



Scientology : The Thriving Cult of Greed and Power

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According to the Cult Awareness Network, whose 23 chapters monitor more than 200 "mind control" cults, no group prompts more telephone pleas for help than does Scientology. Says Cynthia Kisser, the network's Chicago-based executive director: "Scientology is quite likely the most ruthless, the most classically terroristic, the most litigious and the most lucrative cult the country has ever seen. No cult extracts more money from its members." Agrees Vicki Aznaran, who was one of Scientology's six key leaders until she bolted from the church in 1987: "This is a criminal organization, day in and day out. It makes Jim and Tammy ((Bakker)) look like kindergarten."

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To explore Scientology's reach, TIME conducted more than 150 interviews and reviewed hundreds of court records and internal Scientology documents. Church officials refused to be interviewed. The investigation paints a picture of a depraved yet thriving enterprise. Most cults fail to outlast their founder, but Scientology has prospered since Hubbard's death in 1986. In a court filing, one of the cult's many entities -- the Church of Spiritual Technology -- listed \$503 million in income just for 1987. High-level defectors say the parent organization has squirreled away an estimated \$400

million in bank accounts in Liechtenstein, Switzerland and Cyprus. Scientology probably has about 50,000 active members, far fewer than the 8 million the group claims. But in one sense, that inflated figure rings true: millions of people have been affected in one way or another by Hubbard's bizarre creation.

Scientology is now run by David Miscavige, 31, a high school dropout and second-generation church member. Defectors describe him as cunning, ruthless and so paranoid about perceived enemies that he kept plastic wrap over his glass of water. His obsession is to attain credibility for Scientology in the 1990s. Among other tactics, the group:

- Retains public relations powerhouse Hill and Knowlton to help shed the church's fringe-group image.
- Joined such household names as Sony and Pepsi as a main sponsor of Ted Turner's Goodwill Games.
- Buys massive quantities of its own books from retail stores to propel the titles onto best-seller lists.
- Runs full-page ads in such publications as Newsweek and Business Week that call Scientology a "philosophy," along with a plethora of TV ads touting the group's books.
- Recruits wealthy and respectable professionals through a web of consulting groups that typically hide their ties to Scientology.

The founder of this enterprise was part storyteller, part flimflam man. Born in Nebraska in 1911, Hubbard served in the Navy during World War II and soon afterward complained to the Veterans Administration about his "suicidal inclinations" and his "seriously affected" mind. Nevertheless, Hubbard was a moderately successful writer of pulp science fiction. Years later, church brochures described him falsely as an "extensively decorated" World War II hero who was crippled and blinded in action, twice pronounced dead and miraculously cured through Scientology. Hubbard's "doctorate" from "Sequoia University" was a fake mail-order degree. In a 1984 case in which the church sued a Hubbard biographical researcher, a California judge concluded that its founder was "a pathological liar."

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