
Scientology is probably the best-known new religion, and a host of academic texts dealing with this particular group has appeared since 1976, when the first major account was published by Roy Wallis. Most of these contributions have been sociologically oriented, but Hugh B. Urban makes a point of presenting himself as a historian of religions, identifying with Bruce Lincoln’s critical methodological approach to discursive claims of the “transcendent, spiritual, and divine.” Urban’s book offers an in-depth, meticulously researched analysis of how and why Scientology developed the way it did, and in doing so he adds considerably to the scholarship on the subject. A lot of well-known data are repeated, but often in new ways and for new purposes, but the author also offers his readers a host of entirely new insights that convincingly support his argumentation. Considering the vast amount of documents, texts, and not least internet sources available for scholarly inspection, Urban’s work is impressive—and so is his ability to stay focused.

Urban explores the development of Scientology from its inception in the early 1950s to the present, using the on-going controversies surrounding the organization as a unifying theme throughout his exposition. Lawsuits, media battles, internet wars, threats, fraud, and sometimes acts of violence have been with Scientology more or less from the beginning, but it is rarely understood how such phenomena are linked with the religious positions and organizational structures of L. Ron Hubbard’s religion. Urban does not tackle this question directly, but his analysis shows how Scientology has adopted a discourse where the surrounding world is classified as basically untrustworthy while Scientology itself represents everything good, indeed constituting the only hope for humanity. At the centre of things we find the odd character of Hubbard, and Urban should be commended for his ability to make sense of this truly strange man.

Maintaining the strict *etic* position of the historian of religions, Urban has no intention of explaining the religious sentiments of individual Scientologists. The issue at stake, rather, is the phenomenon of Scientology, so to speak, and in chapter after chapter new layers of data and interpretations are offered.

One issue of particular interest to Urban is the discussion regarding the *religious* nature of Scientology. Contextualizing the debate historically, Urban leaves it up to his readers to decide whether Scientology is in fact a religion or not, and prefers to highlight the politics of defining religion. Hence, for Urban the pertinent question is not so much if Scientology is a religion or not, but rather who has the power to pass judgment on this issue. This, obviously, is a crucial question, and the author is right to call upon the historian of religions to engage in the debate and to be respectful as well as critical in his or her study of religious groups as well as of the
media, anti-cult movements, and government agencies that would monitor and control them. Personally I find it difficult not to perceive of Scientology as a religion, albeit a religion entangled in questionable real-estate investments, secret intelligence, murky political interests etc., as aptly described by Urban. Indeed, religions may well be deeply problematic without losing their identity as religions, and key individuals in such movements (in casu Hubbard), may well be con men but be perceived by their followers as semi-divine religious founders nevertheless.

In Urban's analysis Scientology is not understood as an isolated or unusual phenomenon. The organization is contextualized as an expression of popular religious culture within broader post-war American society, and the movement and its founder were influenced by the same cultural trends and problems as everybody else. Urban obviously proceeds from the reasonable assumption that religions are not only composed of the distinctly 'religious.' They are, as I would put it, cultural constructs in a more general sense, and cannot be understood as self-determining organizations somehow detached from their sociohistorical contexts.

The main achievement of Urban's book is precisely this contextualizing perspective. Rather than seeing Scientology as a cultural oddity, he depicts the organization as an adaptive, ever-changing product of the society in which it originated. The focus remains on Scientology, but the organization functions as a prism through which the larger American society can be seen, and we are offered a story not only of a new religion, but also of the society in which it grew.

However, the book also, and rightfully so, sees Scientology as a prolongation of its founder, and as a result of his special kind of creativity. L. Ron Hubbard is discussed at some length and it is shown how and why biography and hagiographical fiction merged, and to what extent the religious self-perception of this fantasy-prone individual came to inspire many people. Most significantly it is argued that Hubbard was a typical American entrepreneur, and that religion became his realm for strategic reasons more than anything else. This insight is not entirely new, but it is well put and certainly adds to our understanding.

The reader will no doubt feel educated and well informed by Urban's analysis, which goes far beyond previous sociological studies. This is, in fact, modern history of religions at its best. While James R. Lewis' edited volume on Scientology (Oxford University Press 2009) has until now been the best overview of Scientology, Urban's work has to be recommended as the better introduction. Lewis' book offers a range of specific studies by different authors, but Urban's new book presents a coherent narrative, is broad and thorough in its coverage and is simply great reading.

A final comment: it is a well known fact that contributions in small European languages (and sometimes even the larger ones) are unlikely to reach an English-language readership. Urban is aware of this fact, although unable to do much about it (Introduction, p. 2). This is perhaps inevitable, but unfortunate nonetheless, since there is a sizeable literature on Scientology in other languages than English,