

Renowned journalist throws the book at Scientology

by [Daniel Burke](#)

January 31, 2013

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. A longer version of this interview is available at www.ReligionNews.com

Q: Why did you write this book?

A: 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?

Q: And what did you find?

A: 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.

Q: Can you describe Scientology's secret camps in the U.S.?

A: 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.

Q: Why hasn't the government done anything about this?

A: 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.

Q: Why would someone agree to stay in those camps?

A: 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. 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.

Q: You write that fame is actually a spiritual value for the church. How so?

A: 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 idea was: if you could get them, think how many people would follow.

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

A: 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. But Scientologists are trained to avoid noticing any kind of public criticism, and I think that's especially true of celebrities.

Q: Is Tom Cruise implicated in the church's misdeeds?

A: 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.

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

A: 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. We sent more than 1,000 fact checking questions to the church. I tried to present the church's perspective as much as possible. —RNS