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Cults or Religions, a misleading debate

Who of you has seen the documentary Going Clear, a documentary broadcasted by HBO about the abuse within CS.

Hopefully you all went to the United States to be able to watch the documentary in a legal way...

Scientology doesn't like critics. They tried to stop HBO from broadcasting Going Clear by sending them a great amount of letters.¹ An analysis of these letters shows that: all negative information about Scientology is a lie and witnesses are immoral or criminal. In those instances that Scientology did become convicted, it is due to discrimination towards religions in general or Scientology specifically. They are having different beliefs, and that is why they, as a non-traditional religion, are being discriminated.

We all know it is not because of different beliefs, but because of harmful practices. And in the case of Scientology, a lot of harmful practices are known, especially through documentaries such as Going Clear. But even then, talking about being discriminated compared to other religions, makes a lot of sense to an open-minded public.

This brings us to the topic of my presentation. I want to show you how going into a discussion about real and false religiosity and belief, about whether a belief system is based on the fraudulent fantasy of one man or a sincere religious experience, is obfuscating a clear informative analysis of cult problems. If we participate in this discussion, even if we didn't start this discussion ourselves, it raises more questions than it solves and shifts the focus from our real concern: harmful sectarian practices.

To give you an example of this strategy, I will take a look at three of the letters CS sent to HBO to prevent Going Clear from going viral.

Letter to Sheila Nevins, President, HBO Documentary Films, by CSI, February 24, 2015

Concluding paragraph:

You cannot hide from the truth and pretend that your film is anything but a one-sided exercise in religious bigotry that relies on lies.

This is a nice summary: the documentary is made of lies and religious intolerance.

¹ Verschillende van deze brieven zijn te vinden op <http://www.freedommag.org>

**Letter to HBO Senior Counsel Stephanie S. Abrutyn, by Bisceglie & Walsh, attorneys at law,
March 16, 2015**

I am writing about the documentary on Scientology Alex Gibney has done using Lawrence Wright's book as a foundation.

...

*But worst of all is Mr. Wright's referring to Scientology as spreading like a "virus" which may "turn lethal." This is shocking language, amounting to **hate speech** and evidencing malice. There is of course only one thing to do against a lethal virus: eradicate it. This precise analogy of a "mutating virus" has been used by **anti-religious extremists in France to advocate stamping out the "pathology of belief" in Europe.***

MIVILUDES, laïcité, FECRIS ... an anti-sectarian witches' brew. But that is not the accusation of CS. We are not fighting against sectarian abuses, but against religion and belief... Three more quotes of the same letter.

*The Church documented more than **1,500 cases of discrimination against its parishioners in Germany during this period [90]** and presented the evidence to international human rights bodies, governments and the human rights community.*

...

*On page 243 of his book, Mr. Wright states that the policy of the German government is to refuse to recognize Scientology as a religion; he then quotes Norbert Blum, the former Minister of Labor in the Kohl administration, and an official as notorious as Mrs. Caberta, for his **discriminatory utterances directed at Scientology**, who states that **Scientology "is not a church or a religious organization"**.*

*While giving the reader the distinct impression that Scientology Churches are treated as commercial organizations in Germany, Mr. Wright fails to mention that there are **over 40 German judicial decisions** recognizing that the **Church of Scientology and its members are entitled to the protections of freedom of religion and belief** granted in Article 4 of the German Constitution.*

This time it isn't France but Germany in the '90 who is the discriminator, whom CS as a hero of justice was fighting against. A 1500 cases... Cults, and especially CS, love to sue for discrimination.

And how are they discriminated according to CS? When we state that CS **"is not a church or a religious organization"**.

One more letter.

Letter to HBO Senior Counsel Stephanie S. Abrutyn, by Rabinowitz, Boudin, Standard, Krinsky & Lieberman, P.C., attorneys at law, March 19, 2015

I am an attorney practicing in the areas of constitutional rights, civil liberties, and First Amendment protections of religious free exercise, speech, and freedom of association. I have represented churches of Scientology for nearly forty years in that capacity. I successfully have argued cases on behalf of the churches, as well as other organizations and persons, in the Supreme Court and most federal circuit courts of appeals.

I write with respect to the “documentary film” by Alex Gibney, based closely upon the book authored by Lawrence Wright entitled *Going Clear: Scientology, Hollywood, and the Prison of Belief*. I strongly urge HBO to cancel its sponsorship of this film, which will only serve to **disseminate religious intolerance and prejudice** against the Scientology religion, its ministers, and its membership, contrary to American principles of religious freedom and equality.

Mr. Wright’s book proceeds from a fundamentally biased and indefensible premise: that there is a “*widespread assumption that Scientology is a cult and a fraud.*” (*Going Clear*, pg. xii.) Giving that premise its ordinary and plain meaning, **according to Wright both the general public and government authorities agree (a “widespread assumption”) that Scientology is a false religion, its religious beliefs and doctrine are without basis and unworthy of respect and the Church promulgates them knowing they are false (the definition of fraud), and that it, as a “cult” (as that term is used in common parlance as a term of degradation), is not entitled to the respect and constitutional protections of older and more traditional religions.** From that premise, Wright proceeds in a one-sided attack against the religion and the Church based upon his discussions with a selected group of anti-Scientology apostates with an agenda to destroy the Church and the religion.

This quote clearly shows to what kind of accusations CS wants to defend itself against:

- (1) Scientology is a **false religion**, its religious beliefs and doctrine are **without basis** and unworthy of respect and the **Church promulgates them knowing they are false**
- (2) it, as a “**cult**” (as that term is used in common parlance as a term of degradation), is **not entitled to the respect** and constitutional protections of older and more **traditional religions**

This means if we accuse CS of one of these things and go into discussions about it, we are giving them what they want. Why do they want this?

Because it shifts the focus of our real concern: their harmful practices. Cults will not stop shouting that they are being discriminated. And for an open minded and uninformed public, it is hard to put questions and concerns of discrimination aside and see them for what they are: a dishonest manipulation of discourse/discussion. By raising questions and concerns again and again they are choosing the subject matter. When trying to be open-minded, you will postpone your judgement about something when someone is talking or shouting about discrimination, and will listen to what he/she has to say. But by doing that, you are already thinking about what the other wants. In the case of cults like scientology, it is part of their proselytism or of converting the other to one's own thoughts. Even when you are critically thinking (which is a good **way** of thinking), you might be thinking **about** the wrong thing.

And when being open-minded, this sounds a bit counter-intuitive. Shouldn't we always have to listen to what someone has to say? The answer is: no, not if we know that what they are saying is solely a rhetorical statement without any willingness to listen to another viewpoint or debate. That is what is dishonest about it. Their indignation is orchestrated and seems like a call to be heard, but it is a call not to listen to others.

An example of how we do make the mistake of going into their discussion, in my opinion, is in stating that scientology or other cultic belief systems aren't real religions, because they are based on a one man's fantasy or because of commercial purposes. Unless this is stated as a funny fait divers, it is problematic because I believe it is hard or impossible to make a distinction between right and false metaphysical beliefs, unless you are accepting some unprovable premises, such as: god and authentic spirituality are good, thus bad deeds can't be inspired by authentic spirituality. This only counts when your definition of god or spirituality includes goodness. I think most of you would agree that referring to a sacred source such as the bible, isn't of any help in deciding whether a belief or practice is true or good, unless you already accept scriptural value. Otherwise, it proves nothing. But, when talking about Scientology, we always point at the fact that LRH made it all up. And we love to quote him saying that 'the best way to become a millionaire is to start a religion', thus it must be all fantasy. This may be true, but for many scientologists, it is the truth. They believe it like most protestant believe in the truth of the gospels. And so I believe that we shouldn't go into questioning the religiosity of this group of people, as we shouldn't of jihadist fighters and other problematic forms of 'religion'. Probably there are jihadist fighters and scientologists who are in it for other purposes, without believing what they preach. But most of them are believers and religious. Anyway, engaging into this discussion can sometimes be interesting, but it is giving them what they want and

dragging away the focus of what really counts: the harmful practices within these groups.

So, this is what I plea for. And I think it shouldn't cause as many practical problems as it does now. For example tax exemption. It is not enough to show that you are a religious organization to be able to benefit a tax exemption status. Another criterion should be, and this has way to little focus in the US and other countries, that you respect the laws of that country. Terrorist or criminal organization don't respect that and so they shoudn't get that exemption, even if they are religious. Religiosity doesn't discharge you from respecting other laws and fundamental rights. And neither does pointing at such offences entail any discrimination. Off course it doesn't expel you from respecting one's freedom to belief and practice its religion, but it is a relative respect.

And it is precisely this relativity and balance that is missing in cult rhetoric. 'Our rights as a religion are not respected so stop talking about other things, because it doesn't matter.' In the mind of cult member, there is no other.

So again, my advice, unless a person is willing to listen and engage in a dialogue, don't let them set the discussion topics. We have to be present in discussions, but then we should steer it to the topics that matters. They see themselves as true believers and authentic religious people? Whatever. As long as they respect the law and all fundamental rights. And if we can keep on informing the public about the offences, harm and dangers, I think we are doing a great job.