

Introduction: The Pen Is Mightier than the Sword

The Journal of CESNUR

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ABSTRACT: Violent incidents where Scientologists were attacked (and one killed, in Sydney) may have been caused inter alia by inflammatory anti-Scientology statements by certain media, and confirm that sensationalist accounts of “cults” may indeed generate violence. On a more positive note, sober scholarly assessments of Scientology are increasingly being published. This issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* salutes and documents a new season of Scientology studies.

KEYWORDS: Scientology, Church of Scientology, Anti-Cult Movement, Sydney Scientology Stabbing, CESNUR.

Words that Kill

On January 3, 2019, a teenager entered the premises of the Church of Scientology in Sydney, Australia, to express his dissatisfaction that his mother was participating in Church activities there. While he was being escorted out of the building, he stabbed to death a Taiwanese Scientologist, Yeh Chih-Jen (1994–2019), and seriously wounded another (Duffin 2019; *ABC News* 2019). One may speculate that sensationalist anti-cult accounts of Scientology may have played a role in motivating the violent actions of the teenager and persuading him his mother was in danger.

It was not the first time that this happened. Scientology has published documents about several attacks or attempted attacks against its buildings and leaders. In Los Angeles, a man attacked the Scientology headquarters by throwing a hammer through a plate glass window and claiming he wanted to assassinate the Church’s leader, David Miscavige. In Austin, Texas, a woman crashed her car into the lobby of the local Church of Scientology. The

perpetrators of both crimes claimed they had been persuaded by TV shows, particularly *Leah Remini: Scientology and the Aftermath* by actress and former Scientologist Leah Remini, that Scientology is evil and concerned citizens should take the law into their own hands to stop it. Some may doubt the veracity of these incidents, as they have been reported in websites operated by the Church of Scientology itself. However, these websites quote and offer photographic reproductions of police reports and other official documents (Church of Scientology International 2018).

As British esoteric novelist Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803–1873) stated first in 1839 (although the paternity of the quote had been spuriously attributed to several other sources), in some cases “the pen is mightier than the sword.” Nothing about Scientology is neutral. The very mention of its name elicits passionate attacks and equally passionate defenses. Sensationalist criticism may be irresponsible and become the cause of actual violence. In this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*, we offer a review of one such incendiary journalistic book, *Nella setta*, published in Italy in 2018, a textbook example of anti-cult journalism with an agenda. And Russian scholar Boris Falikov reviews the book by an “apostate” anti-cultist, a government anti-cult commissioner in Austria who became so critical of Austrian and German official anti-Scientology activities that he quit his job and started writing exposes.

Words that Help

The Journal of CESNUR devoted to Scientology issue 2 of its volume 2 in March–April 2018. Why a second issue on the same topic? First, we had to leave out from our 2018 issue valuable contributions for reasons of space, but still wanted to publish them. Second, some of our articles generated responses and criticism. One of our authors, Ian Camacho, asked to answer those directed to his article. Third, in the short span of nine months, significant progress was made in the field of the scholarly study of Scientology.

In our 2018 issue, we noted that, although exceptions existed, most books and articles on Scientology focused on either controversies and court cases or the celebrities who are members of the Church. We suggested it was great time for Scientology Studies 2.0, focusing on the theology of Scientology and the reasons it attracts ordinary people, not the likes of Tom Cruise only.

Two significant contributions did not inaugurate the time of Scientology Studies 2.0, as something in this vein had been published before, but signaled an important progress. The first was the book by Donald Westbrook, *Among the Scientologists: History, Theology, and Praxis* published by Oxford University Press in late 2018. As Gordon Melton notes in his review, the book focuses on the “ordinary Scientologists,” who are not movie stars or well-known musicians, are not involved in court cases about Scientology, do not write books on their experiences in the Church, yet constitute the overwhelming majority of its members. Never before had Scientology been described by a scholar through the eyes of these ordinary members. Yet, without such study, one can write hundreds of pages about the celebrities, the controversies, and the court cases only to realize at the end of the book that the essential about Scientology has been left out. Nobody really joins Scientology because Tom Cruise is a member, and we doubt they join for the masochistic pleasure of being part of a group demonized by sensationalist media. While the latter focus on a few dissatisfied members who left and turned into vocal critics of Scientology, Westbrook gives voice to the voiceless, the many happy members who stay.

Some Scientologists have tried to offer answers to the same questions, most notably Éric Roux in his French book *Tout savoir sur la scientologie*, which also appeared in 2018. Although Roux’s book is interesting for scholars too, it is an emic insider account, while Westbrook is obviously not a Scientologist.

The second relevant event of 2018 was the long participant observation in Los Angeles of the life of the same “ordinary Scientologists,” as well as of some with positions of leadership in the Church, by senior French scholar Bernadette Rigal-Cellard, which followed her long familiarity with Scientology in France. We are happy to publish her detailed report, almost a small book in length, which usefully complements Westbrook’s.

We do not ignore controversies, though. Some of them focus on the practice of “disconnection,” the shunning of apostate ex-members and other critics of the Church by Scientology devotees, including their relatives who remain in the movement. It is a delicate matter, and it is important to reconstruct the history of the practice within Scientology, sorting out fact from fiction. Massimo Introvigne offers a detailed study of Scientology’s foundational texts about disconnection. He also observes that similar practices exist in other religions as well, where

sometimes they are discussed in less heated terms than when they are found in Scientology.

This somewhat connects the two themes of the issue, the words that generate violence and the words that help understanding. More often than not, the same or similar practices are found in Scientology and in other religions, yet they are described more malevolently when Scientology is involved. It is an obvious example of the anti-cult prejudice and intolerance. The aim of this issue is to further contribute to a dialogue where difficult themes about Scientology may be freely and soberly discussed, without refraining from examining controversial aspects but remembering at the same time that sensational, inflammatory fake news may generate real violence.

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