

Book Reviews

Kent, Stephen A., and Susan Raine, eds. *Scientology and Popular Culture: Influences and Struggles for Legitimacy*. Santa Barbara (California): Praeger, 2017. 373 pages. Hc. \$ 58.00. ISBN: 078-1-4408-3249-9.

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The interaction with popular culture is crucial for Scientology. L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986) certainly contributed to popular culture through his fiction and music. Scientology celebrities such as Tom Cruise and John Travolta are part of popular culture. And popular culture, from comics to cartoons, include frequent references to Scientology. As both the president of something called CESPOC, the Center for Studies on Popular Culture (as well as a lifelong collector of pulps and dime novels), and a scholar of Scientology, I welcome the idea of an edited book on Scientology and popular culture. I wished I had thought of it myself. Unfortunately, despite a couple of good articles, the book edited by Stephen Kent and Susan Raine fails to deliver what the title promises. Rather than a study of Scientology and popular culture, it is largely a summary of Kent’s decade-old anti-Scientology obsessions. Kent has become somewhat proverbial among scholars of new religious movements for his obsessive crusade against the Church of Scientology. While he has been able to recruit to it some younger disciples, his claims have become increasingly bizarre, as evidenced by his recent statement that Scientology “faces extinction” (McMaster 2018). This may well be Kent’s dearest wish, but the claim looks quite ridiculous in view of the progress of Scientology in Italy and other countries.

Susan Raine has emerged in recent years as Kent's most loyal disciple. Not surprisingly, she parrots her mentor's theory in the introduction to the book, repeating that "the long-term future of Scientology appears to be tenuous" and that "its membership likely is floundering" (xvii: "likely" meaning that she has no real evidence of this). She also believes that Scientology may not be considered a religion because of its campaigns against psychiatry (xiv): by the same standard, one could easily argue that Catholicism is not a religion because of its campaigns against abortion. Raine's introduction is a confession of sort that the book was assembled with the aim of harming Scientology. She states that attacks against Scientology "have been the consequences of Scientology's own actions" (viii). No doubt Scientology made its own mistakes but, again, this is similar to arguing that Christianity's persecution was the Christians' fault, an egregious way of blaming the victims.

A problem with the book is that Raine's appears grossly unfamiliar with Hubbard's and Scientology's contributions to popular culture. She writes that Hubbard's pulp fiction is held "in low regard" by "contemporary critics," with a note confusing Hubbard's early short stories with his late science fiction books (xii). I do not remember having met Raine at any major pulp fiction or dime novel convention. I don't know if she reads or collects Hubbard's pulp fiction, or pulps and dime novels in general. My own collection has been called in trade publications the largest in the world, and I can assure her that the prices commanded by magazines including Hubbard's early stories are among the highest in the field—not because Scientologists collect them: in fact, I met several collectors who share Kent's opinion of Scientology, yet regard Hubbard as one of the greatest contributors to American pulps magazines.

Raine also claims that the meager chapter in the book about Scientology and the visual arts is "the first scholarly work to examine the artwork of Scientology" (xxiii). I am certainly not surprised that Kent does not recommend to his disciples to read my own work, but the claim ignores my long entry "Scientology and the Visual Arts" in David Bromley's *World Religions and Spirituality Project*, which is after all the largest international online encyclopedia of religious movements (Introvigne 2017).

Raine's chapter on the relationship between Hubbard's science fiction and the OT levels of Scientology revamps her previous articles on the subject. She adds a comment on the relationship between science fiction and colonialism, and

states that “sectarian and cultic religions” took advantage of American (neo-)colonialism to spread internationally, mentioning the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Mormons as examples (6). The thesis is common in Russian justifications for “liquidating” religions the government does not like, but what is claimed here is unclear. In the case of both the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Scientology, declassified files now prove that the CIA and other American agencies spread *negative* information about them for years. One can equally argue that American imperialism was at work *against* new religions.

Raine also imported from Kent a serious methodological problem. Like Kent, she mentions in her texts as if they were unquestionably by Hubbard statements only attributed to him in anti-Scientology sources. For instance, Raine “proves” Hubbard’s imperialistic attitudes with this rather impressive quote:

All men shall be my slaves. All women shall succumb to my charms. All mankind shall grovel at my feet and not know why (17).

One hopes that even Kent would teach his students to always check the notes. They would discover here that the only source for this quote is Bent Corydon’s aggressive anti-Hubbard book (Corydon 1987, 58).

Sandwiched between anti-Scientology tirades in vintage Kent style are two chapters that would have deserved better company. Hugh Urban proposes an interesting comparison between Hubbard and Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844–1900). Hubbard’s aesthetics, Urban argues, culminates in the idea of the artist’s life as the supreme work of art. This is relevant for the Scientology religion, as the *thetan* went far beyond Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, and

Hubbard articulated what is arguably the boldest and most radical formulation of the idea that we can in fact create our own realities (45).

In fact, Urban concludes,

Scientology is perhaps best understood as a religion of the *author*, a religion based on a profound faith in the ability of the individual to *write his own story*, to imagine his own universe, and to become all powerful within that universe (46).

Stefano Bigliardi examines the ten volumes of Hubbard’s science fiction “decalogy” *Battlefield Earth*, and proposes an accurate reconstruction of the architecture, development, and main characters of the work, placing it within the larger framework of both Hubbard’s fiction and Hubbard’s thought. To his credit, Bigliardi does not follow Raine’s dictum that anything by Hubbard should be bad

by definition. He quotes the more balanced comment by German scholar Mario Frenschkowski, that Hubbard as a fiction writer may be

overrated by Scientologists but [he is] also much underrated by critics who read him only with the glasses of antipathy against Scientology (66; see Frenschkowski 1999, 6).

The book collects quite a few of these bespectacled critics, as evidenced by Mark Evans' chapter on music, although he at least admits that his dislike of Scientology might have influenced his musical judgment.

Unfortunately, the relief provided by the chapters by Urban and Bigliardi proves to be short-lived. Immediately, the reader is hit by no less than three consecutive chapters by Kent, with all his usual jargon that one is surprised to find in a book published by a scholarly press in 2017, after decades of scholarly criticism. Celebrities are indoctrinated by Scientology, an organization that uses "brainwashing" (89), and become "deployable agents" (81). Scientology also fosters among celebrities "an inflated feeling of self-importance" (103), although probably Tom Cruise didn't need Scientology for this. Happily, some of the celebrities see the light, leave Scientology, and join the anti-cult bandwagon. One can smile at Kent's infatuation with Leah Remini, but taking her book and show as a serious source of information about Scientology seems excessive even for a veteran anti-Scientology activist.

A certain Tami M. Bereska examines the image of Scientology in Hollywood's and mainline TV's shows, fiction, and interviews, and concludes that it is invariably "constructed as a fraudulent, foolish, untrustworthy, and potentially dangerous Other" (207). This is only slightly exaggerated, but might have lead a more astute observer to ask what interests exactly Scientology disturbed to generate such a reaction. Instead, Bereska blames the victim, as is disturbingly usual in this book. Terra Manca (apparently, a real name, although it sounds very much like one of Hubbard's fictional characters) and Max Halupka offer more of the same on TV series and the Internet respectively.

Unlike "Terra Manca," the less poetic "George Shaw" is a pseudonym. He (or she) teams with Raine in producing the strangest chapter of the volume. Anti-cult enterprises often recruit the lunatic fringe and, no matter where they start from, frequently end up with proposing conspiracy theories. The chapter by Shaw and Raine claims to be a discussion of Hubbard's and Scientology's relations with the visual arts, but it isn't. Hubbard's rich aesthetics is liquidated in a few sentences. Instead, the chapter examines the drawings of Canadian painter and

Scientologist, Richard Borthwick Gorman (1935–2010), used for the new covers of several Hubbard’s books in 1968. The authors claim that Gorman and Hubbard conspired to “generate subliminal responses trying to illicit [sic] positive representations of the group” (313), inter alia producing a confusion between Scientology and Christianity among the readers—or perhaps those of them completely unfamiliar with Scientology. Interestingly, Shaw and Raine misspell “elicit” as “illicit.” It would be unfair to blame Praeger’s sloppy proofreading on the authors, if it was not for the fact that they mentions elsewhere that Gorman’s artwork wanted to “illicit (...) the desired emotional—and then, behavioral—response” (309) and that, as the book’s editor, Raine carries some responsibility for sentences such as “adequate to illicit emotional impact” (338) and “in order to illicit emotional responses” (340) in Evans’ subsequent chapter on music.

Since the authors believe in subliminal messages as a form of brainwashing through texts and images, perhaps they are trying, through what may appear to the uninitiated as simple, if persistent, typos, to reiterate subliminally the intent of their book. They want to persuade their readers that Scientology and its artistic endeavors are something “illicit,” both morally and legally, and that governments that repress them should be applauded. Fighting the Church of Scientology and working with those who want to suppress it, as a court expert or a collaborator with governments that try to act against Scientology, has been for decades an important part of Kent’s activities. Whether respectable scholars should want to be involved in all this by adding their names to Kent’s enterprises is a different question altogether.

References

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Aldo Natale Terrin, *Scientology. Libertà e immortalità*. Brescia: Morcelliana, 2017. 288 pages. Pb. € 22. ISBN: 8837231199.

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When dealing with new religious movements, criticism and reservations are often expressed with particular regard to the Church of Scientology. Aldo Natale Terrin, an Italian scholar of international fame, Emeritus Professor of Anthropology of Religion and of Pastoral Liturgy at Padua's College of Saint Giustina, answers this criticism seriously, and with a large documentation, in this important work. The volume summarizes the history and doctrine of Scientology. The vast bibliography demonstrates that Terrin has used a rich array of documentary evidence. A critical phenomenological method is adopted without prejudices and with a balanced perspective.

The first part of the book shows that Scientology is a religion—more precisely, Terrin argues, it is “a church”—in that it shares the key characteristics common to all religions:

1. A set of beliefs affirming the existence of a world beyond this one;
2. An organized community, which communicates these beliefs;
3. A recognized authority, which is the source of truth;
4. Ceremonial practices; and
5. An “ethical-moral” view of life.

Terrin emphasizes that the founder himself of Scientology, L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986), in his 1954 *Phoenix Lectures*, when comparing Tao, Dharma, and Buddhism with spiritual knowledge, claimed that Scientology was the true realisation of Eastern religious philosophies, as well as a religion in line with the great leaders of Western spirituality such as Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. In the 1960s and 1970s, Hubbard insisted on the “religious” nature of Scientology. In a letter from those years, he enjoined the staff to wear ecclesiastical vestments like those of traditional churches. Places of worship, he instructed, should give prominence to the church’s *Credo* and the symbol of the cross. At the same time, he wrote a book about Sunday services and other rituals for church ministers. In 1970, the book of prayers and sermons was published, and no less important was the birth of the journal *Advance!*, whose early issues were dedicated to a comparison of Scientology with other great world religions such as Judaism, Jainism, Shintoism, and others. The conclusion was that Scientology was not only a religion, but the fulfillment of the spiritual quest implied by all these faiths.

The most significant aspects analyzed in Terrin’s study refer to how close Scientology is, on the one hand, to gnostic religions and, on the other, to Hinduism and Buddhism. Scientology does not belong to the category of “religions of salvation.” They are based on the presence of a Saviour who demands the loyalty of the faithful and on the acceptance of beliefs necessary for achieving salvation, spiritual gifts, and the solution of personal problems. Rather, Scientology is a gnostic religious form, which proposes an itinerary of consciousness through different stages. Through them, one obtains both spiritual self-awareness and awareness of the divine. Furthermore, salvation (as in all gnostic forms) comes about through liberation from an original fall. This occurred, according to Scientology, when the spirits (*thetans*) fell into a universe composed of *Matter, Energy, Space* and *Time*—whose reality is, however, only apparent and the fruit of ignorance.

Hubbard himself recognized the relations between Scientology and the Orient, to the extent that it has been defined as a kind of “technological Buddhism” (Flinn 1983, 89). Terrin also makes reference to the use of the E-meter device and to analytical techniques used by Scientology to purify the individual’s mind, making it “clear.” These features, according to Terrin, are reminiscent of concepts in the Hindu tradition, where salvation and health are acquired thanks to awareness and rebirth into a status no longer conditioned by past lives. Terrin

finds it significant that this model reminds us of the Hindu dissociation of *purusha* (the immortal spirit) and *prakrti* (matter) and the idea that the world is not real and is believed to be real and permanent only as a result of ignorance. Suffering, both in Hinduism and in Scientology, is in turn caused by humankind's attachment to the material world.

Thus Scientology's relation with the Orient seems to be neither improvised nor instrumental: on the contrary, Terrin insists, Scientology's doctrines appear as "permeated" by the whole Eastern world. Among others, Terrin finds a genuine Oriental flavor in concepts such as "past lives," *thetans* (close to the *atman* idea), the (Buddhist) vision of spiritual freedom as the highest level humans can achieve, and the sense of unconditional liberty of the *thetan* after it has achieved salvation. "One might say that without its links to the Eastern world, Scientology would no longer be Scientology. One could even say that the call of the East is a *conditio sine qua non* of Scientology's very doctrine" (51).

Terrin sees here also the reason for Scientology's success. It offers an answer to the widespread aspiration to an *individual* truth and to a feeling of clarity and illumination that many believe is no longer found in traditional religions.

References

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