usually precedes the process of defining phenomena.

psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists: functionalist and substantive. Within each type there are further sub-types. I shall argue that, on the basis of personal contacts with Scientologists and scholarly study of Scientology's teachings, practices, organisation and consequences for its followers' lives, I believe that it can be more helpfully defined as a religion than as any other kind of enterprise.

## I. FUNCTIONALIST DEFINITIONS

A functionalist definition is one which focuses attention on the contributions allegedly made by the phenomenon in question to the stability and/or survival of a social or cultural entity. Thus, phenomena can be shown to be functional for entities ranging from the individual person to the world-system. The fact that this manner of defining things raises many philosophical problems and has exercised the minds of many logicians has not prevented it from achieving popularity among social scientists—especially in connection with religion.

It may be said that religion has the functional capacity:

- (a) at the personal level to help people overcome problems of personality imbalance, self-identity, meaning in life, moral reasoning, etc.,
- (b) at the communal level to integrate potentially rootless people into groups and associations which provide direction and meaning in personal life as well as helpful points of reference in large-scale societies where the individual may feel vulnerable to an all-powerful bureaucracy or system, or
- (c) at the societal level to provide legitimation for the prevailing social order; compensation for felt deprivations; and moral regulation of the interrelationships between major social institutions.

The basic teachings of Scientology on the spiritual nature of the *thetan* (spiritual being) and on the Eight Dynamics; the practical objectives of its training courses and counselling services; and the reverential, reflective tone of some Scientology ceremonies all persuade me that, in common with other religions, Scientology may be usefully described as functional at each of the above levels. This is not, of course, to claim that only religions have these functions. It is merely to argue, first, that Scientology *does* share them with other religions and, second, that its particular ways of fulfilling them are more closely akin in appearance



and objectives to those of commonsensically-defined religions than of, say, political groups or welfare agencies.

Defining religion in terms of function may be helpful in some cases of social scientific analysis: light can thereby be cast on many interesting aspects of its varied contribution to social life. In view of the obvious difficulty of distinguishing in this perspective between religion and ideologies, however, a functionalist definition cannot go far towards emphasising religion's distinctiveness. For this reason a substantive definition may be more useful.

## II. SUBSTANTIVE DEFINITIONS

It is clear to me that Professor Parrinder, Professor Pocock and Canon Drury have each suggested criteria by which a phenomenon might qualify as religious in a substantive sense. By this I mean that various grounds are provided by them for restricting the application of the term "religion" to phenomena displaying definite properties which do not occur together in other phenomena.

The strongest form of substantive definitions holds that religion has an essence or essential nature which can be known for certain only by intuition and introspection. Thus, Rudolf Otto claimed that religion was a "...primal element of our psychical nature that needs to be grasped purely in its uniqueness and cannot itself be explained from anything else". (*The Idea of the Holy*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1950, p. 141.) In his opinion the uniqueness of religious experiences lay in their radical differences from all other experiences: they were the experiences of the "wholly other". The elements of circularity and timelessness in this kind of reasoning are problematic and have deterred most social scientists from making use of essentialist definitions. The attractions are, however, undeniable.

More frequently social scientists have been disposed to use "stipulative" definitions of religion. By this means they have stipulated that, for their purposes and without claiming universal validity for their views, "religion" shall be identified by reference to certain characteristics. For the anthropologist M. Spiro, e.g., religion is "an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings." ("Religion: problems of definition and explanation" in M. Banton ed. *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*. London: Tavistock, 1966, p. 96.) Not all social scientists insist, however, on the reference to "superhuman beings". P. Worsley, another anthropologist, finds it more useful to define religion as a "dimension beyond the empirical-technical realm". (*The Trumpet*

*Shall Sound*. London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1957, p. 311.) This preference for a substantive, but fairly inclusive, definition is shared by many sociologists. The well-known and authoritative definition by R. Robertson, e.g., stipulates that,

Religious culture is that set of beliefs and symbols...pertaining to a distinction between an empirical and a super-empirical, transcendent reality: the affairs of the empirical being subordinated in significance to the non-empirical. Second, we define religious action simply as: action shaped by an acknowledgement of the empirical/super-empirical distinction. (*The Sociological Interpretation of Religion*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1970, p. 47.)

No good purpose would be served by adding further examples of stipulative substantive definitions, since the quoted examples are representative of the common ways in which religion is defined for the purpose of social scientific analysis.

Using the definitional criteria implicit in Spiro's, Worsley's and Robertson's definitions, there can be no doubt that Scientology qualifies for the purposes of social scientific analysis as a religion. Its underlying philosophy of man assumes that the person is composed of both a material body and a non-material spirit which enjoys immortal life in a non-empirical realm. Belief in the reality of thetans is a logical prerequisite for subscription to Scientology's rituals, courses of practical training, counselling services and programmes of social reform. There would be no cogent justification for Scientology's particular forms of religion in the absence of belief in the existence and the superiority of a non-empirical, transcendent reality. Indeed, in the view of the author of the most authoritative sociological analysis of Scientology the movement's founder and leader became progressively more oriented towards questions about the origins of the thetan, knowledge of past lives and "the supernatural abilities that the individual can acquire through the practice of Scientology". (R. Wallis, *The Road to Total Freedom*. London: Heinemann, 1976, p. 124.)

The actions of a committed Scientologist would be shaped and guided by the empirical/super-empirical distinction. Professor Parrinder has demonstrated effectively how the rituals of Scientology embody an element of worship and veneration which is consonant with the underlying teachings about non-empirical reality and Professor Pocock has emphasised the clear parallels between Scientology and the Great Traditions of the Hindu and Buddhist religions in respect of their similar understanding of the immanent relationship between Gods or spirits and mankind.

### III. CONCLUSION

My conclusion is that Scientology, whilst clearly differing from the majority of Christian churches, denominations and sects in beliefs, practices and organisational structures, nevertheless satisfies the criteria conventionally applied by social scientists in distinguishing between religion and non-religion.

The fact that the material basis for the religion of Scientology is organised in a business-like manner can have no implications for its status as a religion. Does a work of art cease to be a work of art when it is efficiently produced for sale or exchange? It is naive to think that any new religious movement could survive in the modern world without a business-like material basis for its operations, and as Canon Drury has pointed out, even the ancient Christian churches are nowadays not averse from engaging in business affairs in order to sustain or promote their services to actual and potential members. Lacking the benefits of inherited property-wealth, endowments, patronage and a “birth right” membership, new religious movements must either act in a business-like manner or perish.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*When Professor Beckford wrote “Scientology, Social Science and the Definition of Religion” in 1980, he was Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Durham. He is currently Professor of Sociology at the University of Warwick.*





