

Hugh B. Urban. *The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011. 268pp.

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Money, secrecy, and lawsuits. The Church of Scientology has made headlines throughout the globe often with reporters and critics asking whether such an organization should rightfully be classified as a religion at all. In the past ten years, the church has been the target of popular protests and cyber-attacks, as well as numerous parodies in popular culture, including most infamously, an episode of *South Park*. Oddly, academics have largely avoided the subject of the Church of Scientology. Until the present volume, the sixty-year-old movement had been the subject of only two monographs and one edited collection. *The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion* will hopefully serve to break this tradition. As Urban demonstrates there is an avalanche of provocative material to be analyzed.

On one hand, Hugh Urban's study is a history of the Church of Scientology - an exploration of the internal workings and strategies that has led to it gaining acceptance as a religious body in the United States. On the other hand, *The Church of Scientology* is a case study in how "religion" operates and functions in American society. Urban specifically wants to

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answer the questions of how an organization takes possession of the category of religion, with its inherent sense of legitimacy, tax exemption, and claim to freedom from government scrutiny, persecution, and so forth, and who, in turn, works to question such claims once they have been made.

Interestingly enough, Urban suggests that Scientology did not begin as a religion. When the former science fiction author, L. Ron Hubbard first introduced Dianetics in 1950, he promoted his new movement as a scientific breakthrough designed to bring about mental health. Once his methods, including the electropsychometer device, were questioned by the FDA and others in the scientific community, Hubbard turned to what he referred to as “the religion angle.” He founded the Church of Scientology in 1953 – those who previously served as auditors (counselors) under Dianetics now became ministers of the new church. From this point, Hubbard began to build his complex theological teachings, including notions of reincarnation.

For the next six decades, this claim to being a religion has been contested by government agencies, media outfits, representatives of the anti-cult movement, and so forth. Scientology came to be the prime example of a “cult” in the 1960s and 1970s, as various collectives emerged to challenge the rise of new religious movements. Scientology developed a new culture of counter-response referred to as “fair game,” in which enemies (dubbed “subversive persons” or “SPs”) were the target of surveillance, allegations of misdoing, and, of course, lawsuits over libel. But the greatest threat to Scientology’s religious claims did not come from their competitors but from the federal government, namely the Internal Revenue Service. Urban’s penultimate chapter analyzes the role of the IRS in determining the legitimacy of a group as an official “religion” or a for-profit business. The battle between the Church of Scientology and the IRS lasted three decades, in which Scientology responded by re-enforcing the “religion angle”

through new prayer books, ensuring that each Scientology unit had a crosses in place, and so forth. Although Scientology once again received their tax exempt status, the internet age has initiated a new medium for battles over the church's claims – specifically their right to protect the secrecy of their materials – a losing battle is still underway.

Perhaps what makes the volume most interesting is that Scientology is not portrayed as a fringe movement, simply pushing against American culture, but instead Urban suggests that many of the peculiarities of the sect can best be explained by its origins in the culture of Cold War America. This includes the development of internal agencies, mirroring the FBI and CIA, to conduct surveillance on members and critics alike, as well as a sense of suspicion that pervades the church's official doctrine. Most notably, Urban sees this latter development – certainly not unique to Scientology - in the “space opera” teachings about intergalactic confederations and UFOs. In addition, Hubbard's own Anti-Communist sentiments, including his ongoing, albeit one-sided, correspondence with the CIA are described in some detail. These include his efforts to offer Scientology methods to root out double agents in the government, but also included (perhaps manufactured) Russian secrets on brainwashing. Most striking, Scientology touted itself as a preventive effort for global survival –by promoting sanity perhaps we wouldn't set off any nuclear bombs. As Urban points out, the Cold War history of Scientology often reads as a spy novel, as much as its theology reads as Hubbard's science fiction literature.

There is no doubt that this monograph should be recognized as the go-to academic work on the Church of Scientology, but I would also opine that *The Church of Scientology* is one of the most important volumes published on American new religious movements in the past decade. More broadly, Urban's analysis will be appreciated by all of those interested in gaining a better grasp on America's ongoing legal and cultural contests over the category of religion.