- INTRODUCTION -

THE WORLD'S MOST CONTROVERSIAL NEW RELIGION AND WHY NO ONE WRITES ABOUT IT

> We have a practical religion. And before you say, "Religion, grrrr," think of that—it is a practical religion and religion is the oldest heritage that Man has. . . . We can only exist in the field of religion. Of course, it would be up to us to make religion a much better thing than it has been.
>
> —L. Ron Hubbard, "The Hope of Man" (1955)[1]

> Strange things seem to happen to people who write about Scientology.
>
> —Richard Behar, "The Scientologists and Me," *Time* (1991)[2]

Surely few new religious movements have been the subject of more scandal, controversy, media attention, or misunderstanding than the Church of Scientology. Well known for its high-profile celebrity patrons such as John Travolta, Kirstie Alley, and Tom Cruise, while boasting over seven hundred centers in sixty-five countries, Scientology has also been attacked by government agencies, anticult groups, and the media as a swindling business and a brainwashing cult. Its founder, L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986), has been described variously as the man who "solved the riddle of the human mind" (by the Church of Scientology),[3] as "a mental case" (by the FBI),[4] and as "hopelessly insane" (by his former wife).[5] Since the 1950s, Scientology has come into a series of conflicts with various branches of the U.S. government, particularly the FBI, FDA, and IRS, regarding its status as a religious organization and its involvement in an array of alleged crimes. Dubbed the "Cult of Greed" by *Time* magazine, Scientology has been singled out by the media and anticult groups as the most rapacious and dangerous new religious movement today.[6] Among the most withering critiques was one that appeared in a June 2009 series in the *St. Petersburg Times*, which focused on Scientology's current head, David Miscavige. Using interviews from

former high-ranking executives, the *Times* recounts an array of alleged abuse, violence, and humiliation at the very top of the church's hierarchy that ranges from the shocking to the downright bizarre.[7]

In response, Scientologists have long argued that this is a legitimate religious movement that has been misrepresented, maligned, and persecuted by media witch-hunters and McCarthy-style government attacks.[8] According to the church's *Freedom* magazine, the religion of Scientology has been consistently pounded by the media, government agencies, and anticult groups with "vituperative rumor, innuendo and allegation, all of which resulted in a hostile environment for the Church" and undermine the very ideal of religious freedom.[9] As such, Scientology raises some of the most profound legal, ethical, and political questions that lie at the very heart of the study of religion in the twenty-first century.

Yet remarkably, despite the tantalizing scandal that surrounds it in popular culture, Scientology has received little serious attention by scholars of religions. Apart from Roy Wallis's early study in 1976, J. Gordon Melton's slim overview, and James Lewis's recent edited volume, Scientology has rarely been submitted to a careful, critical study by historians of religion.[10] While some important scholarship appears in German and other European languages, surprisingly little remains available to English readers.[11]

The reasons for this neglect, however, are not far to seek. First, from its origins, the Church of Scientology and its founder have been shrouded in complex layers of secrecy. With a tight system of security and a complex, esoteric hierarchy of teachings, Scientology is surely one of the most impenetrable and least understood new religions. Second, the church has also tended to respond very aggressively to its critics, mounting numerous lawsuits and at times using extralegal means to respond to those who threaten it. A long list of scholars, journalists, former members, and even ordinary college students have reported being harassed and threatened for writing critically about Scientology.[12]

A History of Scientology as a Reflection on the History of "Religion" in Modern America

In this book, I will by no means attempt to write a new exposé of Scientology, nor do I claim to have infiltrated its inner secrets—something

I consider both fundamentally unethical and deeply problematic from an epistemological point of view. Many such exposés by critics and ex-members already exist, with varying degrees of credibility, and the print and television media appear to be generating ever more as we speak.[13] Instead, I approach Scientology primarily as a historian of religions.[14] My aim is not to unveil yet another secret of Scientology but rather to trace the complex, tangled, and often tortuous history of how this controversial movement came to *describe itself* and eventually *become recognized as* a "religion" in the United States—at least in the eyes of the Internal Revenue Service and the State Department—though, notably, not in the eyes of many other governments. And I want to use this specific case as a way to think more broadly about the complex, shifting, and contested category of "religion" itself in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

When L. Ron Hubbard unveiled his "revolutionary new science of the human mind" called Dianetics in 1950, he initially made no particular claims that it had anything to do with religion. If anything, he was quite critical of institutional forms of religion in his early lectures.[15] This position changed rapidly in the early 1950s, however, as Dianetics evolved into the Church of Scientology, first incorporated in December 1953. From the 1950s onward, Scientology began to adopt ever more elements drawn from Eastern religions, alternative spiritualities, and science fiction, such as the notion of an eternal spirit, reincarnation, past-life memories, supernatural powers, and a vast "space opera" history of the universe. Correspondingly, as the church quickly grew in wealth and numbers, it also began to face ever more scrutiny, investigation, and attack by the media and government agencies, particularly the IRS, FBI, and FDA. After an incredibly complex twenty-six-year battle with the Internal Revenue Service and a $12.5 million settlement, Scientology was in fact awarded tax-exempt status as a nonprofit organization by the IRS in 1993 and soon after recognized by the U.S. State Department in its annual report on religious freedom.[16] But the debate has not ended there. Indeed, the church faces a new war of information in the twenty-first century, as decentralized groups such as "Anonymous" challenge its legitimacy as a religion and mount ever more sophisticated forms of technological warfare in cyberspace.

As such, the case of Scientology is a striking example of the complex, shifting, and contested nature of religion in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As the respected historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith famously observed, our abstract category of religion is itself not a universal, monolithic, or homogeneous entity but rather an "imagined" category, a product of second-order reflection and generalization based on a vast array of diverse texts, myths, rituals, and traditions. As Smith put it, "Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes, by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy."[17] More recently, Russell McCutcheon has argued that religion is a "manufactured" category, that is, "a scholarly representation that operates within . . . a very specific set of discursive practices" and institutional structures.[18]

While I agree with Smith and McCutcheon that the abstract category of religion is largely an imagined one, I will, however, also argue that the case of Scientology reveals that the imagining of religion is by no means solely a product of scholars or academic institutions. On the contrary, the imagining of Scientology as "religion" has been an extremely complex historical process that spanned six decades and involved fierce debate among a wide range of different actors, only a few of whom are scholars. These include the movement's founder, his followers and ex-followers, the psychoanalytic and medical professions, the media, high-profile celebrity spokespersons, various government agencies such as the FBI, FDA, and IRS, foreign governments, lawyers, judges, anticult activists, and ordinary citizens posting on the Internet, in addition to a small number of academic observers. As David Chidester comments in his study of religion and American popular culture, "[T]he very term 'religion,' including its definition, application and extension does not, in fact belong solely to the academy but is constantly at stake in the interchanges of cultural discourses and practices."[19] And the debate over Scientology continues to this day, both on the streets of major cities and in the networks of cyberspace, as new generations of critics continue to contest the church's legitimacy as a "real" religion. In this sense, a critical history of Scientology gives us profound insights into what Talal Asad

calls the "genealogies of religion"—that is, the complex historical construction of the phenomena that we now label "religion."[20]

Although this book focuses on the history of the church in the United States, it will also deal briefly with similar issues raised in the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, and Russia for a comparative context. Scientology, I will suggest, is a critically important test case for thinking about much larger legal and theoretical issues in the study of religion as whole. Not only does it raise basic questions such as what gets to count as religion and who gets to decide; more important, it also raises profound issues of privacy and freedom of religious expression in a post-9/11 context of religious violence and rapidly expanding government surveillance.[21] Finally, it also forces us to rethink the role of the academic study of religion in the interpretation of controversial groups such as Scientology. How do we balance a truly serious, critical analysis of problematic groups like these while at the same time countering sensationalistic media attacks and respecting basic rights to privacy and freedom of religious expression?

Methodology and Sources: Balancing a Hermeneutics of Respect and a Hermeneutics of Suspicion

Because Scientology is such a ferociously controversial topic, I should first say a few words about myself and my own reasons for writing this book. I am not, have never been, and probably will never be a Scientologist. At the same time, I am also not an anti-Scientologist and have no particular axe to grind with this movement. My own interests in the church are twofold. First, most of my research to date has focused on the role of secrecy in religion—that is, the complex question of why some religious groups choose to keep certain aspects of their beliefs and practices hidden from outsiders, and, in turn, what are the larger social, political, and cultural effects of that secrecy.[22] With its highly confidential levels of advanced training, its intense control of information, and its long history of surveillance and espionage against the U.S. government, Scientology is among the most extreme examples of secrecy in a religious organization. And it raises some of the most challenging ethical

and methodological questions involved in trying to understand something that is, to a large degree, closed to outsiders.

Second, I am primarily a historian of religions, and, as such, one of the central questions that interests me is the history of our category of "religion" itself—that is, the ways in which we have debated, defined, and redefined this complex term in relation to shifting historical and cultural contexts. Which groups do we privilege with the label "religion," and which do we exclude? More important, *what are the stakes*—legal, financial, and political—*in laying claim to the status of religion*? And what is at risk when government agencies, media, or academics *deny* a given group such status? Again, with its incredibly complex history of struggle with the IRS, anticult groups, and the media over its "religious" status, Scientology is an ideal test case for this question. In fact, when I teach our Introduction to Comparative Religion course at Ohio State, I often begin with the example of Scientology to force students to think hard about what is and is not a religion, who gets to decide, and what are the deeper investments in the way that we define religion in a complex, pluralistic, democratic society.

Much of the journalistic, academic, and popular literature on Scientology, it seems to me, is highly polarized and tends to fall into one of two rather extreme views. On the one side, we find numerous exposés by ex-members, journalists, and critics, who attack the church as either a cynical, money-driven business or a dangerous cult of mind control and power. Thus, Andrew Morton's best-selling book on Tom Cruise describes Scientology as "a paranoid movement reflecting the schizophrenic personality of the founder, a dogmatic cult dedicated to world domination."[23] Among the more scathing exposés of the church was the 2009 series by the *St. Petersburg Times,* which claims to reveal a "culture of violence of intimidation" that pervades the very highest levels of the church's hierarchy. The material presented in the *Times* report ranges from the disturbing to the surreal, including allegations that current head David Miscavige physically beat his senior executives and—in what would be among the most astonishing incidents in the history of American religions—forced executives to play a brutal, all-night game of musical chairs to the tune of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody."[24]

On the other side, many academics writing about Scientology (particularly in the United States) have gone almost to the other extreme, by trying so hard to counter the sensationalistic popular attacks that they at times seem to bend over backward to present the church in a positive light.[25] While the anti-Scientology literature relies almost exclusively on ex-Scientologists and anticult spokespersons, pro-Scientology literature tends to rely primarily on church spokespersons and scholars sympathetic to new religions.

Thus, in my approach to Scientology—and to all religions, old or new—I have tried to adopt a more balanced perspective, using a delicate combination of what I call a hermeneutics of respect and a hermeneutics of suspicion.[26] By a hermeneutics of respect, I mean that I am a firm believer in the First Amendment, religious freedom, and the wonderful diversity of religious worldviews that make the United States such a rich and vibrantly pluralistic democracy. As such, I approach Scientology, like all religious groups, with an attitude of sympathetic respect and a genuine effort to take its claims seriously. By a hermeneutics of suspicion, however, I mean that we should also not be afraid to ask difficult, critical questions of groups such as Scientology (as well as "mainstream" religions). How have they *used* their claims to religious status? What have been the *effects* of this movement on its members and others? What are the social, historical, and political contexts in which this movement emerged, and how did it interact with government, media, and other forces? As we will see in the pages of this book, Scientology has a documented history of extremely problematic behavior ranging from espionage against government agencies to shocking attacks on critics of the church and abuse of its own members. A serious, respectful history of the church does not mean that we should ignore or belittle these aspects of the church—any more than a serious history of the Catholic Church would belittle the Inquisition or sexual abuse by contemporary priests. On the contrary, it demands that we look at these traits as closely, fairly, and critically as the more admirable aspects of the church.

While I am not claiming to expose any new secret information about Scientology in this book, I have drawn upon a great deal of published and unpublished materials that have never before been examined. Among them are Hubbard's first Dianetics and Scientology lectures from the

early 1950s, which the church's own Bridge Publications and Golden Era Productions were generous enough to send me in large numbers. I have also made extensive use of UCLA's invaluable special collection on Scientology, which contains thousands of documents, including letters, magazines, flyers, pamphlets, posters, and other ephemera. And I have been fortunate enough to have a very generous former Scientologist send me a vast number of documents from his years in the church, which includes hundreds of magazines, auditing materials, and copies of Hubbard's letters and bulletins. Finally, I have drawn upon the FBI's extensive files on Hubbard and Scientology, obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, and evidence produced during the church's thousands of court cases, many of which give key insights into its pursuit of religious status.

Although this book is primarily a historical study and not an ethnography, I have also done a number of face-to-face, phone, and email interviews with a wide range of both current and former Scientologists. Again, most of the existing literature on Scientology is quite polarized in its use of interview material: while most academic sources rely almost exclusively on official church spokespersons, virtually all of the journalistic exposés rely primarily on highly critical ex-members. In this book, I have striven for a more balanced approach by using interviews with both current and ex-Scientologists to supplement arguments based on the printed material. In so doing, of course, I am fully aware that both current and former Scientologists have their own biases, agendas, and axes to grind; and both kinds of sources therefore need to be read critically and contextually.

Despite these important qualifications, however, I have found the interview material to be some of the most insightful for understanding *both* the powerful appeal of Scientology to many individuals *and* the many controversial, problematic, and at times shocking aspects of this movement. On one side, I have spoken to numerous practicing Scientologists who offer glowing testimonials about the ways in which the church has changed their lives and empowered them to go out and help others. Many church members whom I have met in central Ohio credit their success both in their business careers and in their personal relationships largely to Scientology. Another enthusiastic member I inter-

viewed in Cincinnati worked with Scientology's Volunteer Ministers program in order to lead a team of rescuers to New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

On the other side, however, I have interviewed numerous former Scientologists who had rather darker tales to tell. Among them is Gerald Armstrong, who had been authorized to help write the official church biography of L. Ron Hubbard and then left the church when he discovered that most of what Hubbard had said about his life was untrue. Armstrong has truly stunning tales to tell of his ordeals after leaving the church, claiming that he was not only bombarded with myriad lawsuits but also physically assaulted, driven off the LA freeway, and threatened with assassination by a private investigator.[27] I also had a chance to interview Jim Dincalci, who was Hubbard's personal physician and close confidant during the 1970s; after leaving the church, Dincalci went on to found an organization called the Forgiveness Foundation, designed to help individuals (including numerous ex-Scientologists) deal with traumatic life experiences.[28] Finally, several former Scientologists agreed to speak with me only on the condition that their identity be kept absolutely anonymous. One former high-level Scientologist told me she was so fearful about talking and possibly being identified by the church that she had anxiety attacks for an entire week prior to our conversation. When we finally did talk, however, she let loose for over three hours in one sitting to recount her years in the church, her reflections on Hubbard, and her final decision to leave Scientology. Indeed, although it will not be central to this book, the interview material I've gathered from former Scientologists could probably serve as the basis for a spy novel or a thriller film.

No doubt, despite my best efforts, some readers will probably not be satisfied with my approach in this book. Many critics will likely find my account too generous to Scientology; and many defenders of the church will probably find it too critical. Moreover, this is a short book about just one aspect of a huge, complex, and multifaceted movement with an extremely tangled history. There are innumerable pieces of this story I have not told and countless, fascinating rabbit holes I have not gone down in this account. But this only leaves plenty of room for others to continue writing the history of the world's most controversial new religion.

Secrecy, Surveillance, and Censorship: Ethical and Epistemological Problems in the Study of Religion

With its complex layers of secrecy and its problematic history of relations with the U.S. government, Scientology raises some of the most profound moral and hermeneutical questions that lie at the heart of the study of religion. Indeed, it raises the fundamental question of how—and *if*—one should go about studying a religious movement that chooses to keep much of its teachings private and closed to outsiders. While I have written a good bit about esoteric traditions and new religious movements, ranging from Hindu Tantra to American Freemasonry and British occultism, I would have to say that Scientology is in many ways the most secretive religious community I have ever encountered. While it is true that the church offers free Sunday services and other public activities to non-Scientologists, the upper levels or "advanced tech" are reserved for the most dedicated and well-trained members; and the church has been extremely aggressive in enforcing its rights to the information contained in its higher grades.[29] As Ann Brill and Ashley Packard observe in their study of Scientology's war of information on the Internet: "What makes the Church of Scientology controversial is not so much Hubbard's teachings, but the church's tenacious secrecy and the extremes to which it is willing to go to protect itself."[30]

From its origins, secrecy has surrounded much of the movement, beginning with its founder. Hubbard's own life story is something of a mystery, since most of the official biography provided by the church has proven to be less a factual account than a kind of "hagiographic mythology."[31] Hubbard in fact spent the last years of his life from 1980 to1986 in hiding, having been named an unindicted coconspirator following the FBI raids on Scientology headquarters and the arrest of his wife, Mary Sue. Since his death, secrecy has continued to shroud much of the church, from its heavily protected headquarters or "Gold Base" in Riverside County, California, to its intensive disciplinary program, the "Rehabilitation Project Force," which has been frequently criticized for its alleged human rights abuses.[32]

As such, Scientology raises in the most acute way what I call the "ethical and epistemological double bind" that is inherent in the attempt to

study any highly secretive religious movement.[33] This double bind can be formulated as follows: first, how can one say anything meaningful about a group that is extremely private and regards portions of its teachings as off-limits to outsiders? Second, is it ethical to even attempt to penetrate the inner secrets of a religious community of which one is not a member—particularly one that sees itself as attacked and persecuted by media, government, and other critics? As Jeffrey K. Hadden argues, "To deny a religious group the right to protect its esoteric knowledge, indeed its most sacred texts, runs contrary to history and the American experience. It constitutes a denial to that group the protection of the Free Exercise clause of the First Amendment of the Constitution."[34] The Church of Scientology itself has argued that it should be given the same respect and protections given to any other religious community, citing examples such as indigenous traditions that have esoteric knowledge reserved only for initiates. As Mikael Rothstein comments in his analysis of Scientology's esoteric grades, Scientology officials "find it offensive whenever esoteric texts are published, and . . . they expect the scholarly community to abide by certain standards. . . . Scientology, in this respect, argues along the same lines as, for instance, Aboriginal Australians who have claimed the right not to have their sacred, esoteric songs or iconographic *churingas* published or otherwise shown to the public by anthropologists."[35]

To make matters even more complex, however, the Church of Scientology also has a long and well-documented history of aggressively confronting scholars, journalists, and ex-members who write critically about it. As Hubbard infamously wrote in his *Manual of Justice* in 1959: "People attack Scientology; I never forget it, always even the score."[36] In the late 1960s, this aggressive strategy toward critics was known as "fair game," meaning that opponents of Scientology could be confronted by any and all means at the church's disposal. Although the "fair game" doctrine was officially dropped after the 1960s, the church has continued to launch literally thousands of lawsuits against journalists, scholars, and others who have spoken critically about it. As various scholars have observed, Scientology's record of litigation "must surely be without parallel in the modern world."[37] This fact has been recognized not only by sociologists and historians of religions but also by legal scholars such

as J. P. Kumar: "In the arena of religious litigation, the past twenty years have shown no litigant more fearsome or intimidating than the Church of Scientology. Whether defending against claims of abuse and fraud, pursuing individuals for defamation or copyright infringement, or even litigating against government agencies, the Church has acquired a well-deserved reputation for extremely aggressive litigation tactics."[38]

But the church has been known to resort not simply to legal measures but to extralegal tactics as well. For example, the first serious academic work on Scientology was Roy Wallis's *The Road to Total Freedom*, published in 1976. As Wallis recounts, he was visited by a Scientologist posing as an interested university student, who allegedly tried to make him confess to drug use. Shortly thereafter, letters were sent to his friends and colleagues suggesting that he was a homosexual.[39] Even more aggressive tactics have confronted journalists who have written critically of the church. As Richard Behar recounted his experience while researching his article for *Time* magazine in 1991, "[A]t least 10 attorneys and six private detectives were unleashed by Scientology and its followers in an effort to threaten, harass and discredit me. . . . A copy of my personal credit report—with detailed information about my bank accounts, home mortgage, credit-card payments, home address and Social Security number—had been illegally retrieved."[40] Thus, John Richardson of *Premiere* magazine offered the following advice to fellow journalists who write about Scientology: they should expect from the outset that anything they say about the church will meet legal challenge and perhaps extralegal intimidation: "[A]ct from the start as if you are already in a lawsuit. . . . There will be attempts to . . . lay groundwork for a case against you. So watch what you say."[41] In sum, anyone who writes about a movement as litigious and defensive as Scientology faces a basic dilemma. Does the writer "tell the truth, and damn the consequences," or does he or she "reflect that in over a hundred thousand words of text, anyone can make a mistake? There is a powerful tension between the threat of censorship and the possibility of enormous cost in time, effort and money for a single error."[42]

Ironically, in the course of my own research on Scientology, I not only had to think carefully about how the church might react to my work and the suspicions it might generate; conversely, I *also* met with suspicion

from some ex-Scientologists I interviewed, who worried that I myself might be a covert Scientologist gathering information on them (!). For example, in 2009, I contacted Hubbard's former personal physician, Jim Dincalci, for an interview. He agreed, but added the following caveat: "Knowing the ways of [Scientology] informs any of us that you are very possibly a scientologist just gathering information for them, whether you are a professor, lawyer, doctor, politician or a movie star."[43] In a bizarre turnabout, I myself was suspected of not being just an enemy infiltrator of Scientology but a *possible covert Scientologist* conducting surveillance on ex-members.

Finally, both of these ethical and epistemological problems are rendered infinitely more complicated by the dawn of the information age and new communications technologies, particularly the Internet. Ironically, most of Scientology's esoteric materials have been made widely available on various websites since the mid-1990s. Despite the church's aggressive legal actions against an array of websites, the most confidential grades of Scientology continue to spread freely in cyberspace. So this raises another rather bizarre ethical and epistemological question, surely one unique to our own peculiar information age: Should we now simply ignore the fact that these "esoteric" Scientology materials are widely available online, in order to protect this church's rights to privacy? Or should we frankly acknowledge that, in the Internet age, little if anything can realistically remain "esoteric" for long and that Scientology's advanced tech should be analyzed freely like any other publicly available religious material? As Mikael Rothstein argues, "With the breakthrough of the Internet an entirely new situation has been created. . . . Pretending that the texts are *not* there is ridiculous, and acting as if anyone with potential interest in the subject is unaware of this material equally meaningless."[44] As such, the advent of the Internet has raised a number of profound new legal and ethical issues for both religious groups and those who would study or interpret them. For both sides want to invoke the First Amendment to their advantage—the Scientologists for their right to protect esoteric religious materials, and scholars and critics for their right to free speech, including free discussion of the more problematic aspects of the church. As Mark Fearer concludes in his discussion of Scientology's war of information on the Internet, "Both

sides see the case as a First Amendment issue, but for entirely different reasons."[45]

In sum, the case of Scientology raises the "ethical and epistemological double bind" of secrecy in an especially acute and complex way. Indeed, it raises some of the most difficult questions at the heart of the attempt to understand *any* controversial new religion, and perhaps even at the heart of the attempt to understand religion itself. Do we have not just a right but perhaps an obligation to write openly about movements as controversial as Scientology, including the secret, confidential, and esoteric aspects of the movement? Or, conversely, is that itself an act of intellectual violence and an invasion of privacy?

I do not pretend to have an ideal solution to this extremely complex moral, intellectual, and methodological conundrum. For the sake of this book, however, I will offer my own alternative approach to the ethical-epistemological double bind. Here I will suggest that we may never truly be able to penetrate the "inner secrets" of Scientology; but we *can* still engage in a rich and complex history of the movement and its more visible interactions with other social, political, and legal structures over the last sixty years. Moreover, we can also use the case of Scientology to reflect on larger questions surrounding the meaning of religion itself—that is, how the term has come to be used in academic, popular, and legal discourse, who gets to define it, and what the stakes are in laying claim to "religious" status. These are questions that have become increasingly complex in the post–World War II era, amidst the rapidly expanding terrain of American religions in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Scientology and the Changing Spiritual Marketplace of Postwar America

The decades during which Scientology was born and initially flourished—the 1950s and 60s—were a period of tremendous growth, change, and experimentation in the American religious landscape. As historians of American religion such as Robert S. Ellwood and Wade Clark Roof have suggested, the United States of the post–World War II decades is best described as a thriving "spiritual marketplace," teeming not just with

a wide assortment of Christian denominations but also with newly imported forms of Eastern religions, UFO religions, and various forms of occultism, magic, and neo-paganism.[46] These decades also saw the birth of eclectic new centers of alternative spirituality, such as the Esalen Institute and what Jeffrey Kripal calls its "religion of no religion."[47] Already promoting itself as the "Philosophy of a New Age" in 1957, Scientology was an important and influential new spiritual offering within this complex, dynamic, rapidly growing religious marketplace.[48] As Hubbard's former personal physician, Jim Dincalci, explained in an interview with me, many young spiritual seekers in the 1960s were just beginning to be interested in nonconventional religious ideas such as reincarnation, psychic phenomena, and alternative medicine. For him, Scientology was one of the first movements he encountered that offered all of these ideas in a persuasive, attractive, and seemingly "scientific" package.[49]

At the same time, like the popular American religious landscape, the academic study of religion in the United States was also rapidly changing during these decades. As Ninian Smart observes, although there had been various fields in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century such as "sociology of religion," "psychology of religion," and so on, the field of religious studies in the English-speaking world "basically dates from the 1960s."[50] Thus in 1963, the "National Association of Biblical Instructors"—whose name clearly indicates its roots in Jewish and Christian theology—changed its name to the "American Academy of Religion," signaling a shift toward a comparative, pluralistic, and inclusive approach. During the same decade, new departments of religious studies were founded across the country, and influential journals of religious studies were established. In sum, the conventional view of American religiosity as comprising "Protestant, Catholic, Jew" (the title of Will Herberg's influential 1955 book) was rapidly giving way to a much richer understanding of the rapidly proliferating diversity of the American spiritual marketplace.[51]

The study of religion in the American university was thus very much a product of these decades, amidst the new interest in Eastern religions and alternative spirituality. "It is no accident," Kripal notes, ". . . that the explosion of 'comparative religion' in American universities coincided *exactly* with the counterculture and its famous turn to the East."[52] But

the rise of the academic study of religion was also tied to larger historical and political forces during these decades, such as cold war anxieties about godless Communism, new immigration patterns, and geopolitical relations with Asia: "In the late 1960s and early 1970s colleges and universities established departments of religious studies as part of larger cultural trends. The 'red scare' and anticommunist political mood encouraged interest in and defense of religion as a defining feature of the democratic cultures. . . . The 1960s counterculture was fascinated with so-called esoteric traditions, such as Buddhism and yoga, and also antitraditional explorations of occultism."[53]

Scientology was a key part of the redefinition of religion in contemporary America. As we will see in the pages that follow, Scientology reflects every one of these new cultural trends: anti-Communism, interest in Asian religions, and fascination with the occult. And yet, interestingly enough, its recognition as "religion" was quite slow in coming. The complex, tangled, often excruciating debates over Scientology's status as a "cult," a "business," a "pyramid scheme," or a legitimate "religion" reflect in microcosmic form the larger debates surrounding religion itself in the postwar decades. Similar debates, of course, surrounded other new spiritual offerings of this period, such as the Hare Krishnas (ISKCON—International Society for Krishna Consciousness), the Unification Church, Transcendental Meditation, and the Peoples Temple as well as more recent movements such as Heaven's Gate, the Branch Davidians, the Raelians, and countless others. However, Scientology is arguably the best documented of these controversial new movements, producing not just thousands of pages of Hubbard's own technical bulletins and lectures, but myriad court cases, FBI investigations, testimonies of hundreds of current and former members, and countless websites proliferating across the Internet—in sum, a veritable mountain of materials that reveal the history of this complex movement and its long road to recognition as a religion in the United States. Moreover, Scientology is also unique in that we can clearly trace the genealogy of its *self-conscious attempt to make itself appear more like a religion and to fit more closely into the accepted definitions of religion in modern America*. As such, many critics have argued that Scientology is better understood not as a "religion" in the traditional sense; rather—as a colleague of mine put it

during an argument with me at a conference at Ohio State—it might be better described as a "simulacrum of a religion," that is, a self-conscious mimicry of the outward trappings of religion in order to obtain the legal benefits, privileges, and protections that come along with that status.[54]

Scientology is thus an ideal case for thinking about religion—that is, for thinking about how religion is defined, who gets to define it, and what the stakes are in laying claim to or being denied such status. Scientology has in fact fought long legal and political battles in many countries over precisely this question, with varying degrees of success: the church is today recognized as a religious institution in some countries, such as Spain and Australia (though in the latter only after being banned in three states up until the 1980s); in other countries such as Ireland and the United Kingdom the church is still not recognized as a religious or charitable entity; in some countries such as Germany, the church continues to be regarded with deep suspicion as an antidemocratic, even totalitarian organization; and in others such as France, it has been dubbed a dangerous *secte* (cult) and convicted of fraud as recently as 2009.[55]

But arguably the church's longest and most convoluted journey to recognition as a religion took place in the United States. Indeed, the pages of this book will trace a sixty-year ordeal that began with an unexpectedly popular form of therapy first published in a small science fiction magazine and culminated in one of the world's largest, most powerful, and wealthiest religious organizations that continues to generate controversy to this day. In short, a genealogy of Scientology, we will see, is in many ways also a genealogy of "religion" itself in the United States from the late 1940s to the present.

As anthropologist Talal Asad suggests, any definition of religion we might come up with is always and inevitably tied to "a particular history of knowledge and power."[56] That is to say, any definition is limited by the biases of its own time and place, its historical context and cultural prejudices. And any definition will necessarily include certain groups and exclude others, thus inevitably granting certain status, privileges, and rights to some while denying them to others. An obvious example is the case of the peyote movement and the Native American Church's long battle for religious recognition in the United States. Although peyote had been consumed as a sacrament by Native American tribes for at least

seven thousand years, peyote use was banned and suppressed by the U.S. government in the late nineteenth century. The peyote movement was first formally recognized as a legitimate "religion" only in 1918 with the founding of the Native American Church, which, significantly, now described itself as a "church" and claimed to be "dedicated to teach the Christian religion with morality, sobriety . . . and right living."[57] Yet even so, its members would continue fighting a complex tangle of legal battles for the right to consume peyote up until the 1990s, and its legality still varies widely by from state to state.[58]

To cite another obvious example, when Joseph Smith and the early Mormon Church emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, they were widely ridiculed, attacked, and persecuted as a dangerous and subversive group. Yet today the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is recognized as the fourth largest Christian denomination in the world and by some even as a new "world religion."[59]

Finally, as many scholars of new religious movements have argued, the term "cult" has long been used to delegitimate, dismiss, and in some cases attack groups that do not fit the mainstream ideal of religion. Perhaps the most poignant example is the Branch Davidian church. Widely branded as a dangerous cult by the media, government, and anticult groups, the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, became the target of an aggressive raid by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms in 1993, which ended in the tragic death of over seventy men, women, and children. As scholars such as Catherine Wessinger, James Tabor, and Eugene Gallagher have argued, the disaster at Waco might well have been avoided if the Branch Davidians were approached first as a *religion* that needed to be understood sympathetically on its own terms rather than as a dangerous *cult* that need to be confronted by overwhelming force.[60]

In sum, our definition of religion is at once historically contingent, widely varied over time, and inevitably linked to real relations of power. As Jonathan Z. Smith aptly observes, "The moral . . . is not that religion cannot be defined, but that it can be defined, with greater or lesser success, more than fifty ways."[61] L. Ron Hubbard himself, we might note, said almost exactly the same thing decades before in 1955, during his own attempt to assert the religiosity of Scientology: "You know that

religion has a great many meanings. . . . It can mean an enormous number of things."[62] And any definitions we come up with will inevitably include and exclude particular groups, thus granting certain benefits and privileges to some while denying them to others.

While I would not presume to offer a final definition of religion of my own here, I find Bruce Lincoln's recent approach very helpful. While acknowledging the historical contingency of any particular definition and the impossibility of coming up with one that is universally applicable, Lincoln suggests that we can still use a kind of flexible, provisional, working concept of religion. Rather than a singular thing or essence, he argues, religion is better understood as a form of discourse that makes a claim to a particular kind of *authority*. Specifically, religious sorts of discourse make a claim to an authority that is believed to "transcend the human, temporary and contingent, and claims for itself a similarly transcendent status." Thus,

> Discourse becomes religious not simply by virtue of its content, but also from its claims to authority. Astrophysicists, for instance, do not engage in religious speech when they discuss cosmogony, so long as they frame their statements as hypotheses and provisional conclusions based on experimentation, calculation and human reason. . . . But should they ground their views in Scripture, revelation or immutable ancestral traditions, in that moment their discourse becomes religious because of its claim to transcendent authority.[63]

In this sense, we can view much of Scientology history from the early 1950s to the present as precisely an *increasing attempt to define itself in religious terms*—that is, a self-conscious effort to invoke a particular kind of transcendent status and authority. In the early phase of Dianetics, Hubbard made no attempt to define his new science of the mind as anything having to do with religion. Yet throughout the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, in response to a variety of internal and external pressures, Hubbard began to increasingly pursue what he called the "religion angle." Foremost among these were Hubbard's wars with the FDA, over his claims to heal physical illness, and his intense battles with the IRS, over his claims to tax-exempt status. Finally, by the 1990s, as we see in promotional films made by the church, Scientology was proudly declaring its authentic

"religious" status as supported by courts in many nations: "Since Scientology is relatively new, you may hear the question asked: 'Is Scientology a bona fide religion?' Let me assure you it is, according to more than sixty-five court decisions around the world."[64] In sum, the pages of this book will trace the complex historical process by which a penny-a-word science fiction writer first established one of the first and most popular self-help therapies and then went on to found one of the world's most powerful and wealthiest but also controversial new religions.

Outline of the Book: Six Decades of Religious Controversy

Each of the chapters of this book will focus on one particular historical period, from the 1940s to the present, following Scientology's complex journey from an obscure self-help movement to a recognized religion with global reach and massive financial resources. Moving roughly decade by decade, I will show that Scientology actually lay at the center of a series of complex debates surrounding religion in the United States from the postwar era to the present, highlighting the contested boundaries between psychology, science fiction, occultism, Eastern spirituality, and cults that have shaped the discourse of religion in the modern world.

Chapter 1, "L. Ron Hubbard: American Entrepreneur, Spiritual *Bricoleur*," will suggest that Scientology's founder is best understood neither as a philosopher-saint (as the church portrays him) nor as a charlatan-madman (as most of the media portray him). Rather, if we place Hubbard in the context of other authors and science fiction writers of the 1940s and 50s, he begins to look more like a unique combination of an American entrepreneur and a cultural *bricoleur*, who blended together a wide array of psychological, spiritual, and occult ideas into a surprisingly successful new synthesis. While Hubbard was primarily known as a prolific author of science fiction and fantasy novels during the 1930s and 40s, he dabbled in a wide array of popular ideas and practices, ranging from psychoanalysis to occultism and magic. His first great breakthrough, however, was his new science of mind called "Dianetics" (1950). First published in the popular magazine *Astounding Science Fiction*, Dianetics made no particular claims to "religious status" but instead drew

heavily on the work of Sigmund Freud, Otto Rank, and popularized versions of psychoanalysis available in the late 1940s. Remarkably, however, Hubbard was able to market his new science in a way that was hugely successful and reached a massive popular audience. In short, Hubbard was from the beginning an ingenious entrepreneur who straddled the ambiguous lines between spirituality and popular culture, occultism and science fiction, pop psychology and mass marketing.

In chapter 2, "Scientology, Inc.," I will examine the formation of the Church of Scientology, which was incorporated in late 1953 and began to advertise itself much more explicitly as a "religious" organization. Hubbard's shift toward a more recognizably religious entity seems to have been inspired not just by his further investigations into the human condition, but also by political fractures within the Dianetics movement and pressures from a growing number of critics in the media and the medical profession. While Hubbard's early system of Dianetics promised to offer optimal well-being in this lifetime, Scientology began to promote ideas drawn from a wide range of materials then available in the spiritual marketplace of 1950s America, such as a belief in reincarnation, a complex history of the universe, and many elements drawn from recently imported forms of Hinduism and Buddhism (including Hubbard's remarkable claim to be the future Buddha, Maitreya). Hubbard's pursuit of the "religion angle" as he called it, however, was by no means an immediate or smooth one, but rather one that happened in fits and starts throughout the 1950s and was driven as much by political and legal expedience as by spiritual concerns. But it appears to have worked remarkably well, as Scientology "franchises" rapidly spread amidst the thriving spiritual marketplace of 1950s America.

Chapter 3, "A Cold War Religion," will place Scientology in the context of the United States of the 1950s and early 1960s, amidst the discourse surrounding nuclear war, secrecy, and surveillance that pervaded much of these decades. From the very beginning, Hubbard marketed Dianetics as the ultimate solution to the nuclear era and as a discovery as important as the atomic bomb. But at the same time, his movement also displayed an intense preoccupation with secrecy and surveillance that mirrors larger concerns with information control in cold war America. Hubbard himself wrote numerous letters to J. Edgar Hoover

and the FBI naming Communist sympathizers and offering Dianetics as a means to combat socialism. Meanwhile, the FBI, FDA, and other agencies also began to aggressively investigate Scientology for its potential subversive threat, leading to an escalating game of espionage and counterespionage throughout the cold war era. Not only did the FBI launch massive raids on Scientology centers in Los Angeles and Washington, DC, but the church responded in turn by its principle of "fair game," meaning that the church could respond to its enemies by any and all means necessary. Thus the church formed its own intelligence agency, the Guardian's Office, and began to run "security checks" on its own members in a growing obsession with information control both within and without the movement—an obsession that only reflected a similar obsession with secrecy and information control in 1960s America.

In chapter 4, "The 'Cult of All Cults'?" I will place Scientology amidst the intense debates surrounding "cults" and "brainwashing" that spread throughout the 1970s and 80s. Even more so than the many other new religions of this period, such as the Unification Church, ISKCON, or Peoples Temple, Scientology was regularly singled out by both the media and anticult groups as the most dangerous, litigious, and rapacious of all cults. In turn, Scientology has responded with aggressive tactics of its own. Perhaps the most extreme example was its barrage of lawsuits against the Cult Awareness Network (CAN), by which it first helped drive CAN into bankruptcy and then bought the rights to CAN's name, help line number, and service mark. Remarkably, the movement once branded the "cult of greed" now owns and operates the "New Cult Awareness Network" and advocates religious tolerance. As such, Scientology has been at the center of much larger debates about fundamental questions such as: How do certain groups become labeled in popular discourse as "cults," and what are the larger legal and political implications of such labeling? More important, how do we engage in a critical interrogation of highly problematic groups—including groups such as Scientology that have at times engaged in criminal activities—while at the same time respecting rights to privacy and freedom of religious expression?

Chapter 5, "'The War' and the Triumph of Scientology," will then explore the complex process through which Scientology actually did

win tax-exempt status in the eyes of the IRS in the 1990s. The church's "triumph" was by no means a simple story, but rather the result of the longest IRS investigation in history, labyrinthine legal debates, and allegations of extralegal pressure that finally led to its status as a tax-exempt organization in 1993. Indeed, the details of the church's conflict with the IRS read like an espionage novel, complete with Scientologists breaking into IRS offices to steal mountains of documents, hiring private investigators to follow senior officials, and filing thousands of lawsuits. In fact, the details of the church's controversial settlement with the IRS were kept secret, despite Freedom of Information Act requests, until 1997 when they were leaked to the *Wall Street Journal.* Meanwhile, outside the United States, many other major governments have still not recognized Scientology as a legitimate religion, but regard it variously as a business, a "cultish psycho-group," or a "pyramid scheme." In an ironic historical twist, the U.S. State Department now criticizes the governments of Germany and other countries for their failure to respect Scientology's rights to religious freedom. As such, Scientology is truly an emblematic test case for thinking about the most basic questions of what constitutes a religion, who gets to decide, and what are the real stakes (legal, economic, political, spiritual) in being acknowledged as such.

In chapter 6, "Secrets, Security, and Cyberspace," I will examine the most recent wars of information surrounding Scientology in the rapidly expanding terrain of the Internet. If Scientology was attacked as a cult and a commercial enterprise in the 1970s, these attacks have grown exponentially with the proliferation of hundreds of anti-Scientology websites, Usenet newsgroups, and online communities dedicated to unmasking the church. And if Scientology was concerned with information control during the cold war era, that concern has become even more intense in the world of cyberspace, where the alleged "inner secrets" of Scientology can be instantly disseminated to a global audience. The church has in fact established its own "Religious Technology Center," dedicated to the control of Scientology copyrights and information, and has filed numerous lawsuits against individuals who have posted confidential church materials online. At the same time, however, Scientology has also become the target of a new and more challenging enemy, the decentralized Internet group known as "Anonymous," which has dedicated itself to exposing

the church's deceitful tactics and spreading its version of the truth to a global Internet audience. One of my own former students actually joined the Anonymous protests and is now an active anti-Scientologist. After he posted some confidential Scientology materials online, he was threatened by church lawyers and had his Internet and email service terminated.[65] He then decided to join forces with Anonymous, adopting the ironic title "Chef Xenu" and working to disseminate as much information on Scientology throughout the Internet as possible. In short, the new "wars of religion" extend not just to multinational corporations but even to ordinary college students and to the innumerable tiny nodes of information that compose the Internet.

Finally, in the conclusion, I will argue that Scientology is a critically important case for thinking about much larger issues in the study of religion in the twenty-first century. First, it shows in a very striking way that our "imagining of religion" is hardly just a scholarly exercise but rather an intensely contested debate that has very real legal, economic, and political consequences. A critical rethinking of religion today, I will argue, would mean not just seeing religion as a complex phenomenon that is deeply entwined with the "secular" domains of law, media, popular culture, historical change, and political struggle. More important, as Bruce Lincoln suggests, it would also mean rethinking religion as a form of discourse that makes a claim to a particular kind of privileged status and authority—and specifically, a status that is believed to be transcendent, suprahuman, and/or eternal.[66] In the case of Scientology, the claim to such status has brought with it a number of tangible benefits, tax-exempt status not least among them. But with Scientology, as with any religion, the claim to such status is also always subject to challenge and contestation.

Second, the case of Scientology also raises profound questions about religious freedom and privacy in the twenty-first century, particularly amidst new forms of religious terrorism and new technologies of surveillance. How do we best undertake a respectful yet critical study of religions, an approach that interrogates the more problematic aspects of such groups while at the same time respecting rights to religious freedom and privacy? As authors such as James Tabor and Eugene Gallagher have shown in the case of the Waco disaster, the academic study of

religion has a crucial role to play in these debates. Above all, it can provide critical analysis of *both* controversial religious groups *and* the media, anticult, and governmental agencies that confront them.[67] In my view, these are among the most important debates of the twenty-first century, amidst the rise of ever more complex networks of information and technologies of surveillance. These are debates in which I expect historians of religions to have an increasingly vital role to play.