

**“We Can Lift This World While Quarantined”:
Scientology and the 2020 Pandemic**

Rosita Šorytė

ORLIR (International Observatory of Religious Liberty of Refugees)

president@orlir.org

ABSTRACT: New religious movements are rarely given credit for their humanitarian work. A case in point is the Church of Scientology during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Opponents used the epidemic as an opportunity to accuse Scientology of spreading conspiracy theories and not respecting anti-virus precautions. In fact, while interpreting the epidemic through L. Ron Hubbard’s theory of “dangerous environments,” Scientologists rapidly adopted state-of-the-art precautions and distributed millions of booklets teaching how to effectively protect hygiene and use masks, gloves, and disinfectants. Scientology’s Volunteer Ministers organized massive humanitarian activities, which were praised by majors and other authorities in several countries. By doing this, they were persuaded that they were not only helping fellow human beings, but moving decisively towards a better, “restored” planet.

KEYWORDS: Scientology, Church of Scientology, L. Ron Hubbard, Religions and COVID-19, Scientology and COVID-19, Scientology Volunteer Ministers.

New Religious Movements and Public Health: A “Paradigm of Suspicion”

The COVID-19 pandemic was a difficult time for religious minorities. As it often happened in history, they were often scapegoated as irresponsible plague spreaders, from South Korea to India, and from France to Italy. It is certainly true that large religious gatherings during the first weeks of the pandemic may have contributed to spreading the virus. What, however, happened was that religious gatherings that occurred while they were not yet illegal were criticized more harshly than larger political and sport events, and minority religions were attacked while those representing the majority were largely left alone.

One example is France, where the evangelical megachurch Porte Ouverte Chrétienne (Christian Open Door) was accused for an international event that gathered more than 3,000 persons in Mulhouse from February 17 to 21, 2020. After the accusations, Porte Ouverte children were insulted in their schools and church members were beaten in the street. Porte Ouverte admitted the gathering might have contributed to spreading the virus, but claimed it had been “scapegoated,” and noted that before February 21, no restrictions existed in France for public events (Lindell 2020). On February 18, thousands had gathered in the same city of Mulhouse to welcome the visiting French President Emmanuel Macron. Images show that the President’s walkabout, a real “bain de foule,” happened without the use of face masks, distancing, or other precautions (Rousseau 2020).

A parallel phenomenon concerns the good, charitable work done by new religious movements during the pandemic. Either it went unreported, or was dismissed as covert proselytization. Indeed, most religions tried to help fighting COVID-19. The Catholic Church was particularly active in this field, including by opening its private hospitals to those in need, but so were others. New religious and spiritual movements were also part of this effort.

The opponents, and sometimes even scholars (e.g. Cawley 2019, 162–63), claim that charitable organizations operated by new religious movements are “fronts” for converting others under the false pretext of helping. This “paradigm of suspicion” may be criticized on two accounts.

First, it is in turn suspicious that critics do not raise these objections against the Catholic Church, the Church of England, or other mainline religious organizations. It is taken for granted that their activities on behalf of public health and the sick are promoted in good faith, out of a sincere desire for a better world, rather than for self-promotion or proselytization purposes. Only the activities of new religious movements are accused of dissimulating hidden motivations. And very often a vicious circle is created. If new religious movements only spend their time in missionary and religious activities, it is objected that this is typical of “cults,” while “real” religions help fellow human beings. If they engage in charitable, social, or health activities, it is argued that these are only “fronts” for proselytization.

Second, the theory that new religious and spiritual movements organize public health activities mostly for proselytization purposes is open to empirical

disconfirmation. The pandemic itself offered a good opportunity to witness this. By serving free meals (as the Mexican movement La Luz del Mundo did), or distributing face masks, disinfectants, and booklets of practical advice (as many did), new religious movements had a limited, quick interaction with the recipients, certainly not suitable to “convert” them. They also interacted with local authorities and chiefs of the police, bureaucrats whose profiles are normally far away from those of the religious seekers looking for a new religion.

Possibly, the humanitarian activities generate a larger awareness of the work of certain new religions, which may indirectly benefit their religious activities. This is, however, different from using the public health activities for proselytization purposes. Helping others is good public relations, but this is true for mainline as well as for new religions, and does not exclude sincerity. The “paradigm of suspicion” singling out and targeting the public health activities of new religious movements is both unfair and demonstrably false.

It depends on a general, negative image of the new religious movements. Data that do not conform to this image are discarded by most media. A “cult” is by definition “bad.” If it does something good, the inconsistency is resolved by either censoring the news, or interpreting it as hidden proselytization or PR.

For reasons that have been addressed by scholars (e.g. Schulte 2017; Westbrook 2018), and perhaps deserve further investigation, a large coalition of interests has been mobilized against the Church of Scientology, portraying it as the stereotypical “cult.” A significant part of this criticism has been supported, if not created, by interests disturbed by Scientology’s campaigns against psychiatry and the use of psychiatric drugs. The image these attacks have tried to create implies that Scientology is a movement hazardous to public health. When, during the pandemic, Scientology actually *promoted* public health through its initiatives, a problem was created for the opponents, and their reaction was predictably violent.

Anti-Cultists, Scientology, and the Pandemic

Anti-cultists have used against Scientology the same line of attack employed against other new religious movements during the COVID-19 crisis. They claimed that Scientology promoted dangerous “conspiracy theories” about the

pandemic, and that Scientologists endangered public health by not respecting social distancing.

The first argument relies, almost exclusively, on an *Inspector General Network Bulletin* dated March 13, 2020, signed by Scientology leader David Miscavige, and largely publicized by Scientology critics (Miscavige 2020). These critics point out that the bulletin mentioned “the current hysteria,” commenting that “the only thing you can be *certain* of, is that it *is* hysteria,” and at one stage used the expression “planetary bullbait.”

Certainly, the bulletin is primarily an internal document for Scientologists, and includes some rhetoric hype when it affirms that “we have already been doing far more and taking greater preventive action than anybody else, anywhere on Earth—and by a long way.” However, the document should be read in its entirety. On the one hand, it denounces the possibility of chaos, “hysteria,” and provocations (“bullbait.”) Few would deny that these have been real possibilities, and in several countries more than possibilities, during the pandemic, the more so when hysteria has been directed at minorities, such as Muslims in India. On the other hand, the bulletin gives detailed advice and directions. This advice is *not* typical of those negationists and conspiracy theorists who denied the existence of the epidemic. It is both sound and consistent with the instructions given by many governments to their citizens.

In fact, it went even beyond such instructions, as Scientology cancelled all public events. The bulletin specified that,

even if no prohibitions were issued by others, standard LRH Sea Org protocol mandates against a mass gathering in times of illness and disease. *It is prohibited.*

After quoting L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986) as a leader who believed in the motto that “an ounce of prevention is worth a ton of cure,” the bulletin continued: “Well, how about a ton of *prevention* so as not to require an ounce of *cure*?” Besides cancelling Scientology’s large gatherings, the document detailed practical, common-sense directions:

1. First, real information for you and your immediate environment. Booklets containing this information have been provided for all staff and public—and in any quantity (free of charge) for dissemination to friends, family, and associates.

2. Second, preventing and/or killing whatever this virus is. We have researched and are utilizing the most effective products and applications for eradicating this virus and *any* virus, bacteria, or germ infestation.

This includes massive infusions of airborne ozone, as well as nebulized peroxide and Decon7. (If you haven’t seen these applications, that’s because the operation occurs in unoccupied spaces before you arrive.)

3. Third, medical checks and isolation. It has been longstanding LRH Sea Org policy that ill persons are isolated (segregated in separate quarters and not in contact with the general population). This *IS* how to prevent the spread of illness. Therefore, as a preventative measure, all staff and public have their temperature taken each day before services. This extends to the *requirement* that all staff and public report any feeling of illness *before* entering Org spaces.

4. Finally, masks and gloves are available for all public when they are out and about (gas station, supermarket, etc.) and wish to insulate themselves.

The second argument used against Scientologists is that they did not respect social distancing, thus endangering the population. At times, this criticism simply confirm that some media are incapable of reporting objectively about Scientology. In Florence, Italy, it seems that on March 25, 2020, eight Scientologists gathered in the local church. Depending on what activities they were performing, the gathering might or might not have been against the city’s regulations for the pandemic: indeed, the Scientologists might have had legitimate reasons to meet (R.C. 2020). However, the subtitle of a local newspaper mentioned that “the police raided a clandestine summit of Scientologists” (*Firenze Today* 2020), with a language more often used for the mafia than for peaceful meetings of law-abiding citizens.

In Clearwater, where Scientology has its Flag base, a recently elected city councilor particularly hostile to the church, Mark Bunker, spread accusations by anti-cultists that Scientologists were not respecting health rules in their premises, and instigated an unannounced police inspection. As reported by local media, the initiative backfired spectacularly.

On Tuesday [March 31], Police Chief Dan Slaughter showed up to Scientology’s Fort Harrison Hotel unannounced to inspect the buildings and ensure Scientology was complying with measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus. Over a 30-minute tour of the church’s Fort Harrison Hotel and its Flag Building, Slaughter said he observed multiple locations with surgical masks, gloves and sanitizer; no groups congregating in common areas; a closed hotel pool; and employees standing six feet apart while waiting in line in dining areas.

Slaughter also said he observed buses on Monday and Tuesday occupied with less than 15 people.

“My goal was to get this resolved, whether it was a problem or not,” Slaughter said. “I think they are doing a pretty darn good job in this particular scenario based on what I saw” (McManus 2020).

Scientology Volunteer Ministers and the Epidemic

Scientology’s immediate reaction to the epidemic was to implement a policy of sanitization and control in its own premises throughout the world, and to switch meetings from in-person to online. In Los Angeles, it reported that, due to the early implementation of preventive measures, no member of the large Scientology staff in the city was infected (Pierce 2020). Soon, however, Scientology started devising ways to help the communities where its Volunteer Ministers were present. Bernadette Rigal-Cellard describes the Volunteer Ministers as “the best-known charity of the Church because of its ministers with their bright yellow jackets highly visible in disaster zones” (Rigal-Cellard 2019, 87). She has also commented on anti-cult criticism that,

with their yellow jackets the Scientologist rescue teams made sure to be far more visible on photos or on television than other teams and to use their presence as a proselytizing tool. Scientologists will say the bright color is to signal to victims or other helpers where they are for extra support. Indeed, all disaster relief volunteers do wear specific colors or logos in order to be located easily by victims or by the other members of their groups or by coordinators, since each team is specialized in one form of relief. In any case, the issue betrays the age-old ambiguity of humanitarian aid, inextricably altruistic and *pro domo* (Rigal-Cellard 2019, 88).

Obviously, humanitarian aid always benefits the image of those providing it. When it is from Scientology, however, we hear a criticism not normally directed at Catholic or other organizations that operate very much in the same way. Rigal-Cellard concludes that,

The volunteer ministers of the Church of Scientology are then just another cog in the never ending conflicts around the real motivations of humanitarian aid that, like any other social activity, will be viewed in diametrically divergent ways according to one’s relation to the group (Rigal-Cellard 2019, 89).

The 2020 pandemic itself witnessed again this debate, with respect not only to NGOs or religions, but also to governments. When China, Russia, or the United

States, while all affected themselves by the epidemic, competed in offering masks, field hospitals, and other aid to several countries, a debate was generated whether theirs was a genuine humanitarian enterprise or a form of “mask diplomacy,” or “soft power” in disguise.

Scientology volunteers operated even before, but the program was organized in its present form after Scientologists offered their help in New York after 9/11. Volunteer Ministers were a recognizable presence, *inter alia*, after the Haiti earthquake of 2010 and Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico in 2017.

How international and effective was the Volunteer Ministers network was demonstrated during the 2020 pandemic. Not all activities were reported by local media, but throughout the world Scientologists mobilized to help in several different ways. In Nashville, Tennessee, a Volunteer Minister turned her home into a “tiny cloth mask factory,” and donated them to the Salvation Army emergency workers and to others ill-equipped “first responders” (Brinker 2020). In Atlanta, Georgia, a visiting Volunteer Minister from Kazakhstan launched the idea that Scientologists should prepare tables where neighbors can pick up for free masks, disinfectant, gloves, and Scientology’s booklets on prevention (Webb 2020).

In Seattle, Scientology reported that it had prepared and distributed at Mary’s Place, a shelter for street children, masks inspired by Dr. Seuss and other popular characters (Pearce 2020). Both in Los Angeles and Clearwater, where Scientology has its main U.S. bases, Volunteer Ministers helped with blood drives, in Florida by operating “blood buses” to reach donors at a time of severe shortage of blood in the hospitals due to the virus crisis (Skjelset 2020; Wieland 2020)

In Madrid, the Fundación para la Mejora de la Vida, la Cultura y la Sociedad, whose leader is Scientology executive Iván Arjona Pelado, and the Volunteer Ministers, reported that they had distributed massive quantities of disinfectant to hospitals, the police, nursing homes, and churches, and co-operated with local businesses in distributing masks (Fundación para la Mejora de la Vida, la Cultura y la Sociedad 2020).



Figure 1. A Volunteer Minister in Madrid shows the disinfectant gel to be donated to the local police.

In several cities, Volunteer Ministers disinfected public facilities. For example, in Rand West City, in the South African province of Gauteng, Volunteer Ministers disinfected the Public Safety Department in Randfontein and Westonaria (the two municipalities whose merger resulted in Rand West City), the Rand West City Civic Centre, the Old Westonaria Municipal Offices, the Randgate Clinic, the Westonaria Shelter for the Homeless, and the Westonaria Library (*Randfontein Herald* 2020a). In the Gauteng province, Scientology mobilized 233 Volunteer Ministers, split in 18 teams (Bosch 2020).

In the Johannesburg area, Volunteer Ministers decontaminated several fire stations (*Sandton Chronicle* 2020), and the city of Johannesburg entered into an agreement with them to systematically disinfect all local taxis (*The Citizen* 2020). Also in South Africa, Korekile Home for Cerebral Palsied Children, in Simunye, was disinfected by Scientology Volunteer Ministers, who donated gloves to the children (*Randfontein Herald* 2020b). In Mogale City, the disinfection involved parts of the City Hall, the local library, the Munsieville Centre for the Aged and Disabled, Munsieville Stadium, and ThuroLefa Secondary School (*Krugersdorp News* 2020). In fact, Scientology volunteers became so popular in South Africa that criminals falsely claiming to be Volunteer Ministers showed up at private homes' door pretending to be there to sanitize them (Deklerk 2020).

The Volunteer Ministers Facebook page includes hundred of other examples, from the U.K. to Hungary, Italy, the Bahamas, and beyond. It is true that news of the Volunteer Ministers activities was often spread by Scientologists themselves,

including as contributors to the popular U.S. Web site of neighbor news *Patch*. But they were also reported by mainline media in several countries.

Opponents dismissed the Volunteer Ministers activities as PR or hidden proselytization, and mentioned isolated incidents such as one where a Scientology pamphlet on prevention was included in 86 meal bags donated to children in public schools in Clearwater, violating provisions against the distribution of religious materials there (Reeves and McManus 2020). Scientology called the incident a mistake, and local media noted that the pamphlets included state-of-the-art advise on hand-washing and social distancing, and “the only mention of the church is on the back cover, which reads ‘Courtesy of Church of Scientology International’” (Reeves and Mc Manus 2020).

Critics also questioned the effectiveness of the Volunteer Ministers’ sanitization activities, ignoring that they used the same technologies adopted by several governments, and that the Ministers were praised by majors and other authorities (*Krugersdorp News* 2020; *Randfontein Herald* 2020b).



Figure 2. Mayor Francis Makgatho of Mogale City, South Africa, with a Volunteer Minister yellow jacket, among the Volunteer Ministers who disinfected the local library.

Indeed, the three *Stay Well* pamphlets (Church of Scientology International 2020a, 2020b, 2020c) are a key part of the strategy deployed by Volunteer Ministers to help against the virus. More than five million copies of them were distributed throughout the world (Reeves and McManus 2020). They are easy to read, illustrated, and intended to teach even to the barely literate the basic precautions to be adopted against the virus. Scientology is never mentioned, except as publisher of the pamphlets, although on the back cover a link to the dedicated page of Scientology's Web site created for offering advice during the pandemic is also offered. While it is difficult to estimate how many were led to the Web site by the pamphlets, there is no reason to doubt that they offered sound and easily understandable advice to their readers. The pamphlets also embraced a strategy based on masks, gloves, social distancing, disinfectants, and the suggestion that hands should be washed frequently, in accordance with the recommendations of most governments, and far away from the conspiracy theories of those denying that the epidemic was real.

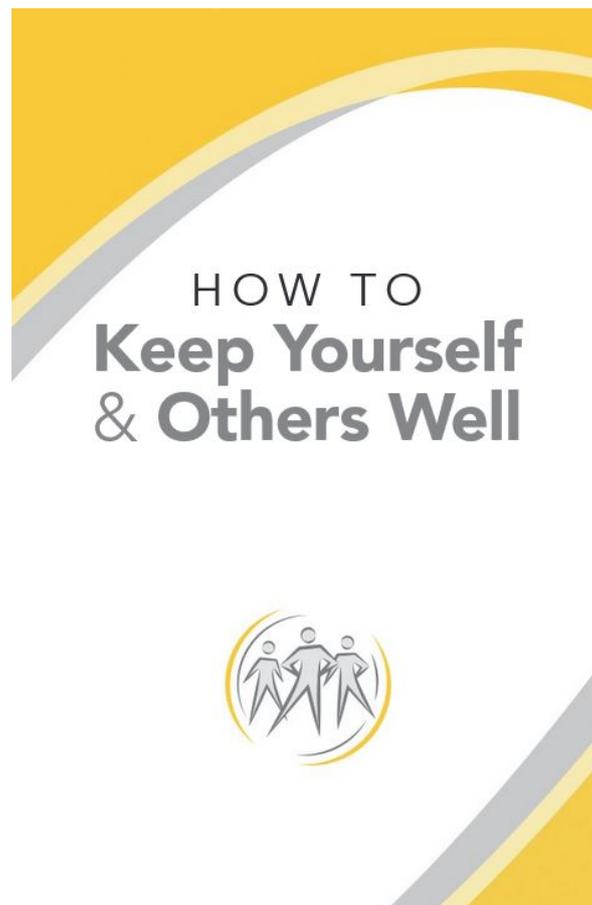


Figure 3. Cover of one of Scientology's brochures.

Dangerous Environments: Learning Resilience

In times of epidemics, religions normally do not limit themselves to offer advice on prevention and hygiene. They may do so very effectively, as in the case of Scientology’s booklets, but this activity remains ancillary to what secular institutions are also expected to provide. Religions should also offer psychological and spiritual guidance.

Modernity tried to exclude religion from the sphere of health, which should be controlled exclusively by medical doctors and psychiatrists. As Meredith McGuire noted,

Biomedicine claimed control over the health and curing physical bodies; a separate science claimed the health and well-being of minds; and religion was relegated to the sphere of the purely spiritual (McGuire 1993, 146–47).

Modernity, thus, “exclude[d] social, psychological, spiritual, and behavioral dimension of illness” (McGuire 1993, 147). Wouter Hanegraaff noted how this vision of health, typical of “Western medicine,” was always rejected by “traditional cultures.” In times of crisis, as many perceived that Western medicine and psychiatry failed to deliver, traditional non-Western forms of healing gained a new popularity, and the “biomedical” model treating the body, and reifying the mind, apart from a broader concept of “a person’s perceptions and experiences,” was increasingly challenged (Hanegraaff 1996, 42–3).

Scientology teaches that the basic essence of humans is an immortal spiritual being known as thetan. Today, thetans have forgotten their spiritual identity and believe they *are* human bodies, while they merely *inhabit* subsequent human bodies, one reincarnation after the other. Scientology reminds thetans of their divine origin, making them realize that they are cause rather than effect of the universe.

The Web page created by Scientology for the COVID-19 emergency proposes three courses corresponding to the three *Stay Well* pamphlets. It also offers a fourth three-hour course, “Solutions for a Dangerous Environment,” based on a booklet Scientology published in 1994, with a second edition in 2001, putting together statements by L. Ron Hubbard from *The Scientology Handbook* (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001).

Hubbard's texts were not written in anticipation of a pandemic. Indeed, they mention “robberies, rapes, riots, murders, fires, earthquakes, floods and famines”—but not epidemics (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001, 2). Yet, it is in these texts that we find the basic principles Scientology proposes to us to cope with the pandemic.

Hubbard criticizes there the common Western notion that, while the environment is dangerous, it does not appear dangerous enough to non-Westerners, and the colonialist assumption that those in developing countries have a backward economy because they are not “challenged” enough by the environment. While the Western white man always had to work hard to survive, Africans or indigenous South Americans, according to this stereotype, were accustomed to simply pick up fruits and eat them. Although the latter condition may seem better, it was in fact worse, as it prevented economic development and progress.

Hubbard traces these theories to British economic historian Arnold Toynbee (1852–1883), noting that he rarely left London and probably never met in his life one of the “backward” natives he was writing about. Had he traveled more, Hubbard argues, Toynbee would have discovered that, in what we now call the Third World, natives experienced daily a terrible “challenge by the environment,” no matter how many fruits they were able to pick without growing them. Indeed, they had a much higher chance of succumbing to wild animals, poisonous snakes, incurable diseases, or malnutrition than Toynbee had in his London armchair:

What did Toynbee know of it? He spent all his time in the back end of a library, reading books written by men who had spent all of *their* days in libraries! That is no way to learn about life (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001, 4).

On the other hand, Hubbard (who was probably aware that Toynbee overworked himself and died of exhaustion at age 30) did not deny that humans are “challenged by the environment” in the rich West too. He gives the example of a painter from Terre Haute, Indiana, who was “challenged by the environment” enough in his native city, where he was systematically bullied and beaten by classmates, that he moved to New York, even if he correctly anticipated that in the competitive art market there, being without connections, he will end up starving (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001, 5).

Hubbard’s point, here, goes beyond the critique of a colonialist prejudice against non-white populations. He wants to lead his readers to the conclusion that the “challenge by the environment” is largely a state of mind. Hubbard does not deny that the environment may be “dangerous enough” (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001, 3), and that “there *are* real areas of danger in the environment” (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001, 10). He does not teach that dangers are merely imaginary, which is important to understand the spirit in which Scientology proposes the booklet to those worried by the pandemic.

However, Scientology tries to see humans, as thetans, as causes and not only as effects of the environment. To some extent, we create the environment, and

An individual’s health level, sanity level, activity level and ambition level are all monitored by his concept of the dangerousness of the environment. [...] [In the environment] there are also areas being made to *seem* more dangerous than they really are (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001, 10).

According to Hubbard, our perception of the “dangerous environment” may make it more dangerous. Fear becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The highest the percentage of the population that is afraid, the more threatening the environment becomes. The process, however, is not totally spontaneous. There are “merchants of chaos,” including journalists, politicians, and those serving the interest of certain pharmaceutical companies, who have a vested interest in making us perceive the environment as even more dangerous than it is.

There are those who could be called “merchants of chaos.” These are people who want an environment to look very, very disturbing. These are people who gain some sort of advantage, they feel, if the environment is made to look more threatening. An obvious example can be seen in newspapers. There are no good news stories. Newspapermen shove the environment in people’s faces and say, “Look! It’s dangerous. Look! It’s overwhelming. Look! It’s threatening.” They not only report the most threatening bits of news, but also sensationalize it, making it worse than it is. What more do you want as a proof of their intention? This is the merchant of chaos. He is paid to the degree that he can make the environment threatening. To yearn for good news is foolhardy in a society where the merchants of chaos reign. The chaos merchant has lots of troops among people with vested interests (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001, 6).

While the merchants of chaos are powerful, they are not invincible. “It is only the things which aren’t handled which are chaotic” (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001, 9). The way of handling the environment is Scientology:

To the degree Scientology progresses in an area, the environment becomes calmer and calmer. Not less adventurous, but calmer. In other words, the potential hostile, unreachable, untouchable threat in the environment reduces. Somebody who knows more about himself, others and life, and who gets a better grip on situations, has less trouble in his environment. Even though it may only be reduced slightly, it is reduced (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001, 7).

Hubbard then proposes seven steps to “confront” the environment, which Scientology now believes are also relevant to confront the pandemic crisis (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001, 11–5).

1. “Find something that isn’t being a threat.” Obviously, not all features of the environment are threatening. While we are led to focus on the threats, we should instead focus on the non-threatening elements.

2. “Don’t read the newspaper” for two weeks. Hubbard believes you will be surprised of how, without continuing exposure to bad news, you will feel better.

3. “Take a walk” and look at what you see while walking. You will find a lot of beautiful and non-threatening aspects of the universe. (Taking a walk may be difficult during a quarantine, and Scientology’s course do not suggest that you violate the rules. However, even a short walk or perhaps a mental walk would do).

4. “Find something that isn’t hostile to you,” a person or a feature of the environment, and concentrate on this. It is unlikely you live in an environment where everything, and everybody, is hostile.

5. “Handle your loss.” If you have lost a loved one, a relationship, or something you deeply cherished, everything in the environment will remind you of your loss. However, this connection, between elements of the environment and what you lost, is in your mind, not in the reality. Slowly, by looking closely at each single element of the environment, “one gets a *differentiation* where an *identification* existed before. And where differentiation exists, intelligence and judgment can return” (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001, 13).

6. “Arrange your life,” i.e. move from a causal, chaotic life to a systematic plan.

7. “Knock off things that upset you.” Some of the upsetting features of the environment cannot easily be “knocked off,” an obvious example being the COVID-19 virus. However, Scientology recommends making a list of “things that upset you,” from the global to the trivial. You will probably discover that at least some of the trivial disturbances may indeed be “knocked off.”

According to Scientology,

A person is either the effect of his environment or is able to have an effect upon his environment. The nineteenth-century psychologist preached that man had to “adjust to his environment.” [...] The truth is that man is as successful as he adjusts the environment to him (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001, 20).

“We’ll Show This World It Can Be Restored”: The Aesthetic of the Quarantine

The individual who reacts to the environment, either succumbing as effect or rising above it as cause, is described by Scientology as a thetan who looks at the images stored in the mind. The mind, however, has three parts. The analytical mind stores images, and use them to take decisions aimed at survival. The reactive mind records images of pain and unpleasantness, which are reactivated when similar circumstances occur. The somatic mind translates at the physical level the inputs of either the analytical or the reactive mind. The more the thetan believes, mistakenly, that he (the thetan is always referred by Scientology with the male pronoun, although women are thetans too) is effect rather than cause, the more the reactive mind takes over, causing most of the problems affecting humans.

Hubbard also taught that there are higher levels above the analytical mind, the first being the aesthetic mind. The latter may positively influence the whole process leading the thetan to understanding himself as cause rather than effect. This is the basis of Hubbard’s rarely studied, yet important in his system, theory of art as communication (Hubbard 1991; see Introvigne 2020). For art to be effective, it should be able to communicate to its audience. Technique is important, but only if it allows the artist to communicate effectively.

Scientology promotes Hubbard’s ideas about the arts, and systematically cultivates the artists through its Celebrity Centers. Hundreds of visual artists, singers, visual artists, and other performers are Scientologists. The proportion of artists in Scientology is higher than in most other religions (Introvigne 2020).

During the 2020 pandemic, Scientology was thus able to mobilize its artists for collective performances aimed at raising the spirits in the middle of the global crisis. For those familiar with Hubbard’s ideas on the arts, this was not merely entertainment, or a PR exercise showing again to the world just how many brilliant artists happen to be Scientologists. In fact, in Hubbard’s system, communicating through art and allowing as large an audience as possible to have

meaningful aesthetic experiences during the quarantine may literally change the world and, in a moment of global desperation, prepare its “restoration” to a more desirable condition.

On May 21, Scientology TV proposed a “Stay Well Concert” by Scientology musicians, described in the network’s Web site as “a monumental event” (Scientology Network 2020). The concert was indeed impressive, lining up Scientologists who are celebrity musicians from several different countries, from Mexico to South Africa, and from Canada to Chile, and of course Americans such as jazz legends Chick Corea and Stanley Clarke. While they performed their signature songs rather than something especially created for the occasion, the concert succeeded in showing that Scientology is now a firmly established presence in the world of music. The concert concluded with a song that had indeed been created as an answer to the pandemic crisis, “Spread a Smile, Stay Well,” collectively presented by all the cast. In the end, host Erika Christensen, a well-known American TV and movie actress, shortly directed the audience to Scientology’s Web page offering the “Stay Well” booklets.



Figure 4. A segment of the “Stay Well” Concert, May 21, 2020, featuring vocalist-guitarist Greg Camp, formerly of the Smash Mouth rock band.

Earlier during the pandemic, Scientology Web sites had started offering the video of “Spread a Smile, Stay Well” where Scientology musicians, including

again Corea and Clarke, virtually came together and sang and played jointly, each from his or her home. When I last accessed the video on May 23, 2020, YouTube indicated that it had exceeded 10 million views (“Spread a Smile, Stay Well” 2020).



Figure 5. Chick Corea in the “Spread a Smile, Stay Well” video.

The lyrics were, in themselves, significant:

Let’s talk about something that ain’t dangerous.

How about this?

So things may be a little strange for us

But listen to this

Yeah, we could start a new direction

Affecting the future ahead

Spreading smiles for miles

A new kinda trend

Wanna new style?

How about this?

Let’s talk about something that’s courageous

How about this?

Let's talk about something that's outrageous
Put this at the top of your list
If you're stuck and gonna sit at home
Live it up, live it up, live it up with me
You're not alone
We can lift this world while quarantined
From your phone
Pick it up, pick it up, just pick it up
Take this shot with me
Spread a smile, not something else
'Cause this world is really needing your help
Spread a smile and nothing more
And we'll show this world it can be restored
You want a smile?
How about this? ("Spread a Smile, Stay Well" 2020).

At first sight, it may appear just as a sugary text, whose main aim is to allow a group of well-known performers to demonstrate their technical prowess. In fact, the text spells out Scientology's ambitions during the pandemic and beyond. Its first commandment is to "spread a smile, not something else" (i.e., not contagion and the virus), but the context is "starting a new direction," "affecting the future ahead," and even "lifting the world" and "showing this world it can be restored."

"Smiles," as evidence that the crisis has been handled and thus ceased to be chaotic, become powerful tools to create a new world, one not dominated by fear but created by the collective effervescence of thetans progressively moving, including through beauty and art, from wrongly perceiving themselves as effect to the truth that they are cause. Scientologists sincerely believe they are equipped with the only technology in the world capable of achieving this goal.

Conclusion

Eileen Barker notes that "one does not often see reports of the charitable work in which many of the NRMs [new religious movements] engage," even if it is

sometimes “outstanding” (Barker 2020, 538). That this happens, is evidence of the phenomenon social scientists call “gatekeeping” (Shoemaker and Vos 2009; Barzilai-Nahon 2008, 2009). For different reasons, the media filters out news that do not correspond to certain agendas or established stereotypes. “Cults” are by definition malignant, and gatekeeping works to exclude information that would contradict this prejudice.

Some specialized media are devoted exclusively to perpetuate the stereotypes about the “cults,” and to attack those, including scholars, who dare to report positive information about these movements. Confronted with the fact that, during the 2020 pandemic, Scientology and its Volunteer Ministers performed significant and positive charitable deeds and helped the population in a moment of deep crisis, anti-cult media reacted by raising doubts about the Scientologists’ motivations, and even ridiculing them with their usual violent language—which, in this case, was also distasteful and offensive towards the victims of the pandemic and those who tried to help them (for a particularly egregious example, see Keller 2020). The verbal violence was also intended to serve notice that, should some media or others lower the gate and allow positive information about Scientology to be published, they will also be attacked.

Although able to influence some mainline media, anti-cultists have not been able to stop Scientology’s progress and activities, at least in democratic countries (Rigal-Cellard 2019, 107). Annoying as they may be, in the eyes of the Scientologists they are merely a distraction in what they see as a cosmic battle to rescue the planet. As for the outside observers, the fact that Scientology’s good work, as in the case of the pandemic, goes unreported is both a confirmation of how persistent prejudices are against certain religious minorities, and something that should slowly be changed by studying how “ordinary Scientologists,” rather than cultivating controversies, try daily to make our planet a more hospitable environment (Westbrook 2018), persuaded that L. Ron Hubbard equipped them with the tools capable, as the song says, of “restoring this world.”

References

- Barker, Eileen. 2020. "New Religious Movements." In *The SAGE Encyclopedia of the Sociology of Religions*, edited by Adam Possamai and Anthony J. Blasi, 2 vol., vol. 2, 536–39. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Barzilai-Nahon Karine. 2008. "Towards a Theory of Network Gatekeeping: A Framework for Exploring Information Control." *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 59(9):1493–512.
- Barzilai-Nahon, Karine. 2009. "Gatekeeping: A Critical Review." *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology* 43:433–78.
- Bosch, Emile. 2020. "Sanitising by the Numbers: What It Takes to Keep COVID-19 at Bay in Gauteng." *The Times* (Johannesburg), May 11. Accessed May 21, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3gmpZ16>.
- Brinker, Julie. 2020. "Church of Scientology Volunteer Ministers Donate Masks." *Patch Nashville Neighbor News*, April 10. Accessed May 21, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2ZyggP7>.
- Cawley, Kevin N. 2019. *Religious and Philosophical Tradition of Korea*. Abingdon, UK, and New York: Routledge.
- Church of Scientology International. 2020a. *How to Keep Yourself & Others Well*. Los Angeles: Church of Scientology International.
- Church of Scientology International. 2020b. *How to Protect Yourself & Others with a Mask & Gloves*. Los Angeles: Church of Scientology International.
- Church of Scientology International. 2020c. *How to Prevent the Spread of Illness with Isolation*. Los Angeles: Church of Scientology International.
- Deklerk, Aphiwe. 2020. "Government Warns Against Criminals Offering 'Door-to-Door' Sanitisation." *Sowetan*, April 14. Accessed May 21, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2WXNeH8>.
- Firenze Today*. 2020. "Coronavirus, i seguaci di Scientology fanno la riunione: 8 denunciati." March 26. Accessed May 19, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2Tzne2y>.
- Fundación para la Mejora de la Vida, la Cultura y la Sociedad. 2020. "Fundación Mejora se remanga y ayuda a policía, ejercito y personal sanitario." n.d. Accessed May 21, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2ywaHFP>.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. 1996. *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Western Thought*. Leiden: Brill.
- Hubbard, L. Ron. 1991. *Art*. Los Angeles: Bridge Publications.
- Introvigne, Massimo. 2020. "*The Most Misunderstood Human Endeavor*": L. Ron Hubbard, Scientology, and Fine Arts. Madrid: FORB Press.

- Keller, Rod. 2020. “Scientology, Stop Being Stupid About the Pandemic: We Have Some Advice for You.” *The Underground Bunker*, April 4. Accessed May 21, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3ekxXpJ>.
- Krugersdorp News*. 2020. “Mayor Helps to Sanitize the Town.” April 8. Accessed May 21, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2AR1YyL>.
- Lindell, Henrik. 2020. “À Mulhouse, les évangéliques se vivent en bouc émissaire.” *La Vie*, April 2, 32–3.
- L. Ron Hubbard Library. 2001. *Solutions for a Dangerous Environment: Based on the Works of L. Ron Hubbard*. Los Angeles: Bridge Publications.
- McGuire, Meredith B. 1993. “Health and Spirituality as Contemporary Concerns.” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 527:144–54.
- McManus, Tracey. 2020. “Clearwater Chief Inspects Scientology for Coronavirus Compliance.” *Tampa Bay Times*, April 2. Accessed May 19, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3guHrR8>.
- Miscavige, David. 2020. “Inspector General Network Bulletin no. 88.” March 13.
- Pearce, Ann. 2020. “Dr. Seuss Masks for Kids—Making Safety Fun.” *Patch Seattle*, May 12. Accessed May 21, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3efHyhl>.
- Pierce, Tony. 2020. “Church of Scientology Reports Zero Cases of COVID-19 at Sunset Hub.” *Los Angeleno*, May 4. Accessed May 23, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3el7qIz>.
- Randfontein Herald*. 2020a. “PICS: Public Places Disinfected in Rand West City.” April 7. Accessed May 21, 2020. <https://bit.ly/36t5vPt>.
- Randfontein Herald*. 2020b. “Mayor Visits Home for Cerebral Palsied Children.” April 14. Accessed May 21, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2XsMcSn>.
- R.C. 2020. “Coronavirus, i seguaci di Scientology non rinunciano alla loro ‘chiesa.’” *Corriere della Sera*, March 25. Accessed May 21, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3d15pRN>.
- Reeves, Megan, and Tracey McManus. 2020. “Some in Pinellas Got Scientology Pamphlets with Their School Lunches.” *Tampa Bay Times*, May 12. Accessed May 21, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3d4fuxa>.
- Rigal-Cellard, Bernadette. 2019. “The Visible Expansion of the Church of Scientology and Its Actors.” *The Journal of CESNUR* 3(1):8–118. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2019.3.1.2.
- Rousseau, Cécile. 2020. “Mulhouse : le bain de foule d’Emmanuel Macron dans le quartier de Bourztwiller.” *France Bleu*, February 18. Accessed May 19, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3d4fIV2>.

- Sandton Chronicle*. 2020. “Volunteers Give Sandton Fire Station a Deep Clean.” May 2. Accessed May 21, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3ehTnUa>.
- Schulte, Peter. 2017. *Die Akte Scientology: Die geheimen Dokumente der Bundesregierung*. Malters, Switzerland: PI-Verlag, Wissen und Leben GmbH.
- Scientology Network. 2020. “Stay Well Concert.” May 21. Accessed May 22, 2020. <https://www.scientology.tv/series/staywell-concert>.
- Shoemaker, Pamela J., and Tim P. Vos. 2009. *Gatekeeping Theory*. New York: Routledge.
- Skjelset, Amber. 2020. “Scientology Volunteer Minister’s Pinellas Blood Drive Saves Lives.” *Patch Clearwater*, March 30. Accessed May 21, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3c0AlAb>.
- “Spread a Smile, Stay Well.” Video by Scientology.org. Uploaded on YouTube on April 12. Accessed May 23, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2XptOKk>.
- The Citizen*. 2020. “Over 400 Joburg Taxi Ranks to Be Disinfected Regularly.” May 12. Accessed May 21, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2LXNdNa>.
- Webb, Mark. 2020. “Free Gloves and Masks in Sandy Springs.” *Patch Atlanta*, March 30. Accessed May 21, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3d1glP7>.
- Westbrook, Donald A. 2018. *Among the Scientologists: History, Theology, and Praxis*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wieland, Linda. 2020. “Scientology L.A.: Blood Drives Save Lives.” *Patch Los Angeles*, March 25. Accessed May 21, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3gml679>.