

The religion that sells the sky

A PIECE OF BLUE SKY. By Jon Atack. Lyle Stuart. 428 Pages. \$21.95.

It has been 17 years since the Church of Scientology secretly bought the historic Fort Harrison Hotel and established a base for an important arm of the church in the city of Clearwater.

And it has been nearly 10 years since critical public hearings — which detailed allegations of a slew of Scientology wrongs — captivated city residents for more than a week.

The church professes to have changed in that time: a kinder, gentler Scientology if you will. Church members in Clearwater have become involved in civic causes, and a church study recently detailed Scientology's economic impact on the city.

But Jon Atack, author of "A Piece of Blue Sky," would have you believe nothing has changed.

"The church is a very rich and very powerful organization," he writes in the book, which was published by Lyle Stuart last year but just recently appeared in Tampa area bookstores.

The title of the book comes from a quote attributed to Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard by an associate, who relayed the story to Atack.

"Let's sell these people a piece of blue sky," Hubbard reportedly said while forming the church's system of offering higher levels of enlightenment for increasingly larger sums of money.

As with most authors of anti-Scientology books, Atack used to be a member. He says he reached some of the highest levels of the church's teachings. Atack left Scientology after nine years in 1983, disillusioned with the philosophy and the new leadership of the church, led by David Miscavige, who took control in a para-military coup in the early 1980s.

It's easy, therefore, to question the Atack's motivation. Former church members are often zealous in their hatred for Scientology and have distorted the truth, whether knowingly or not.

Atack tries to avoid that by documenting each claim with extensive detail and source notes. At times, the detail gets in the way of the story, but this also keeps the book from being just another bitter diatribe on Scientology.

Atack uses documents from various governments, the church and former Scientologists, as well as interviews and his own experiences to portray a church willing to do anything to protect itself and its mission of making money.

He joins the growing number of researchers who have debunked the myths surrounding science fiction writer Hubbard — that he was an atomic physicist and Navy hero who used the principles of Dianetics to overcome severe war injuries. Those supposed injuries, along with Hubbard's other war stories, never happened, according to Navy documents.

Atack claims Hubbard dabbled in black magic and suffered from chronic physical problems most of his life, despite claims that Scientology could cure those ills.

The church itself is full of criminality, contradictions and people who pay thousands of dollars for a message of galactic warfare and self-awareness drills with a morality play thrown in, according to Atack.



L. Ron Hubbard

"Scientology claims religious status; yet at times Scientology represents itself as psychotherapy, a set of business techniques, an educational system for children or a drug rehabilitation program," Atack writes.

Among the incidents Atack recounts is the church's attempt to blackmail then-Clearwater Mayor Gabe Cazares in 1976 and the infiltration of the Internal Revenue Service in the 1970s.

Some of Atack's claims border on the bizarre: fallen church members required to run around a pole for hours or thrown off the sides of ships for disciplinary reasons. Those who have left the church have been harassed through threats and incessant litigation, he writes.

Scientology, through its New Era Publications, tried to keep Atack's book from being published, claiming it violated copyright restrictions. New Era eventually lost its case.

Still, despite the negative publicity that has besieged the church in recent years, including a cover story in Time magazine this year, Atack is quick to note membership is increasing.

And there lies perhaps the greatest lesson from "A Piece of Blue Sky."

Attempts to embarrass the church or legislate against it ultimately fail. As long as people fail in their attempts to deal with events in the world, they will turn to movements offering them hope.

The Church of Scientology has proven itself more than happy to provide them a home.

— KEVIN SHINKLE

Kevin Shinkle is a Tribune Staff Writer.