Res Rhetorica

ISSN: 2392-3113

Rhetoric in religion
Retoryka w religii

3/2017 EDITOR: ANNA BENDRAT

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The Repetitive Rhetoric of Miscavige's Battle: A Preliminary Look at the Church of Scientology
Powtarzalność retoryki Davida Miscavige'a. Wstępne spojrzenie na Kościół Scjentologiczny

Abstract

The Church of Scientology is currently experiencing a rash of negative publicity regarding its belief-system, organizational structure, and practices. Amidst this controversy, Ecclesiastical Leader David Miscavige has continued to make speeches celebrating the church. But he has remained notably silent regarding the challenges facing his church. This short essay aims to: (a) provide an introduction to the church, (b) examine the rhetoric of Miscavige in light of the church's practices, and (c) offer up some initial suggestions regarding how the two can, and do, relate to each other. The tentative conclusions drawn suggest that, at best, Miscavige is providing his followers with a positive vision of the church; at worst, his rhetoric threatens to engender more criticism and further isolate the church.

Kościół scjentologiczny zmaga się obecnie z lawiną wyrażanych publicznie negatywnych opinii na temat systemu przekonań, struktury organizacyjnej i praktyk Kościoła. Pomimo licznych kontrowersji, przywódca duchowy David Miscavige w swoich przemowach nieustannie sławi dokonania Kościoła, lecz pomija temat wyzwań, przed którymi stoi jego zgromadzenie. Artykuł ma na celu: (a) przedstawienie wstępnej charakterystyki Kościoła scjentologicznego, (b) analizę retoryki Miscavige'a w świetle praktyk Kościoła, oraz (c) przedstawienie wstępnych sugestii dotyczących tego, w jaki sposób charakter i retoryka Kościoła odnoszą się do siebie nawzajem. Wstępne wnioski sugerują, że w najlepszym przypadku Miscavige dostarcza swoim wyznawcom pozytywnej wizji Kościoła; w najgorszym razie jego retoryka grozi wzmożeniem krytyki i dalszej izolacji Kościoła.

Key words

Religion; Rhetoric; Scientology; Miscavige; Pragmatism
religia, retoryka, scjentologia, Miscavige, pragmatyzm

Received: 8 January 2017 | Accepted: 10 June 2017

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> . . . the history of religions has also been the history of great discord. It would seem that nothing can more effectively set people at odds than the demand that they think alike. For, given our many disparate ways of life, we couldn't really think alike, even if we wanted to (Burke 1970, v).

A Religious Crossroads

By any conceivable metric, public perceptions about the Church of Scientology are worse than they have ever been. The church is subject to a level of critical scrutiny that far surpasses any of the challenges it has faced in its six-plus decade existence: Legal challenges, some involving allegations of abuse and death, in a host of countries. Critical exposes by learned scholars, former practitioners and even family members. A shrinking membership base. Scientology's response? A consistently bracingly litigious approach to critics, coupled with the seeming continuation of "fair game" like surveillance and harassment. Tone-deaf interviews by the non-Scientologist attorney representing the church, Monique Yingling. Strategic silence from Scientology's Director of Public Affairs, Karin Pouw. In the United States, a continuing series of limited-run/targeted advertisements run during the Super Bowl. In general, a series of slick websites promoting its various organizational entities and also less glossy ones designed to denigrate the church's critics.

These responses are even more intriguing when one considers the role of church leader David Miscavige. Officially listed on the Scientology (2017) website as "Chairman of the Board of Religious Technology Center (RTC) and the ecclesiastical leader of the Scientology religion," he assumed this position in 1987 after the death of its founder, L. Ron Hubbard. Miscavige grew up in a family with long-standing ties to the church. Serving Hubbard as a deputy in his teen years, the church narrative depicts his rise to the leadership position as the smooth transition of a trusted Hubbard confidant. Critics, however, argue that he pushed out other

loyal Scientologists in a bid to grab more power. This tension over his role and his use of leadership has even spilled over into very public disputes with family members. His niece, former Scientologist Jennifer Miscavige Hill, published *Beyond Belief: My Secret Life Inside Scientology And My Harrowing Escape* (2013), criticizing both the church and her uncle. His own father, Ronald Miscavige Sr., who left the church in 2012, also wrote a tell-all entitled *Ruthless: Scientology, My Son David Miscavige, and Me* (2016). The book also condemned Miscavige and his leadership of the church. In both cases, the church launched aggressive counter-campaigns aimed at raising doubts about the legitimacy of these exposés. In 2013, spokesperson Pouw labelled Jennifer's comments "false" and said they were an attempt to "exploit" David Miscavige's name. In 2016, a website called *Ron Miscavige: Shameless* appeared, featuring a series of video and text postings calling into question Ronald's ethos and motivations in writing about his son.

All of this history makes Miscavige's reticence to speak to the larger public about Scientology curious. Aside from a disastrous interview in 1992 on the American news show *Nightline*—an interview in which Miscavige appeared by turns aloof and frustrated when responding to specific questions from Ted Koppel—he has remained generally silent on the issues facing Scientology. Which is not to say that Miscavige has not spoken. That fact forms the specific emphasis of this brief precis. After a brief discussion of some of the issues central to understanding Scientology, this essay will turn its attention to examining what, exactly, it is that Miscavige has said. I will conclude by considering how those responses might factor into further examinations of the rhetoric of Scientology.

What's In A Name?

A seemingly never-ending, and somewhat distracting, part of the debate about Scientology centers on a question: is Scientology a religion? In this paper I take the affirmative position. By almost any recognizable definition, Scientology has in place the sorts of codes of conduct and faith-based protocols that other religions provide. Irving Hexham (1997), a professor of religious studies at the University of Calgary, Canada, argues that "there is no doubt that the Church of Scientology at that time [1978] qualified as a religion. I have no reason to believe that in the last twenty years things have changed. In fact, if anything the religious aspects of Scientology have increased." Granted, some take issue with Scientology-as-religion because they find certain practices and tenets therein dubious, harmful, and/or unethical. Those opinions don't, however, undercut the religious label. If anything, the shift from "it is not a religion" to "I don't like or believe in its practices" betrays a hidden premise of quite a different sort.

I also recognize that others have ascribed different labels to Scientology, framing it as a business in the guise of a religion, or even as a cult. Those definitions tend, to my mind, to distract from engaging in a larger examination of Scientology, as rhetorically defended and as actually practiced. As Tony Ortega (2014), formerly of the *Village Voice* and a long-time critic of Scientology, suggests on his website *The Underground Bunker*:

> . . . we're going to continue to avoid using the word "cult." (We do quote other people using it, but we stay away from it ourselves.) Mainly, that's because we find arguments about whether Scientology is a cult or not a big waste of time. Scientology calls itself a church, so we use that term — but if it's a church, doesn't that make its behavior even more questionable?

Ortega's question deserves consideration. But the answers one might arrive at fall outside the scope of this paper.

It is worth noting, however, that the Church of Scientology is novel in how it is organized. The church is actually a complicated assemblage of units. Scientology's (2017) own explanation on its website does little to clarify matters:

> The Church of Scientology is formed into an ecclesiastical structure which unifies and aligns a multitude of diverse religious activities, including not only ministering Scientology religious services and practices, but proselytization, ecclesiastical management, relay of communication, production of dissemination materials and many other functions. Thus the Scientology religious community is united both by common beliefs and practices and an organizational form uniquely suited to its religious mission.

Others, such as long-time church critic Jeffrey Augustine (2014), have attempted to further tease out the church's structural parts. The two primary units are the Religious Technology Center (RTC; which Miscavige heads) and the Church of Scientology International (CSI; which largely exists to manage the extensive real estate holdings of the church). Flowing from these are a host of inter-locking units, including: Author Services International (ASI; the repository for all of the church's founder's teachings and writings), the International Association of Scientologists Administration (IASA, overseeing the churches outside the United States); and the Commodore's Messenger Org International (CMOI; charged with making sure that Hubbard's religious teachings are followed). At the level of religious practice there are smaller missions/churches overseen by Scientology Missions International (SMI), and larger churches called Ideal Organizations ("Ideal Orgs" for short).

Such a complex hierarchical structure does inspire curiosity, especially given that Scientology (2017) touts itself as offering "a precise path leading to a complete and certain understanding of one's true spiritual nature and one's relationship to self, family, groups, Mankind, all life forms, the material universe, the spiritual

universe and the Supreme Being." With that said, the term religion is functionally neutral in my opinion. A religion is what a religion does, for members of the faith community and for those outside that community. In that way, I am endorsing at least part of William James's (1902) evaluation of religions in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Therein, James argues for this test of a religious belief: "In the end it has to come to our empirical criterion: By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots. . . . The *roots* of a man's virtue are inaccessible to us. No appearances whatever are infallible proofs of grace. Our practice is the only sure evidence, even to ourselves, that we are genuinely Christian" (21).

To be clear, Scientology does engage in a variety of forms of social outreach. Under the awning of "Global Betterment and Humanitarian Programs," Scientology touches on issues related to: education (Applied Scholastics), crime (Criminon), drug rehabilitation (Narconon), and human rights (Citizens Commission on Human Rights). As would be expected, Scientology's efforts in these areas are dogged by critics on a variety of fronts. As examples, there are challenges to the efficacy and safety of the treatments offered by Narconon and also challenges to using other programs as Trojan horses to get Scientology into schools and other non-religious venues. As with the issue of definition, the goal of this paper is not to engage in a critique of Scientology's structure, no less its social programs (or the complaints lodged at both by critics). So, while not arguing against further examinations of Scientology's practices, I now want to more specifically examine the rhetoric used by the church's long-time leader, Miscavige.

Speak As If, and Until, It Is True

Rhetorical scholars such as Edwin Black (1970), Michael Calvin McGee (1980), and Phillip Wander (1984) recognized that the patterns a rhetor uses to speak to an audience frame both. In adopting a particular style of address, a rhetor reveals ideological motivations. At the same time, those messages demonstrate who is, and who is not, being addressed. Such is the case when we consider Miscavige's primary style of address, no less the forums in which he activates this style.

There are several things to note about Miscavige's rhetoric. First, and given the disaster of his interview on *Nightline* in the 90s, he largely limits his public presentations to high-level Scientology events, chief among them: the openings of Ideal Orgs and re-openings of significant church properties, the annual New Year's Eve Address, and the annual IAS gala (most often held in England, but held as recently as 2013 at the refurbished Flag/Super Power Building in Clearwater, Florida, which serves as the "spiritual" headquarters of the church). Second, these are tightly managed events that are designed almost exclusively for church members.

Outside guests, save those brought in to praise Scientology for its charitable and social work, are rarely involved. Press involvement is kept to a minimum, with "official" attendance numbers often being disputed by critics (such as Ortega) who do manage to gain access or insider information. Third, his speeches all share a common, and unique, structure. This structure—notable for its non-standardized phrasing and wording, its reliance on hyperbole coupled with itemized lists of accomplishments, no less the use of Scientology-specific terminology—is largely attributed to Dan Sherman, who serves as Miscavige's speechwriter, and also Hubbard's biographer. Fourth, and related to the previous two issues, is the fact these messages display an incredibly consistent focus on promoting through repetition, again and again, an overwhelmingly positive vision of Scientology.

Actually examining these speeches proves challenging. Aside from unofficial transcripts, one is forced to rely on the smattering of releases from local *orgs* (shorthand for "organizations") or those assembled by the RTC (2017). These first two transcripts are provided by the latter source. In 1999, at Scientology's annual New Year's Eve event in Los Angeles, California, Miscavige gave a presentation entitled "Scientology 2000: The First 50 Years." He begins by saying:

> Welcome to an evening like no other in our history, and a New Year celebration like none other on Earth. For while the whole world awaits the New Millennium tonight, with whatever hope and aspirations they can muster, this one is different for us.
>
> Because we are not only celebrating the first half-century of LRH Technology, but before this night is over, I guarantee you those words "New Millennium" will take on an entirely new meaning.
>
> Now, of course, a thousand years is hardly a blip in the greater galactic drama, not to mention the greater scheme of a thetan's existence. But considering how long beings have been spiraling down the chute, and just what Scientology represents as the turning point upward, the last half of this twentieth century is one that nobody will forget.
>
> But let's first assess the last fifty years, from this phrase, "Fastest Growing Religion on Earth." Because while you may still find some places where Scientology is not yet a fully operative word, you've got to consider the real substance behind that phrase. Factually, the full story runs so much deeper — L. Ron Hubbard forging a technology to bring about total spiritual freedom. And therein lies the story, of not just this twentieth century, but the saga of all ages past and future.

What follows is a treasure trove of Miscavige's favorite topic areas: tracking the growth of the church, assailing the practices of psychiatry (a favorite target since Hubbard's time), and charting the ways in which Scientology has promoted human development over the course of its existence; in his words, "removing rampant criminality, drug abuse, illiteracy, moral despair." While attending to these topics, he also peppers the speech with wording specific to the church's practices and beliefs.

As regards the latter, Miscavige codes the speech in a way that suggests only those conversant in Scientology would get the full picture he is verbally painting. When he speaks of *engrams*, for instance, he is talking about disturbing mental images that people are supposed to store of past life events, images that Scientology can help people recover, understand, and remove. He also liberally sprinkles in other Scientology-specific ideas—such as MEST (matter, energy, space, and time)—that clearly suggest this is not a speech for outsiders. As the speech draws to a close, the degree to which this event is for the devout becomes patently clear:

> In the final analysis, others don't have the answers. We do. But this isn't a game of one-upmanship. Because there are a great many people out there who are searching, and who are trying. Where they fail, it's because they lack the answers we have. So we can't move into this new millennium nattering about the many failings of the world at large. No, we must wake up in the morning, each one of us, look in the mirror and say, "That's my responsibility to handle." Because we are the only ones who can.
>
> So, where do we stand on the threshold of the 21st century? Well, we stand exactly where we need to stand. Fully poised and ready to carry the torch to ultimate victory.

The focus on Scientology and the answers it has for the world, and not on the problems the church faces, can be seen in other officially sanctioned speech transcripts. On August 7, 2004, Miscavige delivered a speech to Scientologists at St. Hill Manor, East Grinstead, UK. This property is of particular significance to the church, as it was one of Hubbard's homes and is the headquarters for the church in England. In the speech, titled "An Overview of the Fastest Growing Religion in the World," Miscavige has this to say:

> While we celebrate the 35th anniversary of this one church — this is also our annual "open house" reflective of the Scientology religion around the globe. As you will have seen when you arrived — throughout the Manor and its grounds, are exhibits and displays explaining both Scientology itself, and the many programs we are engaged in. We want you to know who we are and what we stand for.
>
> Of course, the primary question is "What is Scientology?" The answer has never been more relevant than today — especially with what faces our modern-day society.
>
> Let me be blunt. Scientology does have answers. Real answers. Answers that work. Bold statements? Yes. But, what millions of people — from over 150 nations — will tell you themselves.
>
> Today we are at a watershed in history. At stake is whether the ideals we cherish will survive or some new abhorrent set of values win the day. And if that decline has been evident through the past half century, it continues unabated into this new one.

These two speeches, more than three years apart, are remarkably consistent in terms of tone and messaging. In this second speech, Miscavige again anchors

his narrative to church-specific terminology. As an example, he references the thetan (in Scientology, a term for "spirit"), and ties that concept to a church—*his* church—that is experiencing not just growth, but the fastest growth of *any* religion. Granted, as officially sanctioned speeches, available online, one might expect this sort of thematic consistency.

But, when one compares these two snippets to unauthorized speech transcripts posted elsewhere, one finds a continued focus on similar thematic elements using similar framing devices. On Febuary 8, 2008, an unofficial transcript of Miscavige's 2007 New Year's Eve speech was placed on Google Groups. The speech was posted by Gerry Armstrong, a former Scientologist and vocal critic of the church. Miscavige begins:

> Now as this is indeed a classic New Year's celebration, we'll consider what it means to work the magic of LRH tech across every sector of application.
>
> And make no mistake: to a stultified student discovering Applied Scholastics, a strung out addict entering Narconon, a failing businessman chancing on a WISE consultant, LRH technology seems nothing if not magical.
>
> But to miraculously transform a whole planet, you've got to conjure up the full LRH technical legacy, very much including all you just saw enumerated on those screens as highlights of 2006.
>
> And while we can't yet do it in the blink of an eye, you'll be amazed how much ground we can take when we do it as a strategically coordinated force.
>
> Because with accelerating speed through each passing month of this past year, we really did ignite all engines at the IAS anniversary just 2 months ago.

Note here the references to Scientology-sponsored organizations such as WISE, an acronym for the World Institute of Scientology Enterprises, the church group responsible for getting others to adopt Hubbard's principles in the public and private sector. Note also the continued use of hyperbole as relates to what Scientologists do when they *strategically* work together to *transform* the planet. The speech also contains additional references to topic areas like the evils of psychiatry or the increasing international growth of the church. And, as the speech draws to a close, those in attendance are treated to another list of "facts" that attest to the can-do spirit emanating from the church:

> With presses running off new booklets every 10 seconds and in greater numbers through the last 8 weeks than the whole previous year, 2006 ends with *The Way to Happiness* now in the hands of more than 70 million people across 131 nations. And that's Operation Planetary Calm as we enter 2007!

Here again, the insistently affirming message mixes positive developments (which critics dispute) with framing that makes little sense to an outsider.

The Way to Happiness, for instance, is a long-standing church publication meant to introduce the public to the principles of Scientology and L. Ron Hubbard. What of Operation Planetary Calm? It was the coordinated use of the same publication to "spread Scientology's principles around the world." Or, as the High Administrative Court in Germany more critically put it in *Der Spiegel* (2008), "to implement Scientology's program in Germany and to expand more and more Scientology's principles in government, economy and society." It pays to note that Miscavige's message only works as an explanation of what Scientology is doing if it is meant for Scientologists themselves. It is not addressed to those they are supposedly reaching, or to those who might challenge and question the message that Miscavige is telling members of the church.

Additional leaked transcripts only further the pattern already set. On March 11, 2014, a transcript of Miscavige's speech to celebrate the grand reopening of the church's Pacific Area Command (PAC, a former hospital that serves as Scientology's West Coast headquarters that is often called "Big Blue" because of its distinctive color) Base in Los Angeles was leaked. The leak was posted on Mike Rinder's weblog. Rinder, a former Scientology executive, is also a long-time critic of the church. Miscavige begins:

> Well, thank you very much. It's truly my honor to join you for this spectacular grand opening, on this street on this day, because yes it's momentous and it's certainly one for the history books. Of course take in the grand scope of Scientology today, and never has so much significant history been in play. And by that I refer to ideal orgs rising in pivotal points across the planet, dozens in all and most recently at a gateway to the east in Taiwan.
>
> Next I refer to the golden age of knowledge wherein every Scientologist can literally walk in LRH's footsteps and travel his path of research and discovery.
>
> Then again I refer to the Golden Age of Tech phase 2 wherein progress up the bridge, both sides, can only be described as a whole new world.
>
> And finally let's not forget the opening of our 21st-century cathedral at Flag, signaling the release and delivery of LRHs long-awaited Cause Resurgence and Superpower rundowns.
>
> So no, in recent history we are certainly not lacking in milestone advances to talk about. Yet nonetheless and make no mistake, today's opening signifies yet another milestone. A milestone which in years hence will be looked back on as the one responsible for turning the islands into the sea.

This speech is again densely packed with references to church-specific issues using church-specific phrasing: "up the bridge" being a phrase for advancing within the church; "cause resurgence" and "superpower" are references to two skill-building drills that adherents with the church use. But both leaked speeches are functionally similar to the previous two in high-lighting the positive growth, forward and/or upward, of Scientology.

The second speech is also instructive in how it even further narrows the focus on the church members, both those in attendance and those who could not attend. Towards the end of the speech, Miscavige makes the observation that the development of Scientology in Los Angeles carries with it residential and hotel space "for out of towners staying for the longer haul, or simply desirous of more spacious accommodations." The first part of that comment is an indirect reference the process of *auditing*, a type of lie-detecting style of confession used in the church to move people up the bridge. And such a comment comes amidst a final section of the speech which lists all the ways in which Scientology is transforming PAC into "a global emanation point" charged with "proliferating dreams across the planet."

Clearly, these are not speeches being delivered to audiences of skeptics. These are speeches that project a vision of Miscavige as the leader of a growing, indeed thriving, religion; these speeches no less project a vision of those in attendance—and the members to whom they are linked across the globe—as integral and invested parties to that growth. On a very basic level, the rhetoric of Miscavige is as staged as the events at which he decides to speak.

The Silo of Rhetoric

Rhetorical scholars can advocate. They can also politicize public debates that are already, by nature, political. In examining the Church of Scientology, both avenues are open. I caution, however, that such approaches, as liberating as they may be, might suffer from their engagement and push those—both inside and outside the church—away from the benefits of their research. Anecdotal evidence already suggests the problems such scholarship can engender. Scientology takes a dim view of outright criticism, going to great lengths to silence or downplay those who criticize its tenets, often on the basis of interviewing only apostates. At the same time, Scientology could do more and better work to truly open itself up to outsiders interested in seeking a clearer view of what this novel religion does. But the criticism goes the opposite way as well. Researchers who attempt to take Scientology at its word and objectively examine the merits of its faith system are routinely challenged for "supporting" Scientology or being dupes under the control of the church. Granted, some cases of both likely exist. But rhetorical scholars can avoid such charges, should they choose to systematically examine the practices at play in persuading people to become or remain members of Scientology.

Which is not to say that even this brief overview saves the church from scrutiny. There are clearly issues with the ways in which Miscavige uses his pulpit. Other recognized leaders of established religions—Pope Francis of the Catholic Church, the Dali Lama as the representative of Tibetan Buddhism, and so on—stand in

marked contrast with Miscavige. They take the inner tenets of their faiths and direct them rhetorically outward even as they tend to their adherents. They speak across religious boundaries and engage in actively representing their religions in the larger realm of public affairs. Not so Miscavige. With few exceptions, he speaks in tightly controlled venues. Not only that, he engages in the repetition of overwhelmingly positive proclamations. Most interestingly, he speaks only to the faithful, using the language of their church to further distance his message from those that the church supposedly seeks to help. Miscavige does not attend to matters of controversy that threaten the tended hedgerows of Scientology. He leaves the business of explaining the church to outsiders, and defending it from critics, to a small group of lower-level functionaries.

On one hand, this is understandable. For a church increasingly under scrutiny, it is helpful when a faith-leader preaches positivity to the faithful. On the other hand, it a strategically questionable tactic if Miscavige truly wishes to promote a positive vision of Scientology to the larger world. All of which leads to several conclusions. A siloed rhetoric, one that seeks no larger crowd than the one it already has, implies a weakness in those who use it. It suggests rhetors who are unsure that their church can grow and/or are unconcerned with what outsiders think. Miscavige's rhetoric serves, then, only to maintain internal harmony in the face of criticism. And so, in the place of rhetorical outreach, Scientology instead extends its reach through the accumulation of physical spaces housing the elements of its faith, if not the followers of the same. A comment from Scientology (2017) itself is informative in that respect. In touting its growth now and in the future, the following observation is made:

> Mr. Miscavige is the driving force of a movement now spanning the globe with Ideal Churches of Scientology. He set the direction for the acquisition, design and planning of new Churches and in consequence, the horizons of Scientology are filled with scores of new Churches in the making for the second decade of the century.
>
> Church premises increased from 5.6 million square feet in 2004 to over 11.5 million by the beginning of the new decade, with a million and a half square feet of renovations completed in the last two years and over a quarter of a million square feet now under construction.

This is a message of growth that features only one person, Miscavige; it measures progress in feet, not followers. It is, like the previously covered speeches, a list of glowing particulars and not actual people. His repeated entreaties that "all is well" become a form of incantation, truer by virtue of being repeated. In the continued battle to gain a fair hearing for Scientology, Miscavige would do well to consider how much faith can sustain his church in a world that increasingly doubts it.

The author wishes to thank Sarah E. Gibson for her support and inspiration while this essay was being developed.

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