

Cult or Religion?

by Dennis Wheeler

"To try to stop people from listening, the Chaos Merchant has to use words like 'cult,'" says L. Ron Hubbard (founder of the Church of Scientology) of his enemies. "That's a closed group, whereas Scientology is the most open group on Earth to anyone."

Cult or religion? Scientology has been called both.

A note prefacing most of Hubbard's books defines Scientology as "a religious philosophy containing pastoral counseling procedures intended to assist an individual to gain greater self-confidence and personal integrity, thereby enabling him to really trust and respect himself and his fellow man."

The *Encyclopedia Americana* calls it "a quasi-scientific and religious discipline that claims to be both 'the study of knowledge in its fullest sense' and 'an applied religious philosophy.'"

But Eugene Methvin, senior editor of *Reader's Digest* and writer of two articles highly critical of Hubbard's organization, adds to this definition. "Scientology is far more than mere religion," he says. "An analysis of sworn testimony and the findings of official tribunals in 12 nations, plus independent investigation, reveals it to be a multi-national racket masquerading as a religion... Scientology is one of the oldest, wealthiest — and most dangerous — of the major 'new religions' or cults operating in America today."

Strong words.

But Boston attorney Michael Flynn (plus six other attorneys) go even farther in a recent 196-page report on the group. "There is substantial, perhaps overwhelming, evidence to support the conclusion that, despite Scientology's attempted religious front, it is in reality a criminal, fraud-ridden, commercial, profit-motivated enterprise engaged in the practice of psychotherapy with a military structure and operational methods designed to accumulate money, information and power."

The report continues: "Scientology's legacy of victims who have been swindled, mentally crippled and sometimes killed by Scientology practices have caused many nations to convene formal inquiries into Scientology... It is fair to say that in general these inquiries have concluded that Scientology is a maze of intertwined corporations, claiming tax-exempt status, masquerading as a religion, and conducting anti-social, fraudulent, and psychologically harmful practices."

Scientology officials deny these allegations, but when

Flynn's report was presented at recent hearings in Florida (home of Scientology's "Land Flag Base"), church officials lost a bid in U.S. District Court to block the hearings, then didn't accept the equal time given them to present their own testimony.

Ask people on the street their definition of a cult and they might say something like, "It's an offbeat religion... a small church... weird." Ask them to be a little more specific, and they'll often falter. Then ask them for a concise, thoughtful definition of "religion" and they may give up entirely.

Nearly everyone, however, agrees that the lines distinguishing a "religion" from a "cult" are sometimes vague. The United States is the home of hundreds of recognized religions — mainly organizations of people bound together by a commonly held belief in a deity, with their religious beliefs protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

But the increase in membership of some of the newer religions during the 1970s has prompted a closer look at the entire matter. Many of these newer churches have been accused of being destructive cults, and gradually a more definite meaning of the word "cult" has been formulated.

Most religious organizations are formed for the spiritual benefit of the entire membership. Others, however, adopt a religious facade simply to be protected by the First Amendment, although actually they benefit only one person or a small group of people. These organizations are often called cults, and are characterized, as the dictionary says, by "great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing."

Estimates of the number of people in the United States who belong to such cults vary from three to eight million people, in more than 3,000 groups ranging in size from two or three members and their leader to several hundred thousand.

Various "anti-cult" groups or "cult awareness" groups have sprung up to educate the public about destructive cults. Amongst these organizations are the Freedom Counseling Center, the Citizens Freedom Foundation, and the American Family Foundation's Center on Destructive Cultism.

All three of these groups basically agree that there are certain characteristics of a supposedly religious organization which actually distinguish it as a "destructive cult." Amongst these are the following:

- Total obedience and subservience to an individual or

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a group of leaders who claim special knowledge or special appointment from the divine;

- A demand for the total time, dedication, and resources of its members;

- Distrust of family and all institutions outside the group, to the point of cutting off communications with family members and friends, and regarding those outside the group as enemies;

- A controlled environment characterized by sleep and sensory deprivation, development of deep emotional guilt, disorientation in time and space, public confessions, and systematic forms of consciousness-altering practices which make individuals suggestible to group dictates and control rather than self-determination.

- Use of deceptive recruiting and fundraising techniques;

- Denial of physical needs, such as infrequent medical care, poor nutrition, and inadequate rest; and

- The restraint of members from leaving the group, either through physical means or psychological fears.

"The destructive cults are usually first-generation entities with living leaders," says John G. Clark, Jr., M.D., in an article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. "Their primary goals are expansion through rapid, aggressive conversion and the amassing of money. They rarely launch truly charitable projects as they claim, largely because those needy unconverted persons outside their groups are seen as different and undeserving. A member of such an organization must not only bend his will to the group and its leaders but must yield control of his mind as well."

Cultists themselves usually deny that their organizations are "cults." Yet often they simultaneously claim that *all* religions were "persecuted" at one time or another, and that *all* religions — such as Christianity — began as "cults." Sometimes they compare their authoritarian leaders with the Pope or with the President of the Mormon Church — or they liken their rigorous lifestyles to those of cloistered nuns, monks, and other religious orders.

Members of cult awareness groups, however, merely refer to the aforementioned list of characteristics of destructive cults, and point out that traditional religions have few if any of these traits.

And the Church of Scientology? The Scientology publication *What is Scientology?* denies that the church is a cult. "Scientology literature is freely available to anyone," it says. "There is no demand for the individual to withdraw from society; on the contrary, Scientologists become more involved."

And Scientology has at times found itself allied with other churches. In 1980, during one of the group's many battles with the Internal Revenue Service, officials representing 40 major U.S. denominations with a combined membership of 67 million submitted a legal brief challenging an IRS denial of the tax-exempt status of some of Scientology's churches. Although not approving Scientology as a religion "in a theological sense," the brief stated that constitutional issues important to all religious groups were at stake in the case.

Scientology also has an ally in Berkeley psychiatrist Dr. Lee Coleman, even though Scientology has traditionally disapproved of most psychiatrists. Coleman claims that psychiatry has become a weapon in a "holy war" against certain religions. There's no such thing as mind control, he says, and adds, "If the Unification Church, Scientology, and 'Hare Krishnas' are engaging in brainwashing and mind control, then so are the 'Big Three' (Catholics, Protestants and Jews), not to mention the Boy Scouts, Little League, and Madison Avenue."

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Most cult awareness groups, however, agree that the First Amendment protects religious *beliefs*, but that the freedom to *act* on those beliefs isn't entirely free of restriction. (For instance, the Constitution wasn't intended to protect cults which advocate human sacrifice.) According to a recent report in the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, "The rationale is that religious belief alone poses no great threat to the rights of others, but when those beliefs are translated into action which obstructs the rights of others, the State may interfere."

And the relationship of Scientology to Christianity?

"We embrace all denominations, faiths, and colors," says Hubbard in his *Invitation to Freedom*. "We work with the believer and the unbeliever alike. Part of your freedom is your right to belong to any church. Not only do we hold your right to worship to be sacred, we may also insist you do not change your faith or leave the congregation to which you belong."

Andrea Schwartz, a former Scientologist herself, offers a Christian critique of the organization in a pamphlet published by the Spiritual Counterfeits Project. "The philosophy and practice of Scientology fundamentally contradict Christianity," she says. "While professing not to infringe on a person's religious convictions, Scientology's technology and the logical implications of its beliefs leave no room for Christian faith."

"Scientology can free the human soul and deliver the body from pain," says Hubbard — who himself reportedly claims to be trillions of years old and to have visited Heaven twice. "Man can save his soul. We know how... You have been invited."