



Defining Religion in a Pluralistic Society

Religious scholars faced with the question of how to define religious practice in today's changing and pluralist society have examined the essential characteristics of all faiths and how these factors are manifested in the Scientology religion.

Many consider they already know the answer to the question, "What is a religion?"

The definitions employed from one person to the next almost always are defined by personal religious heritage and experience, yet history has demonstrated that this perspective is a perilous

one. Such approaches have given us the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, hundreds of years of bloodshed in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe, and the troubles of Northern Ireland.

More commonly, restrictive approaches to defining religion lead to less violent but nonetheless equally destructive forms of discrimination and other

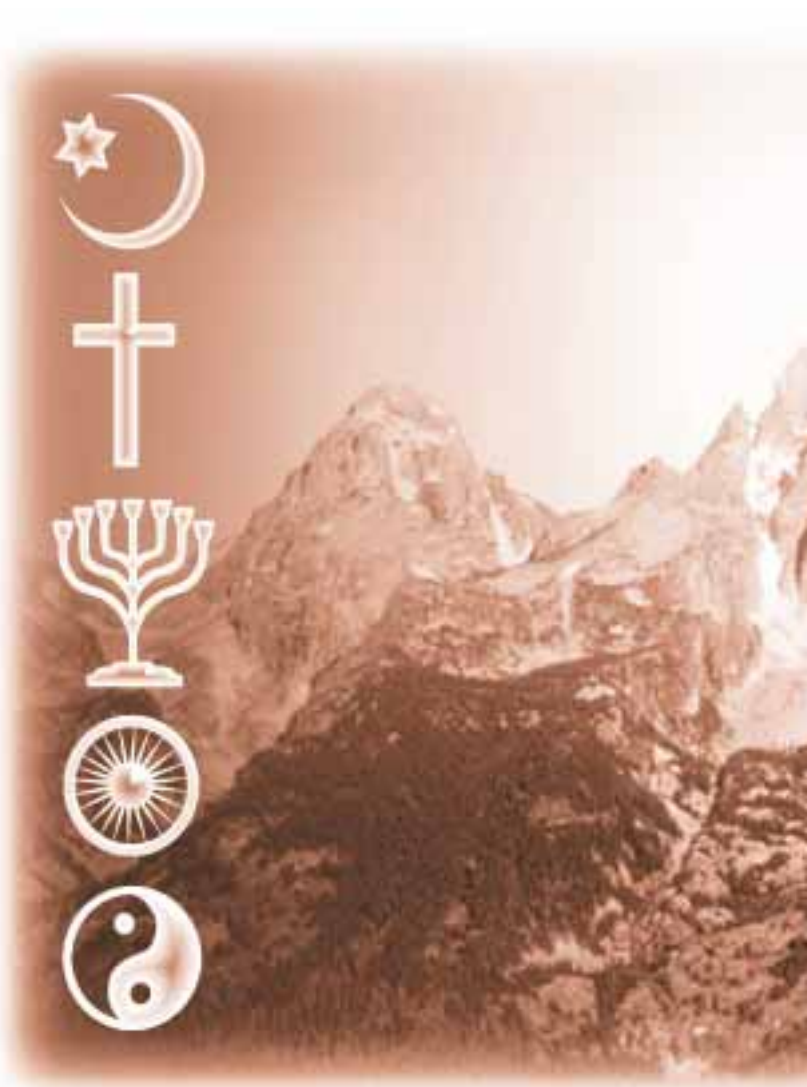
violations of human rights — particularly against members of new or unfamiliar faiths.

For centuries Western thinkers approached the subject from the unique perspective of Judeo-Christian tradition. This approach revolved around two fundamental but related doctrinal concepts — a belief that there is a personal creator God separate and distinct from man, and that man's highest activity is the worship, supplication and veneration of this god. If a set of beliefs did not manifest these doctrines, it was not regarded as a religion.

This doctrinal approach also reflected the way Western scholars analyzed religious thought and practice from the very beginning of civilized society until only relatively recently. For hundreds of years the terms “religion” and “Christianity” were virtually synonymous. Henry Fielding's sarcasm in “By religion I mean Christianity, by Christianity I mean Protestantism, by Protestantism I mean the Church of England as established by law” aptly caught the prevailing belief of the times. In fact, England refused to treat Judaism as a proper religion for purposes of charity law until as late as 1837.

This deceptively simple standard by which religions were judged not only closed the doors to many religions but opened the doors to persecution — underscoring that “defining” religion is far more than an issue of academic concern. From it, uneven treatment, discrimination and even violence have flowed.

Fortunately, as contemporary society became more global and the variety of religious expression in the West blossomed, scholars and others began to



It is the Eastern view that all religions, despite diverse beliefs and practices, are merely different paths leading to the same ultimate reality. As an ancient Japanese poem states, “there are many paths at the foot of the mountain, but the view of the moon is the same at the peak.”

discover that the doctrinal approach could not be applied easily to religions not grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition — a discovery that eventually brought about an enlightened change in view. The inherent bias of the traditional approach to defining religion was

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particularly obvious when indigenous or Eastern religions were at issue, since many of them either have no God or Supreme Being, let alone a personal creator God, or tend to view religion as an integral part of everyday life.

Indeed, in many indigenous religions there is little belief structure, and some Eastern religions such as Zen Buddhism and Hindu Bhakti view doctrine as ancillary and even a hindrance to spiritual advancement. Moreover, how could anyone deny the religiosity

of Theravada Buddhism and Jainism, which have no Supreme Being, when both predate Christianity by five centuries? What of the many Hindu sects which, while recognizing numerous gods, clearly subordinate them to the ultimate goal — union of the “Self” with the “Absolute”? And what of Taoism, which cannot be defined but only “discerned,” or Confucianism, where character is the goal and wisdom the path to attaining it?

Modern religious scholars now agree that the test for religion must be objective and cannot be based on concepts drawn from any one particular tradition. Use of a definition that is biased toward a particular religious tradition is certain to discriminate among religions, and has indeed resulted in varying levels of religious persecution. Rather, experts have broadened their view to achieve what Professor Bryan Wilson, Reader Emeritus in Sociology, Oxford University, calls “ethically neutral definitions” consisting of “elements [which] came to be recognized as constituting religion, regardless of the substance of the beliefs, the nature of the actual practices, or the formal status of the functionaries in their service.” In this way a religion’s beliefs and practices can be interpreted fairly and without bias.

There still are many different ways of defining religion. In more recent years the trend has been toward analysis through “comparative religion,” which approaches the understanding of a religion through cross-cultural comparisons of its component parts. This approach and the context from which it developed are discussed below.

APPROACHES TO DEFINING RELIGION BY WESTERN SCHOLARS

For hundreds of years religion had been defined on the basis of doctrine, and primarily on whether the doctrine in question exhibited the same characteristics as Christianity. The earliest attempts to go beyond the confines of the doctrinal test occurred in the early 1800s when scholars began considering intuitive and experiential factors in order to give more emphasis to man's inner religious feelings, which was fundamental to Asian religions but missing from the Western modes of analysis. This resulted in a more inward approach exemplified by the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher's definition of religion as a "feeling of absolute dependence" — as opposed to a feeling of "relative" dependence on something else, something divine.

For many years religions were interpreted by methods such as this which often were based more on speculation than actual knowledge of the true facts, particularly of Eastern religions. Eventually, in the 1860s the Oxford scholar Max Muller called for the creation of a "science of religion" that would interpret religion through an objective test based on actual facts and fair and accurate methods of comparison.

Anthropologists and sociologists in the 1900s argued that religious belief and practice could be understood only within the cultural context from which they grew. Led by sociologists Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, they posited that religion should be analyzed on the basis of its component societal factors, and they reduced religious belief to its social, economic, political, psychological and cultural components. But many of the approaches they

advocated were subject to criticism on the ground that they did not address what many considered the essential element of religions: *transcendence*.

This concept of transcendence, which means "to go beyond," "to bridge" or "to cross over," is a fundamental characteristic of all religious belief systems and a central element in every modern approach to defining religion. Transcendence creates the connection between the natural world and the supernatural, allowing man to pass through the limitations of his biological or physical state to the place of the divine. This place may be physical, as a temple or a church, or conceptual, as an image or principle — or both.

The distinction between the divine or the supernatural and the physical world — between the "sacred" and the "profane" — is another fundamental characteristic of religious belief and an inherent concept in most definitions of religion. This separation is most obvious in religious rituals, customs and trappings that appear distinctly religious.

Soon other broader approaches to defining religion were developed that drew on the work of Schleiermacher but avoided the "reductive" method that focused so much on societal factors. Two of the most widely known exponents of this new approach, Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade, advocated defining religion in terms of how one experienced the sacred, an awareness of which they described as an intensely deep religious feeling. They focused more on the objects that individuals believed were sacred or endowed with supernatural power, whether an object, a person, an activity or a structure.

Another approach, advocated by the religious historian Joachim Wach, also

analyzed religion in terms of objects and religious symbols. Wach expanded the ordinary notion of symbols to include people and activities, even institutions — thus, any activity, thing or person could serve as a bridge or connection between the sacred and the material world. He called these activating links “forms of religious expression” and grouped them into three main categories: (1) theoretical forms of religious expression — doctrines, beliefs, myths and sayings; (2) practical forms of religious expression — services, rites and practices; and (3) sociological forms of religious expression — organizations, relationships and authority.

While contemporary religious scholars certainly have not settled upon a universal definition of religion, it appears that a consensus believes these three categories of religious expression accurately reflect the essential common features of religions. Their basic approach looks for:

- A belief that deals with the supernatural, some “ultimate reality” that transcends the physical world. This ultimate reality may be a God, gods or Supreme Being, or it may simply be some supernatural principle such as a belief in the transmigration of one’s spirit;
- Religious practices that enable man to contact, understand, attain a union or commune with this ultimate reality; and
- A community of believers who join together in pursuing this ultimate reality.

Thus most scholars of comparative religion now agree with this three-pronged

approach because it is free of religious bias, is not intrusive and avoids evaluation of religious belief or practice. It is, in the words of Dr. Wilson, a truly “ethically neutral” definition.

OVERRIDING INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS

The concept of transcendence, which means “to go beyond” or “to cross over”, is a fundamental characteristic of all religious belief systems. It allows man to pass through the limitations of his physical state to a place of the divine.

While such a definition of religion may have been embraced by modern scholars as the correct approach to the subject, international human rights law mandates it as the only approach. And while international human rights instruments purposely do not define religion, they do establish core international standards requiring that governments not use discriminatory definitions or apply objective definitions in discriminatory ways.

Unfortunately, it is all too apparent that religious discrimination occurs, even in democratic societies. The internationally acclaimed 1997 study *Freedom of Religion and Belief: A World Report*, prepared by the University of Essex Human Rights Centre in conjunction with experts from 50 countries, has found that religious discrimination and repression is broadly occurring through the application of “narrow interpretations” of the concept of religion.

Some of the most important international standards to guard against this discrimination were developed by the



The United Nations' International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and other human rights treaties, protect and guarantee the wide variety of freedom of thought, conscience and religion which is found in the 137 countries around the world that have signed these covenants.

United Nations, which seeks as one of its primary aims to encourage “respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.” (Art. 1(3) of the Charter). These principles of equality and non-discrimination are of such fundamental importance that they are regarded as *principles of customary international law*, binding on all civilized nations.

To further these principles, United Nations human rights treaties, resolutions and reports call upon all member states to use a definition of religion that is sufficiently objective and expansive to avoid discrimination among religions. For this reason, the United Nations has rejected tests derived from Judeo-Christian concepts as outdated and unduly restrictive and suggested instead an inclusive and “ethically neutral” approach like that followed by religious scholars.

This mandate for religious tolerance is clearly evident in authoritative guidelines the United Nations Human Rights Committee adopted regarding Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion in each of the 137 countries which signed and ratified it. The UN’s Human Rights Committee, responsible for ensuring that the Covenant’s signatories comply with its obligations, has expressly warned them not to discriminate against any religion. The Committee has directed the signatories to treat all religions equally, particularly those that are “newly established, or represent religious minorities that may be the subject of hostility by a predominant religious community,” and

those that may have a “nontheistic” system of beliefs. (para. 2)

The UN’s foremost authority on religious matters, the Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance, has underscored this mandate for a broad approach to defining religion, stating that a group which goes “beyond simple belief and appeals to a divinity, or at the very least, to the supernatural, the transcendent, the absolute, or the sacred, enters into the religious sphere.” The UN Religious Rapporteur also has pointedly rejected standards used by some national governments for granting religious recognition that were based on the size of the group or the number of years it existed.

Other international authorities working in this area take this same approach. The European Court of Human Rights, for example, routinely issues decisions that recognize and protect the rights of minority religions. A related organization, the Human Rights Information Centre of the Directorate of Human Rights of the Council of Europe, has noted that the broad concept of religion under the European Convention on Human Rights is “not confined to widespread and globally recognized religions but also applies to rare and virtually unknown faiths” and that religion must “thus be understood in a broad sense.” And in April 1997, a body of religious experts convened by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, a group of more than 50 countries, confirmed that the United Nations’ broad standards should apply to any definition of religion in order to protect nontraditional and minority religions.

COMMON FUNCTIONS OF RELIGIONS

An understanding of the essential characteristics of religion is crucial to identifying religion but falls short of a full grasp of what religion means in modern society. In this regard, the learning of religious scholars and sociologists is again instructive. Beyond isolating the *sine qua non* qualities of religion, many also point to common functions present in modern religion.

Probably the most important function of every religion — in fact, their primary concern — is *salvation*. This is not limited to spiritual salvation which, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, focuses primarily on man's ultimate destiny. Rather, the true meaning of salvation is found in the origin of the word, from the Latin word "salutas," meaning "safety" or "wholeness." Thus, salvation actually has to do with making man "safe" or "whole" in his present life. Religions accomplish this by giving their followers the means to ward off difficulty or by showing what they must do or believe to have a meaningful existence, safe from the major vicissitudes of life.

Of course, the different paths to salvation vary greatly from religion to religion and range from placing one's faith in a "saving" god to sacrificing to various gods, worshiping ancestors, conforming to specific standards of conduct, practicing certain rituals, and meditation.

Another related and equally important function of every religion is to put forth *cosmology*. Every religion has its own distinctive view of the cosmos — the nature of the physical universe, including time and space, the world we live in, and man's place in it. This cosmology forms the philosophical underpinning on which that religion is based and, in effect,

becomes its "religious philosophy". This religious philosophy, in turn, determines the religion's doctrine and belief systems, provides its uniqueness, and frequently is the single most feature that attracts new members. As India's noted Hindu scholar Sri Aurobindo stated, "A religion that is not the expression of philosophic truth degenerates into superstition and obscurantism."

Similarly, *preservation of orthodoxy* is a common feature of almost every religion, and a religion's measures to ensure the integrity of its beliefs, practices, traditions and scripture range from the very simple to the legally sophisticated. *Revelations 22:18* strongly admonishes against alteration or deletion of Christian religious text. In Catholicism, the entire Jesuit religious order is charged with seeing to the integrity of scripture. And the Christian Science Church, among many others, has employed legal devices such as copyright laws to ensure sacred works are not perverted or improperly used.

Establishment of ethical and moral codes and guidelines governing behavior and "right conduct" figure prominently in virtually all religions, and is expressed in such varied forms as the Ten Commandments in Judaism, and the Golden Rule in Christianity, the Noble Eightfold Path in Buddhism and the way of the dharma in Hinduism. The late religious scholar and author Mircea Eliade noted that while religion concerns the sacred, it also guides human conduct: "By imitating the divine behavior, man puts and keeps himself close to the gods — that is, in the real and the significant."

A *spiritual healing element* is one of the most ancient and fundamental religious functions, found in many of the ayurvedic practices of Hinduism, early Christianity, some schools of Buddhism, and in many

modern religious denominations such as Christian Science and Pentecostal. “[A] religion that does not heal cannot long survive,” says Professor David Chidester of the University of Capetown, South Africa noting that it is only in the modern world that religion relinquished primary responsibility for healing the body and the mind.

Almost every religion also provides some way to help members resolve personal problems. In religions from the Judeo-Christian tradition, this often takes the form of pastoral counseling, particularly when the parishioner’s problem has to do with marital difficulties, problems at work or at school, antisocial or self-destructive behavior such as drug or alcohol abuse, or simply the stress of day-to-day life. Increasingly, churches encourage members to resolve problems through methods such as reading books or listening to recorded lectures in the privacy of their homes. Other religions prescribe following special rituals as a way to resolve personal problems. Catholics often use the confessional for this purpose. Dr. Wilson has described this function as providing “proximate salvation from immediate suffering and travail.”

Numerous other functions of religion could be noted here. But scholars and historians have stressed that the presence or absence of one or more of these or other functions should not be mistaken as a factor in “defining” religion. Rather, they furnish a deeper understanding of the greater meaning of religion in modern society, and what particular religions mean to their adherents.

APPROACHES BY GOVERNMENT BODIES TO DEFINING RELIGION

There is another source of definitions of religion — governmental bodies. Government officials regularly must determine whether a particular group is religious and therefore qualifies for some privilege accorded only to religious organizations. This privilege may be a special zoning variance, exemption from taxes, the authorization to perform marriages, or in some localities just the simple right to provide spiritual healing to the ill or distressed. In some countries, particularly those dominated by a state religion, religious groups are required to register and be approved by the government before they may function or even hold religious services.

Despite the specific cultural differences among countries, contemporary court decisions are adopting expansive definitions of religion that appear to fit perfectly within the “ethically neutral” approach taken by scholars of comparative religion. In just the past several years the highest courts in Italy, the United States, Australia, New Zealand and India all have rejected an exclusively theistic definition of religion. The Italian Supreme Court specifically directed that courts look to the opinions of religious experts when determining whether a set of beliefs is religious.

In fact, the definition of religion adopted by the High Court of Australia in *Church of the New Faith v. Commissioner*

*Every religion
has its own
distinctive view
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— the nature of
the physical
universe,
including time
and space, the
world we live in
and man’s place
in it.*

for *Pay-Roll Tax* (1983) 154 CLR 120, could well have been written by a scholar of religion. In that opinion, the Court set forth a series of four indicia derived from an empirical analysis of accepted religions: (1) a belief in something supernatural, some reality beyond that which can be conceived by the senses; (2) that the belief in question relates to man's nature and place in the universe and his relationship to things supernatural; (3) as a result of this belief adherents are required or encouraged to observe particular codes of conduct or engage in particular practices that have supernatural significance; and (4) the adherents comprise one or more identifiable groups.

Yet many if not most governmental officials and judges who have to make these decisions are not always familiar with the nuances of the variety of religious thought. And in all likelihood, their views of religion have been framed by their own experience, by the concepts, practices and trappings of the religious world in which they were born and raised. Thus, it would not be unusual to have as many definitions of religion as there are decision makers. With this lack of objective uniformity, it also is easy to see how discrimination among religions can occur, unintentional or not.

BONA FIDES OF THE SCIENTOLOGY RELIGION — AN OVERVIEW

Even with the growing preponderance of an ethically neutral and informed approach to religiosity by academia and governments, the Church of Scientology sometimes is asked why it should be treated as a religion if all of its beliefs and practices do not fit

within the Judeo-Christian tradition. As explained later in this book, although Scientologists believe in the existence of a Supreme Being, which is placed at the apex of Scientology's cosmology.

Scientology religious practices "differ" from practices of the traditional Western religions in that they seek to better one's understanding of and relationship with the Supreme Being, as well as the entire cosmos. In this respect Scientology is more like many Eastern religions, which seek to better one's understanding of and relation to some other supernatural being, principle or power.

To assist others to understand how Scientology compares with other religions, the Church of Scientology asked a number of internationally recognized religious scholars and experts from diverse disciplines to examine Scientology beliefs, practices and organizations and give their opinion as to its religiosity. These experts, all of whom examined Scientology from an "ethically neutral" standpoint, agree that it is a religion.

The opinions of several of these experts are published as Appendices to this book. They are:

1. Dr. Bryan Wilson

*Reader Emeritus in Sociology,
Oxford University*

Professor Wilson is one of the most distinguished authorities on comparative religion in the world and has been studying Scientology for over 20 years, writing extensively about the religion. In applying the three-pronged approach, Dr. Wilson utilized a "probabilistic inventory" of 20 factors that he finds are characteristic of any religion in one combination or another.

Defining Religion in a Pluralistic Society

Dr. Wilson wrote an extensive opinion, analyzing the major features of Scientology as well as the other important religions of the world. Finding that “Scientology is a genuine system of religious belief and practice which evokes from its votaries deep and earnest commitment,” he ultimately concluded that “it is clear to me that Scientology is a bona fide religion and should be considered as such.”

2. Dr. M. Darrol Bryant

*Professor of Religion
and Culture, Renison College,
University of Waterloo, Canada*

Since first becoming aware of Scientology in the mid-1970s, Dr. Bryant has conducted a lengthy review of the religion. His test for religiosity is an adaptation of the three-pronged approach, which he defines as “a community of men and women bound together by a complex of beliefs, practices, behaviours, and rituals that seek, through this Way, to relate human to sacred/divine life.” Like Dr. Wilson, Dr. Bryant concluded that “Scientology is a religion. It has its own distinctive beliefs in and account of an unseen spiritual order, its own distinctive religious practice and ritual life, it has its own authoritative texts and community-building activity.”

3. Dr. Regis Dericquebourg

*Professor of Sociology
of Religion at the University
of Lille III, France*

Dr. Dericquebourg’s test is another modification of the three-pronged approach that looked for: (1) a cosmology in which the universe takes on meaning regarding one or more supernatural forces, (2) a moral that stems from this cosmology that supplies direction and guidance,

(3) tools or practices which put human beings in contact with the supernatural principle, and (4) a community of followers. After studying Scientology Scripture and practice and interviewing almost 300 French Scientologists, Dr. Dericquebourg easily concluded that Scientology is a bona fide religion: “Scientology has the characteristics of a religion. It has a theology, a set of exercises making it possible to reach the spiritual part in every human being, a ‘very bureaucratized’ church structure, and religious rites. . . . Scientologists extend the use of instruments of rationality in the service of a mystical path, a self-transformation and a transformation of the world. It is probably for this reason that it appears unique among religions.”

4. Dr. Alejandro Frigerio

*Associate Professor of Sociology,
Catholic University of Argentina*

Dr. Frigerio took a more expansive approach to analyzing Scientology, utilizing five different methodologies used by social scientists: (1) a “substantive” approach, which examines a religion by the religious experiences of its practitioners, (2) a “comparative” approach, which distinguishes religion from other systems of meaning, (3) a “functional” approach, which examines religion in terms of the consequences it holds in other areas of life, (4) an “analytical” approach, which examines religion through the different ways that it expresses itself, and (5) what is called the “emic” approach, which focuses on aspects that culture acknowledges as religious. At the end of his exhaustive analysis, Dr. Frigerio concluded that “Scientology is a religion from all perspectives which exist in the current discussion of the definition of the term in the social sciences....”



5. Dr. Frank K. Flinn

*Adjunct Professor in
Religious Studies,
Washington University,
Missouri*

Dr. Flinn has been studying emerging religions since 1962. He took the classic three-pronged approach discussed above, concluding that Scientology unquestionably is a religion: "I can state without hesitation that the Church of Scientology constitutes a bona fide religion. It possesses all the essential marks of religions known around the world; (1) a well-defined belief

system, (2) which issues into religious practices (positive and negative norms for behavior, religious rites and ceremonies, acts and observances), and (3) which sustain a body of believers in an identifiable religious community, distinguishable from other religious communities."

6. Mr. Fumio Sawada

*Eighth Holder of the Secrets
of Yu-Itsu Shinto*

Mr. Sawada is one of Japan's foremost authorities on religion and a former director of the Sophis University. Mr. Sawada, as

an Asian scholar and a leader of the oldest religion in Japan, brought a unique perspective to the analysis of Scientology. He approached his task from the standpoint of the Japanese definition of religion, which is “to teach the origin, teach the source of the origin.” In addition to satisfying this test, to be recognized as a religion in Japan the religious organization must also “disseminate the teachings, perform religious ceremonies, and train parishioners.” Mr. Sawada unequivocally concluded that “Scientology does all these things.” As he went on to note, “Japan is a country where religions place an accent on the raising of one’s spiritual ability. From a Japanese point of view, Scientology is indeed a similar religion to others already here. ... It has more similarities to Japanese religions than Western religions, and for this reason it may be misunderstood in the West for not being similar to other mainstream religions.”

7. Prof. Urbano Alonso Galan

*Theologian and Philosopher,
Madrid*

Prof. Alonso also utilized an adaptation of the three-pronged approach, focusing on doctrine, ritual, organization and spiritual objective. He found that Scientology comprises a “community of persons united with a complex body of beliefs, in its search for

the infinite, the sacred, searching to place man into his proper relationship with the divine,” and concluded that “Scientology fulfills completely the requirements that can be asked of any religion.”

These well-grounded, thorough and balanced expert opinions are supported by dozens of others. Together they illustrate the wide variety of approaches to the analysis of religious thought and practice utilizing “ethically neutral” standards. And they are unequivocal in their findings that Scientology is a bona fide religion in every respect.

Each of these expert opinions gives a fascinating depiction of the essential characteristics of any religion and how these characteristics are manifested in Scientology. While much can be gained by reading them, a further dimension can be gained by what follows: a description of the Scientology religion that plainly shows the transcendent dimension of its beliefs, practices and organization. In reading these chapters you will easily see how Scientology shares fundamental characteristics with other religions and serves the common functions described above. You also will see something even more important — how Scientology is dedicated to offering man a practical and attainable path to spiritual salvation.