

Handbook of Scientology. Edited by James R. Lewis and Kjersti Hellesøy. Boston: Brill, 2017. 592 pp. €199 (hardback). ISBN 9789004328716.

Since its inception as a religious organization, Scientology has caused controversy, and it has continued to do so as it has expanded. Founded by L. R. Hubbard, the Church of Scientology (CoS) has always sparked polarizing public discussions, which have led to furious debates, conspiracy theories, and even moral panic. In the Greek context, the CoS has been accused of causing divisions in the Greek Orthodox Church via tactics such as brainwashing and sexual abuse. Indeed, the growth of Scientology in Greece has caused a climate of panic due to the organization's secrecy. For this reason, in my view, books such as *Handbook of Scientology* are very welcome because they cast light on a religious group that has not yet been researched in great detail (as mentioned in the introduction to the *Handbook* itself).

Edited by James R. Lewis and Kjersti Hellesøy of the University of Tromsø, Norway, *Handbook of Scientology* consists of an introductory chapter, followed by twenty-four chapters that are divided into seven sections. In the first section, there are five essays that can be considered to offer an introduction to the organization, focusing on areas including existing research, methodological issues, the role of religious history in Hubbard's writings, Scientology around the world, and the relative success of the CoS. The second section includes two chapters on Scientology and marketplace religion, while the third section deals with the controversy surrounding the organization (including its secrets, associated conspiracy theories, etc.).

Part four concentrates on another important parameter: the treatment of Scientology in the media, including the news, films (e.g., *The Master*), and documentaries (e.g., *Going Clear*). Here, the open-source Scientology movement is also discussed, with the issue of the negotiation of information within the CoS being examined closely. The fifth part includes two interesting chapters on sex and gender in the CoS, while part six considers disaffiliation and the schisms that have occurred during the organization's history. The last part focuses on the personality of L. R. Hubbard, including his legacy.

The contributors include prominent scholars and their younger colleagues in the field of NRMs. While the majority of the contributions are new, eight of the chapters appeared originally in other publications (two of which have been elaborated upon and expanded for this particular publication).

Given the length of the book and the variety of topics discussed, it is not easy to offer a complete overview of the chapters within the confines of this brief review. For this reason, I have chosen to discuss just a selection—although this is not to imply that those which are not included here are any less important. Perhaps one

of the most interesting chapters (chapter 7) is Michelle Swainson's discussion of the relationship between Scientology and neoliberalism. Her aim is to expose some of the "economistic" frameworks that, in her view, have been ignored or overlooked as defining characteristics of the CoS. Arguing that religious movements are not standalone bodies operating outside of socio-cultural, economic, and historical contexts, she studies the self as a site of consumption, freedom, and control, as well as examining the regulation of religion in a liberal democracy (p. 200). Swainson argues that the CoS has endorsed many of the values of the free-market economy that circulate in broader society. More specifically, she notes the significance of the project of individual self-realization through consumption within Scientology and beyond. The main conclusion of the chapter is that the CoS had adopted some of the main aspects of the neoliberal ideology (especially the neoliberal project of self-mastery through consumption) by offering commercial religious goods and services via its pay-to-participate hierarchical soteriology (p. 221). In this respect, the story of Scientology provides an excellent case study in terms of the penetration of religious, political, and social institutions by capitalist ideology, values, and rationalities (i.e., individualism, consumption, corporate structure, infinite growth, and human capital).

Another significant issue is the relationship between the CoS, the media and the Internet (chapter 12). The ways in which NRMs in general are treated by the media is an important topic in the field and, as authors Nicole Ruskell and James Lewis argue, the journalistic tendency to focus on conflict and dramatic narratives has been a decisive factor in the promotion to wider society of negative images and stereotypes of contemporary non-traditional religions (p. 322). As it is argued, the media's tendency to portray Scientology's internal subculture as a perverse inversion of mainstream culture helps to explain much of the intense criticism leveled at the CoS. The analysis conducted by the authors is based on the concepts of moral panic and folk devils, which first appeared in the 1970s. Here, however, these media-created images are shown to be just one aspect of the story as the CoS has mounted what the authors term an excessively belligerent defensive strategy to counteract such claims. Indeed, for Ruskell and Lewis, the "misconceived management style" practiced at the highest levels of the CoS is causing the worst damage (p. 336). Such a line of argument offers some explanation for the organization's negative treatment in the media.

Where both the CoS specifically and NRMs in general are concerned, the extent to which one is free to leave the organization is often much discussed. Questions surrounding affiliation, disaffiliation, apostasy, and ex-members' post-movement beliefs are examined by Elisabeth Tuxen Rubin in chapter 18. She posits that the difficulties experienced when leaving a religious movement are proportional to the individual's degree of commitment to the movement. Further, Rubin contends that both the degree of affiliation and the exit process

determine the roles that ex-members take on in the future (p. 424). Based on qualitative interviews with ex-members of the CoS, Rubin demonstrates that CoS ex-members experience exactly the same emancipation process as individuals leaving other closed communities. Interestingly, she also finds that ex-members do not lose or renounce their belief systems, although the extent to which this is the case is related to the individual's level of affiliation, the movement's organizational form, and the nature of the exit process (pp. 444–445). The conclusion that is drawn is that apostasy from a religious group does not necessarily determine or influence an individual's post-movement faith (p. 445). Such a contention can be likened to what Davie (1990) has termed "believing without belonging" and, as such, an examination of existing research on the subject could have strengthened Rubin's thought-provoking argument.

The final chapter that I would like to draw attention to is Mikael Rothstein's contribution on Hubbard and his legacy (chapter 22). Rothstein presents a very constructive discussion of Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority and its routinization in relation to the concept of religious space. In this way, he suggests that Hubbard's charisma is routinized into Scientology as an organization. Indeed, as Rothstein argues, the immanent presence of the beloved charismatic leader is expressed symbolically in the physical structures of the organization—i.e., its buildings. According to the analysis, Hubbard is not reincarnated, but *architecturized*, and thereby also *topographized*, as sacred places and spaces are defined according to his whereabouts, with specific locations being linked with what is seen, emically speaking, as Hubbard's bequest to humanity (p. 531). These concepts, according to the author, are used in order to expand on the phenomenon of "charismatic textualization," in which Hubbard is transformed from a historically significant person into a mythological figure identified with a set of religious ideas and practices.

As mentioned above, the commentary given here is by no means exhaustive; the book contains many other valuable and significant chapters. In my view, the *Handbook* is a very important contribution to the Scientology research field as it covers all the related key topics. Furthermore, the text builds constructively on existing work on Scientology (Lewis 2009). If any comment at all can be made regarding the scope of this publication, then perhaps more could be said on the CoS in different societal contexts (beyond western societies such as Europe, the US, and Australia). Such an approach could set the scene for some fruitful comparisons. On the whole, what is presented can be considered a very useful set of discussions for researchers and students working on NRMs and Scientology. Moreover, the book will appeal more widely to those interested in sociology and the anthropology of religion, particularly as Scientology seems to be such a fertile area for further research at present.

References

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