

How did L. Ron Hubbard Engineer a Religion?



Extended Essay: World Religions

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Abstract

The Church of Scientology is an organization and a set of beliefs created by L. Ron Hubbard, prolific fiction author. Its existence and classification is often a point of controversy. While Scientologists consider it to be a religion, others consider it a dangerous cult, and others a commercial enterprise. The literature of Scientology constructs Hubbard's biography as a near-mythical figure with heroic war service, an advanced scientific education, and extensive knowledge of world philosophy. In actuality, Hubbard's experiences were largely fabricated, and his successes imaginary. Because of Scientology's long-standing publicity war, literature about the Church tends to take one of two polar positions. Sources are either produced by the Church of Scientology or are attempting to denounce it. Thus, any consideration of the topic as well as any information provided could be construed as bias. Regardless of one's stance of Scientology, one thing is indisputable: Scientology's explosion in popularity occurred incredibly rapidly, and its long-standing foothold in the public eye is a testament to Hubbard's ingenuity. This ingenuity in exploiting the changing attitudes of the time (post-WWII America and the Cold War atmosphere) as well as a strong understanding of human psychology allowed Hubbard to disseminate his practices with remarkable rapidity.

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Introduction

The Church of Scientology is an organization created by L. Ron Hubbard, prolific fiction author, which promotes a set of beliefs - Scientology - also created by L. Ron Hubbard. Its religious and legal status is often disputed. While it is an official, tax-exempt religion in many countries, including the United States, it is considered a cult in France and Chile, a non-profit organisation in Norway, and a for-profit enterprise in Switzerland. It was outright banned for a time in parts of Australia.

Scientology is well-known today as the religion of celebrity actors Tom Cruise and John Travolta, and formerly of stars Gloria Swanson and Dave Brubeck. The church maintains a number of 'Celebrity Centres' which are specialized churches aimed at recruiting celebrities. This practice dates back to 1955 when Hubbard himself established "Project Celebrity" as a means of disseminating his religion.

Hubbard embellished his career and exploits to give his teachings a sense of authority. He also used the attitudes of the time to assist in spreading his belief system.



What is Scientology?

Scientological beliefs stem from a self-help system developed by Hubbard in 1950 called Dianetics. In Scientology, a human being is in essence a thetan, an immortal, spiritual entity much like a soul in other religious canons. Thetans have lived an infinite number of past lives (Position), and these past lives are encoded into our brains as engrams, memories of painful experiences (Cooper). Through a process known as auditing, wherein a participant re-experiences the memories that caused the engram, the participant can clear the experience from their reactive mind and transfer it to their analytical mind, where it will no longer assert a subconscious influence (Urban).

Important in the auditing process is the “E-meter.” This is a device similar to a polygraph, which measures the electrical conductance. Electrical conductance is increased by active sweat glands, which in turn are increased by emotional duress or stimulation. This is used by the auditor to locate subjects of emotional stress caused by engrams (Scientology Device).

Scientology is not exclusive with other faiths; it allows members to belong to other religions and invites members to explore their own understanding of God. Unlike many religions, Hubbard (as the prophetic figure) did not acquire his knowledge of the faith through sudden revelation but claims he discovered the doctrine through scientific means (Cooper).



Early Life of L. Ron Hubbard

Lafayette Ronald Hubbard was born in 1911 in Tilden, Nebraska to Ledora May and Harry Ross Hubbard (Anderson). Harry Ross had been an officer in the United States Navy, and later rejoined during the first World War. The Hubbards moved several times during L. Ron's childhood, first to Kalispell, Montana, and later to Helena, Montana (Miller 3). There are many discrepancies surrounding Hubbard's childhood in Helena. Biographies from the Church of Scientology state that he was raised with his grandfather, who was a wealthy cattle rancher. Hubbard spent his time "riding, breaking broncos, hunting coyote and taking his first steps as an explorer" (Mission) He spent time with a Native American medicine man and through him, became a blood brother to the Blackfeet tribe of Native Americans (Cooper). However, it is more likely that Hubbard spent his childhood in a series of townhouses rather than with his grandfather, who was a veterinarian, not a rancher (Miller 4).

Hubbard traveled to Japan, China, the Philippines, and Guam between 1927 and 1929. Scientological canon states that he spent this time learning about philosophy, meeting Buddhist priests and Chinese magicians. However, his diary shows that he was disdainful of China and its relative poverty, writing: "They smell of all the baths they didn't take. The trouble with China is, there are too many chinks here" (Miller 43).

After failing the Naval Academy entrance exam, Hubbard enrolled in the civil engineering program at George Washington University, which he dropped out of two years later. However, Scientology embellishes his time in University greatly, stating that he was a member of one of the first classes on nuclear physics - when in actuality he took one course titled "Atomic and Molecular Phenomena" which he flunked (Owen).



He then traveled to Puerto Rico. Sources differ on what he did there; Scientologists maintain that he completed a mineralogical survey of Puerto Rico (An Introduction), though he may have gone to work in the Red Cross (after Puerto Rico was hit by the San Ciprian Hurricane in 1932). Hubbard himself assays that he spent his time there looking for gold that Spanish Conquistadores had left behind (Miller 59).

It was around this time that Hubbard's literary career began to accelerate. He had begun by publishing stories in the George Washington University school paper. From 1934 to 1940, he successfully published around 140 stories in pulp fiction magazines (Miller 73). During this time he was also a screenwriter in Hollywood, writing the script for *The Secret of Treasure Island*. Scientology claims more screenplays to his name, but these are unconfirmed (Miller 69).

In 1940 he joined the Explorers Club and received approval for an "Alaskan Radio-Experimental Expedition" which aimed to update maps of the Alaskan coastline. However, the engine on his ship broke down soon after setting out. Having underestimated the cost of the voyage, he was trapped in Alaska for six months, until he could raise enough money to repair the engine (Miller 89).



Hubbard's Naval Service

After returning to the mainland United States, Hubbard joined the Navy. He gathered several letters of recommendation. One was written by Congressman Warren G. Magnuson to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. It stated that “[Hubbard] has marine masters papers for more types of vessels than any other man in the United States” (Miller 93). It also described his “distaste for personal publicity” (Miller 93). Another letter was from State Senator Robert Ford and began “This will introduce one of the most brilliant men I have ever known” (Miller 93). Ford later stated that Hubbard himself had written the letter. Hubbard was granted a position as a Lieutenant, Junior Grade in the Naval Reserve in July of 1941 (Cooper).

During the second World War, he was placed in command of two anti-submarine vessels, the USS YP-422 and the USS PC-815. He was relieved of the command of the latter when conducting gunnery practice off of the Coronado Islands under the mistaken belief that they belonged to the United States (Miller 107).

His military career, however, forms a large portion of the mythology surrounding his life. Scientological beliefs state that he saw combat numerous times in every theatre of World War II; he earned a total of twenty-one medals; he was also machine-gunned in the back, sunk four times, had both feet broken, and was blinded by a muzzle flash or a bomb (Miller 109). He claims to have cured himself of these injuries using Scientological techniques (Sappell). In actuality, he was hospitalized with a duodenal ulcer. However, by painting an image of himself as a war hero, he was able to exploit Americans' sense of nationalism as well as their respect for the armed forces. Here was a figure who cared deeply about American values; and his war



experience gave his teachings authority. His naval career continued to impact his way of thinking, as evident in the establishment of the Sea Org later in life.

Hubbard was found physically fit to perform duty ashore and was transferred to inactive duty in 1946. He resigned his commission in 1950 (Miller 121).



Hubbard and the Occult

He moved to Pasadena in August 1945 to the mansion of John Whiteside Parsons, a follower of the magician Aleister Crowley. At Pasadena, Hubbard and Parsons collaborated in occult rites. A year later, Parsons and Hubbard, along with Marjorie Cameron, formed a business venture. Hubbard and Parsons' former girlfriend Sara Northrup would purchase yachts in Miami and sail them to the West Coast where they would be sold for profit. However, Hubbard and Northrup instead attempted to leave the country with the yachts, effectively defrauding Parsons of his entire life's savings (Urban). Parsons' mansion was torn down to recoup his losses. Scientological beliefs make little mention of Hubbard's extensive involvement in Crowley's Ordo Templi Orientis, but Hubbard later stated that he was sent undercover by either the US Navy or fellow science fiction writer Robert Heinlein to investigate and dismantle the occult organisation. "Hubbard's mission was successful far beyond anyone's expectations. The house was torn down. Hubbard rescued a girl they were using [a presumed reference to Sara Northrup.] The black magic group was dispersed and destroyed and has never recovered" (Miller 112).



Beginnings of Scientology

After marrying Northrup (while still married to Margaret Grubb), Hubbard began work on Dianetics, his self-help system, which would eventually become Scientology (although Dianetics claimed to be a science, where Scientology did not). Dianetics introduced the concept of auditing to remove previous negative experiences (engrams) from the subconscious brain (Cooper). Hubbard asserted that many ailments were purely psychosomatic, and that Dianetics had cured “institutionalized schizophrenics, apathies, manics, depressives, perverts, stuttering, neuroses” as well as “ulcers, arthritis, asthma” (Miller 149).

Dianetics became extraordinarily popular, despite condemnation from the scientific community. Hubbard charged exorbitant rates for auditing sessions and thus became extraordinarily wealthy (Cooper). However, the organisation soon splintered; Hubbard had made Dianetics an open, public practice, and a number of members soon claimed that their own methods produced more results than Hubbard’s. On top of this, several branches of the Hubbard Dianetic Research Foundation had fallen into debt (Miller 163). Hubbard had essentially lost control over his creation, and Dianetics dissolved into the background.

Hubbard then began work on a new book, *Science of Survival*. It is here where he introduced the concept of a thetan, an immortal soul-like entity. It is around this time that he also introduced the E-meter, the device that he claimed was able to reveal a person’s thoughts (Miller 204).

Having learned his lesson from the decentralized structure of Dianetics, Hubbard gave Scientology a rigid structure, with only one official organisation - The Hubbard Association of Scientologists, in Phoenix, Arizona - as opposed to the numerous Foundations for Dianetics.



Auditors and administrators at Hubbard's "orgs" or the branches of the organisation were not permitted to deviate from the official material, unlike the encouraged exploration of Dianetics, and each org sent ten percent of its income to the central organisation. In addition, each org could only teach entry-level practices; more advanced teaching was only provided by the central organisation (Miller 210).

Hubbard was aware of the many financial and legal benefits of status as a religion. He is often quoted as saying in a 1948 science fiction convention: "Writing for a penny a word is ridiculous. If a man really wants to make a million dollars, the best way would be to start his own religion"(Methvin) (it's unclear if he actually said this; the Church claims otherwise). Converting from a pseudo-scientific practice to a religion would not only give them tax exemptions, but also provide a defense against critics in the medical field.

In addition, religion was becoming even more popular in 1950s post-war America. Church attendance in every religion boomed. It was in 1952 that Eisenhower declared: "Our government makes no sense unless it is rounded on a deeply felt religious faith - and I don't care what it is!" (Miller 220) and it was in 1952 that Congress inserted "under God" into the pledge of allegiance.

Hubbard sued competitors out of practice: "The law can be used very easily to harass, and enough harassment on somebody who is simply on the thin edge anyway, well knowing that he is not authorized, will generally be sufficient to cause his professional decease. If possible, of course, ruin him utterly" (Miller 223). Similarly, he urged Scientologists who were arrested (as they often were, for practicing medicine without licenses) to sue the state for disturbing "a Man



of God going about his business” (Miller 223). It seems Hubbard was a subscriber to the adage “The best defense is a good offense.”

Hubbard also encouraged auditors to look over newspaper articles and find people who were victims of any sort of tragedy. The auditors would then place calls to the victims and present themselves as ministers looking to console them. Only when a personal interview was granted would the auditor invite the “pre-clear” to Church services each Sunday, stating that “a much fuller recovery is possible by coming to these free services...” (Miller 226)

In 1957, the Church implemented a ‘proportional pay plan’ where in place of a salary, Hubbard would receive a percentage of the Church’s total income. This increased his yearly income from around \$100,000 to about \$250,000 (Miller 227).



Project Celebrity

L. Ron Hubbard created Project Celebrity in 1955 as a way of bolstering the Church's membership. Hubbard knew that recruiting celebrities would make the religion more mainstream and popular. Among the first celebrity Scientologists were Dave Brubeck and Gloria Swanson. Hubbard compiled a list of celebrities to be targeted (Sappell).

Scientology appealed to Hollywood people as a gateway into a highly contested industry. It offered them connections into the already-established network of Scientologists in Hollywood. The religion itself also promoted individualism and self-exploration. Auditors promised that Scientology would increase self-confidence, and courses at Celebrity Centres were offered in communications skills (Wright 139).

Scientology also validated wealth. Whereas many other religions denounced material possessions, Scientologists see earned wealth as a marker of personal achievement (Urban). This appealed to wealthy celebrities who were often degraded by other faiths. Whether Hubbard intentionally created the religion in this manner, its attraction to celebrities dramatically contributed to its rise in popularity.



Scientology, Radiation, and the Cold War

The dropping of the atomic bomb at the end of the second World War issued in a new era in the American mindset. The American and Soviet governments possessed immense power and the American government needed to convince its public not to panic. The Atomic Energy Commission often ignored or downplayed the effects of radioactive fallout on humans, stating that it was no more harmful than radiation from the sun, despite high rates of cancer in Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and around American test sites (Manca). This, combined with the earlier secrecy of the government surrounding the Manhattan Project, sowed distrust between the American public and their government.

Scientists also struggled to provide answers. They had difficulty inventing a suitable and safe disposal method for nuclear waste and disagreed on the level of radiation that was safe for the human body (Manca). This led many Americans away from science and towards pseudo-science.

Hubbard capitalized on the Cold War and this post-bomb mentality. He used the public's distrust of the ineffective and unsure scientific agencies (in particular the Atomic Energy Commission) to disseminate his much more absolute self-help book *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health*, and another self-help book, *All About Radiation*, which contained his views on the effects of radiation and instructions on how to protect oneself from atomic explosions, as well as commentary by "a Medical Doctor" whose name has varied between editions (Owen). Hubbard published *All About Radiation* under the false claim that he was a nuclear physicist, lending a sense of authority to his practices. The practices in these two books claimed to be able to cure a wide variety of both physical and mental ailments, in particular



radiation sickness (Manca). In post-bomb America, the sensationalist fear of radiation sickness was widespread, causing many to subscribe to the philosophies of Dianetics; the book *Dianetics* sold 150,000 copies within a year (Cooper). Dismissive of the government's inconclusive answers, Hubbard promoted himself as a scientific authority who had definite solutions and medical cures.

Hubbard also claimed to have conducted experiments in a scientific manner, satisfying the public's growing desire for clinical trials. He also alleged that a number of the radiation experiments had been performed on himself (Manca), painting a picture of himself as a heroic martyr for knowledge.

In *All About Radiation*, Hubbard also promoted a pharmaceutical that he had produced (a vitamin supplement called Dianazene), claiming that it improved resistance to radiation as well as cured cancer. It was seized and discontinued by the Food and Drug Administration after having been labelled as a preventative against radiation sickness; however vitamin supplements remain a staple in Scientology as a purification method (Owen). The public's fear of nuclear power and its consequences allowed Hubbard to become a widely-recognized name in the self-help field.

Previously, in 1953, Hubbard had become a Doctor, acquiring a PhD from the University of Sequoia (Smith). He began to refer to himself as "L. Ron Hubbard, Ph.D., C.E." (Owen). C.E. referred to a degree in Civil Engineering - the program which he had been enrolled in at George Washington University, but had dropped out of in his second year. These titles gave credibility to his claims about science. However, in 1965 it was brought to light that Sequoia University was not accredited under the state of California (Smith). Furthermore, it had a reputation for being a



“degree mill” - an organisation operating out of a private home which sent degrees via mail order in exchange for a sum of money (Cooper). Indeed, the school was shut down by court order around twenty years later (Owen).

Hubbard had been receiving heavy criticism from the medical and psychiatric fields. In defense, he lashed out against them in turn. He claimed that the field of psychiatry had been infiltrated by communists and that proximity to radiation made nuclear physicists clinically insane (Owen). He renounced his doctoral degree (acquired from Sequoia University), saying he had “reviewed the damage being done in our society with nuclear physics and psychiatry by persons calling themselves ‘Doctor’” (Cooper). This served a threefold purpose; one, it defended Scientology against criticism; two, it discredited competition in the mental health industry; and three, it provided an excuse to drop the PhD from his name, the fraudulency of which had been exposed three weeks earlier.

By linking the fields of psychiatry and psychology to communism, Hubbard exploited the Cold War and the Americans’ fear of Soviet spies. He (or someone within the Church) even went so far as to forge documents which were alleged to Lavrentiy Beria, the head of the NKVD (a Soviet secret police organisation). Titled *Brain-Washing: A Synthesis of the Russian Textbook on Psychopolitics*, the book was a purported manual for brainwashing, teaching Soviet agents to sow “chaos, distrust, economic depression, and scientific turmoil” (Brain-washing 3) in the United States through the psychiatric industry. It stated that “every chair of psychology in the United States is occupied by persons in [the Soviet] connection” (Brain-washing 53)

Hubbard also appealed to Americans’ sense of patriotism, professing that Scientology was a uniquely American science, compared to the German and Russian fields of psychology



and psychiatry (Manca). “Dianetics is the only entirely American development in the field of the human mind” (Brain-washing 2)



Criticism of Scientology

Scientology began to receive negative publicity in the 1960s. In 1965, the government of the Australian state of Victoria published the Anderson Report, which strongly condemned Scientology. It viciously attacked Hubbard, calling his work “dangerous nonsense” (Anderson). This led to not only a ban on Scientological practices in Victoria, Western Australia, and South Australia (Owen), but a wave of criticism from British newspapers. Eventually in 1968, the British Minister of Health declared that no further Scientologists would be admitted to the country; and Hubbard himself was also prohibited from entering the UK (Cooper).

Hubbard was also denied a permanent “safe environment” for Scientology in Rhodesia (what was to become Zimbabwe today) when Prime Minister Ian Smith refused to see him, despite Hubbard having drafted an unofficial (and uninvited) constitution for Rhodesia (Miller 231). After spending three years boasting that he could single-handedly solve the country’s financial problems, Hubbard’s visa was denied renewal and he was forced to leave the country (Miller 232).

In light of Scientology’s failing public image, Hubbard (with influence from his wife, Mary Sue) introduced “ethics technology” to tighten control of the organisation (Miller 227). Anyone suspected of breaking one of the rules of Scientology was assigned a “condition” or a penalty. Conditions ranged from humiliation - being forced to wear a dirty rag around one arm - to excommunication, in which an individual was labeled a “suppressive person,” or an SP. Scientologists were encouraged to harass SPs at every opportunity (Miller 228). Scientologists were also required to detach completely from anything deemed suppressive. This often included family members (Cooper).



Hubbard also attempted to viciously suppress his attackers. This took the form of smear campaigns, investigating Scientology's enemies and sending any marks on their records to the press. He hired private detectives to unearth information on every British psychiatrist; however, one detective sold the story to the local newspaper, generating even more negative press for Scientology (Miller 229).



The Sea Org

Hubbard established the Sea Organisation (Sea Org) in 1967. The Sea Org was essentially Hubbard's private navy, of which he named himself Commodore. Hubbard had said earlier: "Do you realize that 75 per cent of the earth's surface is completely free from the control of any government? That's where we could be free - on the high seas" (Miller 262). Hubbard intended to transfer command of the Church of Scientology to the open ocean, where there were no government restrictions, probably induced by Australia's ban on Scientology and the crackdown in the UK.



Conclusion

Hubbard masterfully disseminated his religion. He manipulated the public opinion by exploiting common fears such as Communism and atomic power. He purposefully recruited celebrities to his religion to bolster its name recognition. He maintained tight control over his organisation, leaving no room for dissention. The rigid structure and large advertising campaign allowed him to turn enormous profits, all of it tax exempt. Through elaborate embellishments of his own exploits, he was able to establish himself as an authority on all topics. Hubbard's creation of Scientology was carefully engineered to become a well-known, if not always well-regarded, organisation.

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