“Secrets, secrets, SECRETS!” Concealment, Surveillance, and Information-Control in the Church of Scientology

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Introduction

SECRET! Secrets, secrets, SECRETS! Ah, the endless quest, the far, far search, the codes, the vias, the symbols, the complications, the compilations, the mathematicity and abstractacity of secrets, secrets, SECRETS! L. Ron Hubbard, Dianetics 55 (2007:3)

Popular media accounts and journalistic exposés of the Church of Scientology have often made a great deal of the role of secrecy in this complex religious movement. Recently dubbed “America’s most secretive religion”, the church has also been the target of numerous critical documentaries such as the BBC’s “Secrets of Scientology”, and many others (Reitman 2010). However, while these popular accounts are often sensational and not particularly balanced, they do highlight the fact that secrecy has in fact been a pervasive aspect of the church from its inception.

From its origins in the early 1950s, Scientology has displayed a remarkable preoccupation – at times a seeming obsession – with concealment, security, and information control. Not only did the church develop an esoteric series of training levels or “advanced technology”, but it has also been extremely aggressive in enforcing its rights to the information contained in these higher grades (Urban 2006; Cowan 2004; Cowan 2009). By the late 1960s, moreover, Scientology had also created elaborate mechanisms of surveillance to monitor both its own members and critics in the surrounding society, including its own intelligence agency (the Guardian’s Office and later the Office of Special Affairs) that many have likened to the FBI and the CIA. As Ann Brill and Ashley Packard observe in their study of Scientology’s war of information on the Internet, “What makes the Church of Scientology controversial is not so much Hubbard’s teachings, but the church’s tenacious secrecy and the extremes to which it is willing to go to protect itself” (1997: 5–8; see Urban 2011; Raine 2009). At the same time, this preoccupation with information control has also
been one of the primary reasons why there has been – at least until recently – comparatively little good scholarship on Scientology.¹

This chapter will critically examine the role of secrecy in Scientology, placing it within the historical and cultural context of the United States during the last six decades. A full discussion of secrecy here would require a very long book; however, for the sake of this short chapter, I will focus on just three dimension of secrecy and three periods in the development of Scientology from the 1940s to the present: (1) the early life and biographical narrative of Scientology’s founder, L. Ron Hubbard, particularly his involvement in occultism and ritual magic in the late 1940s; (2), the origins of the Church of Scientology in the context of Cold War America, where it reflected and indeed epitomized the obsession with secrecy and information control that characterized this period; and (3) the ongoing wars of information currently being fought in cyberspace, as ever more of Scientology’s esoteric knowledge is leaked on-line and the church wages massive legal battles over copyrights and trade secrets in the digital realm.

The Church of Scientology, I will argue, is a striking example of the fact that religious secrecy is typically not just a matter of esoteric gnosis with no connection to the broader social and political domain. On the contrary, it is often intimately entwined with politics, power, social struggle, and historical change. Perhaps most important, Scientology offers profound insight into what I call the dual nature of secrecy – its role as both as a source of symbolic power and a potential liability for its owner. On the one hand, as the sociologist Georg Simmel famously observed, secrecy can serve as a kind of “adorning possession” for its owner; like fine clothing or jewelry, esoteric knowledge can ironically enhance the status of its owner precisely by virtue of what it conceals (1950). Yet on the other hand, conversely, secrecy can also bring even more suspicion, scrutiny, and attack from critics and government agencies who see such concealment as a potential threat; and in turn, increasing government scrutiny tends to foster even more elaborate tactics of concealment, obfuscation and dissimulation on the part of the religious organization (Urban 2008; Tefft 1992). It is just this sort of spiraling feedback-loop of secrecy, surveillance, government scrutiny and increasing dissimulation that we see in the tangled history of the Church of Scientology over the last sixty years. As such, it offers some profound insights into the role of secrecy, surveillance, and information-control in the twenty-first century.

¹ The few scholarly discussions of Scientology in English include Wallis (1976); Whitehead (1987); Kent (1999); Christensen (2005); Lewis (2009); Urban (2008); Urban (2011).