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Review:

At last there is an academic publication with the simple title “Scientology”. It aims at covering one of the most controversial developments among newer religious groups, while it is being debated whether this phenomenon can be labelled a “religion” at all. James R. Lewis, well known and prolific writer and editor of many books on new religious phenomena, undertook the difficult task of bringing together various authors of different professions to give a state-of-the-art overview, although not a complete one yet. But the result though is an impressive collection touching many important areas of interest concerning this group. Its controversial nature however cannot be overlooked. This is obvious when we consider that there are not many academic books which receive their own private Wikipedia-entry after its publication ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scientology_\(James_R._Lewis_book\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scientology_(James_R._Lewis_book))). With this we are already in the eye of the storm: Saying something about Scientology means also taking part and being an actor in a problematic discourse. This is especially true for Religious Studies, which – *per definitionem* – tends (or should tend) to focus on a non-partial approach. From this point of view Scientology is also a kind of litmus-test for the discipline of religious studies itself. Although with Scientology there is the question, whether this is possible at all. In this regard the scope of the contributors to this volume is quite far-ranging: On the one hand you may find authors deeply impressed by Scientology, either because of its program (as it is regarded as an example of a movement on the edge of what may be labelled religion) or because of the proud fierceness the group tries to defend its position as a new religious movement among others. On the other hand you may find contributors who clearly have a purely academic interest in handling a controversial development fully aware of the problems surrounding it and making cautious statements in regard to the major questions. What you will not find in this book is a sample of the “critics” of Scientology, meaning all the authors from various fields of interest challenging the claim of Scientology in different fields and “criticizing” it for whatever reason. On the one hand this absence is legitimized by the fact that

there is a big sample of anti-Scientology-books and Scientology bashing articles, but – on the other hand – it may lead to the problem that the book is perceived in a “group legitimating” way (this is done in the review of this book by Terra Manca for the *International Journal of Cultic Studies* 1, 2010; and, on another level, in the satirical magazine *Private Eye*, April 2009, 16; both reviews are unfortunately the main source of the Wikipedia-article, by the way).

Now, for a short description of the content: The book begins with a sample of introductory essays, some of them with a highly programmatic approach. Gordon Melton’s “Birth of a Religion” is taken out of his book “Church of Scientology” of 2000, one of the first attempts to describe Scientology as a religious movement in close connection with the material provided by the group itself (see the important review of this book by Marco Frenschkowski in the Marburg Journal of Religion Volume 6, 1, 2001: http://archiv.ub.uni-marburg.de/mjr/rev1_1_01.html). The second essay on “The Cultural Context of Scientology” is written by William Sims Bainbridge, a specialist on information technology, who has written a lot on Scientology presenting it as one of the most eminent and interesting developments in the field of religion. These two texts are followed by a concise and precise treatment of the major problems arising when dealing with Scientology: Douglas E. Cowan writes on “Perceptions, Premises, Promises, and Problematics” covering all the topics in a clear and objective way.

The second part of the book is devoted to “theoretical and quantitative approaches”. Therein James R. Lewis provides an interesting article on “the growth of Scientology and the Stark model of religious ‘success’”, where he challenges a problem often perceived when dealing with newer movements, and that is their alleged enormous growth of membership figures. This article is not only dealing with Scientology but with other newer groups as well and can be regarded as a valuable source tool for further research. The following section of the book “community and practices” deals with three major important topics: the question of communal expression and community activity in Scientology (Peter B. Andersen and Rie Wellendorf) which is often denied for Scientology. The next contributions deal with the alleged “religious ceremonies” of Scientology (Régis Dericquebourg) and the well known “auditing” as a kind of core practice (Gail M. Harley and John Kieffer). Therein the focus is laid on the development of this practice and its history (as described by Roy Wallis in his book “The Road to Total Freedom” already) including the description of a regular “field experience” of the authors. In the next chapter on “sources and comparative approaches” various contributions are gathered together which aim at placing Scientology within the framework of other religious traditions. Frank K. Flinn takes the alleged resemblance to Buddhism into account; Andreas Grünschloss provides a very interesting chapter on Scientology as a “New Age”-religion and Gerald Wilms expands ideas of his valuable German dissertation on Scientology with the scope on the question of the “modernity” of Scientology. Dealing with Scientology cannot be complete without a chapter on “controversy”. This is clearly expected by the reader but in this regard this book falls short. Therein three articles are presented which are dealing with the well known fact that controversial perception is a fact in the history of Scientology and a kind of spectre accompanying its development (and we may add: *since* its inception and *not only* in Europe - as exactly this book shows). It is especially with regards to this question that the approach taken to the problem is crucial. This is more than obvious with the essay

on “Scientology in France” by Susan Palmer, who gives the impression of an attempt to present Scientology as a haunted religious minority group being the innocent victim of the French politics and mass-media working closely together with a group of anti-cult fighters and advocates. It is a fact that France with its fight for *laïcité* has a very specific approach to religion in general and to new religious movements in particular, but this should not lead to the description of Scientology as a fighter for religious freedom in the name of the US State government. Since the argument that Scientology fights for “religious freedom” leads to the question who accepts its position in this regard especially among the other new religious movements. With regard to “controversy” there is a list of *desiderata* which would fill a separate volume. But it is a pity that the case of Germany with its long tradition of anti-Scientology-activism is not treated in a separate chapter, contrasting for example Spain, where Scientology gained status as a group enlisted in the state’s “register of religious corporations” (*registro de entidades religiosas*) in 2008.

The concluding chapter deals with “dimensions of Scientology” focussing on various topics. In addition to articles on “Celebrity, the Popular Media, and Scientology” (by Carole M. Cusack) and a useful overview of the “sources” (by Dorthe Refsund Christensen), which can be used as an introduction to the study of Scientology, one can find a superb chapter on the “founding myth” of Scientology, namely the Xenu-story, by Mikael Rothstein. Although the treatment of this topic raises some ethical questions as this is (or seems to be) part of esoteric teachings (nowadays even denied by leading Scientologists and often presented as symbol for the nonsense-content in critical descriptions of Scientology), it is a fact that the material is known to the public and religious studies cannot dismiss it. As a result of these problematic side-effects the approach of Rothstein is cautious, but very important in so far as it is one of the rare examples of an in-depth study of a feature of the religious content, an aspect missing in new religions movement studies in general.

It is beyond question that this book gives answers to many questions concerning “the thing called Scientology.” But many still remain. The book is an opening chapter of an ongoing research worth being conducted. As the controversial status of Scientology seems to loose its high standing nowadays (*even* in Europe) there is the hope that future studies may be able to pose further questions. But this is not just with society’s approach changing but also the group’s attitude towards the world outside. As stated at the beginning, because of the many crucial questions arising with Scientology within religious studies and in other academic disciplines as well this book is of concern for a much broader readership, not just for the fortunate few directly involved – for whatever reason – in the discourse. It is to congratulate James R. Lewis for his work – which – although academic – cannot be called a simple academic publication among others. And it is also a sign for a changing approach since Scientology was regarded for a very long time as forbidden territory for scholars of religious studies when taking into account that you either get blamed by mainstream society for “legitimizing” an alleged dangerous group or you get sued by Scientology for whatever reason. But, hopefully, the times they are a-changin’.