

Scientology, Anti-Cultists, and Scholars: An Interview with Bernadette Rigal-Cellard

The internationally well-known French scholar tells *Bitter Winter* how she decided to study both the Church of Scientology and the “irrational hatred” targeting it.

by Rosita Šoryté



Bernadette Rigal-Cellard is the most well-known specialist of new religious movements in the French academia. She is Professor of North-American Studies and Religious Studies at the Université Bordeaux Montaigne, where in 2005 she founded the multidisciplinary Master Program “Religions and Societies.” She has also studied the relations between religions and literatures, the religious landscape in the United States and Canada, and the transatlantic religious relations between North America and France. In a recent article in *Implicit Religion*, she tells, not without humor, the story of how, when she entered the “forbidden” domain of the study of Scientology, she started being attacked by anti-cultists who tried, repeatedly and unsuccessfully, to have her censored by her university. While Scientology is again in the news in several countries, she tells us the fascinating story of how she came to know and study the religion founded by L. Ron Hubbard, and what she thinks of the anti-cult campaigns targeting it.

How did you get into the study of Scientology?

My interest in religions grew out of several encounters with Mormon missionaries when I was an English and American studies student at the University of Bordeaux, France. The links I could see between the history of their movement and that of the USA, as well as between their doctrinal tenets and major American spiritual and intellectual traits, enticed me to study how religions both mirrored and impacted the culture that had spawned them.

Since I specialized in the analysis of contemporary North American religions, Scientology was on my agenda. I first encountered it in the streets of Santa Barbara, California, where I was an exchange student at UCSB. I was asked to fill in a questionnaire. Later I read *Dianetics*, and I looked into the different phases that Ron L. Hubbard added to the first levels. I could then see the cultural and spiritual connections between Scientology and American society. Clearly, in my eyes, Scientology sacralized secular American ideals to address the desire of the “rugged individualist” to master the physical world and him/herself, to the point of self-divinization. Several movements and, in particular, Mormonism share such an ambition with Scientology. When years afterwards I studied SMI, Scientology Missions International, I found that the discipline missionaries have to abide by (self-finance all their enterprises, set up their recruiting activities on their own...) corresponded to the originally Protestant ethic of individual responsibility forcefully implemented in American education and business in general. Being from a foreign culture has probably helped me perceive the idiosyncrasies of American-born religions better than if I shared them.

You also mention in the article the problems you encountered in studying Scientology in France. Why is the situation so peculiar in France, and can you tell us about some representative incidents?

In French, the name “Scientologie” sounds extremely close to “sorcellerie” (witchcraft), and I do believe the identification operates in the minds of a lot of people since, though they do not know anything about Scientology itself; whether its history, its beliefs, practices, or real membership in the country, they instinctively react negatively on hearing the name, with disproportionate suspicion. For the anti-cultists, it has likewise become the epitome of the evil group, the target of an irrational hatred which has obnubilated them to such a point that they have focused their investigations on Scientology as the vehicle of the infiltration of the American intelligence services bent on disrupting French society and politics. Consequently, they did not really bother about the really dangerous home-grown groups that were soon to cause hundreds of deaths in France and in neighboring countries. Or, if they saw them, they were probably afraid of being physically attacked by them, whereas Scientologists are fair game, to be dealt with in courts but not at gunpoint. For a full year, I was the victim of a media campaign organized by a local Freemason and anti-cultist some fifteen years ago because I had given a public lecture in which I explained what Scientology was, and did not criticize it.

Recently in Australia a media campaign was launched to de-register Scientology (and other groups, including the Plymouth Brethren) as charities. One of the arguments against Scientology is that it does not have charitable activities for the benefit of the general public. However, in 2019 you wrote a long article in The Journal of CESNUR about Scientology’s outreach through its ancillary and volunteer

organizations. So, does Scientology in fact have an activity benefiting also non-Scientologists or not?

Over the years, I have visited many churches of Scientology and many of their social facilities. I studied more particularly some of its humanitarian organizations that I called "Foundations that promote better methods of living," including Volunteer Ministers. Without any doubt, these are geared towards both Scientologists and non-members, and they do not force the latter to join. Just as I was never forced to join when I was a young student asking a lot of questions of the Scientologists I encountered in various cities who did not know who I was or what I was doing. I have found the Church operates exactly like most religious groups have for centuries throughout the world: in the Christianity, they go out to help their neighbor, and in doing so obviously they obey Jesus' mandate as well as proselytize at the same time in a more or less subtle manner. Even groups that seem to be the most genuinely disinterested and exclusively humanitarian will in the end bring to themselves rewards under the form of admiration and possible conversion and belonging. This is what Christian schools have been about throughout history and geography. In the Muslim domain, this is what the Fethullah Gülen schools do in Turkey (well, did until they were banned there) and in Central Asia and in many other parts of the world, which has led them to be called the Muslim Jesuits.

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In South Central Los Angeles, in the Inglewood Community Center of the Church of Scientology, I met with several local African Americans and Hispanics who used the facilities of the center to play music, drama etc., yet did not necessarily take Scientology courses. If they did, they could take some of them for free (the Church offers courses online for free too). I interviewed members of the Nation of Islam, a group well-known for its work against drugs and violence in urban ghettos, and they explained to me how the Scientology courses they did follow helped them be better Muslims and better persons, as they had now become color-blind.

I was recently asked by a journalist of *Le Monde*, one of the three major French daily newspapers, about a current project of the Church of Scientology to open a church in Seine-Saint-Denis, a Northern suburb of Paris notorious for its high density of immigrants, mostly from the Maghreb, where a lot of areas are clearly "the lost neighborhoods of the Republic" (to use the title of Georges Bensoussan' 2002 landmark study on the frightening developments in French public schools, *Les Territoires perdus de la République*), a nursery for radical political Islamists. The State has been pouring billions of euros in these areas to improve the social conditions there, most forcefully after the 2005 massive riots there that soon spread to many cities throughout the country.

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The journalist was obviously expecting me to comment very negatively about this future Scientology church: it was going to force the kids and their parents to spend all their money there. Someone had told me earlier: "the area is already so downtrodden, they do not need other parasites." But I tried to explain to the journalist that in fact a Scientology church there would be really helpful. If people came to listen to the message, they would understand that working at school was better than dealing drugs, or become radical terrorists. Also, they would learn to rely upon themselves only, and not constantly on the charity of the State (the French social system being one of the most generous in the world), etc. etc. I told him to read my study of South Central and on how the Church there

had allied itself with other religious actors, and the LAPD to help fight gang violence and educate people. My explanations must have sounded terribly “racist” and “fascist” (two of the favored critical terms in France).

His article is coming out exactly while we are doing this interview. It exclusively treats Scientology as a dangerous group “on a discreet mission” planning to benefit massively from its proximity to the 2024 Paris Olympic Games that will unfold largely in Saint-Denis. Not a word on what the members of the Church there might be interested in doing in actual fact; they are only denounced as waiting for the Olympic Games.

Another argument is that building new impressive Ideal Orgs is not the way a bona fide religious organization should spend its money, it could have built hospitals or shelters for the homeless instead. Perhaps to you in France this would look familiar as an argument historically used against all religions: they are rich, why don't they give their money to the poor?

I see here two points that need an explanation. In France, the Catholic Church is much less than earlier perceived as vastly rich, and its charitable works (Secours catholique) are quite well-known. The other point that needs to be explained, because it bears on the accusation of groups such as Scientology, is that older religions, and in France “the” religion is of course the Catholic Church, have become part of the culture, and their financial arrangements are now seldom investigated. As sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger has remarked, in France people do not associate a “genuine religion” with money because, after the 1905 law establishing the separation of Church and State, the Roman Catholic Church tried to make itself irreproachable. Since money in France is always a dirty word, the fees it charges for services and sacraments (baptism, marriage, burials, and specific masses) are extremely low (between around 40 to 300 euros, depending on the ceremony requested and the diocese), and not even compulsory. Likewise, the amount suggested for yearly tithing or contributions in Catholic parishes starts at 50 euros per year (when I was looking into this issue, I found a Buddhist center in Brittany whose tithing started at 500 euros).

Another factor explains the disconnect between religion and money in the eyes of the French: except in Alsace-Moselle and some overseas *départements*, all the Catholic religious buildings that existed prior to 1905 do not belong to the dioceses. Parish churches belong to their municipality, and cathedrals to the State, a situation that allowed President Macron to claim that Notre Dame would be rebuilt in a couple of years. Americans were shocked to hear him say this, but he was fully entitled to do so as he is the landlord of Notre Dame.

The cost of the major maintenance is thus not covered by the Church but by taxpayers, yet it is without their being aware of this as religion is not mentioned in tax-return forms (unlike in Germany or Italy for example). Parishes only have to take care of utilities, electricity and heating notably. Finances were never publicly discussed until very recently. Now, once a year, a lay person in charge of the parish council presents the records to the congregation at the end of Sunday mass. Private Catholic schools benefit from the same arrangement. Those “under contract” receives funds from the State

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(notably to cover the salary of teachers) and thus charge extremely low tuition to families, affordable then by even poor families and regardless of their religious belonging.

The consequence is that a group that claims to be a religion but is known to ask for money in a direct way is not regarded as a “real religion.” I have given several public lectures on “religious economies” in which I developed the analysis of Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, or Larry Iannaccone, and each time, someone in the audience would say: “Oh well, mixing money and God is so typically American, it is not about genuine religion. We don’t do this here.”

I can imagine that other countries would think likewise, but this means critics are not aware of the actual cost of religious practice when not only do members have to finance everything but also compete to exhibit their personal wealth to other members, and to allow their congregation to shame all the others nearby.

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I visited the huge Hindu temple BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir (North East of Atlanta, at Lilburn, Georgia) with a member on the day before one of the regular meetings of the finance committee. The mandir is huge, built in Carrara marble, carved as lace work. Its construction and maintenance cost a fortune, all paid by members, proud to outshine the slightly smaller mandir of the same group in Houston (though the latter underwent extension a few years ago to avenge this slight) and all the other religious buildings of the urban area. That day the minimum contribution was 500 dollars, and I was told that of course nobody would dare give such a low sum. Part of the collected funds go towards relief and social work in disaster zones throughout the whole world, but clearly this is not the first goal of the mandir builders.

Something critics of Scientology now always mention, to the point it is becoming an obsession for them, is that Scientology is “shrinking” and may even disappear soon. Given that reliable statistics about Scientology are notoriously difficult to find, and that censuses in particular are generally regarded by scholars as not reliable for new religions, both scholars and anti-cultists may only rely on impressions. However, you visited different Scientology facilities and institutions in France and the United States, and spent several weeks exploring Scientology in California a few years ago. What are your views on this issue?

Active religious membership has notoriously always been difficult to assess with precision. In movements that demand a form of institutional proof of belonging, like baptism in the Orthodox Church, in Catholicism, or Mormonism, figures are easy to obtain, but these are those of the signature of parents on the day of the ceremony. They tell us nothing about actual practice or retention, and they thus appear extremely inflated. For Muslims in France, we get huge figures, but these do not correspond to regular practitioners either. Not many journalists will protest against such fuzzy estimates. Yet, when it comes to minority religions, the same approximations are interpreted as hiding sinister plots and deceptive practices. In Scientology, no equivalent of baptism or of the *shahada* formula in Islam will brand someone a “Scientologist.” What is recorded is the number of students for a class, for auditing, for sessions and who buy books and

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videos, etc. But people take several courses, not necessarily progressing from below to above, etc.

I entitled my 2019 paper "[The Visible Expansion of the Church of Scientology](#)," because I wanted to report on what I had actually seen. Critics say that the Church pretends to have many members by showcasing huge centers and churches all over the world that are just window displays with nobody inside. It is true that except for Flag in Clearwater and the church in Kaohsiung, Taiwan (I did visit both), one does not encounter throngs of people in those facilities, rather a regular trickle of small groups. I feel this is mostly due to the fact that courses are given to tiny groups, and auditing is done one-to-one in the numerous teaching rooms of the church or mission centre. I have the same feeling watching Mormon "saints" (as they call their members) coming in and out of their temples: regular flows of disciples who will perform their rituals in the numerous rooms inside the temple structure are booked specially for their private ceremonies, not all squeezed inside like in a Christian church for Christmas.

The missions and churches of Scientology must be mostly financed by the members themselves, who organize all kinds of fund-raising activities. The mother institution may help financially at some point but not in total. If there were only a few hundreds of thousands of members in the world, such undertakings would be impossible, even if each member gave huge amounts to the Church.

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