Hugh B. Urban


Despite the fact that the Church of Scientology (CoS) stands as one of the most controversial new religious movements to have emerged after World War II, up until quite recently surprisingly little has been published on the group from a scholarly perspective. The two primary reasons for the apparent reluctance to study the CoS are, on the one hand, the fact that it practices a strict form of privacy and secrecy regarding its more advanced forms of teaching and certain aspects of its organizational structure, and, on the other hand, the often aggressive strategies the church has adopted in order to maintain its privacy and to combat critics and apostates. In *The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion,* Hugh Urban not only addresses these two problematic issues from a methodological perspective, but more importantly places the CoS in the broader context of the history of modern American religion. In this way Urban repeats the approach of his previous books, most notably *Magia Sexualis* (2002), in which sexual magic was used as a case study to understand wider questions (in this case the relationship between sexuality and spirituality in Western culture). Urban’s aim is thus to discuss how the history of Scientology reflects new cultural trends in American society, such as anti-Communism, interest in Asian religions, and fascination with the occult (p. 16), but, more significantly, the study of the group is important for the study of religion itself. Or to put it in Urban’s own words: “Scientology…is a critically important test case for thinking about much larger legal and theoretical issues in the study of religion as [a] whole” (p. 5). The church’s ongoing legal battles with various American legal departments (such as the IRS) to be recognized as a religion bring to the forefront, according to Urban, the question of who has the right to define something as a religion and on what grounds such a definition is being made.

The book consists of six chapters, in addition to an introduction, conclusion, and an appendix (“A Timeline of Major Events in Scientology’s Complex Journey to Becoming a ‘Religion’”). The introduction addresses some of the problems a scholar faces when writing about a controversial group like the CoS, and Urban argues for a methodological approach characterized by balance between critical and apologetic perspectives — a balancing of a “Hermeneutics of Respect” and a “Hermeneutics of Suspicion” (pp. 5–9). Furthermore, Urban raises the problem of what he calls the “ethical and epistemological double bind” that scholars are facing when studying private groups like Scientology. This double bind is explained by Urban in the following way:
“first, how can one say anything meaningful about a group that is extremely private and regards portions of its teachings as off-limits to outsiders? Second, is it ethical to even attempt to penetrate the inner secrets of a religious community of which one is not a member — particularly one that sees itself as attacked and persecuted by media, government, and other critics?” (p. 11). Urban’s solution to this double bind is simple enough: “[W]e may never truly be able to penetrate the ‘inner secrets’ of Scientology; but we can still engage in a rich and complex history of the movement and its more visible interactions with other social, political, and legal structures over the last sixty years” (p. 14). And that is exactly what Urban sets out to do in the remainder of the book: each chapter focuses on a particular historical period from the 1940s to the present, covering Scientology’s development from a self-help movement to a worldwide new religion.

In chapter 1 Urban discusses the founder of Scientology, L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986), against the backdrop of the science fiction milieu, thereby placing Hubbard in the context of American alternative spirituality of the 1930s and 1940s. In Hubbard’s case, the spiritual milieu in which he moved was characterized by a wide range of ideas and practices, ranging from magic and occultism to psychoanalysis. Hubbard is portrayed by Urban as a combination of an ingenious American entrepreneur and a cultural bricoleur, and the success of his “new science of the mind,” Dianetics (1950), is attributed not only to the attractiveness of the message, but also to Hubbard’s successful promotion of his new science.

Chapter 2 deals with the “religion angle,” that is, the formation of the Church of Scientology (1953) and the gradual transformation from a self-help movement into an explicitly religious organization. Critics of Scientology maintain that this was a cynical and calculated strategy by Hubbard for purely monetary reasons, whereas Urban shows that this was a complicated process that was “driven as much by political and legal expedience as by spiritual concerns” (p. 21).

In chapter 3, Urban shows how Hubbard’s growing preoccupation with secrecy and surveillance in fact reflects wider trends in cold-war American society associated with the fear of Communism and nuclear war. The escalating focus on secrecy coincided with investigations and raids conducted against the CoS by the FBI and other agencies. Scientology responded by setting up its own intelligence agency, the Guardian’s Office, and by launching the “fair game” policy, which in effect meant that the CoS adopted a number of more or less unorthodox strategies to combat critics and dissidents.

Chapter 4 deals with the “cult wars” of the 1970s and 1980s. Various antic ult groups came to dominate the public discussions on groups such as the