

## Book Reviews

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Donald A. Westbrook, *Among the Scientologists: History, Theology, and Praxis*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 332 pp. Hb. USD 45.00. ISBN: 9780190664978.

Reviewed by J. Gordon Melton, Baylor University, JGordon\_Melton@baylor.edu

At the time I began studying new religions some forty years ago, the Church of Scientology was among the most controversial new religious bodies in North America and Western Europe, and today maintains that status even as other groups have come and gone. It has been the subject of a number of scholarly texts (including one by myself) that explore the basics of the church's organization and its founder's thought, and even more books by angry former members exposing the church even as they invite readers to share their perspective of the real story behind all the polemics. Amid all of the focus on the church, however, it remains an enigma in many ways.

As charges that it controls and manipulates its members abound, the church welcomes a continued stream of new members into its life. Even as accusations persist that it is preaching a simplistic science-fiction based pseudo-theology, thousands of people find the church's teachings to be a meaningful explanation of their life condition and continue to be nurtured by its teachings and spiritual practices. In spite of assertions that the church is in decline, it shows new signs of substantial growth around the globe. And, as dozens of former church members offer their complaints about the church, almost no one has turned to the active church members to ask them what keeps them enthusiastic supporters.

Now, the first of a new generation of scholars has offered answers to some of the long-standing questions about the church by following an as yet largely untried (on new and alternative religions) methodology. Donald A. Westbrook has chosen to approach the church initially, not through its organization or its

texts, or its teachings, but through its members. Over a six year period, he conducted detailed interviews with literally hundreds of members, some with the church only a few years and some around from the beginning back in the 1950s, to explore how the church developed and what attracted them to it. He invites us into their lives as they experienced the church's significant changes as it transitioned from its original teachings (called Dianetics) and began to offer higher levels of attainment beyond the original highly promoted goal of "going clear;" tackled the variant experiences of going up the Bridge to new realms of personal awareness; felt the loss of its founder who passed in 1986; and coped with the church's second generation under its present head, David Miscavige.

In covering the development of the church, Westbrook gives voice to people who sat through founder L. Ron Hubbard's (1911–1986) early lectures and eagerly awaited each new series. Having experienced the personal breakthrough from Dianetics auditing (the spiritual-but-scientific counseling technique through which they explored their early memories and traumas), they would travel many miles to learn about Hubbard's latest discoveries. As they pursued their own life of keeping a job and raising a family, they enjoyed the fact that they could pursue their spiritual development at their own pace, with some moving very slowly (after decades still short of clear) and others going up the higher levels (termed OT or Operating Thetan) in just a few years.

And what made Scientology so attractive, besides its move-at-your-own-pace scheduling? Missed (or simply ignored) by most commentators is Hubbard's rather sophisticated theology, a variant of Gnostic Esotericism (the same theological tradition that informs Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism), a theology that has continually attracted people since the first century CE. Hubbard found his way to Gnostic Esotericism as a young man and began writing and creating his own version of it in the 1950s. In 1959, he offered his unique version of the Gnostic creation myth in a brief work called "The Factors." He had previously developed a reverse form of the myth in his understanding of the "Eight Dynamics," which developed a picture of the universe beginning with the individual human and reaching back to the Divine.

And as he developed his theological vision, he made three major contributions to the tradition. First, he discarded the basic spatial metaphor that had previously dominated Gnostic thought ("As above, so below") and replaced it with a temporal metaphor that begins with the first cause in the far distant past and moves forward as "beingness" becomes. Second, this changed metaphor supported a new explanation of the human condition and presented new means to transcend our mundane situation. Third, the temporal metaphor offered an

opening for Hubbard's desire and eventual claim to having found both a scientific method and the technological tools to reach the human goal of complete spiritual freedom. It should also probably be noted that in support of his theology, Hubbard also developed an ethical system that advocated both a public morality and each member's spiritual strivings within the church, an important accomplishment in spite of the possible abuse of his teachings by some members or leaders (about which the church's critics have complained).

For those interested in the church, Westbrook's approach will provide a chance to see the organization's rather steady evolution, but one punctuated by what it sees as the important events, such as the 1993 settlement of its long-term battle with the Internal Revenue Service, and to hear from members who went through these events. Reading their stories provides an open doorway into a large religious organization, overseeing a vast membership of people basically pursuing a very personal individualized path to self-awareness, freedom, happiness, and enlightenment. Members show their patience with the seemingly never ending attacks from church critics, whose charges against the church often fail to resonate with their own experience, and are given the chance to explain all that they have gained from their involvement with the church and their relationships with fellow members.

It is far from the final word on Scientology, but I would suggest that *Among the Scientologists* will supersede previous works on the church (including my own) and provide the new foundation for future explorations of what has become one of the most successful expressions of Western Gnostic Esotericism. Westbrook does not ignore the many controversies (and the critics are duly acknowledged and their works cited), but he also succeeds in contextualizing those controversies and in shining light on the very appealing spiritual path integral to the church's life, a spiritual program that has led to its international spread and its relative ongoing success.

Peter Schulte, *Die Akte Scientology: Die geheimen Dokumente der Bundesregierung*. Malters, Switzerland: PI-Verlag, Wissen und Leben GmbH, 2017. 260 pages. Pb. Euro 19.90. ISBN: 978-3-9058375-0-6.

Peter Schulte, *The Scientology File: The Secret Documents of Germany's Federal Government*. Malters, Switzerland: PI-Verlag, Wissen und Leben GmbH, 2017. 211 pages. Pb. Euro 19.90. ISBN: 978-3-9524902-1-1.

Reviewed by Boris Falikov, The Russian State University for the Humanities, falikov@yandex.ru

The author of this book, Dr. Peter Schulte, was a Commissioner for religious and ideological questions in the Federal State of Tyrol (Austria) from 1998 to 2010, a position involving dealing with “dangerous cults” in his jurisdiction and cooperating with the authorities in both Austria and the nearby German State of Bavaria. During this time, he became aware that the official policy of the German government towards new religious movements (NRMs) branded as “cults” (*Sekten*) led to their social exclusion. He decided to quit his job, and in 2012 published a book, *Neue Religiöse Bewegungen: Gesellschaftliche Dramatisierungsstrategien und soziale Wirklichkeit* (New Religious Movements: Social Dramatization Strategies and Social Realities, Hamburg: Verlag Dr Kovač, 2012), where he exposed the violations of freedom of religion, guaranteed by the German constitution, in the case of NRMs operating in Germany.

In his new book, devoted to Scientology, Schulte analyzes the history of this religion in Germany in the face of strong governmental opposition. The book is based on secret federal documents, released only recently and after fierce legal fighting. They demonstrate that the Federal Criminal Police and Germany's Office for the Protection of the Constitution long ago found Scientology mostly innocent of the accusations, but their conclusions were kept confidential while the government went on with the persecution.

Schulte's conclusion is rather sad: the public negative image of Scientology is a result of a disinformation campaign by mainline churches and government agencies. This discriminating policy brought this religion under the surveillance of Germany's domestic intelligence agency, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution. However, during almost 20 years of it, no anti-Constitutional

actions by Scientology were found. In his book, the author tries to discover the reasons of this absurd situation.

He starts with the history and development of Scientology in Germany, which spread there in the late 1960s from England, where its founder, L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986), lived at that time. The first Scientology church in Germany was founded in 1970 in Munich. A few years later, communities and churches were established in Berlin, Hamburg, Düsseldorf, Stuttgart, and Frankfurt am Main. Three major enemies quickly opposed them: the established churches (both Catholic and Lutheran), the psychiatric community, and the mass media. The mainline churches did not want any competition from a religion they considered heretical at best, and a commercial corporation who fought for religious status to avoid taxes at worst. The psychiatrists hated Scientology's fierce critique of their alleged psychic manipulations, and accused it of the same crime. The mass media loved to cover the misdeeds of the "evil cults," which were read about with great moral indignation by a wide audience and made good copy. Thus, a negative public image of Scientology started to take shape, and the government exploited it to channel public indignation, which might be otherwise directed at its own actions.

The author compares the attitude to Scientology in Germany with those in neighboring countries—Austria and Switzerland—and concludes that the former's one is more similar to Germany, while the latter's is much less negative. He doesn't go into an explanation of these phenomena, probably because he prefers to concentrate on Germany. But in my opinion, one of the reasons for it might have to do with the historic trauma that Germany and to a lesser extent Austria experienced in connection with Nazism: hence their fear of the "totalitarianism" Scientology is often (falsely) accused of. On the other hand, Switzerland never passed through this trauma and is not affected by this kind of fears.

Next, Schulte discusses the activity of four German and Austrian leaders of the anti-cult movement—Friedrich-Wilhelm Haack (1935–1991), Renate Hartwig, Ursula Caberta y Diaz, and Wilfried Handl—and carefully analyzes their respective contributions to the smear campaign against Scientology. Haack (1935–1991) was a "cult commissioner" of the Evangelical Church. In 1975, along with his wife and several other sympathizers, he founded the Parents's Initiative against Religious Extremism and Psychological Dependence.

Haack spoke of Scientology as one of

the religious multinationals that are more dangerous than ... all other extremist political groups. ... These religious multinationals were playing a game across national borders, and the individual person was completely at their mercy. Even democratic states seemed helpless against them (47: page numbers are from the English edition).

Scientology tried to answer such groundless accusations, but this was mostly in vain. Mainstream German journals like the *Spiegel* took the side of “the pastor for the spirit,” as Haack was ironically named.

Renate Hartwig was a freelance author and publicist, who put a lot of energy into the fight against Scientology in the 1990s. She said she was in possession of explosive documents, which she claimed to have received from “top-ranking ex-Scientologists,” and had forwarded them to the authorities, criminal police and public prosecutors’ offices (53). No such documents ever surfaced, but this sensational news was published by mass media and contributed to the campaign against Scientology. In the same vein, Hartwig falsely accused Scientology of an assassination attempt.

A former SPD Member of Parliament, Ursula Caberta y Diaz followed Hartwig by laying criminal charges against Scientology without a single piece of evidence.

On the basis of these charges, a permanent office—the Working Group on Scientology—was set up in Germany, and Caberta was appointed head of it. However, after several years of costly research, the charges against Scientology were dropped.

The last of the four, Austrian ex-Scientologist Wilfried Handl, went a somewhat different way. He founded and operated a private website on Scientology. Handl’s message was simple: Scientology is evil, and only a public realization of it can defeat this evil. On his website, he wrote about his personal involvement with Scientology and claimed that it harmed his life. His claims were rather subjective, but he compensated for the lack of facts with liberal high-flown rhetoric.

The fourth chapter of the book is devoted to the surveillance of Scientology by Germany’s domestic intelligence agency. Schulte analyzes the development of the surveillance process and comes to the conclusion that nearly 20 years of it did not give any tangible results. No violations of the Constitution by Scientology were found. Rather, it was the German government itself that violated the

Constitutional right to the freedom of religion, states the author. He expresses the hope that this fact will slowly be understood by the German authorities. At least,

in 2015 Lower Saxony seemed to distance itself from the need for surveillance by the domestic intelligence agency. Before that, Bremen, the Saarland, Saxony, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Brandenburg ended the surveillance. In Schleswig-Holstein, Hesse and Rhineland-Palatinate, Scientology was never placed under surveillance (123).

The final chapter of the book deals with the scholarly study of Scientology by German and foreign academics. The scholars' conclusions are very much different from the ones proposed by the anti-cultists. One can get an impression that these groups describe two different realities. While anti-cultists mostly use ideological stereotypes, scholars try to analyze proved facts. The most impressive results were discovered by a research project on the subject of manipulation of "cult members." It was ordered by the Commission of Inquiry on *Sekten* of the German Bundestag, and might have disappointed the expectations of some of the members of the Commission, adds the author with irony.

The research team came to a conclusion that: firstly, membership in a so-called sect [*Sekte*, whose most appropriate English translation is "cult"] per se had no harmful effects, and in fact it often had even a therapeutic function in the case of personal problems. Secondly, it became clear that people could leave a sect mostly without problems and without outside help. The notions that circulated in the public, namely that people are being deceived into sect membership as victims of skilled manipulation techniques and can only be freed by brutal 'deprogramming,' needed to be corrected in the light of these findings: the conversion to a religious minority must be regarded as a self-directed decision; membership can even have beneficial effects and members can exit just as freely (138).

To my mind, the existing scholarly research of Scientology is the strongest argument supporting the conclusion that it is innocent of the accusations forwarded by the German government. The opponents of Scientology are ideologically prejudiced and subjective, while scholars are not an interested party and try to reach objective conclusions. It is on their work and on official investigations previously unknown that the conclusions of Peter Schtule are based on:

Neither the binding doctrine of Scientology nor the actual conduct of their German communities give any justifiable reason to doubt their law-abidingness and respect for the German legal system. This has been repeatedly confirmed by numerous, some of them hitherto unknown, official investigations themselves of the last 20 years. On the basis of the researched facts, one inevitably comes to the conclusion that the repression of Scientology

by the state is exclusively politically determined, was influenced by the church, and is devoid of any legal or factual basis (153).

Éric Roux, *Tout savoir sur la scientologie*. Paris: Pierre-Guillaume de Roux, 2018. 192 pages. Pb. Euro 19.90. ISBN: 9782363712349.

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This is the first book in French entirely devoted to a dispassionate presentation of the Church of Scientology as a bona fide religion, by an avowed member of its clergy, Eric Roux. So far in French, apart from several book chapters by scholars, including by the current reviewer, and J. Gordon Melton's short translated book *L'Église de Scientologie* (Turin: Elledici, 2002), only Régis Dericquebourg had published extensive studies of several of its characteristics, notably its therapeutic function, in *Croire et guérir* (Paris: Dervy, 2001).

The book inaugurates a new collection "Mystères et religions," which courageously aims at opening up an editorial market in France that continuously refuses to publish scholarly essays on groups labeled as "sectes." Legal scholar Frédéric-Jérôme Pansier contributed the preface: he explains that, while he would not become a Scientologist, he finds both Scientology and the book most useful for those who wish to progress in knowledge and learn about the truth.

In the introduction, Roux quotes various scholars who have asserted that Scientology is a religion, thus clearing the path for an in-depth analysis of its functioning. Chapter 1 surveys the history of the movement, of Dianetics, and of Lafayette Ron Hubbard (LRH, 1911–1986), considered by his followers as an exceptional man and as a guide. Chapter 2 focuses on the value of the written and orally recorded corpus of LRH and the obligation for the students to study it, because it contains the whole metaphysical explanation of human existence, Scientology being a "religious philosophy" whose sole goal is to be useful to humans. The Church has massively invested in the printing, reproduction,



translations in at least half the languages of the world of LRH's scriptures, regarded as sacred by Scientologists and equal to the Bible or the Koran for other believers, and to which everyone must have easy access.

Chapter 3 defines the major doctrinal tenets: the human soul or *thetan* is the infinitely powerful spiritual being of humans, distinct from the mind and from the body. The *thetan* is the source of life itself, it is immortal, and it will animate several bodies successively. Roux compares the concept to Thomas Aquinas' (1225–1274) definition of the divine. Scientology has developed, even more than Dianetics, the postulate of the infinite goodness of humans and of the *thetan*, whose goodness has been altered by negative experiences in the physical world, thus creating what LHR termed the reactive mind. The latter is responsible for aberrations, disorders and for the incapacity of humans to see through their own nature.

Like for many other religions, the goal of Scientology is to allow individuals to master their own nature and reach total spiritual freedom, in a move reminiscent of the gnostic quest for light and knowledge, to use Dericquebourg's analysis (quoted in the book). Existence is made possible by the eight impulses of dynamics, the basic one being survival, which moves towards immortality. The first such dynamic is the impulse to survive individually, the second to survive through and for one's family, the third is to survive through and for social life, which can be a group of friends or the nation, the fourth implies survival through and for humankind, the fifth involves all forms of life, whether vegetal or animal, the sixth is the dynamic of the physical universe, the seventh, or *Theta* dynamic, implies the urge to survive as spiritual beings thanks to creative imagination etc.; the eighth is the dynamic of the infinite, of the Supreme Being or God. All these dynamics coexist in the individual, who must explore them one after the other in order to be able to discover the final one.

Roux then broaches the issue of the definition of Scientology as a theistic system or not. First, Scientology does not teach a specific dogma about God, it does not give an anthropomorphic description of the divine either, and the members are not told how to pray, yet they hold that God does exist as creator but each individual has to discover this personally. Moreover, humans themselves through mastering knowledge move closer and closer to their own divine nature, so that they can protect all the dynamics.

The full understanding of God results from the prior understanding of one's own nature. To this end, symbols have been crafted to guide the seeker, notably the eight-pointed cross that gives a new meaning to the age-old symbolism of the cross. Roux explains the elements of the symbol before moving to one of the major questions: is the movement a scientific religion? He clarifies the etymology of the word Scientology, by pointing out that "Sciento" refers to "scio," "to know" in Latin, in the general sense. The movement is first of all based on a quest that is rational more than mystical, and because of its precision it is best adapted to our present times.

Chapter 4 describes the rituals, as Scientology would not exist without a specific practice that involves the physical participation of the disciples. The first one is auditing, a true pastoral act, through which the auditor will bring the audited to discover their own past existences and be able to correct what went wrong. Roux likens this training to the spiritual exercises of Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), though the method is more codified in Scientology thanks to the technical precision of the e-meter, which is described at length.

The purification rundown completes the auditing. It is another major rite on the road to freedom, since it purifies the reactive mind and the body that have been weighed down by toxic "engrams." The purification program eliminates toxins at all levels, more or less like fasting or sweating. The last rite described here is the training to understand the scriptures and to audit other people, considered as a gift: one cannot save oneself without helping one's neighbor complete the same process. The clergy perform Sunday services, baptism or name-giving ceremony, marriages, burials, and ordinations. Scientologists will also proclaim the creed written by LRH in 1954: it performatively calls for the liberation of humans through the consent of God.

Chapter 5 discloses the training of the pastoral clergy and the conditions they have to abide by to join the general staff and the elite Sea Org, all demands resembling those of monastic communities. Chapter 6 defines the ethic code of the Church, which rests on the sense of responsibility of the individual members, who must live in constant symbiosis with, and interiorization of, the eight dynamics. Happiness can only be obtained by the mastery of one's self and emotions. Work must be oriented towards the self and the outer world. Roux defines the codes, the canonical laws Scientologists must abide by to remain

within the group. If the individuals cannot do so, the institution will help them regain their sense of mastery—or they will be expelled.

Chapter 7 describes the hierarchical structure of the Church and the statutes of its houses of worship. RTC, Religious Technology Center is the highest ecclesiastical authority whose major function is to guarantee the purity, notably through copyrights, of LRH's teachings. David Miscavige is president of its board of administration. The highest authorities are members of the Sea Org. Yet, this chapter does not deliver all the information that readers expect: one would like to know more about the exact composition and functioning of the organization. How many members does RTC include? Who are they right now in 2019? How are higher ranking members promoted, are they co-opted? Elected? Chosen by David Miscavige, and by him only? More details should be given on the members of RTC. And how many members does the clergy include? Do the lower ranks know the higher ranks?

These are questions that one keeps asking about the Church and that may have been answered more fully here. The end of the chapter broaches the other controversial issue, that of the funding of the Church. It does clarify the expenses: the courses, the ceremonies, the auditing, and so on, the price paid corresponding to the services received, the cost of maintaining the facilities etc. Though the explanations are comprehensive enough, some specific costs should have been mentioned, for example for a specific level of auditing, in order to give a more precise idea to the reader. We know the costs of book-sets can be found on the Internet but this welcome guide should give clues without forcing one to google for information.

Chapter 8 details all the foundations the Church runs: first, those to prevent drug abuse and rehabilitate drug addicts, Narconon being the most famous even outside Scientology and in France, where interestingly it obtained the not for profit statute in 2006. Follow the foundations against illiteracy, notably Applied Scholastics, and Roux explains how this foundation operates with similar ones, notably within the Christian network of the World Literacy Crusade; The Way to Happiness and all the operations to rehabilitate inmates such as Criminon; the promotion of human rights throughout the whole world; volunteer ministers involved in humanitarian and relief operations; advocacy operations to protect the freedom of religions of harassed minority groups and individuals. All these

foundations testify to the comprehensive functioning of the Church as a major religious institution.

In conclusion, Roux expresses his hopes that his little book will have served the goal he intended: helping people to know what Scientology is with as much precision as possible in order to possibly use it to improve their own condition. The book does fulfill the promise of the introduction, except for chapter 7 that specialists would like to be far more precise. However, the book was not written for scholars but for the general public, which should find it most useful for it is well-written and explanatory. It should be now in most libraries and in bookshops.

Flavia Piccinni and Carmine Gazzanni, *Nella setta*. Rome: Fandango, 2018. 368 pages. Pb. Euro 18.50. ISBN 9788860445780.

Reviewed by Massimo Introvigne, Center for Studies on New Religions, [maxintrovigne@gmail.com](mailto:maxintrovigne@gmail.com)

You know there is something wrong in a book about “cults” when it refers repeatedly to “Professor” Steven Hassan. Whoever has a minimal knowledge of this field knows that Hassan went from devotee of the Unification Church to deprogrammer without the benefit of any academic education. Those curious enough to access his LinkedIn page would learn that in 1985 he got a M.Ed. degree from Cambridge College, an obscure institution in Charlestown, Massachusetts, not to be confused with U.K.’s University of Cambridge, and plans to receive a Ph.D. in 2020 from Fielding Graduate University, an accredited school offering to professionals fast graduate courses that can be completed mostly through online learning. I am sure Hassan himself would be greatly surprised that somebody calls him a “professor.” While he is called in the book “the world’s leading expert in mental manipulation” (6), he would also agree that at least 95% of the scholars who participate in the New Religious

Movements group of the American Academy of Religion (he doesn't) would regard his theory of mind control, to put it mildly, as totally unacceptable.

This is one of many problems of the book *Nella setta* (In the Cult), written by two Italian journalists mostly specialized in organized crime, which also has some redeeming features. First, the book is admittedly entertaining. Piccinni and Gazzanni know how to write in an attractive journalistic Italian, which makes the book more readable than many other anti-cult diatribes, whose main feature is to be deadly boring. Second, the duo is, in its own way, polite. On a personal note, I am accustomed to being simply insulted by anti-cultists and here my opinions are mentioned critically but respectfully. Although, by hanging around with some bizarre Italian anti-cult characters, they did not resist to mention that I have written scholarly books and papers about vampires, as if it was something disreputable. Perhaps "Professor" Hassan has never heard about it, but vampire studies are recognized internationally as an academic discipline, and the latest scholarly compendium of the matter, by Professor Nick Groom, has just been published in October 2018 by Yale University Press.

Notwithstanding its readability, the book fails spectacularly in offering a minimally objective account of groups maligned as "cults," for four main reasons. First, Piccinni and Gazzanni offer reasonably accurate summaries of the literature produced by the movements themselves, and of what they were told when they visited, undercover, their targets. But these reports are biased on two accounts. First, they are spiced with derogatory comments revealing the author's own prejudices. In the very first account of the book, the authors enter the Milan branch of Scientology, where they are met by a young receptionist. She is immediately described as having "alligator-like" eyes coupled with "horse-like" teeth (14). Using derogatory references to the physical appearance of members to create a sinister image of a group is not good journalism, it is simply bad taste. Similar unnecessary adjectives are repeatedly used to create a sinister halo round the Italian esoteric community, Damanhur.

Secondly, key elements of the group's theologies are omitted, while secondary details are emphasized, if they can function as a tool to present the groups as unsavory and strange. As is typical of hundreds of anti-cult books, the summary of Scientology's account of human origins focuses on its esoteric teachings about primordial extra-terrestrial battles, which look strange to the uninitiated—but even more strange if they are presented out of context. The core doctrine of

Scientology, the *thetan*, is nowhere to be explained. The sexual tantric techniques of MISA, the Movements of Spiritual Inner Awareness, are discussed, but the reader does not find anywhere their center, continence, i.e. the idea that orgasm should be without ejaculation in order to achieve certain physical and spiritual benefits. And so on. Obviously, the book is not interested in explaining what the “cultists” really believe, but in showing that they are “strange” and, consequently, dangerous.

The second problem with the book is that it uses only two sources: the movement’s own literature (summarized with the biases described above) and the accounts by apostate ex-members and anti-cultists. The authors may object that they occasionally quote scholars (including the undersigned). But these references are minimal, and often come from the tiny minority of scholars who accept one or another element of the anti-cult criticism of a group. The reader ignoring the scholarly literature is never told that a very large majority of the scholars who have studied the groups mentioned in the book do not share the anti-cult perspective. And the use of anti-cult sources also accounts for tall tales and unbelievable folk statistics about four million Italians allegedly involved in dangerous “cults.”

The third problem is that the book starts with a very unclear approach to what a “cult” may be and, by the end of the volume, the matter has become even more garbled. The book insists on two Italian associations. The first is Il Forteto, an agricultural co-operative near Florence where disturbed or physically handicapped minors were sent by Italian juvenile courts to be cared for and rehabilitated. Italian court decisions have ascertained that minors were sexually and physically abused in the co-operative, whose leaders were sexual predators. While the Forteto case has largely been examined and assessed by courts of law, Mario Pianesi, the founder of the well-being and diet empire Un Punto Macrobiotico (A Macrobiotic Point), is still under investigation. He is accused of having sexually abused several women who came to learn about his miraculous diets, and even of having killed his first wife. The authors criticize the scholars for ignoring Il Forteto and Pianesi, although their groups are normally referred to as “cults” in the media. But if “cults” are religious movements gone bad, as it would seem at the beginning of the book itself, these two do not qualify, as they are obviously not religious.

Even within the limit of clearly religious practices, the authors seem not to realize that several features they see as typical of “cults” are ubiquitous in religions. As I show in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*, the practice of shunning ex-members turned critics of a religion is not found only among the Jehovah’s Witnesses or Scientology but also in the history of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Obviously, insisting for donations and collecting significant amounts of money is not a feature of “cults” only. And it seems strange to single out some new religious movements for having been involved in cases of sexual abuse, after the much larger scandals of Catholic priests.

The fourth problem in the book is that, by following mostly Internet and anti-cult sources, one necessarily makes serious mistakes. I would pass on the fact that I am described as having been “in 2016 the national regent of the Catholic Action” (235). A quick look at Wikipedia would have told the authors that in 2016 I *ceased* to be the *deputy* “national regent” of Catholic *Alliance*, a different organization from the Catholic Action. This is admittedly not important, but shows a cavalier use of the sources.

The book seems to have been hastily confectioned for two aims. The first is to give voice to a small but nasty opposition to Soka Gakkai, after the Buddhist movement signed in 2016 a concordat with the Italian Government. Horror stories of how the leader of Soka Gakkai, the internationally respected Daisaku Ikeda, consorted with criminals and Japanese mafia godfathers, are repeated uncritically, without mentioning that they have been long since debunked in Japan and elsewhere.

The second aim is to re-introduce in Italy a law against brainwashing, something very difficult after in 1981 the Constitutional Court declared similar provisions punishing “plagio” (undue influence), which dated back to the Fascist era, as incompatible with the democratic Constitution. This is a theme running through the whole book, yet the authors make a fundamental mistake on the essence of the 1981 decision. The discussion on “plagio” started in Italy when the rarely applied provision was used to send to jail the Communist author Aldo Braibanti (1922–2014), accused of having brainwashed several young men into homosexual relations with him. The book reports that the Constitutional Court “took care of the case” (352), which for the reader can only be the Braibanti case, since no other “plagio” incidents are mentioned. This is a mistake I often encountered in conversations with fellow Italians of my generation. They

remember that Braibanti was sentenced for “plagio” and they remember that in 1981 the Constitutional Court declared the corresponding legal provision unconstitutional, and they connect the two incidents. However, the truth is that the Constitutional Court refused to review the conviction of Braibanti and intervened in the later case of Father Emilio Grasso, a Catholic priest accused of “brainwashing” young people into abandoning their bourgeois life to serve the poor and the destitute.

This is accompanied by another frequent mistake, this one legal. The book argues that, by striking out the “plagio” provision, the Constitutional Court was conscious of creating a “legal void,” and suggested that a different law be enacted to cover real instances of brainwashing. In fact, the Court stated that “plagio” was an imaginary crime, and no laws are needed for crimes of the imagination.

These are not minor points. Had it mentioned Father Grasso, the book should have admitted that accusations of practicing brainwashing or being a “cult” can target also mainline religions. Father Grasso, by the way, is not a marginal priest and has been honored by several Popes, including the present one. And this leads us back to the main point. What is a “cult”? Besides “a group anti-cultists do not like,” answers appear to be very much unclear. This book is not the place where to look for them. It is occasionally entertaining, and of course mentions some real abuses, but it offers a distorted, unreliable view of most of the new religious movements it criticizes. The request by some members of the Italian Parliament that the book be taken seriously at the basis for political actions against the “cults” only shows that prejudices and ignorance about new religious movements are not the province of journalists only.