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Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief

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Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief

Abstract

This is a film review of *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief* (2015), directed by Alex Gibney.

Author Notes

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Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief
(2015)

Directed by Alex Gibney
Based on the book by Lawrence Wright

"Going clear" is described in the movie as a process in Scientology wherein individuals identify those painful or emotional moments in their past, moments that causes one to have fear and pain, moments that hold one back. After identifying these moments and dealing with them, the individual is liberated from the burden of the past and is now free to experience joy and live a life of fulfillment. This is "moving up the bridge" until one has "gone clear" and removed the last impediment to living a life of joy and fulfillment.

So far there doesn't seem to be any problem. Although John Travolta says in the film that he does not know of another philosophy or religion that emphasizes joy, it seems to me that most religions and many psychological theories are interested in improving the lives of individuals and giving people the experience of joy. From sin to enlightenment to psychoanalysis, we find

that many people are interested in improving their lives, living more freely, and experiencing joy. The end result may be called inner peace or the overcoming of the ego, or nirvana, or salvation, or something else, but these seem to be in the same genre as joy. And if joy is not to be found in this world, there is another world coming in which we will experience joy.

Scientology also says that it wants every person to reach his or her potential. David Miscavige (Chairman of the Board of Directors of Scientology) says that Scientology wants to make every life extraordinary. Again, who could argue with such goals? Sign me up.

But the question arises as to how we are going to accomplish these goals. And here is the conundrum. The movie includes interviews with a number of former members who paint a picture of processes or methods that in the long run are designed to control the minds and actions of members of Scientology. This is why the words "prison of belief" are added to the title of the film. There are two sides to the story of Scientology – the official side that offers people an opportunity to grow and develop and reach their full potential (an extraordinary life filled with joy) and the side provided by former members who feel betrayed, ashamed, foolish, and most of all harmed by their experience with Scientology.

Author Lawrence Wright, upon whose book the movie is based, says he "did not set out to write an exposé, it was simply to understand Scientology – what do people get out of it and why do they get into it in the first place." The movie seems to take the same approach. It provides a good deal of information about Scientology and it allows spokespersons for Scientology to offer explanations of their practices and to deny what others say about the negative aspects of Scientology. But it also offers a perspective on Scientology provided by former members who have become disenchanted with Scientology and left the organization.

Part of *Going Clear* examines the life and ideas of L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of Scientology. Hubbard was first a writer of pulp fiction and then a writer of science fiction. Drawing on these early writings, Hubbard developed a way of understanding the world he identified as Dianetics, which became for a while a wildly popular phenomenon. When the popularity of Dianetics faded, Hubbard seems to have repackaged Dianetics and put it forward again as Scientology. Calling it “Scientology” seems to give the impression that Scientology is in some way scientific or supported by science. In the process of going clear, however, individuals eventually reach a stage in which things called thetans enter our bodies (we must get rid of them) and we get a picture of the world that seems more like science fiction rather than science. Hubbard also expresses a belief in previous lives and while all of this seems a bit unlikely to me, many religions have ideas that also seem improbable to me. Once we get to the thetan stage, in any case, it seems to me that what may have been uncontroversial becomes problematic.

Another part of *Going Clear* explores Scientology after the death of L. Ron Hubbard in 1986. (By the way, L. Ron Hubbard was born in Tilden, Nebraska.) L. Ron. Hubbard may always be very important to Scientology as its founder, but the movie also explores Scientology as it is today, twenty nine years after his death. Scientology is now headed by David Miscavige and boasts a bevy of celebrities as adherents, two of the most notable being Tom Cruise and John Travolta. One of the complaints about the present organization is that it is very expensive to move up the bridge – as much as \$200,000.00 or more. “We’re out to make every life extraordinary, as long as you can afford it.” Whenever organizations offer people salvation (or help in general) and then end up accumulating a lot of money, it raises a red flag for many. In this situation, people may be reminded of Jim and Tammy Faye Baker.

Another complaint is that Scientology attacks those who are critical of it. Former members complain about being harassed by members of the organization. The movie actually shows a scene in which several members of the organization confront a former member with cameras attached to their heads and wearing shirts with the word "squirrel" on them – someone who leaves the organization is known as a *squirrel*. Although the member who speaks says that he only wants to talk, it seemed to be portrayed more as a case of harassment.

There are other complaints from ex-members that range from being asked for more and more money, to being treated as slave labor, and even being beaten. Spokespersons for the organization deny all of these complaints. As a movie, it seemed to portray Scientology relatively even-handedly. What one ends up believing about Scientology, then, depends upon which parties you care to believe because you find yourself in a “he said, she said” situation. From your own observations, the question is, who do you trust?