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FEATURES PAGE

IN-DEPTH, INVESTIGATIVE REPORTS

Scientology

The McGill Daily ventures into the belly of the beast, emerges enlightened

by Kirsten Weldon

MONTREAL (CUP)—I am quite understandably, afraid.

I'm standing outside of Montreal's Church of Scientology, and I'm beginning to seriously doubt the ability of my plan, not to mention its wisdom. The original idea? To waltz into the place undercover, posing as an interested and eager potential convert. I wanted to see what these Scientologists would do to me. Would they brainwash and indoctrinate me with utopian, sci-fi visions of an alternate reality? Would they blackmail me into signing my life away? Or would they simply demand the entirety of my meager savings account in exchange for promises of spiritual fulfillment?

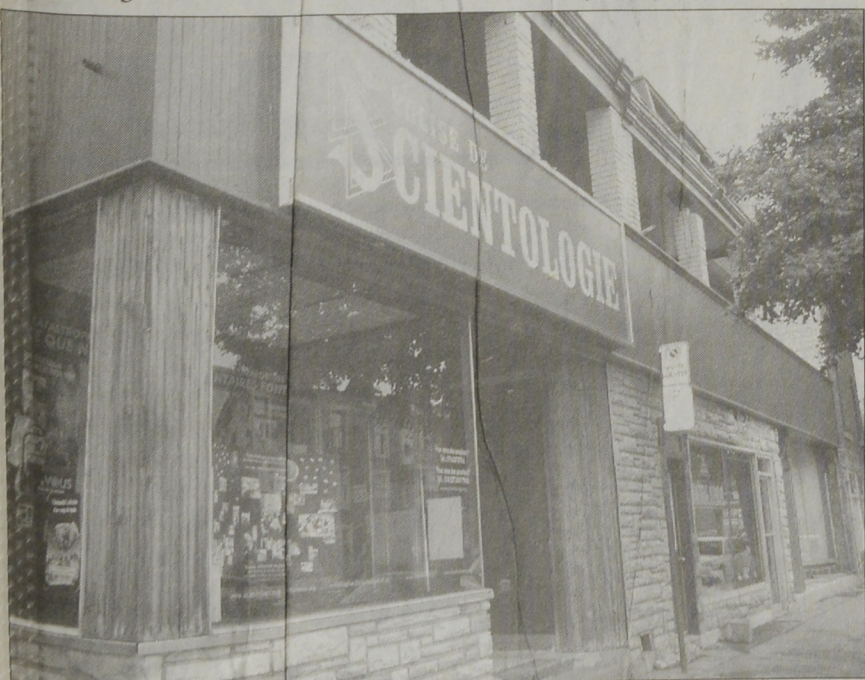
Suddenly—realising that I am armed solely with stereotypes and a sizeable dose of paranoia—the whole venture starts to seem ill-conceived. Tying with the dark and mysterious forces of a pop religion that has been widely condemned as a dangerous cult, merely for the sake of gonzo student journalism, no longer appears to be worth the effort. The place doesn't even look like a church, but instead like a decrepit hardware store. I take a deep breath and summon forth all my faculties of rational thought and analysis, as well as my courage. Feeling myself, I stride through the glass door, only to be confronted with an array of glossy pamphlets and two or three mild-mannered, relatively normal-looking people sitting calmly at their desks.

Playing with fire and brimstone

I enter, fully expecting a weird and unsettling experience. The Scientologists do not disappoint. Immediately a man approaches me, inquiring into my business. I play innocent, feigning an interest in Scientology that remains unquenched by my casual internet surfing. He offers to show me a hour-long instructional video that he promises will answer some of my questions and I accept.

He ushers me into a special viewing cubicle, where I sit among stacks of videos with names like *The Deterioration of Liberty*, *Operation Manual for the Mind* and *The Dynamic Principles of Listening*. The video I watch consists entirely of a 1966 interview with L. Ron Hubbard, the charismatic founder of Scientology. He has "cult leader" written all over him: a friendly Nebraska drawl, intense eyes, an avuncular air. I do my best to conceal my reporter's notebook in which I furiously scrawl notes, convinced that I am being watched.

In the video, L. Ron—as he is affectionately known in Scientology circles—explains that the practice of his new religion, which to my eyes seems like a harmless mix of futuristic techno-spirituality and crack psychotherapy, can improve my reaction time, alertness, overall happiness and IQ. He discusses Scientology therapy, or "processing," as well as the training involved to become a full practitioner, or "auditor." It all sounds terribly Orwellian to me, but I keep listening.



What I discern to be the basic premise of the faith is the following: human beings, in their unconscious "reactive" minds, accumulate memories of painful experiences, which Scientology calls "engrams." The presence of these engrams impedes personal development and happiness in one's lifetime, and so they need to be expunged, or "cleared," in order to achieve mental and emotional

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Will your dreams become real? Or will failure blow them away like leaves in a bitter wind?



well-being.

Murky logic aside, I remain ill at ease. The second the movie concludes, a second unidentified man appears behind me. "I need to speak with you now," he says. I follow him into a different cubicle and sit opposite him at a desk, looking up at a garish and oversized portrait of L. Ron himself. In the next room sits a massive, faux-bronze L. Ron bust. The walls are covered in gaudy Scientology posters of rising suns, slogans, and happy white families. I furtively look around and map out possible escape routes.

The man—Alain—and I talk for some time. He is rather non-threatening. He asks about any potential engrams I may be harbouring, and I quickly invent a tale of a troubled relationship with my parents. He nods and recommends that I take one of the instructional courses offered by the Church, which he assures me will improve my interpersonal relations. I don't bite right away, so he offers to give me a standardised personality test. In the box for my name, address and telephone number, I provide a battery of fakes, as friends had warned me that the Scientologists would stalk and blackmail me if I gave them my real vitals. Whatever the case, I don't want to take any chances.

I tend to consider myself sound in judgment and fairly mentally stable. My test results, it would seem, disagree; Alain gravely informs me that I am in serious emotional trouble. The graph I am shown indicates that the majority of my personal traits are in the "Unacceptable State" zone, and the several pages of analytic print-out—only parts of which I am permitted to see, and then only after begging and wheedling—tell me the following: "You have an unstable character...you are a person on whom no one can count...you are in a total nervous state...you do not know how to control yourself, even in ordinary circumstances." The report goes on to tell me that I am irritable and "can become hysterical or violent" in my everyday actions. I am

Other people!

This chart tells you what people are like and what they will do. And it's all explained in...

HUBBARD CHART OF HUMAN EVALUATION AND DIAGNOSIS

Time	Area	Sub Area	Level	Notes
1000	A	10.0	10.0	
900	B	9.0	9.0	
800	C	8.0	8.0	
700	D	7.0	7.0	
600	E	6.0	6.0	
500	F	5.0	5.0	
400	G	4.0	4.0	
300	H	3.0	3.0	
200	I	2.0	2.0	
100	J	1.0	1.0	
0	K	0.0	0.0	

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Some facts, for once

One can't really be blamed for holding biased, stereotypical views of Scientology. The cult-cum-religion is a favourite punching bag of the mainstream media, particularly given its penchant for recruiting celebrities. Isaac Hayes, John Travolta, Tom Cruise, Chick Corea, Juliette Lewis, Jenna Elfman, Lisa Marie Presley and Nancy Cartwright—the voice of Bart Simpson—can all be counted among its converts.

Scientology is also frequently targeted as being a racket; much is made of the high prices charged for training, materials and buying various levels of devotion or enlightenment within its hierarchy of faith. Attaining "Gold Patron Meritorious" status, the top of the Scientology food chain, costs one million dollars. As a result of its shady dealings, the organisation has found itself the target of investigations in the United States by the Food and Drug Administration, the Internal Revenue Service and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, among others.

Ever wondered what Scientology was really all about? So had I. Prior to my church visit, I tried to find legit information about Scientology online, to no avail. Everything I found was either eerie Scientologist propaganda or anti-cult fear mongering.

Among the "facts" I learned: that adherents can buy immunity from nuclear blasts, that the supreme religious level of "Operating Thetan" involves spiritual immortality, that L. Ron Hubbard has "dangerously hypnotic" eyes, that Scientologists are frightening stalkers, that Scientology treatments can help me fully get over the death of a parent in just one visit, and more.

It was only after my paranoid jaunt to the Church of Scientology that I bothered to seek out any credible information regarding my experience, not to mention about the sizeable organisation behind it. I was pleasantly surprised to discover a number of leading authorities in the field of new religious movements (NRMs) who actually support Scientology as a bona fide religion and who see the term "cult" as a total misnomer, regarding the evolution of L. Ron Hubbard's brainchild.

"Scientology is definitely a legitimate religion," attests Professor Susan Palmer, an expert on modern religions who teaches a course called "Cults and Religious Controversy" at Concordia University. "A religion is a group of people who address the ultimate questions of meaning and life." Palmer believes that the word "cult" has been abused and employed, particularly in the media, as an excuse to isolate and persecute nascent religious movements. "On the whole, Scientologists are people who are very well-integrated into society—they no longer have a

charismatic leader, they don't demand that their adherents drop out of society, they use modern medicine," she says. "They're not a cult."

Douglas Cowan, professor of Religious Studies and Sociology at the University of Missouri, Kansas City, agrees. "In the early 1950s, when Scientology was first getting started, it was not a religion—it was more like Freudian psychoanalysis with a techno twist," he comments. "But now it's evolved. It accords with all the accepted definitions of a religion, and so a case can certainly be made for it in that respect. That's not a value judgment on whether it's good or bad."

Both Palmer and Cowan point to the religious phenomenon's popularity, its resilience in the face of adversity, and its similarity to many other accepted faiths as indicators of its legitimacy. "Scientology has to have merit, in the sense that hundreds of thousands of people have practiced it and found it extremely helpful and rewarding," Palmer says. "Of course you'll find some people who don't approve of it or who dislike it, but does that destroy its entire merit?"

While neither expert is much of a Scientology fan, each acknowledges the common ground it shares with other accepted religious systems. But what of critics' claims that Scientology is a racket, a savvy financial scheme designed to extract cash from weak-willed and brainwashed adherents?

"Everyone levels the racket charge when it comes to Scientology," Cowan says. "It seems like we want to criticise Scientology for something that is quintessentially American: commodifying everything. I think it's very interesting that a controversial new religious movement is critiqued for something that is seen as a credit to American society in any number of other ways. Regardless, I've talked to lots of Scientologists who aren't out there scamming people for money," he says.

One could easily make the case that organised religion has been commodifying, or selling, itself for centuries. Why, then, has Scientology found itself under specific attack for attributes shared not only by other religions, but by Western society itself?

"I think that in many ways, Scientology has opened itself to criticism. Every time you use celebrities as spokespeople," Cowan says, "you open yourself to ridicule. What does Jenna Elfman have to say to me about spirituality? She recites lines like these for a living!" But Scientology, nonetheless, has struck gold with its celebrity, high-profile converts. "We are a celebrity-driven culture," continues Cowan, "and Scientology has taken advantage of that."

Not all the experts, however, view Scientology in so positive a light. Dr. Stephen Kent, a sociologist of religion at the University of Alberta, points to Scientology's extreme secrecy, rigorous doctrinal study and attempts to control the lives of its members as indicators that the faith is certainly not innocuous.

"There is much debate about what a cult is, and I try to avoid using that kind of terminology," Kent says. "But regardless of how you classify it, serious moral, ethical and personal issues exist

within Scientology. The lower-level functionaries don't necessarily know about the upper-level abuses."

Kent cites L. Ron Hubbard's own Scientology dictionary, *Modern Management Technology Defined*, as evidence of Scientology's nebulous and sinister ways. In it, one of the given definitions of "ethics" is the following: "The purpose of ethics is to remove counter-intentions from the environment. Having accomplished that, the purpose becomes to remove other intentionedness from the environment." One interpretation of such Newspeak is that the purpose of Scientology is to eliminate all its opposition, Kent proposes.

"Once you're in the Church," Kent says, "no discussion, debate or criticism are permitted. Higher-level adherents must advertise and advance L. Ron Hubbard's teachings in all aspects of their lives, or else they will be silenced." What's more, Scientology is extremely secretive and closeted about its sacred texts and upper religious levels, punishing and attacking those who release such "classified" information.

"There are issues about full disclosure," Kent continues. "Ideally, a group should say up front what it's all about. Scientology, by contrast, staunchly protects its most important information, and as a result, it's very difficult to determine its motives."

The future of futurists

So Scientology has cleverly cashed in on our consumerism, our celebrity fetishising and our searching for modern spirituality in a technological, globalised world. I'm starting to think that these Scientologists, while perhaps a little creative in their beliefs, are rather clever—they're obviously filling a niche here and, as Cowan observes, "they may be working very hard to create that niche, but they're satisfying it nonetheless." The combination of high-tech faith and entrepreneurial drive, as kooky as it may sound, has proven successful for thousands of believers worldwide.

"I see Scientology as a multifaceted, transnational organisation, only part of which is religious," Kent says. In today's context, one of corporations and global communication, Scientology seems to be the bizarre, perfect religious manifestation of our millennial angst.

"Scientology looks like one of the new religious movements that will actually survive," Palmer says. "They've overcome the death of their leader, as well as incredible persecution and bigotry."

Jean La Riviere, Director of Public Affairs at Montreal's Church of Scientology and a practitioner of the faith since 1974, acknowledges how damaging the widespread criticism and scapegoating of Scientology has been for its believers. "It's hard to hear these stories, which continue pushing negative stereotypes of our beliefs," La Riviere observes that any new religion encounters difficulty and opposition at its inception, as did Christianity and other now-accepted faiths when they were getting off the ground.

"When you have a new religious movement, this kind of targeting happens because the faith is not understood," La Riviere says. "Right away, because they don't have any information, people will create information for themselves. It's unfortunate, but that's how human nature works."

What does the future hold for Scientology? It's hard to say. Now that society has legions of second- and third-generation Scientologists on its hands, it looks as though the faith is here to stay. "If the media start reporting on Scientology in a more positive way," Cowan remarks, "that might fuel its growth even more."

In the end, Scientologists are harmless—they don't have laser eyes, they won't stalk your family, they don't have apocalyptic fantasies. They're just people who go to church, like any other people who go to church. Ultimately, I'm amazed at how entrenched my misconceptions about these people were, and I feel rather silly.

I have to say, my greatest comfort through this whole experience has been learning that the personality test I took at the Church has been widely documented as being skewed—designed to indicate that people have problems that Scientology can solve. So while I may still need to worry about my stereotypes and biases, I can sleep easy about my hysterical, violent outbursts.