

Pulitzer-Winning Journalist Exposes Alleged Abuse in Church of Scientology

After winning the Pulitzer Prize in 2007 for his expose of al-Qaida, journalist Lawrence Wright turned his eye toward another secretive and controversial **religious movement**.

The **Church of Scientology** boasts a glittering roster of celebrity adherents and landmark real estate. But beneath that surface, Wright says, sits a troubling web of deceit, violence and paranoia.

His new book *Going Clear: Scientology, Hollywood & the Prison of Belief*, uncovers a church in which the founder lied about his wartime exploits, top executives are regularly abused and children sign billion-year contracts to work for low wages under poor conditions.

The Church of Scientology emphatically denies Wright's charges, calling them "ludicrous" and "unsubstantiated." The church has also dedicated a website to correcting what they see as errors in the book.

Wright spoke recently to Religion News Service. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Why did you write this book?

I've always been curious about why people believe one thing rather than another. In America you can believe anything you want, unlike in a lot of other countries where there's only one religion. So why would people be drawn to Scientology, one of the most esoteric and stigmatized religions?

And what did you find?

Oftentimes people who go into Scientology are dealing with a personal problem. If you enter a Church of Scientology building you'll be asked, "What is your ruin?" That is, what is standing in the way of your financial, spiritual and emotional success? And they will talk through things with you and offer a menu of courses designed to help. And many people do feel that they are helped by the courses or therapy.

What does "going clear" mean for Scientologists?

L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of Scientology, had a theory that we have two minds. One is our rational, analytic mind. It's like a computer: it remembers everything perfectly. What gets in the way of that is the "reactive" mind, which is full of fears and neuroses and traumas from our previous life and previous lifetimes. The object is to expunge those old painful memories, which he calls "engrams." Once you eliminate the reactive mind you become "clear": more intelligent, your reactions are quicker, your eyesight is better, you're invulnerable to disease—near superhuman, in other words.

And people believed this despite the fact that the promised benefits rarely come to pass, even for Hubbard?

The idea that you could acquire these powers was definitively an incentive and still is. In one of their magazines, they have a section called "OT Powers," in which upper-level Scientologists report what appear to be coincidences that they have experienced, like being able to change traffic lights to green and cure goldfish of sudden disease. None of them seem very remarkable, and it's a very expensive course of treatment.

You present a complex portrait of Hubbard, who seemed both desperately insecure and supremely self-confident. What drove him?

I think much of what he wanted was to cure himself. In the book, I make an analogy to schizophrenia being called the

“shaman sickness” in aboriginal cultures. These are people we would consider schizophrenics, but who perform a function in society and religion. Hubbard created this image of himself as a wounded warrior who couldn’t be healed by modern medicine, but healed himself and then went out to heal the community.

And yet his injuries and war record were largely fictional, according to your reporting.

Yes, exactly.

Can you describe what you discovered about Scientology’s secret work camps in the U.S.?

There are re-education camps in different locations for Sea Org members (Scientology’s clergy) who have offended the leader or committed some infraction against the Church of Scientology. On one of them, Gold Base, there’s a place called “the hole”: two double-wide trailers married together, where people are sent, often without being told of their crimes.

In 2004, (church leader) David Miscavige cleared away all the furniture and sent top executives to stay there, some for years. An elderly man who was the president of the church (a nominal post) was in the hole for seven years. Mike Rinder, Scientology’s (former) international spokesman, was placed in the hole. Occasionally they pulled him out, put a tuxedo on him and sent him to a gala to give a speech. Then he went back in the hole.

Why hasn’t the government done anything about this?

At one point the FBI told my sources, former Scientologists, that they were planning a raid on Gold Base. They were going to open the hole and liberate the people there. But my sources told the FBI not to bother. The people held in the hole would only tell them that everything was sunlight and seashells there – that they were there for their own good. There are some people who actually escaped from the Sea Orgs but who

went back. Other times they would be tracked down and brought back by a crew that is trained to follow and find people who have fled. They are very good at finding you; and when they do, you are likely going back into confinement for a long time.

Why would someone willingly go back, or agree to stay in those camps?

Well, put yourself in their place. Many of them joined as children, some were born into it. Many, if not all, of their friends and family are Scientologists. If you left, they would never talk to you again. They are only paid \$50 a week, so they don't have any income or education to fall back on. Young Scientologists don't really get any formal education. Their knowledge of the outside world is very restricted and they are taught to distrust outsiders. From the very beginning, when you go into Scientology your world narrows down very quickly. You're also taught that your salvation is at stake and if you bring disgrace on Scientology nothing could be worse. To some extent, they are not being held against their will; it's their will that is holding them there.

You detail some pretty serious violations of child labor laws by Scientology. Why isn't law enforcement stepping in?

I don't know. I mean, the church says it's not in violation, but I look at those labor laws and it seems pretty clear. I can tell you that law enforcement agencies are reluctant to get involved with the Church of Scientology. The church is surrounded by high-powered lawyers. If you are going to take on the Church of Scientology, whether it's the FBI or the IRS or the sheriff of Riverside County, it's a mighty task, and the agencies know that very well.

For example, they completely cowed the IRS to get their religious organization exemption.

And this is a rather small organization that could inflict so

much trouble on the IRS. I don't know what the IRS used to judge that Scientology was a religion. A group of accountants and lawyers is not the best-equipped body to disentangle what a religion is, but the circumstances surrounding the tax exemption are pretty alarming. The church filed a barrage of lawsuits, had private investigators tail IRS agents and smear their careers. The reason behind the deal for the IRS was so that the harassment and lawsuits would stop.

Scientologists have a history of surveilling, threatening, and suing journalists too, sometimes even framing them for crimes. Are you concerned about that?

My eyes were open to start with, but it was such an amazing story I couldn't resist myself. So far the church has published one surveillance photo of me interviewing a source, but I think they were more interested in the source than me. I have received stern letters from the Church of Scientology and their lawyers and from the lawyers of celebrities mentioned in the book, but no one has sued me. And I'm very confident in the sourcing and material in the book.

David Miscavige, the leader of the Church of Scientology, comes across as a violent, abusive person in your book. How different would the church be if he weren't leading it?

You have to give him credit, he saved Scientology. If not for the tax exemption he managed to get, Scientology would be out of business. They owed a billion dollars in back taxes, and he salvaged the church from certain death. I know that a lot of people who have left the church blame him for moving away from L. Ron Hubbard's original ideas, but the difference is that Miscavige grew up in, and is a product of, the Church of Scientology. It's hard to know how it would be different without him.

If people know anything about Scientology, they likely know about celebrity members like Tom Cruise. You write that fame

is actually a spiritual value for the church. How so?

L. Ron Hubbard set up the Church of Scientology in Hollywood in 1954 for a reason. He understood that celebrity was increasingly a feature of American public life, and celebrities themselves were going to be worshipped as minor deities were in the ancient world. The Celebrity Center in Hollywood went out to court exemplary figures that Scientology could use as front men. Early on, the church published an ideal list of catches, including Bob Hope, John Ford, Marlene Dietrich and Walt Disney. The idea was: if you could get them, think how many people would follow.

Do you think celebrity members like John Travolta and Cruise know about the abuses perpetuated by church leaders?

If they don't, I think it must be willful blindness on their part. It's not as if people in the public don't know, or that you can't find out about these abuses. It's easy to do. But Scientologists are trained to avoid noticing any kind of public criticism, and I think that's especially true of celebrities. They are coddled and given special treatment—that's a perk of being a celebrity in the Church of Scientology—and they are reluctant to give that up, and in the process they are overlooking very serious abuses.

You write that no one has receive more material benefits from the church—motorcycles, cars, house repairs, etc.—than Tom Cruise. Is he, then, implicated in the church's misdeeds?

I think he bears a moral responsibility to look into the abuses. The public sees him as the primary spokesperson for the Church of Scientology. The church has exploited him and rewarded him, and because of his membership, more people have heard about and joined the church. There are not many avenues for change in the Church of Scientology, and Tom Cruise might be able to affect more change than anyone else.

You write that Miscavige watches videos of Cruise's secret

confessions at night with a glass of whiskey. That alone might draw some response from Cruise. Has he reacted to your book yet?

His lawyer weighed in and said Tom Cruise thought the book was very boring.

The church has been a bit more critical, calling your book “error-filled” and “unsubstantiated.” How do you respond to that?

I spoke to more than 250 people, many of them current or former Scientologists, and some of them were at the top levels of the church. Starting with *The New Yorker* (Wright wrote an article about Scientology for the magazine in 2011), we sent more than 1,000 fact checking questions to the church. Since the article came out in *The New Yorker*, we’ve sent more than 150 fact checking questions to the church. We received only partial responses, some of them very hostile. I tried to present the church’s perspective as much as possible.