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Among the Scientologists: History, Theology, and Praxis, by Donald A. Westbrook. Oxford University Press, 2019. 332pp. Hb $45.00/£29.99. ISBN-13: 9780190664978.

Reviewed by Fredrik Gregorius, Linköping University, Sweden, fredrik.gregorius@liu.se

Scientology is one of the most controversial and hotly discussed new religious movements to have emerged in the twentieth century. The movement has been the subject of several books and documentaries, which have mostly portrayed Scientology in a negative light, and often relied primarily on the recollections of former members. In popular culture, Scientology has recurrently been portrayed as the prototypical "dangerous cult," mimicked and mocked —either explicitly or through thinly veiled references—in a variety of comedy shows including *Family Guy*, *The Simpsons*, and *South Park*. The Church of Scientology has arguably come under increased media scrutiny in recent years due to the vocal and public 2013 defection of actress Leah Remini, and the HBO documentary *Going Clear* (2015), based on the investigative journalist Lawrence Wright's 2013 eponymous book. Given the onslaught of negative publicity surrounding the Church of Scientology, one might be prompted to ask why the organization continues to attract and retain members, to the extent that there are currently second- and even third-generation Scientologists. While the voices of some former members have been greatly publicized, the experiences of current Scientologists have been under-represented in both media and academic research on the movement. With some notable exceptions, Scientologists are generally spoken about, but seldom with.

In contrast to most previous studies, Donald A. Westbrook's *Among the Scientologists: History, Theology, and Praxis* relies on extended ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with practicing Scientologists. In addition to these qualitative sources, Westbrook has also drawn on quantitative studies conducted by the Church of Scientology as a complement. While previous academic studies have tended to focus mostly on writings by the founder L. Ron Hubbard as well as statements from leading spokespersons and promotional material—conveying an image of a uniform movement whose members hold nigh-identical views—Westbrook's study highlights diversity and variance. The first chapter presents a range of statements from Scientologists regarding their beliefs, such as their views on Hubbard. Westbrook also explores how Scientologists view other religions and the theoretically all-denomina-

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tional but functionally sectarian nature of the movement; Scientologists are not required to leave their former faith, but in practice, most members are exclusively Scientologists. The first chapter also presents demographic data on involvement, showing, for instance, that most Scientologists are on the lower half of the "Bridge to Total Freedom," that is, in the lower degrees of the Church. The cited interviews convey a more nuanced view of Scientology and its members perceptions' of their religion. Nonetheless, it is clear that Scientologists hold fairly homogenous views on their founder and faith, and especially the technology developed by Hubbard. An area of particular interest that Westbrook addresses is Scientology's relationship with the Nation of Islam (NOI). Based on his interviews, the relationship between the two organizations appears more significant than NOI members simply using Dianetic mental and psychological techniques, extending to a more fundamental ideological influence from Scientology on NOI. In the predominantly African American neighborhood Inglewood in Los Angeles, where NOI has a strong presence, NOI even uses the Church's venues for meetings.

The book is both thematically and chronologically structured, tracing the development of Scientology from the 1950s until today while also highlighting the development and reception of certain core themes during specific time periods. For instance, Hubbard's early work on Dianetics is presented in the chapters dealing with the earliest history, with Westbrook exploring contemporary followers' views on Dianetics in later chapters. The chapters dealing with the earliest history of the movement are primarily based upon written and archival sources mixed with interviews with older members who were active during Hubbard's own lifetime. Westbrook continually highlights the role of theology when it comes to the evolution of Scientology. While not rejecting practical (e.g., legal) causes for certain developments, such as the transformation of Scientology from a form of therapy to a registered religion, Westbrook argues that the role of theology has been under-explored in the transformation of the movement.

It is most welcome that Westbrook devotes an entire chapter to the "Sea Org," the elite arm of the Church that remains one of the most well-known and discussed aspects of Scientology. In this chapter, the reader is given an understanding of why a person might choose to join, learns of the experiences of Sea Org members, and how one can leave the Sea Org while remaining in good standing within the Church. Exiting the Sea Org is potentially expensive as members who want to remain within the Church are required to make repayments for courses taken during their time in the Sea Org. Westbrook presents this process in a clear and objective manner.

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The book concludes with the development of Scientology after Hubbard's death in 1986, exploring the rise of the current head of the Church, David Miscavige; the IRS ruling of 1993 that made Scientology a recognized religious body; and the "Golden Age of Tech," established after the Church revised and published new editions of Hubbard's work. The "Golden Age of Tech" is a term used by Miscavige referring to new edited volumes of Hubbard's work that are claimed to have been cleansed from previous editorial errors, rendering the new versions more harmonious with Hubbard's intentions. Because of the belief that these new editions fully communicate Hubbard's perfect spiritual technology, Scientologists argue that Scientology can now, at last, be practiced as intended. Finally, Westbrook offers some suggestions for future research, comparing the academic study of Scientology to the study of Mormonism. The earliest studies of Mormonism were also primarily journalistic and sensationalistic accounts, mixed with stories from ex-members. Today, however, research on Mormonism is a growing academic field that includes both Mormon and non-Mormon scholars. Westbrook emphasizes the need for an academic biography on Hubbard, a project that he himself is currently engaged in, and which will be a seminal addition to the field of Scientology studies.

Naturally, a single monograph of 210 pages (excluding footnotes) cannot address all possible questions of interest. A more extensive discussion of Westbrook's own methodological issues pertaining to access would have been welcome. The author states clearly in the introduction that his contact with prospective interviewees was facilitated by the organization itself. While many Scientologists are wary of the media—a position that is understandable given how they have often been treated—academic researchers are generally more favorably received. Reading Westbrook's book, however, the reader gets the impression that this hospitality is not always unconditional, especially for researchers dealing with more controversial topics. Despite this, Westbrook often makes references to previous studies that have been more critical, and he encourages a dialogue between different interpretations and perspectives.

Among the Scientologists is, in many ways, a groundbreaking work. In the academic study of Scientology, it is likely to become a standard reference alongside works such as Hugh B. Urban's *The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion* (Princeton University Press, 2011). By highlighting Scientologists' own voices, Westbrook's book brings attention to Scientology as a "lived" and evolving religious movement. It also shows how most members' views of the Church have not been significantly altered by the generally negative media portrayal, and how they reflect critically on media coverage of the

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organization. Westbrook's work is likely to inspire a continuation of more nuanced and less polemical research on what is, arguably, one of the most fascinating new religious movements to have emerged in the twentieth century. As many questions remain to be explored, the work also indicates venues for more direct and specific lines of research.

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