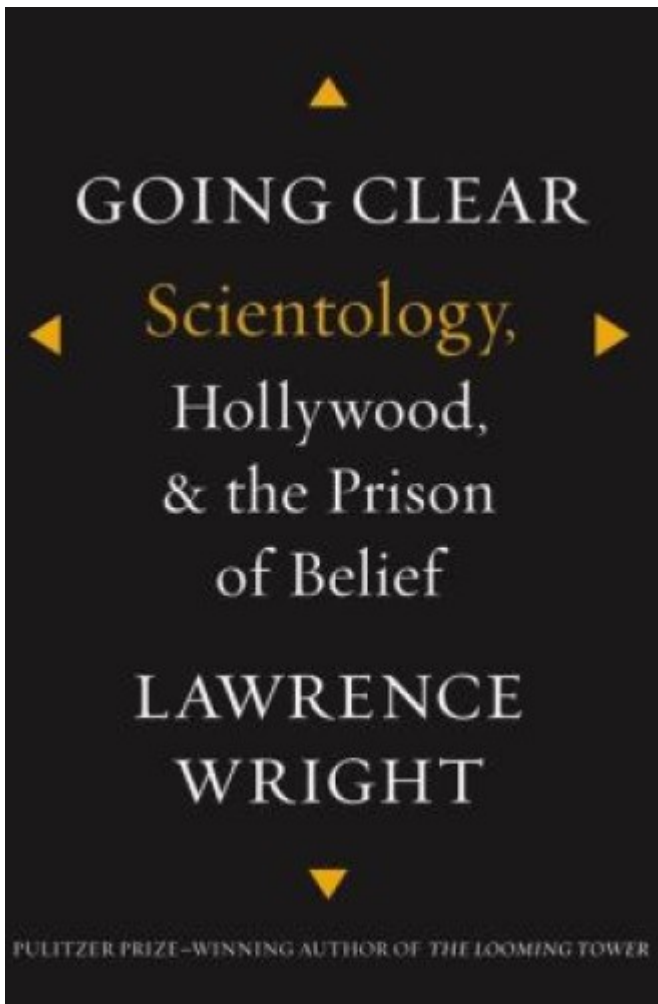


Going Clear, by Lawrence Wright

reviewed by [Randall Balmer](#) in the [May 1, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Going Clear

by Lawrence Wright

Knopf

I'm sure it's only a coincidence, but nearly every time I've shoehorned a brief lecture on Scientology into my survey of religion in North America course—brief because I'm not at all sure it merits being classified as a religion—I've received a phone call or e-

mail from some Scientology entity or another offering to send a representative or materials so my students will be properly informed. The last time, I received a large box of CDs and DVDs of what appeared to be every lecture L. Ron Hubbard ever gave. My colleagues received boxes as well.

All of that is to say that I cannot imagine the volume of materials Lawrence Wright sifted through to write *Going Clear*. He clearly needed to be a brave researcher and a gifted writer to understand and explain such recondite notions as thetans and the infamous Sea Org, much less to reconcile Scientology's claim that it adds 4.4 million new members every year with independent estimates that peg the number of Scientologists in the United States at 25,000.

The story of Scientology begins, of course, with Lafayette Ronald Hubbard, the native of Tilden, Nebraska, who created the movement. Wright preemptively dismisses attempts to dismiss Hubbard, arguing "that to label him a pure fraud is to ignore the complex, charming, delusional, and visionary features of his character that made him so compelling to the many thousands who followed him and the millions who read his work." Hubbard fancied himself an adventurer and traveled widely; a long-ago acquaintance of his said that Hubbard "possessed the ego and talents" to "develop his own private religion." One of Hubbard's ex-lovers remarked, "He said he always wanted to found a religion like Moses or Jesus."

Hubbard's epiphanic moment occurred in a dental chair on New Year's Day 1938. Under a gas anesthetic, he learned the secrets of the universe, which he disclosed in a feverish manuscript, *Excalibur*. "I have high hopes of smashing my name into history so violently that it will take a legendary form even if all the books are destroyed," Hubbard wrote to his wife. The book, however, never saw print. Hubbard claimed that the first six people who read the manuscript lost their minds; another set the manuscript on the desk and then jumped out of a skyscraper.

Hubbard was by then a seasoned science fiction writer, so prolific that he fed rolls of paper through his typewriter so he wouldn't have to stop and reload single sheets. "The broad canvas of science fiction allowed Hubbard to think in large-scale terms about the human condition," Wright comments. "He could easily invent an elaborate, plausible universe. But it is one thing to make that universe believable, and another to believe it. That is the difference between art and religion."

Those who want to assail Hubbard's credibility have plenty to work with. He had multiple marriages and several extramarital affairs, and apparently he was a bigamist for a time. He abused at least one of his wives, and he abducted and eventually disowned one of his daughters. He appears to have fabricated his military service, and he repeatedly sought compensation from the government to which he was not entitled. One of his pleas to the Veterans Administration included Hubbard's statement that a previous physician had "informed me that it might be very helpful if I were to be examined and perhaps treated psychiatrically or even by a psychiatrist." However, "I avoided out of pride any mental examinations, hoping that time would balance a mind which I had every reason to suppose was seriously affected."

Hubbard published *Dianetics* in 1950. Here, Hubbard detailed his insights into the universe and the human soul (which he called the thetan). He invented new words (*enturbulate* and *hatting*) and turned others into nouns (*overt*, *static*)—"all of which would entrap his followers in a self-referential semantic labyrinth." Dianetics therapy, Hubbard promised, would readjust painful past experiences, engrams, so the individual could eventually attain the state of "Clear."

Such therapy, however, would not come cheap. Hubbard's E-meter, originally a couple of Campbell's soup cans with the labels removed, became the device with which blockages could be diagnosed—for a fee. Hubbard became the "Source" for Scientology, and set up an elite organization of Scientology clergy, the Sea Organization, or Sea Org. "Not only was he inventing a new religion," Wright notes, "he was also reinventing himself as a religious leader."

As Hubbard began attracting followers, he became an autocrat. Sea Org recruits signed contracts for a "billion years" of service, and they catered to his every whim, including obsessive standards of cleanliness aboard his fleet of ships. Those who displeased him were consigned to "Non-Existence" or "Liability," a plight akin to serfdom—manual labor, no bathing or changing clothes for months, and eating the leftover scraps from Hubbard's sumptuous table out of buckets. Those who displeased Hubbard were thrown overboard as a disciplinary measure, even in rough seas, and then fished out of the water.

In the lexicon of Scientology, anyone blocking a thetan's spiritual progress is a "Suppressive Person," and no one knows the perils of being labeled an "SP" more than Paulette Cooper. Her 1971 exposé, *The Scandal of Scientology*, prompted death

threats. Her name and telephone number started to appear on the stalls in men's rooms. One day the author's sister, staying in Cooper's New York apartment, answered the door to receive a delivery of flowers; the courier pulled out a gun, put it to her temple and pulled the trigger. When the gun failed to fire, he tried to strangle her, but her screams deterred the assailant. When Cooper moved to another apartment building, 300 neighbors received letters saying that Cooper was a prostitute who molested children. A Scientologist complained to the FBI that Cooper had voiced death threats against Gerald Ford and Henry Kissinger.

Cooper later learned that she had been the target of Operation Freakout, whose stated goal was to have Cooper "incarcerated in a mental institution or jail."

Hubbard's paranoia, like his grandiosity, knew no bounds. In 1973 he authorized Operation Snow White, an audacious—and remarkably successful—program to infiltrate various government and international agencies, including Interpol and the IRS, to purge any documents germane to Scientology. Wright reports that as many as 5,000 Scientologists infiltrated 136 agencies around the world, in addition to various professional associations and newspapers such as the *St. Petersburg Times* and the *Washington Post*.

It is at this point in the narrative that Wright says, "Scientology changed course and sailed toward a darker horizon." Could it get any worse? Yes. The balance of the book chronicles hit-and-run "accidents," slashed tires, mysterious deaths, a dungeon housing 120 people in the basement of Scientology's Advanced Org building in Los Angeles, and abuse at various Scientology sites, including one in La Quinta, California, and its Flag Land Base in Clearwater, Florida. Lisa McPherson had spent \$176,700 on Scientology services, and she had only \$11 in her savings account when she died under suspicious circumstances in 1995. Anyone who tries to leave Scientology is charged with crimes against the group and presented a massive bill for payment of "auditing" services. Scientologists, according to Wright, conduct "blow drills" to capture anyone who tries to flee.

Critics are slapped with lawsuits that have little chance of success but saddle the critic with legal bills and litigation. For example, Scientologists tied the Cult Awareness Network into knots with lawsuits, forcing the group into bankruptcy. A Scientologist purchased the organization's name and assets, and the reorganized group shortly thereafter lauded Scientology for its efforts to "increase happiness and improve conditions for oneself and others."

Scientology's assiduous courting of celebrities allows the movement to offer an attractive face to the public—the smiling, happy faces of people like John Travolta, Kirstie Alley and Tom Cruise, all of whom enjoy the level of pampering bestowed on Hubbard himself. Scientology's antics continued, however, and arguably intensified when David Miscavige succeeded to leadership after Hubbard died in 1986—no, “dropped his body” to move on to a higher level.

The brass ring for Hubbard and for Miscavige was Scientology's classification as a religion by the IRS, which provided both tax exemption and First Amendment protection. Once again the machinations are shrouded in mystery, but the IRS finally abandoned its fight with Scientology and reached a settlement that allowed Scientology to avoid \$1 billion in back taxes and be deemed a religion. A Scientology cross was created, and Church of Scientology ministers began sporting Roman collars.

What are we to make of these outrages, and especially of the absence of a public outcry? As Wright points out, the term *cult* has been construed by scholars of religion as pejorative rather than descriptive—and to this I must plead guilty. When someone asks me whether some group or another is a cult, I typically demur that I don't like to use the word *cult* because I've never heard anyone say, “Yes, I'm a member of a cult!” Religion scholars have even invented a new category, “New Religious Movements,” to evade that moniker and avoid any hint of judgment.

I wonder, however, if Wright's book, especially because of its lack of bombast and its understated, evenhanded presentation, doesn't demand a reconsideration of that stance. My colleagues and I, both ecclesiastical and academic, have no problem denouncing racism, sexism, homophobia and sexual abuse—and properly so. Perhaps it's time we peek out from behind the ruse of “New Religious Movements” and denounce abuse perpetrated in the name of religion as well.

When Hubbard wrote, in the late 1930s, “I have high hopes of smashing my name into history so violently that it will take a legendary form,” he was on that count at least prophetic, although I'd be inclined to substitute *notorious* for *legendary*.