

Quasi-Religious Rhetoric in Scientology and *Heart of Darkness*

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Scientology recently came to the forefront of the media after the protest group Anonymous exposed them for their alleged fraudulent activities and violations of human rights. But Scientology has attracted controversy since its infancy in the late 1940s, when L. Ron Hubbard merged psychoanalysis and spiritual power to create Dianetics. According to sociologist Roy Wallis, Hubbard claimed that Dianetics would be able to cure all sorts of ailments, from insanity to disease (24). When desperate people were promised this cure-all, they came to Hubbard with everything that he demanded in exchange: loyalty, devotion, and money. To experience the promised benefits of Dianetics, members were required to pay their way through each class. This continued as Dianetics transformed into Scientology, allowing the church to amass large amounts of money for their services. Soon after the transformation into Scientology, "Hubbard was able to claim the new gnosis as a revelation into which he had privileged insight, heightening his authority over the movement, and inhibiting competing claims to revelation" (Wallis 125). Hubbard thus secured his place as the leader of Scientology and, more importantly, as the main profiteer of this businesslike religion.

Most critics say that Scientology is a business, not a genuine charitable or religious institution. They point out that the Church of Scientology has tax exemption status like any other charity or religion, despite having it once revoked, suing the IRS 26 times over, and suddenly regaining it again in 1993 under mysterious circumstances (Dahl). Donald Alexander, the former head of the IRS, had "great reservations" about Scientology's true intentions, just by examining them from the public's perspective (Dahl). Indeed, the Church of Scientology is barely able to identify as a charity in practice. The Scientology website states that those who receive the help of Scientology are "encouraged" to exchange their own services, so that those receiving can "maintain their self-respect" (Church of Scientology International). To accomplish this form of exchange, there are Scientology-sponsored events where those in need can work a charity event. The people receiving aid at that charity event are then expected to provide their services in the next charity event, and this cycle continues with each group affected by the charity. This aid is lawfully classified as charity, though it is merely a way for Scientology to receive charitable status from the I.R.S. while influencing and recruiting others into service.

The history of Scientology does suggest that they are a business masquerading as a religious



L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of The Church of Scientology, photographed in 1950.

institution. Alexander's theory, however, does not explain their un-businesslike hoarding. The Church thrives on donations from its constituents, which it collects under the pretext of building new facilities. Though the buildings are very expensive, the fundraisers continue to raise millions of dollars past their need. In a 2009 exposé, for example, journalists Joe Childs and Thomas C. Tobin document that the Church raised funds for a new facility called the Super Power Building that was projected to cost \$90 million dollars. By counting the contributors listed in each contributor status, Childs and Tobin found that the total funds raised for the Superpower Building project by 2007 were at the very least \$142.76 million. That is around \$50 million of unneeded funds (Childs and Tobin). By being tax exempt, holding excessive amounts of fundraisers, and doing some of the least expensive charitable work possible, the Church of Scientology can pull enormous profits while maintaining the face of a church. In a practical business, this profit would be reinvested in other ventures to turn more profit from sources other than the Church members. Instead, the money evaporates out of the system. Thus, Scientology as a business in religious dress does not make sense, as its profitable ventures do not feed a business machine.

In reality, Scientology is about neither religion nor money by themselves: it is a religion of money. The pursuit of money feeds a hunger that is far darker in nature than a simple greed for profit. Hubbard's psychological need to obtain absolute control over others manifested itself in him obtaining as much of the church's members' wealth as possible. These financial and emotional investments entwined members into The Church and strengthened Hubbard's personal power over them. To fulfill this insatiable need for dominance, Hubbard established himself as the infallible prophet of Scientology. He thus gained access to a constantly growing population of people eager to realize their own potential by completely submitting to his will. He alone was

the source of Scientology's ideals, religious doctrine, and path to enlightenment, and he continues to be that, even after death.

These dark motivations for a religion of greed are not entirely unprecedented. Hubbard's religious pretext for the sake of personal income has a parallel in Joseph Conrad's portrayal of the European colonists' missionary greed in *Heart of Darkness*. The Europeans had come down to the Belgium Congo under the philanthropic pretext of spreading Christianity and modernizing the native population, but this farce masks the truth that they are only there to collect a profit from gathering Ivory. One of the most profitable of these immigrants is Kurtz, a man who has "collected, bartered, swindled, or stolen more ivory than all the other agents together" (Conrad 107). Ivory is the main conquest of most of the colonists who have flocked to the Congo, but for Kurtz, "that [ivory] was not the point" (Conrad 107). The point, Conrad shows us, is that Kurtz has this "gift of expression," a presence of voice that entrances those around him, allowing him to manipulate others into following his cause. The ivory, like the religious pretense of the colonists, is only another pretext for a deeper motive. The power obtained by the manipulation of others is Kurtz's true conquest.

A similar underlying concern with the domination of others can be seen in Hubbard's psychotherapeutic technique of "auditing." Similar to suppressing or erasing memories, Dianetic therapy aimed to locate and erase "engrams," memories from this or a previous life, to lighten the burdens they place on the subjects mind (Wallis 26). One Dianetic method used to do this is the repeater method of auditing. The purpose of the "activity was to get the pre-clear to return to the 'basic area,' that is, the area of pre-natal experience... erasing later life engrams until the individual was cleared" (Wallis 29). After the patient was put into a dreamlike state called the Dianetic reverie, they would begin the therapy. During the therapy session, if the subject was unable to estab-

lish the next engramic incident, they would be ordered to "verbalize this inability with a phrase such as 'I can't go back at this point'...repeat the phrase over and over again" (Wallis 29). The following transcript is from such an incident, which took place during a public auditing session done by L. Ron Hubbard himself on September 28, 1951:

Woman: All I get is 'Take her away'.
 Hubbard: Go over that again
 Woman: Take her away [repeated three times].
 Hubbard: Go over it again.
 Woman: Take her away.
 Hubbard: Go over it again.
 Woman: No, no, I won't
 Hubbard: Go over it again.
 Woman: I won't, I won't, I won't, I won't.
 Hubbard: Go over it again—take her away.
 Go over the phrase again. Take her away.
 Woman: Take her away [crying] No, no.
 Hubbard: Go over the phrase, take her away.
 Woman: Take...take [crying], no, no.
 Hubbard: Go over the words 'no, no'.
 Woman: No, no, no.
 Hubbard: Go over it again.
 Woman: No.
 Hubbard: Go over it again.
 Woman: [Moaning]...don't...
 Hubbard: Go over it again, go over 'don't'.
 Woman: [Crying].
 Hubbard: Go over the word 'don't'.
 Woman: Don't, don't, don't, don't, [Etc.]"
 (Wallis 29-30)

This process of hypnosis through repetition to reach enlightenment is not a new method and is even common amongst spiritual gatherings today. Spiritual groups often use repetitious chants to connect with the universe, communicate with ancestors, or simply send themselves into states of meditation. In *Heart of Darkness*, the natives of the Congo also practiced a hypnotic percussion and chant, but with the addition of violent outbursts that shocked them out of their calm state

of mind. Marlow, in the midst of the jungle, witnesses their ritual:

The monotonous beating of a big drum filled the air with muffled shocks and a lingering vibration. A steady droning sound of many men chanting each to himself some weird incantation... had a strange narcotic effect upon my half-awake senses. I believe I dozed off leaning over the rail, till an abrupt burst of yells, an overwhelming outbreak of a pent-up and mysterious frenzy, woke me up in a bewildered wonder. It was cut short all at once, and the low droning went on with an effect of audible and soothing silence (Conrad 131).

The sleep-inducing lucid effect of the "monotonous beating" of the drums and the "droning sound" of the chanting is similar to that which would be experienced during the repetitive technique of auditing. While the Dianetic reverie would put the subject into a half-asleep state, the repetition would get to work on the subconscious, repeating words until distress and causing the subject to become frightened, then feel relieved—much like Marlow feels "sooth[ed]" after the sudden yelling. The process numbs the subject to what is really happening, which is to say it brainwashes them. The process, while satisfying the need to dominate the subject, fools them into feeling purified and enlightened. The subject will tell themselves that the distress and submission is essential to the process, interpreting any resistance as a personal weakness to be punished by this repetitious droning of words and phrases. This would cause the subject to feel better after a repeater session, leading them to believe that they had been cured of weakness and allowing them to become masters, physically and spiritually, of a more profitable life.

Indeed, Scientology often lures its followers with the promise of mastering worldly concerns such as work and social life. In Hubbard's book, *The Problem of Work*, he explicitly states that "Scientology can and does change human behavior for the better,...increase human intelli-

gence,...[and] pull the years off one's appearance" (Hubbard 13). One could argue that these things would indeed make life easier. Increased intelligence would increase productivity, better behavior would increase the happiness found in life, and a youthful appearance would superficially make for a better social life. But these are all such superficial desires, one that someone who seeks spiritual enlightenment would not be overly concerned with. If one were to list the reasons to follow a religion about enlightenment, why list shallow gains and not its spiritual advantages? If the aim is not ultimately to appeal to one's desire for a successful life, then why spell out the worldly advantages of scientology? Disguising the worldly intent seems to only make it painfully clear that his real intent is to recruit the reader into Scientology, even if it is not enlightenment that they seek. Though it is enlightenment that would be the ultimate goal – the conclusion that ends all worldly problems – Hubbard only acknowledges what may spur the readers of its generation, in this case the "Problem with Work" that concerned people in the economic circumstances of the late 1980s.

This tactic of using abstract religious goals to justify personal gain is much like the psychology of the colonists in *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad calls the colonists "weak-eyed devils" because of their blindness: they came down to the Congo with the pretext of spreading religion but were actually there to oversee the collection of ivory and profit from it. Weak-eyed devils, by nature, do not go out and collect the ivory themselves; instead they manipulate others into doing the dirty work and reap the profits. In their intentions there is "an air of plotting...[that] was as unreal as everything else – as the philanthropic pretense for the whole concern, as their talk, as their government, as their show of work. The only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading-post where ivory was to be had, so that they could earn percentages" (Conrad 74). The goals of the pilgrims in the Congo may have once been to spread religion and give aid to those in need, or perhaps they

had just thoroughly convinced themselves of that they were of pure intention; but whatever their original intent, it now had developed into a pretext for amassing wealth by means of collecting ivory. Though Scientology has always been focused on "the study of life," or bettering the quality of life one experiences through introspection and Dianetics, it had become a practice that was heavily dependent on the guidance of the church and its auditors. Dianetics may also have started out as a practice with the interest of bettering lives, but it has developed into a system that hides behind an spiritual pretext, appealing to a surface truth of worldly successes and hiding a dark inner truth. Weak-eyed devils are weak-eyed because they cannot see past the surface of religious and financial conquests and are blind to the truth that drives them to come to the Congo. Scientologists are blinded by their brilliant intentions and by the veneer of greed, both of which make them too "weak-eyed" to see the underlying struggle for domination.

The inner truth behind the surface motives of material gain is what Kurtz recognizes as "the horror" at the end of *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad 139). This is when Kurtz, who had for so long concerned himself with "incidents of the surface," like amassing his ivory and participating in ritual sacrifices, finally realizes the inner truth of his actions (Conrad 89). All of his violence was for the sake of violence and primal domination and not for his deceiving abstractions of enlightenment and greed. For Kurtz, at least for a while, "the inner truth is hidden – luckily, luckily" and he is able to focus on the surface truth, without end and without guilt (Conrad 89). Kurtz's belief that he is an enlightened being creates an environment in which he is entitled to do what he desires, masking not only the surface deceptions of greediness but also the inner truth of pure, uncontrollable violence within him. It is because that he does not realize the inner truth that he can go on without guilt.

Like Kurtz, Scientology strongly discourages its members from questioning the quasi-religious

front for the organization's money-hoarding. Wallis, while studying sociology at Nuttfield College in Oxford, analyzes the manipulation of the members of the church:

As one progresses further up the grades and levels of training it becomes increasingly difficult to admit disagreements or doubts.... Disagreement might suggest that one had 'falsely attested' to the earlier grades and levels, requiring that one retake them, have a 'review,' or become subject to ethics penalties. Doubts and disagreements, as matters for remedy, have costly consequences, and the incentives are therefore entirely in favor of easy acquiescence (Wallis 179).

Those who have given "the commitment of time, money and ego-involvement" are also happily ignorant of the inner truth they share with their church: self-aggrandizement. They are able to continue in their ways without qualms as long as they do not know the true meaning of their actions. The church gives them all the reasons they need to reject any suggestion of their worldly intentions, since members have dedicated so much of their being to the church and the slightest doubt will result in the church taking all of that away. Suppressing the inner truth of the church is the only way to ensure a place among friends in Scientology.

Surface truth is a belief put into action. One does not necessarily need to know the true reason behind their actions, only what they abstract their actions to mean in their belief system. Scientology followers are put into a curriculum that would slowly raise them grade level by grade level to the fully enlightened state of an "Operating Thetan." As Wallis ascertained from his study of the followers' educational process: "One's purpose in continuing involvement has become not the achievement of some particular improvement that, however nebulously, one had identified in oneself, but the achievement of a goal identified by the organization, by means which it alone provides. The client has become transmuted into

a *follower*" (Wallis 180). The unattainable goal designated by the church of Scientology fulfills its purpose by endlessly entwining the followers emotionally and financially. The surface truth is the follower's educational regimen used to achieve spiritual enlightenment. The inner truth of the process is to trap followers into an educational system in which they can rise in rank above other members, but from which they can never graduate.

As a member of the church is mutated into a follower, they become an actualization of what Conrad calls the "red-eyed devils" – the brutal, but honest, savages. Red-eyed devils are people whose sight is stained with the passion of action. They do not operate on abstractions or pursue any other aim than completing the goal set by their superiors. In *Heart of Darkness*, red-eyed devils are exemplified by the Roman Empire's army: conquerors and men of action. They would pillage the city-states, taking claim of their land and other necessities in the name of the Roman Empire and then leave (Conrad 48-50). The only thing that gave them direction was a goal designated by a ruler. Obtaining land and supplies is very much a tangible and necessary goal, unlike an abstract goal such as obtaining wealth, which can be amassed to no end. It is the weak-eyed devils – the modern European "pilgrims" – that establish abstracted goals of conquest – though, not so much as a *substitute* for the Romans' passionate greed as a *multiplier* of their bloodlust. This is exemplified by the "pilgrims" in *Heart of Darkness*, who use their intentions of improving the natives' lives by converting them to Christianity to mask their true intentions of attaining wealth through ivory (Conrad 48-50). The goals of the weak-eyed devils are so abstracted – so insatiable – that they result in them taking what they want but then *staying*, because they desire to take *to no end*.

The "weak-eyed devils" in the Church of Scientology do not openly seek to obtain the money of the members, but hide behind the intention

that they will better their lives by providing them with the teachings that will lead them to enlightenment. However, as Dianetics developed into Scientology, or more like a business establishment, Hubbard's position of power was no longer secure. True, Hubbard had already accumulated quite a lot of wealth, so he was in no need of funds to live comfortably, and he was revered as the founder of the religion. The problem was that his current position in the church did not allow him to keep his hand in what the church might become, leaving him restless with the insatiable need to continue control. Continued manipulation of the movement to suit his agenda would require a more powerful seat of office, and no position could be more powerful than that of its omniscient leader, blessed with exclusive holy visions. This drove Hubbard to "claim the new gnosis as a revelation into which he had privileged insight" (Wallis 125). Though it seems that Hubbard would claim omniscience for purposes of securing himself as the main beneficiary of Scientology, in reality it is much more primitive than that. The hoarding of wealth, much like Kurtz's endless quest for ivory, was not enough for Hubbard. All along, the endless money demanded by Hubbard had not been sought to accumulate the wealth, but to feed off of the power this pursuit of wealth gave him. Kurtz also took over those he

had taken ivory from. Even though Kurtz had taken what he supposedly came for, he still required the native people's presence — their awe — and most of all, their submission. Kurtz and Hubbard both have this insatiable need to dominate those around them, to feed their insatiable human need for power over their subjects, raising themselves over others to sanctify their own existences and give meaning to their own lives.

Hubbard's confidence in his prophecy created a self-assured charisma that intimidated those around him to the point of utter domination. The moment that Hubbard had blessed himself with the exclusive gift of sight, he had made himself the sole prophet of his religion. All doctrine of Scientology, even after his death, is based on Hubbard's word and his alone. He had made himself the bearer of all secrets of existence, the only one who knows the path to enlightenment (Neusner 229). This is similar to Kurtz, who physically descended into the Congolese jungle and then ascended from it a creature of myth on the tips of the pilgrims' tongues and a great and terrible being that the savages sought after in awe. When Kurtz raised himself to that state of being, he became the source of truth, as he only looked inward for true enlightenment. His gift of charm and intimidation allowed him to not only obtain his ivory but also to bewilder those around



The Church of Scientology's "Big Blue" building in Los Angeles, CA

him with the hunger and endless violence in his soul. Kurtz became the truth bearer, for he alone had "the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness" (Conrad 107). Hubbard had started as the revered and trusted leader of Scientology, but his claim of exclusive prophecy pushed him into the state godhood.

Part of what suggests such power in gods is their power to move people so significantly without being physically present. Kurtz is a being that has this power. Even though Kurtz had been in the heart of the Congolese jungle for so long, he was still able to have a profound effect on his co-workers and even on Marlow, the protagonist, who hadn't even seen him in the flesh before. When Marlow learns that Kurtz might even be dead before they retrieve him from deep in the jungle, he realizes what power Kurtz has over him by analyzing his own disappointment. Marlow realizes that he "had never imagined him as doing... but as discoursing.... The man presented himself as a voice. Not of course that I did not connect him with some sort of action... [Kurtz's Voice] carried with it a sense of real presence." Kurtz—even through so many degrees of social separation—had profoundly affected Marlow and changed his goal for being in the Congo. Marlow had no longer come to explore; he had come to desperately want to "hear him." Kurtz's power of vocal presence is a gift that makes him godlike, much like Hubbard.

Hubbard also has been credited with having an "intoxicating" voice by his followers (Mooney 47). Mooney, commenting on the many audio files of Hubbard, states that it is key that "While we cannot see L. Ron Hubbard as he is speaking, we do hear his voice" (Mooney 47-48). This can be interpreted in different ways. Firstly, now that his voice and doctrine is preserved as an audio file, Scientology can live on as he intended it, and his voice can be taken as the voice that delivers

doctrine, much like a prophet or even a god. Secondly, it reasserts his godliness in a sense that he does not have to be physically present for his voice to have power over to those who will listen. Hubbard is talented in the way that he manipulates his audience by the manner that he delivers his oratories. As Mooney explains, "He manages a style that is at once conversational and assured... [using] enough hesitations...to suggest that this is not a script learnt in minute detail and delivered" (Mooney 48). By using these techniques, Hubbard helps the potential member to feel more like they're listening to a friend they can trust rather than like they're being indoctrinated to a religious view. The charisma in Hubbard's voice manifests itself into a powerful energy that compels them to passionate purpose.

Scientology has been protested for many reasons: for being too much like a business, or a self-help scam, or oppressing its members. All of these reasons have merit, but one must remember that, as Marlow said of Kurtz's ivory lust, "that was not the point" (Conrad 107). Looking past layer upon layer of abstractions of enlightenment and money, we can see an even darker inner truth that vies for absolute dominance over everything and everyone. Hubbard's control maintains its hold over others even after his death. The idea of him is now an insatiable hunger that has been nourished to thrive without any earthly vessel. Hubbard, much like Kurtz, is now an idea that compels red-eyed and weak-eyed devils alike to pursue unobtainable goals they do not understand for rewards they can never secure. However, such a devilish compulsion is not only given birth by such characters as Hubbard and Kurtz. The inner truth is the monster that exists in all of humanity, compelling us forward without direction.

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