Book Review


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Donald A. Westbrook’s Among the Scientologists: History, Theology, and Praxis is a sensitive and ethnographically driven work which attempts to transcend the sensationalist narratives surrounding the Church of Scientology by focusing on the lived religion of Scientologists themselves. As he notes in his introduction: “When one hears the word ‘Scientology’, a number of names, ideas and preconceptions may spring to mind: L. Ron Hubbard, celebrities, science fiction, Dianetics, popular psychology, E-Meter, Sea Organization, David Miscavige, lawsuits, Internal Revenue Service (IRS), religion, business, surveillance, secrecy, and, perhaps above all else, controversy” (p. 1, author’s emphasis). Among the Scientologists thus foregrounds the marginalized voices of actual practising Scientologists in a landscape which is often focused on the more problematic and sensationalist aspects of the religion: “what distinguishes this volume from the rest is that it is not so much a book about the Church of Scientology, its leaders, or its controversies as it is a compilation of narratives and histories that invokes the largely unheard or ignored perspectives of Scientologists themselves” (p. 1). In order to do so, Westbrook deploys a socio-religious methodology, fusing historical research and ethnographic interviews with his own insider-outsider experience of the Church of Scientology’s praxis, undertaking several introductory courses in Dianetics, training in auditing (both with and without the infamous E-meter), and completing the first two steps on the “Bridge to Total Freedom”: the “Purification Rundown” and “Objectives Processing” (p. 8). This unique approach of separating the “History, Theology and Praxis” from its controversies speaks to the significant gap in existing popular and academic literature on the Church of Scientology which, as Westbrook points out, is either published by the Church itself and is highly positive, or is written from the vehemently critical perspectives of its apostates.

The book is divided into an Introduction, five chapters, Conclusion, Notes, Bibliography and Index. The first section, “Introduction: Methods and Means of Researching Scientology and Scientologists” (pp. 1–15) offers an outline of the research and its methodologies, and foregrounds its intention to offer “an ethnographically informed historical and theological narrative of how and why Scientology functions as a religion in the lives of practicing members” (p. 2). This is followed by Chapter 1, “Preliminary Conclusions from Interviews and Fieldwork” (pp. 16–58), which offers eight foundational frameworks through which
Scientology can be understood, including its approaches to philosophy, theology, praxis and the role of its founder, L. Ron Hubbard, who is posited as being “not god” but “the Model OT” (Operating Thetan) (p. 22). Here, the standout observation is the Scientologist’s foundational concept of “knowing” that the “technology” works, which is opposed to other religious epistemological frameworks which are understood in terms of belief, feeling, or faith. As one of Westbrook’s informants states, “Scientology is not a question of faith ... It is not a question of dogma. It’s a question of subjective personal reality, of self-knowledge” (p. 17). Westbrook thus suggests that, because of the religion’s concept of self in three parts (mind, body, and spiritual being or thetan) and the adherent’s pursuit of “self-knowledge”, Scientology can be understood as both an esoteric and gnostic tradition. Chapter 2, “Before the Religion: Episodes from the Advent of Dianetics and Scientology” (pp. 59–94), looks at the early history of Scientology with a focus on its foundational philosophy, theology, scripture and technology, locating the origins of the Church in the sociological context of 1950s post-war America and its cultural fascination with science fiction, atomic weapons, and the Cold War. Chapter 3, “‘Keeping Scientology Working’: Features of Systematic Theology” (pp. 95–124), deals with the external and internal factors which led to the evolution of Hubbard’s early philosophical, psychological and medical claims into religious theology during the 1960s and 1970s. In addition to this, Westbrook offers an account of Scientology’s foundational theology of “sin” in its concept of overts and withholds (O/Ws) and Suppressive Persons (SPs). Chapter 4, “‘We Come Back’: Past and Present of the Sea Organization” (pp. 125–57), offers a history and in-depth case study of the Church’s under-examined but highly publicized “Sea Org”. Chapter 5, “‘Build a Better Bridge!’: From LRH to COB and Beyond” (pp. 158–203), examines the final years of Hubbard’s life and the more recent history of the “post-Hubbard” Church under the leadership of David Miscavige up until 2018. Finally, in “Conclusion: Reflections on the Future of Scientology and Its Academic Study” (pp. 204–210), Westbrook offers useful reflections on the future of academic research, both in theory and practice.

Although the Church is notoriously secretive, the research presented is extensive and impressive, not only collating six years of interviews and participation within the American Church of Scientology, but also drawing from the Church’s entire archive. This is, in part, due to the direct assistance of the Church of Scientology itself, with Westbrook acknowledging that he was significantly assisted by the cooperation of the Church of Scientology and its Office of Special Affairs (OSA), a division of the church which is responsible for “the oversight of public and legal affairs” (p. 6). In addition to being offered “dozens of Hubbard’s books and lectures” (p. 8) through the OSA, the author was also granted access to “the entirety of Scientology’s publicly available scriptures” (p. 8). Although access to this material is undoubtedly crucial, the conditions under which it was offered to the author must also be considered. Given the Church of Scientology’s reputation for litigation, questions must be asked of the extent to which the author’s research process was shaped by the desire to appease the Church and maintain access to this information. For example, Westbrook states that “the OSA reviewed my interview questions and consent form in advance, approving both without reservation” (p. 6). It is no secret that the Church of Scientology actively pursues its critics, as Westbrook notes in the introduction: “I would be remiss not to acknowledge the perception that academic research on Scientology carries with it the risk of legal or extra-legal liabilities or repercussions” (p. 9). While the author acknowledges previous tensions between researchers and the Church (with examples given of litigation and more alarming incidents of extra-legal controversy), he goes on to note that this work is the product of their “positive interactions” (p. 9) with the Church of Scientology and is thus an indication of the Church’s willingness to open itself up to academic enquiry and critical
investigation. Westbrook suggests that this is of mutual benefit to both academics and the Church of Scientology, with the later possibly viewing academic analysis as a means of not only legitimizing the religion on its own terms, but also “outside its own flock” (p. 10).

Although Westbrook rightfully suggests that it is crucial to move beyond “false, divisive, and unproductive binaries” (p. 210), the reticence to fully engage with more controversial aspects of Scientology does stand out to the reader as a potential case of the academic having to sacrifice a line of critique for the sake of maintaining a good working relationship with the Church. Indeed, as Westbrook’s focus is on active members of the Church, the more problematic and controversial perspectives of Scientology’s ex-members are essentially absent. That being said, Westbrook does touch on some of Scientology’s more problematic issues such as Hubbard’s nefarious financial aspirations, accusations of brainwashing, and the claim that the Church is in fact a cult. As is the case with many religious groups, the claims of abuse against the Church of Scientology are extensive and difficult to sidestep. In light of this, it can be suggested that Westbrook’s work raises the question, to what extent is it possible to separate the praxis and theology of Scientologists from the institution itself? The perspectives and data collated are a significant achievement and could be used to enrich and balance the work of future academics working outside the Church. Westbrook’s work is not only engaging but provides incredible illumination on the lived religious experience of Scientologists and most definitely achieves its aims. I recommend this outstanding work to any researcher who wishes to understand Scientology and to separate its history, theology and praxis from its controversial quagmire.