

Is Scientology a Religion?

Luigi Berzano
University of Turin
luigi.berzano@tin.it

ABSTRACT: Is Scientology a religion? In order to answer the question, I use the substantial definitions that today many scholars (among them Aldo Natale Terrin, in his recent volume on Scientology) call “polythetic,” in that they put together several specific, common characteristics in a *set* of dimensions. We find in Scientology, *firstly* (especially in the *Dianetics* volume), a complex set of doctrines, beliefs and behaviors, which the faithful must observe in order to reach the state of *clear*. *Secondly*, we find a community organized around certain beliefs and practices, common to all Scientology members. The *third* characteristic defining religion is the presence of a recognized authority, in this case L. Ron Hubbard, the sole master of the truth, understood as a doctrine with a practical, effective side that can be verified. The *fourth* characteristic is the community dimension around the “Sunday service,” comparable with the liturgical services of Protestant churches. The *fifth* characteristic is an ethical-moral view of life, based on promoting rationality at the service of the greatest good for the greatest number of “dynamics.” The *sixth* feature is the presence of God, identified in Scientology as the “Eight Dynamic,” whose essence is not yet well known.

KEYWORDS: Scientology, Defining Religion, L. Ron Hubbard, Gnosticism, Scientology and Theology, Scientology as Religion.

Introduction

“When I mention religion, I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion, but the Protestant religion; and not only the Protestant religion, but the Church of England” (Fielding 2001, 76). So says Thwackum in Henry Fielding’s (1707–1754) 1749 novel *Tom Jones*. Many still think like Thwackum—when they talk about religion, they mean only their own. Today this form of ethnocentrism is increasingly challenged, on the one hand, by the globalisation of religions that fuels religious pluralism and, on the other, by

secularisation, which makes societies and individuals more and more autonomous from religions in their lifestyles.

Religions today exhibit a great variety: to name but some, religions without founders or magisterium (Hinduism); religions without a supreme divinity or clergy (Buddhism); religions without specific beliefs but mainly focused on rituals and practices (Confucianism); religions with belief in one God only and with highly organized communities (Christianity); and religions without a clear distinction between the religious and political spheres (Islam). Even the etymology of the term “religion” is controversial, between Cicero’s (106–43 BCE) *relegare* (to gather, collect carefully) and Lactantius’s (ca. 250–325) *religare* (to connect).

Many scholars agree with a distinction, which divides religions into two main classes on the basis of two kinds of definitions. *Functional definitions* indicate what a religion *does* for its devotees and the social roles it plays. *Substantial definitions* show what a religion *is* and consider its substance.

Functional Definitions of Religion

Sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) offered the best-known functional definition of religion. After him, scholars identified six principal functions common to all religions. Religion offers support, consolation and a sense of reconciliation. It builds a transcendental relationship through worship and ceremonies. It attributes a sacred character to the values and norms of the society where the individual lives. Sometimes, it even plays a role seemingly contrary to the one just mentioned, the prophetic function, by means of which the present state of affairs is challenged and a different future society is foreshadowed. A fifth function concerns identity: religion gives the individual a sense of identity, not only for the present but also for the past and the future.

The latter feature is connected with individual development, maturity and progress, through the various phases of existence and in the society in which one lives. Based on these functions, Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) defined religion as: “A system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in [people] by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of

factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Geertz 1973, 90).

A large amount of criticism has been levelled at functional definitions, accused of reducing religions to the social roles they play in society. Such criticism is based on the idea that the religious goes well beyond any purely functional dimension.

Substantial Definitions of Religion

Substantial definitions, on the other hand, define religion as a set of beliefs and symbols, and values derived directly from them, linked to a distinction between an empirical and a supra-empirical reality. Thus, religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices related to a transcendent reality, joining its adherents together with the aim of forming a moral community.

Substantial definitions refer mostly to a supernatural reality, and to certain historical religions. It can be argued that these definitions are much more exclusive, because they indicate more specifically the elements that contribute to the making of a religion: a notion of divinity, forms of worship, ethical duties, types of authority, and beliefs in the present and future worlds. Functional definitions, on the contrary, are much more inclusive, because they comprise all the institutions, including the cultural and social ones, which fulfill the same functions of the individuals’ social and cultural integration.

Scientology as Religion: Five Traits

Is Scientology a religion? In order to answer the question, I use these substantial definitions that today many scholars (among them Aldo Natale Terrin, in his recent volume on Scientology: Terrin 2017) call “polythetic,” in that they put together several specific, common characteristics in a *set* of dimensions, including the following: 1) a set of beliefs affirming the existence of an *ad extra* world; 2) an organized community, which communicates information about belief; 3) an important authority as the source of truth; 4) ritual practices; and 5) an ethical-moral view of life.

Is it possible to find these traits in Scientology? Firstly, it should be recalled that L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986) himself, as early as in his 1954 *Phoenix Lectures*, when comparing Taoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism with spiritual knowledge, indicated that Scientology was the true realisation of Oriental religious philosophies, and states that it was in line with the great spiritual leaders of the West such as Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. Later, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, Hubbard insisted on the “religious” nature of Scientology. “Scientology is a religion in the very oldest and fullest sense” (Hubbard 1968, 35), if we assume that “the word ‘religion’ itself can embrace sacred lore, wisdom, knowingness of gods and souls and spirits” (Hubbard 1968, 13). In a letter from the same period, Hubbard instructed Scientology staff to wear vestments recalling traditional churches. In places of worship the Church’s “Credo” and the crucifix should be plainly in evidence. At the same time, he wrote a book for Church ministers about Sunday services and other ceremonies (Hubbard 1976a). In 1970, Scientology’s book of prayers and sermons had been published (Hubbard 1970). Then, the journal *Advance!* saw the light, the earliest issues being dedicated to Scientology taking its place among the major world religions. Subsequent issues directly compared Scientology with other religions (e.g. Judaism, Jainism, Shintoism), concluding that Scientology was not only a religion but the completion of the spiritual quest implicit in these other faiths.

Two further books are relevant to this claim of Scientology to be a religion. *Scientology: A World Religion Emerges in the Space Age* (Hubbard 1974) aims to demonstrate that Scientology is the great universal twentieth-century religion. In 1998, the book *Scientology: Theology and Practice of a Contemporary Religion* was published, containing both published and unpublished writings, inter alia by scholars Bryan R. Wilson (1926–2004), Frank K. Flinn and J. Gordon Melton, and original documents, supporting Scientology’s arguments for calling itself a religion (Church of Scientology International 1998). Basing its argument on Joachim Wach’s (1898–1955) definition of religion as being founded on the three characteristics of doctrine, practices and forms of community, the book concluded that Scientology has a religious nature and the aim of raising its members’ spiritual awareness to a higher level.

There is no shortage of authors who contest this thesis. The first criticism is that Scientology does not have a unique identity but on the organizational level provides for a multinational series of institutions and institutes, each with

different facets and tasks, so that if one can talk about “religion,” it is confined to “one” only of these organizations. In this connection, Terrin points out that other lay Scientology organizations

may obscure the possible ‘religious’ nature of the principal organization, which is the ‘Church of Scientology.’ It is true that there are many organizations with mainly humanitarian backgrounds side by side with the Scientology religion, but how can these associations make Scientology less ‘religious’ or less ‘credible’? (Terrin 2017, 50).

The second criticism is that Scientology has taken advantage of its affinity with Hinduism and Buddhism for instrumental reasons. Indeed, at the beginning, in the early 1950s, Dianetics did not boast of having a “religious” nature but presented itself as mental therapy, and Scientology was seen as a science. The Oriental link, in this theory, is useful for justifying the idea of “religion” in Scientology and making it more respectable.

According to Terrin, however, the relationship between Scientology and the Orient appears as neither improvised nor instrumental. On the contrary, an overall view of Scientology’s doctrines shows that they are “permeated” by the entire Oriental world: the concept of “past lives” comes from the East; the *thetan* idea is Eastern and is close to that of *Atman*; spiritual freedom as the ultimate achievement is Buddhist, as is the sense of unlimited freedom of the *thetan* when it reaches salvation. “One might say that without its links to the Eastern world, Scientology would no longer be Scientology. One could even say that the call of the East is a *conditio sine qua non* of Scientology’s very doctrine” (Terrin 2017, 51).

Is Scientology really a religion? The *thetan* concept present in its theology removes any possibility of doubt as to the fact that it is. The notion of *thetan* immediately refers to the “spiritual,” to the extent that such a vision fully expresses the existence of the sacred and the supernatural based on what a human being is: an “immortal spirit.” We are dealing here with a worldview that may be compared with other religious and spiritual experiences. The *thetan* spirituality, which makes Scientology a religion, is a launching pad that Hubbard himself used when he wrote *The Volunteer Minister’s Handbook* and *Religious Influence in Society: Role of the Volunteer Minister* (Hubbard 1976a, 1976b)

In a few words, religion can be defined as belief in spiritual beings. More broadly, religion can be defined as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems of human life (Hubbard 1976a, LXXI).

The *thetan* is the “immortal spirit,” the “divine,” the “eternal” I, which unites, at the same time, the characteristics of the human and the divine. This concept is close to the Hindu idea of *purusha*, present in the *Samkhya-Yoga* system, where *purusha* is the divine, the eternal, the immortal, which lives in us and that we have the task of discovering. The concept is also close to the Gnostic worldview, where humankind carries within itself the “image of the divine” by means of a spiritual particle, which, having fallen into matter by mistake, feels the need to return to its origins, the *pleroma*, i.e. to the fullness of the divinity of which it is part. One might say that the *thetan* has the same characteristics and is therefore by its own nature the spiritual, the divine element in humans. Indeed, “the *thetan*—through the history of humanity—is the spiritual, which is the victim of matter and has been ‘imprisoned’ within matter itself” (Terrin 2017, 54).

In Scientology the path to salvation is no different from the spiritual road to total freedom, as in it is the case in the *Samkhya-Yoga* system and elsewhere in the East. Here, we can observe an analogy with the Oriental world of Hinduism and Buddhism. The objective of the *thetan* is not only to free himself from the slavery to MEST (Matter, Energy, Space, Time) but also to reach, by means of particular techniques, something resembling a “divine” state, also called an “original” or “native” state.

To return to the five dimensions, which Terrin considers as present in all religions, we find in Scientology, *firstly* (especially in the book *Dianetics*), a complex set of doctrines, beliefs and behaviours, which the faithful must observe in order to reach the state of *clear*. Similarly, the doctrine of the *thetan* offers a way to understand and interpret reality.

Secondly, we find a community organized around certain beliefs and practices common to all members, which the Danish theologian Dorthe R. Christensen (in *Scientology and Self-Narrativity: Theology and Soteriology as Resource and Strategy*) identifies as three basic ideas:

1. Every Scientologist has a notion of himself or herself as a “spiritual being” (a *thetan*).
2. The notion of *time track*; members believe they have lived past lives in their bodies and now, by a process of *auditing*, they can become aware of these past lives (reincarnation and karma); and

3. The belief that Hubbard's teachings derive from "discoveries," thanks to which a safe path to mental and spiritual freedom is available to everyone (Christensen 2009).

The *third* characteristic defining the concept of religion is the presence of a recognized authority. Here Hubbard is regarded as the sole master of the truth, understood as a doctrine with a practical and effective side that can be verified. The church's doctrine is considered a source of liberation only when applied exactly as proposed by the founder. The *Religious Technology Center* (RTC) was founded by Hubbard and some close collaborators in 1982 to supervise the authoritative, correct application of doctrine.

The *fourth* characteristic is the community dimension, built around the "Sunday service," which is comparable with the liturgical services of Protestant churches. In fact, a ritual dimension appears in Scientology both in the Sunday service and in the *auditing*. The whole world of Scientology is "ritually" organized. Its "prayers" refer to the great themes to be found in all religions: a sense of justice, a greater understanding of the Supreme Being, a deeper self-awareness, religious freedom, and spiritual advancement. Then there are "rites of passage"—weddings, funerals and baptism (*Naming Ceremony*). Finally, the *group processing*, which is held before the ceremony, aims at focusing the attention and instilling an increased awareness of the environment one is entering. It is a group auditing, to connect with the situation and augment self-awareness. All the texts of these rituals are presented as instructions for the minister and the deacon, and are included in the already mentioned book by Hubbard, *The Volunteer Minister's Handbook*.

The *fifth* characteristic is an ethical-moral view of life. It is based on favouring rationality at the service of the greatest good for the greatest number of "dynamics." A "dynamic" is an impulse to survive in a certain direction (the self, the family, the group, humanity as a whole, all living beings, the material universe, the spiritual universe, and the Supreme Being/God). The same awareness is raised in Scientology to increasingly high levels by various exercises. It aims essentially at becoming conscious of broader responsibilities in relations with others, and promotes a greater involvement in the society, for the good of both oneself and the community. Thus, "good" and "evil" are clearly distinguished in Scientology, based on a fundamental distinction about life. Whatever leads to greater survival, to "more" life, is positive; whatever leads to the destruction of

life, or to a negation of survival, is negative. This is the background against which the Church's "ethical code," its "credo," its *training* and *auditing*, and all its other projects for the betterment of the individual and humankind are set.

The *sixth* characteristic is the presence of God. In Scientology, God is identified as the "Eight Dynamic," whose essence is not yet well known, "what is beyond the concentric circles of existence and survival." This is parallel to the Gnostic worldview, where God is *ágnostos theos* (unknowable God). We may further add that, in both Gnosticism and Scientology, increased awareness (by the Gnostic student or the *thetan*) corresponds to a deep perception of God. The Eight Dynamic is the urge toward existence as "infinity," as the "Supreme Being." Contrary to the great Semitic religions, Scientology does not impose a belief in God on its members, but little by little, as the Scientologist progresses in the level of spiritual awareness, he or she will experience the eight dynamic and understand the force of attraction of infinity in human life.

A Different Scientology Narrative

Among the various characteristics listed in Terrin's volume, the most significant seems to be the idea of "salvation," which includes both "health" and "well-being." The notions of "health" and "salvation" are complementary, and they play a central part in every religion, including Scientology. The idea that *bodily health* and *spiritual salvation* are connected appears in several religion. The English word "health" comes itself from an anglo-saxon root meaning "whole," with the same meaning of the Greek *holos*. "Holy" also comes from the same root. Thus, there is an etymological exchange between the terms indicating physical and spiritual well-being.

In fact, health, spirituality, and well-being share a common ancestry in an ancient principle of wholeness. This is being rediscovered by several new religious movements in our days, insisting on concepts such as wholeness, spirituality, well-being, health, salvation. The individual capable of integrating health and well-being is holistic, one in whom the physical, psychic, and spiritual dimensions are well integrated. The concept of *holos* is the crossroad where spirituality, health, and prosperity meet. It is the nature of holism to safeguard individuals' health, satisfaction, and material success. It is no accident that some have noticed that today we are moving from a *fitness* spirituality to a so-called

wellness spirituality. From this, an idea of “meta-health” as a concept widespread in contemporary society is emerging.

In Scientology, this new frontier—the freedom of the spirit—is gradually attained by *eight dynamics* of openness towards ever-more totalising realities. This openness spreads like wildfire through the widening awareness of the self, humanity, and the entire world. All this is brought about by “growing” towards freedom, which requires distinct phases of development known as levels of OT (*Operating Thetan*). There are eight levels, representing what is called the “Bridge to Total Freedom.”

These levels of progressive freedom, which broaden more and more and grant “powers,” can be compared with the so-called *siddhi* in the Hindu and Buddhist world (Terrin 2017, 261). Given that the OTs are the most advanced stages on the road to freedom, and taking into account that the doctrines of these higher levels are not communicated but form part of “initiatric” (i.e. progressive) knowledge, many misunderstandings and fantasies have grown up about it over time, upon which Terrin’s otherwise thorough volume does not dwell.

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