

FREE ZONE SCIENTOLOGY

An Interview with Dr Aled Thomas



WRSP: You've stayed within the academic track of Religious Studies from the undergraduate to the PhD level—and have also picked up a PGCE teaching qualification in Religious Education along the way—so religion has clearly been a topic of great interest to you. Where does your interest in religion, and especially in what we might call 'alternative religion', come from?

Dr. Thomas: I think, like several academics in the UK, I was initially drawn to the topic of religion by my two fantastic Religious Education (RE) teachers in secondary school. They were engaging and exciting—and very open to debate (always a good thing!). I knew quite early on that I wanted to pursue Religious Studies as my undergraduate degree and that's where my interest in 'alternative religions' started. My RE teachers had to work within the limitations of a precise curriculum, which left little room for exploring the 'alternatives'. I remember that one of my earliest undergraduate modules was called 'Cults and Sects' (what a name!), and discovering religions outside the World Religions Paradigm* was a revelation.

* = WRSP: The World Religions Paradigm is a framework for studying religion that only focuses on five or six religions, chosen for their numerical size and/or influence upon Western history (i.e. Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and sometimes Sikhism).

WRSP: It is probably fair to say that Scientology has proven more controversial than almost any other new religion active in Western countries over the last fifty years or so, inspiring really emotive responses from both members and detractors. This being the case, what brought about your decision to devote your PhD research to this particular topic? Did you have hesitations about doing so?

Dr. Thomas: Admittedly I had no hesitations. The controversies associated with Scientology did play a part in my interest, particularly the heated discourses surrounding it. But I always envisaged the research as a purely scholarly endeavour rather than an exposé or polemic piece—avoiding value judgements to the best of my abilities and so forth. My fieldwork participants certainly seemed to appreciate that.

WRSP: Can you tell us a bit more about Free Zone Scientology? How is it different from the Church of Scientology, an organisation that thus far has dominated both media and academic discussions of the Scientology movement? Is it probable, as some have suggested, that the number of Free Zoners will soon be larger than the number of Church members?

Dr. Thomas: Simply put, the term ‘Free Zone Scientology’ is most often used to identify any type of Scientology (I use the term ‘Scientologies’) or Scientologist which exists outside the Church of Scientology. The divisions between the two largely come down to two factors: (1) the application of L. Ron Hubbard’s* spiritual technology and (2) the organisational management of the Church of Scientology. The Free Zone, broadly conceived, is mostly concerned with the application of Hubbard’s ‘tech’, while the Church has expanded its practices into a variety of areas, such as life management courses (designed by Hubbard) and religious ceremonies, such as weddings. In terms of numbers, it is difficult to contrast the two. Many ‘Freezoners’ do not advertise their services publicly in fear of litigation from the Church of Scientology (due to the use of copyrighted L. Ron Hubbard texts and ideas). While others, following their departure from the Church, have continued to make use of Hubbard’s work as part of a broader practice. For example, I’ve interviewed ‘spiritual counsellors’ who no longer identify as Scientologists, but have maintained aspects of Scientology in their practices. These little nuances and boundaries are fascinating from a critical perspective, but can cause a headache for those seeking membership numbers!

* = WRSP: L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986) was the American writer responsible for founding Scientology.

WRSP: The main topic of your PhD thesis, and a key theme in your book on Free Zone Scientology, is auditing—sometimes seen as the central ritual within Scientology, and one that is often presented as having both scientific and religious components. Can you tell us more about auditing and its role in Scientology?

Dr. Thomas: For many Scientologists, especially those in the Free Zone, auditing *is* Scientology. It is the practice upon which Scientology was founded and is the core process of the movement to this day. Auditing is a practice consisting of question-and-answer exercises, in which the Preclear (the person being audited) answers questions directed by a trained auditor. The auditor seeks to discover ‘engrams’ (traces of anxieties and neuroses) within the Preclear’s mind in an attempt to remove them, thus enabling the Preclear to move forward in life, unhindered by their engrams. This began as a secular process, as published in Hubbard’s *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health* in 1950. However, he soon claimed to discover that people were affected by engrams from past lives, which lead to the ‘religion angle’ of auditing. It is here that auditing transitioned from ‘Dianetic auditing’ to ‘Scientology auditing’—with a simultaneous emphasis on improving mental health and spiritual development. Today Scientologists engage with auditing as they progress through Hubbard’s ‘Bridge to Total Freedom’, a series of levels to be traversed in attaining spiritual liberation.

WRSP: How did you approach Scientologists, whether they be in the Church or Free Zone, and explain that you wanted to research them? Did you feel that you were welcomed, or was there considerable distrust that you had to overcome?

Dr. Thomas: Scientology has a history of being difficult to navigate for academics—most notably due to the experiences of sociologist Roy Wallis, who experienced some pushback from the Church of Scientology during the publication of *The Road to Total Freedom* in 1976. Some academics have since expressed hesitation in researching Scientology for this reason, but there has been a considerable improvement in relationships between scholars and the Church of Scientology in recent decades. Religious studies scholar Donald A. Westbrook’s doctoral research and monograph (*Among the Scientologists: History, Theology, and Praxis*, 2019) involved a significant amount of fieldwork with the Church of Scientology, during which he was able to undertake Scientology courses, auditing, and meet/interview dozens of everyday Scientologists.

In my own research, I was welcomed by Scientologists within both the Church of Scientology and Free Zone. Interestingly, Freezoners were especially keen to use my work as a platform to promote their vision of Scientology (as something that can exist outside the Church), and were very open about the more esoteric elements of Scientology—sharing aspects of its practice that would usually be kept confidential by the Church. The Church were also very welcoming in allowing me to tour their Orgs in London and Saint Hill, near East Grinstead in West Sussex. This included a tour of the Saint Hill Manor (Hubbard’s former home), which contains many of his possessions and writings on Scientology—exciting stuff for a scholar researching Scientology! Some participants in the Church were a little hesitant regarding my interest in the Free Zone and how the relationship between both groups would be presented in my work. Their concern is understandable—the Church of Scientology has experienced a considerable amount of negative coverage in reports and journalistic accounts over the years. However, my focus is purely scholarly—my work does not ‘take sides’ in the discourses between both groups.

WRSP: Although there are few if any scholars of new religious movements who reject the idea that Scientology is a religion, there have been considerable attempts by the movement’s critics to insist that Scientology is *not-a-religion* (and specifically to ensure that governments do not recognise the Church of Scientology as a religious organisation). In countries such as France and Germany, these efforts have so far had greater success than in the United States and Britain. How does this public contestation over the very suitability of the label ‘religion’ for Scientology impact the work of scholars like yourself who focus on this movement?

Dr. Thomas: Interesting question! I am one of those frustrating scholars who sees religion everywhere—the conversations surrounding whether Scientology ‘is a religion’ ties in with theoretical questions in the wider study of religions, not only the study of new religious movements. I am interested in religion as something people ‘do’, and Scientology is an interesting case of people ‘religioning’ in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. But as you correctly mention, its status as a religion is hotly contested by anti-Scientologists and some former members. It is not uncommon for scholars researching Scientology to experience some pushback (especially online) from those who oppose the notion of Scientology as a religion. I think it is important to remember that the term ‘religion’ is not used as an endorsement in the study of religions—perhaps this is a failing on our part (as a wider scholarly community) in communicating some of the core aspects of our discipline. From a critical and academic perspective, however, I have not experienced any pushback in considering Scientology to be a religion.

WRSP: In your book, you draw on the concepts of ‘lived religion’ and ‘vernacular religion’ when trying to understand Free Zone Scientology. These concepts have not been heavily employed by scholars of new

religions (who have tended to adopt sociological perspectives), so what do you feel that these approaches bring to the table when examining younger religious movements like Scientology?

Dr. Thomas: I was very excited to approach Scientology with these methods. The lived/vernacular approaches are an excellent way to understand how religion is practised 'on the ground', rather than relying on institutional projections of what a particular religion entails. For a group like Scientology, particularly the Free Zone, this approach is invaluable. As a fluid network of a variety of Scientologists with different understandings of 'what Scientology is', examining their beliefs and practices as lived religion is a useful way of researching how different Free Zone Scientologies emerge, the relationships they hold with one another, and the role Scientology plays in the day-to-day life of a Scientologist. As younger movements like Scientology are generally under-researched, this is an ideal way to unpack the nuances found within their communities.

WRSP: Have you had much feedback to your PhD thesis and subsequent book, *Free Zone Scientology: Contesting the Boundaries of a New Religion* (2021), either from Scientologists themselves (whether Church members or Free Zone) or from anti-Scientologists? What has been the response from other scholars of Scientology and/or religion more broadly? Do you feel that scholars whose focus is on 'mainstream religions' like Christianity and Islam take research on 'alternative religions' seriously enough?

Dr. Thomas: I've had a few responses from former Scientologists which have been very interesting. One email I received from an ex-Scientologist thanked me for exploring an under-researched area of Scientology. They framed Scientology as a cult, not a religion, but were nonetheless interested to learn more of my findings. Like other scholars researching Scientology, I have also experienced some pushback from anti-Scientologists, most notably due to my positioning of Scientology as a religion.

In terms of the academic community, I'm very happy to say that my work has been warmly received by scholars of NRMs [new religious movements] and Scientology. The academic study of Scientology is experiencing a resurgence of interest of late, so it's been a thrill to contribute to that discourse and discuss my work with scholars whose work has been invaluable to me. We are standing on the shoulders of giants, after all.

Your question regarding scholars of 'mainstream' religions is an interesting one as it reminds me of an experience I had during my PhD studies. I once presented a paper on Scientology practices at a conference, during which a significant number of (senior) scholars openly laughed at the beliefs of Scientologists throughout my talk. I was somewhat taken aback—since I had not seen any laughter directed towards the range of other beliefs I heard discussed during the rest of the conference. A reminder of how some religions/beliefs are often more respected than others, particularly those within the World Religions Paradigm, even amongst the scholarly community.

WRSP: The past fifteen years or so have seen a considerable growth in the number of studies of Scientology, resulting in several edited volumes and monographs on the subject. Although scholarly understandings of the movement have improved accordingly, what parts of Scientology do you feel are crying out for greater scholarly investigation?

Dr. Thomas: I think an aspect of Scientology that could do with further research are ex-Scientologists. While the anti-cult movements of the 1970s and 1980s were largely organized networks, many anti-Scientologists now interact with one another online, and have essentially formed their own digital communities in which they discuss Scientology (mostly the Church of Scientology) and air their objections. These online groups include a significant member of former Scientologists, and their journey out of the Church and into anti-Scientologist networks blurs the insider/outsider binary that is often applied to Scientology and its critics.

WRSP: You have also published on religion and comics, namely Hergé's series *The Adventures of Tintin*. Could you tell us more about this and what you see as the significance for analysing how religion has been portrayed in the comic book medium?

Dr. Thomas: I am heavily interested in the study of religion and popular culture—particularly the ways in which it tells us about how people engage with religion on a day-to-day basis. Comic books are a useful way of doing this—telling us about the stories people enjoy reading, the ideas that resonate with them, and how religion is understood in these narratives. *The Adventures of Tintin* is notable for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is a very European series. Hergé, a Belgian artist, drew from contemporary European events and figures while constructing his *Tintin* stories. Secondly, Hergé was a devout Catholic for the majority of his life, which fed its way into his stories. Notably, however, Hergé did experience disillusion with the Catholic Church, and became interested in Eastern religious practices, notably Tibetan Buddhism. He presented the ways he navigated between both Catholicism and Buddhism within his comics—offering a critique of European Catholicism, whilst also allowing us to gain an insight to his own life.

WRSP: You are one of the founders of [the alt-ac.uk website](http://the-alt-ac.uk), through which you have sought to promote “alternative academia”. Could you tell us more about this project and what it seeks to achieve?

Dr. Thomas: We're very proud of Alt-Ac. It is an organization that aims to promote academia outside the ivory towers it often finds itself restricted to. We believe that good scholarship should not only be celebrated, but communicated with wider publics. We organise workshops and conferences, whilst also providing an open access journal. We are always keen to find new ways of approaching academia and encourage anyone with any ideas to get involved.

WRSP: Do you have any other projects on the horizon that we should be looking out for?

Dr. Thomas: I'm currently editing a volume on twenty-first century cultic discourses, *'Cult' Rhetoric in the 21st Century: Deconstructing the Study of New Religious Movements*, with Edward Graham-Hyde from the University of Central Lancashire. It should be published by Bloomsbury next year. The volume collates contributions from a variety of figures in the study of new religions to not only consider paths forward for the discipline, but to consider how normative cultic language is deployed and understood in the twenty-first century.

I'm also the co-host of the Religion and Popular Culture Podcast, which unpacks the ways in which religion and popular culture are deeply tied to one another. It can be found here:

<https://www.incidentalmythology.com/religion-and-popular-culture-podcast>

Dr. Thomas, thank you for participating in the WRSP Forum!
This interview is also being made available at the personal blog of the interviewer,
Dr. Ethan Doyle White (<http://ethandoylewhite.blogspot.com/>)

Dr. Aled Thomas is a Teaching Fellow at the University of Leeds and Associate Lecturer at the Open University. A specialist in Scientology, he completed his PhD on the movement at the Open University in 2019 and subsequently published his first monograph as *Free Zone Scientology: Contesting the Boundaries of a New Religion* (Bloomsbury, 2021). He is also a co-founder of Alt-Ac, a group promoting “alternative academia”, and is co-host of the Religion and Popular Culture Podcast.

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