

Donald A. Westbrook. *Among the Scientologists: History, Theology, and Praxis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. xi + 332 pp. ISBN: 9780190664978. £29.99.

During its relatively short history, Scientology has been the subject of little academic study. While the number of publications (particularly edited volumes and journal articles) concerning Scientology is on the rise, only a handful of monographs on the topic exist.¹ Donald A. Westbrook's *Among the Scientologists: History, Theology, and Praxis* is therefore a much-needed contribution to the scholarly study of Scientology. Drawing heavily from ethnographic methods, Westbrook provides both a historical account of the Church of Scientology (CoS) and a contemporary analysis of the beliefs and practices of its members in the twenty-first century.

Observing that “remarkably little *qualitative* attention from scholars of religion” (4) has been dedicated to Scientology, and more specifically ethnographic research, Westbrook seeks to distance his study of the CoS from former research by concentrating on the lived reality of CoS membership. While former scholarship on the CoS has concerned the movement as an institutional organization, Westbrook positions his research to ask “what does ‘lived religion’ look like for a Scientologist?” (5). To this end, this monograph is based upon Westbrook’s extensive ethnographic research with CoS members at churches across America. This fieldwork is significant for a number of reasons, perhaps most notably the level of access he received at the CoS for a scholar of religion. Throughout the course of his research, Westbrook was able to secure 69 formal interviews with CoS members of various levels of Scientological development and training. Furthermore, he received an immersive fieldwork

1. Notable monographs on the topic of Scientology include: Hugh B. Urban, *The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); J. Gordon Melton, *Studies in Contemporary Religion: The Church of Scientology* (USA: Signature Books, 2011); Harriet Whitehead, *Renunciation and Reformulation: A Study of Conversion in an American Sect* (London: Cornell University Press, 1987).

experience, during which he was able to attend CoS holiday celebrations, undertake courses created by L. Ron Hubbard (the founder of Scientology), and take part in Scientologist practices including auditing and the Purification Rundown. Altogether, Westbrook's ethnographic data provides a rich bed of knowledge through which both the history of the CoS and the lived experience of Scientologists can be understood, whilst also sparking conversation regarding methodological approaches to engaging with the CoS in the field.

One of the most daunting challenges in the academic study of Scientology is engaging with L. Ron Hubbard's specialized nomenclature, frequently referred to by Scientologists as "Scientologese." Such esoteric language appears not only in Hubbard's written texts and bulletins to CoS staff members, but also in everyday conversation between practising Scientologists. Fortunately, *Among the Scientologists* excels in clarity, treading the fine line between offering an in-depth study of the CoS for scholars of Scientology on the one hand, and providing an accessible (yet detailed) introduction to those new to the subject on the other.

Assisting this accessibility, Westbrook outlines his conclusions towards the beginning of the monograph accordingly: (i) Scientologists view their practice as *knowledge over faith*. (ii) Hubbard is not a divine being to Scientologists, but is the model Operating Thetan (an advanced Scientologist). (iii) Scientologist development is codified in Hubbard's Bridge to Total Freedom (the "Bridge"). (iv) Documents concerning the Operating Thetan levels (the higher levels of the Bridge) are copyrighted and intended to be kept confidential within CoS spaces, however (v) most practising CoS members are on the lower levels of the Bridge. (vi) Progressing the Bridge involves investing money and time. (vii) The CoS is "theoretically all-denominational but functionally sectarian — at least most of the time" (40), and finally (viii) most CoS members are everyday people, not staff members or Hollywood celebrities. While some of these conclusions may already be apparent to those familiar with Scientology, they serve as a useful introduction to those new to the topic. Unlike these preliminary conclusions, however, the main thrust of Westbrook's argument is methodological.

The book is structured through an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion. Beginning with a chapter outlining Westbrook's aforementioned preliminary conclusions, the book moves on to present the history of Scientology in four core chapters. Beginning with a chapter documenting the origins of Scientology in Hubbard's Dianetic theory (the "science of the mind" upon which much of Scientology is based), and culminating with a chapter on significant CoS events and practices following the death of Hubbard, the reader is guided through the history of the CoS, ranging from Hubbard's early work on Dianetics in the 1940s to contemporary CoS practices.

Historical analyses of the CoS are not uncommon in scholarly studies of Scientology, yet Westbrook's account is enriched by his fieldwork interviews. For example, his interviews with two "Founding Scientologists" (early members of Scientology) add a valuable insight to the ways in which Hubbard's theories appealed to initial members of the "Dianetic community." Further to this ethnographic approach, Westbrook engages with Hubbard's often complicated writings on Scientology. For example, he examines Hubbard's "The Factors": the incorporation of religious elements to his theory of the mind. The fifth chapter, concerning the years following Hubbard's death in 1986, places a focus on Hubbard's successor and the current leader, David Miscavige. This chapter also benefits from Westbrook's emphasis on ethnography, allowing Miscavige's status as leader of the CoS to be framed amongst the perceptions and opinions of practising Scientologists. Indeed, testimonies from everyday Scientologists on contemporary CoS affairs offer refreshing avenues through which the lives of CoS members can be explored, distancing Westbrook's work from the focus on the institution that has dominated the scholarly study of the CoS to date.

Perhaps the most interesting aspects of Westbrook's study concern the beliefs and practices of Scientology. Chapter Three considers its "systematic theology" (95). It documents the years that Hubbard spent in East Grinstead, UK, in the 1960s, during which he developed much of his Scientological ideas and systems that would become CoS policy. The chapter explores a number of Hubbard's

works, including *Study Tech* (Scientologist pedagogy) and the *Bridge to Total Freedom*, but places a particular emphasis on “Keeping Scientology Working” (KSW), a ten-point policy written by Hubbard in 1965 outlining the orthodoxy of belief in the CoS in direct opposition to the “squirrels” (Scientologists practising Scientology outside the CoS). The purpose of KSW is to ensure that Scientologist practices are applied across all CoS Orgs precisely as Hubbard is believed to have intended. Describing KSW as “the crown jewel of Scientology’s systematic theology” (124), Westbrook outlines a paradox between the orthodoxy of KSW and Hubbard’s encouragement of subjective approaches to Scientology. Despite this contrast, Westbrook argues that a conflict between a Scientologist and the CoS would ultimately be resolved in favour of the church, due to the institutional nature of KSW.

Building upon this exploration of how the CoS regulates its belief system, the fourth chapter moves on to consider the Sea Org, an elite organization consisting of highly dedicated and trained CoS members, distinguished by their use of naval imagery, uniforms, and titles. Westbrook’s account of the Sea Org is particularly fascinating for two reasons. Firstly, he draws from his fieldwork to provide a case study of the daily life of a Sea Org member, something hitherto unexplored in the study of Scientology. Secondly, Westbrook situates the origins of the organization in Hubbard’s work on the esoteric Operating Thetan (OT) levels, which the CoS attempts to keep confidential from public circulation. Rather than focusing on the specific contents of the OT levels, he explores the role of the Sea Org in administering and delivering confidential teachings to Scientologists that have sufficiently progressed across the *Bridge*. This approach highlights the centrality and (in some cases) confidentiality of much of the Scientologist belief system to the overall goal of the Sea Org, as well as the methods with which the CoS continue to attempt to protect these teachings through administrative procedures.

It must be noted, however, that the esoteric elements of Scientologist beliefs result in a barrier between the CoS and the scholar seeking to conduct a study of Scientology as a lived religion. As Westbrook himself states, “for members of

the Church of Scientology, discussion of the specifics of *any* [Operating Thetan] level is a high crime... that is worthy of excommunication” (132). Coupled with the CoS’ rigorous control of its public image amongst outsiders, scholars (including Westbrook) are highly unlikely to be able to examine the advanced stages of CoS practice from the perspective of “lived religion.” Rather, they must turn to ex-member testimonies and leaked documents, which involves the careful triangulation of sources and data. However, this does not hinder Westbrook’s efforts, particularly due to his observation that most Scientologists are on the lower stages of the Bridge (and are accordingly unfamiliar with the confidential aspects of Scientology), and to the approval he gained from the CoS’ Office of Special Affairs, which allowed a “level of comfort and trust” (12) between himself and his fieldwork participants. Notwithstanding the confidential aspects of CoS practice, Westbrook has been largely successful in providing a comprehensive history of the CoS as an organization, in addition to Scientology as a belief system, that draws from the lives and experiences of everyday CoS members.

Westbrook concludes his monograph by expressing hope that the scholarly study of Scientology will continue to grow through a variety of interdisciplinary methods, observing that the combined efforts of scholars to examine the contemporary Scientologist landscape could result in a rewarding and nuanced picture. Indeed, as Westbrook himself observes, the increasing number of Scientologist groups emerging in the “Free Zone” (Scientology *outside* the institutional CoS), and questions arising around the succession to Miscavige, demonstrate that Scientology continues to be a rich field of study for scholars of contemporary religions. Westbrook’s ethnographic and historical approach to the CoS not only provides a highly valuable contribution to this continuing conversation, but will hopefully encourage other scholars to also turn their attention to Scientology as a topic for study.

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