

Disconnection in Scientology: A “Unique” Policy?

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ABSTRACT: In the 1960s, L. Ron Hubbard identified a main obstacle in the progress of Scientology in the Suppressive Persons (SPs), i.e. hostile apostate ex-members and other aggressive critics. He labeled Scientologists in regular touch with SPs as “Potential Trouble Sources” (PTS) and elaborated a series of practices for solving the problem. The most controversial was “disconnection,” i.e. the suggestion that PTS cut all ties and communication with SPs, even when the latter were their spouses or relatives. Disconnection as a policy was discontinued in 1968, but reinstated between 1973 and 1983. Contrary to frequent claims by critics, Scientology’s disconnection is not a unique practice, and in fact finds parallels in the treatment of apostates and excommunicated and disassociated members in most old and new religions.

KEYWORDS: Scientology, Disconnection, Suppressive Persons, Potential Trouble Sources, Apostates.

Hubbard and the Notion of Suppressive Persons

The sources of the practice of disconnection in Scientology date back to the 1960s, when L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986) proposed a number of reflections on what was making the progress of Scientology more difficult than he expected. As all newly established religions, Scientology encountered external opposition from a variety of sources. Hubbard singled out these opponents who consciously tried to suppress Scientology and labeled them as “suppressive persons” (SPs):

A SUPPRESSIVE PERSON or GROUP is one that actively seeks to suppress or damage Scientology or a Scientologist by Suppressive Acts.

SUPPRESSIVE ACTS are acts calculated to impede or destroy Scientology or a Scientologist (Hubbard 1965b, 552).

These definitions were included in an HCO (Hubbard Communication Office) Policy Letter dated December 23, 1965, which in fact modified a similar Policy Letter of March 7, 1965 (originally misdated as March 1, 1965). The changes introduced are listed at the bottom of the December 23 document (Hubbard 1965b, 557).

Although some of its provisions were later cancelled, the Policy Letter of December 23, 1965, remains of crucial importance for its theoretical content. Hubbard took a grim view of the SPs and their motivations:

The real motives of Suppressive Persons have been traced to quite sordid hidden desires—in one case the wife wanted her husband’s death, so she could get his money, and fought Scientology because it was making the husband well (Hubbard 1965b, 555).

Hubbard discussed two different problems: how to handle the SPs and how to deal with the Scientologists who were influenced and manipulated by the SPs. As for the first problem, Hubbard’s letter instituted the policy of “fair game,” which would later become the source of innumerable controversies:

A Suppressive Person or Group becomes “fair game.”

By FAIR GAME is meant, may not be further protected by the codes and disciplines of Scientology or the rights of a Scientologist (Hubbard 1965b, 552).

A truly Suppressive Person or Group has no rights of any kind as Scientologists and actions taken against them are not punishable under Scientology Ethics Codes (Hubbard 1965b, 556).

There is no doubt that Hubbard regarded SPs as inherently dishonest persons, but two words in the last sentence are important. The first is “truly.” Declaring somebody “suppressive” should not be taken lightly. “A person or group may be falsely labelled a Suppressive Person or Group” (Hubbard 1965b, 556). Hubbard cautioned that,

The imagination must not be stretched to place this label on a person. Errors, misdemeanors and crimes do not label a person as a Suppressive Person or Group. Only High Crimes do so (Hubbard 1965b, 554).

By “High Crimes” Hubbard meant actions consciously aimed at destroying Scientology. It is often alleged that all those who cease to be active in Scientology are regarded as SPs. In fact, “apostates” are SPs for Scientology, but Hubbard’s concept of an apostate is similar to contemporary sociology. Not all those who leave a religion are “apostates.” Most are “leavetakers” or “defectors,” with no interest in publicly attacking the group they have left. Only those who spend

significant time criticizing their former religion are really “apostates” (Bromley 1998; Introvigne 1999).

The second key part of the sentence is that SPs have no rights *as Scientologists*. Actions against them by Scientologists are not punishable *by Scientology’s Ethical Committees*. Obviously, this does not mean that SPs (although declared not “rational”: Hubbard 1965b, 553) lose their normal rights as citizens or human beings. Nothing in the letter incites Scientologists to commit illegal acts against SPs. However, the term “fair game” was open to arbitrary interpretation and abuse, not to mention how it could be used by opponents to attack Scientology. Three years after it was introduced, the “Fair Game Law” was cancelled by another HCO Policy Letter dated October 21, 1968 (Hubbard 1968a). Not unexpectedly, however, opponents of Scientology still mention the short-lived “fair game” policy to characterize any action taken by the Church of Scientology against them.

Potential Trouble Sources and Disconnection

But what about those inside Scientology who were controlled or manipulated by the SPs? These were defined as Potential Trouble Sources (PTS). The category had been introduced before 1965, although initially with a different name. An HCO Policy Letter of October 27, 1964 referred in its title to “Troublesome Sources,” and distinguished between different categories of “Threatening Sources.” The first of ten categories concerned

Persons intimately connected with persons (such as marital or familial ties) of known antagonism to mental or spiritual treatment or Scientology. In practice such persons, even when they approach Scientology in a friendly fashion, have such pressure continually brought to bear upon them by persons with undue influence over them that they make very poor gains in processing and their interest is solely devoted to proving the antagonistic element wrong.

They, by experience, produce a great deal of trouble in the long run as their own condition does not improve adequately under such stresses to effectively combat the antagonism. Their present time problem cannot be reached as it is continuous, and so long as it remains so, they should not be accepted for auditing by any organization or auditor (Hubbard 1964, 513).

Here, the problem was solved by excluding these “Threatening Sources” from auditing. But this solution was not completely satisfactory, as it might lead to

discouraging potentially interested persons from joining or continuing in Scientology.

In the Policy Letter of December 23, 1965, Hubbard included this definition:

A POTENTIAL TROUBLE SOURCE is defined as a person who while active in Scientology or a pc [preclear] yet remains connected to a person or group that is a Suppressive Person or Group (Hubbard 1965b, 552).

The policy for handling PTS was spelled out in more details. Not only they “may receive no processing until the situation is handled” (Hubbard 1965b, 552), but they were told that, if they wished to remain in Scientology, they had to either “reform” the SPs they were in touch with, or “disconnect” from them.

A Scientologist connected by familial or other ties to a person who is guilty of Suppressive Acts is known as a Potential Trouble Source or Trouble Source. The history of Dianetics and Scientology is strewn with these. Confused by emotional ties, dogged in refusing to give up Scientology, yet invalidated by a Suppressive Person at every turn they cannot, having a PTP, make case gains. If they would act with determination one way or the other—reform the Suppressive Person or disconnect, they could then make gains and recover their potential. If they make no determined move, they eventually succumb (Hubbard 1965b, 555).

It was entirely clear to Hubbard that this may involve “disconnecting” with one’s spouse or another close relative:

[...] this Policy Letter extends to suppressive non-Scientology wives and husbands and parents, or other family members or hostile groups or even close friends. So long as a wife or husband, father or mother or other family connection, who is attempting to suppress the Scientology spouse or child, or hostile group remains continually acknowledged or in communication with the Scientology spouse or child or member, then that Scientologist or preclear comes under the *family* or *adherent* clause and may not be processed or further trained until he or she has taken appropriate action to cease to be a Potential Trouble Source (Hubbard 1965b, 555).

Hubbard’s preferred solution was dialogue: the relative or friend should approach the SP and try to “reform” her by persuading her to cease the anti-Scientology activities:

[...] the Scientologist would be well advised to fully inform the person he or she accuses of Suppressive Acts of the substance of this policy letter and seek a reform of the person, disconnecting only when honest efforts to reform the person have not been co-operated with or have failed. And only then disconnecting publicly (Hubbard 1965b, 555).

However, in the model of the 1965 letter, when efforts at reform failed, disconnection should be public:

Disconnection from a family member or cessation of adherence to a Suppressive Person or Group is done by the Potential Trouble Source publicly publishing the fact, as in the legal notices of “The Auditor” and public announcements and taking any required civil action such as disavowal, separation or divorce and thereafter cutting all further communication and disassociating from the person or group (Hubbard 1965b, 555).

Hubbard was surely conscious of the radical nature of these provisions—although the PTS always had the option of remaining in contact with the SP relative and suspend the auditing—but claimed that they were necessary for saving Scientology and, ultimately, humanity itself:

The greatest good for the greatest number of dynamics requires that actions destructive of the advance of the many, by Scientology means, overtly or covertly undertaken with the direct target of destroying Scientology as a whole, or a Scientologist in particular, be summarily handled due to the character of the reactive mind and the consequent impulses of the insane or near insane to ruin every chance of Mankind via Scientology (Hubbard 1965b, 554).

Two clarifications should be included. The first is that the most radical policies only applied when a SP was trying to suppress or destroy Scientology. The case of a SP that was hurting an individual Scientologist, without greater schemes of destroying the Church, was handled differently. According to a Policy Letter of July 19, 1965,

There are instances met with by Ethics Officers, especially in relation to husbands and wives, where there may be suppressions on individual people but not suppressive of Scientology. In such cases a ‘Separation Order’ for a specific period of time is the best action. For example, Joe S— and Mary S— are hereby placed under a Separation Order while Joe is undergoing Processing. They are to have no contact with each other during this period from (date) to (Hubbard 1965a, 605).

In this case, the safety of Scientology was not at stake, only the individual well-being of the single Scientologist. Accordingly, a temporary separation was regarded as sufficient.

The second clarification concerns the “disconnection letters” some PTS who decided to disconnect with their SPs decided to write. These letters figure prominently in the anti-Scientology literature. Scientology admitted they had been really written:

Disconnection was the action of helping persons to become exterior from circumstances or people that suppress them. At one time (between 1966–1968) this was done by formally writing a letter, which in some cases caused upsets (Church of Scientology 1978, 204).

However, writing letters of disconnection seem to have derived from overzealous PTS, or perhaps their auditors, and was contrary to Hubbard's instructions. "Publishing" the disconnection for Hubbard meant placing a legal notice in a Scientology publication or in the appropriate official venue in case of separation or divorce. Not only was writing letters not mentioned, it was explicitly discouraged. Although a short Technical Bulletin of July 20, 1966 may also be interpreted as a prohibition to write disconnection letters only until the SP had been clearly identified, it hints at Hubbard's dislike of these letters in general:

It has been revealed at Saint Hill that HGC [Hubbard Guidance Center] auditors and Review auditors are permitting their preclears to be sent through to Ethics for writing disconnection letters to any person or group which the preclear thinks to have been suppressive of him [...]. This is improper (Hubbard 1966, 166).

1968: Disconnection Cancelled

In 1968, disconnection was cancelled through a separate HCO Policy Letter published less than one month after the "Fair Game Law" had also been abolished. Hubbard wrote that, "Since we can now handle all types of cases, disconnection as a condition is cancelled" (Hubbard 1968b, 489).

This HBO Policy Letter consist of one line only, yet it had been widely discussed in controversies about Scientology. Critics maintain that the change in policy was caused by criticism in the media and by the investigation by an official Commission of Enquiry into Scientology in New Zealand, to which in fact Hubbard wrote on March 26, 1969 that,

With regard to the practice of Disconnection, I have taken this up with the Board of Directors of the Church of Scientology, and they have no intention of re-introducing this policy, which was cancelled on 15th November 1968. For my part, I can see no reason why this policy should ever be re-introduced, as an extensive survey in the English-speaking countries found that this practice was not acceptable (Snoeck 2017).

By the way, Hubbard was not inventing the "extensive survey": he had really consulted Scientologists all over the English-speaking world through a questionnaire (Snoeck 2017). But it is also true that by 1968, Hubbard believed

that Scientology was able to “handle all types of cases,” without disconnection being strictly needed.

Although some critics argue otherwise, a study of the texts produced by Scientology in the following years confirm that the practice of disconnection was in fact discontinued, and several other alternative techniques were put in place to handle the PTS. This is reflected in the second edition (1970) of Hubbard’s *Introduction to Scientology Ethics*, where previous references to disconnection were substituted by a paragraph explaining that the PTS situation should be handled through “special auditing”:

A POTENTIAL TROUBLE SOURCE is defined as a person who while active in Scientology, or while a preclear, yet remains connected to a person or group that is a Suppressive Person or Suppressive Group. Until this connection is handled by special auditing, nothing beneficial can happen. (A Potential Trouble Source is a person or preclear who “roller-coasters,” i.e., gets better, then worse. This occurs only when his connection to a suppressive person or group is unhandled and he must, in order to make his gains from Scientology permanent, receive processing intended to handle such) (Hubbard 1970, 48).

1973–1983: Disconnection Redux

Later, however, disconnection came back. An HCO Bulletin dated September 10, 1983, shows that by that date disconnection was again in place. This Bulletin includes Hubbard’s latest apology for the disconnection policy. He noted that the right to communicate also includes the right *not* to communicate:

If one has the right to communicate, then one must also have the right to not receive communication from another. It is this latter corollary of the right to communicate that gives us our right to privacy [...]

An example of this is a marriage: In a monogamous society, the agreement is that one will be married to only one person at one time. That agreement extends to having second-dynamic relations with one’s spouse and no one else. Thus, should wife Shirley establish a 2D-type of communication line with someone other than her husband Pete, it is a violation of the agreement and postulates of the marriage. Pete has the right to insist that either this communication cease or that the marriage will cease (Hubbard 1983, 447).

Apart from the Scientology jargon, Hubbard was effectively answering his critics by noting that, if there is the right to “disconnect” from one’s spouse through divorce for a variety of reasons, some of them trivial, it is unclear why a

Scientologist cannot “disconnect” from relatives or friend when they commit what, in his or her eyes, is the very serious crime of trying to destroy Scientology.

Hubbard reminds Scientologists that in 1968

disconnection as a condition was cancelled. It had been abused by a few individuals who'd failed to handle situations which could have been handled and who lazily or criminally disconnected, thereby creating situations even worse than the original because it was the wrong action (Hubbard 1983, 447).

Time, however, proved that SPs used the cancellation policy to further harm Scientology: hence, the reinstatement of disconnection. In 1983, Hubbard was ready to present the disconnection policy publicly again, and to defend it as part not only of freedom of religion, but of basic human rights:

We cannot afford to deny Scientologists that basic freedom that is granted to everyone else: the right to choose whom one wishes to communicate with or not communicate with.

It's bad enough that there are governments trying, through the use of force, to prevent people from disconnecting from them (witness those who want to leave Russia but can't!).

The bare fact is that disconnection is a vital tool in handling PTSness and can be very effective when used correctly.

Therefore, the tech of disconnection is hereby restored to use, in the hands of those persons thoroughly and standardly trained in PTS/SP tech (Hubbard 1983, 447–48).

Hubbard also reiterated that disconnection in most cases is not needed, as most PTS situations can be handled through auditing. Experience, however, had taught Scientology that the disconnection policy could not be eliminated completely, although it should be implemented within the strict limits of the laws of the land:

The technology of disconnection is essential in the handling of PTSes. It can and has saved lives and untold trouble and upset. It must be preserved and used correctly.

Nothing in this HCOB shall ever or under any circumstances justify any violations of the laws of the land. Any such offense shall subject the offender to penalties described by law as well as to ethics and justice actions (Hubbard 1983, 449).

But when had disconnection being reintroduced, exactly? The matter is controversial. A possible date is 1973, as on August 10 of that year, “disconnect” was mentioned in passing in an HCO Bulletin about PTS:

There are two stable data which anyone has to have, understand and know are true in order to obtain results in handling the person connected to suppressives.

These data are:

1. That all illness in greater or lesser degree and all foul-ups stem directly and only from a PTS condition.
2. That getting rid of the condition requires three basic actions: A. Discover. B. Handle *or disconnect*.

Persons called upon to handle PTS people can do so very easily, far more easily than they believe. Their basic stumbling block is thinking that there are exceptions or that there is other tech or that the two above data have modifiers or are not sweeping. The moment a person who is trying to handle PTSs gets persuaded there are other conditions or reasons or tech, he is at once lost and will lose the game and not obtain results. And this is very too bad because it is not difficult and the results are there to be obtained (Hubbard 1973, 209, emphasis added).

This is just a passing reference to the possibility that a PTS may “disconnect” from a SP, but it is also true that the fact that disconnection had been abolished in 1968 was not mentioned nor reiterated here.

Critics contend that in fact disconnection was introduced in 1973, although without public announcements. They mention an HCO Policy Letter of September 15, 1973. They claim it was marked “confidential,” and it is not published in the official collections. The letter has been repeatedly posted on the Web by critics of Scientology (see e.g. Suppressive Person Defense League 2018).

The style looks like Hubbard’s, but its authenticity cannot be conclusively confirmed. The letter notes that, “‘Handle or disconnect’ is part of current procedure on handling Potential Trouble Sources, as per HCO B 10 August ’73, ‘PTS Handling.’” Of course, the August 10 Bulletin is a genuine document, and it did mention disconnection in passing. The more dubious September 15, 1973 letter insisted that “the practice of publishing or writing disconnection letters to the person concerned” was still forbidden, “any misemotional or accusative disconnection letters or actions should be avoided,” and “a large percentage of cases will completely resolve” without any need to resort to disconnection.

However, in this document disconnection was presented as a practice effectively reinstated, although as an exception to be used “in very few cases” and without undue publicity:

A person can simply decide to disconnect and be disconnected from that moment on.

In some cases, the item found may be dead, and the person has no other choice but to disconnect. In that event, the person simply disconnects then and there, in the Ethics

Officer's office, or in session. No other action is required. Some may wish to write up a statement of such which is simply filed in his ethics file, with no other action taken. It is not mailed to anyone.

There is no way to establish beyond doubt whether this letter is genuine. However, the August 10, 1973 Bulletin confirms that in that year Hubbard was at least considering reinstating disconnection, and by 1983 that this had indeed happened had been officially confirmed.

A Comparative Approach to Disconnection: (1) State Monopoly Religions

Critics contend that disconnection is a unique, cruel feature of Scientology. Spouses, children, siblings, and parents are compelled to cease communication with their relatives, if they want to remain in Scientology. Anti-cultists claim that disconnection is a typical feature of “cults,” something distinguishing them from genuine religions. In Russia, the Supreme Court identified in 2017 the practice of discouraging communication with relatives who have left the movement or have been “disfellowshipped” as one of the features of “extremist” groups, which may be “liquidated” and banned under the legal provisions against “extremism.” Although similar accusations have been made in Russia against the Church of Scientology, the 2017 case concerned the Jehovah's Witnesses (Introvigne 2017).

After the 2017 Russian decision of “liquidating” the Jehovah's Witnesses, there has been an international flourishing of books and even movies criticizing their practices connected with “disfellowshipping.” This had always been a key theme in anti-Witnesses literature. However, one may also wonder whether the proliferation of international attacks against the Witnesses' disassociation practices exactly after Russian propaganda started targeting them is simply coincidental.

The comparison between Jehovah's Witnesses and Scientology with respect of “disconnection,” often proposed in Russia, is somewhat misleading. Jehovah's Witnesses have a practice of “withholding fellowship” from “disfellowshipped” members (the term “shunning” is used mostly by critics). Maintaining and withholding fellowship is based on traditional Protestant notions of heresy and sin (Chryssides 2008, 42–3 and 124), which are not found in Scientology. Hubbard did not believe that God's wrath mandated separation from the heretics. His

theory and policy of disconnection were based on practical rather than theological considerations. Hubbard wanted to protect Scientology and the possibility of individual Scientologists to progress rather than a cosmic purity threatened by the danger of sin.

The argument that disconnection-like policies are unique to new religious movements or “cults” is, in general, false. Insisting on it betrays a fundamental ignorance of religious history. Measures against apostates and “disconnection” from them exist in most traditional religions. What is found in Scientology or among the Jehovah’s Witnesses—and the respective rationales are, as we have seen, different—is part of a model that followed the disestablishment of state churches and religions. The pre-disestablishment model was (and is, since it has not disappeared), if anything, much harsher.

In the Abrahamic religion, the apostate is traditionally seen as inherently evil (the ultimate “suppressive person,” in Hubbard’s term). That a true believer should not associate with apostates is a matter of course. However, in societies where religion and state are not separated, there is not so much insistence on how *individuals* should “disconnect” from apostates, because the problem *is delegated to the secular arm of the state*. It is the state that should punish the apostates and prevent them from associating with good believers, including their relatives. The quickest and most effective solution is to execute the apostate.

A key text influencing all the abrahamic religions is *Deuteronomy* 13:6–16:

If anyone secretly entices you—even if it is your brother, your father’s son or your mother’s son, or your own son or daughter, or the wife you embrace, or your most intimate friend—saying, “Let us go worship other gods,” whom neither you nor your ancestors have known, any of the gods of the peoples that are around you, whether near you or far away from you, from one end of the earth to the other, you must not yield to or heed any such persons. Show them no pity or compassion and do not shield them.

But you shall surely kill them; your own hand shall be first against them to execute them, and afterwards the hand of all the people. Stone them to death for trying to turn you away from the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. Then all Israel shall hear and be afraid, and never again do any such wickedness.

If you hear it said about one of the towns that the Lord your God is giving you to live in, that scoundrels from among you have gone out and led the inhabitants of the town astray, saying, “Let us go and worship other gods,” whom you have not known, then you shall inquire and make a thorough investigation. If the charge is established that such an abhorrent thing has been done among you, you shall put the inhabitants of that town to the sword, utterly

destroying it and everything in it—even putting its livestock to the sword. All of its spoil you shall gather into its public square; then burn the town and all its spoil with fire, as a whole burnt offering to the Lord your God. It shall remain a perpetual ruin, never to be rebuilt.

In ancient Israel, the apostate, who had betrayed the religion and the people, and those opposed to the faith had to be exterminated. Later, the Jews lost their political power and became a persecuted minority. The execution of the apostate was replaced by rituals and practices enacting his or her symbolic “death.” The community, including the close relatives, regarded the apostate as dead. The apostate was mentioned by using the language usually reserved for the deceased persons, a very effective kind of “disconnection.” Talmudic Judaism had the notions of *niddui*, a less severe form of social isolation, and *herem*, which was more radical. The apostate, as well any other subject to *herem*

had to live in confinement with his family only, no outsider being allowed to come near him, eat and drink with him, greet him (...). After his death his coffin would be stoned, if only symbolically by placing a single stone on it (Cohn 1996, 351).

This was a symbolic and posthumous execution. In post-Talmudic law, the fate of those subjected to *herem* became worse, “the Talmudic provisions being regarded as a minimum” that was often deemed not to be enough. The apostate or banned member of the community was regarded as a non-Jew, which “amounted (...) to civil death; and indeed, it is said that a man on whom a *herem* lies can be regarded as dead.” The dissident Jews known as Karaites had a similar saying for the person subjected to *herem*: “In short, we must treat him [sic] as if he were dead” (Cohn 1965, 354). Traces of this practice survive to this very day in some ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities (Cohn 1965, 365).

There is a large literature about apostasy in Islam. Although the relevant text of the *Quran* may be subject to different interpretation, and today there are liberals insisting that execution is not mandatory (Saeed and Saeed 2017), the opinion that apostates from Islam should be killed is still widespread. Several Islamic states maintain laws considering apostasy from Islam a crime to be punished by the death penalty. Authoritative theologians consider killing an apostate relative a virtuous deed.

Some liberals, and the dissident Ahmadi Muslims (who are themselves regarded as apostates and persecuted by mainline Muslims in Pakistan and elsewhere), try to argue that death penalty for the apostates was never really taught by Islam. As historian David Cook noted, their efforts are politically

“laudable” and may even save some lives, but are historically untenable. Cook states that “it is really amazing (...) to note the ease with which they ignore the weight of the entire Muslim legal tradition.” “The accepted punishment for apostasy from early stages of Islam was death.” It is true that the penalty was not applied with the same regularity in different times and regions. However,

This attitude has been strengthened immensely over the centuries to the point where even when modern Arab or Muslim states abolish the death penalty for apostasy, it is usually enforced by the enraged populace (Cook 2006, 276–77).

This is not only a position of the past. On June 16, 2016, in a television interview, Sheikh Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, the current Grand Imam of al-Azhar in Cairo and former president of al-Azhar University, who is both one of the highest scholarly authorities in Islam and somebody normally described as a “moderate,” explained that Islamic and Western

civilizations are different. Our civilization is based on religion and moral values, whereas their civilization is based more on personal liberties and some moral values. (...) If an apostate has left Islam out of hatred toward it, and with the purpose of acting against it—this is considered high treason, because this is a Muslim society, which has had Islam for 1,400 years and other religions for over 5,000 years. One does not have the right to... In this case, apostasy is a rebellion against society. It is a rebellion both against religion and what is held sacrosanct by society.

[Contemporary] jurists concur—and so does ancient jurisprudence—that apostasy is a crime. You could say that all jurists agree. A very few [dissent], but you could say that everybody agrees. The four schools of law all concur that apostasy is a crime, and that an apostate should be asked to repent, and that if he does not, he should be killed (al-Tayyeb 2016).

Al-Tayyeb further explained that all main Muslim legal schools agree that the apostate should be killed,

regardless of whether it is a man or a woman—with the exception of the Hanafi School, where it is said that a female apostate should not be killed. Because [for the Hanafi] it is inconceivable that a woman would rebel against her community (al-Tayyeb 2016).

Feminists would hardly be happy to escape the death penalty for this reason.

When Christianity went from persecuted minority to state religion, it quickly obtained from the Roman Emperors laws mandating the execution of those Christians who would apostatize and return to the pagan rites (*Codex Justinianus* I,11:1 and 7). Those who would induce Christians to apostatize should also be executed (*Codex Justinianus* I,7:5). If arrests and executions would be carried

out timely, there should be no risk that Christians would put their faith at danger by associating with apostates. However, to be on the safer side, the *Codex Justinianus* (I,7:3) also mandated that apostates “shall be separated from association with all other persons.”

In more recent centuries, apostates from Christianity managed to escape execution, but still they were harassed in several different ways. Apostates who had been priests were particularly singled out. As late as 1929, in its Concordat with Italy, the Catholic Church obtained from the government that “apostate” ex-priests would be prevented from teachings in all kind of state schools or “be hired or maintain any employment or job placing them in direct contact with the public” (Concordat of February 11, 1929, art. 5). This was Fascist Italy, but the provision remained in the democratic Italian Republic, was successfully defended (if through a technicality) against a challenge before the Constitutional Court in 1962 (Corte Costituzionale 1962) and was finally abolished only in 1984 (Dalla Torre 2014, 84).

The Orthodox practice was very similar to its Catholic counterpart, which is not surprising, given the common roots in the post-Constantinian legal tradition of Rome and Byzantium. The authoritative Russian *Orthodox Encyclopedia*, discussing the practice of *anathema*, compares it to *herem* in Judaism, and reminds its readers that *anathema* is different from excommunication. While the excommunicated person is excluded from certain rituals but is still regarded as a member of the Church and is not shunned, those anathematized are completely cast off from the Church and should be “avoided” by all believers. It is by no means a practice of the past. The *Orthodox Encyclopedia* mentions the recent cases of dissident priest and human rights activist Gleb Yakunin (1936–2014) and of Patriarch Filaret of Kiev (b. 1929), very much in the news recently as the founder of an autocephalous Ukrainian Orthodox Church separated from the Patriarchate of Moscow, and of those associating with “cults and sects,” including Theosophy and Spiritualism (Maksimovich 2008, 274–79).

Similar practices exist or existed among several Hindus and Buddhist communities, as well as the Baha’is, as a more extended comparative study would easily demonstrate.

(2) The Protestant Disestablishment Model

Originally, Protestants were reluctant to abandon the model delegating the punishment and isolation of the apostates to the state. One can find in the writings of Martin Luther (1483–1546) principles that would later lead to the foundation of a doctrine of religious liberty. Yet, as the German Peasants’ War of 1524–1525 progressed, he asked the princes to exterminate peasants who had rejected both civil and religious authority, including his own:

they cloak their frightful and revolting sins with the gospel, call themselves Christian brethren, swear allegiance, and compel people to join them in such abominations. Thereby they become the greatest blasphemers and violators of God’s holy name, and serve and honor the devil under the semblance of the gospel, so that they have ten times deserved death of body and soul, for never have I heard of uglier sins.

Authorities should slay them, Luther said, “just as one must slay a mad dog”:

It is right and lawful to slay at the first opportunity a rebellious person, who is known as such, for he is already under God’s and the emperor’s ban. Every man is at once judge and executioner of a public rebel; just as, when a fire starts, he who can extinguish it first is the best fellow. (...) Therefore, whosoever can, should smite, strangle, and stab, secretly or publicly, and should remember that there is nothing more poisonous, pernicious, and devilish than a rebellious man (Robinson 1906, 107–8).

Some can object that Luther was dealing here with *political* rebels and his advice to the princes was not particularly unusual in these days. However, these particular rebels are singled out for merciless punishment because they are “blasphemers and violators of God’s holy name,” i.e. apostates.

When he ruled Geneva, John Calvin (1509–1564) burned at stake dissidents like Michael Servetus (1511?–1543) he had accused of apostasy (Bainton 1953). Other reformers in Switzerland did the same (Gordon 2002).

Protestant theology, however, included the potential for justifying and even mandating the autonomy of the individual believers and the separation of religion and state. As mentioned earlier, Protestants offered a unique contribution towards creating the modern theory of religious liberty. This, however, did not imply that Protestants liked apostates. They were aware of the risk that those consorting with apostates would sow the seeds of doubt and disruption in religious communities—“Potential Trouble Sources” indeed.

Protestant groups advocating the separation of church and state maintained that apostates *should not be punished by the state*, which had no business in adjudicating religious controversies. They did not leave the apostates alone, however, but *privatized the repression of apostasy*. Since the state was asked to remain out of the picture, containing the danger represented by the apostates became the responsibility of individual believers, first among them the apostate's relatives.

Today, the Amish and other heirs of the so called "Radical Reformation" are widely criticized for their practice of *Meidung*, or shunning (see e.g. Wiser 2014), which again is somewhat similar to Scientology's disconnection;

"You suddenly lose all your security and you become a goat, like a piece of dirt." (...) The practice makes some family gathering awkward. The banned person may attend but will likely be served at a separate table or at the end of a table covered with a separate tablecloth. In one case, an adult male who was shunned was excluded from the plans for his father's funeral. (...) A woman, who persisted in attending a non-Amish Bible study was placed under the ban. Although continuing to live with her Amish husband, she eats at a separate table and abstains from sexual relations. Parents must shun her adult children who are excommunicated. Brothers and sisters are required to shun each other. Members who do not practice shunning will jeopardize their own standing in the church (Kraybill 1989, 116).

Few realize that *Meidung*, when it was introduced, was regarded as a progress. The Radical Reformation championed the separation of church and state, and groups like the Amish fled to the United States precisely to affirm and enjoy religious liberty. As part of religious freedom, apostates were no longer executed, and physical violence against them was forbidden. They were free to go elsewhere and, if inclined to do so, establish new separate religious communities (Kraybill 1989, 115). The only sanction they were subjected to was shunning, i.e. disconnection from their friends and relatives, which was perhaps sad but surely better than being burned at stake or drowned in the icy waters of the Limmat river, the penalty for apostates in Protestant Zurich (Gordon 2002, 215).

With exceptions, by the 19th century American Protestantism had embraced separation of church and state as a quintessential part of the American ethos. Appeals to the state for punishment or execution of the apostates were regarded as a thing of the past, or the mark of barbarian religions contrary to the ethos of the United States. That apostates, if left unchecked, may undermine the faith of

the believers or destroy the religious communities, was still acknowledged. But dealing with apostates, and isolating them, was left to individuals and families.

Conclusion: Is Scientology “Unique”?

One may argue that, in the late 20th and in the 21st century, a second revolution of sort in dealing with apostates occurred, at least in English-speaking Christianity. Tolerance for apostates was affirmed, not only at the public but also at the private level, and disconnecting from them was no longer regarded as necessary.

This argument should be qualified. It is surely true for the more liberal form of Protestantism, but in many other communities, apostates are still shunned, including often by their relatives. Even in its *Code of Canon Law* published after the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church still punishes apostasy with excommunication (c. 1364), and excommunication involves several serious sanctions. *Anathema* is still practiced in the Orthodox Church.

The threat represented by apostates and external opponents is more dangerous for younger religions. A relative tolerance toward apostates may emerge when mainline religions feel safe and well established. It is rarely a trait of new religions, whose existence is more precarious and subject to potentially lethal attacks and persecutions. It is not surprising that religions established in the 19th century, such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses, or in the 20th, such as Scientology, maintain stricter boundaries against apostates than century-old traditions and churches. As we have seen, at one stage in 1968 Hubbard believed he could let disconnection go, but later experience taught him otherwise. As sociologist Armand Mauss noticed by studying the history of Mormonism, new religions may become persuaded at some stage that they will become more popular if they soften their harsher policies of boundary maintenance, but this in turn creates problems and they will eventually need a “retrenchment” (Mauss 1994).

Scientology is in many respects a unique religion, but no new religion emerges in a vacuum. Its policy against apostates and “Suppressive Persons” in general is, in a way, typical of the American context of Protestant ethos, religious liberty, and separation of church and state. Scientology defends the rights of the citizens against the state’s attempts to enter their personal sphere. Unlike other religious

traditions, Scientology does not ask the state to punish its apostates—unless, of course, they commit common crimes, but in this case, they should be punished for their crimes rather than for being apostates. Scientology explicitly states that SPs remain protected by the “laws of the land”—including against Scientologists (Hubbard 1983, 449).

SPs, on the other hand, are *not* protected by Scientology’s *internal* ethical rules, which was the original meaning of the “fair game” terminology until its use was discontinued. Scientologists who are in touch with SPs are PTS and they should act to protect themselves and Scientology. Acting does not necessarily mean disconnecting, but includes disconnection as a possibility and a last resort. Similar or harsher practices exist in many religions, both traditional and new.

Hubbard’s 1983 Bulletin is his last word on disconnection. In reading this text, it becomes apparent that critics complaining that Scientology’s disconnection policy violates religious liberty and human rights are off the mark. One may disagree with disconnection, but Hubbard’s argument does not imply any criticism of the American post-disestablishment religious liberty tradition. On the contrary, it radically reaffirms it. The apostate enjoys the religious liberty to apostatize *and* the Scientologist enjoys the religious liberty to disconnect from the apostate. Human beings have the right to communicate *and* the parallel right not to communicate. A husband can disconnect, divorce and cut any contact with his wife, or ex-wife, because she kept criticizing the husband himself, or his dear father, or his preferred political party, or football team—or religion. This individual freedom is not only American, but emphatically affirming it is quintessentially American at the same time. Scientology’s disconnection policy is not “unique.” Its application, as it happens with similar policies in other religions, may occasionally be harsh and painful. But most religions have provisions against associating with apostates, and young religions can hardly continue to exist without clearly maintaining their boundaries.

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