Scientology: Religious Studies Approaches

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We're not playing some minor game in Scientology. It isn't cute or something to do for lack of something better. The whole agonized future of this planet, every Man, Woman and Child on it, and your own destiny for the next endless trillions of years depend on what you do here and now with and in Scientology. (Hubbard 1965)

The story of Scientology proper begins in the late 1940s when L. Ron Hubbard, the founder, was a struggling pulp fiction author. During the same period, he was also experimenting with a form of self-help therapy that he eventually called Dianetics. Following a positive response to his article, “Dianetics: The Evolution of a Science,” in Astounding Science Fiction, Hubbard published Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health in 1950. This was the beginning of what would eventually become Scientology. Dianetics presented techniques aimed at ridding the “reactive mind” (Scientology's term for the unconscious) of the residues of traumas (engrams) that LRH postulated lie at the source of irrational behaviors and psychosomatic illnesses. Dianetics quickly became a bestseller, and groups were soon formed to practice Hubbard's techniques. There was, in fact, a Dianetics “fad” for a few years. Even sophisticated intellectuals like Aldous Huxley became involved. As a consequence, Hubbard was able to lecture extensively and write more books. In 1951 he announced Scientology, described as different from Dianetics because it dealt not only with the mind (the focus of Dianetics) but also with humanity’s spiritual nature.

Though the Church of Scientology (CoS) portrays the movement from Dianetics to Scientology as a natural development based on Hubbard's “discoveries,” any honest assessment of the Dianetics/Scientology movement has to conclude that Hubbard transformed his movement into a religion for purely pragmatic reasons.1

1 In contrast to the argument I am presenting on Hubbard's non-religious conceptualization of Scientology, refer to Frenschkowski 2016.
In the early phase of Dianetics, Hubbard made no attempt to define his new science of the mind as anything having to do with religion. Yet throughout the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, in response to a variety of internal and external pressures, Hubbard began to increasingly pursue what he called the “religion angle.” Foremost among these were Hubbard’s wars with the FDA, over his claims to heal physical illness, and his intense battles with the IRS, over his claims to tax-exempt status. (Urban 2011: 19)²

That Hubbard never seriously regarded his movement as a religion explains why Scientologists were permitted to be members of other religious organizations. Rather than a religion, Dianetics/Scientology was, from Hubbard’s perspective, an empirical science. As he asserted in one of his earlier works, The Fundamentals of Thought, “There are no tenets in Scientology which cannot be demonstrated with entirely scientific procedures” (1956: 79).³ While critics might regard Hubbard’s ascription of scientific status to Scientology as just another cynical ploy — what one might perhaps call the “science angle” — it is clear that Hubbard really did regard his creation as a science (Lewis 2015). Had he not regarded Dianetics/Scientology therapy as having legitimate scientific status, he would never have invited the American Psychiatric Association and the American Medical Association to investigate his findings (Melton 2000: 12).

In order to grasp his perspective on this point, one must understand that Hubbard’s frame of reference was not the mainstream science of universities and research institutes, but, rather, the broader cultural understanding of science found in what Colin Campbell influentially referred to as the “cultic milieu” (2002). It is within this alternative dimension of modern culture where one finds such fields of study as astrology, ufology, cryptozoology, pyramidology, etc., which are all regarded (within this milieu) as empirical “sciences” on par with academic biology, chemistry, physics, and the like (Hammer 2001). As part of this milieu, Hubbard had inherited a more general cultural understanding which regarded any enterprise that was empirical in the broadest sense — even religious or quasi-religious enterprises — as “scientific” (Hazen 2000; Rapport 2011). The transition from therapy movement to religion is reflected in, among other things, the evolution of Hubbard’s counseling technique.

Scientology “auditing” (counseling of one individual by another) consists of an “auditor” (counselor) guiding someone through various mental processes in

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² Refer, in this regard, to the discussion in chapter 15 of Atack 2013. The same basic discussion with a few less details can be found in chapter 5 of the first edition of Atack’s book from 1990.

³ In later editions of this book — editions that were issued only after Hubbard’s death — this statement was deleted.