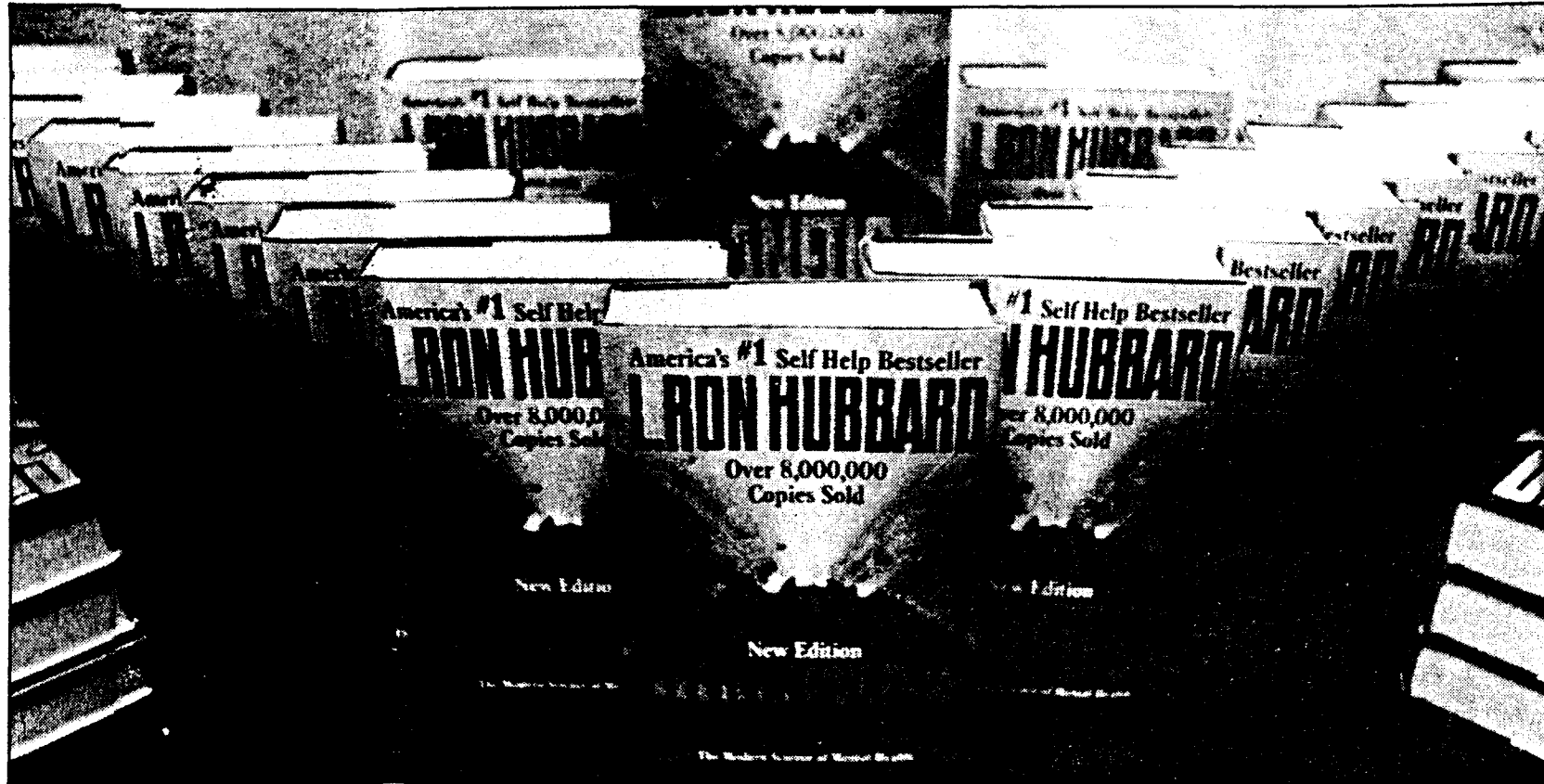


# LOCAL NEWS

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## SPECIAL REPORT



Nearly 40 years later, L. Ron Hubbard's *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health* is still on the bookshelves.

Photo by Chuck Kowal

# Scientology: Religion or cult?

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By Julie Edgar  
Staff Writer

The Church of Scientology is often denounced as a cult profiting from the blind faith of its members.

But arguments over its true nature — Is Scientology a religion or a cult? — seem irrelevant except when referring to its legal status, because the organization has features common to mainstream religions as well as to so-called cults.

The Church of Scientology has won the legal right to function as a religious organization, and therefore is entitled to tax-exempt status in most states. At the same time, people suspect the church demands more from its members than just fees for its services.

Gary Shepherd is a sociology professor at Oakland University. He maintains that before excluding the Church of Scientology from its purview, that religion must first be defined.

He defines a religion first and foremost as something widely established, or "acceptable" to the general population.

The Hare Krishnas, he says, are considered a cult in the United States in that they are "alien" to the host culture. In India, however, they would be defined as a sect, "a splinter off an already established traditional religion."

The Church of Scientology, on the other hand, is based on "the extraordinary claims" of a founder about himself and his mission — one trend that Shepherd says he has found in cult groups he has studied.

"I suspect there's more intentional deceit in Scientology than is true for many of the other so-called religions. Hare Krishnas are clearly sincere, for the most part, and Moonies (adherents of the Christian Unification Church) are sincere and true believers," Shepherd says.

The man credited with creating Scientology, L. Ron Hubbard, became personally wealthy, whereas the Rev. Sun Yung Moon did not, Shepherd adds.

"I get the feeling that Hubbard was as much as anything engaged in making a lot of money. At one level, what he created was a profitable business."

Despite the fact that the Rev. Moon was indicted on tax evasion charges some years ago, Shepherd maintains Moon's "primary intention is not to make money, but rather to bring about the kinds of religious events he believes constitute his mission."

Richard Burke, an Oakland University philosophy professor, points to another feature of the Church of Scientology found in a number of cults.

"It's either 'join us or not, be a loyal member or not.'"

But Debbie Blair, spokesperson for Royal Oak's Church of Scientology, disputes this.

"I still consider myself a Catholic," she says. "Part of the creed of Scientology is that you respect other people's beliefs. It doesn't conflict with your religion. It usually enhances your own religion."

Blair, who attended a Catholic high school, says she goes to church "when my mom wants me to go."

But she maintains that she also believes in some tenets of Roman Catholicism.

"I believe in the part in the Bible that God helps those that help themselves. I believe that people who lead a clean life are the happiest. If the person is ethical and moral, they'll be a happy person. Kind of like, what goes around comes around."

It's not unusual, Blair adds, to find Scientologists at denominational church services.

Keith Tolbert seriously doubts Blair's suggestion that Christianity and Scientology are compatible.

As a member of the Apologetics Research Coalition (ARC), a Dearborn-based Christian cult-monitoring organization, Tolbert has traveled far and wide in the course of his research into organizations like the Church of Scientology.

"If you believe a particular world view is true, then you'd have all kinds of problems with Scientology," Tolbert says.

The steps to becoming "Clear," or free of emotional and physical blocks brought on by trauma, involve moving through levels of enlightenment, all conceived by L. Ron Hubbard, Tolbert explains.

"After they've grown through known territory, the first seven drives of man, they teach the eighth, which is urge toward existence, which is supreme being. That's totally incompatible with Christian thought," Tolbert says.

The eighth drive is known as Operating Thetan (OT), the highest state a mortal can attain. The *Basic Dictionary of Dianetics & Scientology* defines OT as "a being at cause over matter, energy, space, time, form and life."

In order to reach OT, a member must go through an auditing "levels" and receive special training at a Flag, or a higher learning institute. According to a fee schedule released this summer, a "briefing course" for auditors on their way to co-auditing preparatory courses for OT-bound members is \$2,200 per level. The total package will cost a student \$11,000.

The tremendous financial commitment to absolute enlightenment points to another seemingly insurmountable contradiction between Scientology and Christianity:

"In the Christian world view, salvation is free to anyone who asks," Tolbert notes.

Rabbi Sherwin Wine of the Birmingham Temple questions if the Church of Scientology is dangerous to its adherents and whether it keeps sound financial records.

"The basic issue is not whether it's a cult," he says. "It seems they entertain certain beliefs which are religious, like the immortality of the soul. Certainly, that could apply to Swami X from India who might be opening an ashram."

Rabbi Wine questions the methodology of the group, just as he says he would that of the Rev. Moon's Unification Church.

"People involved in Scientology are very caught up in the belief system. The pursuit of therapy is the most important thing in their life," he says.

"However, if you seriously believe in endless lives and reincarnation, it seems logical. If not, it seems exploitive."

The social aspect of an organization such as the Church of Scientology can be harmful, helpful or both, Rabbi Wine suggests.

If "people feel isolated and therefore compelled by fear to continue a program," a harmful situation exists, he says.

Debbie Blair says expulsions from the church are rare and coercion is non-existent.

It's not easy to banish a person from the church, Blair says.

"Say a person is causing a lot of trouble. We would make every attempt to make that person come clean. If he refuses, then that would be the final recourse."

Whether they comprise a religion or a cult, the hundreds of Scientology and Dianetics satellites around the world are certainly complex. The Royal Oak branch has an infrastructure equal in complexity to that of an average corporate conglomerate.

The staff of about 40 is divided into nine sections, which are divided into departments.