

In *The Church of Scientology: A New Religion*, Hugh Urban discusses the Church of Scientology from a new perspective—an unbiased one. Let us start by discussing what this book is *not*. This book is not an assessment of scientology; it is not an attempt to determine whether it heals people, provides people with legitimate spiritual guidance, or otherwise enhances their lives. It is not an attempt to determine whether or not scientology is a scam. It is not an attempt to determine whether or not scientology is a cult. Nor is it an attempt to determine whether or not the Church of Scientology has committed crimes or is of its very nature a criminal enterprise.

This book discusses the history of scientology. In the process, it sheds light on each of these questions, but the author abstains from weighing in on them. He cites facts, as he must, given that he is writing a history; and those facts speak to these questions. Usually, what the facts have to say is negative. The facts suggest that the Church of Scientology is indeed a rookery, at least in certain respects. The facts also suggest that the Church of Scientology has always been fraudulent, albeit in varying respects and to varying degrees. Finally, the facts strongly suggest, if they do not definitively show, that L. Ron Hubbard was in at least some respects an out-and-out conman.

But it is not the purpose of the book to establish these claims. The purpose of the book is to describe how the Church of Scientology came into existence and to discuss the intense hostility it has dealt with since its inception. As long as it has existed, the author claims, the Church of Scientology has been persecuted. Indeed, it has been singled out for persecution by the establishment, that is, by the totality consisting of the government and media and also, as of late, Big Tech. For years, the IRS fought its attempts to be classified as a religious organization. (Scientology ultimately won this battle, but, so Urban contends, it should never have been fought in the first place, since Scientology, whatever its merits or lack thereof, clearly is a religion.) The media pillories Scientology, blasting out wave after wave of hostile news reports, alongside a barrage of primetime TV shows (e.g., *South Park*) ridiculing the Church. The management of Wikipedia unanimously decided to block all contributions, including edits, coming from IP addresses associated with the Church. Google deliberately routes Scientology-related searches to sites that are hostile to the Church.

Because it is on the receiving end of this onslaught of establishment-ire, Urban contends, the Church's ability to continue to exist reflects the degree to which American organizations, and by extension American individuals, continue to enjoy various civil liberties. These include

freedom of religion and, by implication, freedom of assembly and speech and, more generally, freedom from government intrusion in one's private affairs.

This is not, as Urban clearly shows, because the Church itself embodies the values associated with these freedoms. The Church is extremely oppressive towards its own members. It micromanages their thought and behavior, and it also charges them borderline extortionate membership fees. Urban's contention is not that the Church is a force of good, but that the Church is, indeed, a church and that, by virtue of fighting for its own existence, it has come, however paradoxically, to represent freedom from establishment tyranny. The fact—if it is a fact—that the Church of Scientology is *itself* tyrannical obscures the fact that, in fighting for its right to exist, it is fighting against tyranny.

In Urban's view, practically everything about the Church is ambiguous. It is ambiguous whether it benefits its own members. It is also ambiguous what it is exactly. In some respects, it is a religion; in others, a corporation. However, Urban contends, it ultimately isn't exactly either; each of those identities was forced on it. It had to *become* a religion, Urban argues, and it also had to *become* a corporation; but originally it was neither, being more in the nature of a self-help movement. For whatever reason, this movement incurred the wrath of the establishment. It defended itself by assuming different institutional forms, eventuating in its becoming the uncategorizable Frankenstein (part-Church, part-corporation, part-evil cult) that it is today.

Urban establishes this by carefully going through the Church's history. Initially, the Church of Scientology was not a church at all. It was a self-help movement created by L. Ron Hubbard. Much like the Church of Scientology itself, L. Ron Hubbard is hard to categorize. He was in some respects a legitimate entrepreneur; in some respects, a charlatan; and in some respects, an out-and-out conman and criminal (one of his ventures involved convincing someone to give him a large sum of money to start a shipping business and then simply pocketing the cash). That said, he was unambiguously a serious science fiction writer; in fact, he was one of the most prolific writers of all time. (By every indication, Hubbard's science fiction was at least reasonably good, though I cannot personally speak to this, not having read any of it, and Urban is silent on the matter.) Hubbard was also a brilliant *raconteur*, as even his bitterest foes would concede.

Indeed, Hubbard was not merely a storyteller. His own life, as he told it to others, including his followers, was a giant story, with only tangential connections to his actual life.

Hubbard claimed to be a master engineer and a great explorer. In reality, he only took one engineering class in college, which he failed; and while he did travel extensively, he did so as a garden-variety tourist. But this giant tapestry of lies was not *just* a tapestry of lies. In it, he was describing the person that he wanted to be; and he was also describing the methods that, in reality, he was using to try to become this person. In his largely fictitious stories about himself, he talks about meetings with religious sages and great psychoanalysts. In reality, these meetings never took place, but Hubbard read their works; and using his gift for science fiction, he synthesized what he read into *Dianetics*, Hubbard's signature doctrine.

Dianetics was (and still is) meant to be a method for actualizing oneself. Significantly, for the first several years that Hubbard promoted Dianetics, it was simply as part of a self-improvement program; it was not meant to be part of a religion, and Hubbard did not at that point claim that anything about it was divine in origin. When promoting Dianetics, he did so claiming it to be extension of Freudian psychoanalysis, his concern being its *scientific*, not its *religious* validity. But for this very reason, Urban tells us, the American medical establishment targeted Hubbard, claiming that he was a snake oil salesman; and to insulate himself from the ensuing barrage of litigation, Hubbard had to rebrand his movement as a religion. This, Urban seems to hold, forced Hubbard to convert his innocuous, if not actually legitimate, self-help movement into a religion (Scientology); it was, to use my own example, what forced Hubbard to metamorphose from Tony Robbins into Jim Jones.

Urban's book, in addition to being lucid and readable, is unbiased—a rarity when it comes to discussions of Scientology. But at no point does Urban answer the question: *Why* was Scientology targeted by the establishment? I would like to answer that question. In the United States, we often hear about “freedom of religion”; but that usually means “freedom to choose from *existing* religions” or “freedom to create a new branch of an existing religion.” It very rarely means: “freedom to *create* a new religion.” I submit that L. Ron Hubbard actually invented a new religion: and this irked people. They did not know how to process it. It is easy enough to allow someone to be a Quaker or a Sunni Muslim, and it's only slightly less easy to let someone create a new branch of Protestantism. All of this falls well within our existing categories. But Hubbard wasn't exercising his right to join an existing religion or to create a knock-off of such a religion: he was actually creating a new one. He was doing whatever it was that the creators of established, “legitimate” religions were doing---whatever it was that Moses,

Jesus, and Mohammed were doing. But he was doing it in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (and in a distinctively 20<sup>th</sup> century way, this being why his Gods came to Earth from other planets on spaceships instead of descending from the heavens like more traditional gods); and he met with much the same ambivalence as the creators of established religion: he amassed a large following, who saw him as a divine being, while incurring the wrath of the establishment.