

Westbrook, Donald A: *Among the Scientologists: History, Theology, and Praxis* (Oxford Studies in Western Esotericism). New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, 352pp.

Foolishly perhaps, but determined none the less, I have high hopes of smashing my name into history so violently that it will take a legendary form....

— L. Ron Hubbard

It seems that L. Ron Hubbard, Scientology's founder, is getting his wish to have his name smashed into history – but not as he imagined. To the general public the Church of Scientology (CoS) is the worst kind of destructive cult, founded by a science fiction writer who decided to get rich by inventing a fake religion. What most people know about Scientology is often confined to what they learned from the *South Park* episode which focused on the CoS's confidential teachings about the cosmic dictator Xenu. Additionally, the public is aware that Tom Cruise and other celebrities, especially in the film industry, are Scientologists. This, unfortunately, is the full extent of most people's knowledge of Scientology.

The Church of Scientology has acquired a reputation as a litigious organisation, ready to sue critics or anyone else who portrays the church in an unfavourable light. Partly as a consequence of this fierce reputation, and partly because in the past the CoS has tried to interfere with scholarship, academics have tended

to avoid publishing studies of Scientology outside the esoteric realm of specialised scholarly journals until relatively recently.

However, the CoS changed its tactics around the time of the now famous 2005 episode of *South Park*, 'Trapped in the Closet', which caricatured Scientology's once secret teachings. This programme represented an important threshold in that, contrary to expectations, the CoS did not sue its producers. Some observers have argued that the new hesitancy to use lawsuits or their threat to silence critics represents a conscious strategic shift.

However, the topic of Scientology has become white hot as a consequence of the Church's (losing) battle with the Internet and increasing media coverage. We are on the verge of experiencing a small tsunami of new scholarship on Scientology in the form of new articles, dissertations, monographs, and anthologies.

One of the best overviews of the CoS to emerge from this new scholarly activity is Donald A. Westbrook's *Among the Scientologists: History, Theology, and Practice*. In contrast with researchers who have drawn their information primarily from published sources Westbrook spent years talking with active Scientologists and attending events with the cooperation of the church. The result is a respectful and insightful treatment of the organisation.

Following a general introduction in which he discusses his research project and his methodology, Westbrook's first chapter, 'Preliminary

Conclusions from Interviews and Fieldwork', takes the unusual step of presenting some of his conclusions as a frame for the balance of his monograph. Chapter two examines the founder's background in the post-war era and traces the steps in the development of the Dianetics movement, Scientology's predecessor, and the beginnings of Scientology.

The third chapter, "'Keeping Scientology Working": Features of Systematic Theology', presents a general overview of Scientology as a religious system, but this overview provides more than the sum of its parts. Focusing on the period when the church was headquartered in the United Kingdom at Saint Hill Manor in East Grinstead, Westbrook demonstrates that it was during this period that Hubbard systematised his 'theology' in terms of his philosophical anthropology, views of education, 'sin', and 'evil'.

The fourth chapter, "'We Come Back": Past and Present of the Sea Organization', focuses on the next period, when Hubbard shifted his activities to Scientology's ships. Shortly before this move he formed the Sea Organization. It was also during this period that Hubbard began developing the Church of Scientology's upper level 'Operating Thetan' (OT) teachings, which would later become the source of so much controversy.

Chapter five, "'Build a Better Bridge!": From LRH to COB and Beyond', covers the final phase of Scientology under Hubbard until

his death and the church's transition to the leadership of David Miscavige (referred to internally as COB, Chairman of the Board). In his conclusion Westbrook reflects on the future of Scientology and its academic study.

While there are many points one could take up with respect to Westbrook's treatment of Scientology, the issue his volume presents for New Religious Movement researchers is that of the researcher's relationship with her/his informants. When studying a religious group, this relationship is usually regarded as unproblematic with any mainstream religious denomination like the United Methodists, and only moderately problematic when studying less controversial religious movements. But what about when one conducts research on a highly controversial religion like Scientology?

In his celebrated 'Theses on Method' the prominent historian of religion Bruce Lincoln asserts that 'When [in the course of studying a religious community] good manners and good conscience cannot be reconciled, the demands of the latter ought to prevail': if you think the truth demands it, don't hesitate to step on your informants' toes. This is, of course, easy enough to say for someone like Lincoln, who mostly studies the dead religions of the past. The situation is different for anyone who studies a living religion, whose members will probably read what one writes about them. Whatever one says needs to be said respectfully to ensure the religious

community will allow one to return to conduct future research – and other researchers to approach the same community.

We thus deeply appreciated Westbrook's quandary in studying the Church of Scientology. Although not uncritical overall, he does present the church's account of events whenever a controversial situation from the past is discussed – and we do not think he is wrong to do this. Indeed, we appreciated knowing exactly how the CoS describes the contested events of its history.

This concern aside, Westbrook's treatment raises Scientology studies to an entirely new level. Just as all prior research on this group has had to refer to Roy Wallis's classic study, *The Road to Total Freedom*, all future research will have to refer to Donald A. Westbrook's *Among the Scientologists*.

Among the Scientologists: History, Theology, and Practice will be of interest to scholars of religion, especially new religious movements specialists. It will also be attractive to a general readership curious about this group and why it has been so controversial.

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