

## Labeling Scientology: “Cult,” “Fringe,” “Extremist,” or Mainstream?

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**ABSTRACT:** The Church of Scientology has been variously labeled as a “cult,” an “extremist” organization, or a “fringe” religion. Based on her experience in the political field, where labels are both important for defining issues and shaping public opinion, and easily manipulated, the author examines these labels, and asks the question what actors or coalitions were able to impose them to a wide range of different media.

**KEYWORDS:** Scientology, Church of Scientology, Cults, Religious Extremism, Anti-Cultism, Labeling Theories.

### *The “Cult” Question*

Like many others, I heard about Scientology from the media long before I met a Scientologist in person. As a diplomat, I worked in France for five years in the 1990s, and I had been a college student there before. French media were systematically depicting Scientology as a dangerous *secte*.

In the early 2000, I worked in New York at the United Nations, and learned that to describe something as “bad” as a *secte* in French the word “cult” was used in English.

As many of us, who take what we hear from the media for granted without questioning or making our own inquiries, I heard repeated so many times that Scientology was a “cult,” meaning something “bad,” that it was something that I thought was true.

It was only after I started working in the field of religious liberty that I began having questions and doubts about why the “cult” label was so deliberately used in certain media to describe Scientology and other groups, without giving any persuasive arguments to corroborate its use. Other labels attached to Scientology are “extremist” and “fringe.” I will discuss these later, and I will then ask the question who created and uses these labels, and why.

In my professional life as a diplomat, I experienced how labels are important for defining issues and shaping public opinion but are also easily manipulated for political reasons. For instance, the same organization can be described as a group of “terrorists” or “freedom fighters.” For those who read the news, it makes a great difference, but the question is who created these labels. They are not self-evident. More often than not, they are the results of complicated political games.

I gradually realized that the same logic is at work when calling a group a “religion” or a “cult.” When I started attending conferences about religious liberty and contemporary religious movements, I realized that serious academic scholars try to avoid the word “cult,” because its current meaning involves a negative value judgement, and scholars do not deal in value judgements. Yet, scholars have their own jargon and rarely manage to change the popular language. “Cult” is still largely used by the laypersons and the media. Just listen how often and how easily in our own households and circles of friends many use the word “cult” to describe any religious group about which they know very little about.

The next question is how those who use the word define a “cult.” The answer is less obvious than it may seem. If I look at the early TV shows and books critical of “cults,” I find two different meanings, and a consistent lack of precise definitions. “Cults” and, in the Soviet and post-Soviet world, *CEKTA* (in Russia, the equivalent of the French *secte* and the negative Russian word corresponding to the English “cult”) were used by Christians to designate a group whose theology was regarded as heretic, and which was in competition with the majority church. As I have discussed elsewhere (Šorytė 2020c), in Russia a *CEKTA* is a group perceived as being in competition with, and “stealing” members from, the Russian Orthodox Church. The most targeted group are the Jehovah’s Witnesses, which were also criticized in my native Lithuania by Roman Catholics and called in Lithuanian a *sekta*.

In France and United States, I found, however, in the media and in common language, also a more secular meaning of *secte* and “cult.” It was described as a

group whose members lived apart from the mainline society. They had little social interaction with non-members of their group, often lived communally and secretively, and most of their devotees were full-time and had no job other than proselyting for the group. The examples one found more often in the media were the Unification Church, ISKCON, popularly known as the Hare Krishna Movement, and the Children of God, later renamed the Family. And indeed, it was difficult to escape the conclusion that the Hare Krishna, for example, were, and to some extent still are, “different.” Most of them live communally, dress in a distinctive way, and spend time singing and proselyting in the streets.

On time, I came to meet members of the Hare Krishna Movement as well, and found they are nice people and sincere believers. They have chosen a way of living that is very much different from how most of their fellow citizens of Western countries live, but this is not a reason to persecute them or put them in psychiatric asylums, as it happened in Soviet times, including in Lithuania (Pranskevičiūtė and Juras 2014).

However, these examples show how the label “cult,” even for those who do not share the scholarly criticism of the use of the word, should appear as very problematic when applied to Scientology. The first use of the word “cult,” to indicate a (mostly) Christian “heresy” “stealing the sheep” from mainline Christian churches may fit the Jehovah’s Witnesses, but not Scientology. Clearly, Scientology is not a Christian new religious movement. It does not promote a new interpretation of Christianity, nor does it ask anybody to leave their own religion. In my experience with Scientology, there are people who become so busy with its activities that they no longer practice their original religion, or they may find certain teachings of Scientology incompatible with their previous theology. But defecting from Christianity to Scientology is certainly not a massive phenomenon, nor something the “old” Christian churches may find statistically relevant to explain why they lose members, a process whose causes lie elsewhere.

Some Scientologists I met work full-time for the church as administrative staff, while others do not. There is nothing strange for a religious organizations to have officers and employees who work full-time for it. As a diplomat, I met people working at the Vatican embassies throughout the world. The ambassador, called a nuncio, is usually a bishop, but the staff includes laypersons, both men and women. Many married men and women work in the Vatican, and the German Catholic Bishops Conference employs a lay woman, Dr. Beate Gilles, as its

General Secretary (*Deutsche Welle* 2021). These people are Catholics, but they are not part of the clergy, nor are the women nuns. The same happens in many other religions.

I also had the opportunity of meeting members of Scientology’s Sea Org, easily recognizable for their Navy-like uniforms. They work full-time for the church and, as American scholar J. Gordon Melton has argued, are part of the equivalent of a religious order within the Catholic Church, or a monastic group within Hinduism or Buddhism (Melton 2018). Not all religions have within themselves ordained religious communities, but many do.

Just as the typical Catholic is not a priest, a nun, or a Vatican employee, the typical Scientologist is not a member of the Sea Org or somebody working full-time as part of the staff. These are the most visible Scientologists, but not the majority. As Donald Westbrook has argued, full-time Scientologists are so visible that they have created an optical illusion of sort among some observers of Scientology. The “ordinary” Scientologists, who do not work full-time for the Church and are found in all professions and stations in life, from Hollywood actors to restaurant chefs or medical doctors, from musicians to nurses and carpenters, have remained largely invisible, yet it is their experience of Scientology that is typical and average (Westbrook 2018).

Because of the same optical illusion, sometimes I find it difficult to explain to friends who have only read horror stories about Scientology as a “cult” that most Scientologists are not very much different from them and me. They do not dress in an unusual way, or spend all their time inside a Scientology building. They have their normal lives and their normal jobs and, while others would go to a Christian church or a synagogue, they would periodically visit a church of Scientology. These churches are very visible, often in the very centers of large cities. There is nothing secretive about them, and everybody can enter and visit.

This is not similar to the Hare Krishna, at least the Hare Krishnas we know from their popular image and who served as raw material for building the stereotypical image of the “cult.” Most Hare Krishna devotees dress in a distinctive manner and live a Hindu monastic life (although certain things have changed even for them in most recent times).

Scientologists do not shave their head, live in monastery-like “compounds” (the derogatory word often used for the buildings of the “cults”), or abandon

their jobs and careers. On the contrary, they are often very successful professionals and claim, rightly or wrongly, that Scientology courses greatly helped them in their careers. This is true, for example, for hundreds if not thousands of professional artists, a constituency where Scientology is over-represented (Introvigne 2020).

If a “cult” is defined from its “separatism” (an adjective it is now fashionable to use in France), i.e., the fact that its members live separately from the mainline society, then Scientology is very much far away from it.

Opponents may insist that Scientologists are not “physically” separate from their fellow human beings, but they are “psychologically” separate, because they inhabit a different mental world. This is certainly not true if it means that Scientologists are obsessed about Scientology and only care about the Church. This is argued either by angry ex-members with their own agendas or by those who have never met a Scientologist.

You do not need to take my word that this is not true. It is a question of logic. If Scientologists spent their time focusing only on Scientology, they would be unable to focus on their jobs and would be unsuccessful there. On the contrary, many Scientologists are very successful in professions and activities that require their full attention, from business to music. I once met Stan Gerson, a Scientologist who is also a realtor but is well-known as a stage magician, and watched one of his amazing magic shows. Stage magic only works if the magician is totally concentrated on its act. A short loss of concentration would make the performance end in disaster. Obviously, Gerson is fully able to concentrate on magic, and is not lost in some separate Scientology realm.

On the other hand, Scientologists do have their own beliefs, jargons, and interests in the activities of Scientology, which do set them apart from non-Scientologists. This is so general in society that it cannot serve as the mark of a “closed” group or a “cult” living within the tick wall of psychological separation. Our pluralistic, diverse societies are full of subcultures whose practices and language are hard to understand for the non-initiate. In Italy, supporters of a particular soccer club would know all the players, past and present, and allude in their conversations to games and incidents that non-supporters would know nothing about. Lest one objects that soccer is less serious than religion, soccer has been described as a religion in Italy and other countries, and has caused riots where many have died.

Soccer is just an example. Committed fans of abstract art, postmodern movies, Chinese pottery, or any other subject may form circles difficult to penetrate for outsiders. Some passionate about politics may get so angry at those with different opinions that old friendships may suddenly end, a phenomenon particularly obvious in American society in recent years. While physical separation from society is easy to ascertain, to some extent we all live some form of “psychological” separation from others. Most of us share a jargon, jokes, and memories others would not understand with our circle of more intimate friends, which is thus “separated” from outsiders.

A further objection may be that, while being passionate about sport or politics or the Presbyterian Church is “normal,” Scientology is “strange” because of its beliefs. Sometimes, even some scholars seem to enjoy discussing those beliefs in Scientology that seems to them particularly exotic, such as reincarnation or the idea that some of our past lives might have involved dramatic encounters with aliens from other planets. What exactly Scientologists believe about aliens is a matter of dispute, but this is not the point here. In 2018, a Pew Center survey concluded that 33% of Americans believe in reincarnation, including 36% of the Catholics, 26% of the Protestants, and even 35% of those who identify themselves as atheists or agnostics (Gecewitz 2018). In a country where all religious beliefs are shared by a lower percentage of the population such as France, in the same year 2018, 26% believed in reincarnation, but 30% if those older than 60 were excluded (Dargent 2019). These figures are typical of what one would characterize as a mainline belief.

Also in 2018, a Glocalities survey in 28 economically advanced countries (including China and Russia) concluded that 47% of their population believed in the existence of intelligent extraterrestrial civilizations (37% in France: Lampert and Papadongonas 2018). In the U.S., an IPSOS poll in 2019 revealed that 52% of the Americans believe that extraterrestrial living beings exist, and 29% that they have visited our planet, either recently or in a remote past (IPSOS 2019). I do not want to enter into the discussion about what Scientologists really believe about extraterrestrials and their role in Planet Earth’s history, but before qualifying their beliefs as unusual consider that, according to the same Glocalities report, 25% of the population surveyed believed in 2018 that “the first form of life on earth came from another place in the universe” (Lampert and Papadongonas 2018, 7).

More generally, religious beliefs always appear strange to non-believers. Most Christians believe that Jesus Christ literally walked on Lake Tiberias' waters, and in 2021, 61% of the Americans believe in the existence of the Devil (Statista 2021). Living in societies with a majority of Christians, we tend to regard these beliefs as “normal.” But from the point of view of an atheist, they are not less strange than the religious beliefs of the Scientologists—and perhaps more.

Also, critics often assume that all Scientologists believe in the founding teachings of their religions in the same way. In fact, belief is less simple than that. There are Christians believing that Jesus' feet touched the water of Lake Tiberias and he did not sink, while for others this is a symbol of spirit prevailing about matter. They would say that, in this sense, we can all learn to walk on the waters. Religious “myths” (not a bad word, and not one implying in any way that what is taught is not “true”) are more important for what they teach us about our own life than for their historical content. Sometimes, critics seems to approach the religious narratives of Scientology in a more primitive way than Scientologists do themselves.

### *“Extremist”?*

While accusations that Scientology is a “cult” (in French, *secte*) have certainly not disappeared, in some countries the fact that Scientology is difficult to fit into the classic mold of the “cult” has been recognized, if only tacitly or implicitly, and opponents have tried to find new labels.

The story of the label “extremist” applied to minority religions is interesting. The use of the label started in Russia, where anti-cultists realized that within the Russian legal system it was difficult to use “cult” as a legal category to prosecute and ban religions they did not like. However, they found that Russian law included a useful tool, i.e., the Federal Law of the Russian Federation on Countering Extremist Activity, which was promulgated in 2002. In its 2002 text, the law already went beyond the meaning of the word “extremism” in common language (SOVA Center for Information and Analysis 2010). However, the core of this legislation was to provide for the swift “liquidation” of groups promoting terrorism or violence. Although violence was broadly defined, it was (mostly) *physical* violence. The legislation was passed in 2002, and few abroad criticized

Russia for a statute introduced less than one year after 9/11, and ostensibly aimed at Islamic radical organizations.

However, on September 1, 2004, the terrorist attack against the Beslan School in North Ossetia left 334 dead, including 186 children. In Russia, it became known as “the 9/11 of children” and generated enormous emotion. These feelings reinforced the position of those who believed that the 2002 law on extremism was not tough enough. In fact, the group who claimed responsibility for the Beslan attack, Riyad-us Saliheen, led by Chechen separatist Shamil Basayev (1965–2006), had already been classified as a terrorist organization by both Russia and the United States, and no new law was needed to ban it.

But in the post-Beslan emotional climate those who claimed that the seeds of terrorism should be extirpated by combating religious extremism on a broader scale prevailed, and the 2002 law was modified twice, in 2006 and 2007. The new text went substantially beyond the original definition of extremism, and criminalized teachings that had nothing to do with violence (SOVA Center for Information and Analysis 2010; Kravchenko 2018). “Religious extremism” became a core part of the law, and it was defined as “propaganda of exclusiveness, superiority or inferiority of individuals based on their religious identity, or their attitude to religion.”

Subsequent studies evidenced the role of anti-cultists, including the well-known Alexander Dvorkin, in promoting this definition (USCIRF 2020; Fautré 2020). These studies suggested that those who proposed to amend the anti-extremism law, while claiming that the amendments were needed to fight Islamic radicalism, in fact intended to use them to fight “cults” and in general groups accused of “stealing” members from the Russian Orthodox Church through active proselytization.

In fact, the largest and most important case under the new anti-extremist law targeted the Jehovah’s Witnesses, who were liquidated and totally banned in Russia by the Supreme Court in 2017 (USCIRF 2020; Fautré 2020; Ivanenko 2020). While there were other accusations against the Jehovah’s Witnesses, how the definition of “religious extremism” was interpreted was crucial. “Extremist.” under the current anti-extremism law as interpreted by the Russian Supreme Court. are these religious groups that claim that their teachings are “superior” to the teachings of other religions, and that they offer the only way to enlightenment or salvation.



As virtually all scholarly observers commented, in practice this meant that “extremists” are those who claim that their religion is better than the one preached by the Russian Orthodox Church, and try to convert Orthodox to their fold (Ivanenko 2020). The law protects a “de facto monopoly” (Carobene 2021, 82) of the Russian Orthodox Church, which is free to convert others and to argue that its religion is “superior” to other faiths and teachings. If others do the same, they are labeled “extremists” and liquidated.

Clearly, the definition of “religious extremism” of the law can be applied to most religions. Very few religions would *not* claim that their message is the best one, and is better than what other religions teach. Otherwise, why should one want to convert?

Not surprisingly, in Russia the legislation against extremism has been mentioned also in attacks against Scientology. In fact, while it is extremely easy to apply it to pretty much everybody, there may be specific problems in using it as a tool against Scientology. As mentioned earlier, Scientology does not try to induce members to abandon their former religion. One can become a Scientologist and keep practicing the previous religion. Surely, Scientology believes that what it calls its technology is uniquely suitable to solve the world’s problems. But it is much less “exclusivist” (thus, in Russian jargon, less “extremist”) than most other religions.

Through the international anti-cult networks (USCIRF 2020), Russian ideas about “extremist” religion have been spread abroad. The new French law on religion, originally called law against “separatism,” also targets groups labeled as “extremist.” The same political logic is at work. Legislation is introduced claiming it is needed to combat radical Islam and terrorism, and is then used against peaceful religious groups such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses or Scientology. Just as in Russia, this is an open secret, and there are politicians openly telling the media that provisions sold to the public opinion as weapons against radical Islam will in fact be used against groups stigmatized as “cults” (Wesfreid 2020).

In France it would be difficult to liquidate as “extremist” every religion that claims that its teachings are superior to others. However, one way of applying the Russian logic of “religious extremism” in Western Europe is to single out one clue that the Russian judges have considered to indicate that a religion declares non-members as “inferior” to members, which is forbidden by Russian law (in the law’s practical application, except to members of the Russian Orthodox Church).

This is the suggestion to members that they should not associate with ex-members, particularly with those critical of the religion. The practice of “ostracism” or “shunning” by the Jehovah’s Witnesses was quoted by the Russian Supreme Court as part of the evidence that they are part of an “extremist” organization.

European anti-cultists have seen here a promising avenue to attack religious movements, despite the fact that the shunning practices of the Jehovah’s Witnesses have been examined by courts of law in several Western countries, and consistently found as being part of the freedom of religious groups to organize themselves internally as they deem fit (Introvigne and Amicarelli 2020).

On March 16, 2021, the Criminal Court of Ghent in Belgium, in a surprising decision reversing the case law of other European, and even Belgian, courts, declared the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ practice of ostracism a crime. The decision has been appealed, but anti-cultists in France have made no mystery that similar arguments will be used to claim that “ostracism” is contrary to the new French law on “separatism.”

Scientology also practices “disconnection,” and suggests that members do not associate with “suppressive persons” who have committed serious hostile acts against the Church. This can be compared to shunning as practiced by the Jehovah’s Witnesses, although differences also exist (Introvigne 2019).

Several scholars have commented negatively about the Ghent decision. Most of them noted that the practice of ostracism or disconnection has been, and still is, widely used in mainline religions. Several groups of Orthodox Jews practice a strict shunning, and Islam’s treatment of “apostates” is well-known. This indicates that the practice of disconnection cannot be used as a test to distinguish “normal” religions from “extremist” groups or “cults.”

### *“Fringe”?*

Even when labels involving a potential criminal liability, such as “extremist” in Russia, are not used, we still see Scientology described in some media as a “fringe” group. Again, this is a subtle way of disparaging and discriminating. I am the author or co-author of several articles about Shincheonji, a South Korean Christian new religious movement that was accused of having spread COVID-19

through its refusal to cooperate with the health authorities (Šorytė 2020a; Introvigne et al. 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d). After the headquarters of the movement were raided with a great participation of journalists, and its 89-year-old leader was arrested and kept in jail for several months, on January 13, 2021, the Suwon District Court found him and his co-defendants not guilty of any COVID-related charges.

Not only was this one of the most spectacular cases of fake news spread throughout the world about a movement labeled as a “cult.” It was also interesting that, when not using the word “cult,” and particularly after it became clear that serious human rights violations were being perpetrated against its members, South Korean media started referring to Shincheonji as a “fringe” or “minor religion.” As if being “minor” made less serious the injustices and unjust persecution vested on it...

What do labels such as “minor” or “fringe” mean? Compared with Muslims (1.9 billion), Roman Catholics (1.2 billion), Hindus (1.1 billion), Protestant Christians (800 million), or Buddhists (500 million), all religions are “minor.” Even Orthodox Christians (220 million) are comparatively small when compared to Muslims or Roman Catholics. Jews are less than 15 million, meaning that their religion is more than 100 times smaller than Islam, yet media would not call it “minor” or “fringe.”

Surely, there are theories that all religions are born at the margins of what one may call the religious “mainline,” and only slowly progress to the center (Mauss 1994; Stark and Finke 2000). No religion is born as a majority. Christians were despised as marginal at least for the first two centuries of their existence. In this sense, new religions are all in the process of moving to the center of the religious landscape, and Scientology has only been in existence for less than 70 years. One can hardly blame it for being in the middle of a process of mainstreaming that normally takes centuries to complete.

However, those using labels such as “fringe” do not mean that Scientology is a new religion, or a young religion. Hidden, or not too hidden, is a value judgement, that Scientology is not very important, or does not contribute in a significant way to society at large.

We can discuss as a philosophical question whether religions should necessarily prove their usefulness to society by promoting charitable activities.

After all, the core business of religions is religion, and they can be hardly criticized if they take care of the souls and the hearts rather than of the bodies.

However, in the case of Scientology, that it does not offer charitable, cultural, and social activities that benefit society as a whole is false. I have argued elsewhere (Šorytè 2020a, 2020b) that anti-cultists create a convenient but vicious circle, which is unfortunately taken at face value by some media. If groups they label as “cults” confine themselves to religious and missionary activities, they are dismissed as “fringe” groups that do not care for their fellow human beings. But if they engage in significant charitable activities, these are in turn dismissed as “fronts” for the “cult.”

Surely, helping other countries improves the reputation of governments, and during the COVID-19 crisis we became familiar with expressions such as “mask diplomacy” and “vaccine diplomacy.” And Catholic or Protestant charities boost the reputation of the churches operating them. Yet, they also really help those in need. Charitable activities are always performed for a number of different reasons, and we cannot exactly know what motivations prevail. The Bible tells us that we will know “the intentions of the hearts” only at the end of the world (*I Corinthians* 4:5). And why should we regard as suspicious and “front” the charitable services offered by Scientology, but not those by Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish charities, not to mention the U.S. or Russian or Chinese governments?

There is little doubt that associations established and operated by Scientologists positively contribute to a number of good causes. Youth for Human Rights, for example, promotes an impressive range of educational activities about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It rarely, if ever, talks about how human rights of Scientologists are violated, even if this obviously occurs in several countries. For its global outreach, its founder, Mary Shuttleworth, received in 2019 the Peace Summit Medal for Social Activism from the World Summit of Nobel Peace Laureates, an organization that it would be difficult for opponents to dismiss as just another “front” for Scientology (World Summit of Nobel Peace Laureates 2019).

French scholar Bernadette Rigal-Cellard has analyzed in detail in 2019 the numerous charitable, humanitarian, and cultural programs of Scientology, and how they benefit, primarily, non-Scientologists (Rigal-Cellard 2019). Some of these programs operate in controversial areas. For example, according to Rigal-Cellard in Glendale and other Californian cities the Foundation for a Drug Free

World opposed the opening of shops selling marijuana (after they were legalized by the state in 2016: Rigal-Cellard 2019, 79), which disturbed some powerful local commercial interests. The Citizens Commission for Human Rights, where Scientologists have always cooperated with non-Scientologists (Westbrook 2017), opposes the abuse of psychiatry, psychiatric drugs, and the abuse of drugs in general in our Western society. Many disagree with what they perceive as its blanket indictment of psychiatry in general. On the other hand, the Commission has exposed very real and even criminal instances of abuse of psychiatry and false statements spread to promote the sale of psychiatric and other drugs, which caused incalculable damage to public health.

In 2020, I published a small book about Scientology's activities to help those in need during the COVID-19 pandemic (Šorytė 2020b). While reactions by the opponents proved once again that there is nothing Scientology can do that they would find praiseworthy, local authorities in several countries acknowledged that by supplying masks, disinfectants, and good advice Scientologists really helped. But there was also another aspect I tried to emphasize in that book. In a time of crisis, we do not expect religions to offer material help only. That Scientology mobilized its musicians, some of them world-famous, for a concert that reached millions via YouTube, and tried to boost the morale of those quarantined by inducing them to reflect on how to convert a crisis into an opportunity for moral and spiritual growth, was not less important, nor less beneficial, than the material help.

If this is what “fringe” religions do, then we need more “fringe” religions in our society.

### *Cui Bono?*

Since my background is in politics rather than in religious studies, when I see a religion attacked and vilified, I ask the question who is behind the attacks and why. Based on my admittedly limited experience of the scholarly study of new religious movements, perhaps this question is not asked often enough.

This may happen because it is a question that is difficult to answer. There are forces that by their very nature prefer to operate in the shadow, while scholars look for hard evidence and smoking guns. Some of my tentative answers to the

question who is behind labeling Scientology as a “cult,” an “extremist” movement, or a “fringe” religion are based on statements not difficult to find. Others are educated guesses.

Only conspiracy theories posit that behind certain cultural campaigns there is only one “Big Brother.” I would suggest that behind the hostility to Scientology there are at least five different forces.

First, new religions enter a crowded market, and they are rarely welcomed by old religions. Nobody likes a new competitor. In Russia, it is pretty much obvious that the Russian Orthodox Church is behind the strongest attacks against Scientology (USCIRF 2020). Nor would it deny it. In other countries, some Catholics and Protestants are not exactly happy that some of their devotees spend a part of their time with Scientology (even if, as I mentioned earlier, Scientology does not ask anybody to abandon their religion). However, their power and influence are rarely as pervasive as the Russian Orthodox Church’s in Russia. And their opinions are divided. Two well-known Italian scholars who have written books and articles emphasizing the positive aspects of Scientology, Aldo Natale Terrin and Luigi Berzano, are both Catholic priests (see Terrin 2017; Berzano 2018).

Second, there are governments and forces in governments, with a problematic relation to democracy, which do not like those who are fiercely independent, insist on thinking with their own head, and live apart from the lifestyle dictated by the official propaganda. Russia, again, is an egregious example of how these independently-minded people, including Scientologists, are treated, and the fact that the headquarters of their religion are in the United States make their predicament worse, because the politicians in power use as a propaganda tool a primitive anti-Americanism. Nor should we dismiss the greed of politicians and bureaucrats who, in “liquidating” religious movements, are also eager to take control of their bank accounts and real estate.

Third, there are secular humanists who had predicted the demise of religion in the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century. While they may have been right in anticipating that mainline churches would lose members (although not everywhere), they were taken by surprise by the emergence of new religions such as Scientology. Hence their strange obsession with the theory that groups such as Scientology are not really growing and are in fact shrinking, or are about to disappear, a theory that is not supported by any reliable statistics (Rigal-Cellard 2019, 107). Although they

sometimes ally with religionists trying to protect themselves against competition, secular humanists are widely present in Western anti-cult groups and in the media and cultural establishment, which explains the hostile coverage of Scientology and other new religious movements.

Fourth, there is a growing influx of libertarians and proponents of “new rights” who do not tolerate that people in their right mind may voluntarily decide to join high-demand groups, knowing that they should respect certain rules. These powerful cultural and social movements do not like religion in general, but they become particularly incensed when a religion disciplines those in its ranks who have breached its rules.

While these four groups harass and persecute a number of different religions, Scientology incurred the hostility of a fifth group, which is among the most powerful lobbies on the planet. The financial resources at its disposal are virtually limitless. It is the pharmaceutical lobby. Scientologists likes to mention psychiatry as the source of their troubles, and certainly Scientology’s criticism of psychiatrists in general created powerful enemies. However, I would respectfully suggest that, as much as some of them may have tried to prevent the growth of Scientology in its early years, today psychiatrists are rarely a united front, have different opinions on many subjects, and have both less power and less to lose from Scientology’s campaigns than some pharmaceutical companies.

Consider that Scientology is opposed to the use of psychiatric drugs, and that the corresponding market was evaluated at more than \$27 billion in 2020. Since prescriptions of psychiatric drugs boomed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and many became addicted to them, some expect that their sales will reach \$40 billion by 2025 (GlobalData 2020).

We should perhaps pause and read these figures again. Everybody who becomes a Scientologist will opt out of this market. And will try to persuade others that psychiatric drugs are harmful. Everybody who ever enters a Scientology building or attends a Scientology event will be exposed to the argument that psychiatric drugs are bad for him, her, and the world in general. Worse, from the point of view of those who sell these products, Scientologists such as Tom Cruise are opinion leaders, and when interviewed they often speak out against psychiatric drugs. As one columnist argued, trying to dismiss Cruise’s arguments by just offending Scientology did not really work out (Navarrete 2005).

We can suspect that these companies are not attacking Scientology because they have been persuaded by some journalists, or to protect the rights of ex-members “disconnected” from their former friends and relatives. What they are protecting is a \$27-billion market, not to mention the fact that Scientology suggests moderation in consuming both prescription and over-the-counter drugs in general. And, since the COVID may almost double the psychiatric drugs market, perhaps we can guess that they are currently increasing their support for anti-Scientology efforts as well.

More generally, what Scientology does is to offer alternative techniques to solve problems normally our medicalized society tries to address with drugs. When these techniques succeed, there is no further need to buy drugs. This does not endear Scientology to pharmaceutical companies.

Indeed, the coalition of those opposing Scientology is so impressive that the fact that it managed to survive is the best evidence that it is a stable organization, in which many have found a new, meaningful way of living they are prepared to defend at the cost of significant sacrifice. It is the best proof that it is not a “fringe” religion.

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