

# **RB4003: Contemporary Spirituality**

**2020**

**Assessment Cover Sheet for the Essay  
(previously a presentation)**

**Assessment Due Date: 29th April 2020**

**Please complete the following**

**I confirm that this assignment which I have submitted is all my own work and the source of any information or material I have used (including the internet) has been fully identified and properly acknowledged as required in the school guidelines I have received.**

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## Scientology: Cult, Science or a Corporate Enterprise?

From damaging campaigns spearheaded by once-loyal celebrities (A&E, 2018; Westbrook, 2019, p150-152) to documentaries revealing internal exploitation (Magnolia Pictures & Magnet Releasing, 2016), Scientology is now considered a cult by many, but this essay aims to understand whether that label is accurate or whether Scientology should instead be considered a science. Alternatively, may it be more accurately referred to as a new religious movement (NRMs), or as a corporate enterprise straddling the fence between the sacred and the commercial. It is the postulation of this essay that Scientology, in its complexity of operations, suits all of these labels simultaneously and that what Scientology represents is a result of contemporary spirituality in a highly commercialised modern world.

A new religion is likely to experience many difficulties in its formative years, the principal reason for this is its pariah status in relation to the dominant culture, thus igniting widespread suspicion from the public and attracting severe criticism (Glasscock, 2019, p53-54). Although lines are often blurred and outsiders conflate the two, it is important to distinguish an NRM from a cult. Each often both possess beliefs that are unusual to the mainstream, however, it is their actions and intentions that distinguish their natures (Olson, 2006, p97-106). As such, an NRM is likely to act in similar ways to traditional religions e.g. public services, commitment to practices, but not to significantly control a person's life.

In contrast, a cult is all-encompassing and acts in a way to manipulate its followers into giving the cult leader control over their lives, hence the popularity amongst cults of living in a commune (Turner, 2019). Furthermore, cults do not desire acceptance by mainstream society as many choose instead to keep their activities far away from public attention (Rubinstein, 2019). New members are carefully handpicked by those already inside the cult which is a major difference from a genuine NRM that is itself likely to advertise to the public with the intention of eventually being accepted into the mainstream (Erickson, 2019, p1,4-6,52-60). It is the negative connotations of the word "cult" and the pejorative way in which the term is applied that has led to its weaponisation against alternative spiritualities that are nonetheless unusual, but are in fact still NRMs (Rodia, 2019). Therefore, NRMs are often mistaken as cults until they are accepted in society.

It is this road to acceptance that NRMs must endure (Shupe, 2009, p269-283) while cults do not as the more members a cult has, the harder it is to retain control over its members, which *is* the cult's main goal. This is the principal reason why all true cults eventually implode, triggered either by the death of their leader, or by the fact that the cult has grown too large and its members begin to defect. For cults to avoid implosion, but to continue to grow, especially after their original leader's death, they must begin the transition into a genuine NRM. Therefore, an accurate analogy could be that the word "religion" itself is reserved for NRMs that have managed to survive and crucially grow in size, after the death of their founder, as the ultimate test of their validity. In this case, Scientology would be considered a religion as its founder, L. Ron Hubbard, passed away in the 1980s (Urban, 2014). However, there are still policies enforced that operate Scientology in a cult-like manner.

The most damning of these policies is disconnection which is the doctrine that a Scientologist must sever ties with those whom have spoken publicly against the Church (BBC News, 2007). The policy of disconnection is particularly powerful in threatening the separation of Scientologists from their families. The threat of disconnection is ever-looming

and as such, a culture of fear is established that works to reduce the levels of apostasy (Kent, 2001, p349-378). Overall, it could be that Scientology is currently undergoing this transition process in which its cultic must eventually be removed in order for it to continue to thrive.

Beyond the label of cult, NRMs are also criticised for their engagement in enterprise (Resane, 2017). Since Scientology has begun the arduous campaign for its recognition as a religion, it has faced numerous court hearings concluding that it is a profiteering company rather than a religion (BBC News, 2007). However, this commercial nature is at the heart of Scientology, as demonstrated by its expensive auditing sessions. The commercialisation of spirituality is not just a characteristic of Scientology (Page, 2017), but for Scientology, its entire belief system is pivoted around the achievement of a “higher state of being”, albeit for the right price (Gibney et al., 2015, p972-974). There should be no doubt that Scientology, despite its services having gained religious status in some countries, is a company in the basic sense that it is exchanging money for its services (Palmer, 2009, p304-306). Furthermore, Scientology, from its very name to the way it markets itself, uses the concept of science to provide a stronger justification for its practices.

As such, Scientology’s main claim is that its religious practices are scientifically proven to help people (Shermer, 2011). The entire identity and goal of Scientology is to associate itself with science and to combine that with religion. Science acts as an alternative from divine revelation to provide the strength of message and authority which is required to convince people of Scientology’s truth. The mixture of science and religion is a contemporary phenomenon that NRMs can and do use to their advantage in order to bolster their validity (Willms, 2009, p245-268). However, Scientology’s proclamation that it is indeed a science is mixed with a variety of non-scientific beliefs that are entirely dependent upon faith which ultimately reaffirms Scientology’s place as a contemporary spirituality (Lewis, 2004, p360, 427, 458). The fact that Scientology consists of these non-scientific beliefs raises the question of the true viability of religion and science’s unification.

In conclusion, Scientology resembles the reunion of science and religion, but whether the concoction of those two elements is truly sustainable will indeed be measured according to Scientology’s ability to survive. Not only is Scientology an NRM in the sense that it is a movement of recent founding, but it is also a cult in the sense that it acts in a controlling manner which is harmful to its members. Finally, as Jeanine Poggi’s article (2013, p13) suggests, it is essential for Scientology to exist as a corporate entity in the modern world in order to survive financially and to continue to promote their message.

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