

Scientology

From the Edges to the Core

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ABSTRACT: Although there has been relatively little scholarly research on Scientology apart from the remarkable works of Roy Wallis, Harriet Whitehead, James R. Lewis, and Hugh B. Urban, that is changing as indicated by the large number of submissions in response to the call for papers for the first international conference on Scientology held in Antwerpen-Wilrijkje, Belgium, in 2014. The articles in this special issue of *Nova Religio* explore what appear to be peripheral aspects of Scientology in order to get at its core. This method of moving from the periphery to the center of this religious tradition and its institutions reflects the difficulty scholars still encounter in obtaining fundamental data relating to the Church of Scientology.

KEYWORDS: Church of Scientology, Dianetics, L. Ron Hubbard, Brain-Washing Manual, OT VIII, Citizens Commission on Human Rights

This special issue of *Nova Religio* on Scientology has its origins in a conference titled “Scientology in Scholarly Perspective,” the first academic conference devoted exclusively to Scientology, held in Antwerpen-Wilrijkje, Belgium, on 24–25 January 2014, which was co-sponsored by the European Observatory of Religion and Laïcité (secularism), the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), and the Faculty of Comparative Study of Religion and Humanism (FVG). After the publication of *The Road to Total Freedom: A Sociological Analysis of Scientology*

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by Roy Wallis (1945–1990) in 1976¹ and *Renunciation and Reformulation: A Study of Conversion in an American Sect* by Harriet Whitehead in 1987,² it was more than two decades before the next academic volumes on the Church of Scientology appeared. *Scientology* edited by James R. Lewis was published in 2009,³ and *The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion* by Hugh B. Urban was published in 2011.⁴ The “Scientology in Scholarly Perspective” conference in Antwerpen-Wilrijkje demonstrated that numerous scholars are currently researching various aspects of Scientology.

The historical and legal difficulties experienced by the Church of Scientology have been recounted by these and other scholars, not to mention the methodological difficulties faced by academic researchers of Scientology, for instance as explored by Douglas E. Cowan.⁵ In the United States, where Dianetics and Scientology were born and where Scientologists are the most numerous, tensions with governmental agencies trace to a number of episodes. In a 1963 Food and Drug Administration raid on the Washington, D.C. church, books and electropsychometers (E-Meters) were confiscated over concerns about improper medical usage. In 1967 the Internal Revenue Service revoked the Church of Scientology’s tax-exempt status due to questions over the Church’s non-profit status under founder L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986). The Church, now under the leadership of David Miscavige (b. 1960), enjoyed a key victory in 1993 when the IRS re-granted tax-exempt status to the Church of Scientology International and its affiliated organizations following the settlement of a long litigation.

While the Church of Scientology is recognized as a religion in numerous countries (for instance, the United Kingdom, Italy, Australia, South Africa, and others),⁶ it continues to struggle for legal recognition and freedom of religious expression throughout the world (for instance in France, where churches have been raided and materials confiscated, as documented by Susan J. Palmer).⁷ These challenges are ongoing. Scientology is ranked as one of the most dangerous “sects” by parliamentary reports in Belgium and other European countries, and the Church experiences restrictions of practice in Russia, to mention just a few. Most of these issues, at least in the United States and Western Europe, have been resolved by judges, including those on the European Court of Human Rights, who validated the religious status of the Church of Scientology and rebuffed calls for its dissolution by various governmental agencies or opponents.⁸

The reasons for the Church’s difficulties with governments are explored in the books by Urban and Lewis. They are connected in general to the claim that the Church of Scientology is a “cult” according to the model promulgated by the anticult movement. This claim is reinforced by a certain secretiveness on the part of the Church, members’ aggressive behavior towards ex-members and Church opponents, and by

the fact that what are presented by the Church as religious practices should be paid for by members on a quid pro quo basis; all of this appears to be atypical of a religion according to the perspectives of the media and certain political and administrative agencies in several countries.

Even so, and perhaps more damaging, the Church of Scientology continues to face challenges to its religious status in the popular culture due to attacks it receives in the media and from ex-members troubled by matters such as its monetized “Bridge to Total Freedom” and practices such as “disconnection” (comparable to shunning in traditions such as the Amish). Scientology’s confidential materials have been published on the internet and there have been intense legal battles as the Church has tried to prevent their dissemination. Following the publication of journalist Lawrence Wright’s book, *Going Clear: Scientology, Hollywood, and the Prison of Belief* in 2013,⁹ HBO aired a documentary directed by Alex Gibney titled *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief* in 2015, in which Wright and critical former Scientologists were interviewed.¹⁰ Beginning on 29 November 2016 through January 2017, A&E aired nine episodes of *Leah Remini: Scientology and the Aftermath*, in which critical ex-members were interviewed, several of whom had already published their claims in books and online blogs.

Although precise membership figures are difficult to ascertain and also depend on how “membership” is defined, as of 2017 the Church of Scientology International claims that “over 11,000 Scientology Churches, Missions and affiliated groups exist across 167 nations”¹¹ and that “Millions of Scientologists around the world sincerely believe in the religious tenets and practices of Scientology.”¹² However, the Church does not provide exact membership statistics and outsiders have put active membership numbers (for instance those belonging to the Church’s International Association of Scientologists) in the tens of thousands worldwide, although this does not count the many more who have purchased Hubbard’s books or have taken only introductory courses in Dianetics and Scientology.¹³

The doctrines taught by the Church of Scientology took shape during the 1950s, first in the book by L. Ron Hubbard titled *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health* (1950). Dianetics—which was at first not presented as a religion—is a sort of psychotherapy meant to make one recall past traumatic incidents, which is asserted as being the reason for physical and mental illnesses as well as inappropriate behaviors (“aberrations”). Through a counseling method termed “auditing” using the E-Meter, auditors attempt to wash away associated emotional burdens and therein are supposed to cure people from their troubles and improve their relationships. Facing distrust of numerous psychologists and psychiatrists towards Dianetics, and because of the evolving nature of Dianetics techniques, Hubbard decided to locate his movement within spirituality. Because his students called up memories of events in past lives, he concluded that the

soul, which he termed the *thetan*, reincarnates and carries unconscious memories through successive lives. Those mnemonic traces determine behavior during the present life. Hubbard offered an ethic consistent with his idea of reincarnation and a path to personal salvation.

Hubbard called his religious way of thinking Scientology. Dianetics became a way to analyze past lives and liberate someone from collected traumas that prevent spiritual development. Dianetics is promoted by the Church of Scientology as being the cure leading to salvation, which is defined as the return of the thetan to its original condition as an Operating Thetan (OT), a pure and powerful spirit liberated from a physical body. Scientology is depicted as liberating Scientologists from the consequences of mistakes and traumas in past and present lives through auditing. Hubbard called Scientology an “applied religious philosophy,”¹⁴ because it contains a metaphysical doctrine, a psychological theory, moral teachings, and tools to enable one to revisit and “clear” traumas experienced in the present life as well as in former lives. He also presented Scientology as wisdom¹⁵ and knowledge.¹⁶

In late 1953 Hubbard founded and supported the establishment of the first churches of Scientology,¹⁷ and today the Church of Scientology International traces its institutional origins to the founding of a church in Los Angeles in 1954.¹⁸ Hubbard also added methods of organizational management, pedagogical principles, a communication theory, and preventive methods for a healthy life. Such a variety of interests in the Church of Scientology disconcerted observers; it was sometimes criticized even though the same types of activities can be found in established churches,¹⁹ which similarly include schools, publishing houses, and companies producing goods or services.

Researchers who have studied Scientology’s doctrine find it to be complex. Some, such as Frank K. Flinn, say it looks like Buddhism,²⁰ while others have concluded it is a type of gnosticism.²¹ I find similarities with the Theosophy of Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–1891).²²

Based on a religion’s principal characteristics as expounded by Bryan Wilson (1926–2004),²³ Scientology can be considered a religious doctrine since it offers:

- 1) A cosmology according to which the universe is part of one or many occult forces. The reality of “human being” is beyond the limits of terrestrial existence. There is “before” and “after” human life on Earth. The finiteness of human life is not accepted.
- 2) An ethic that accords with this cosmology. It proposes behavior matching the way Scientologists see the universe.
- 3) Tools for humans to get in touch with the occult through praying, religious ceremonies, and meditation.
- 4) A group of faithful to maintain, transmit, produce beliefs, and deal with the set of values that grant salvation.²⁴

The articles in this special issue of *Nova Religio* on Scientology by Hugh B. Urban, Donald A. Westbrook, and Massimo Introvigne raise questions about topics that might at first sight appear to be on the periphery of Scientology, but in fact the analysis provided by these scholars takes us to Scientology's core concerns.

The article by Hugh B. Urban examines the function of secrecy in the Operating Thetan levels in the Church of Scientology. Urban's discussion of the OT VIII controversy sheds light on the function of secrecy in the Church of Scientology as well as other minority religious groups and movements based on secrecy. Through the case study of the OT VIII level materials, Urban depicts the social construction of secrecy to which sociological theorist Georg Simmel drew attention. It is in fact a double-sided tool: secrecy is used as a lure to induce Scientologists to climb the "Bridge to Total Freedom," acquire extraordinary gifts, and follow the path to "complete freedom," but this secret also became a source of judicial conflict with former members who revealed the purported contents of OT VIII, presently the highest available OT level. The OT VIII case and subsequent legal fights led Urban to reflect in his article on five steps and strategies in the social construction of this remarkable secret, which can also be applied to other organizations in which secrecy is important. In the Church of Scientology, the value of the Operating Thetan levels, knowledge of which is not supposed to be available to non-Scientologists or to Scientologists deemed unprepared, is based on the claimed benefits of auditing. However, nowadays, the ubiquity of the internet is a means by which all kinds of secrets are revealed, for instance Masonic or Mormon ones. In Freemasonry, the rituals and content of each grade of initiation have value and sense only when transmitted, practiced and experienced within a fraternal group. Hugh Urban's article triggers debate about the role of secrecy in organizations that use it as an element of their operations. If today secrecy has become significantly peripheral to contemporary experience due to the spread of information, Urban's article directs our attention to the core of movements in which secrecy is important and which have practices based on understanding of knowledge unknown to non-members.

Donald A. Westbrook studies the links between psychiatrist Thomas Szasz (1920–2012), who is known as having been an opponent of psychiatry, and the Citizens Commission on Human Rights (CCHR), which is supported by the Church of Scientology and opposes what it calls "coercive psychiatry." That this relationship between Szasz and the CCHR held until the death of Szasz is strange since he was an atheist and libertarian, while Scientology has a spiritual vision of the world and is hierarchically organized. Westbrook shows that this relationship was in fact mutually beneficial. CCHR found in Szasz a legitimately credentialed authority who supported Scientology's view of psychiatry, and he found in the CCHR an organization that could help him in his fight

against what he called the “therapeutic state.”²⁵ This term designates an alliance formed between state and psychiatric authorities against individual liberties. Szasz referred to it as a “pharmacocracy,”²⁶ whose bible is the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). Westbrook shows that for the Church of Scientology this alliance between Szasz and CCHR was not simply tactical. It relied on Scientology’s theory of evil, according to which psychiatry (and psychology) are detrimental to mental and spiritual progress. By analyzing the relationship between Szasz and CCHR, Westbrook takes us back to the core practice of Dianetics and Scientology—auditing—which enables advancement to Clear,²⁷ and describes the conflicts between Hubbard, psychiatrists/psychologists, and the mental health profession at large. Initially, Hubbard hoped that his book *Dianetics* would be accepted within the field of psychology, but instead it was rejected by associations of psychologists and psychiatrists. As a consequence, Hubbard situated his Dianetics within physics and electronics by relying on the use of the E-Meter for auditing, and then when he founded the Church of Scientology he placed it in the realm of religion. Be that as it may, Scientology continues to employ psychological tools, for instance its Oxford Capacity Analysis, or “personality test.” Westbrook’s article directs our attention to the tension between the Church of Scientology and the psychological circles that play important roles in Western societies.

Massimo Introvigne’s article deals with a “Brain-Washing Manual” published in 1955 by L. Ron Hubbard as the supposed translation of a Soviet manual for indoctrination, withdrawn from distribution shortly thereafter, and never republished by the Church of Scientology. In attempting to shed light on the identity of the author of this manual, Introvigne introduces the reader to the political context in which Scientology was created—the Cold War between the United States and the U.S.S.R. During that time “brainwashing” was seen as one of the psychological tools used during this conflict. The concept of “brainwashing” was used by Americans to explain the conversion of people living in the Soviet Union to Communism. Curiously, the Brain-Washing Manual was then used by the opponents of Scientology to show how allegedly the leaders of the Church of Scientology held sway over the faithful by using “brainwashing” techniques Hubbard had admitted to be familiar with when the manual was published. In fact, Introvigne argues, “brainwashing” as supposedly used by the Soviets according to the Brain-Washing Manual and the “brainwashing” the anticult movement accuses groups such as Scientology of utilizing are conceptually and philosophically different. This allegation of “brainwashing” against Scientology and other new religious movements lingers, even though a number of social scientists²⁸ have concluded that the brainwashing theory is not supported by credible evidence.²⁹ While Introvigne’s article on the Brain-Washing Manual may seem a mere footnote to the history of the Church

of Scientology, it in fact brings us from the periphery to the core of this movement: the influence of the ideological and political context of the Cold War on the worldview, practice, and organization of a growing movement looking for social recognition.

By their implications these three articles point us to central questions about Scientology. Indeed, scholars in their research may have to pass through the outskirts of the Church of Scientology in order to reach its core.

ENDNOTES

¹ Roy Wallis, *The Road to Total Freedom: A Sociological Analysis of Scientology* (London: Heinemann, 1976).

² Harriet Whitehead, *Renunciation and Reformulation: A Study of Conversion in an American Sect* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987).

³ James R. Lewis, ed. *Scientology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁴ Hugh B. Urban, *The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁵ Douglas E. Cowan, "Researching Scientology: Perceptions, Premises, Promises, and Problematics," in Lewis, *Scientology*, 53–79.

⁶ The Church of Scientology International has created a website to list its numerous legal and religious recognitions. See *Scientology: A World Religion: International Religious Recognitions of the Church of Scientology*, <http://www.scientologyreligion.org/religious-recognitions/>, accessed 30 January 2017.

⁷ Susan J. Palmer, *The New Heretics of France: Minority Religions, la Republique, and the Government-Sponsored "War on Sects"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁸ For the lengthy Italian legal saga, which ended up with Scientology being recognized as a religion by the Supreme Court and influenced other European cases, see Massimo Introvigne, "Scientology in Italy: Plagio and the Twenty-Year Legal Saga," in *Legal Cases, New Religious Movements, and Minority Faiths*, ed. James T. Richardson and François Bellanger (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 25–36.

⁹ Lawrence Wright, *Going Clear: Scientology, Hollywood, and the Prison of Belief* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).

¹⁰ Alex Gibney, dir., *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief* (New York: HBO Documentary Films, 2015).

¹¹ "Scientology: Unparalleled Growth Since 2004," *Scientology Newroom*, <http://www.scientologynews.org/quick-facts/>, accessed 30 January 2017.

¹² "A Comprehensive Overview of the Background, Theology and Religious Practice of the Scientology Religion," <http://www.scientologyreligion.org/>, accessed 30 January 2017.

¹³ For discussion of Scientology membership figures, see Urban, *Church of Scientology*, 206, 254n26; and Donald A. Westbrook, "Researching Scientology and

Scientologists in the United States: Methods and Conclusions,” in *Handbook of Scientology*, ed. James R. Lewis and Kjersti Hellesøy (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 31n14.

¹⁴ L. Ron Hubbard, *Have You Lived Before This Life?* (Copenhagen: New Era Publications, 1958), vii.

¹⁵ L. Ron Hubbard, “Scientology, Its General Background,” in *Phoenix Lectures* (Los Angeles: Golden Era Production, 2007), 58.

¹⁶ Hubbard, “Scientology, Its General background,” 26.

¹⁷ Urban, *Church of Scientology*, 65.

¹⁸ According to the Church of Scientology International, this Los Angeles church was founded on 18 February 1954. “The Creed of the Church of Scientology,” <http://www.scientology.org/what-is-scientology/the-scientology-creeds-and-codes/the-creed-of-the-church.html>, accessed 30 January 2017.

¹⁹ The expression “established churches” in the West refers to confessions integrated into the religious landscape. Their presence and activities are accepted as socially legitimate. For instance, this includes the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformed and Calvinist Protestant Churches, the Orthodox Churches, and Jewish communities.

²⁰ Frank K. Flinn, “Scientology as Technological Buddhism,” in Lewis, *Scientology*, 209.

²¹ Hugh B. Urban, “The Occult Roots of Scientology? L. Ron Hubbard, Aleister Crowley and the Origins of a Controversial New Religion,” *Nova Religio* 5, no. 3 (February 2012): 91–116; Mary Farrell Bednarowski, *New Religions and the Theological Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

²² Régis Dericquebourg, “Affinities between Scientology and Theosophy,” *Subsidia IV* (January 2017): 105–28.

²³ Bryan Wilson, « La Scientologie. Une analyse et comparaison de ses systèmes et doctrines religieux, » in *Les experts étudient la Scientologie* (Paris : Association Spirituelle de l’Eglise de Scientologie de l’Île de France, 1995), 33–34. For the text in English see Bryan Wilson, “Scientology: An Analysis and Comparison of Its Religious Systems and Doctrines,” 1995, *Scientology*, <http://www.scientologyreligion.org/religious-expertises/scientology-analysis-and-comparison/page1.html>, accessed 30 January 2017.

²⁴ Régis Dericquebourg, *La Scientologie est-elle une religion?* (Los Angeles: Freedom Publishing, n.d.), 1–2.

²⁵ Thomas Szasz, *The Therapeutic State: Psychiatry in the Mirror of Current Events* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1984).

²⁶ Thomas Szasz, *Pharmacracy: Medicine and Politics in America* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001).

²⁷ In Scientology, a Clear is a person who has erased traumatic memories from his or her deep memory (“reactive mind”), and whose behavior and physical condition are no longer determined by those traumas.

²⁸ Dick Anthony and Massimo Introvigne, *Le lavage de cerveau: mythe ou réalité?* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2006).

²⁹ See the debate in Benjamin Zablocki and Thomas Robbins, eds., *Misunderstanding Cults: Searching for Objectivity in a Controversial Field* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).