

The Church of Scientology



While not exactly a church in the usual sense of the word, this ancient mansion on Franklin Avenue in Hollywood is used by the Church of Scientology as a residential training center.

Valley News photo by Jeff Goldwater

Religion or traveling medicine show?

This is the first segment of a four-part series on the controversial Church of Scientology. The 25-year-old organization is the object of popular and official scrutiny with the recent seizure of thousands of church documents by the U.S. Justice Department. The government claims the papers were official documents stolen by the church. The church is suing the government for return of the documents, and for alleged damages caused in the raids.

By BRIAN ALEXANDER

The Church of Scientology is like no other religion in the world. Its adherents say it makes a technology of self knowledge and a science of wisdom. It can clear an individual of mental flaws, they say, and then launch his spirit to new heights.

Its critics, including some former members, say that Scientology offers nothing more than a brand of psychotherapy. Implications of scientific accuracy and precision place a benign mask on a malevolent organization, they say. The church is nondenominational, embracing all faiths from atheist to fundamentalist. It holds no formal religious services in the usual sense, although it does train "ministers." Spokesmen say it is the fastest growing religion in the world, with 4.2 million members in the U.S. and 5.5 million worldwide.

"It works," says Gene Esquivel, director of public affairs at Scien-

tology's palatial training center in Hollywood. The intent of the church, he says, is to "make the able more able."

The church's counseling cannot help heavy drug users or electroshock therapy patients. But beyond such severe cases of physical or mental deterioration, he says, anyone can reach the unencumbered state Scientologists call "clear."

However, out of an estimated one million "very active" members of the organization in the U.S., "close to 7,000" have attained this level, which the spokesman says takes the average working person — who has only evenings and weekends free — about two years to reach. Why haven't more members "cleared" themselves?

"Basically, time considerations," Esquivel says. "The average couple, you know, they're raising families, they're pursuing careers..."

Parishioners advance through a variety of courses, such as "Life Repair," "Personal Communications" and "The Drug Rundown." But the central technique for ridding members of unconscious memories which supposedly interfere with optimum functioning is "auditing."

Esquivel described auditing as a method of counseling which differs from traditional psychotherapies in that the auditor (usually a minister) offers no evaluation, makes no judgments about the patient's problems.

"Through a series of questions and commands," he says, "the person will soon discover his own area of travail. And that's one of the reasons why, for certain individuals, it takes a great deal of counseling."

The resultant stability is permanent, he claims.

This counseling is broken into two stages: Dianetics, which focuses on mental health, and Scientology, which is aimed at releasing full spiritual potential.

"About 70% of the physician's current roster of diseases falls into the category of psychosomatic illness," says the church's primer, "Dianetics, The Modern Science of Mental Health," referring to diseases caused by mental processes.

"The problem of psychosomatic illness is entirely embraced by dianetics," says the book, of which more than two million copies have been published since 1950, "and by dianetic technique such illness has been eradicated entirely in every case."

Theoretically, once the body is exorcised of destructive memories and behaviors through dianetic auditing, the advanced counseling techniques of Scientology can operate to elevate the spirit.

"Dianetics" and other manuals of the church rely heavily on a complex jargon devised by founder Lafayette Ronald Hubbard (see accompanying story). One "erases" the "engrams" from the "reactive mind" to achieve the "clear" state. There are

"groupers," "demon circuits," "bouncers," "standard memory banks" and "denyers."

Esquivel says this terminology is necessary because Hubbard discovered so many new elements and operations of the psyche that he needed new words.

Such scientific overlay is one reason many wonder whether Scientology is less a religion than a traveling medicine show. U.S. District Court Judge Gerhard Gesell, in a 1971 opinion relating to a controversial device called an "electrometer" (to be discussed in a later segment of this series), went further than that. He called the church's promises of physical and mental cures "extravagant false claims."

He wrote: "An individual processed (audited) with the aid of the E-meter was said to reach the intended goal of 'clear' and was led to believe there was reliable scientific proof that once cleared many, indeed most illnesses would be automatically cured."

"Auditing was guaranteed to be successful. All this was and is false — in short, a fraud."

Esquivel says the church makes no claims of being able to heal diseases which have a physical origin. While psychosomatic illness can be cured through auditing, he said, persons with actual diseases are referred to medical doctors.

The Internal Revenue Service has long battled with the church over its tax-exempt status. Only 13 of the 24 Scientology churches in

the United States have religious tax exemptions. The Founding Church of Scientology in Washington, D.C., lost its tax exempt status in 1969 when a court decided that L. Ron Hubbard and his family had profited from the church. The IRS revoked the tax exemption of the Church of Scientology of California in 1968, retroactive to 1957.

Esquivel calls these actions and others, including the seizure of church documents by the government (allegedly because they were first stolen from the government by the church) "a minor form of harassment." The government, he says, resents the various social action programs endorsed by Scientology.

These programs range from a drug abuse counseling project (Narconon) to committees investigating abuses of medical practice (Committee on Public Health and Safety) and law enforcement (National Commission on Law Enforcement and Social Justice). There are nine such programs, and all but the last — which is directly sponsored by the church — are only indirectly connected to the church, although they are run by Scientologists.

Esquivel is reluctant to discuss money matters, although to a reporter's expression of surprise at the grandeur of the residential training facility in Hollywood, he passed it off as one barely significant part of the whole church. He said the Manor, as it is called, may

soon become a Celebrity Center (where celebrated Scientologists are publicized). Negotiations are underway to obtain a larger facility for the training programs.

On a smaller scale, he declined to say within what range the cost of becoming "clear" falls. There are too many variables, he says. (A minister of the church told a reporter posing as a potential member that the cost could easily reach \$10,000.)

Esquivel would say, however, that auditing costs \$60 per hour, and he defends that fee by comparing it to equal or higher psychiatric fees. Psychiatrists, however, do not apply for a religious tax exemption — and ministers of most churches do not charge fees for counseling. That's one reason the Church of Scientology is like no other religion in the world.

(Tuesday — A Valley News reporter tells what happened when he walked into a Scientology center under an assumed name and took the church's "personality test.")



L. Ron Hubbard: No more penny a word

L. Ron Hubbard, founder of Scientology, is not available for interviews.

His photograph is sprinkled liberally throughout Scientology literature, but few members have seen him in person. A few years ago, it was rumored that he was making a sea-going yacht his research base but a church spokesman says he now travels around the world without benefit of yachts. The spokesman said he did not know if Hubbard has a home base.

He gave up his directorship of the church in 1968, according to Gene Esquivel of the Los Angeles branch of Scientology. Since then, he has been devoting himself entirely to research.

Despite a court ruling which found that Hubbard and his family had profited from Scientology (thereby ruining the church's chances for tax exemption), Esquivel says the founder "doesn't receive a dime" from the church.

"As a matter of fact," Esquivel says, "there was a \$13 million debt owed to him by the Church of Scientology and he absolved the church of that debt."

Hubbard's travels and research are supported entirely by his pre-Scientology writings, Esquivel says.

Hubbard wrote science fiction before he began writing the teachings of Dianetics in 1950 and the advanced teachings called Scientology in 1952.

One of the more embarrassing remarks (for the church) that has been attributed to Hubbard comes from a lecture on science fiction writing he gave in 1949:

"Writing for a penny a word is ridiculous. If a man really wanted to make a million dollars, the best way would be to start his own religion."

Scientologists say the remark is misleading

when taken out of context. It was a joke, they say.

Shortly before, he had written an article for "Astounding Science Fiction" magazine introducing the basic concepts of dianetics. The next year a book called "Dianetics, The Modern Science of Mental Health" was published and swept the country. A following formed and Hubbard founded the Church of Scientology in 1952.

Born in 1911 in Tilden, Neb., Hubbard is said to have traveled extensively during his adolescence, because his father was a naval officer and moved constantly. He is called an explorer and student of man in church publications.

He led or went along on five major scientific expeditions, according to the church, such as a mineralogical survey of Puerto Rico and a search for submerged cities in the Caribbean and Mediterranean Seas.

"Ron Hubbard is also certainly a writer," says the official biography. "He may even be the most prolific writer of his time."

Besides Scientology tracts more easily measured by volume than by counting volumes, Hubbard wrote science fiction novels and short stories, screenplays, westerns and other fiction amounting to more than 15 million words, according to the church.

He is revered as a great man, but not worshiped, said one Scientology minister. "Naturally, we regard him as a man of great genius."

He was no slouch at business management, either, the church proclaims, pointing to a far-flung Scientology empire that owes its swift expansion as much to a Hubbard-developed technology of management as it does to the effectiveness of its spiritual counseling techniques. —BA