

The Ontology of Suppression: Apostasy, Disconnection, and the “Suppressive Person” Type

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Abstract

Previous research into religions, New Religious Movements, and cults detail the structural elements that lead to the social phenomenon known as apostasy, the abandonment of one's religious beliefs. Apostasy is not simply the act of disassociating oneself from a religious organization but requires a person to completely renounce their former beliefs and actions while affiliated with the organization. Apostasy from an organization like the Church of Scientology does not come without a price. Persons who publicly renounce Scientology are deemed “Suppressive,” a speech act that within the social domain (Agha 2007) of the Church leads to the social action of disconnection (the shunning of that person by other Scientologists). This paper examines discourse data from the Church of Scientology to analyze how the Church constructs and voices (Wortham and Reyes 2015; Bucholtz and Hall 2005) the social type of the Suppressive Person. My data comes from statements intended for a general public audience outside of Scientology: the “Frequently Asked Questions” section of the Church's official website. I argue that through the description and profile of the Suppressive Person in the FAQ section, the Church attempts to create the reality of the Suppressive Person in order to align itself with mainstream organizations and the interests of the general public. Using Bromley's classifications of organizations, I show through a critical discourse analysis how the Church, in a vulnerable state of illegitimacy in mainstream culture, uses the discourse outlining the “Suppressive Person” as a social control mechanism to control both current members and apostates. By trying to control the apostate narrative through the ontology of the Suppressive Person, the Church shows its vulnerability to criticism and to apostates who threaten its credibility.

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The word “apostate” carries with it a heavy weight in certain religious communities. Apostasy is a public declaration of leaving one's faith and a renouncement of his or her former beliefs and actions while part of the organization. The gravity of this word and its meanings are manifested differently in various religious communities, depending on the figured world constructed by each group. We all build “figured worlds” from which we base our identities and interactions; this is often unspoken and implicit (Gee 2014). Gee (2014) puts forth the notion of the figured world to contextualize how discourse functions in interactions. A figured world is a “simplified, often unconscious and taken-for-granted theor[y] or stor[y] about how the world works that we use to get on efficiently with our daily lives” (Gee 2014, 95). In this paper, I will be examining the explicit creation of a reality, a figured world, for the purpose of justifying actions and controlling narratives, particularly actions concerning apostasy. I ask, how does the creation of a social type serve as a justification for actions taken against those who are deemed the type? How is a type created and reified in the world?

Through a critical analysis of the genre of the Frequently Asked Question from the Church of Scientology's official website, I show how a reality is constructed in which a social type is reified for the purpose of rejecting a person from a community. An apostate to the Church of Scientology is labeled and known as a “Suppressive Person.” This is an official title that a person can have within the Church's domain. In attempting to manipulate into reality the social type of the Suppressive Person not only within the domain of the Church, but as a type that exists in non-Scientologist contexts, the institution reveals the insecurity and vulnerability of an organization whose credibility and legitimacy is being challenged in mainstream society.

There has been much sociological research into the social phenomena of apostasy, New Religious Movements, and Scientology specifically (Bromley & Hammond 1987; Bromley 1998; Lewis 2009). Specific research into the structure of these organizations has led to theories about their classifications and the types of leave-takers those structures produce. Bromley (1998) offers a typology for organizations that classifies institutions based on their levels of “tension” within their sociocultural environments as well as their degrees of autonomy and legitimacy in society in comparison with other legitimate organizations that fall within their “environmental category” (21). Scientology's level of tension in its environment is “variable” (Bainbridge 1987, 59), due largely to its level of strict enforcement of its “explicit system of ethics” (Lewis 2009, 135). It maintains this tension in society, and for that reason I would classify the Church of Scientology as an organization that lies between Bromley's (1998) categories of Contestant and Subversive, which carry

moderate to high levels of tension, respectively. The Church is currently recognized in the United States as an official religion and has numerous high-profile members that lend it legitimacy. However, recent negative publicity and opposition from former members has thrust Scientology into the spotlight as a questionable organization.

Bromley's typology is important in establishing the basis for the social phenomena of apostasy that I will take up in this paper. He theorizes that the organizational structure of a Subversive organization facilitates and leads to apostasy. In sociological concepts of apostasy, the act comes about because of an organization that is seen as being illegitimate and on the fringes of mainstream culture (Bromley 1998). It is useful to study how, through language, the role of an apostate is produced within the domain of a religious institution and how discourse surrounding apostasy affects and produces certain social consequences. Discourse surrounding apostasy in certain religious domains directly affects how former members are viewed and treated. Within the social domain of the Church of Scientology, apostasy is an act that warrants the label of "Suppressive Person" (usually abbreviated 'SP') (Agha 2007). Through its construction of the Suppressive Person type, the Church redefines the role of an apostate in order to achieve its own ends. It is not unusual for religions to have the role of "apostate," as the word has generally meant "general religious leavetaking" (Bromley 1998, 35). However, Scientology posits that anyone who publicly renounces the faith is "Suppressive." In doing this, it attributes characteristics and personality traits to a person who leaves the religion that extend beyond the typical apostate role. I will analyze how the SP is reified by drawing on concepts from Wortham and Reyes's (2015) methods of discourse analysis, Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) principles of identity in interaction, and van Dijk's (2006) notions of manipulation in discourse. Through the "Frequently Asked Question," the institution invites the public to share in its constructed ontology in order to disbelieve apostates. Kockelman (2013) defines ontology as the "relatively portable set of assumptions regarding the recursive and reflexive, as well as fragile and fraught, entangling of indices, agents, kinds, individuals, and worlds" (34). The focus of this essay is on analyzing how the Church of Scientology attempts to create the ontology of the Suppressive Person to discredit critics.

The Frequently Asked Question

In the "Frequently Asked Questions" section of the Church of Scientology's (n.d.-c) official website, one question is explicitly "What does a 'Suppressive Person' mean?" Using Mikhail Bakhtin's (1986) theories of speech genre, I suggest that the Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) is a genre in direct dialogue with the public that attempts to

share an ontology. The utterance (the FAQ answer) has "dialogic overtones" that indicate an awareness of previous discourse surrounding the initiated topic (Bakhtin 1986, 92). An utterance, in addition to being related to previous utterances, is also related to "subsequent links in the chain of speech communion," meaning that the utterer will expect a response from listeners (Bakhtin 1986, 94). Bakhtin (1986) states that an "entire utterance is constructed . . . in anticipation of encountering this response" which may be in the form of what he calls "active responsive understanding" (94). The FAQ presupposes public discourse about the "question" and demonstrates an awareness of the kinds of discourses being circulated in the public sphere. I submit that using the FAQ is a discursive strategy to share the ontology of the Suppressive Person with a public audience and invite it to share in the reality being constructed. It is a genre that presupposes public opinion and discourse and is a strategy for establishing credibility against apostate claims. Successful creation of this ontology would come from an "active responsive understanding" and an acceptance of the Suppressive Person as a social type outside the domain of the Church.

The Suppressive Person

In the first half of the answer to the FAQ "What does 'Suppressive Person' Mean?" the language used by the Church to construct the role of the "Suppressive Person" indicates an ontology in which the social type of the Suppressive Person exists in the world outside of the social domain of the Church. Determining the figured world from which the definition of a Suppressive Person stems is important in analyzing how the Church of Scientology seeks to create the social type as a reified position outside of the domain of the Church rather than just as a role and title that exists within their institution. Below is an excerpt from the first half of the FAQ answer:

A Suppressive Person (SP) is a person who seeks to suppress other people in their vicinity. A Suppressive Person will goof up or vilify any effort to help anybody and particularly knife with violence anything calculated to make human beings more powerful or more intelligent Because of this, the Suppressive Person seeks to upset, continuously undermine, spread bad news about and denigrate betterment activities and groups. Thus the Anti-Social Personality is also against what Scientology is about—helping people become more able and improving conditions in society. As anyone can think of many examples of a Suppressive Person, this concept is not limited to Scientology (Church of Scientology International n.d.-a, para. 1, 4).

In the excerpt, there are many instances of the Church voicing the Suppressive Person. Voicing is “the characterization of a narrative person as occupying a recognizable social position” (Wortham & Reyes 2015, 6). The social position is already recognizable to Scientologists, but the Church attempts to make it recognizable to non-Scientologists through voicing. The Church voices the SP through reference and predication (Wortham and Reyes 2015, 51). The repeated reference of “The Suppressive Person” followed by an active metapragmatic verb remains consistent in order to solidify the Church’s term for the characteristics and intentions they proceed to describe and attribute to the social type. The choices of words to describe the actions of an SP are predicated on what it means to be suppressive according to the referential definition of the word (Hill 2008). Verbs such as “seeks,” “vilify,” “continuously undermine,” “denigrate,” and “knife with violence” are what Wortham and Reyes (2015) call metapragmatic verbs that characterize and position individuals within an interaction (or “narrated event”) (50). They are predications that lend themselves to a broader profile of what it means to be generally suppressive without specifying actions directly related to religion. These verbs characterize an SP as intentionally malicious and violent.

The Anti-Social Personality

Deviating from the reference of “Suppressive Person,” the Church also asserts that the SP is also known as the “Anti-Social Personality”:

The Suppressive Person is also known as the Anti-Social Personality. Within this category one finds Napoleon, Hitler, the unrepentant killer and the drug lord. But if such are easily spotted, if only from the bodies they leave in their wake, Anti-Social Personalities also commonly exist in current life and often go undetected (Church of Scientology International n.d.-a, para. 2).

By referencing Hitler and Napoleon, the Church invokes notoriously “suppressive” individuals from history in order to reify both the ideas of the Anti-Social Personality and the Suppressive Person. Hitler and Napoleon can be agreed upon by both the Church and the general public as being people who have been “violent” and have left “bodies in their wake.” Bucholtz and Hall (2005) provide a framework for identity analysis that includes the principles of adequation and distinction. They discuss this type of social positioning as “for groups or individuals to be positioned as alike, they need no . . . be identical but must merely be understood as sufficiently similar for current interactional purposes” (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 599). The label of Suppressive Person (or Anti-Social Personality) in this

text is conferred upon Napoleon and Hitler, two notorious figures of which there is a shared cultural knowledge. Doing this then allows for anyone who is subsequently labeled an SP to be adequated with Napoleon Bonaparte and Adolf Hitler. Persons labeled SPs will then be understood not to be identical to Hitler, Napoleon, or an unrepentant murderer, but they can be “understood as sufficiently similar” to these figures for the purposes of Disconnection, which will be discussed later (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 599). Teun van Dijk (2006) notes that overall interaction strategies that include “positive self-representation” and “negative other-representation” are typical features of biased discourse that is used to manipulate recipients to “accept as knowledge” whatever is being said (pp. 373, 376). Together, adequation and negative other-representation through references to Napoleon and Hitler accomplish exactly what is explicitly suggested by the Church: “anyone can think of many examples of a Suppressive Person, this concept is not limited to Scientology” (Church of Scientology Int. n.d.-a). While a Suppressive Person may be identifiable in mainstream society according to the first half of the FAQ, it is within the social domain of the Church of Scientology that the label of the SP is reified as an official role and title that a person can occupy.

Disconnection

Presupposing the social type of the Suppressive Person establishes a common ground between the Church of Scientology and the general public of non-Scientologists who may read this FAQ answer. The way that Scientology has defined an SP in the first half of the answer seems reasonable. It is a person who wants to suppress good activities and stop others from improving society. The Church establishes this as a type that could be agreed upon without believing in other principles or doctrines of Scientology. The text then transitions to discussing apostasy (although it does not use this word) and how it relates to the Suppressive Person:

1. However, when such a person is connected to Scientology, for the good of the Church and the individuals in it, such a person is officially labeled a Suppressive Person so that others will know not to associate with them. To be declared a Suppressive Person is extremely rare and results in expulsion from the Scientology religion. This occurs in instances of serious offenses against the Scientology faith and can also occur when
10. an individual is found to be actively working to suppress the well-being of others. This can be done through criminal acts already recognized by society as unlawful or through the commitment of acts deemed Suppressive Acts in the Scientology Justice Codes—which includes

the Suppressive Act of publicly renouncing the faith, an act which in Scientology, as well as almost every religion, is grounds for automatic expulsion. When someone has been expelled from the religion, that person loses both his or her fellowship

20. with the Church as well as with other Scientologists.

The condition lasts until they have been restored to good standing. Once the person has been restored to good standing, the prohibition against fellowship with other Scientologists is lifted. Similar practices have been part of religious communities for thousands of years and have been recognized by courts of law as a fundamental right (Church of Scientology International n.d.-a, para. 3–5).

The text qualifies, “when such a person is connected with Scientology, for the good of the Church and the individuals in it” he or she is labeled an SP and cut off from the Church and all current members (lines 1–5). This is an attempt to establish intersubjectivity with the public. People would not readily associate with Hitler or Napoleon-like persons, and they would not want to be around others who wish to “denigrate” and “suppress” positive actions. Furthermore, the label of ‘SP’ is thus conditionalized: “when such a person is connected with Scientology” (lines 1–2). This statement makes it clear that the assumption is that the SP exists in the world: there is “such a person” that can exist, and only “when” he or she happens to be “connected to Scientology” would they then officially be labeled an SP.

The answer then states that those who are labeled as Suppressive by the Church include those who “publicly renounce” Scientology (lines 14–16). This leads to a connection between apostasy and being an SP. The ontology being conveyed here is that apostates have intentions similar to dictators and murderers; they are not merely disinterested in bettering society, but they actively intend to prohibit the positive actions of others. The Church assigns this intention through evaluation of the out-group (of SPs) by their “past injustices” (Donohue 2012, 15). They look at the past injustices of so-called Suppressive People in the world like Hitler and Napoleon, who are notorious historical figures associated with horrific atrocities. This creates an out-group that is villainized by everyone who shares the common interest of bettering society. Once this has been established, and an ontology in which the SP exists in the real world, the second half of the FAQ answer becomes specific to what it means to be an SP within the domain of Scientology.

To the in-group (Scientologists), the out-group of SPs includes those who have renounced their faith in and affiliation with the organization. This is evidently indicated in their Scientology “Justice Codes.” The act of publicly renouncing one’s faith, or apostasy, is considered a

“Suppressive Act” in Scientology. A person who does this is then labeled the official title of “Suppressive Person.” Apostasy thus becomes an indexical of an SP. Although the first paragraphs of the FAQ answer attempt to convince non-Scientologists of the reality of the SP, the last ones show that the actual title of “SP” is bestowed only within the social domain of the Church by Scientologists who are in charge of “discerning” who fits the type (Reyes 2017). That person is then “declared” a Suppressive Person to current Scientologists. “Declaring” is an “explicit performative locution” in the domain of Scientology that creates “social fact” (Agha 2007, 55). The “social fact” being created is the fact of the Suppressive Person’s existence and everything that the title indexes. The subsequent action taken because of this declaration is called “Disconnection.” The concept of Disconnection is discussed in its own FAQ and is generally defined as the “self-determined” ceasing of communication with another person (Church of Scientology Int. n.d.-b). Scientology disclaims that there is no official Disconnection policy and that individuals make their own personal decisions to stop associating with someone because of their antagonistic nature (Church of Scientology Int. n.d.-b). Based on the definition of Disconnection (the ceasing of association with people who are “antagonistic”), it is clear that the “expulsion” talked about in the “Suppressive Person” FAQ is Disconnection. This is further evidenced by the fact that a declared SP “loses both his or her fellowship with the Church as well as with other Scientologists.” Why does this happen? Precisely because of the ontology created in which a Suppressive Person “lives in terror of others” and seeks only to destroy things. The logic follows that people would not want to associate with a person who is characterized the way that an SP has been characterized by the Church of Scientology.

As mentioned above, the Church says that apostasy is a Suppressive Act against its Justice Codes. This terminology applies only to the social domain of Scientology. However, it is immediately qualified by the statement that public renouncement, “as in any other religion, is grounds for automatic expulsion” (lines 15–17). The connection between apostasy and Suppression is paramount to justifying the action of Disconnection and thus responding to claims about the Church’s abuses of current and former members. In this FAQ thus far, it has been established that an SP is a person who seeks to prohibit any actions taken for the betterment of society. It is also distinguished that the Church of Scientology works towards the goal of bettering individuals and society. Expulsion is said to happen when a person commits “Suppressive Acts,” one of which is apostasy. The connection here is that those who would publicly renounce Scientology would be standing against everything that Scientology stood for. However, the Church extends this to mean that a person who does not want to be a Scientologist

any longer is denouncing *all* attempts at improvement and human progress even outside of the social domain of the Church with its altruistic programs and missions.

Conclusions

Being an apostate to Scientology comes with serious consequences. Disconnection extends beyond the social domain of the Church and means that one cannot communicate with family and friends in any circumstances. Scientologists operate from an ontology or figured world in which an apostate, who is a Suppressive Person according to the Church, has evil intentions and wants to halt progress and improvement. Suppressive People are equated with Hitler, Napoleon, and murderers, and this adequation convinces a Scientologist to disconnect from such people, even if they are family members.

The FAQ genre provides a way for the Church to justify its actions against the people it declares as Suppressive by creating or attempting to create a shared reality with a public audience in which the title and role of Suppressive Person is one that exists and can be taken up. In this ontology, the Church's declaring someone a Suppressive Person would not only mean Disconnection from current Scientologists but would indicate that that person should not be associated with in any domain because of the characteristics he or she possesses. Looking at the larger cultural context, reifying the position of SP as part of a non-Scientologist society would virtually discredit anyone who tried to criticize the Church. Although the Church goes to great lengths to personally attack SPs who are publicly critical of the institution, the establishment of the ontology of SP enables them to do so. For the Church of Scientology, addressing the meaning of Suppressive Person in an FAQ meant for a public audience is a way of preemptively discrediting any criticism of its actions from former members. They posit that persons who publicly renounce Scientology are Suppressive, that Suppressive people are less than human for their lack of morals and malicious natures, and that they should not be believed.

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