

SCIENTOLOGY
A COMPARISON WITH
RELIGIONS OF
THE EAST AND WEST

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Having been requested in my capacity as an historian of religion to give an opinion on the Church of Scientology, I shall herewith deliver the following statement:

Initially, I would like to point out that in my research I have primarily dealt with Buddhism in its various regional forms and with Tibetan religion. However, in my education and in my seminary teaching, I have had reason to work with and discuss the general issues on history of religion. The following brief reflections are based on my study of a larger number of scriptures from the Church of Scientology and on a number of religious scientific examinations and discussions concerning the Church from different angles, including history of ideas as well as sociological and psychological.

Among recent important studies, I would like to emphasise, in particular, "Scientology" (1994) by Bryan Ronald Wilson, leading British sociologist of religion; "From Therapy to Religion" (1994) by Dorthe Refslund Christensen; and the article "Scientology and Indian Religion" (Chaos No. 25, 1994) by Oluf Schonbeck. I have furthermore visited the Church's premises in Stockholm and spoken to its representatives there

as well as in other relations and thereby have sought to form a direct personal understanding of the Church of Scientology.

Scientology is usually viewed as an example of a “new religion,” a designation which commonly refers to movements created in the Western world in this century and which arrived in Sweden during the 1960s and later. With this designation, one refers not only to the origins of the religion but also infers that this “new spirituality” in many respects is different from other older churches, communities and sects as far as concept, religious ceremonies, methods of missionary work and acquisition of new members. It is possible that the designation “new religions” is also an expression of a disassociative opinion; that in a certain eagerness to “explain” origin and formation on the basis of social and psychological analyses, they may be minimising new religions to functions of these social-psychological factors. Particularly in older representations by authors who belong to or are closely related to older and more established religious communities, an irritation is noticeable concerning the “competition” being offered by the “new spirituality.” In some cases, this is expressed by branding these religions as “sects” and claiming they attract primarily young people under emotional circumstances and then are about to retain them with dubious and authoritarian methods. All religions, churches and religious communities have at one point in time been “new” and have appeared against an older and traditional background with all this may imply as far as missionary work, proselytisation, organisation and dissemination of the message.

The instrumentality, the focusing on life here and now, the organisation and the rational and technical vocabulary existing among certain “new religions” have caused representatives from primarily Christian communities to question whether we can refer to these as religions. This discussion is of little interest and relevance to an historian of religion today.

For example, if one uses a common definition of religion — “Religion is the conviction of the existence of a supernatural world, a conviction which first and foremost is expressed in concepts of belief of various kind which are concretely illustrated in rituals and observances and in epic portraying” (Ake Hulcrantz, “Methods Within the Comparative Research of Religion,” 1973, page 13), the Church of Scientology very clearly appears as a religion. There is furthermore no

reason for an historian of religion to rank different religions from different starting points along a scale of value.

Religions can be analysed in manifold ways and from different angles of approach. In this context, it appears fitting to make use of a disposition which indicates variations and nuances as well as the degree of fullness. The historian of religion Ninian Smart has in several works pedagogically arranged his presentation under seven headlines, each of them aimed at a particular and characteristic dimension of the religion in question. These seven dimensions are the ritual and practical; the emotional and those related to experience; the mystic and narrative; the philosophical and educational; the ethical and juridical; the social and institutional; and, finally, the material and estetical. On the basis of this pattern, one can seek to discern the typical characteristics in one single religion in a way which facilitates comparisons with other religions and other relative comparisons.

This statement is not the place for describing the history of the Church of Scientology, nor to broach the problems of reliability of sources facing an historian of religion when comparing the contributions of the dynamic founder of Dianetics and Scientology, L. Ron Hubbard (1911-1986), from different periods in his development. Neither will the development from Dianetics therapy to the doctrines of the Church of Scientology be taken up; the starting point as far as the source of the religion is concerned is simply the picture of itself which the church considers as representative.

The first dimension is the ritual and practical. Here is found the individual spiritual counselling called *auditing*, and Scientology's religious education, called *training*. Here also are the collective rituals, regularly held religious services and ceremonies for marriages, naming of children, and funerals. The auditing procedure and its structure is naturally directly dependent on the church's viewpoint on man and his spiritual possibilities for development, which will be taken up later. The principle is that the individual in a formalised way is to be brought to realisation of his spiritual status and what is preventing his development as a spiritual being. By making such barriers visible, the individual is placed in a position where he can remove these and proceed. In this respect, the spiritual counselling has some similarity with certain therapeutic activity and the method is as well reminiscent of those used by certain forms of Buddhism and Hinduism, which are also based on

a close relationship between the teacher and the pupil and interaction between formalism and intuition.

The collective religious ceremonies appear to be influenced by Christianity and are not unique within a Western context. The texts that guide the performance of the ceremonies render a dignified and adequate impression.

The second dimension is related to experience and is more difficult to grasp. Based on information from active members of the church as well as from outside observers, the collective ritual gives the participants the opportunity to experience congregation and devotion. The individual counselling, like similar experiences in other religions, is possibly subject to those tensions which may arise during such a procedure; but it apparently also is able to provide an experience of relief and liberation.

The third dimension is the narrative and mystical. In this respect, Scientology appears quite lacking, comparatively. One has the impression that their short history and their rational and almost technological approach hinders this aspect of the religion. By my reading of the material provided to me, however, I wondered whether the account of L. Ron Hubbard's life, particularly the early stage, carried an ingredient of hagiography, and it could be of interest here to follow the development.

The philosophical and doctrinal dimension is the fourth. It is not possible to adequately address Scientology's extensive and not totally uncomplicated philosophy in this limited space. It is in part an esoteric doctrine, wherein the full meaning of various things is revealed on a gradual basis, using an esoteric terminology with many verbal neologisms and semantic shifts. It can be stated that although the concept of a "Supreme Being" exists, other concepts of faith also play an important role. The most essential is that a human being is said to be a spiritual being. The person himself, beyond name, body and mind, is called the *thetan* (for "spirit," "soul," "life force") from the word *theta*, a symbol for thought or spirit. The thetan is non-material and not actually a part of our physical world, but caught in it and burdened down in it, assuming a human body at birth.

The cause of this is earlier existences and deeds in this or former lives which hinder insight and understanding. The objective of the auditing procedure is that these hindrances, "traces" of the past, are discovered and understood and thereby eliminated. In this way, a

human being, or rather the thetan, develops away from the emotional and reactive up to higher levels of insight and freedom.

The aim is for the thetan to achieve a god-like but actually original state. Every man is believed to have this potential of development. He is believed to be basically good and to have the potential to achieve a higher spiritual state and knowledge of the Supreme Being.

From this we can see that Scientology possesses a theology, an anthropology and a doctrine for salvation of inner coherence which is well thought through. What an historian of religion first of all is struck by is the great similarity that exists between these teachings and those that exist in certain Indian religions and systems of religious philosophy. In those, we also find the concept that the deeds of man have consequences for his future lives in the form of experiences which can be reactivated and which then form his future. Through good acts, meditation and other exercises, these can be located and eliminated to benefit or make spiritual development possible at all. In the Hinduistic systems, the core and essence of every human being is thought to consist of a spiritual entity, a soul beyond all individuality. It is this soul that shall be relieved in order to return to its original state.

The often technical language of Scientology in the description of these procedures thus has its equivalent in the Indian technologies of salvation.

Putting the teaching in hierarchical form so that one must first achieve a certain spiritual level or state to be entitled to participate in the next level is also common to Scientology and some Indian schools of thought. For both traditions, transitions between the levels are connected with performance of various kinds.

The fifth dimension is the ethical and juridical. Because man is believed to be basically good, he is able to choose the right and the good. In the Creed of the Church of Scientology, the belief in the equal rights of all is expressed and emphasis is placed on human rights. The larger perspective is definitely included, even if the ethics in Scientology is much oriented around the individual. There is also the performance of social betterment activities through various organisations, which, however, is not of prime interest to an historian of religion.

The sixth dimension, the social and the institutional, may reflect the integration and acceptance of a religious community into its surrounding society. The Church of Scientology is organised in a way which is

reminiscent of the Christian churches, i.e. with a hierarchy of clergy and laymen as the uniting force. Various activities of the congregation exist but, as the practice is centered on the individual and his development, one does not get the impression that it is the congregation of the church which is the central social entity. Of the available surveys, it appears that the average member is in his younger middle age and socially belongs to the middle class. The average member furthermore does not join in response to any "crisis," the same is true in cases where someone has left the church. The activity of the church is, according to the information at hand, financed through donations and contributions from its members.

The seventh and the last dimension is the material and esthetic. The designation of a chapel for religious services, the garb of the ministers and the religious symbolism overall make a comparison with Western Christianity natural. Distinctive for the Church of Scientology is the office for the founder, L. Ron Hubbard, in each Church. This appears to serve as a symbol of reverence and respect for his legacy.

A conclusion of this brief examination of the various aspects of the Church of Scientology is that great similarities with oriental religion exist, in matters concerning the view of human nature and formation of doctrine. The organisation and religious services are more reminiscent of the West and Christianity.

Furthermore, Scientology appears fully as a religion and it is therefore natural to express the opinion that, in a community which has religious freedom, it should be provided with the facilities to satisfy the need of its adherents and members of the religious faith.

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