

Pulling back the curtain on L. Ron Hubbard: The Wizard of Scientology OZ

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Research Objective:

I have decided to base my field work project on the “living religion” of Scientology, and specifically on its perspective on the issue of mental health. The community of Scientologists represents a very new religion, founded in 1952 by the former pulp fiction author L. Ron Hubbard (often abbreviated to his initials LRH), previously best known for his science fiction and fantasy novels. A mere few years after telling a science fiction convention in 1948 that “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,” Hubbard created the self-help system called *Dianetics*, which rapidly led to the creation of the Church of Scientology. I have decided to explore this religion’s sometimes controversial opinions towards the issue of mental health, in the context of the study of the psychology of religion. In this vein, I visited the community’s church in Washington D.C., and interviewed two employees of the faith; the welcome center guide Vanessa, and the minister Flo, as well as being shown hours of additional interview footage.

Preparatory Research:

Prior to my site visit, I searched for material pertaining to the topic of the relationship between Scientology and mental health, and was marked by the lack of truly unbiased sources. The material on Scientology seemed to consist entirely, on the one hand, of anti-Scientology propaganda published by hard-hitting journalists keen on bringing down the institution; on the other hand was a mass of articles, books, DVDs and pamphlets, published by the Church of Scientology itself, which clearly reflected the opposite bias, in seeking to promote and encourage membership to Scientology. An impartial conclusion was thus difficult to reach via the written sources available, as none seemed to admit to the possibility of any middle ground. I did however encounter material that was exceptionally helpful in preparing my site visit. From the writings published by the Church of Scientology itself, I reached a basic understanding of Scientology’s views towards mental health: the idea behind Dianetics and its process of ‘auditing’ (i.e. spiritual counseling) is to enable one to be able to eliminate the ‘engrams’ (i.e. painful memories) which are the root of all human suffering. I also found a book, published by The Church of Scientology, compiling all the letters it had sent to and received from mental hospitals during the 1950s and the 1960s. All suggested the use of alternative treatment methods on patients, and clearly reflect a direct interest in mental health. In this same book, were records of the discourse between mental hospitals and the Church of Scientology’s side-groups, who sought to ‘free’ patients from mental hospitals. Amongst the anti-Scientology material, I found Dr. W Vaughn McCall’s journal article “Psychiatry and Psychology in the Writings of L. Ron Hubbard”, published in *The Journal of Religion and Health* notably relevant. This article specifically addresses the topic of Scientology and mental health, positing that Scientology’s views towards mental health are extremely dated, reflective of the time in which the religion was created. Peter Connolly’s *Approaches to the Study of Religion*, meanwhile, was also insightful on

the connections between modern religions and mental health.

Site Visit:

To further my research on Scientology, I decided to journey to Washington D.C., to visit the site of the Founding Church of Scientology, established by L. Ron Hubbard himself in Washington D.C., in 1955. The current Church resides in a six-floor building, formerly an embassy, in a very affluent part of the American capital and just a short walk from its original location, one can now find the 'L. Ron Hubbard Museum'. The new church, meanwhile, has recently undergone extensive, and clearly expensive, renovation. On the first floor is an ornate reception area, L. Ron Hubbard's 'office', a gift shop, a movie theatre, café and couches, all with touch screen TVs that are constantly playing footage discussing different aspects of Scientology (viz. Scientology and Education, Scientology and Work...). When I asked about the modern, luxurious, and yet clearly empty and roped-off office of the Church's deceased founder, I was informed that every Church of Scientology in fact has an 'office' for L. Ron Hubbard. The second floor housed a restaurant on one side, and the actual 'church' itself on the other. Floors three to six were off limits to visitors, though I was vaguely informed in the course of my interviews that the "study rooms" were located "upstairs."

The visit of the Washington D.C. Church of Scientology was enormously helpful in the perspective of my research, though the church itself left me with a rather uneasy feeling. It seemed that, though the building was physically beautiful, the place lacked any sort of sacred or spiritual element, which led me to question the validity of Scientology. The employees all wore matching black pants, white shirts and black vests, and tottered about on high heels, making the atmosphere more like that of a country club, or an exclusive health care centre, rather than that of a religious centre. Though I was not able to verify these claims, I was also informed that some Scientology churches contain pools, saunas and gyms: such additions would serve to render the place even more in keeping with some sort of exclusive centre for the very wealthy.

Interviewees:

Whilst in Washington D.C., I interviewed two women who worked directly with the Church of Scientology. The first was the Visitors Center guide, Vanessa, a recent convert in her late fifties. I had previously been in contact with Vanessa on the phone, to arrange my site visit and confirm that my academic investigation in Scientology would be acceptable to the community. Even at that stage, I found Vanessa to be extremely enthusiastic at the idea, and extremely keen that my visit be as comfortable as possible, offering to let me stay at the Scientology Church or arrange rides to/from the airport. When it came time to interview Vanessa, I found her to be extremely welcoming and open, traits I observed in all the Church of Scientology's employees. She did however insist on showing me footage of LRH, instead of specifically answering most of my questions, which somewhat limited my interview.

My second interviewee was Flo, the current minister of the Washington branch of the Church. She was younger than Vanessa, most likely in her forties, and just as enthusiastic about both the Church itself, and my interest in it. She was well spoken, and took great pains to make

sure she was clearly explaining everything: she in fact answered my questions with only the most thought out responses, thus facilitating certain aspects of my research.

In addition to these two interviews, it must be noted I was shown close to ten hours of film, including the only recorded interview with L. Ron Hubbard, during my two visits to the site. This additional information from the perspective of Scientology's founder further aided me in answering many of the questions I had regarding the position of the Church on mental health.

Analysis:

The members of the Church of Scientology were extremely welcoming, and enthusiastic about my research, offering help that at times was almost excessive. I do however feel that not all the information I was able to gather during my site visit and via my interviews was as useful as I had initially hoped. The video footage I was shown was however crucial.

The video of L. Ron Hubbard's only recorded interview, played for me by Vanessa, contained probably the most pertinent information. Many of the questions asked of LRH were directly related to the topic of mental health, and, as Vanessa constantly assured me, the answers coming from the creator of Scientology hold more authority than anything a follower could attempt. In this interview, LRH begins by explaining the origins of his understanding of 'man.' He claims it began with his extensive travels in Asia as a teenager, during which he supposedly studied twenty-one 'primitive' races. Subsequently, he entered university and was "forced to take courses on sciences and mathematics, rather than Philosophy" (his "real interest"), which enabled him to learn "the rules of logic and scientific approach [...] generally not known to philosophers." L. Ron Hubbard seems to imply by this mention that his youthful experiences enabled him to understand more about human existence than the average philosopher who, in his own words, has "spent the most part of his working life in his ivory towers, isolated from life." Interestingly, despite LRH's claims to having surpassed the mere philosopher thanks to his university years, modern investigations into his life have shown that Hubbard in fact failed all his courses during his first year at university, and was asked to leave. This fact serves to somewhat discredit his claims, though a student's grades is not necessarily always reflective of their capabilities.

Whether L. Ron Hubbard was, or not, in fact privy to a higher level of understanding, he nonetheless describes a reasonably complex ideology. In his interview, he states that his effort to clarify the human condition became an attempt to find a common denominator that links all mankind. This he found to be the basic instinct of survival, leading him to study the methods man uses to adapt and develop whilst preserving a spiritual identity. When asked how Scientology can help man overcome difficulties, LRH clarifies: "Simple –we live in a world where we have governments and societies who are desperately trying to help man [by trying] to solve his problems for him. And these efforts [...] have not resulted in any great advance for man. Now the real work here is to put man in a mental condition where he can solve his own problems –and the aim and goal of Scientology is to take an individual and to put them in position where they can confront their problems themselves." Further elaborating on this point,

L. Ron Hubbard states that the key difference between Scientology and other “efforts to better man” is that “we [the Church of Scientology] put him [man] in a position [...] where he [can] identify the factors in his life more easily.” He argues thus that the key to solving life’s difficulties is identifying them, a process facilitated solely, or at least most efficiently, by his very own Church of Scientology. Scientology emerges as a supposed direct route to sound mental health.

As well as this background on the beliefs on Scientology, LRH’s interview directly addresses my initial topic: the position of mental health in the Church. L. Ron Hubbard stresses the importance of man as a “spiritual being, not a piece of flesh,” insisting it is crucial to treat the human spirit in pain, rather than merely his body. He develops in saying that that he believes “man is a spirit of infinite capability, and when we try to improve that capability, then we win, and we win very, very greatly.” When the interviewer links this notion to psychology and psychiatry, Hubbard is quick to point out that Scientology is in fact very different from these fields, inasmuch as they have a different understanding of the fundamental definition of ‘man’. For L. Ron Hubbard, “Psychology is 1879, when Wundt decided that men were all animals”; it is the belief that “man is just a machine [that] runs on nuts and bolts only.” Psychiatry, in his eyes, “has to do with the insane, and we [the Church of Scientology] have nothing to do with the insane whatsoever. The insane, well, uh... they’re insane.” He further criticizes both medical fields, stating that even psychology textbooks themselves admit “they don’t know what a ‘psyche’ is” and that they do not in the least deal with the study of the human spirit, merely its animal body. Hubbard is convinced Scientology alone truly studies the spirit: that is in fact why he chose the name of ‘scientology’, “which means ‘truth’ or ‘knowledge’ and ‘the study of’”, or as it is sometimes called ‘I know the word.’” The arrogance in Hubbard’s response to the fields of psychology and psychiatry is evident. LRH distances himself from conventional methods of studying the human mind, convinced that the main difference derives from an incorrect understanding of humanity. For L. Ron Hubbard’s followers, psychiatry and psychology dismiss mankind as merely some sort of automated animal.

I furthermore found L. Ron Hubbard’s discussion and explanation of Dianetics to be particularly relevant to my topic of mental health. Dianetics, referred to as ‘Processing’ in Hubbard’s interview, appears to be the main tool Scientologists use in an effort to improve converts’ mental health. As previously stated, Hubbard believes that Scientology enables an individual to “look at his own existence and to improve his ability to confront what he is and where is.” When asked exactly how the method of ‘Processing’ aids in this, LRH explains that it is achieved by “just asking the person to look.” Explicitly, he describes it as asking a very simple question, but that the auditor continues to repeat the question until “the individual being processed [is] finally able to answer the question [and be] totally aware that they have answered the question.” When pressed again about similarities with psycho-analysis, Hubbard strongly answers “No, in psycho-analysis they lay back and... don’t associate Scientology with such people! That’s terrible! That’s such bad manners!” Hubbard continues on a rant against scientific approaches to mental health, accusing them of “charg[ing] you about 9000 quid for not having helped,” an accusation I found particularly ironic in light of the lavish setting in which I was

viewing this interview. He finally dismisses psycho-therapy as being “for the neurotic, for the insane,” groups of people that he insists have “nothing to do with Scientology.” Rather, L. Ron Hubbard believes his religion to be there for those who are “enabled [and] able to function in life” and thus who are, in some ways, unaware of the fact that they could better their environment if only they were “in a position where [their] intelligence is better.” He concludes, in an almost disturbing manner: “The insane, and so forth, somebody else can have them, they’ve already failed.” Again, this time in a specific description of Dianetics, L. Ron Hubbard expresses his belief in a strict divide between Scientology and Psycho-analysis. He also makes some pretty direct observations on the relationship between Scientology and the mental health: Scientology has interest only in the “abled-being.” The mentally ill are considered beyond the saving powers of the religion of L. Ron Hubbard and his miraculous Dianetics.

The video footage of L. Ron Hubbard proved by far the most useful information I gleaned from my site visit in Washington D.C. Though many of LRH’s views seem greatly outdated, both employees I interviewed gave very similar, if not identical, responses to almost all my questions. It seems therefore safe to assume that the views expressed by the Church’s founder in 1966 are relevant to the beliefs of the Church of Scientology today. I did however specifically ask both employees what their definition of mental health was. The minister, Flo, responded that it was “when someone is able to handle life well.” Vanessa gave a very similar answer, which also implied an unshakeable belief in Scientology as the key to a complete life. Flo furthermore provided insight into modern recruitment into the movement. She pointed out that, with the exception of a very small number born into the faith, all members of Scientology *choose* to be members of their own free will. In joining the Church, members accept Scientology and Dianetics as the best, and in fact only, means by which to live a better life and reach complete mental health.

Conclusion:

It is clear from my site visit research, that Scientologists view Scientology itself as the only lens through which to view the human condition; in the words of L. Ron Hubbard himself: “Scientology has accomplished the goal of religion expressed in all man’s written history, the freeing of the soul by wisdom.” Scientology is thus directly linked to the issue of mental health in that it is a religion directly applied to the individual’s life in the hopes of bettering their state of mental health. Furthermore, despite L. Ron Hubbard’s insistence that Scientology conflicts with psycho-analysis, it is interesting that many principles are shared. Both believe that the mind can be divided into various subsystems; both perceive these subsystems as in conflict; both suggest methods for resolving conflict. Thus both the founders of modern psychology and the founder of Scientology view their systems as favourable alternatives to pre-existing religions in combating the sometimes disharmonious relationship between parts of the human psyche.

Peter Connolly also introduces the insightful work of John Schumakerin his book *Approaches to the Study of Religion*. Schumaker notes that “at least one of the criteria frequently associated with mental health (an accurate perception/conception of reality) is actually more prominent among depressives than the psychologically healthy,” concluding that it is “the healthiest people [who

seem] to operate accurate and illusory conceptions of the world in parallel.” This passage is enlightening as, on the one hand, it seems to support L. Ron Hubbard’s claim that religion is for the “abled” man, whilst also cementing my site impressions that, perhaps, the followers of Scientology live in a false reality. Shumaker asserts however, that a false sense of reality in fact promotes mental health, opposing an “accurate perception of reality [that] can be debilitating.” Scientology therefore betters the mental health of its community, by “distort[ing] reality in a beneficial way.” Connolly concludes with the assertion that religion “provides a crucial component of psychological health: a sense that there is meaning to life.” Whilst it is impossible to argue that Scientology is the *only* path to finding meaning, it does provide a method to obtain a “better handle on life.” Though this “better handle” seemed clouded in falseness, the community I investigated was convinced its mental health issues were effectively managed through Dianetics. Though Scientology has made some shattering statements about the mentally ill, it is, by its very nature, intricately linked with the issue, providing a basis for a mental stability, and providing a haven for many of the “abled” who dream of personal betterment.

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