

Why Celebrities Are Defecting From Scientology

The departure of U.S. actress Leah Remini from the Church of Scientology this week raised new questions about the relationship top leaders assume with their high-profile Hollywood members and their ability to retain them.

The New York Post, which first reported Remini's defection on Thursday, said the actress chose to leave after "being subjected to years of 'interrogations' and 'thought modification' for questioning leader David Miscavige's rule," citing an unnamed source.

Remini, 43, best known for her role as Carrie Heffernan in the CBS comedy "King of Queens," released a statement thanking supporters on Thursday, but both she and her representatives declined to comment on her reasons for leaving the church.

It was not possible to independently confirm Miscavige's role in Remini's departure.

The Church of Scientology had no comment on Remini leaving the movement but said the allegations against Miscavige and the characterization of interrogations were "categorically false."

Miscavige, 53, who became the church's leader in 1987, refocused Scientology as a celebrity-friendly religion that depended on the name recognition and deep pockets of Hollywood stars, said Janet Reitman, the author of "Inside Scientology: The Story of America's Most Secretive Religion."

"Celebrities are treated better than any other human being with that organization," she said. "They are the kings and queens of Scientology."

But Remini's departure suggests that celebrities are feeling

uncomfortable in the church, especially if leadership is putting them through what Scientology calls security checks, an intense confessional, Reitman said.

“That used to be something the church was careful not to do,” the author added. “They would do anything they could to make them comfortable because they needed them.”

A Supporter Lost

Scientology, which was founded in 1954 by science-fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard, has attracted several Hollywood stars including Tom Cruise and John Travolta.

It believes that humans are immortal beings whose experience extends beyond one lifetime, but critics of the church describe it as a cult that harasses people who try and quit, a criticism the movement rejects.

Former Scientologist Nancy Many, who was involved with the church’s celebrity circle for more than two decades and left Scientology in 1996, is a fierce critic and believes Miscavige’s power with celebrities is waning.

The New York Post linked Remini’s falling out with the church to the 2006 wedding of Cruise and Katie Holmes, when Remini reportedly asked about Miscavige’s wife, who was not present.

“Leah asked about David’s wife and came under an unbelievable torrent of attack on her, an attack and inquisition,” Many told Reuters.

Mike Rinder, a former church spokesman who writes a blog, said Remini got tired of being told what to do.

“As a result, the church has lost one of its most effective supporters—both in the public relations arena and their bank balances,” he wrote in a blog post.

Departures from the church have become the trend in recent

years, said Reitman.

Well-known names to have left the church recently have been Oscar-winning director Paul Haggis, actor Jason Beghe and Holmes, who left the church after her divorce from Cruise last year.

In Reitman's view, change from within the church is nearly impossible because the church has yet to reform despite the recent spate of celebrities breaking ranks.

"They're just going to continue on as they've been continuing on," Reitman said. "If they were to truly want to rebound, I think they would have to lose their leadership."

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