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## **The Art of H.C. Mansveld and Its Impact on the Public Perception of Dutch Spiritualism in the Period 1925–1939**

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**ABSTRACT:** Spiritualism was a movement that gained high popularity in the inter-war period. Spiritualist communities, such as the Dutch Spiritist Society, set out to find proof for the Spiritualist thesis, which holds that existence does not end with death, but continues in a world beyond our earthly one. This community included a group of art-producing mediums, and their own art movement became known as mediumistic art. Mediumistic art is a form of trance creation, based on the premise that the artist (or so was believed) channels a spirit, who uses the artist's hands as his or her own in order to create art works. The Dutch painter H.C. Mansveld was such an artist, and he was highly praised in Dutch Spiritualist circles. Mansveld, however, never gained true popularity with the general public in Holland. This, the article argues, was the result of the dogmatic attitude held by the Spiritualist community towards Mansveld's case and what it meant for the Spiritualist thesis.

**KEYWORDS:** Dutch Spiritualism, Spiritualism, Spirit Art, Mediumistic Art, H.C. Mansveld.

### *Introduction*

The Dutch Foundation Het Johan Borgman Fonds (hereafter referred to as HJBF) has initiated and has been involved in the past decade in actively archiving the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century Dutch Spiritualism, centered around the national Spiritualist society Harmonia, established in 1888. The results of this endeavor are publicly available at the Het Utrechts Archief (the city archive of Utrecht, The Netherlands), which holds over 5,600 folders with original documents, pictures, journals and booklets, dealing with all aspects of the Spiritualist movement in the Netherlands between 1890 and 2010.

Additionally, a study into the so-called “mediumistic art” was started in 2012 (Kramer 2015, Kramer 2018). Mediumistic art is often regarded as part of the *art brut* or *outsider art* movement. We, however, consider it to be a topic of its own, since it has certain distinct implications. Even though mediumistic artists are indeed “outsiders”—and not professional painters or sculptors—they have a specific purpose: to prove the existence of a world beyond our earthly one. This article is the result of an investigation on Dutch painter Hendrik Cornelis Mansveld (1874–1957), the most productive, discussed and influential medium-art-painter within the Dutch Spiritualist tradition. More specifically, it examines the impact of the reception of Mansveld’s work on the Spiritualist cause.

### *Mansveld and In-Trance Creation*

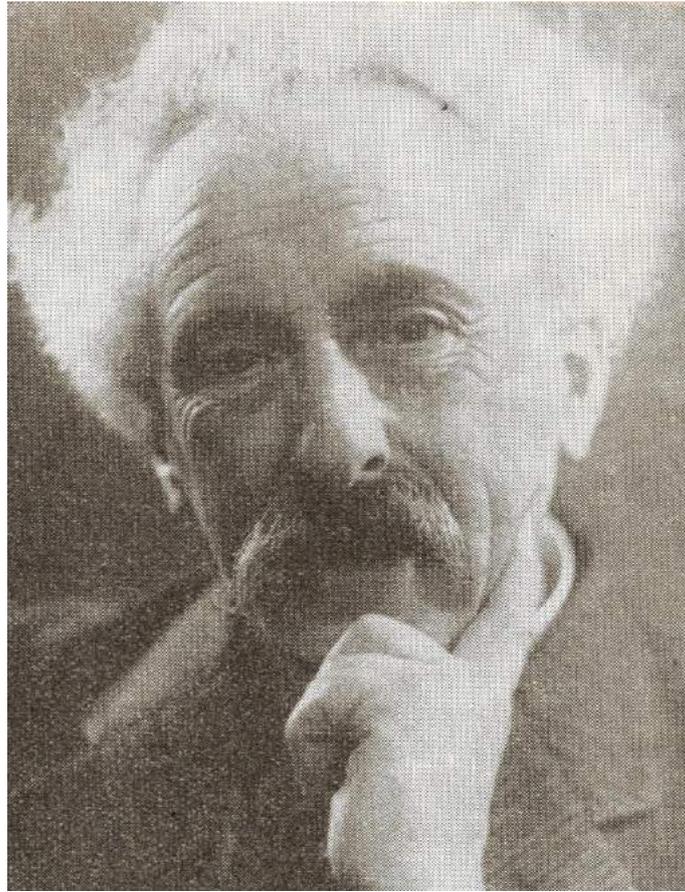
On an August night in 1929, Johannes Pieter Smits (1891–1960)—a central figure in the Dutch Spiritualist community—and his wife knocked on the door of a small residence in The Hague, The Netherlands. They were invited in by 55-year old house-painter and decorator, H.C. Mansveld. Mansveld was a seemingly ordinary man, modest and appropriate. After the customary small talk, Mansveld, Smits and their wives adjourned to a small room, empty except for a table and an easel. They all sat down at the table. Mansveld took some pastels and waited. After a while, “something happened to Mansveld, he changed, his posture turned rigid and his eyes turned glazy.” Moving much slower than before, Mansveld picked up his painting tools and seated himself in front of the easel, his eyes looking upwards, as if awaiting something from above. Then, abruptly, Mansveld started painting. With surprising determination and pace, he applied his pastel to the canvas and within moments, he finished a complete composition. After this intense, in-trance burst of creativity Mansveld turned back to his old self (Smits 1929, 297–98).

This account seems quite extra-ordinary, but this method of painting was not uncommon in the 1920s and 1930s and was even practiced by many of the world most famous Surrealists, including André Breton (1896–1966), Joan Miró (1893–1983) and Salvador Dalí (1904–1989), and abstract expressionists like Jackson Pollock (1912–1956). Artists would detach themselves from precise, conscious and calculated painting, and instead let their subconscious take over in order to create works of art from free association or “automatic,” uncoordinated

movements of the hands. Mansveld, however, did not consider himself to be an artist of subconscious creativity. In fact, he did not consider himself to be an artist at all. The reason for this stems from Mansveld's fervent Spiritualism (or "Spiritism") and his strong belief in a world "beyond the veil," a transcendent world inhabited by the spirits of the deceased. When it comes to its practices, Spiritualism is quite diversified in the different ways of interacting with the spirit world. Mediums use instruments (like Ouija boards and planchettes), personal objects, music, their own senses, or get in a trance in their séances. And one very particular and interesting form of mediumistic communication is mediumistic art.

In 1920, during a séance, Mansveld received a message that he would become a medium himself and would start painting and sculpting in trance. Mansveld was untrained and uneducated in the practice of creative painting, and lacked the skills to create works of art. Nonetheless, one year later, Mansveld started to produce paintings during séances, but in this process of painting he did not see himself as the painter, but as the brush. The reason was that he believed that, during the séances, he was visited by the souls of deceased painters (some of them very famous even after they died), who would then inhabit Mansveld's body and through his hand move the brush on the canvas. The spirits would even finish the work off with their own signature. "When Mansveld paints, he is not Mansveld" (Smits 1929, 301)—because, supposedly, it was not Mansveld who was painting but the spirit moving his hands and body.

So, Mansveld was convinced that his creative trance was not fueled by his subconscious mind, but by a consciousness from above. This is why he distanced himself from the artworks he produced, and did not consider himself an artist. The perception of his art, specifically the Spiritualists' perception, eventually had severe consequences for Dutch Spiritualism, and the "Mansveld- case" revealed significant flaws in the mentality of the Dutch Spiritualists.



**Figure 1.** Photo portrait of H.C. Mansveld at age 81 (Smits 1955).

*Mansveld as Proof for the “World Beyond the Veil”*

After an exhibition in Berlin, in 1925, Mansveld became highly popular in Dutch Spiritualist circles. His popularity was strongly connected with the increased enthusiasm for Spiritualism in the inter-war period. The peaking interest in the spiritual was a result of the devastations of World War I. Millions of soldiers found their death in the trenches, leaving tens of millions in grief back home, and creating an enormous need for consolation. However, since many were unable to properly say goodbye to their lost ones, and were under high pressure to keep things running at the home front, there often was little closure. Thus, people turned elsewhere to alleviate their sorrows, and this led to a steep increase in the popularity of Spiritualism and its belief in a world beyond our earthly life. Many hoped that mediums and psychics could put them in contact with their lost relatives, and through this contact give them the closure they

otherwise lacked. Spiritualism thus became an established institution, criticized but not condemned, with Spiritualist societies and accompanying magazines and newspapers. Within the broad spectrum of Spiritualism, mediumistic art (or psychic art) served two purposes: it conveyed (like all Spiritualist practices) messages from the spirit world and, more importantly, it functioned as a prominent proof of the existence of a higher realm.

The idea of the existence of a higher world and the conception of a world or a life after death define the “Spiritualist thesis.” This is what made Mansveld so interesting for Spiritualists: his art provided a proof for life after death, i.e. for the thesis. Because how could a “simple,” untrained, working-class man with no significant talent for painting produce “great” works of art, if not through the (literal) influence of more gifted spirits of the deceased? Mansveld was not the only Spiritualist artist who was popular in the Netherlands. Other artists such as Jan Huibrecht Verwaal (1889–1972) and Jacoba Catharina Calkoen (1866–1944) were appreciated too. They produced abstract, intuitively painted works, displaying obscure, symbolic, and sometimes frightening scenes with spirits and demons, unusual landscapes and religious symbols, and sometimes unidentifiable shapes.

But Mansveld’s art was different, because his works were, unlike that of the others, not cryptic and abstract, but plain and figurative and close to natural reality. Mansveld’s art was original in its banality. This constituted the perfect premise for a proof of the afterlife, and was seen by the Spiritualists as very empowering for their thesis. The contrast between the simplicity of Mansveld’s person and the (supposed) grandeur of his work implied, in the eyes of the Spiritualists, a necessity for a life after death. The very “common” Mansveld produced paintings that only the greatest could, and therefore there had to be some sort of transcendental influence at work. Finding proofs for the Spiritualist thesis was of the utmost importance to the Spiritualist community at the time. The journals from the 1920s and 1930s are filled with accounts of Spiritualism and mediums that supposedly proved the existence of the transcendental world. Very often, this led to discussions in the more mainstream media about the validity of those proofs as well, with people questioning the mediums, their integrity and capabilities.

### *Mansveld's Limited Artistic Capabilities*

Mansveld, provided a seemingly endless supply of “spirit-proving” artworks. The creative spirits were far from being idle. Mansveld “received” several hundred works, an estimate based on the fact that, by the late 1920s, he had already created at least two hundred pieces, and would continue painting until at least 1939. The works came from many different deceased artists, such as the Dutch Jacob Maris (1837–1899), Willem Cornelis Rip (1856–1922), and Théophile de Bock (1851–1904), the Belgian Henry De Braekeleer (1840–1888), and the French Loys Potet (1866–?) and Henri Fantin–Latour (1836–1904), among many others.

Reports in Dutch Spiritualist monthly journals like *Het Toekomstige Leven* and *Spiritische Bladen* show that Mansveld had many exhibitions where sometimes there were as much as two hundred paintings on display, with thirty different painters as the creative forces behind them (De Laat de Kanter 1925, 21). This is confirmed by a set of exhibition catalogues, preserved in the city council archive in The Hague, which list the works on display in two different exhibitions held in that city in December 1929 and September 1931, with up to seventy-four Mansvelds shown at once. At some exhibitions, including one held in Rotterdam in 1927, around six hundred people would visit in approximately three days, confirming Mansveld’s popularity in this period. A report about this exhibition also reveals the ambition that the Spiritualist community had to expand and reach a broader audience through mediumistic art. One of the three aims (besides providing proof for the thesis and establishing Spiritualism’s influence) of the exhibitions was to “draw the attention of the Dutch public” (W.A.B. 1927, 5). This shows Mansveld’s role for the Spiritualist community not only in providing evidence for the thesis, but also in attracting and convincing the public.

At some of these exhibitions, Mansveld would also sell his works for “good money” (“Spiritistische Kunst. Bijna Echt” 1927, 2). When hearing this, one might intuitively get suspicious of the motives of the medium-painter. It may seem as if he merely pretended to be gifted to give his paintings weight and sell them for more money. This would not be a fair suspicion, however, because Mansveld did not set prices for the works himself. Instead, he was convinced that the spirits of the deceased painters did. Once, at an exhibition, Mansveld was offered a thousand German marks by an enthusiast for a single work. After having

consulted his “spirit friends,” he gave the potential buyer the work for free, simply because that was the price set by the spirits. This is not the attitude of an imposter or a charlatan.

Additionally, there seems to be a consensus among not only Spiritualists, but also more impartial journalists who met the painter, that Mansveld was an ordinary, honest, and humble man. Based on the combination of these factors, we can safely assume that Mansveld was truly convinced of his gift as a medium, and was honorable in his motives. It would, thus, be pointless to question Mansveld’s integrity. However, what can and should be examined is Mansveld’s true quality as a painter. The implications of such an examination will show to be quite problematic for the “Mansveld-proof” of the Spiritualist thesis.

In the collection of the HJBF, there are fourteen paintings by Mansveld, of which most are attributed to a certain “J. Dulaque.” Research on Dulaque’s identity has not been fruitful, and he remains shrouded in mystery. Two of the works in the collection are attributed to the well-known French painter Henri Fantin-Latour and one is attributed to “George Verlain.” Verlain, like Dulaque, remains an unknown figure, despite research. Almost all of the works are made with pastel and vary in size. The smallest of the paintings are a mere 16 by 10 centimeters, while the largest work is 60 by 45 centimeters. Some depict cities or landscapes, others still lifes with flowers, and one shows a portrait of a sideways-facing woman.

Mansveld was unanimously praised by the Spiritualists for the “astonishing similarities” between his paintings and the ones made by the artists while they were alive. His pastels were described as “so beautiful that they looked like they were made with oil” (“Hooger Leven” 1936, 4). Once, a more skeptical visitor of one of the exhibitions in The Hague was unimpressed by a work by the spirit of the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century Dutch landscape painter Jacob Maris, saying that it did not look like a real Maris, and was much more “one-dimensional.”

The journalist reporting on the incident for *Het Toekomstige Leven* meagerly defended Mansveld by saying to the sceptic, “How would you paint if you were painting with a broomstick instead of a brush?” (“Tentoonstelling Mansveld” 1927, 15). By this, the Spiritualist journalist meant that Mansveld functioned as a bodily tool for Maris, but the difference in quality was due to the fact that Mansveld’s body was still the body of a non-painter, which would make it harder to make a painting equal in quality to the production of the Dutch master. This

rebuttal of the criticism reveals a biased disposition, grounded on the inherently biased dogmatic belief in the Spiritualist thesis, combined with a strong need to find proofs for it. This combination resulted in a lack of reasonable evaluation of Mansveld's work.

After analyzing the works in the collection of the HJBF, several observations about the artistic quality of the paintings can be made. The first is that Mansveld, in fact, was proficient in pastel painting. The works show a strong use of color and this leads to aesthetically pleasing pictures, with the bright or deep colored flowers in still lifes and the twilight skies and the reflecting seas in some of the cityscapes. Mansveld, thus, had definitely a talent for painting. However, after drawing a comparison between the paintings and the original works of the deceased artists, it becomes hard to deny the difference in quality.

Mansveld's inability to match the standard of the great painters of the past becomes most clear in his portraits. In the collection, there is a portrait of a woman which was allegedly received by Mansveld via the French painter Fantin-Latour. Fantin-Latour was one of France's most talented realist painters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although he used a monochromatic palette, he created depth and shadows that truly brought his portraits and still lifes to life. Mansveld's portrait attributed to Fantin-Latour (which was painted with the depicted woman posing in the room) is quite the opposite: two-dimensional, anatomically incorrect, and too contrasting in colors. It does not share any clear resemblances with Fantin-Latour.

In the newspaper *De Haagsche Courant* of 13 December 1929, there is a reproduction of another portrait by Mansveld, this time attributed to Giovanni Bellini (1430–1516; "Mediamiek Verkregen Schilderwerk" 1929). It is quite similar to Mansveld's Fantin-Latour. Both figures have sharp facial features and are in a sideways-facing pose. Once again, this work is, if anything, a reduction of the true artistic genius of the original artist.

Mansveld's flower paintings are more impressive (perhaps his body functioned better as a tool for still lifes than it did for portraits). Most of the flower works in the collection of HJBF are attributed to "J. Dulaque."



**Figure 2.** Still life with flowers by Mansveld (37 x 46 cm), attributed to “J. Dulaque,” 1930 (work in the collection of HJBF).

Since we do not have any further information on Dulaque’s identity, a comparison is not possible. When measuring the Dulaque paintings not to original works, but to a standard of good painting in general, the same conclusions can be drawn as with the Fantin-Latours. Mansveld displays a solid style of painting, however, the only true excitement is contained in his use of colors, and even there he falls short of the truly brilliant.

This assessment of Mansveld as a painter might seem quite harsh and as a denial of his talent. This is, in fact, not the case. Considering Mansveld’s complete lack of training and artistic background, and the pace he held when painting his works, he truly was an extraordinary painter. Nevertheless, to claim there is a correspondence between the quality of the original works of some of the greatest painters of all time and the quality of the works “received” by Mansveld, is simply a stretch of reality. An art critic who wrote an article in 1926 on Mansveld, signed “P.K.-n.,” went even further in his criticism and condemned Mansveld’s art as not being art at all, because it merely reminds us of, but does not even resemble, the art of other painters (“P.K.-n.” 1926, 9). The critic is right in pointing out the gap in quality between Mansveld and the painters he supposedly channeled, but to deprive Mansveld of the label “artist” is unfair. Quite apart from

the ironic fact that Mansveld himself did not want to be called an artist in the first place—since he regarded himself merely as a medium, a tool—, his raw talent and remarkable production process make his status as an artist very much deserved.

### *Questioning the Validity of the Mansveld-Proof*

The conclusions about Mansveld's quality as a painter have significant consequences for Mansveld, and more importantly for what he stood for in the Spiritualist tradition in general. He was praised and popular for how "normal" his paintings were, and how much they resembled the old works. This resemblance was emphasized over and over again in the Spiritualist journals, because it was essential to make Mansveld a proof that there was life after death. Craving a proof like this, the Dutch Spiritualists were even too willing to see the resemblances with the great masters. In reality, however, the paintings are indeed adequate, but not awe-inspiring, like those of Fantin-Latour, Maris or Bellini. Cornelis Petrus Van Rossem (1885–1933) wrote an article for the *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* in 1930, about the "Spiritualist Mentality and its Shortcomings," and also discussed Mansveld. Van Rossem was a lawyer who was affiliated with Spiritualism. He was interested in the idea of a transcendental world but expressed strong criticism towards the Spiritualist community. In his article, Van Rossem wrote that the Spiritualists were too eager in accepting Mansveld as an incredibly gifted medium-painter who produced great works of art. He argued that this "premature drawing of conclusions" made them lose credibility. He urged the Spiritualists to be more critical and less gullible, and believed that altering their approach would make much better "propaganda" for their cause (Van Rossem 1930, 3).

Van Rossem regarded the Spiritualists themselves as the reason Spiritualism was not receiving the interest and enthusiasm it deserved. The case of Mansveld was entirely in line with the mistake Van Rossem identified. Comparing a Mansveld to a Maris or a De Bock when looking for a proof of the Spiritualist thesis had a counter-effect on the Spiritualists' credibility, and was therefore harmful to the institution of Spiritualism.

This credibility was of importance, even though it had no mentionable effect on the Spiritualists themselves, since most of them were already thoroughly convinced of the thesis and had grown accustomed to shielding themselves against skepticism. The general public, on the other hand, evaluated Spiritualism

a priori from a skeptical viewpoint, and needed to trust the integrity and intellectual validity of the Spiritualist community to get enthusiastic about its message and its thesis. Losing credibility as a result of the proof-seeking attitude might have had negative effects on Spiritualism in the eyes of those who were interested but not yet convinced.

This idea was already put into words in 1927 in a piece written by one “C.E.H.,” who identified Mansveld’s artistic shortcomings. However, he also expressed appreciation for Mansveld as an artist and interest in his trance-painting method. “C.E.H.” similarly criticized the Spiritualists for their unwillingness to open up the Mansveld case for scientific and psychological examination. Not just because it could help to give insights on what being in trance entailed, but also, and especially, because it could “help rid the world of the suspicion against mediumistic art” (“C.E.H.” 1927, 10). The loss of credibility and high suspicion towards Spiritualism confined mediumistic artists to a relatively large, but still limited audience. Perhaps, this is part of the reason why nowadays Spiritualist (or mediumistic) art has been mostly forgotten as an art movement, whereas automatism and Surrealism (also movements that sprung from in-trance painting) have gained mainstream popularity.

### *The Spiritualist Attitude Towards Criticism*

Another critique Mansveld received over the years came from Professor Wilhelm Martin (1876–1954), who wrote an article for *De Groene Amsterdammer* in 1927, in which he questioned whether claiming the works were made by other painters was legal. In the 1920s, Mansveld would not add anything to the paintings himself. In his narrative, even the signature came from the painting spirits. The paintings would be signed with a simple “J. Dulaque” or “F. Latour” or sometimes “et ses amis” (“and his friends”) would be added, signifying the painters sometimes came to Mansveld in a group. In his article, Martin ironically, and as a juridical thought-experiment, asked the question whether Mansveld could possibly be sued for forgery. Since he created paintings that he would sign in somebody else’s name. Martin discussed the possibility of identity theft and falsification, and asked whether the deceased painters were not entitled to copyright (Martin 1927).

The angle of the article was ironic, but the Spiritualists responded aggressively, saying that the spirits themselves were the creators of the works, not Mansveld. They continued by arguing that, even if Mansveld should be considered as the author of the works, copyright was a privilege of the living, not of the spirits, because “only the living are subject to the law and have rights.” Therefore, they saw the criticism as unjust (Nederburgh 1928, 70). Furthermore, they pointed to the unambiguity of the situation, because they emphasized time and again that the works were created by the spirits of the painters after their deaths, not during their lives, thus ridding the case of any vagueness which could lead to people being deceived. Mansveld, according to the Spiritualists, affixed to the works what they called a “ghost-signature,” not a real one, and therefore did not produce forgeries.



**Figure 3.** *Handtekeningen* (Dutch for “signatures”) of many different deceased artists, written on a piece of paper by Mansveld during a séance (Smits 1929).

A journalist writing in the *Algemeen Handelsblad* evaluated the discussion and accepted the “ghost-signature” rebuttal, but then asked whether placing a “ghost-signature” on a painting was nonetheless punishable by the law. He

continued by arguing that article 225 of the Dutch Criminal Law held that the forgery of a document is punishable if: 1) the forgery was executed with the aim to present the document as real and unforged, and if 2) using the document can lead to a disadvantageous situation to others. The journalist realized quite well that the Spiritualists would respond to this in their usual manner, by saying that it was not forgery at all, since it was made by the spirits. He commented (as a pro-active form of rebuttal) that Dutch law does not recognize the possibility of a deceased person placing a signature. He then warned Mansveld to be cautious, since it could be well possible that a judge would consider the aforementioned criteria for forgery as met, and the painter would then risk a five-year prison sentence. Additionally, he blamed the Spiritualist community for harming Mansveld's defense, by being naïve in relying only on their Spiritualist beliefs, while they should examine the legal implications of the situation with a more rational and secular attitude ("Mediamieke Kunstwerken. Auteurs- En Strafrecht" 1927).

Although the Spiritualists did respond to Martin's critical article, they didn't offer any rebuttal showing they took it seriously. They simply dismissed it by arguing from their own dogmatic viewpoint, instead of engaging in a nuanced debate and respond to the questions Martin had raised. The author writing in the *Algemeen Handelsblad* sided with Martin in advising Mansveld to put a defense mechanism in place, by adding something to the ghost-signature that would state his own—at the very least physical—participation in the creation of the works ("Mediamieke Kunstwerken. Auteurs- En Strafrecht" 1927, 10).

Mansveld was defended by the Spiritualist community, but the article still left a lasting impression on him, and from that point on he would always add either his initials "H.M." or "received by H. Mansveld." This is, like the article by Van Rossem, another example of the criticism generated by the unwavering, unanimous believe in Mansveld's capabilities by the Spiritualist community and their reluctance to adapt or be open to the criticism or interests of others. Once again, the Spiritualists assumed a defensive attitude towards the criticism, and once again it led to the exact opposite of what they intended to achieve.

### *Conclusion*

Mansveld played an important role in the tradition of Dutch Spiritualism. His incredible productivity, his ability to use pastels to make color come to life and

make works at least reminiscent of that of known masters, and his modesty and ordinary way of life, made him perfect as the foundation for a proof of the existence of a world beyond our own. Unfortunately for the Spiritualists, they overplayed their hand with excessive confidence in Mansveld. The unending praise and the lack of contrasting opinions and arguments within the Spiritualist community turned out to be counter-productive. It helped the sceptics in pointing out Mansveld's flaws and questioning both the validity of using him as proof for the Spiritualist thesis and the credibility of the community as a whole.

Even though Mansveld wrote that, "I hope that I can support and fortify some and if possible many, in their Spiritualist belief" (Mansveld 1939, 328), we cannot say with certainty that it was his personal priority to provide proofs for the Spiritualist thesis. Regardless of Mansveld, providing proof for the after-life is the essence of mediumistic art. And this is why a fairer assessment of Mansveld's abilities would have been more preferable for the Spiritualists. By making more room for the outsiders, with all their skepticism and their science-oriented mindsets, Mansveld's popularity might have come a long way. In other words, a more open, self-reflective and therefore intellectual approach by the Spiritualists to the art that arose out of their own movement, could have led to an increased interest in mediumistic art from people outside of their small and closed community. Perhaps, it could have placed mediumistic art in the limelight of a much broader audience, and truly integrate it in the (international) art world.

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## **The World's First Clear Presentation: When Hubbard Met Sonya Bianchi at the Shrine Auditorium**

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**ABSTRACT:** On August 10, 1950, L. Ron Hubbard presented to a crowd of 6,000 in Los Angeles' Shrine Auditorium the first "clear" in the history of Dianetics, a college student called Sonya Bianchi. Anti-Scientology literature insists that the event was a fiasco, Bianchi behaved strangely, and the crowd left ridiculing Hubbard. This tale has been passed from one Scientology critic to another. However, it is not supported by contemporary evidence, from which the opposite conclusion may be reached. The event at the Shrine Auditorium was successful, and in the following weeks the sales of Dianetics and the interest in Hubbard's theories continued to grow.

**KEYWORDS:** Ann Singer, Arthur Jean Cox, Cy Endfield, Dianetics, Fake News, Forrest J. Ackerman, L. Ron Hubbard, Richard de Mille, Scientology, Shrine Auditorium, Sonya Bianchi.

### *Introduction*

The first Dianetic Clear was not Scientology founder, L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986), but a college student named Sonya Bianchi (b. 1926)—sometimes called Sonia Bianca, Sonja Bianca or Ann Singer—whom he presented to 6,000 people at the Los Angeles Shrine Auditorium on August 10, 1950. Two years later, skeptic Martin Gardner (1914–2010) published a portrayal of the event as one where people interrupted, laughed and left (Gardner 1957, 270–72). Several others would repeat and expand on Gardner's claims, such as George Malko and Russell Miller (Malko 1970, 56; Miller 1987, 163–66 and 378). In turn, both Gardner's and Miller's books were cited by Janet Reitman and Lawrence Wright (Reitman 2011, 31 and 380; Wright 2013, 69–70 and 383). Likewise, Jon Atack cited not only Miller's book (Atack 1990, 114–15 and 399) but also

Christopher Evans' (1931–1979: Evans 1973, 49). Harriet S. Mosatche also cited Evans as her sole source (Mosatche 1983, 134 and 407).

This public failure narrative can be traced to three people: science fiction writer Arthur Jean Cox (1929–2016), film director Cy Endfield (1914–1995), and Hubbard's literary agent Forrest J. Ackerman (1916–2008). Nevertheless, while each story had some truth, when compared against one another, various interview transcripts, the absence of negative press regarding this event, and the Church of Scientology's own transcripts of that night, it becomes obvious that the narrative is a modern myth, and in fact nothing controversial actually occurred.

### *Acknowledgements*

Thank you to “JC Denton” for bringing to my attention this issue, by mentioning the lack of negative press regarding the event, despite oft repeated claims that dozens of reporters and cynics were present. Gratitude goes to Jon Atack for pointing me to the UCLA Special Collections Department, where Simon Elliott provided the letters from A.J. Cox to Martin Gardner and all of Russell Miller's interview transcripts. Many thanks go to Romy Light at Bridge Publications, who provided some additional background and history regarding the Church of Scientology's transcripts. Likewise, Max Hauri of the *True Source Scientology Foundation* provided the 1987 edition of the *Research and Development Series*, and Randy Smith and Kay Christenson provided the 1994 edition. Both also proofread earlier drafts of this analysis along with my lovely wife Olga.

### *Setting The Stage*

As author Martin Gardner was not present at the Shrine Auditorium event, he referenced science-fiction writer Arthur Jean Cox's 1952 letter (Gardner 1957, 272). Miller also cited an “Interview with Cox and letter to Martin Gardner, 30 April 1952” as his primary source (Miller 1987, 378). Indeed, the Shrine Auditorium story originated with Cox's letter to Martin Gardner on April 30, 1952:

It's too bad you weren't here in Los Angeles when Hubbard spoke here at the Shrine Auditorium. What a fiasco! The “clear” he introduced, who was supposed to have “full

and perfect recall for every moment of all her life, including all perceptics,” not only couldn’t recall a single page from one of her textbooks (she was a college student), further not only couldn’t remember a single formula (she was majoring in physics), but couldn’t remember the color of Mr. Hubbard’s tie when her back was turned to him! I think that that one false note, alone, alienated most of the huge audience who had come to see him, some 6000 people. Hundreds started leaving, even before Hubbard finished speaking. The “clear’s” name, incidentally, was Sonya Bianca. Naturally, there was a dianetic explanation for her lapses of memory: When Hubbard called her out from the wings, he said, “Will you come out here now, Sonya?” The “..now..” stuck her in present-time. Later, she performed perfectly in private, I’m told. There were Life reporters present at that session, but nothing about her ever appeared in the magazine.

The audience was extremely vociferous. It was like a meeting of the German-American Bund.

On the stage with Hubbard, there was about a dozen other people (including Mr. [Alfred Elton] van Vogt [1912–2000]). [...] The reason I tell you all of the above is because I’ve seen no published accounts of that speech. The date was August 10, 1950.

Gardner shared this story in his book *In the Name of Science* in 1952, later renamed as *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science* in 1957, which included a rather critical review of Dianetics and first mentioned the Shrine event:

In 1950, speaking to an audience of 6,000 in the Shrine Auditorium, Los Angeles, Hubbard introduced a coed named Sonya Bianca as a clear who had attained perfect recall of all “perceptics” (sense perceptions) for every moment of her past. In the demonstration which followed, however, she failed to remember a single formula in physics (the subject in which she was majoring), or the color of Hubbard’s tie when his back was turned. At this point, a large part of the audience got up and left. Hubbard later produced a neat dianetic explanation for the fiasco. He had called her from the wings by saying, “Will you come out here *now*, Sonya?” The “now” got her stuck in present time (Gardner 1957, 270–71).

Next, author George Malko took this story and added a few details not found to be claimed elsewhere, such as purported kinetic abilities. Although he listed no sources, it became obvious that he used Gardner’s story as his only source, as per the verbatim definition of perceptics:

He said he had already submitted proof to several scientists and associations, and expressed total agreement with the notion that the public was entitled to proof. He said he was ready and willing to give it in detail. And then he made what I can only charitably call a tactical blunder.

Speaking to 6,000 people in the Los Angeles Shrine Auditorium, Hubbard introduced a girl named Sonya Bianca and said she was a *clear*, possessing total recall of all *perceptics*

(sense perceptions) for her entire past, as well as kinetic abilities. It was a disaster. Miss Bianca not only could not remember basic formulas in physics, the subject she was supposedly majoring in, but could not give the color of Hubbard's tie when his back was turned, and certainly could not, exercising her kinetic powers, knock off somebody's hat at fifty feet. In a matter of minutes the audience was streaming out of the hall in moods ranging from gagging hilarity to plain disgust. But Hubbard, with a sense which suggested anticipation, explained the whole thing away as having been his fault. He had, he said, called Miss Bianca on stage by saying, "Will you come here *now*, Sonya?" and in doing so, using the "now," trapped her in present time (Malko 1970, 56).

Author Russell Miller would add several dramatic flourishes for maximum effect and to paint Hubbard, Bianchi and the entire event in the worst imaginable light:

[Hubbard] was to attend a rally on Thursday 10 August at the Shrine Auditorium. It promised to be Dianetics' finest hour, for on that evening the identity of the world's first 'clear' was to be announced.

The Shrine was a vast, mosque-like building with white stucco castellated walls and a dome in each corner, unforgettably characterized by the music critic of the *LA Times* as being of the 'neopenal Bagdad' school of architecture. Built in 1925 by the Al Malaikah Temple, it was the largest auditorium in Los Angeles and could seat nearly 6500 people under a swooping ceiling designed to resemble the roof of a tent. When the Hubbard Dianetic Research Foundation booked it for the meeting on 10 August, few people expected more than half the seats to be filled.

Arthur Jean Cox, the young teletype operator who had met Hubbard at the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society, left early for the meeting by streetcar and was surprised how crowded it was. 'More and more people got on at every stop,' he said. 'I couldn't believe that *everyone* was going to the meeting but when we arrived at the Shrine on Royal Street, everyone got off. I was absolutely amazed. By the time I got inside there were only a few seats left' [1].

The audience was predominantly young, noisy and good-humoured. Many people carried well-thumbed copies of 'The Book,' in the hope of getting them signed by Hubbard, and there was much speculation about 'the world's first clear' and what he or she would be able to do. Dozens of newspapers and magazines, including *Life*, had sent reporters and photographers to cover the event and those cynics who had predicted a sea of empty seats looked on in astonishment as even the aisles began to fill.

When L. Ron Hubbard walked on to the stage, followed by A. E. van Vogt, whom he had recently recruited, and other directors of the Foundation, there was a spontaneous roar from the audience, followed by applause and cheering that continued for several minutes. Hubbard, totally assured and relaxed, smiled broadly as he looked around the packed auditorium and finally held up his hands for silence.

The meeting opened with Hubbard demonstrating Dianetic techniques. With the help of a pretty blonde, he showed how to induce Dianetic reverie and then he ‘ran a grief incident’ on a girl called Marcia. While the audience obligingly responded when Hubbard spread his arms for applause at the end of each demonstration, it all seemed a little too well rehearsed and there was a murmur of approval when someone stood up in the audience and called out: ‘Ladies and gentlemen, somehow I can’t help but feel that all this has been pre-arranged.’

Immediately people began shouting for Hubbard to demonstrate on someone from the audience and when a young man jumped on to the piano in the orchestra pit, a chant went up: ‘Take *him!* Take *him!*’ Hubbard, not in the least flustered by this turn of events, invited him up on to the stage. The young man introduced himself as an actor whose father had studied with [Sigmund] Freud [1856–1939], which fortuitously gave Hubbard the opportunity of mentioning his own connection with the great analyst, through his old friend [Joseph Cheesman] ‘Snake’ Thompson [1874–1943].

Sitting on facing chairs at the front of the stage, Hubbard made a determined attempt to audit the man, but he proved an unresponsive subject, answering almost every question in the negative. The audience soon became bored and restless and began calling, ‘Throw him out, throw him out!’ Hubbard, perhaps somewhat relieved, shook the man’s hand and he stepped down.

The atmosphere throughout had remained perfectly cordial, even if the shouted comments from the audience were increasingly irreverent. When Hubbard was explaining the multitude of mental and physical benefits arising from successful auditing, someone yelled, ‘Are your cavities filling up?’ and caused a good deal of laughter.

As the highlight of the evening approached, there was a palpable sense of excitement and anticipation in the packed hall. A hush descended on the audience when at last Hubbard stepped up to the microphone to introduce the ‘world’s first clear.’ She was, he said, a young woman by the name of Sonya Bianca, a physics major and pianist from Boston. Among her many newly acquired attributes, he claimed she had ‘full and perfect recall of every moment of her life,’ which she would be happy to demonstrate. He turned slowly to the wings on one side of the stage and said: ‘Will you come out now please, Sonya?’

The audience erupted once more in applause as a thin, obviously nervous, girl stepped out of the wings and into a spotlight which followed her to centre stage, where she was embraced by Hubbard. In a tremulous voice she told the meeting that Dianetics had cleared up her sinus trouble and cured her ‘strange and embarrassing’ allergy to paint. ‘For days after I came in contact with paint I had a painful itching in my eyebrows,’ she stammered. ‘Now both conditions have cleared up and I feel like a million dollars.’ She answered a few routine questions from Hubbard, who then made the mistake of inviting questions from the audience: they had clearly been expecting rather more spectacular revelations.

‘What did you have for breakfast on October 3 1942?’ somebody yelled. Miss Bianca understandably looked somewhat startled, blinked in the lights and shook her head. ‘What’s on page 122 of *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health*?’ someone else asked. Miss Bianca opened her mouth but no words came out. Similar questions came thick and fast, amid much derisive laughter. Many in the audience took pity on the wretched girl and tried to put easier questions, but she was so terrified that she could not even remember simple formulae in physics, her own subject.

As people began getting up and walking out of the auditorium, one man noticed that Hubbard had momentarily turned his back on the girl and shouted, ‘OK, what colour necktie is Mr Hubbard wearing?’ The world’s first ‘clear’ screwed up her face in a frantic effort to remember, stared into the hostile blackness of the auditorium, then hung her head in misery. It was an awful moment.

Hubbard, sweat glistening in beads on his forehead, stepped forward and brought the demonstration swiftly to an end. Quick-witted as always, he proffered an explanation for Miss Bianca’s impressive lapses of memory. The problem, Dianetically speaking, was that when he called her forward, asking her to come out ‘now,’ the ‘now’ had frozen her in ‘present time’ and blocked her total recall. It was not particularly convincing, but it was the best he could do in the circumstances.

Forrie Ackerman, who was at the Shrine that night to see his client perform, summed up the feelings of many people who were there: ‘I was somewhat disappointed not to see a vibrant woman in command of herself and situation. She certainly was not my idea of a “clear”’ [2] (Miller 1987, 163–66).

Miller listed two primary sources for his version: “[1] Interview with Cox and letter to Martin Gardner, 30 April 1952” and “[2] Interview with Ackerman” (Miller 1987, 378). Likewise, Jon Atack’s book *A Piece of Blue Sky* told a similar tale:

The first signs came in August 1950, when Hubbard exhibited a “Clear” at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles. Despite claims of “perfect recall,” and the fact that she was majoring in physics, the “Clear” was unable to remember a simple physics formula. When Hubbard turned his back, she could not remember the color of his tie.

The Shrine Auditorium lecture has been published by the Scientologists as part of Hubbard’s immense collected works. The girl is renamed “Ann Singer” in the Scientologists’ version. The transcript has been edited, but the question about the tie remains, as does one about physics, with a vague answer. A Scientology account says Hubbard “spoke to a jammed house of over 6,000 enthusiastic people.” According to author Martin Gardner, when Ann Singer could not remember the color of Hubbard’s tie, “a large part of the audience got up and left.” The incident had a marked effect on Hubbard’s credibility, and he became cagey about declaring more Clears, avoiding public demonstrations of their supposed abilities from then on (Atack 1990, 114–15).

Atack referenced not only Gardner's book but also Christopher Evans' as sources (Atack 1990, 399). The difference in Evans' version, however, was that he also mentioned Cy Endfield, whose account published twenty years after Cox's:

The well-known film director, Cy Endfield—*Zulu*, *Hide and Seek* and, more recently, *de Sade* are some of his best known films—was at that time working in California. Like many others in the movie business, he had been intrigued by the impact Dianetics was making in Hollywood, and was sufficiently curious to attend one or two meetings in Los Angeles where the well-known science fiction writer, A.E. van Vogt, lectured warmly on the topic. Endfield found it all a bit unconvincing, but when it was announced that shortly the founder himself would be lecturing and *presenting the world's first Clear* to a public meeting, he decided that this was too good an opportunity to miss.

The venue was the famous Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles, a huge hall capable of accommodating six thousand. This was packed to capacity, for good—or at least interesting—news travels fast. Endfield recalls that a stir of excitement ran through the audience when Hubbard, after speaking at some length on various matters, called out on to the stage a pretty college student named Sonia Bianca, whom he introduced to the audience as the world's first Clear. Miss Bianca, who seemed somewhat overcome by it all, answered a few routine questions from Hubbard without revealing any spectacular powers, and it is possible that Hubbard thought that no more formal demonstration than this was necessary. But it was not to be, for Mr. Endfield, remembering that Clears were currently supposed to have perfect recall of all sense perceptions and knowing Miss Bianca was a major in physics, decided to ask her some simple questions in her own topic. Amazingly, she seemed unable to remember even rudimentary formulae, such as Boyle's Law, and fell down completely when asked to give the colour of Hubbard's tie when his back was turned. It was an awful moment. There was improper laughter and sections of the audience got up and left (Evans 1973, 49).

Harriet S. Mosatche, the only scholar to describe the event, used Evans' book as her sole citation (Mosatche 1983, 407):

One of Hubbard's earliest difficulties with promoting Dianetics to the public occurred when he permitted the observation of Sonia Bianca, a college student majoring in physics, whom he considered to have attained the state of clear. Cy Endfield, a film director, was present at the demonstration and asked Bianca some simple formulas, but she was unable to pass even these simple memory tests (Mosatche 1983, 134).

Miller directly lifted the quote "It was an awful moment" from Evans while citing his book as a source for something else. Likewise, Lawrence Wright had lifted most of Miller's claims as it was his sole source, including details such as the audience asking about what Sonya had for breakfast years prior and a specific

page number of *Dianetics* (Miller 1987, 166; Evans 1973, 49; Wright 2013, 383). Wright also mimicked Gardner's earlier use of "fiasco"—itself taken directly from Cox—whose work he cited elsewhere (Gardner 1957, 270):

In August 1950, Hubbard presented the "World's First Clear" at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles. Sonia Bianca, a very nervous physics student from Boston, was brought to the stage. Hubbard claimed that through Dianetics, Bianca had attained "full and perfect recall of every moment of her life." The audience began peppering her with questions, such as what she had had for breakfast eight years before, or what was on page 122 of Hubbard's book, or even elemental formulas in physics, her area of specialty. She was incapable of responding when someone asked the color of Hubbard's necktie, when he briefly had his back turned to her. It was a very public fiasco (Wright 2013, 69–70).

Janet Reitman also provided two new witnesses: "Just out of college, [Richard] De Mille [1922-2009] was present at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles on 10 August, 1950, the night of the Clear disaster. He'd brought his girlfriend, who'd dismissed Hubbard as a fraud; De Mille, though, was unswayed" (Reitman 2011, 31). Reitman listed only two secondary sources: "The account of the Shrine Auditorium event draws from Gardner's *Fads and Fallacies* and from Russell Miller's *Barefaced [sic] Messiah*" (Reitman 2011, 380). As one can observe, her two sources have appeared in virtually all retellings of this event.

Per these accounts, it appears that Hubbard was publicly humiliated and exposed. Yet despite repeated versions of this event, the available evidence showed a very different account.

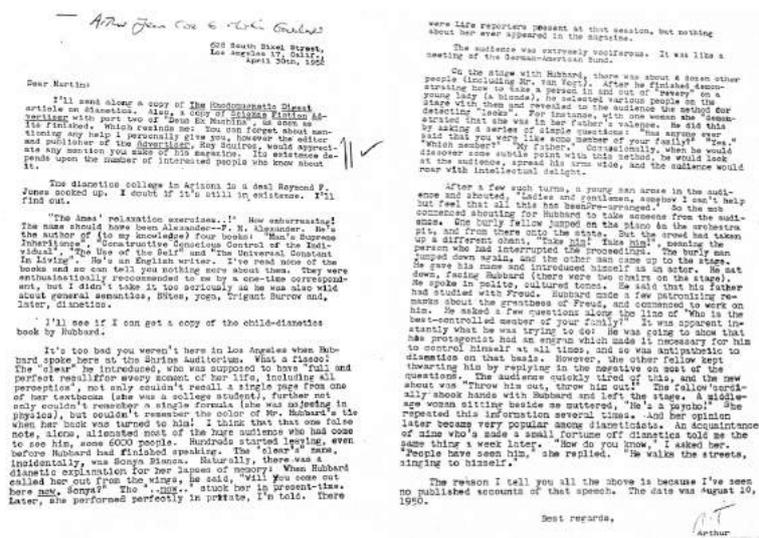
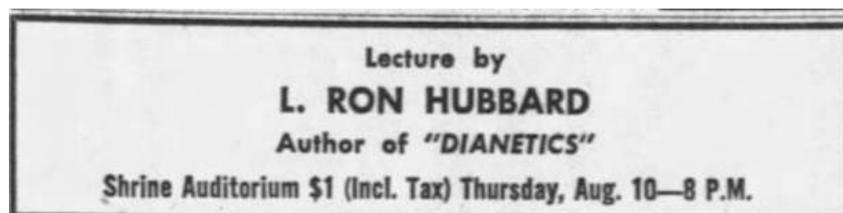


Figure 1. Arthur Jean Cox's letter to Martin Gardner on 30 August 1952.

*An Auditor, an Author and an Oddity Walk into an Auditorium ...*

The clear demonstration definitely occurred at the Shrine Auditorium. An advertisement even showed that Hubbard would lecture at the Shrine Auditorium at 8 PM on 10 August 1950.



**Figure 2.** Ad for Dianetics Event at Shrine Auditorium on 10 August 1950.

The Church of Scientology confirmed the event in a recent press release:

L. Ron Hubbard himself lectured to an audience of six thousand at the Shrine Auditorium on August 10, 1950, shortly after releasing *Dianetics* on May 9th, 1950. Since its release, *Dianetics* (<http://www.dianetics.org>) has appeared on over 600 bestseller lists, including 100 weeks on the *New York Times*' list (Polo and Ricketts 2011).

Sonya Adelaide Bianchi was a graduate student with a B.S. in physics who worked as a Teaching Assistant at Wellesley College from 1949–50 (Wellesley College 1949, 15). She had graduated from Bates College the prior year (Bates College 2018). Scientology critic Tony Ortega even tracked her down through her son, Chris Hulswit, who confirmed this:

“That’s her. That’s my mom,” he said. “I know there was an event. It was never really explained to me. But I think that’s what prompted my dad to go out and get her. She had graduated from Bates with a BS in chemistry [sic: physics] [...] She was that woman, but she doesn’t have any real solid recollections of it. I got the distinct impression that she didn’t want to talk about it” (Ortega 2018).

Indeed, she had married Frank T. Hulswit (1924–2018: Burns 2010, 33). Bianchi also briefly mentioned Hulswit in the lecture transcript:

Who gets the credit for this clearing effort?

*Sonia: Well, Mr. Frank Hulswit* (L. Ron Hubbard Library 1994, 35).

This confirmed that she was the same person in the lecture and the two were dating at the time as well. Her statement passed on vicariously through her son, however, yielded little insight regarding that event's outcome either way.

### *Stick To The Script*

There were also two versions of the transcripts which the Church of Scientology published; the first version appeared in 1987 and the other in 1994. The first used the pseudonym “Ann Singer” for reasons unstated, presumably to protect her privacy or more likely because Bianchi was no longer a Dianeticist or Scientologist at publication. Atack noted that the 1987 transcript was edited, although how he knew this was unclear. The church's position is that the later edition is more accurate. Indeed, the 1994 edition referenced Frank Hulswit well before Ortega researched him, it presented the questions that others referenced about Hubbard's teeth, tie color and a specific *Dianetics* page. Furthermore, it unfolded in the same sequence that Cox described. Aside from Atack's observation about the 1987 edition edits, other critics have not disputed the authenticity of these transcripts.

It is worth noting, however, that the 1987 edition stated that “the author gratefully acknowledges the editorial assistance of” John Lichtensteiger and Rosemary Delderfield Goding, among several others (L. Ron Hubbard Library 1987, vi). Both had compiled and edited the *Organizational Executive Course* books from 1970 to 1974, which included several Hubbard Communication Office (HCO) Information Letters of questionable authenticity, with the typist initials “rd” for Rosemary Delderfield (Hubbard 1974a, 169–71; Hubbard 1974b, 193–94; Hubbard, 1974c, 172) and sometimes “jl” for John Lichtensteiger on the same document (Hubbard 1974d, 196–99). Given Hubbard's location at the time of their alleged 1961 publications—in fact, they did not appear in print before 1974—it appeared that someone else wrote them (Camacho 2018, 52–3; Camacho 2019, 147–48). Although suspected authorship was initially attributed to Peter Greene (1929–1991), that these same two were involved with the obviously edited 1987 transcript suggests that they may have also altered the HCO Information Letters.

Thus, in defense of Atack, the only transcript released before his book was the 1987 edition which referred to Sonya Bianchi as “Ann Singer” (L. Ron Hubbard

Library 1987, 20–4). Regarding the key points in question, however, they remained virtually the same in both versions:

All right, what do you normally study?

*Physics.*

All right, shut your eyes. (Of course this type of examination actually means very little). Read me something out of the physics textbook—something complicated.

*Very complicated?*

Yes, very complicated. Just look at the physics textbook and read it.

*Which one?*

Which one do you want to read?

*Well, let's look at Electromagnetic Theory.*

*Electromagnetic Theory*, now that's a nice book for a young lady to have been studying.

*It's by Hugh Skilling [1905–1990].*

Okay, and let's go over to the middle of the book and read something complicated out of it.

*All right.*

How about [Isaac] Newton's [1642–1727] formula of gravity?

*In vector notation?*

Yes, in vector notation.

*All right, yes, there's a vector notation in the book I'm using. It is written in darker ink. It is equal to M, which is not in dark ink, times A, which is also in the dark ink.*

Can you see the page number in it?

*This is my mechanics book.*

Okay. Actually, we could probably do a lot of that sort of thing. Your eyes are closed there, what color suit do I have on?

*A sort of grayish blue.*

And what's the color of my tie?

*I'm afraid I didn't look at it (L. Ron Hubbard Library 1987, 22–4).*

The 1994 edition replaced “Ann Singer” with Sonia (instead of Sonya) and filled in several gaps, which made for a smoother, fuller read. When asked about the differences between these versions, Romy Light at Bridge Publications stated that, although she did not know why the 1987 version differed, the 1994 version

should be used as the official version as it was the latest one. She also mentioned that it was quite likely that either no audio copy of the lecture existed, or if it did exist it was of such poor quality, due to being so early in Scientology history, that it still needed restoration, or that the latest transcript was possibly compiled from all available handwritten notes by the transcribers in the audience (Romy Light, phone call with author, 25 February 2019). Romy also mentioned a note in the Scientology materials chart:

Complete chronological listing of the LRH lecture library: The lectures shown on this chronology are available in written form in the Research & Discovery volumes or as a special audio release.

An arrow leads from 1948 to 1950, which then shows the lecture “Public and Professional Course Lectures Los Angeles, California August-September 1950” (CSI 2010).

Nevertheless, the disputed points did not change in the updated, corrected version:

[To Sonia] What do you normally study?

*Sonia: Physics.*

All right, shut your eyes. (Of course, this type of examination actually means very little).

Read me something out of the physics textbook—something complicated.

*Sonia: Very complicated?*

Yeah, very complicated. Just look at the physics textbook and read it.

*Sonia: Which one?*

Well, which one do you want to read?

*Sonia: Well, let's look at Electromagnetic Theory.*

*Electromagnetic Theory.* Now that's a nice book for a young lady to have been studying.

*Male voice: Author.*

*Second male voice: By whom?*

*Sonia: Hugh Skillings. [sic: Skillings]*

Okay, and let's read something complicated out of it.

*Sonia: Well, when you open it up there's the Chapter One.*

Chapter One, well there usually is. Well let's go over to the middle of the book and read something.

*Sonia: All right.*

*Male voice: "Thirty-six."*

*Sonia: I'm sorry, I can't do that because I'm not conscious of page numbers when I read.*

Open it up to the middle someplace, the moment you're reading it. Now, what are you reading? (*pause*) Anywhere in the middle of the book.

How about Newton's formula of gravity, something that these people know.

*Sonia: In vector notations?*

Yes, in vector notations.

*Sonia: All right, yup, there's a vector notation in the book I'm using. It is written in darker ink—is equal to  $M$ , which is  $M$  which is not in dark ink, times  $A$ , which is also in the dark ink.*

Do you see the page number in it?

*Sonia: This is my mechanics book.*

Oh, this is a mechanics book?

*Sonia: Yes.*

Okay, actually, we could probably do a lot of that sort of thing. Your eyes are closed there, what color suit do I have on?

*Sonia: It's sort of grayish blue.*

Okay, and what's the color of my tie?

*Sonia: I'm afraid I didn't look at it.*

[...]

*Male voice: Recite a page from Dianetics.*

*Sonia: I read the book only once and was—afraid it was quite a while ago.*

All right.

*Sonia: I'm afraid I couldn't do it.*

Afraid you couldn't do it? Okay, let this young lady get tested tomorrow. We're not going to use her up tonight. Okay.

Thank you very much Miss Bianca. And thank you very good people for coming here tonight (L. Ron Hubbard Library 1994, 37–9).

*No News Is Good News*

Despite the claim that “Dozens of newspapers and magazines, including *Life*, had sent reporters and photographers to cover the event,” *Life* published nothing about it (Miller 1987, 164). Cox had even mentioned this omission in his letter to Gardner: “There were Life reporters present at that session, but nothing about her ever appeared in the magazine.” Given that several reporters were purportedly present, that none criticized the event does not match these accounts given that Hubbard’s book was on top of the *New York Times*’ bestseller list and in the public eye.

Indeed, negative reviews about *Dianetics* followed soon after, including one in *The New Republic* on 14 August (Gumpert 1950, 20–1) and another on 3 September in the *New York Herald Tribune Book Review* (Fromm 1950, 7), but none mentioned the Shrine Auditorium event. In fact, a news article published three weeks later also gave a snide review of Hubbard and *Dianetics*, but even this had noted that Hubbard had packed the auditorium and would continue to do so:

Hubbard rushed from New Jersey to Los Angeles, much as Dale Carnegie [1888–1955] had done at an earlier date, to supplement his written message by word-of-mouth exposition.

It is no trick at all for Hubbard to fill the Los Angeles Shrine Auditorium, at a dollar a head, to its 6,400 capacity and turn other thousands away. Undoubtedly, when the summer season of music under the stars is over, he will be found filling the 25,000-seat Hollywood Bowl (Foote 1950, 35).

That even a cynical reporter stated that there would be more sell-outs did not indicate any public fiasco. Likewise, a series of articles with a purportedly objective view about *Dianetics* and Hubbard ran from September 6–9 in the *Los Angeles Daily News*. These also never mentioned the Shrine Auditorium event (Clarke 1950a; Clarke 1950b; Clarke 1950c; and Clarke 1950d).

Thus, Cox believed that nothing published about the event, or at least nothing negative. This fueled his motivation to write Gardner: “The reason I tell you all of the above is because I’ve seen no published accounts of that speech.” Unbeknownst to him, however, *PARADE* published an article two months later with a favorable report from that night:

Other reports are even more impressive. Sonya Bianchi, a favorite student of founder Hubbard, and a winsome graduate student at Wellesley College, made this report to

6,000 dianetics enthusiasts in Los Angeles: “I had violent sinus trouble. I also had a strange and embarrassing allergy to fresh paint for days after I came in contact with it. I had a painful itching in my eyebrows. Both conditions have cleared up, and I feel like a million dollars.” End of Bianchi’s report (Sprague and Wild 1950, 6–7).

Russell Miller took her words and spun them to fit Cox’s narrative:

In a tremulous voice she told the meeting that Dianetics had cleared up her sinus trouble and cured her ‘strange and embarrassing’ allergy to paint. ‘For days after I came in contact with paint I had a painful itching in my eyebrows,’ she stammered. ‘Now both conditions have cleared up and I feel like a million dollars’ (Miller 1987, 165).

The problem with his version was that it was entirely fictional; Miller plagiarized a *written* report to the newspaper magazine, the only publication to issue her statement. Indeed, it does not appear in the transcript published by the Church of Scientology in 1987, when his book was published, nor in the 1994 edition—which came out later. When asked about whether he had heard the audio or obtained this information some other way, Miller stated that he could not recall, as it was over 30 years ago and he had given all of his records to Jon Atack (Miller, email to author, 29 April 2019). Atack in turn stated that the UCLA Special Collections Department would have his work as “all of my collection is copied there” (Atack, email to author, 26 April 2019). Yet no such statement, record or mention appeared in that collection. The closest statement to appear on either transcript was when Hubbard asked Sonya if she used to have psychosomatic conditions, to which she replied “Yes, I had hay fever, several types of allergies plus chronic sinusitis” (L. Ron Hubbard Library 1994, 35). Evidently, Miller based his version of that night on both Cox’s and Ackerman’s interviews and added supposed nervousness and stammering to Bianchi’s written report. In fact, the transcripts showed the opposite:

Now did you use to have any psychosomatic illnesses?

*Sonia: Yes, I had hay fever, several types of allergies plus chronic sinusitis.*

Yes, and were you happy or normally...

*Sonia: Well, I was considered a rather moody person.*

Moody?

*Sonia: Mm-hm.*

Were you ever nervous?

*Sonia: Oh, very.*

And by the way, was this a record of psychometry which was available?

*Sonia: Yes, at the university.*

All right. And how do you feel now?

*Sonia: Fine.*

Fine.

*Sonia: Certainly* (L. Ron Hubbard Library 1994, 35).

Considering that this was a very recent, well-publicized, local, relevant event apparently covered by multiple reporters, the absence of negative mentions in any publications until Cox's letter seems unusual. Given the general negative reception of *Dianetics* from news outlets, the event that Cox described should have provided ample material for criticism and ridicule for any reporter, yet neutral or positive depictions appeared for some time until his 1952 letter.

Furthermore, if the event were witnessed by 6,000 people and was the rowdy catastrophe that Cox and Endfield described, then surely word would have spread and hurt book sales. After all, "good—or at least interesting—news travels fast" (Evans 1973, 49). Instead, *Dianetics* remained in the top spot for four more weeks with only a slight dip for two weeks and then returned to the top spot, remaining in the top ten books for months afterwards according to the *Los Angeles Times* (Meepthorp 2017). In short, what known available data that was found did not match either of their claims.

### *A Brief Inter-Omission*

Another problem that these stories have are their unreliable source notes. For example, Reitman's claim that de Mille and his girlfriend witnessed the event contradicted her notes: "The account of the Shrine Auditorium event draws from Gardner's *Fads and Fallacies* and from Russell Miller's *Barefaced* [sic] *Messiah*" (Reitman 2011, 380). Gardner's book never mentioned de Mille or his girlfriend, and Miller's book made no reference to either at Shrine (Miller 1987, 182). Although contacted repeatedly about the sources for her claims, Reitman did not respond. Her uncited source, however, was a 1986 interview transcript between Miller and de Mille:

I first saw him in t Shrine Auditorium giving lecture in 50. Remember someone yelling “Are your cavities filling up?” Hubbard hd v bad teeth, he ws always hving trouble with dentists, fit in w engram thing they were always giving him laughing gas.

First impression. My girlfriend (now wife) ws I don’t want anything to do with this rube, this slob. I thought this is t great man who made this grt discovery and whatever his shortcomings may be hey must be discpouted because he has t answer. He ws fluent, informal, his tricks worked on t people they worked on. Packed mtg. Its enormous bldg (de Mille 1986, 4).

De Mille was correct as an audience member had asked a similar question:

*Male voice: A personal question in the balcony.*

[Hubbard:] Okay!

*Male voice: I have read a little sheet of paper and I can’t—you’ve had some teeth trouble and that the cavities have begun to heal themselves. Is there any degree of truth in that?*

*Announcer: The question is “Are the holes in Mr. Hubbard’s teeth filling in?” (L. Ron Hubbard Library 1994, 10).*

The rest of the interview did not support Reitman’s claims whatsoever. Richard de Mille’s girlfriend and eventual wife Margaret Belgrano van Fossen (1925–2014) may have disliked Hubbard’s appearance, but nothing suggested that she thought he was a fraud or that the event was a failure. Reitman’s claim that de Mille “was unswayed” actually countered “the Clear disaster” narrative, as de Mille had stated, “his tricks worked on the people they worked on,” which suggested that Hubbard’s “tricks” worked as intended and there were no issues at Shrine.

It also was apparent that Endfield and every author who referenced “the color of Hubbard’s tie when his back was turned” got this from Gardner’s book (or one another’s) and not any primary sources (Gardner 1957, 271). The giveaway was that Cox had actually stated in his letter to Gardner that Bianchi “couldn’t remember the color of Mr. Hubbard’s tie when *her* back was turned to him!” When Gardner transposed the order, however, this error carried forth and repeated despite being contradicted by Cox’s own account. This further demonstrated a complete lack of investigation as well as prior incorrect claims working their way into future ones, such as with this one which Endfield obviously made up. If this were not enough, what further discounted their claims was the fact that in both transcripts her eyes were closed:

Your eyes are closed there, what color suit do I have on?

Sonia: It's sort of grayish blue.

Okay, and what's the color of my tie?

Sonia: I'm afraid I didn't look at it (L. Ron Hubbard Library 1994, 38).

Another example of omitted information appeared in the 18 August 1986 transcript notes of Miller's interview with Cox. According to him, A. E. van Vogt made the claim, not Hubbard:

Climax of t mtg ws t clear called her on t stage. Supposedly she hd total recall—a phrase tt ws much used at t time—She cld supposedly recall any page of any text book she ws studying physics. She cldnt remember a thing. Van Vogt explained tt she ws asked “Sonja will you come out here nw” and the “now” froze her in present time (Cox 1986, 1).

Cox's statement that “van Vogt explained” and not Hubbard did not make it into Miller's book. In Miller's interview transcript with van Vogt, neither man brought up the Shrine Auditorium event, so there is no confirmation either way. However, Cox's letter to Gardner underscored that van Vogt was on stage, a detail that all other witnesses not only omitted, but also one that Cox let slip, which countered his entire story.

SHRINE mts (6B)

cox/1

Interview Arthur Jean Cox, Hollywood, 18 Aug 86:

Month before publication of Dianetics membership of Lasfas doubled. Hubbard and Campbell were generating rumours. Even before it appeared in Astounding there were rumours everywhere.

Originally he called it traumatic psychology, he mentioned it at Lasfas.

Theodore Sturgeon story called t Golden Egg in Unknown Worlds in 41 edited by Campbell and featured Elron "With his new found knowledge Elron found it easy to extract money from the man in the street."

Story of how alien comes to earth in human form, his name ws Elron.

Shrine mtg I noticed street car ws v crowded and everyone got off at The Shrine. When Hubbard got up man stood up and sd he didnt believe a word of it, crowd ws unruly. They wanted him to go on stage he went up and Hubbard hd conversation with him. Climax of t mtg ws t clear called her on t stage. Supposedly she hd total recall - a phrase tt ws much used as t time - She cld supposedly recall any page of any text book she ws studying physics. She cldnt remember a thing. Van Vogt explained tt she ws asked "Sonja will you come out here nw" and the "now" froze her in present time.

People were shouting questions at her fm t floor. She cldnt remember t colour of t tie Hubbard ws wearing. Hubbard turned his back and they asked her t colour of his tie. Some people got up and walked out. The crowd ws boisterous but not ill humoured.

Hubbard ws there on stage. He ws v understanding abt Ms Bianca's performance - he ws v good humoured. I ws teletype operator and stringer for Los Angeles radio station.

Amazed at number of people there. Auditorium ws packed. Dianetics ws on NY Times best seller list at No 1.

Every time Dianetics ws mentioned in t press, t membership at t Foundation went up.

Figure 3. 18 August 1986 Arthur Jean Cox interview transcript by Russell Miller.

*An Evening to Misremember*

Cox made another claim in his letter to Gardner, which Miller repeated as a fact:

After a few such turns, a young man arose in the audience and shouted, “Ladies and gentlemen, somehow I can’t help but feel that all this has been pre-arranged.” So the mob commenced shouting for Hubbard to take someone from the audience. One burly fellow jumped on the piano in the orchestra pit, and from there onto the state [sic]. But the crowd had taken up a different chant, “Take him! Take him!” meaning the person who had interrupted the proceedings. He gave his name and introduced himself as an actor. He sat down, facing Hubbard (there were two chairs on the stage). He spoke in polite, cultured tones. He said that his father had studied with Freud. Hubbard made a few patronizing remarks about the greatness of Freud, and commenced to work on him. He asked a few questions along the line of “Who is the best-controlled member of your family?” It was apparent instantly what he was trying to do: He was going to show that his protagonist had an engram which made it necessary for him to control himself at all times, and so was antipathetic to dianetics on that basis. However, the other fellow kept thwarting him by replying in the negative on most of the questions. The audience quickly tired of this, and the new shout was “Throw him out, throw him out!” The fellow cordially shook hands with Hubbard and left the stage (Cox letter to Gardner 30 April 1952).

When compared against the transcripts, a very different course of events unfolded. In fact, Hubbard segued from a prior demonstration to explain his intentions in dealing with the man. The dialogue does not suggest any sort of interruption or failure:

“You’re just like your mother.” This has a tendency to shift valence. And the person will stay in the shifted valence because there might have been other people around and mother also said to them “You’re just like your mother.” It may be in the engram bank somewhere. This is a valence shifter.

Another type of valence shifter is “I have to pretend I am somebody else; I can’t be myself around you.” Now, that valence shifter puts a person, you might say, in another valence. That is to say, he is not himself, he thinks of himself as his father, that he is his father. A complete identification with another human being.

By straight line memory we can sometimes *part* the identification so that a person comes off from being just like Father and is himself, and at that moment will attain a greater perceptic range. In other words, he’ll be able to hear, see, feel better as he returns on the track to old incidents.

Some people have sonic—that is to say, he can hear things which are said to him. Some people cannot, and the valence is one of the reasons why people can't. Now, we are trying to discover what valence people are in. You follow me? Okay.

**LRH:** [to pc (pre-clear)] Tell me your name, sir.

**PC:** *Harry Wasserman.*

**LRH:** Harry Wasserman. Very pleased to meet you.

**PC:** *How do you do, Mr. Hubbard.*

**LRH:** I was demonstrating here and would like to demonstrate just this straight line memory. It is important as a diagnostic technique. We're trying to discover somebody's dramatization—somebody in the family's dramatization on the theory that that dramatization will appear in an engram. Once you know the words in the dramatization it is, of course, very easy to find the engram. So in straight memory we force the person, as best we can, by various questions to recover memory of one of these dramatizations.

[to pc] For instance, did your father used to get angry?

**PC:** *Very.*

**LRH:** He used to get very angry?

**PC:** *Very.*

**LRH:** What'd he used to say?

**PC:** *He's told my mother to hold her mouth!*

**LRH:** Yeah, "Hold your mouth."

**PC:** *Yeah, in German.*

**LRH:** In German.

**PC:** *Yeah.*

**LRH:** How'd he say it?

**PC:** *Halt den mund!*

**LRH:** Halt den mund.

**PC:** *Yes.*

**LRH:** My German is not so good.

**PC:** *(laughs)*

**LRH:** [to audience] That's nothing. I was running a case the other day in Chinese!

That's a very brilliant boy, by the way, who is in charge of Honolulu now, he's making things hum out there.

[to pc] Now tell me, did he ever punish you very much?

**PC:** *Oh, extensively.*

**LRH:** What did he say to you when he punished you?

**PC:** *“Dummkopf!”*

**LRH:** Mm-hm, “dummkopf.” Did he ever tell you to control yourself?

**PC:** *No. He figured that the punishment would do the job.*

**LRH:** Uh-huh. Whoever said you were like your father?

**PC:** *My wife.*

**LRH:** Your wife said you were like your father?

**PC:** *Yes.*

**LRH:** Have you been happy about this?

**PC:** *No.*

**LRH:** Now, let’s remember a specific moment.

**PC:** *Right.*

**LRH:** Can you remember a moment when she said this? Not reverie, just remember it straight. Remember a moment when she said, “You’re just like your father.”

**PC:** *I was very angry.*

**LRH:** Uh-huh. Do you remember when she said it?

**PC:** *Yes.*

**LRH:** Where was she standing?

**PC:** *She was standing next to me in the kitchen.*

**LRH:** Uh-huh, and what did she say?

**PC:** *She said, “You’re just like your father!” Like this.*

**LRH:** Uh-huh. How do you feel when you contact that?

**PC:** *Well, I-I sort of get a mingled emotion, I sort of feel strange, a little elated, and strange, a little disappointed.*

**LRH:** Why?

**PC:** *Well, I don’t admire my father too much.*

**LRH:** You don’t admire him too much.

**PC:** *Not too much.*

**LRH:** Did your mother ever say you were like your father?

**PC:** *Never!*

**LRH:** Who does your wife remind you of?

**PC:** *(pause) (laughing) Well, she's unlike any other person that I've ever met before.*

**LRH:** She is completely?

**PC:** *Yes, yes.*

**LRH:** You get along well with her though?

**PC:** *After therapy.*

**LRH:** Ah, ho! All right. Now, tell me this then, was your mother well self-controlled and so forth, very self-controlled?

**PC:** *Quite self-controlled.*

**LRH:** Did she ever tell you to control yourself?

**PC:** *No.*

**LRH:** Never did?

**PC:** *No.*

**LRH:** All right, did your father punish you very often?

**PC:** *Yes.*

**LRH:** Did you have an elder brother?

**PC:** *No.*

**LRH:** Only child?

**PC:** *No, I was the only male child.*

**LRH:** Was there an older sister?

**PC:** *Older sister, yes.*

**LRH:** Did he ever call her a dummkopf?

**PC:** *Yes.*

**LRH:** Yes.

**PC:** *A great deal.*

**LRH:** Yes, a great deal. How much older?

**PC:** *Year and a half.*

**LRH:** Year and a half older. When she was a little baby would he have called her a dummkopf?

**PC:** *Would he have?*

**LRH:** Yeah, would he?

**PC:** *I don't think so. He's partial towards girls.*

**LRH:** Partial, huh.

**PC:** *Yes.*

**LRH:** When did he say he was partial toward girls?

**PC:** *He never said so.*

**LRH:** He just acts that way?

**PC:** *Yes.*

**LRH:** All right. What would your mother say if she were very angry with you?

**PC:** *(pause) She would say "Why?"*

**LRH:** And what else?

**PC:** *(pause) "That is not right!"*

**LRH:** She would say what?

**PC:** *"That is not right."*

**LRH:** How would she say this?

**PC:** *Well, she'd say it in English.*

**LRH:** She would say "That is not right"?

**PC:** *Yes, "That is not right."*

**LRH:** Mm-hm. Would she tell the daughter this, your elder sister?

**PC:** *Yeah, she would say that.*

**LRH:** "That is not right."

**PC:** *"That is not right."*

**LRH:** What are you doing in therapy?

**PC:** *Auditing and being audited.*

**LRH:** Yes, but in auditing do you ever have trouble with your data?

**PC:** *Sometimes.*

**LRH:** You change it sometimes as you're running it?

**PC:** *Yes. (pause) Jeez! (laughing)*

**LRH:** Thank you.

**PC:** *Thank you very much. (laughing)*

[to audience] Just showing you the mechanics of this. They are very simple. We're trying to establish first, does he have control circuitry (L. Ron Hubbard Library 1994, 20–5).

To summarize: Hubbard asked Wasserman about a time when he was very upset, to which Wasserman replied when his wife said that he was like his father, a very angry person that punished and belittled him. He also added that his mother when angry would say, “That is not right!” In short, Wasserman’s parents when angry called him “Dummkopf!” or said “That is not right!” Wasserman noticed that this comparison to his angry father by his wife when she was angry resulted in an odd “mingling” sensation. He also stated half-jokingly that he got along with her after therapy. Anger in others was present in all events, as his wife’s angry attitude reminded him of both parents’ anger. Not wanting to be made wrong (“Dummkopf!” “That is not right!”) or be like his angry, uncontrolled father, then during Dianetics sessions he would change the information so as to seem like his “quite self-controlled” mother, to avoid anger and be “right.” Upon this realization, Wasserman laughed and the demonstration ended.

Notably, almost none of Cox’s claims checked out as they would have also made great news. No mention of Freud or Commander “Snake” Thompson occurred at any point. Wasserman never mentioned being an actor. Most answers were in the affirmative, and some negative ones were actually confirmations of upsets:

**LRH:** Have you been happy about this [being called your father]?

**PC:** *No. [...]*

**LRH:** You don’t admire him too much.

**PC:** *Not too much.*

There was no sudden removal of Wasserman with a failed outcome, nor wild crowd interruptions before or after the demonstration. In fact, quite the opposite occurred, as apparently Wasserman had a sudden realization “Jeez!” and laughter, indicative of the end of a Dianetics session. Additionally, Hubbard explained at the outset how valences can shift due to phrases such as “You’re just like your mother” and negative emotions, which he then proceeded to demonstrate with Wasserman. In short, Cox’s recollections were again incorrect.

### *Story Problems*

Ackerman also mentioned the event in his interview with Miller:

There ws big big mtg packed at Shrine Auditorium and there ws girl Sonja Bianca she ws supposed to be t first clear. and people put her on spot, what is on page 355 second line fm top. Course she cld not do these things, so we were not v convinced.

[...]

Ws v interested to be present when Life ws interviewing t world's furst clear, Sonja Bianca, in little room in LA before she ws to make an appearance tt evg in the Shrine. The presentatio of a dianetic clear ws a great disappointment. She ws handed a book, asked to glance at page at random and it ws thought w eidetic memory she cld repeat page and she cldnt do it v well. Explanation givern ws tt she ws not public spkr, hd fgaced an audience befroe and ws kinda nervous. That ws not my idea of a clear – I thought clr wld be in command of audience/ It ws audience of believers who werer waiting to see t miracle. I ws somewhat disappointed not to see a vibrant woman in commamd of herself and t situation.

LIFE interview did not impress either.

Shrine mtg. The tie story is familiar.

Don't think anyone walked out (Ackerman 1986, 1 & 7).

Ackerman said that “The tie story is familiar” but did not confirm it. Nor did he confirm people walking out or a rowdy audience as they were “an audience of believers” waiting to see the miracle. In fact, no other witnesses supported Cox's statement until *after* he wrote it. Bianchi actually had stated, “I'm afraid I didn't see it” but not that she could not remember it. Atack had even confirmed this in his book: “the question about the tie remains, as does one about physics, with a vague answer” (Atack 1990, 115).

Ackerman also had claimed things not in either transcript, such as “She ws handed a book, asked to glance at page at random and it ws thought w eidetic memory she cld repeat page and she cldnt do it v well.” Not only did this not happen, but this was not what Hubbard claimed, at least not at the lecture, but that it was a trained process:

*Male voice: Mr. Hubbard, one question please?*

You bet.

*Male voice: You say in your book that a clear has eidetic memory, sonically and visually. Is this true of this young lady? Does she have eidetic memory?*

You say I say it in my book; yes, it is true that those things which a person has actually looked at are recorded. The photographic type of memory where one looks at a page, a whole page, and has that whole page on record is a trained process. But what a person has looked at, that is, actually *has* read, *has* done, is a matter of record (L. Ron Hubbard Library 1994, 36–7).

Ackerman's comment also contradicts all the other accounts in which she was asked to remember a page of something that she had once read, whether *Dianetics* or a physics textbook. Similarly, Jack Horner, who was interviewed for Miller's book but whose story did not make it in for this segment, gave a different account and backed up Hubbard's answer:

I ws hired as instructor to teach first course in LA. He hd big demo at Shrine auditorium. 5,000 people showed up to see Hubbard. I ws on stage w stage when he gave a demo except t girl he presented as clear did not match expectations.

Sonja Bianca ws pianist. Purpose ws to introduce Hubbard and first clear. Tie story something like tt. That ws an expectation tt a clear wld hv total recall – but he never sd it wld be instantaneous. He never claimed clear wld be like a computer. It went disastrously fm tt standooint. She ws presented as first public clear but she invalidated concept because she cld not answer questions like this. She ws pianist fm Boston. Those who came to find something wrong found something wrong, more objective dont necessarily think one demo is a failure.

Hubbard presented her and said he had cleared her. He also gave a demo session o girl called Marcia who ws on staff. He ran a grief incident. Then Sonja ws first clear. Hubbard invited questions fm audience and it quickly went wrong fm standpoint of being able to instantly asnwer questions like exactly what did you hv for breakfast of morning of Oct 3 1942? (Horner 1986, 2).

Miller used only the last line of Horner's interview, which he embellished and added in his retelling: “What did you have for breakfast on October 3 1942?” somebody yelled” (Miller 1987, 165). Even this, however, was uncorroborated in the transcripts or by other witnesses. Cox would later make the forgotten breakfast claim with a different date in the 1997 *Secret Lives* interview, but only *after* it came out in Miller's book a decade before.

Likewise, Endfield did not ask Bianchi for “simple formulas” or “Boyle's Law,” which she could not recite. Aside from no audience members asking this, Endfield's statement conflicts with Hubbard's request: “Read me something out of the physics textbook—something complicated [...] How about Newton's formula of gravity, something that these people know.” To which she responded, “All right, yup, there's a vector notation in the book I'm using. It is written in

darker ink—is equal to M, which is M which is not in dark ink, times A, which is also in the dark ink” (L. Ron Hubbard Library 1994, 37–8). M times A is the vector form of mass times acceleration, known as  $F=MA$  or Newton’s Second Law, a simple formula.

*And “Now” for a Clear and “Present-Time” Danger*

Cox’s claim that Hubbard’s alleged excuse “‘now’ had frozen her in ‘present time’ and blocked her total recall” was fabricated. In both the 1987 and 1994 transcript versions of the event, Hubbard not only explained that this could not happen, well before Sonya appeared onstage, but the example he gave was for a different woman altogether:

LRH: [to pc] All right, Lynn, close your eyes. Now, anytime in the future that I utter to you the word “cancelled,” anything which I have said to you while you are lying here is to be cancelled and will become completely nonaberrative, okay?

PC: *Mm-hm*

LRH: [to audience] All right, we installed a canceller because sometimes people do go to sleep and we don’t know it.

[to pc] All right, let’s find out now something very important. How old are you? (*snap*)

PC: *Thirty-two.*

LRH: [to audience] Ah, hah! She’s in present time. This is so unusual, I have to stop here. This stops the whole show.

It says in the book, if the preclear is stuck in present time ... Now, the editor of the book erroneously took the quotations out from around the words “present time” since no one could possibly be stuck in present time and he’s *always* stuck in past time. He isn’t stuck at the end of his time track, he is stuck *on* his time track somewhere and it is up to you to find out where he is (L. Ron Hubbard Library 1994, 27).

True enough, the first edition of *Dianetics* has a subsection entitled “STUCK IN PRESENT TIME” which explains that this is an apparent, but incorrect, diagnosis:

But the case which seems to be stuck in present time and on whom no repeater phrase works is very often quite puzzling to an auditor [...] when a case is stuck in present time either when it is opened or during progress, it is highly charged with occluded emotion and it is obeying a restimulated engram to the effect that it must go all the way to now and

stay there [...] Even a “stuck in present time” case will eventually begin to return on the sole principle of repeater technique (Hubbard 1950, 283 and 285).

Two other segments underscore this technique: “If he is stuck in present time, start him on repeater technique again, suggesting bouncers” and, “He can be stuck in present time, which would mean he has a bouncer thrusting him all the way up the track” (Hubbard 1950, 277 and 292–3). In other words, people unable to run *Dianetics* and seemingly stuck in the present moment do so because a mental trauma so intense keeps them in the present instead of allowing them to remember the past experience. Thus, they are “bounced” into the present and “stuck” there by something from their past, rather than being in the present of their own accord. Whether Hubbard’s claim is actually true here is moot, however, but it remains more consistent with his lecture comments on the book, which mentioned cases that “seem to be” in present time and referred to the term “stuck in present time” in quotes. Given that Cox had already mentioned van Vogt in his letter to Gardner, his later slip to Miller that van Vogt also made the “stuck in present-time” claim was a revelation as it aligned with the other available evidence.

In fact, neither transcript has Hubbard ask Bianchi to come out “now.” There are uses of “now,” but no commands appear, aside from “Now tell me something about yourself.”

Now, I want to show you one thing before we get out of here, just one thing only. The goal of Dianetic therapy is the Clear.

The psychometry on a Clear demonstrates him to be without aberration. Now, I would be very pleased if you would give your attention to a young lady whose case has this great interest to us. She was cleared by an auditor who knew no more of Dianetics than the book. She was a relatively easy case, this is true, but all he knew was the handbook. He took the handbook and he ran out the engram bank. And as a result, the case checks out as Clear.

Now, the technical definition of Clear is merely a case which has been returned all the way up and down the time track; we don’t find any engrams. Psychometry on this case demonstrates the person to be without aberration.

Tomorrow morning a well-known psychometrist in this city is going to give this lady complete psychometry. It was set up for this morning but things mixed up so I haven’t the data to hand here. And any of you who would be interested in this young lady, if they seem interested in this psychometry (which I assure you is disinterested psychometry, so signed, by somebody wholly qualified) or actually is interested in meeting this young lady (if that person is a professional like a psychiatrist who wishes to examine her in any way),

arrangements will be made for that tomorrow at the office. It would be tomorrow afternoon—she has to take this psychometry in the morning.

Now I want to introduce you to a young lady of Boston, a Dianetic Clear who has come here tonight to show you that there are such things. Miss Sonia Bianca.

How are you, Sonny?

*Sonia: Fine.*

Well, I was sorry to keep you back of the wings all this time but I'm sure that now you've walked out, that people like to see this. Now tell me something about yourself here. Are you in a university? (L. Ron Hubbard Library 1994, 34–5).

### *A Narrative Controlled by the Cox-swain*

Cox repeated and modified the story he had originally sent to Gardner in his interview with Miller only to further embellish it in a 1997 interview on BBC Radio 4's *Secret Lives*:

Well, later in 1950, Hubbard who had been back east all this time, came to Los Angeles and present—apparently there was going to be a huge presenta...—he was going to speak at the Shrine Auditorium, which is a large auditorium in Los Angeles. Of course, I had to attend it. I caught a street car there, going there. And the street car was very crowded, more and more people got on at every stop and it was like the New York subway at rush hour, but I thought that not everyone could be going to this—to this talk. But when we got to the Shrine Auditorium, everyone got off, except the driver. They were all going to hear L. Ron Hubbard. I managed to get in and get a seat at the very back of the auditorium. Hubbard came out followed by A.E. van Vogt, they made various remarks and claims about *Dianetics*, what it could do. They brought in a—somebody, they audited and cleared of a—of a grief engram and uh, somebody in the audience stood up and said—shouted that he thought all of this had been prearranged. So Hubbard invited this man—rather I should say that Hubbard was going to invite somebody from the audience onto the stage to talk about—to talk to him. And the audience, which was extremely rowdy—it's been described as good-humored but it seemed to me very noisy and rowdy, kept shouting that this particular man who had made this objection to be brought up. So he was and Hubbard sat down with him and—a couple of chairs face to face, talked to him for a while but didn't come to anything. In fact it was very—very anti-climactic. But then the climax of the evening was when he brought out a Clear. One of the claims of *Dianetics* is that a person could be cleared of all engrams, which would mean that they would be cleared of all neuroses, all illnesses, all incapacities. And he brought out this woman, Sonya Bianca who was a student at some eastern college, and she was supposed to be a Clear. She was supposed to have total recall. She could uh—

recollect with photographic clarity everything she'd ever read, everything she'd ever experienced, and so forth. So various members of the audience called questions at her: could she remember what was said on page 217 of her physics textbook? She couldn't. Could she remember what she had had for breakfast the morning of August 17, 1946? She couldn't. Then various people called out for Hubbard to turn his back on her and see if she could remember the color of his tie. She couldn't and um, so that was—at that moment the whole business sort of collapsed. People started leaving the auditorium. A few days later, we were told that what had happened is that when Hubbard had called Sonya out from the wings, he had said to her—he said to her, “Would you come out here *now*, Sonya?” And so when he used the word “now” he stuck her in present time so that she was unable to remember these things from the past.

*So that was the great excuse?*

That was the great excuse, yeah (Cox 1997).

Conversely, on the same series Ackerman told a completely different version of events:

Well the presentation of the first Clear had started earlier in the day when *Life* magazine came and—and interviewed this young lady, and when she was up on the stage the expectation was that anyone in the audience could uh, take a dictionary and turn to a page and—and read three or four words or something and—and uh, she could repeat it all, was supposed to have an eidetic memory. And she was a total disappointment. Afterwards the explanation was that she was just a, I guess a little farm girl and she had never uh, in the—in public on a stage, and was—had kind of stage fright and I felt “that shouldn't happen to a Clear person, they shouldn't have stage fright.” Here was a whole auditorium, nobody was ready to throw rotten eggs at her or anything, every—everybody was just on tenterhooks waiting with belief for the—for the wonderful presentation, so it was quite a letdown.

*Did the audience start walking out? Did they react?*

Nobody walked out or anything, but there was just kind of a lot of mumbling, a low hum around the auditorium of disappointment.

*How did Ron react to it?*

I didn't, uh—I'm trying to think if Ron was even present at that time, I don't draw back any—any memory of him (Ackerman 1997).

At this point, the reporter changed topics, ignoring that either Cox, Ackerman or both were incorrect about that night, given that both presented contradictory stories and incorrect information. Cox described mass walkouts, rowdiness and constant interruptions while Ackerman said that nobody walked out and people were respectful, and did not even recall Hubbard being there. That Ackerman

claimed that Hubbard was not present is definitely false, whereas Cox's claim that Hubbard later used the excuse of freezing her in "present time" with the word "now" entirely contradicts *Dianetics*, the lecture transcripts, and even Miller's dramatized fictional version, where Hubbard immediately gave the excuse onstage to the crowd. Nevertheless, these contradictions were neither noticed nor further investigated.

What's more, in May 1951, Ackerman had claimed that he had seen a clear:

P.S.: AND HUBBARD'S AGENT—FOREST [sic] J. ACKERMAN, ONE OF THE LEADING STF FANS, AGREES WITH HIS TOP CLIENT 100%! [...] I have seen a clear, and at least 6000 other people in Los Angeles have seen a clear. Her name was given publicly, so I do not see why I should not repeat it here: Sonya Bianca [sic]. I do not know what her fate may be—eventually she may change her name to escape publicity! (Hubbard 1951, 113).

If Hubbard wrote this part of the article, then Ackerman never disavowed it, which meant that he either felt it was true or did not mind his name being used to sell books (as he was Hubbard's literary agent at the time), in which case this casts doubts on his credibility. If Ackerman fabricated this story to sell copies of *Dianetics*, then this also casts doubt on his later interview credibility with Miller in 1987 and with *Secret Lives* in 1997, possibly when he felt that he could speak more freely after Hubbard's death, as there could also be financial motive for all anecdotes. If Ackerman actually wrote this part of the article, however, then this was the earliest, most recent eyewitness commentary after the event, surpassing even Cox's by a year. This suggests that in 1951, Ackerman felt that he had seen a clear at Shrine, contradicting his later interviews that contained some factual errors. Either way, this made him a rather unreliable witness as he was either dishonest and said whatever was needed to fit the popular narrative and profit, or more likely he told the truth initially but over time his memory and recollections became less reliable.

### *Conclusion*

There was some truth to all three stories. Endfield correctly noted that Bianchi studied physics, Cox correctly noted that she was from an eastern college and didn't know the color of Hubbard's tie—although she stated this was because she had not looked at it—while Ackerman noted that the audience was respectful and

calm. To know for certain what actually occurred one would need to hear the audio tape, but even without it none of the various accounts matched, as a new detail from one person tended to work its way into later versions of others' stories. As with any myth, the tale grew over the decades with various retellings.

The problem with memories, whether from 2, 34, 36, 37, 47, or 68 years before, is that they are generally unreliable when compared to recorded materials such as audio and transcripts. Even if the transcripts were edited, what they presented refuted virtually every claim. Even if one dismissed the transcripts as fabricated, then this would fail to explain the absence of negative press about the event until after Cox's letter. After all, there were allegedly dozens of reporters present. All three stories also failed to explain the increased sales of *Dianetics* in Los Angeles for weeks after or the sold-out classes which followed immediately. Given that both Endfield and Cox mentioned how quickly word spread in Los Angeles, which resulted in a full Shrine Auditorium, word should also have spread quickly enough to affect sales and classes if so many people had felt that it was a scam. Lastly, the stories also contradict one another and the authors' own later recollections.

In reality, these three men were unimpressed with what they witnessed at Shrine Auditorium and also had unreliable memories. When writers and journalists eager to smear Hubbard and *Dianetics* not only copied each other's notes but also failed to compare the claims and available materials against each other, they produced a nearly seventy-year rumor. This example may help to explain why Hubbard made such a point to record and transcribe his lectures, not only for future preservation, but also for others to verify claims such as these for themselves. Hopefully, the Church of Scientology will release the audio of the event soon, if any indeed exists, but until then, this examination of available data concludes this tale of the theater of the mind.

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## The Gnostic L. Ron Hubbard: Was He Influenced by Aleister Crowley?

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**ABSTRACT:** Scientology was defined by its founder himself, L. Ron Hubbard, as a “Gnostic religion.” In 1969, however, a Trotskyist Australian journalist and an opponent of Scientology, Alex Mitchell, disclosed in a *Sunday Times* article that Hubbard had been involved, in 1945–46, in the activities of California’s Agapé Lodge of the Ordo Templi Orientis, an occult organization led by British magus Aleister Crowley. The article generated a cottage industry of exposés criticizing Hubbard as having been a member of a “black magic” organization. Some scholars also believe Hubbard to have been influenced by Crowley in his subsequent writings about Dianetics and Scientology. While conflicting narratives exist about why exactly Hubbard participated in the activities of the Agapé Lodge and his leader, the rocket scientist Jack Parsons, the article argues that Hubbard researched magic well before 1945, came to conclusions about the role of magic in Western culture that are largely shared by 21<sup>st</sup> century scholars, and created with Scientology a system that is inherently religious rather than magic.

**KEYWORDS:** Scientology, L. Ron Hubbard, Babalon Working, Aleister Crowley, Jack Parsons, John Whiteside Parsons, O.T.O., Agapé Lodge.

### *Scientology and Gnosticism*

Some weeks ago, I was visited by a leading Chinese scholar of religion, Zhang Xinzhang from Zhejiang University. Zhang is a scholar of Gnosticism and a critic of movements the Chinese government identifies as *xie jiao* (“heterodox teachings,” sometimes translated, less accurately, as “evil cults”). We discussed the Gnostic features he found in several new religious movements active in China. There, “Gnostic” may be used to criticize Christian movements as “heretic” or “heterodox.”

I told Zhang that not all new religious movements are offended when they are called “Gnostic.” A case in point I mentioned is Scientology. When, in 2017, Aldo Natale Terrin, an Italian scholar of religion of international fame (and a Catholic priest) published a book on Scientology, insisting it is basically a Gnostic religion (Terrin 2017), reactions by Scientologists were very favorable. Presentations of Terrin’s book were organized by the Church of Scientology itself in various Italian cities. Éric Roux, a leading European Scientologist, expressed his appreciation for Terrin in his own 2018 presentation of Scientology (Roux 2018). As early as 2006, an article by French sociologist Régis Dericquebourg, emphasizing the Gnostic nature of Scientology, had already been favorably received by Scientologists (Dericquebourg 2006). L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986), the founder of Scientology, had claimed himself more than once that he had founded a “Gnostic religion” or a “Gnostic faith” (see e.g. Hubbard 1955, 152) and that Scientologists are “Gnostics” (Hubbard 1955, 158).

Nor does Scientology complain when it is claimed that it is part of Western esotericism. This is J. Gordon Melton’s interpretation of Scientology (Melton 2000; see Introvigne 2018), a scholar again often referred to favorably by Scientologists.

### *The Fall and Rise of Aleister Crowley*

There is, however, an old literature connecting Scientology with Gnosticism that Scientologists traditionally disliked. It includes articles and portions of books mentioning California’s Agapé Lodge of the Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.). Hubbard joined the Lodge in 1945 and lived shortly in the home of its most well-known member and leader (but not founder), rocket propulsion scientist John Whiteside (“Jack”) Parsons (1914–1952). The international leader (but, again, not founder) of the O.T.O., or at least of its largest branch, to which the Agapé Lodge was connected, was British magus Aleister Crowley (1875–1947).

Crowley was widely regarded as a sinister character and a Satanist. He contributed to this image himself and did what he could to scandalize both the media and the Christians by proclaiming himself “the Great Beast” of the *Book of Revelation*, “Master Therion” and “To Mega Therion” (i.e. “the Great Beast” in Greek), and not denying, at times even embracing, his popular press’ designation as “the wickedest man in the world.” One label Crowley did not accept, however,

was “Satanist.” He was radically anti-Christian and believed Satanists were playing in the hands of Christianity by accepting the Bible as true, since it was in the Bible that they had found the story of Satan in the first place. While writing hymns to Satan in the tradition of “romantic Satanism” (Schock 2003; Faxneld 2017), Crowley always insisted that, for those who do not believe in the Bible, Satan obviously does not exist. Satanists, “for all their pretended devotion to Lucifer or Belial [are] sincere Christians, and inferior Christians as that” (Crowley 1979, 126), as they implicitly proclaim the truth of the Bible in the very moment they are condemning and blaspheming it.

Crowley’s dark fame as a black magician and a Satanist was all that was left of him when he died in 1947, except within the small circle of his disciples. That he was *not* a Satanist was not generally known then, and is still not generally accepted today (Introvigne 2016, 237–46). Few scholars took him seriously, until the revival of the academic study of contemporary Western esotericism, from the 1980s on, hit American and European universities through luminaries such as Antoine Faivre and, later, Wouter Hanegraaff and Marco Pasi. They quickly realized how important Crowley was for many subsequent esoteric movements. At the same time, the study of new religious movements also emerged as an independent academic subfield. Here again, from its very beginning, Crowley was studied as a significant influence (see e.g. Melton 1981).

By the 21<sup>st</sup> century, research on Crowley had emerged as a robust segment of the academic study of contemporary esoteric movements. Following a pioneer conference organized in 1997 by CESNUR, the Center for Studies on New Religions, in Cefalù, Sicily (where Crowley lived in an “Abbey of Thelema” between 1920 and 1923: Zoccatelli 1998), sessions on Crowley became routine at academic gatherings of scholars of Western esotericism. In 2017, the yearly Academia O.T.O. conferences, entirely devoted to Crowley and the O.T.O., were started in Ascona, Switzerland, and continued in 2018 in Barcelona, Spain. A new generation of Crowley scholars emerged, including Henrik Bogdan, Gordan Djurdjevic, Christian Giudice and Manon Hedenborg White, while older academics continued to explore the relevance of the British magus not only for the history of Western esotericism, but also of modernist art (Churton 2014), European literature (Pessoa and Crowley 2018), and the controversial relationship between esoteric movements and politics (Pasi 2014).

As those who attended the first Academia O.T.O. conference in 2017, included the undersigned, noticed, the presenters, most of them *both* academics and members of the O.T.O., did not avoid the topic of Crowley's personal shortcomings, from authoritarianism to the systematic manipulation of his female and male lovers and, possibly, racism. These aspects of Crowley's life are not ignored even in sympathetic biographies (see e.g. Kaczynski 2010).

His success in influencing a significant portion of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Western esotericism was not regarded as a reason to forget or forgive his multiple failures as a lover, leader, and human being. It remains that, by that time, Crowley, notwithstanding the unsavory traits of his personal life, had completed a journey from being regarded as a mere oddity to being studied as a significant thinker in academic courses in several universities.

### *Jack Parsons and the Agapé Lodge*

But what exactly did Crowley have to do with Hubbard? To answer this question, another character should be introduced, Jack Parsons. Crowley spent several years in the United States, where he hoped to escape European controversies, raise the funds he badly needed, and gather some loyal followers. He was more successful than elsewhere in California. There, Wilfred Talbot Smith (1885–1957) had founded a Church of Thelema in 1934 and in 1935 the Agapé Lodge of the O.T.O., whose celebrations of the “Gnostic Mass,” a ritual Crowley did not invent but codified by insisting on its content of sexual magic, attracted the attention of the tabloids (Starr 2003).

In 1941, Marvel Whiteside Parsons, a scientist, engineer and expert in explosives, who had legally changed his name from Marvel to John and was normally referred to as “Jack,” joined Smith's lodge together with his wife Helen Cowley (1910–2003). The mother of the latter, Olga Helena Nelson Cowley (1885–1949), widowed since 1920, had married Burton Ashley Northrup (1872–1946), of Pasadena, who ran a credit recovery agency but was also an agent, or at least a trusted informer, for the U.S. military intelligence (Starr 2003, 254). From her second marriage, Olga had two daughters. One of them, Sarah Elizabeth “Betty” Northrup (1924–1997), joined the Smith-Parsons lodge at a very early age, on the impulse of her stepsister Helen, and took the magical name Soror Cassap.

Parsons became in that period a nationally (and later internationally) well-known figure in his profession (Carter 1999; Pendle 2005). He was a researcher at the California Institute of Technology (Cal Tech), and worked both for the American government and for private companies. For the government, Parsons and his colleagues carried out the experiments of Arroyo Seco, which were at the origins of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory and had a primary role in the American space projects. For the private industry, Parsons worked on a series of programs, which led to the incorporation of Aerojet General Corporation. In recognition of these merits, in 1972, twenty years after his death, a crater on the Moon will be baptized with his name. Perhaps the International Astronomical Union, which gave the name of Parsons to the crater, did not know the occult activities of the famous scientist—or, if it did, it did not care.

Parsons lived indeed two lives, one as the brilliant scientist and one as the occultist involved in movements of dubious fame. Parsons had always been attracted to radical and marginal groups. After having participated in the activities of a Communist cell at Cal Tech, he met Smith and joined the O.T.O. Smith's lodge was under attack from the press as a congregation of dangerous subversives, but this for Parsons counted as a recommendation. At the same time, Crowley and Smith were having differences on various topics, primarily on the money that the British magus, in deep financial troubles, believed he had the right to receive from his American disciples. Parsons thus attracted the attention of Crowley, who corresponded with him and became a source of inspiration for the writings of the Californian scientist (Parsons 1989; Parsons 2008).

In 1942, Parsons, who was well paid by Cal Tech, rented a rather expensive home, called simply “1003,” at the address 1003, South Orange Grove Avenue, in Pasadena's “Millionaires' Row.” It became the new “convent,” or “profess house,” where a group of Agapé Lodge members started living communally. Among these were Smith, Parsons, his wife Helen, and Helen's stepsister Betty. Then, a soap opera developed. Parsons had started having intimate relations with Betty when the latter, who was now eighteen, was thirteen. His wife Helen finally discovered what was going on, and gave him a taste of his own medicine by starting a relationship with their superior in the O.T.O., Smith. When the Agapé Lodge moved to the new convent in Pasadena, Smith was already living openly with Helen, and Parsons with Betty. Crowley sardonically commented that the number 1003, the address of the home, was probably chosen as it coincided with

the number of women conquered by Don Giovanni in the opera consecrated to him by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791: Starr 2003, 271–73).

Crowley was everything but a moralist, but was afraid that, between love triangles and even more complicated amorous polygons, things at 1003 would end up badly. He instructed two people he trusted, both his future successors at the guide of the main branch of the O.T.O., Karl Germer (1885–1962) and Grady Louis McMurtry (1918–1985), to keep him informed of what was going on in Pasadena. The latter, in particular, sent vitriolic reports, suspecting Smith of having an affair with his own ex-wife, who lived in the “convent” in Pasadena, and that he had persuaded her to have an abortion: a capital sin for Crowley, who was, in his own bizarre way, pro-life. In 1943, Germer, on behalf of Crowley, removed Smith from his office of superior of the Agapé Lodge, substituting him with Parsons.

But the latter had his own problems. Cal Tech worked for the military. During both World War II and the Cold War, it was kept under surveillance by the secret services. Parsons had already been investigated as a suspected Communist. In 1943, Betty eventually revealed to her parents that not only did she live with Parsons, but she had started sleeping with him when she was thirteen. Her father, as one can imagine, was not happy. Since he had connections with the military intelligence services, he put them on Parsons’ trail, not only as a Communist but also as a dangerous “black magician” (Starr 2003, 254).

### *Enter L. Ron Hubbard*

It is in this context that Hubbard entered the story. One of the high-level initiates of the Agapé Lodge was pianist and composer Roy Edward Leffingwell (1886–1952). He was a friend of Hubbard and a fan of his fiction. At that time, Hubbard had not yet “discovered” Dianetics, but was well-known in California as a successful writer of fiction. It was through Leffingwell that Hubbard joined the Agapé Lodge, and in 1945, went to live at 1003. Parsons reported to Crowley that Hubbard was an excellent swordsman and well known in the California literary milieu, including for his science fiction stories. Invited by Hubbard, even the prince of American science fiction, Robert Anson Heinlein (1907–1988), came to 1003 for a swordplay. McMurtry, always the gossip, commented that Hubbard preferred to train with Betty Northrup, for reasons going beyond sport

(Pendle 2005, 256). Soon thereafter, as McMurtry had correctly predicted, Betty left Parsons and started a relationship with Hubbard.

Parsons suffered privately, but declared that in the O.T.O. women were free and there was no place for jealousy. He even asked Hubbard to help him accomplishing a series of rituals based on the Enochian system of magic, which have been reconstructed in great detail by Swedish scholar Henrik Bogdan (Bogdan 2016). As a result, Parsons expected the appearance of a “spirit” that might help him in his magical activities. On January 18, 1946, a sculptress and painter, Marjorie Cameron (1922–1995), who, under the simple name of “Cameron,” will subsequently become a well-known artist (Lipschutz, Breeze and Pile 2014; Parsons and Cameron 2014; Kansa 2014), appeared at 1003, joined the lodge and came to live in the home. Or so Parsons would later report. In fact, “Cameron had actually been at the house on South Orange Grove Avenue a short period before, but had not spoken with Parsons at that time” (Bogdan 2016, 22). Cameron quickly became the new lover of Parsons, and the latter concluded that the magical operations undertaken with Hubbard had been successful. Cameron had appeared, and Cameron was indeed the “spirit” promised to him.

Sexual magic was a core practice in Crowley’s O.T.O. and Parsons quickly began a new series of sex magic experiments with Cameron (Bogdan 2016, 29–30). The purpose, this time, was the birth of a *homunculus*, both “artificial man” and the vehicle for the coming Antichrist, a *positive* character for Crowley, who regarded traditional Christianity as evil and its demise as desirable. Crowley himself had written a secret instruction on the *homunculus* (King 1973, 231–39), and it was to this being that his novel *Moonchild* alluded (Crowley 1929). However, according to Crowley, not only the times were not mature, but also initiates of a much higher level than Parsons would have been necessary. Informed of the so-called “Babalon Working,” by which Parsons believed he could produce the *homunculus*, Crowley wrote back that Parsons was simply “a fool” (King 1987, 162–66). Parsons continued all the same, and went so far to produce an unauthorized fourth chapter of Crowley’s sacred scripture, *The Book of the Law*. He probably never dared to send it to Crowley himself (Bogdan 2016, 23), who regarded any innovation or addition to his canon as blasphemy.

Eventually, Parsons parted company with Crowley and concluded that Cameron herself, rather than the child she was supposed to produce with him,

was the incarnation of “the Thelemic goddess Babalon,” the “Scarlet Woman” of the *Book of Revelation* (Bogdan 2016, 29). If it did not produce a *homunculus*, the “Babalon Working” at least generated a schism in the O.T.O.

What was the role of Hubbard in the meantime? It seems that Parsons now mostly relied on him as a financial advisor. Between the spring and the summer of 1946, the two of them and Betty incorporated a company called Allied Enterprises. It should buy yachts in Miami, where they costed less, sail them to California through the Panama Channel, and sell them at considerably higher prices there. Soon, however, Parsons started protesting that Hubbard and Betty were cheating him. Crowley was informed by Germer, and believed the story was true (Pendle 2005, 269). On July 1, Parsons descended into Miami, where he obtained from the local court an order prohibiting Hubbard and Betty from leaving Florida. But they were already at sea, and Parsons decided to summon the demon Bartzabel to stop them. He wrote to Crowley that the summoning was successful. On July 5, a storm, that Parsons believed had been created by Bartzabel, forced the couple to return to Miami.

Parsons, however, was less successful in court. The court did not believe his story of fraud and cheating. He had to leave the yachts and most of the money to Hubbard, who signed a promissory note for \$ 2,900 only. One of Parsons’ biographer believes that the scientist did not protest, as Betty had threatened to inform the police about the sexual relationship he had started with her when she was still a minor (Pendle 2005, 270).

### *The Post-Crowleyan Parsons*

Hubbard does not seem to have taken an interest in the post-Crowleyan activities of Parsons, but they are not uninteresting. Excommunicated by Crowley, Parsons undertook in his last years a personal journey, trying to launch an independent Gnostic Church and promoting the cult of Babalon and the Antichrist. In 1948, he swore an “Oath of Antichrist” in the hands of his ex-superior in the O.T.O., Smith, and changed his name into Belarion Arminuss Al Dajal Anti-Christ. This oath preceded an apparition, dated October 31, 1948, of Babalon, thanks to which Parsons discovered he was the reincarnation of Simon Magus, a sorcerer or perhaps a Gnostic of the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E. mentioned in the *Acts of the Apostles* (8:9–24), of 15<sup>th</sup> century criminal Gilles de Rais (1405–

1440), and of 18<sup>th</sup> century esoteric master Cagliostro (1743–1795). After the oath, Parsons believed he had become himself the Antichrist.

The ideas of Parsons' latter period are summarized in the *Manifesto of the Antichrist* he wrote in 1949. It was a strongly anti-Christian text, yet curiously it proclaimed its respect for Jesus Christ, who, Parsons proclaimed, was not a "Christian" and in fact taught sexual freedom. Parsons also expressed a faith in the Trinity and an interest in a reformed Christianity, very much different from the teachings of the Christian churches. The Holy Spirit for him was Sophia, the female counterpart of Christ. God was manifested in the union of Christ and Sophia, and the latter was also identified with Babalon.

Parsons promised to "bring all men to the law of the BEAST 666, and in His law I shall conquer the world." As "Belarion, Antichrist," he prophesied,

Within seven years of this time, BABALON, THE SCARLET WOMAN HILARION will manifest among ye, and bring this my work to its fruition. An end to conscription, compulsion, regimentation, and the tyranny of false laws. And within nine years a nation shall accept the Law of the BEAST 666 in my name, and that nation will be the first nation of earth. And all who accept me the ANTICHRIST and the law of the BEAST 666, shall be accursed and their joy shall be a thousandfold greater than the false joys of the false saints. And in my name BELARION shall they work miracles, and confound our enemies, and none shall stand before us (Parsons 1980, 7).

Parsons the Antichrist promised the destruction of Christianity. Before his prophecies could come true, he destroyed himself in the accidental explosion of his chemical laboratory in 1952. Notwithstanding the old controversies, his writings are still popular in Crowleyan circles, and they remain in print thanks also to the fame of Cameron, who illustrated some of them, as an artist. A Cameron-Parsons Foundation was established in 2006 in California, and the scientific community still remembers Parsons as a significant pioneer of rocket science.

### *Exit Betty*

A month after the Miami incident with Parsons, Hubbard and Betty got married, though the marriage was brief and ended in a bitter divorce. This, too, is a matter of controversy. Some deny that Hubbard was ever married to Parsons' ex-lover. Documents, however, indicate that the two were married on August 10,

1946 in Chestertown, Maryland. Hubbard himself, in a letter written on May 14, 1951 to the U.S. Attorney General, described Betty as a woman “I believed to be my wife, having married her and then, after some mix-up about a divorce, believed her to be my wife in common law” (Hubbard 1951b). The mix-up was about Hubbard’s own divorce from his first wife, Margaret Louise “Polly” Grubb (1907–1963). Hubbard may have not been legally divorced yet when he married Betty in 1946.

The marriage between Betty and Hubbard quickly deteriorated, and the girl found a lover in one of Hubbard’s early associates in the activities of Dianetics, Miles Fenton Hollister (1925–1998). Betty later divorced Hubbard and married Hollister. Hubbard suspected that Communist infiltrations and Soviet-style mind control techniques may have been partially responsible for both his marital difficulties and problems within Dianetics. On March 3, 1951, he wrote to the FBI claiming that Hollister was “confessedly a member of the Young Communists,” and that Betty was “friendly with many Communists. Currently intimate with them but evidently under coercion” (Hubbard 1951a). He reiterated the same accusations in the letter to the Attorney General he wrote in May 1951 (Hubbard 1951b).

Betty’s father, possibly informed by Hubbard, had already reported to federal agencies his fear that Parsons had recruited his daughter into a Communist cell. Now, Hubbard concluded that Betty had succumbed to the sinister Communist technique of “pain-drug hypnosis” (see Introvigne 2017). He named several members of the early Dianetics circle as suspects of Communism, including Gregory Hemingway (1931–2001), the son of the famous writer Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961). Gregory, a transsexual medical doctor, was shortly associated with Dianetics but is better known for his later change of name into Gloria. He died in 2001 in the women’s section of the Miami jail, after his arrest outside a state park for indecent exposure (Conway n.d.).

In 1952, Betty attended Parson’s funeral service organized by the Agapé Lodge with her new husband Hollister, and reconciled with her stepsister Helen. Hubbard did not attend, as by 1952 he had lost any interest in Betty and her O.T.O. friends.

*The Mitchell Incident (1969): A Trotskyist Against Hubbard*

As told by subsequent critics of Scientology, the story of the relationship between Hubbard and Parsons was based on sources close to Parsons. They had a vested interest in depicting Hubbard as both an amateur occultist and somebody who defrauded Parsons of a significant amount of money, not to mention his girlfriend. As mentioned earlier, court records do not support the fraud narrative. They depict a business relationship gone sour, not a criminal fraud perpetrated by Hubbard. Rather than punishing Hubbard for stealing Parsons' money, the court did what courts of law normally do when partners in a company quarrel between themselves. They divided the assets of the company in a solomonic way, leaving the best part to Hubbard and greatly reducing Parsons' original claims. As for the girlfriend, Parsons himself was the first to realize that the bourgeois narrative of one lodge member "stealing" the girlfriend of another was hardly applicable to the free love milieu of the Agapé Lodge.

The relationship between Hubbard and magic is a much more complicated subject. As mentioned earlier, for decades Crowley was synonymous of evil, dark magic, and Satanism. Associating Hubbard with Crowley was an easy way to depict him as a sinister "cultist." An article in the London *Sunday Times* did just this in 1969 (Mitchell 1969). The article was written by Australian journalist Alex Mitchell (b. 1942), then a young man of 27, who later became the editor of the controversial London Trotskyist daily newspaper *Workers Press*, later renamed *The News Line*, the organ of the Workers Revolutionary Party (see his autobiography: Mitchell 2011).

As a Communist, Mitchell was strongly anti-American and hostile to Hubbard, who had repeatedly criticized Communism in typical Cold War terms (see Introvigne 2017). Mitchell was Australian, and what he knew about Scientology came from the controversial Victoria government's Anderson report of 1965, which he called "a landmark inquiry" into a "cult" (Mitchell 2011, 143). When he moved to London, he decided he should "uncover the operations of the Church of Scientology in the UK" (Mitchell 2011, 143). With other Australians, he enrolled in several courses at the London org of Scientology in Tottenham Court Road, where, as he later admitted, he paid more attentions to girls than to Hubbard's teachings: "We had suntans, we were lost in the London metropolis

and we were searching desperately for companionship—that is, sex” (Mitchell 2011, 143).

While Mitchell’s antipathy towards Scientology had obvious political motivations, the *Sunday Times* article reveals that it had access to original documents and letters by both Parsons and Crowley. He wrote that he used “a vast collection of papers owned by a former admirer of Crowley.” This “former admirer of Crowley,” as Bogdan noted, “could have been none other than the Crowley collector and former disciple Gerald Yorke (1901–1983)” (Bogdan 2016, 13). As the *Sunday Times* article shows, Mitchell had no knowledge of esotericism, did not understand Crowley’s ideas, and failed to recognize the background of Parsons’ magical operations in the Enochian magic of John Dee (1527–1608). Nor was he interested in understanding Crowley and Parsons. His aim was to expose Scientology by associating Hubbard with a lurid tale of magic and sex.

This was, after all, 1969. Only in 1976, with the publication of Mircea Eliade’s (1907–1986) *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions*, would most scholars of religion become acquainted with the fact that the ritual use of sexuality was part of the esoteric teachings of several religions (Eliade 1976, 93–119). And only from the following decade, scholars of new religious movements such as J. Gordon Melton would emphasize that sex magic was indeed a frequent, if often hidden, feature of several religious and esoteric movements that flourished in the West since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Melton 1981; Melton 2017).

Mitchell did have access to original documents. But, as he did not “speak the language,” he read them outside of their context, and looked at Crowleyan magic as simply disgusting and weird. The same is true for professional anti-Scientologists, who learned the story of the Babalon Working from Mitchell and were only too happy to repeat it. John Atack devoted to the incident a whole chapter of his 1990 anti-Scientology summa *A Piece of Blue Sky* (Atack 1990, 89–102) Shortly thereafter, counter-cult Danish Christian scholar Helle Meldgaard, at that time an associate of leading Lutheran anti-Scientologist, Johannes Aagaard (1928–2007), brought the argument to the Vatican, at a conference where I also spoke (Meldgaard 1992).

Meanwhile, Mitchell continued his anti-Scientology crusade, and in 1969 tried to visit Hubbard’s ship *Apollo* when it was docked in Corfu, Greece. He was

refused access to the ship but was warmly welcomed by the local British vice-consul, Major John Knox Forte (1915–2012). Although Mitchell did not disclose it in his autobiography (Mitchell 2011, 144), Forte was both the local correspondent in Corfu of an international clique of anti-Scientologists, and the person entrusted by the British intelligence with the task of persuading the Greek authorities not to let Hubbard open a university in Corfu. He published his own version of the events and anti-Scientology diatribe in 1980 (Forte 1980). Why the British intelligence should interfere with Hubbard's activities in a foreign country is unclear, but beyond the scope of this article.

With the help of Forte, Mitchell tried to corner Hubbard in the toilets of the Achilleion Palace, a luxury museum-cum-casino he was visiting in Corfu, but was outsmarted by Scientology's founder, who knew who he was and refused an interview. As Mitchell later reported, Hubbard

left to visit the toilet and I followed. I found him leaning over the urinal so I took my stance next to him. 'Any chance of an interview with you, Mr Hubbard?' I asked. He turned his head and drawled, 'And who, may I ask, are you, sir?' I gave him my name and he lit up. 'Alex, you are a very persistent reporter. Haven't you got better things to do than write about me?' I replied that I found him and Scientology endlessly fascinating and that an interview would be eagerly read in Britain to clear up misunderstandings about the church. 'Alex,' he replied with patronising charm, 'you're wasting your time. I know where you're coming from, and it's been very nice meeting you. Goodbye' (Mitchell 2011, 144).

Mitchell's opposition to Scientology verged on the obsession. Later, he had to confront his Trotskyist comrades who doubted attacking Hubbard would really advance the cause of the proletarian revolution. In the end, he prevailed and his became "the first Trotskyist newspaper in the world to publish a full-page exposé of L. Ron Hubbard's Church of Scientology" (Mitchell 2011, 228).

After Mitchell had written on the Crowley-Hubbard-Parsons connection, Scientology answered the *Sunday Times*, with a letter the London newspaper considered for a while and then deemed wise to publish, fearing litigation. There, Scientology explained that,

Hubbard broke up black magic in America: Dr. Jack Parsons of Pasadena, California, was America's Number One solid fuel rocket expert. He was involved with the infamous English black magician Aleister Crowley who called himself "The Beast 666." Crowley ran an organization called the Order of Templars Orientalis over the world which had savage and bestial rites. Dr. Parsons was head of the American branch located at 100

Orange Grove Avenue, Pasadena, California. This was a huge old house which had paying guests who were the U.S.A. nuclear physicists working at Cal. Tech. Certain agencies objected to nuclear physicists being housed under the same roof. L. Ron Hubbard was still an officer of the U.S. Navy because he was well known as a writer and a philosopher and had friends amongst the physicists, he was sent in to handle the situation. He went to live at the house and investigated the black magic rites and the general situation and found them very bad. Parsons wrote to Crowley in England about Hubbard. Crowley “the Beast 666” evidently detected an enemy and warned Parsons. This was all proven by the correspondence unearthed by the Sunday Times. Hubbard’s Mission was successful far beyond anyone’s expectations. The house was torn down. Hubbard rescued a girl they were using. The black magic group was dispersed and destroyed and has never recovered. The physicists included many of the sixty-four top U.S. scientists who were later declared insecure and dismissed from government service with so much publicity (Church of Scientology 1969).

According to Atack, the original of the statement was produced “during the Scientologists’ case against Gerald Armstrong in 1984” and “is in Hubbard’s handwriting” (Atack 1990, 90). Obviously, the founder of Scientology was confronted with the need of answering a newspaper article quickly by putting in writing his recollections of events that had occurred 23 years earlier. This explains mistakes such as calling the Ordo Templi Orientis “Order of Templar Orientalis,” giving a wrong address for the Agapé Lodge’s headquarters, and promoting Parsons to the position of “head of [its] American branch,” that in fact he never achieved. These are, however, mere details. The core of the letter is that Hubbard infiltrated the Agapé Lodge on behalf of American intelligence agencies.

Atack describes this claim as “ridiculous” (Atack 1990, 90), but the aim of his book is to attack Scientology, not to reconstruct historical facts and put them in context. Unlike authors in the O.T.O. tradition, he overlooks the connections of Betty’s father, Burton Ashley Northrup, with American military intelligence services (Starr 2003, 254), and the possibility that Hubbard informed him about Parsons. That Hubbard was commissioned to do so cannot be confirmed but, in the climate of the early Cold War years, would not have been particularly unusual either.

As J. Gordon Melton has noted, here we are confronted with two irreconcilable narratives (Melton 1981; Melton 2009). The O.T.O. claims that Hubbard was a member of the Agapé Lodge who later betrayed Parsons and cheated him out of his money (as we have seen, court documents *do not* confirm this accusation). For

Scientists, Hubbard worked undercover in the interest of U.S. intelligence services, and his mission was substantially successful because he put an end to Parsons' "black magic" activities. It is possible, as Melton concluded, that the two stories are both, from their respective different points of view, genuine perceptions of the same events (Melton 2009, 21).

### *Hubbard's View of Crowley's Magic*

This is, however, only part of the story. Nobody would deny that Hubbard was a complex character, naturally curious about a number of things. Obviously, while participating in Parsons' activities, and irrespective of his motivations for doing so, he became familiar with the ideas of Crowley. In a speech of December 5, 1952, Hubbard explained that

Now, he could simply say, "I have action." A magician—the magic cults of the eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh, twelfth centuries in the Middle East were fascinating. The only modern work that has anything to do with them is a trifle wild in spots, but it's fascinating work in itself, and that's work written by Aleister Crowley, the late Aleister Crowley [sic], my very good friend. And he did himself a splendid piece of aesthetics built around those magic cults. It's very interesting reading to get hold of a copy of a book, quite rare, but it can be obtained, *The Master Therion*, T-h-e-r-i-o-n, *The Master Therion* by Aleister Crowley. He signs himself "The Beast"; "The Mark of the Beast, 666." Very, very something or other. But anyway, the—Crowley exhumed a lot of the data from these old magic cults. And he, as a matter of fact, handles cause and effect quite a bit. Cause and effect is handled according to a ritual. And it's interesting that whenever you have any of these things you can always assign a ritual to it and that ritual is what you do in order to accomplish this, or how you have to go through and how many motions you have to make to come into the ownership of that. And that's a ritual. Or how many motions or words you have to say in order to be something else. Now, that's a ritual. And that is a—each ritual is a cycle of some sort or another (Hubbard 1985, 12).

The language is quite convoluted and there are imprecisions. For instance, Hubbard never personally met Crowley. This is not an article but a literal transcription of a speech by Hubbard. However, some critics found mistakes where there are none. For instance, it has been claimed that Crowley did not write a book titled *The Master Therion*. But in fact, in 1916, he published in London a four-page flyer called *The Message of the Master Therion* (Crowley 1916). The text was later revised and published in the New York review *The International* in 1918 (Crowley 1918). In 1943, it was reprinted, with some variations, as a small

booklet, *Liber II: The Message of the Master Therion* by The Church of Thelema, Pasadena, and the cover even mentioned the address of 1003, South Orange Grove Avenue (Crowley 1943). It is surely this edition, undoubtedly “quite rare,” that Hubbard read in Pasadena, and calling it in short “The Master Therion” is understandable.

The following week, on December 11, 1952, memories of discussing Crowley should have been fresh in Hubbard’s mind, as he mentioned him again within the context of an analysis of religious liberty. If we really believe in religious freedom, Hubbard stated, we should grant it even to a religion as far away from Christianity as Crowley’s. Religious liberty, Hubbard said,

is a very, very relative term. You, for instance, today sit here with a constitution which guarantees religious freedom but, by golly, what would happen to you if you started to worship Baal? Man! How that would ring in the tabloids. If you started to worship Lucifer, if you started to worship any of the various gods... One fellow, Allistair [sic] Crowley uh... picked up a level of religious worship which is very interesting—oh boy! The press played hocky with his head for his whole lifetime. The Great Beast—666. He just had another level of religious worship. Yes, sir. You’re free to worship everything under the Constitution so long as it’s Christian (Hubbard 1998, 152).

Here, Crowley’s religion is mentioned as an extreme case, a test for religious liberty, but the approach is not hostile. How can the two 1952 texts be reconciled with the late letter to the *Sunday Times*, where Crowley was described as an “infamous black magician,” practicing “savage and bestial rites”? One possibility is that, by 1969, Hubbard had read more material about Crowley’s less savory activities, and had developed a more negative opinion of the British magus. There is, however, an alternative I regard as both more likely and more interesting. One can argue that Crowley was capable of *both* “infamous” behavior towards his disciples *and* of producing “splendid pieces of aesthetics,” in more than one field. The *Sunday Times* letter clearly belongs to the literary genre of the press release, and served the purpose of answering dangerous criticism in a simple way. However, as mentioned earlier, a good percentage of contemporary scholars would agree that Crowley had, at the same time, some dark and extremely unpleasant traits and a unique capability of producing brilliant and aesthetically valuable texts on magic, as well as poems and paintings (although, on the quality of his paintings, opinions differ). One can be both a very unpleasant character and a genius in his field.

Critics of Hubbard also quote a text where, allegedly, he speaks favorably of Parsons. The context is a discussion on how schools for problematic and under-achieving students may produce very successful businessperson and scientists.

One chap by the way, who gave us solid fuel, rockets and assist take-offs for airplanes too heavily loaded on aircraft carriers, and all the rest of this rocketry panorama, and who formed Aerojet in California and so on. The late Jack Parsons, by the way, was not a chemist the way we think of chemists. He was not taught in the field of chemistry beyond this fact: There was a little professor who opened up a school. Nobody could do anything with Jack so they sent him over to this school and the professor found out he was interested in chemical experiments and turned him loose in the laboratory and gave him a lot of encouragement. He eventually became quite a man. It is interesting that this completely sloppy type of education is apparently quite workable (Hubbard 1957a, 31).

This text does not include any appreciation of Parsons' activities in the Agapé Lodge. It states the obvious, i.e. that Parsons, despite his difficult beginnings and his problems as a student, eventually became one of the leading rocket scientists of his generation. No expert of Parsons' professional field would deny this, and why Hubbard's statement should be regarded as controversial is unclear. Similarly, the fact that later occultists in the Crowley tradition such as the German Eugen Grosche ("Gregor A. Gregorius," 1888–1964) read and appreciated *Dianetics* (Popiol and Schrader 2007, 114) can hardly be used against Hubbard. They shared an interest in *Dianetics* with millions of other readers, and there is no evidence that Hubbard had any contact with them.

What is more questionable is Parsons' contribution to Western esotericism. Some of his literary texts have found a sympathetic audience, and he has been acknowledged for his association with such an increasingly recognized artist as Cameron. However, few would put Parsons in the same league as Crowley as an esoteric author. There are no conferences or academic courses on Parsons as an original esoteric thinker. Hubbard didn't think highly of Parsons either, except as a scientist, and never mentioned Parsons' occult ideas in his writings.

### *Hidden in Plain Sight*

On the other hand, although in one lecture only, Hubbard did seriously discuss Crowley's theory of magic. Recently, Hugh Urban returned on this issue in an article about Hubbard's Gnosticism (Urban 2019, in turn largely based on Urban 2012, which expanded on Urban 2011, 39–42). Urban raises an important

issue, and correctly notes that Hubbard's core religious ideas bear "more than a passing resemblance to early Gnostic beliefs" (Urban 2019, 110), although he believes that they may be "best understood not so much as a unified, coherent system but rather as a wildly eclectic bricolage" (Urban 2019, 111). Personally, I find Terrin's reconstruction of Hubbard's ideas as a coherent and highly organized system of modern Gnosticism (Terrin 2017) as more persuasive, but this is beyond the scope of the present article.

Urban also discusses Crowley, although he does not mention the scope and magnitude of contemporary Crowleyn scholarship, and this despite the fact that he contributed to at least one important volume on the British occultist (Urban 2012). He simply repeats three times that Crowley was an "infamous" and even "most infamous leader" (Urban 2019, 99, 100, and 102), while Parsons was merely "the most infamous member of the [O.T.O.'s] California group" (Urban 2019, 105). Urban speculates about the sources of Crowley's "Gnostic" sex magic with some interesting comments (Urban 2019, 104). However, while he is aware of the flourishing in France and other countries, from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century on, of various self-styled "Gnostic Churches," with which the British magus was well acquainted, he does not mention that they also had an interest in sex magic and might have been a more direct source than ancient Gnostics for Crowley (see Introvigne 1993). Crucial for the story of these "Gnostic Churches" was the circle of Lady Caithness (Marie Sinclair de Mariategui, 1830–1895), where the magical use of sexuality was certainly not unknown (Pasi 2006), not to mention the late Belgian KVMRIS and a long sequel of sex magicians in the whole history of Western esotericism (Kripal and Hanegraaff 2008).

In a way, Hubbard's assessment of Crowley seems more in tune with contemporary scholars of the O.T.O. than Urban's. Crowley may well have been a quintessential bad guy, but his theory of magic deserves to be taken seriously.

Urban also believes that Hubbard was influenced by Crowley when he elaborated the Gnostic worldview of Scientology. Some of the evidence he offers is not persuasive, such as that the cross used by Scientology resembles one used by Crowley (it resembles other crosses as well), and that "the key term for the Spirit or soul in Scientology is the *thetan*—symbolized by the Greek letter theta—which is also the central symbol in the O.T.O.'s sigil of Babalon and the first letter in Crowley's key term *Thelema*" (Urban 2019, 107). One can as well argue that "thetan" shares the initial Greek letter with "Theosophy," "theology,"

and “thermodynamics,” not to mention the Greek city of Thessaloniki, where the brothers saints Cyril (826–869) and Methodius (815–885), decisive for the formation of Slavic Christianity, were born. These arguments were also used by Atack, whose theories connecting Hubbard to the occult became increasingly preposterous. He found similar symbols among the O.T.O., Scientology, the Nazis, Freemasons, and all the usual suspects of countless conspiracy theories (Atack n.d.). As Umberto Eco (1932–2016) famously noted, the problem with conspiracy theories is that similar symbols may be found almost everywhere (Eco 1990).

Urban states that Scientologists try to conceal both Hubbard’s connection with Gnosticism and the Parsons-Crowley incident. Certainly, they do not advertise the latter, given the popular prevailing negative image of Crowley but, as Urban recognizes, they don’t deny it either. As for the Gnostic connections of Scientology, the secret is hidden in plain sight. Hubbard himself, in texts Urban quotes, described Scientology as a “Gnostic religion” (Urban 2019, 107–8).

My impression is that the story of Jack Parsons is such a sensational tale of science, magic, and sex that both anti-cultists and some scholars have been mesmerized by the mere fact that Hubbard mentioned Crowley’s occultism in his lecture of December 5, 1952, without focusing on the content of the lecture. The content, however, deserves attention.

*The Washington Irving-Athanius Kircher Connection: An Early Text by Hubbard (1939)*

Here, again, Hubbard appears as surprisingly modern, considering that the lecture was delivered in 1952. Well before scholars such as Wouter Hanegraaff insisted on this point (obviously in a much more systematic way: Hanegraaff 2012), Hubbard had noticed that magic and esotericism are an important part of Western thought that was rejected and censored. Hubbard didn’t discover this for the first time during his experience with the Agapé Lodge. As is true for other subjects (see Introvigne 2017), Hubbard’s fiction tells us a good deal about his pre-Dianetics interests, and those scholars who do not read his short stories and novels miss key elements of his background. Several pieces of fiction tell us that he was interested in the role of magic well before 1945 (see e.g. Hubbard 1939; Hubbard 1940).

Hubbard's sources were mostly literary, and included Washington Irving (1783–1859), the well-known author of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. As Arthur Versluis, one of the best specialists of esotericism in the United States, has documented, the novelists of the so-called American Renaissance avoided criticism by presenting occult themes with a certain levity, but in fact did believe in supernatural phenomena. Irving, for example, was in touch with Emma Hardinge Britten (1823–1899), a leading figure in British and American Spiritualism (Versluis 2001, 56).

One of Hubbard's most celebrated short stories was *Slaves of Sleep*, published in the July 1939 issue of the *Unknown* magazine (Hubbard 1939). It had a sequel, *Masters of Sleep*, which appeared in *Fantastic Adventures* in October 1950 (Hubbard 1950). *Slaves of Sleep* is about the accidental opening of a magic jar, which bears a Seal of Solomon. The Seal is in fact a talisman, which releases an *ifrit*, a nature spirit of the Arabic folklore (a type of *jinn*) and unfolds a sequel of events in which the main character, American millionaire Jan Palmer, is transported into a dimension where *ifrits* rule humans.

Hubbard introduced *Slaves of Sleep* with an “Author's Note” (Hubbard 1939, 9–10), which opens with a long quote from Irving's *Alhambra*:

A word more to the curious reader. There are many persons in these skeptical times who affect to deride everything connected with the occult sciences, or black art; who have no faith in the efficacy of conjurations, incantations or divinations; and who stoutly contend that such things never had existence. To such determined unbelievers the testimony of past ages is as nothing; they require the evidence of their own senses, and deny that such arts and practices have prevailed in days of yore, simply because they meet with no instance of them in the present day. They cannot perceive that, as the world became versed in the natural sciences, the supernatural became superfluous and fell into disuse, and that the hardy inventions of art superseded the mysteries of magic. Still, say the enlightened few, those mystic powers exist, though in a latent state, and untasked by the ingenuity of man (Irving 1871, 491–92, quoted by Hubbard 1939, 9–10).

Hubbard also refers to “Kirker's *Cabala Sarracenic*” as an authoritative source about the magic powers of the Seals of Solomon (Hubbard 1939, 10). German scholar Mario Frenschkowski comments that the quote “has puzzled many Scientology readers,” and in fact refers to “a work by Baroque scholar Athanasius Kircher” (S.J., 1602–1680: Frenschkowski 2010, 37). Frenschkowski is right in arguing that the quote came from Irving, as it appears in *Alhambra* shortly before the long passage Hubbard reproduced, with the same

spelling, “Kirker,” and as a source for “the Seal of Solomon” (Irving 1871, 491). The Seal has a central role in Irving’s story *The Legend of the Enchanted Soldier* (Irving 1871, 474–89), part of *Alhambra*, at the end of which a “Note to the Enchanted Soldier” was included (Irving 1871, 489–92). However, there is no book by Kircher with the title *Cabala Sarracenicæ*. In fact, Kircher’s magnum opus *Œdipus Ægyptiacus* divides the study of the ancient use of magic symbols and seals in twelve classes. Class V (to which a section of Kircher’s book corresponds) is called “Cabala Sarracenicæ” and includes the magical use, or misuse, of both Islamic and Jewish symbols by Muslims. One of the symbols discussed is, indeed, the Seal of Solomon (Kircher 1653, 397–98). Note that Hubbard mentions “Kirker’s *Cabala Sarracenicæ*” rather than “Kirker’s book *Cabala Sarracenicæ*.” Apart from the spelling of the last name of the Jesuit scholar, Hubbard was quite correct if his reference was to a *notion* or *a part of a book* by Kircher.

The author’s notes in both *Slaves of Sleep* and *The Legend of Enchanted Soldier* are important for understanding Hubbard’s research on magic, as it was unfolding as early as 1939. Scholars of Irving tell us that, when he wrote *Alhambra*, he wanted to produce a sellable book (González Alcantud 2009, 33), yet he also hoped to preserve old Spanish legends that would otherwise be lost. He relied on apocryphal tales fabricated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by authors such as Cristóbal Medina Conde (1726–1798) and Juan Velázquez de Echeverría (1729–1804), taking from the latter the material he used in *The Legend of the Enchanted Soldier* (González Alcantud 2009, 34–5). Irving may have suspected the legends to be fabricated, but he still insisted they expressed the spirit of the people of Granada and of the city itself. He had an Orientalist approach to both the Islamic Granada of old and the contemporary inhabitants of the city, as simple and naïve but carrying at the same time reminiscences of an ancient wisdom. He approached magic through a strategy of “concealment and evasion,” “inner distancing and calculated nostalgia” (Delpech 2001, 122). He presented his matter lightly, yet invited his readers to respect the “honest credence” in tales of magic (Irving 1871, 492).

Hubbard’s *Slaves of Sleep* has obvious references to Irving’s *The Legend of Enchanted Soldier*. In both stories, magic is unfolded by a Seal of Solomon, and both texts are accompanied by notes where the authors discuss their attitudes to magic. Frenschkowski has noted that “Hubbard liked to speak on magic with

frivolous levity,” which however “does not mean his remarks on the subject should not receive attention” (Frenschkowski 2010, 35–6). As in the case of Irving, levity could have been a strategy.

In his note preceding *Slaves of Sleep*, Hubbard concluded that,

Man is a stubborn creature. He would rather confound himself with “laws” of his own invention than to fatalistically accept perhaps truer but infinitely simpler explanations as offered by the supernatural—though it is a travesty to so group the omnipresent jinn! (Hubbard 1939, 10).

Here, again, scholars of esotericism would perhaps agree with Hubbard that “supernatural” is a confusing label when used for lumping together several different esoteric and non-esoteric doctrines and practices. More importantly, the note to *Slaves of Sleep* shows that, by 1939, long before meeting Parsons, Hubbard had already researched magic seriously enough to reach some conclusions that would later inform his assessment of Crowley’s theories.

Hubbard had already concluded that something was wrong with the dominant mainstream culture. Relying on “laws’ of [human] invention,” many had become unable to solve their problems. The magic and esoteric style of thinking had offered for centuries an alternative, and it was still there. Its “explanations” had the advantage of being “simpler.” In some cases, “perhaps,” they were also “truer.”

But what was magic all about? Hubbard answered the question in the passage of his 1952 lecture where he discussed Crowley. In magic, “cause and effect is handled according to a ritual.” “You can always assign a ritual” to problems you need to solve, and “each ritual is a cycle of some sort or another” (Hubbard 1985, 12).

There is nothing weird in this discussion. Modern scholars would agree that, first, this is a valid description of the magical style of thinking and second, Crowley was an important theorist in this field (no matter how unpleasant his personal lifestyle might have been). Some of them would also dispute that the magical model is always less effective than the prevailing rational-scientific model of cause and effect for solving certain problems: perhaps, in some case, it may even offer better solutions (Kripal 2017 is a good example). If anything, Hubbard anticipated here conclusions that would become popular among some 21<sup>st</sup> century scholars. However, he did not believe that magic would solve the most

intractable problems of humanity. Neither the narrow rationalism of mainstream culture nor magic would solve them. Something new was needed.

*Conclusion: Scientology as “Supermagic”*

Unlike Urban, I do not believe that Crowley was a significant source (although, as Urban concedes, not the main one) for Hubbard’s mature worldview. On the other hand, it is certainly true that Hubbard did research the role of magic and magical traditions, and he started well before meeting Parsons or hearing of Crowley. However, the fact that he *studied* magic does not mean that he *accepted* it. In advance of his times, he recognized the historical role of magic as an important system of thought throughout Western history. But he concluded that it was not a system that would solve the basic human problems.

There is a very clear text about this, published by Hubbard in the *Ability* magazine in 1957. The premise is that humans perceive that they are trapped in a less than desirable condition and should escape it. “We knew all of us that we were in a sort of trap called physical universe.” In fact, “we’d gotten in ourselves” (Hubbard 1957b, 133). This is, of course, the Gnostic core of Scientology. According to Hubbard, at the beginning, there were the “thetans,” pure spirits who created MEST (matter, energy, space, and time), largely for their own pleasure. Unfortunately, incarnating and reincarnating in human bodies, the thetans came to forget that they had created the world, and to believe that they were the effect rather than the cause of physical universe. As a consequence, they remained entrapped in the MEST universe, unable to escape, yet maintaining a feeling that escape was needed.

All successful religions, Hubbard noted, persuaded their followers they knew the way to escape:

Tell me why Christianity won so well. Wasn’t it because of promised escape? Tell me why Buddhism won so sweepingly. Because it promised escape. Well, why not escape. If the great religions of all time became great on the promise of escape, we must assume that a lot of people want out and that there’s something wrong with in (Hubbard 1957b, 134).

However, many claimed religions had not delivered. Nor did rationalist science solve the most fundamental human problems. Some looked at magic as a way to escape. When Dianetics appeared, Hubbard reported, some believed that, since it “worked” and solved some of their petty practical problems, it was a sort of

magic. However, this was a wrong interpretation. Magic in itself does not “open the gate.” Scientology is a “gnostic religion” but is not magic. More precisely, it goes beyond both rationalism and magic. It claims to offer both a clear explanation of why we are in the “sort of trap called the physical universe” and the only technology offering a way out of the trap. In this sense, Scientology is not magic but “supermagic.”

Is there a way out? Yes there is. We have it in Scientology now. I have found it and charted it. I know exactly how to open the gate. For whom. Ah yes, that’s the news. We used to say—“if your case is in good shape” or “if you really want to.” Of course you want to. But it didn’t require magic to open the gate. It required a supermagic to let our friends go free (Hubbard 1957b, 134).

The magic ritual works, if and when it does, because of belief. The beauty of Scientology, Hubbard argued, is that the technology works “without belief and faith” (Hubbard 1957b, 135).

Hubbard researched magic because he regarded as interesting its claim that it was possible to transcend the normal relations of cause and effect, thanks to alternative forms of knowledge and ritual practices. Eventually, however, Hubbard concluded that an alternative to mainstream thinking was indeed needed, but should be based on a precise technology rather than on ritual, and elaborated a very different system. As Frenschkowski has noticed, “Scientology does not have magical evocations or rituals and does not deal in spells, occult paraphernalia or the power of the true will in a Crowleyan sense.” Scientology is a (Gnostic) religion, not a magic system, and “does not have more affinity with it [magic] than other new religions.” Scientology is “something very different from magic,” and magic “is no magical key to understand what Scientology is about” (Frenschkowski 2010, 37).

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## **Religion-Based Refugee Claims in Italy: Chinese Asylum Seekers from The Church of Almighty God**

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**ABSTRACT:** In recent years in Italy, the number of requests for international protection based on religious reasons has increased. The article discusses the case of Chinese refugees from The Church of Almighty God, a Christian new religious movement severely persecuted in China. Based on interviews conducted with lawyers, social workers, and Chinese refugees themselves, an attempt was made at reconstructing the situation of these asylum seekers after the recent changes in Italian law.

**KEYWORDS:** The Church of Almighty God, Chinese Refugees in Italy, Religion-Based Asylum Claims, “Decreto Sicurezza,” Refugees in Italy.

### *Introduction*

Chinese migration is one of the oldest and most important migratory flows on both the Italian and international scene. The first significant waves of modern Chinese migrants came to Italy in the 1980s and 1990s, when China was still far from being today’s economic and technological superpower. In fact, most of the Chinese migrants to Italy came in these years from the city of Wenzhou, and from the rural areas of its hinterland, where the poverty rate was very high.

In recent years, however, this traditional economic immigration has been supplemented by a smaller but completely new category, which often comes from economically advanced cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. The phenomenon concerns Chinese fleeing China and coming to Italy asking for protection, as they are being persecuted for their religious beliefs. The specific case analyzed in this paper concerns Chinese asylum seekers belonging to The

Church of Almighty God, a religious group included by scholars within the category of Christian new religious movements (Folk 2018) and inserted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in its list of *xie jiao* (Introvigne 2019b). This list includes movements and religions regarded by the CCP as “heterodox” and severely persecuted (Irons 2018).

In theory, the Chinese legal system formally recognizes and guarantees religious freedom for “normal” religions, by which it means State-approved and State-controlled religions. These are also subject to limitations and occasional repression (Introvigne 2019a), and religions outside the system of State-controlled organizations are persecuted. The groups the CCP decides to single out as *xie jiao* are the most persecuted (Irons 2018). To escape this harsh repression, and freely profess their beliefs, devotees of The Church of Almighty God are willing to undertake great sacrifices, even if this involves severing all their relations with their home country and their loved ones and escaping abroad.

As of May 2019, 814 members of The Church of Almighty God had requested asylum in Italy. 113 requests were granted, 291 were rejected with final decisions, and the others were pending (Introvigne 2019b). These refugees arrive in Italy with tourist visas, and passports obtained either because they are not known to the authorities as members of The Church of Almighty God, or because they were able to exploit loopholes in the system or be assisted by friendly or corrupted police officers (Zoccatelli 2019). Upon arrival, the fugitives do not know what rights they can exercise on Italian territory. Neither do they know the meaning nor the function of the request for international protection, notions they should be patiently taught.

Institutional bodies and non-profit organizations are supporting asylum seekers at every stage during the process of requesting international protection, offering them both the psychological and the legal assistance needed to fulfill the requirements to obtain refugee status. Still, obtaining protection remains very difficult for many Chinese asylum seekers fleeing religious persecution in their country. The Territorial Commissions are reluctant to recognize their status as refugees. They often perceive their stories, as told in the interviews, as vague and contradictory. Some Commissions also claim that there would be a low probability of incurring violence and serious harm, should the asylum seekers return to China.

Clearly, something is wrong here, as the perception of the Commissions is in

contrast with the relevant scholarly and human rights literature, which is virtually unanimous in assessing as very serious the risk that members of The Church of Almighty God who seek asylum abroad, should they return to China, would be arrested and sentenced to long jail terms, and possibly even tortured and killed (Introvigne 2019b; USCIRF 2019). Hence, the need in Italy to train both the lawyers who assist these refugees in their appeals against the negative decisions of the Commissions and the judges, so that they may deepen their understanding of the real socio-political context in China and of The Church of Almighty God.

### *Religion-based Refugee Claims in Italy*

How asylum is regulated in the Italian legal system is a matter of great complexity. There is no single regulation governing this matter. Instead, there are several and numerous sources of law, at times not well coordinated among them. First of all, article 10 paragraph 3 of the Italian Constitution of 1947, i.e. the Constitution still in force, states that “the foreigner, who is prevented in his or her country from actually exercising the democratic freedoms guaranteed by the Italian Constitution, has the right of asylum in the territory of the Republic, according to the conditions established by the law.”

However, this general statement was not followed by any directly binding legal provision. It was only several years later, thanks to some important rulings of the Court of Cassation (Cassation, Joint Sections, decisions no. 4674/97 and 907/99; Cassation, Section I, decision no. 8423/04), that the case law finally recognized asylum as a subjective right of the refugee. As a right, it can be requested by the refugee directly before an Italian judge (ASGI 2014). In this paper, I cannot comprehensively discuss the complex issue of the Italian Constitutional notion of asylum. I will focus on the discipline of international protection in Italian law, and its application to the case of religion-based asylum requests by Chinese refugees from The Church of Almighty God.

International protection in Italy can be granted in two different ways. One is the status of refugee, the second is subsidiary protection. The first type of protection, granted through the issuance of a residence permit based on political asylum, is the only one that fully recognizes the status of refugee. Its validity lasts for five years. It is renewable, and allows access in the same way granted to any Italian citizen to study, work, health care, public housing, and the right to be

reunited with spouses and children, who have a right to come to Italy and reside there (Ministero dell'Interno 2015).

According to the Geneva Convention on Refugees of 1951 (Article 1), “refugee” is defined as whoever

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

The essential elements for the legal recognition of refugee status are three. First, the applicant must be outside of his or her own country, and (most importantly) should have a well-founded fear of persecution in case of returning there. A merely subjective feeling of fear is not enough. It is necessary to prove that the fear is well-founded. It should be proved that the asylum seeker risks persecution in the country of origin. The feeling of fear is, by its very nature, turned towards the future. It is not necessary that a refugee has already suffered persecution in the past (ASGI 2014). A refugee may, in fact, have succeeded until the time of the escape to avoid persecution. The asylum should still be granted, when the fear to suffer persecution in the future is reasonable, especially when co-religionists of the same family or local community have already been persecuted. Asylum should also be granted when it appears that in the country of origin, individuals who are in the same situation of the applicant are persecuted. Of course, having personally suffered persecution in the past or having been the object of direct threats, justifies in the clearest way the fear of being persecuted again in the future, unless it emerges that in the meantime the situation of the country of origin has radically changed.

Second, there should have been specific reasons for the persecution. The persecution, feared or suffered, should have been inflicted because of one of the reasons indicated by the same Article 1 of the Geneva Convention, i.e. race (for example, skin color, descent, belonging to a specific ethnic group), religion (including theistic, non-theistic and atheistic convictions; participation in, or abstention, from certain rituals; public acts of faith and forms of behavior prescribed by a certain religion); nationality (including belonging to a group characterized by a specific cultural, ethnic or linguistic identity, a common

geographical or political origin, or affinity with the population of another state); belonging to a particular social group (sharing a certain common history, identity, or sexual orientation); or professing political opinions banned in the country of origin.

In Italy, the subsidiary protection, which is also valid for five years, is recognized to those non-European citizens who, although they do not possess the specific requirements to obtain the status of refugee, are nonetheless awarded the same rights granted by the residence permit for political asylum. In this case, the authorities believe that returning to their country of origin would expose them to the real risk of suffering serious damage, including a death sentence, acts of torture or inhuman or degrading treatment, a threat to life, or harsh instances of persecution.

In order for the applicant to be recognized as a refugee, there should be a third and important element. It should be impossible to be protected in the country of origin. The asylum seekers must, in other words, be in the position of not being able to contact the authorities of their own country, because, if contacted, the latter would persecute rather than protect the refugees. However, in some cases, an act of persecution may be considered directly attributable to a State even when it is not committed by its official bodies. For example, when the act of persecution comes from agents who, although not being part of a governmental body, are in any case able, based on the domestic law of that same state, to act in a way typical of a public authority. Even an act of persecution committed by private individuals can be considered directly referable to a State, if the act was committed under instruction, direction, or control of state bodies.

With respect to persecution for religious reasons, a subject of interest for the purposes of our discussion, international law protects the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (see e.g. art. 9 ECHR) in the widest possible sense, including the freedom to change religion, to profess a religion, and to express it, both in public and in private. Protection should also be granted when a person is persecuted because she does not wish to profess any religion, refuses to adhere to it, or does not want to comply with parts or all of the rituals and customs relating to a religion (Article 8, paragraph 1, letter b of the Italian Legislative Decree 251/2007, based on the European so-called Qualification Directive).

The persecution for religious reasons can take different forms, such as the prohibition of belonging to a religious community, of celebrating its rituals in

public or in private, of evangelizing on behalf of it, of giving or receiving religious instruction. It may consist in the adoption of discriminatory measures against those who profess a creed or who are part of a religious community, as well as in practices aimed at forced conversion or the obligation to conform to certain religious or atheistic models. Finally, persecution acts also include those carried out to directly violate freedom of religion, for example by prohibiting or imposing certain religions, or discriminating citizens because of their religion.

### *Arriving in Italy*

What has been described so far represents the system of normative prerequisites for the recognition of refugee status. Now, I will discuss the procedure an applicant has to follow in Italy to prepare the asylum request and arrive at the decisive interview with the Territorial Commission. First, I will list the main bureaucratic and administrative requirements. Second, I will discuss the specific case of Chinese asylum seekers from The Church of Almighty God, based on my interviews with them, their lawyers, and NGOs trying to help them.

Upon entry into Italy, the refugee should be informed immediately about the possibility of applying for international protection, which should be requested personally and individually to the relevant public security authority. By law, no peremptory deadline for submitting the application is determined. An asylum request cannot be subjected to any preliminary assessment of admissibility by the public security authority, nor can it be rejected or excluded solely because of not having been presented promptly. The police officers should limit themselves to receiving the application and passing it on to the competent Commission.

The system of hosting refugees in Italy operates at two levels. The first level includes hotspots and CPAs (First Reception Centers), and the activity provided by the SPRAR (Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees). The SPRAR is a circuit of second level hosting services, aimed at helping applicants for international protection and refugees (Morandi, Schiavone and Bonetti 2015).

It is important to understand the functioning and meaning of the hotspots system. In 2015, the European Union published the *European Agenda on Migration*, which for the first time introduced this system and defined its key features. The term “hotspot,” which is intended here as a “critical intervention

point,” refers to all those operations designed to facilitate these countries most interested in best managing refugee and migration flows. It is a “filter,” through which all refugees are subjected for a first identification, a health screening, registration and fingerprinting, and, finally, assessment of possible vulnerabilities. Subsequently, the refugees should fill in the so-called “news sheet,” a document including their personal details, their pictures, basic information about their origin, the reasons for coming to Italy and for seeking international protection.

The SPRAR was established by Italian Law 189/02. It is characterized by a network of local administrative authorities aimed at providing what is called an “integrated reception.” The aim is not only implementing basic material subsidies, such as board and lodging, but above all providing a series of services, such as legal assistance, orientation and support for work, social and housing integration, linguistic and cultural mediation. The SPRAR should also favor a progressive and effective path towards the achievement of the full autonomy of its beneficiaries. The SPRAR network puts together several public and private subjects, such as the ANCI (National Association of Italian Municipalities), the Ministry of the Internal Affairs, and local administrative authorities, as well as NGOs and specialized cooperative companies, which have the task of assisting institutional bodies in the management of various local projects. All participate in a dense network of collaboration aimed at guaranteeing to asylum seekers the minimum services that must be offered to develop their integrated reception.

Regarding those defined as vulnerable, including people who have suffered torture or physical and psychological violence, these structures have the task of starting the procedures to ascertain it as soon as possible. When these situations are ascertained, asylum seekers should receive adequate assistance and psychological support (Servizio Centrale SPRAR 2016).

All those who have applied for international protection and are present on Italian territory, even if they are at the border, in transit areas, or in Italy’s territorial waters, have the right to access the services offered by the reception system. According to Italian legislative decree no. 142/2015, the applicant for international protection enjoys special guarantees concerning the right to be informed and duty to inform. The duty to inform is required, first of all, from the police officers who, when receiving the request for international protection, should inform the applicant about the procedure to be followed, the refugee’s

rights and duties during the proceedings, the deadlines and the remedies in case the request is denied, and so on. Secondly, the right to be informed applies to every stage of the procedure. The applicant has the right, at any stage, to communicate with UNHCR representatives, lawyers, and specialized NGOs to receive adequate support.

In theory, the system should effectively protect the asylum seekers' rights. In practice, several flaws have been noted, starting with the hotspot model. NGOs report about confused refugees seeking in their offices information they should have received as soon as they arrived in Italy, but didn't. Often, language is the problem. The hotspots should immediately ascertain situations of vulnerability, but they cannot do so if their personnel lack the necessary linguistic skills (Parlato 2015). Language is also a problem when the asylum seekers, as the law theoretically mandates, should receive a complete overview of their rights and obligations.

As mentioned earlier, the "second reception" should be carried out in the SPRAR centers. However, SPRAR are overcrowded, and this has increased the recourse over the years to extraordinary reception centers. The NGOs dealing with migrants and refugees, which represent a valid support to the activity of the SPRAR, have requested that the assistance network be extended. They call for more "second reception" facilities, and in general for a better management of a phenomenon whose growth has created several problems. In some regions, the number of asylum seekers is so high that the operators do not always manage to guarantee an interview to all (Rome NGO 2018).

### *The Church of Almighty God Refugees Discover Italy*

In 2015, two Chinese women visited an NGO in Rome seeking information about how refugees fleeing from religious persecution can receive asylum in Italy. They were members of The Church of Almighty God. For the NGO, this was an absolute novelty, since until that moment Asia for them was represented by Pakistani, Afghan and Bengali migrants and refugees. They knew these countries well, but the visit of Chinese asylum seekers surprised the NGO operators and caught them completely unprepared. Until them, Chinese refugees were for them an unknown phenomenon. Since other NGOs received similar requests, an informal network for exchanging information was created among several

associations operating in Italy, lawyers, and social workers.

The Church of Almighty God was, however, largely unknown. It quickly became apparent that the information available on the Internet was far from being reliable. Slowly, NGOs started consulting scholars of religion and specialists of China, and received several clarifications about religious persecution in China and The Church of Almighty God. Yet, question marks remained (Rome NGO 2018).

Since 2015, in fact, numbers of asylum seekers from China became substantial in several countries. The UNHCR Global Trends mentioned a quintupled figure within five years. There were 57,705 asylum seekers from China throughout the world in 2015 compared to 10,617 in 2010. In the same period, the aggregated number of Chinese in refugee-like situation increased, from 190,369 in 2011 to 212,911 in 2016 (UNHCR 2015, 62).

In Italy, almost all Chinese asylum seekers mentioned religious persecution and their desire to be able to profess their faith freely as the reason for seeking protection. Many of them came from large urban centers, such as Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shanghai. There, the asylum seekers had good jobs and possessed a high level of education. Once they arrived in Italy, they continued their religious life, recreating prayer groups within spaces granted by some NGOs such as ARCI (Italian Recreational and Cultural Association) or by the reception centers. However, even during prayer meetings they rarely mentioned their past experiences and their precise religious affiliation to other Chinese living in Italy. NGOs report that they felt a strong sense of distrust towards their fellow countrymen and were afraid they may be spies ready to report them to the Chinese government (Rome NGO 2018). They did not discuss religious matters with strangers, and did not even show to others their residence permits. Another sign of this distrust is that they prefer translators who are not Chinese citizens when dealing with NGOs and with the Territorial Commissions (Rome Law Firm 2018).

When first interviewed by NGOs and, later, the Commissions, Chinese asylum seekers, especially the women, appear distraught and moved. It is the first time they psychologically must face and tell others the story of their escape from China (Rome Law Firm 2018). In the case of the refugees from The Church of Almighty God, the trip should be carefully planned, often secretly for fear both of being reported to the police and creating problems for those who will remain in China.

The visas are issued by specialized agencies. They often take advantage of people who want to leave China quickly and charge disproportionate fees, up to ten thousand euros. Since a large documentation is required for receiving a visa, which the applicant does not always manage to procure directly, the agency, which in some cases is owned by acquaintances, plays an important role as an intermediary.

According to my interviews, there were mothers who had left their children in China. To freely profess their beliefs, they were forced to sever all ties with members of their families, not to jeopardize their safety and their own. This is a moving, painful choice, where God is put first. However, the stories of these choices are often regarded as not believable by the Commissions. They do not understand how somebody can put religion above family. “God is stronger!” answered a girl when the Commission suggested that in China she could have simply prayed in private and hidden her faith (Rome Law Firm 2018).

Of course, members of The Church of Almighty God, even when identified and arrested in China, can always escape detention by persuading the authorities that they are ready to give up their faith and cooperate with the police. However, most refuse, as it has always happened in the history of religions and of Christianity, including among the first Christians. Believers know that they would be discriminated against in the workplace and in some cases even expelled from their own family (Rome NGO 2018). Others report that their universities, under government pressure, refused to give them a degree they were entitled to. And others could not continue school beyond the eighth grade. just because they were discriminated against for their faith (CAG Asylum Seekers 2018). Yet, they refused to give up—“God is stronger!”

### *Filing the Application*

As for the presentation of the asylum application, those who decide to flee China in most cases do not know in advance where they will go. The destination is chosen only in the final phase of the travel planning. Therefore, information on the local laws is not collected in advance, and they do not know what to do when they arrive in Italy. As far as housing is concerned, some refugees stated that, once they arrived in Italy, they already had contacts to turn to. For example, they had the addresses of co-religionists, who would host them or direct them to

dormitories. Others, however, initially relied on the reception centers. Accommodation in dormitories allowed them to get in touch with other Chinese who, having lived in the city for some time, were able to provide useful information about services or how to find a job. This is the so-called “ethnic network,” which represents a very important immediate support after arrival. Networks are operative for all nationalities, but seems to be particularly effective for the Chinese (Rome NGO 2018).

This, however, is not always the case. Other Chinese refugees claim to have arrived on the Italian territory without previous contacts, or a network ready to help them. There is a Web site for Chinese in Italy, called [www.huarenjie.net](http://www.huarenjie.net), also available through a mobile application. Through [huarenjie.net](http://huarenjie.net), it is possible to rent an apartment or find jobs such as bellboy for a warehouse, waiter for a restaurant, or clerk for a clothing store, all in commercial establishments owned by other Chinese (CAG Asylum Seekers 2018). This is how many Chinese asylum seekers start their own experience in Italy and manage to survive. Some Chinese reported that they had to work without a contract due to the lack of a residence permit (Rome NGO 2018).

In the case of asylum seekers from The Church of Almighty God, two questions are often raised by Commissions and courts: why is the asylum application presented on average three months after arriving in Italy, when the tourist visa expires, or later, rather than immediately? And why do most refugees fail to apply for hospitality in a reception center? (Rome NGO 2018). In fact, there are answers to both questions. To the first, the timing is not significantly different from that found among other asylum seekers. Obtaining an appointment with the local Immigration Police Headquarters is not easy, and for refugees it may take a long time to file the application (Rome NGO 2018).

In the case of the refugees from The Church of Almighty God, an additional problem is that they do not know how the international protection exactly works in Italy. The information is not easily accessible. Most applicants claim they have received the necessary information only by chance or thanks to co-religionists who arrived in Italy and sought asylum prior to them (CAG Asylum Seekers 2018). Those who arrive in Italian ports by sea follow the hotspots procedure. In addition to photo-signaling and identification, they receive comprehensive legal information on the asylum system in Italy. The same situation is not found in the airports. There, it is theoretically possible to file an application for asylum

immediately upon arrival, but the corresponding information is rarely available. In fact, several questions are asked and answered in China when applying for a tourist visa. Those arriving at an Italian airport with a tourist visa are not asked further questions, nor offered information about asylum (Rome NGO 2018).

### *The Territorial Commissions*

Asylum applications are granted or denied by Territorial Commissions, which pursuant to Art. 4 of Legislative Decree no. 25/2008, are administrative bodies established at the local branches of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, known as Prefectures. The Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration of the Ministry of Internal Affairs is responsible for the national coordination of the Commissions. The Ministry appoints the members of the Territorial Commissions and determines the territorial districts in which each Commission operates. Before a recent reform (discussed below), they included an officer of the Prefecture who acted as president, an official of the State Police, a representative of a territorial body (such as the local municipality), and a representative designated by the UNHCR. However, this composition of the Commissions did not really guarantee that the interview of the asylum seeker might take place, as Italian law mandated, “with due attention to the personal or general context in which the question [of asylum] arises, including the cultural origin or vulnerability of the applicant” (art. 15 of the regulations amended pursuant to Legislative Decree no. 119/2014, now called “Formation of Territorial and Staff Commissions”). There were no requirements for the selection of officials with specialized qualifications, skills and experience. The aim of the regulations was to provide the most competent evaluation possible, coming from a plurality of professional experiences. In fact, however, Commission members were rarely able to provide a truly professional and homogeneous evaluation. The absence of an adequate preparation of the Commission members damaged the applicants. Many applications by members of The Church of Almighty God were rejected for non-persuasive reasons.

In January 2018, the Legislative Decree no. 220 of 22 December 2017 came into force and radically changed the composition of the Territorial Commissions. Since July 2018, officers of the State Police and representatives of the local authorities are no longer part of the Commissions. Now, each Territorial

Commission is made up of professional members selected through public competition among candidates specialized in the field. Each Commission should include an officer of the Prefecture who acts as president and an expert in international refugee matters appointed by the UNHCR. However, some problems still remain. The new law specifies that the interviews may normally take place in the presence of only one of the Commission members, although chosen among those who have a specialized formation. The presence of all members is no longer required. Obviously, being interviewed by one Commission member only offers less guarantees to the refugee.

The key moment of the administrative procedure is certainly the applicant's interview before the Commission. There, the applicant has the right to expose in an exhaustive way the elements that form the basis of the request. Since the investigation deals with an extremely personal and delicate situation, the interview must take place in a non-public session, individually, objectively, and impartially.

A very important aspect of the interview is that the Commission should rely on precise and constantly updated information about the general situation of the country of origin, based on established and accredited sources (COI, "country of origin information"), normally from UNHCR or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or from other agencies and institutions for the protection of human rights operating internationally. If there is a need to investigate further, by law the Commission can avail itself of the support of experts for the purpose of a reasonable examination of the application. The experts may be consultants specialized in health, culture, religion, gender or children, depending on the topic the Commission needs to investigate.

Furthermore, with the consent of the applicant, the Commission can order medical examinations to ascertain the consequences of persecution or torture. As discussed above, the Commission cannot fail to consider the elements proving that the applicant has already suffered persecution, or direct threats of being persecuted. They are a serious indication that the fear of future persecution is well-founded. To reject the application, the Commission should conclude that the fear of persecution is not well-founded, and that the applicant does not run serious risks in case of return to the country of origin.

Once all the elements have been examined, the Commission takes a decision, thus putting an end to the administrative procedure. Three different outcomes

are possible. First, the Commission can accept the request and, consequently, grant the international protection, alternatively in the form of refugee status or in the form of subsidiary protection. Second, it may reject the application if it believes that the conditions for granting international protection are not met or the application is manifestly groundless. Third, despite its rejection of the request for international protection, the Commission (before the reform known as “Decreto Sicurezza,” discussed below), might still find that there were serious humanitarian reasons for accommodating the refugee in Italy. In this case, it would transmit the documents to the police so that a residence permit for humanitarian reasons might be issued.

### *Why the Commissions Reject the Applications*

From the interviews I conducted with several lawyers of the Rome and Perugia courts, it came out that applications of members of The Church of Almighty God were consistently rejected for the same reasons. In the opinions issued by the Commissions, contradictions were found between the stories as told in the interviews and the written documents (the so called “news sheets”) originally filed by the applicant explaining the reasons for leaving China and the dangers in case of return. The parts of the stories where applicants explain how they managed to obtain a passport are regarded as particularly problematic.

Second, the Commissions compare the narratives of the applicants to the COI and find an inconsistency of the statements with respect to the news acquired from Refworld.org, concluding that the facts are not credible and contradictory. Also based on the COI, some Commissions emphasize that the applicant’s statements reveal only a partial knowledge of the principles and theology of The Church of Almighty God. Finally, some Commissions believe that there is no serious risk for the applicant in China.

In summary, the reasons most frequently mentioned by the Commissions for their negative decisions refer to four factors, First, a lack of credibility of the statements provided by the applicants, perceived as vague and contradictory. Second, an alleged lack of sufficient knowledge of the history and theology of The Church of Almighty God (that the Commissions presume to know through the COI). Third, the Commissions do not believe the applicant’s stories with regards to how a passport and visa were obtained (Zoccatelli 2019). Fourth, some

Commissions believe that in case of a return to China, the risk to suffer serious harm is low, so that even subsidiary protection is not granted. Lawyers filing appeals on behalf of refugees point out that the latter comments are paradoxical, since international organizations and NGOs are unanimous in describing a situation of religious persecution in China (USCIRF 2019). It is also obvious that The Church of Almighty God is a primary target of this persecution (Introvigne 2019b). When this was not recognized, even the mildest form of protection, the (no longer existing) humanitarian one, was not granted.

### *Appealing the Negative Decisions: Lawyers and Judges*

In the opinion of the attorneys dealing with the appeals I interviewed, the Commissions, in carrying out their examining activity, were extremely superficial. Although the law calls for an extensive investigation and collection of documents, and in-depth study of each case, this is fact does not happen. Another problem the lawyers noticed is that the Commissions adopt a Western way of thinking, which makes understanding stories told by Chinese refugees very difficult. Rather than objectively, these stories are assessed through “Western glasses” (Perugia Law Firm 2018). One example is that refugees of The Church of Almighty God may claim that they have been arrested but no record of their arrest was entered into the national computer data base, for different reasons (including corruption of the police officers, who may release those arrested without recording the arrest, if relatives pay a sum of money that they will pocket). This is important for the passport question. If there is no record of a previous arrest, there is no obstacle in obtaining a passport. This is part of a general phenomenon of corruption in China, which by the way also allows some whose arrest *has* been recorded to get a passport. However, the Commissions do not believe these stories, as failing to record an arrest would be impossible in the Italian police system (Perugia law firm 2018).

All the lawyers interviewed expressed the view that they are persuaded that the stories of persecution and torture told by their clients are very much real, yet they are difficult to prove. Commissions and judges request that torture is certified by a specialized doctor. Not only refugees may lack the resources to submit to such specialized exams, but torture does not always leave tangible signs on the body. Being submitted to sleep or food deprivation, or being compelled to stand up for

hours, does not leave visible signs, particularly months after the events. Therefore, it seems unreasonable to demand tangible proofs of torture (Rome Law Firm 2018).

Originally, lawyers filed with the courts documents by NGOs such as Amnesty International and ChinaAid detailing religious persecution in China in general. My interviews confirmed that, when first approached by the refugees, lawyers had never heard of The Church of Almighty God and were only vaguely familiar with the situation of religion in China, and how the groups listed as *xie jiao* were persecuted in a particularly harsh way. In order to proceed with the appeals, they needed to study matters they were not familiar with, contact scholars of religion and sinologists, read articles and sometimes books. Even after all this study, their knowledge varies from lawyer to lawyer and still appears to be incomplete.

Scholars, in turn, were often frustrated when they learned that the Commissions and the courts (particularly, in decisions rendered in Milan), when confronted with academic studies of The Church of Almighty God published by reputable scholarly journals and presses, still regarded them as carrying the same, or even a minor, weight than the COI available through the UNHCR data base Refworld, most of them dating back to several years ago and including serious mistakes. I understand that, at the time of this writing, an effort is being made at the international level to produce and include in Refworld new and more reliable COI about The Church of Almighty God. So far, however, they have not yet been published, and in Italy we still find cases where refugees are accused of not knowing the theology of their own Church because their answers do not correspond to what the Commissions and the Courts find in the COI. However, refugees are right, and the COI are wrong (Šorytė 2018).

Finally, both NGOs and lawyers recommend that refugees should be assisted by experts when preparing for the interviews. This would allow them to better tell their stories. Of course, this is a problem common to most refugees (Rome Law Firm 2018).

### *The “Decreto Sicurezza” (2018)*

While I was conducting my interviews for this article, on November 2, 2018, the Italian Parliament approved the Decree-Law 840/2018, the so-called

“Decreto Sicurezza” (Security Decree). The new law introduced reforms that radically changed the regulatory framework on asylum, immigration, citizenship, and security.

The Decree also deals with matters outside the purpose of the present study. As far as the situation of asylum seekers is concerned, a first crucial aspect of the Decree is the repeal of the provisions about humanitarian protection. Before the new law, humanitarian protection represented the category of protection more easily accessible to asylum seekers, including the Chinese refugees fleeing religious persecution. Protection was granted based on “serious humanitarian reasons, or those resulting from obligations constitutional or international law imposes on the Italian state.” It was also available to those fleeing wars, natural disasters, or other particularly calamitous events.

The humanitarian protection was recognized to those who could not be expelled, because they would face persecution in their country of origin, as well as to victims of labor exploitation or human trafficking. In all these cases, the humanitarian permit was different from asylum or subsidiary protection. The duration of humanitarian protection was variable, from six months to two years, and was renewable, as well as convertible into a residence permit for work, although the right to family reunification (i.e. to be joined in Italy by spouses or children) was not included.

With the coming into force of the “Decreto Sicurezza,” humanitarian protection can no longer be granted, neither by Commissions nor by courts of law. What is left, instead of humanitarian protection, is a residence permit for a maximum duration of one year to be granted in some “special cases,” including for victims of domestic violence or serious labor exploitation, for those who need medical care in Italy because they are in a seriously compromised state of health, or for those coming from a country that is in a situation of “contingent and exceptional calamity.” At last, a residence permit is provided for those who, after they entered Italy have distinguished themselves for “acts of particular civil value.” This last permit has a duration of two years, and can be renewed. Religious persecution is included among the circumstances allowing for a “special” permit to be granted.

Furthermore, pursuant to article 3, the Decree modifies the maximum time during which asylum seekers and immigrants may remain in hotspots and first reception facilities. This is only the period needed to ascertain their identity and

citizenship. This provision also applies to minors who are part of a family unit. Article 4, finally, provides that irregular immigrants can be detained by the customs in their offices at the Italian borders, if there are no places available in the detention and repatriation centers (CPR). For this, a request by the provincial chief of the police (questore) and the authorization of a justice of the peace are required, pending the implementation of the repatriation procedure, for which the allocation of more funds was recommended by the Decree.

With the entry into force of the Decree, it is also easier to lose the already granted status of refugee or the supplementary protection. Protection will be lost in case of convictions for threats or violence to public officials, serious issues of violence to other citizens, and involvement in female genital mutilation practices. The request for protection may also be suspended, when the applicant is subject to pending criminal proceedings for one of the crimes that would result in the refusal of asylum in the event of a final conviction. Furthermore, if the refugee returns to his country of origin, even temporarily, both asylum and subsidiary protection may be easily lost. For the cases of criminal proceedings or convictions, article 10 of the decree introduces urgent proceedings before the Territorial Commission, for which a possible appeal has no suspensive effect. Therefore, the asylum seeker can be immediately expelled.

Another substantial change concerns the System for the reception of asylum seekers and refugees, the SPRAR, which will be downsized and limited to holders of international protection or unaccompanied foreign minors. The other applicants will be hosted in the Extraordinary Centers (CAS) and in the Reception Centers for Asylum Seekers (CARA).

### *Conclusions*

In Italy, the phenomenon of Chinese asylum seekers for religious reasons is comparatively recent. In itself, this is a factor making Italian authorities suspicious. The first large waves of asylum requests by Chinese in Italy were recorded in 2015, coinciding with two important international events, the World Expo in Milan and the Roman Catholic Jubilee in Rome. Some believe this is not a coincidence, because the two events made it easier to obtain tourist visas to Italy in China, as elsewhere. The problem, however, is that these easily obtainable tourist visas were used by both asylum seekers and migrant workers trying to

enter Italy for purely economic reasons. The authorities, thus, suspected that some asylum seekers were just pretending to be at risk of religious persecution, but were in fact just illegal economic immigrants (Rome NGO 2018).

Another reason made the authorities suspicious. With the so called Flow Decrees of 2014 and 2016, obtaining a permit to stay in Italy for temporary or seasonal work became much more difficult. Authorities came to believe that some Chinese economic immigrants came to Italy and claimed to be victims of religious persecution to obtain humanitarian protection, understanding that a humanitarian permit can later be converted into a working license (Rome NGO 2018). This explains the high number of negative decisions against Chinese asylum seekers by Commissions, although it seems unfair to argue that stories of religious persecution are all false (Rome NGO 2018).

In fact, Chinese asylum seekers from The Church of Almighty God did not come all from the same region. Some resided in China in large metropolitan centers, including Beijing and Shanghai, where they had well-paid and prestigious jobs. Some were university graduates and spoke fluent English, to the point of not requiring an interpreter. Others came from small urban centers, carried out more modest activities, such as hairdresser or decorator. Some had chosen to devote themselves full-time to preaching their faith or leading prayer groups (CAG Asylum Seekers 2018). This heterogenous social and geographical origin is *not* typical of economic migrants disguising themselves as refugees. In fact, it contributes to confirm that, in the case of Church of Almighty God refugees, the stories they tell are true and the request for asylum is well-founded (Rome NGO 2018).

Some of the lawyers I interviewed, who had handled multiple cases of refugees from The Church of Almighty God, also reported to me that some Italian authorities they preferred not to name, although not putting this in writing, told them that the high number of young female applicants made them suspect that religion-based asylum application may in fact disguise a human trafficking of sex workers (Perugia Law Firm 2018). This is not unheard of in Italy in the case of other (false) refugees, including some from China. However, in the case of The Church of Almighty God refugees, the same sources told me that the possibility was investigated, and no evidence whatsoever of sex trafficking emerged.

A main problem for refugees is to prove that they are indeed members of The Church of Almighty God. The multiple publications by scholars and journalists

now often persuade the courts, if not the Commissions, that The Church of Almighty God is indeed targeted by religious persecution in China. Yet, the courts (again, particularly in Milan) often conclude that, even if The Church of Almighty God is persecuted, there is not enough evidence that the applicant is a bona fide member of that Church. The problem is how to prove it. One can hope that, if COI improves, interviews based on faulty COI will become a thing of the past. However, the problem of certifying to the satisfaction of the authorities that the refugee is indeed a member of The Church of Almighty God will remain. Obviously, it is impossible to obtain a certificate from China, where the Church is banned and operates underground. No comprehensive records about Church members are kept in China for security reasons. Members are often identified by religious names and pseudonyms, and may even be known to the police under their assumed names only (CAG Asylum Seekers, 2018).

There are two problems here. First, how can The Church of Almighty God ascertain that somebody is really its member. Second, how can the Commissions and courts be sure that documents certifying this membership are authentic. Both Church of Almighty God devotees and scholars (Introvigne 2019b) believe that the Church has in fact a highly effective and complex organization. Members are known to leaders of the local communities in China. These leaders can be effectively, if clandestinely, contacted from abroad, putting leaders in the diaspora, including in Italy, in the position to come to solid conclusions about who is a member and who is not. It is also a fact that Church of Almighty God members use a jargon and are aware of religious insights and practices that it would be very difficult for an outsider to imitate, even after a careful study of the Church's publicly available literature and Web sites.

Accordingly, we can conclude that the leaders of The Church of Almighty God outside China may assess in a reliable way that a certain refugee is really a member of the Church. How can they certify it in a way that Commissions and courts may regard as acceptable? Initially, asylum seekers gave to the lawyers a very short letter certifying that they were members of The Church of Almighty God, issued by the Church's organization in New York. In Perugia, lawyers reported that the fact that these letters used all the same words led the courts to conclude that they were false. Lawyers started keeping the envelopes to prove that they in fact came from New York (Perugia Law Firm 2018). Similar problems occurred in Rome and Milan (Rome NGO 2018).

The fact that a letter came from New York, however, did not prove that its content was true. Later, letters attesting that an individual asylum seeker was a member of The Church of Almighty God started to be issued by the Church's branch in Rome. It was objected that there was no evidence that the Rome Church was affiliated with the New York Church, which the latter in turn attested.

Still, an obvious uneasiness remains in the courts when they are confronted with assessing the evidence that somebody is really a member in good standing of The Church of Almighty God. It is clearly possible that some may falsely claim to be a member. However, once a duly constituted branch of the Church abroad attests to the fact of the membership, it seems unreasonable to doubt that this is true. Sometimes, if the certification is too simple and short, it is claimed that it is not believable, and if it is too detailed, that it is "too well done" and prepared with the sole aim to support the asylum requests. This places an impossible burden of evidence on the refugee.

As previously mentioned, in Italy there is still no organic law on the right of asylum. There is no structured reception system, and an emergency management perpetuates itself. Policies and decisions are clearly influenced by economic problems and the general European attitude hostile to refugees. Although lip service is paid to international conventions and agreements protecting fundamental human rights, laws are continually modified in a more and more restrictive way.

The attitude of the Territorial Commissions does not always appear to be neutral and impartial (Rome Law Firm 2018). The percentage of asylum requests accepted is decreasing, and it is difficult to believe this is not connected with the political situation, although the result is that more and more refugees simply go into hiding. As I mentioned, before the new Legislative Decree no. 220/2017, the composition of the Territorial Commissions did not guarantee that they might be able to correctly fulfill the tasks entrusted to them by the law. All my interviewees, both lawyers and refugees, lamented that the Commissions were not well prepared to understand the asylum seekers. The law provided for the possibility of using specializing consultants, but in fact this did not happen, and it seems lack of funds was not the main reason (Rome Law Firm 2018). Lawyers expressed a cautious optimism about the effects of the new law, which should gradually introduce better prepared members as part of the Commissions.

There has also been a willingness at the national level to cooperate with

scholars and provide these new Commissions members with information on asylum seekers from little known groups, including The Church of Almighty God. The role of scholars should not be underestimated. There is a growing body of scholarly studies about The Church of Almighty God, and it may be hoped that Commissions and courts will rely more and more on them in the future, rather than on fake news circulating on the Web (Introvigne 2018). Refugees should also realize that information on The Church of Almighty God self-produced by the Church itself is often rejected by Commissions and courts as self-serving evidence, while works by scholars are regarded as independent and taken more seriously.

Ultimately, however, refugees should also help themselves. They should take time trying to understand the Italian law and system, and what parts of their stories are interesting for the Commissions and should be mentioned in the interviews. They cannot do this alone, and need to be assisted by different experts (Perugia Law Firm 2018). For example, forensic doctors would be useful when the presence of visible torture wounds may be certified. And anthropologists may be called in to bridge the cultural distance between East and West, a question of greater complexity for the judges.

But what about the new Security Decree? Its effects are vigorously debated in Italy. The elimination of humanitarian protection is regarded by some legal experts and NGOs as being against both the Italian Constitution and international treaties Italy has signed. A special criticism is that the “special cases,” in which a form of protection similar to the old humanitarian one may still be granted, do not include the risk of torture in the home country and the impossibility of exercising there the basic rights guaranteed by the Italian Constitution and the international treaties, including the right to religious liberty.

There is no doubt that the new Decree has been unfavorable for the asylum seekers from The Church of Almighty God. Before the Decree, several of them were granted humanitarian protection, a possibility that has now disappeared. Worse consequences may come in the future. Article 7-bis of the Decree calls for the establishment of a list of “safe countries of origin,” where in principle there are no serious risks of persecution or torture. Some lawyers have expressed concern about the possibility that China may be included in this list, because of political reasons and the fact that Italy joined the Belt and Road Initiative (Perugia Law Firm 2019). Asylum seekers coming from a country listed as “safe” will not

be automatically denied protection, but will face a very high burden of proof. NGOs and scholars have observed that including China in the list of “safe countries of origins” in Italy would be paradoxical, considering that international organizations continuously denounce its violations of human rights and religious liberty (USCIRF 2019).

Lawyers and NGOs are both concerned and unhappy about the Decree. It is, however, comparatively recent, and it is too early to assess its effects. Very often in Italy case law has preceded the Constitutional Court in interpreting questionable provisions in a way more favorable to human rights. The impression by some refugees that, after the “Decreto Sicurezza,” it is impossible to be granted asylum in Italy is psychologically understandable, but wrong. While in its recent decisions the Court of Milan has consistently rejected asylum requests from members of The Church of Almighty God, other courts such as Perugia, Rome, or Florence continue to grant at least some of them.

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