

THE RELIGIOUS STATUS OF SCIENTOLOGY: IS SCIENTOLOGY A RELIGION?

By

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Introduction

Before commenting on the religious status of Scientology I would like to provide the reader with the following information about myself to help them evaluate my comments. I am a practicing Christian belonging to the evangelical wing of the of Anglican (Episcopalian or Church of England) Communion. Before becoming an academic I worked almost ten years for the North Western Gas Board in England where I gained various trade and engineering qualifications. In 1967 I entered the University of Lancaster where I obtained my B.A. (Hons.) in Religious Studies under Professor Ninian Smart. From Lancaster I went to Bristol University where I completed an M.A. "with commendation," before going on to a Ph.D. At Bristol I was supervised by the Rev. F.B. Welbourn (Religious Studies) and Professor Kenneth Ingham (History).

As a graduate student my work concentrated on the interaction between religion and society. My M.A. was on new religious movements in Britain centered on the town of Glastonbury. My doctorate dealt with the origins of apartheid as an ideology, Afrikaner Nationalism, and neo-Calvinism as contemporary religious movements. Since completing graduate work I have continued research into new religions in Africa, Europe and North America.

As an scholar of religion I have published over 60 refereed academic articles, 4 books, 8 edited books, and more than 100 book reviews. Most of the articles and all of the books have dealt with various aspects of new religious movements. I particular I argued that Afrikaner Christian-Nationalism ought to be seen as a modern movement not something which can be traced back to the sixteenth century. I have also published extensively on Zulu religion and African Independent Churches. Two of my books, both co-authored with my wife Karla Poewe, Professor of Anthropology, provide interpretive theories for understanding cults, sects and new religions and popular criticisms these movements face.

Full details about my academic career and publications can be found in my online cv.

Defining religion

One of the main problems facing anyone who wishes to make a judgment about the religious nature of a particular group is finding an adequate definition of religion. Although scholars offer many different definitions of religion such definitions can, very broadly, be divided into two main groups. There are those definitions which define religion in terms of a cultic organization and there are those definitions which define religions in terms of a way of life. A list of various definitions can be found in the *Concise Dictionary of Religion* which is available online at: www.understandingworldreligions.com

To access the religious nature of Scientology I began using the definition provided by Professor Ninian Smart, who is the founder of the first Religious Studies Department in England and one of the world's leading authorities in the field of religious studies. Currently he is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

In his paper "Meaning in and the Meaning of Religion," given at a colloquium on the "meaning of religion" at the University of Lancaster, December 1969, Smart argued that the big problem facing anyone who wishes to define religion is to ensure that all clearly identifiable religions, such as Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, the Hindu tradition, etc., are included while things that are analogous to religion, like certain forms of membership in such things as a political party, are excluded. Therefore, he suggested the following model for identifying a religious as opposed to some similar form of social organization. A religion should include most if not all of the following elements:

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

An alternate definition with which I have a lot of sympathy is the one provided by Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge in their book *A Theory of Religion*, Toronto, Peter Lang, 1987, p. 39. They say:

Religion refers to systems of general compensators based on supernatural assumptions.

Scientology as a religion

When I was first asked to pass judgment on the religious nature of Scientology I conducted a small random sample survey of people participating in the activities of the Church of Scientology in Vancouver, B.C., Canada (1978). The results of this survey plus qualitative interviews with Ms. Davidson, a number of other local Scientologists, and an examination of a number of key texts published by the movement convinced me that in terms of Ninian Smart's definition Scientology is a religion. Looking at the data again it should also be noted that Scientology also qualifies as a religion in terms of Stark and Bainbridge's definition.

Thus in terms of two standard and widely used definitions of religion there is no doubt that the Church of Scientology at that time qualified as a religion. I have no reason to believe that in the last twenty years things have changed. In fact, if anything the religious aspects of Scientology have increased.

Further, even using those definitions which see religions as at total way of life or act of faith, cf. Rev. F.B. Welbourn, "Towards Eliminating the Concept of Religion," Lancaster University, January 1968 which is found online at www.understandingworldreligions/articles.com, and theologian Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1957, leads to the conclusion that Scientology is a religion.

Good Religions - Bad Religions

To argue that Scientology is a genuine religion is not to say that it is a good religion or a bad religion, a "true" religion or a "false" religion. These are theological questions which go beyond

the scope of this paper. Roy Wallis, in his book *The Road to Total Freedom*, London, Heinemann, 1976, says:

While Scientology may, at first glance, appear to mark a radical discontinuity with the Western religious tradition, the characteristics summarized above and described in detail in earlier chapters, identify it, in fact, as a logical outcome and extension of certain central features of that tradition (p. 246).

The church is, as he points out, p. 247-255, a new religion.

With this conclusion I must agree. As a Christian I do not believe that Scientology, as a belief system, is compatible with traditional Christian teachings. But then, in my view, neither are the unique teachings of the Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints), Buddhism or many other religions despite the fact that many people, including some eminent scholars, will regard my views as narrow and dogmatic. Nevertheless, I recognize that all of these traditions, including Scientology, are religious and that they deserve equitable treatment under the law.
