Secrets, scandals, and the rise of Scientology

By Glenn Altschuler

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The “whole agonized future of this planet, every Man, Woman, and Child on it, and your own destiny for the next trillions of years,” L. Ron Hubbard declared, “depend on what you do here and now with and in Scientology. This is deadly serious activity.”

Hubbard, Scientology’s founder and a writer of science fiction, meant what he said. The Church of Scientology, an immensely successful enterprise with Tom Cruise and John Travolta among its celebrity converts, has gone to great lengths to protect its secrets. The church has been, and remains, controversial, not least over the basic question of whether it is a religion or, as its critics charge, “a swindling business and a brainwashing cult.”

In “The Church of Scientology,” Hugh B. Urban, a professor of religious studies at Ohio State University, provides a fascinating account of how a healing practice called Dianetics came to define itself - and become officially recognized - as a religion in the United States. Urban strains to strike a balance between what he calls “a hermeneutics of respect and a hermeneutics of suspicion,” grounded in a firm belief in freedom of worship and an obligation to ask tough questions about alleged misbehavior by Scientologists, including espionage against government agencies, attacks on critics, abuse of members, and attempts to alter entries in Wikipedia.

That Scientology flourished during the Cold War, Urban argues, was not a coincidence. Hubbard’s “space opera” narratives, he writes, reflected a preoccupation with safety and security, mind control, UFOs, time travelers, and the threat of nuclear war. Offering Dianetics as a means to combat communist infiltration, Hubbard designed systems of surveillance to thwart enemies from within the organization and defend it from external threats.

The greatest threat, Urban reveals, in the most intriguing and important chapter of his book, came from the Internal Revenue Service. Forced to decide (despite First Amendment strictures against a government “establishment” of religion) what is or is not a valid church, the IRS revoked Scientology’s tax-exempt status in 1967, igniting a 26-year battle that resulted in thousands of lawsuits. At first, the IRS decreed - and the courts concurred - that despite its clerical collars and crosses, its doctrine and discipline, the Church of Scientology was not a bona fide religion because its activities had a commercial character and served the private and pecuniary interests of its members.

But in 1991, five years after Hubbard’s death, following negotiations shrouded in secrecy, the IRS reversed itself. And the State Department began to defend Scientology operations abroad. In a triumphant speech, church leader David Miscavige hailed the about-face as a “historic victory for religious freedom.”

Despite vast financial resources, new building projects, and boasts that Scientology is the fastest-growing religion in the United States, however, Urban suggests that membership may actually be declining in the 21st century.

Either way, it matters a lot whom society delegates to settle claims regarding religious status. And so it is disappointing that Urban concludes by asking his readers to resolve that question for themselves. He asks them to decide whether the Church of Scientology is a legitimate religion, entitled to First Amendment rights applicable to civil and criminal cases, and control over (lucrative) copyrighted material. And he asks readers to determine whether American citizens require protection from religious groups (and cults) or, conversely, whether minority religious groups need greater protection from government intrusion.

When presented with these head scratchers, most readers are sure to need some help.

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