

Scientology: More than a celebrity Cruise? "A religion based on a rebuilt Gnostic myth"

News in the [August 9, 2005](#) issue

A brash Hollywood actor with a boyish smile and slim tailored suits would not seem the first source that ordinary folks would seek out for psychiatric advice. Yet who could miss Tom Cruise lately, swinging through the news, spinning off from movie promotion to set us straight about the motives of doctors who treat mental illness? "Here's the problem; you don't know the history of psychiatry," the confident star told *Today* host Matt Lauer. "I do."

Cruise is a Scientologist. He and other supporters of the celebrity-rich religious organization that science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard launched in 1954 share a noisy antagonism toward mental health physicians. Church members refer to them as pseudoscientists.

Cruise and fellow members say prescribing drugs for mental illness is spurious, even dangerous, and only enriches doctors and drug companies. Illnesses for which drugs are common therapy range from postpartum depression to attention deficit disorder, bipolar disease and schizophrenia.

There's much more to Scientology than rejecting psychiatry. But the conflict (church members have picketed the American Psychiatric Association's meetings for years) offers an entry point into a group about which outsiders know little.

Conversations with insiders, religion scholars and others who deal with the church offer glimpses into Scientology's beliefs and practices.

Its main, stated mission is to explain and help to perfect humans and their behavior. A coherent (if offbeat) spiritual vision emerges from hundreds of Hubbard's written works and 3,000 recorded lectures explaining where people came from and how they can reach enlightenment. Hubbard, who died in 1986 and whom church

members refer to as LRH, veered from pulp science fiction in the late 1940s and published *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health* in 1950. That book and *Scientology*, which four years later helped launch the religion, are available in 32 languages.

Despite the popularity of Hubbard's teachings (leaders say people have bought 117 million copies of his works), few scholars closely study them. They tend to list Scientology in the category of 20th-century American fringe religions.

Sean McCloud, author and religious studies professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, prominently included Scientology in his book *Making the American Religious Fringe*.

And Durwood Smith, chairman of religious studies at Cleveland State University, said he considers Scientology "especially noteworthy even among the fringe religions, in that it brings in features of science fiction."

None of that has stopped growth. Some scholars estimate core membership at about 500,000; others estimate it at only one-tenth of that. The church claims 8 million devotees.

Deep in Hubbard's writings lies a striking assertion: that "thetans," extraterrestrial spirits, colonized humans long ago. Correcting our flawed "reactive mind" and curing generations of pain and suffering absorbed since thetans arrived are the focus of church practices.

That means stripping back reactions to abuses suffered over thousands of years and urging people to get more in touch with the operating thetan within.

"For all practical purposes, this operating thetan is the soul," said J. Gordon Melton, researcher at the University of California at Santa Barbara. He said Scientologists clear "encumbrances" through the signature church practice of "auditing."

John Baker, executive director of the four-story Scientology Church in downtown Columbus, Ohio, said trained church auditors help members "clear their reactive minds of these encumbrances so they can reach the higher spiritual levels people are capable of."

For dedicated Scientologists, clearing ever-deeper encumbrances is a lifelong commitment. Audits grow more rigorous in the higher of eight levels of connection

to the thetan.

Many adherents believe the church is an underappreciated champion of unpopular causes in talking about “abuses of psychiatry.”

The church took the lead in raising questions about overprescribing Ritalin to hyperactive children.

Medicine mostly takes a different view. Nada Stotland, vice president of the American Psychiatric Association and a Chicago psychiatrist, let frustration over church criticism of her profession creep into her voice.

Stotland agreed that medical science, including psychiatry, has its dark past. Doctors used radical surgeries, locked inmates up, shocked them and prescribed unproven drugs. “It’s true of all medical science,” she said. “We test practices, publish results so they’re out there for others to pick apart. We build on our past.” Religious practices are not subject to the same scrutiny as those of science, Stotland said.

One criticism that the church aims at psychiatrists focuses on how much they make from patients. But Smith, who heads Cleveland State’s religious studies program, said Scientology auditors make out well, too, in charging “astronomical prices for audits.”

Melton said that in buying necessary books and tapes, courses, paying for audits and making contributions, “young people at lower levels might pay out \$1,000 or \$1,500 a year.” Scientologists who move to the highest levels of operating thetans, or OT, “easily spend tens of thousands of dollars a year, much more if they want to move fast,” Melton said.

Critics have called Scientology less a religion than a commercial enterprise.

A number of nations do not recognize Scientology as a church. The U.S. granted a tax-exempt designation only after the 1993 settlement of a long series of court battles between Scientology and the Internal Revenue Service.

From his standpoint, Melton sees no good reason not to consider Scientology a church. “It’s a religion based on a rebuilt Gnostic myth,” he said. “The spirit falls into a material world and runs into trouble because it forgot who it is.” *—Frank Bentayou, Religion News Service*