

GIRL TALK



RELIGION
ISSUE

Table of Contents

Editor's Note(s) by Eve Kaplan and Alex Wexler	4-5
Cults Are More than Just Odd: They're Strategically Destroying Us by Sophie Saxl	6
How Digital Meditation Industry is Changing Spirituality by Zohar Lindemann	7
Homophobia & Christianity by Eleni Bahati	9
Where's Our New Religion? by Eve Kaplan	10
My God: A Personal Piece by Sabine Fuchs	11
The Interconnectedness and Separation of Judaism and Zionism by Alex Wexler	12

Continued:

13

Recovery and Religion

by Lily Kramon

14

The Truth Behind the “Religion” of Scientology

by Gemma Lubber

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Editors Note(s)

Is this goodbye?

by Alex Wexler

To be writing my final editor's note is very bittersweet. It's been a great privilege to not just write articles and read GirlTalk, but to have been able to witness GirlTalk flourish over the years and really take form. COVID greatly affected everyone's ability to connect, and GirlTalk most definitely felt the weight of the pandemic. When Eve and I began to discuss our hopes for GirlTalk around this time last year, we emphasized our desire to bring people together again through the publication, and as I write this goodbye, I feel like we've succeeded in many ways. For much of my GirlTalk experience, I had the privilege of learning from and writing with people I went to school with and already knew well, but this year, with the integration of a new school into the magazine and with more and more writers joining our team, I feel like I've been able to meet and connect with so many different people. I've had the opportunity to learn from students younger than me which I've never really experienced before, and I've really gained a new perspective from people who are experiencing the pandemic in completely different ways than I have/am. GirlTalk has a unique ability, I think, to help people understand one another, and to respect one another. It's been humbling to read articles of people who have such incredible and unique ways of thinking, and the opinions you find in GirlTalk are so unique to people's experiences, they're exclusive to a broad platform like the one the magazine has developed. Of course I'm preaching to the choir here, many of you are already GirlTalk readers. To plug another great feature of the GirlTalk team though, working on the leadership has been incredible. It's a huge responsibility to edit, finalize, organize, and create for GirlTalk, and the team's desire to produce something meaningful has been the driving force behind everything. No one on the team is being paid to do the work they do, and it's been inspiring to work with people who are in it simply because they love what they do here with GirlTalk. The passion is contagious, and because the team is so motivated, there's a fantastic support system. We're all interested in helping one another out, and keeping each other on track. As older people often say about younger people, "they keep me young." This perfectly encapsulates my feelings towards the leadership team. Their motivation, resilience, passion and energy revitalized my love of writing and journalism. So as sad as it is to say goodbye, I couldn't be more confident about the hands I'm leaving GirlTalk in. This may be the end of my writing for GirlTalk, but I couldn't be more excited to see what Eve and the rest of the team does with the magazine, and to see how you all develop as writers, so in that sense it doesn't really feel like I'm leaving GirlTalk. Just transitioning from a co-editor to a writer. With that, I want to thank you all for being part of our GirlTalk community, and I can't wait to see what the future brings! Lots of love, Alex :)*

Editors note

by Eve Kaplan

I keep saying to myself, it cannot have been a year, it cannot have been a year since I started as a Co-Editor-in-Chief. In one year, we have achieved so much, our management staff of four is expanding to twelve. We are opening up clubs at any school we can and working to have a larger outreach. We are becoming a presence, the presence within schools and our communities. I am so excited for the next year, and equally so, sad to let my partnership with Alex Wexler go. An inspiration, a talent and a force, Alex Wexler has been a major piece of this magazine for years, and her legacy will be carried on through the magazine's work and the trajectory towards growth GirlTalk is on. But, next year, the magazine is in good hands, from extremely talented staff artists and writers, to my new Co-Editors-in-Chief, I am so excited. To say I put my soul into this magazine, would be an understatement. The last year has been a series of late nights bugging writers for their articles and sources, emails to bigger magazines looking for publications, planning GirlTalk @ Cate meetings and so much more. Recently, I've had an article published in Teen Ink about GirlTalk about my journey with the magazine. This article is one of the public ways my work is shown. I believe in what we're doing so strongly, I believe in the change we will make so deeply. This belief drives me to continue producing and dedicating hours to GirlTalk. Charlotte Kramon changed my life. Her invitation to apply as a Managing Editor in 2020 sparked everything that has happened in the past year and in the years to come. Here is to one year as a Co-Editor-in-Chief and the next three. Here is to the magazine that holds a part of me, that is, my biggest pride and my biggest inspiration. Thank you to the readers, to the writers, to the artists, to the editors, to our layout designer, and especially to Alex Wexler.*





Cults Are More than Just Odd: They're Strategically Destroying Us

by Sophie Saxl

We all had our depths of loneliness during quarantine, but would you ever consider resorting to a cult? For many, this became a detrimental reality. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the concept of cults became a safe place for some people. Cults thrive on the fact that they are looked down upon, marginalized. They bring people in to feel like even if they are hated by the world, they are still accepted by this small community. For example, anti-vaxxers (justifiably) received lots of hate for their opinions against vaccinations. Cults not only took them in, but adopted the anti-vax mindset to create an even stronger “us and them” mindset. Cults push anti-vaxxers forward with the building up of trust in them, leading to a push of mistrust in the institutions of society. This all stands as the foundation for the concept of cults, and that’s why it all comes together so well.

Gen Z obviously has a new relationship with religion, and it’s become mostly about how we feel individually connected to parts of it. With this trend, many cults like NXIVM have disconnected themselves from religion completely in order to revolve around what we want and customize the experience. As our generation changes, so does the environment around us, even the oddest and most drastic parts. With this built-up false sense of security, dangers come along (as all situations involving cults typically do). In the fall of 2021, South Korea experienced a major spike in COVID. This was quietly but importantly connected to a small religious cult led by a pastor. This leader would claim to be able to “heal” people by poking their eyes, and in this brought along what would go on to become what the KDCA declared a “large scale outbreak”. According to Independent,

“Officials said 90 percent of the religious community (in this South Korean spike area) was unvaccinated”. This example of religious cults bringing us on a path of physical harm shows a crystal clear view of cult structure, why it is so dangerous and why it makes absolutely no sense. This whole idea of “healing”, what does it mean? Why is there one completely random individual with a “huge amount of power”? Blind trust can lead to anything, and in this case, it charged the spread of an intensely dangerous epidemic.

Cults always have a wise leading man at the top, a tier of beautiful, angelic, and sexually charged women below him. Then lies the rest of us. This system mirrors the patriarchy as a whole, and shows that the societal structure we live under is the same used in horror stories of terrifying cult mass suicides and tragedies.

By viewing cults as less detached groups of misfits and more as genuine dangers to society, we can escape this terrifying future in which we may spiral deeper into the mystery of cult society. As things in our life become closer and closer to seeming like cults, we must know that it is not benign. Companies are structured in this same way for a reason: all of the methodology works. Don't let it work on you. We are individuals, not pawns to be pushed into pyramid schemes and messes like this. The danger of the cult is real, and it is around us now more than ever.*



How the Digital Meditation Industry is Changing Spirituality

by Zohar Lindemann

According to the Oxford University Press, since 2007, the sense of a devout faith in religion across the globe has been in rapid decline. While it is difficult to make broad statements about global religion as a whole, studies make it clear that Americans are altogether moving towards a more secular society. However, in a world where religion plays a smaller part in the lives of many Americans, that constant need to be a part of something greater than oneself is not at all gone- and through the stress and anxiety of today's world, has only grown for some. Whether it's through finding a community on social media, becoming obsessive over health and routine, or taking part in the immense popularity of cult-like businesses such as SoulCycle or WeWork, we look for a sense of something larger than ourselves anywhere we can find it: regardless of whether or not that desperate need for spiritual connection is truly being fulfilled.

It is in this in-between area, where traditional religious values are no longer relevant in so many people's lives, yet everyone still wants to feel connected to something greater, where the digital wellness industry has taken off. According to Businesswire, “The global mindfulness meditation apps market size is expected to reach USD 4,206.1 million by 2027.” These apps, most prominently Calm and Headspace, profit off of selling a supposed cure to our busy and stressed out lives. They promise healthier habits, a happier life, and a clearer mind altogether for a relatively affordable price annually. In fact, at the beginning of the pandemic, a time when many individuals were experiencing extreme mental health problems, the ten largest English-language mental health apps saw a combined 2 million more downloads compared to pre-pandemic times (according to Sensor Tower research.)

The biggest trend in meditation apps is that their products mainly stem from Burmese and Tibetan Buddhist cultural traditions. Headspace's founder, Andy Puddicombe, was a Buddhist monk in the Himalayas for many years throughout his early twenties, giving him the inspiration and knowledge to start the app in the first place. But, as much as these corporations may promise us spiritual fulfillment, can these products truly deliver? How many times before have we heard that spending money on a product would save us – why would this be any different?

The problem with meditation apps is not the concept altogether. They can be useful tools to cope with stress and anxiety, as well as accessible ones due to the digital aspect. However, these apps unfairly push the huge problem of spiritual disconnect onto individuals. A Calm or Headspace subscription cannot fulfill you completely, and you certainly aren't a bad person for not buying into the paradoxical ideals that they sell. The kinds of issues that they claim to solve- anxiety, depression, lack of spirituality- can't simply be bought and forgotten about. Feeling disconnected spiritually in today's world is completely normal and ok, and corporations that make us feel "normal" under these circumstances are part of the problem.*



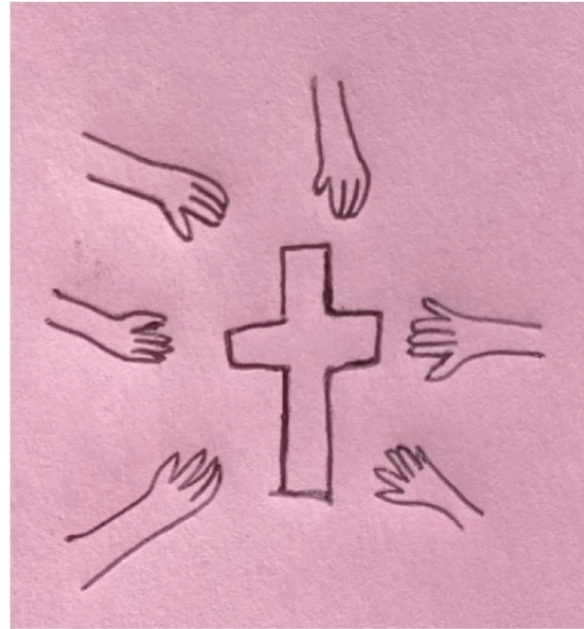
Homophobia & Christianity

by Eleni Bahati

It feels like our world keeps getting more and more divided in politics. There are two distinct sides, and people have very different but equally strong opinions on both sides. It's hard to have conversations with people we disagree with because people can never find a middle ground. My mom is the most open-minded person I know regarding politics, and unlike many, she takes many outside sources before forming her own opinion. She votes blue in every election, listens to NPR each morning, and has been taking my sister and me to protests since I can remember. On the flip side, my mom is a strict Orthodox Christian who goes to church every Sunday and makes a point to pray twice a day.

In 2016, when I was ten years old, I asked my mom to buy me the book *Being Jazz*—a biography by Jazz Jennings, a famous transgender teen whose videos were all over YouTube. My mom immediately shut me down after reading the description. “Absolutely not. I don’t want you reading about that...stuff. Of course, I support gay people, but I don’t want you reading a book like that,” she explained. I could not have been more confused. If she was supportive, why couldn’t I buy the book? I was young at the time, so I let it go. I chalked it up to a misunderstanding, and we never talked about the book again. Now and then, a conversation about gay marriage, gender fluidity, or trans people would come up, and it would never fail to turn into an argument. I often thought about how someone could claim to be so welcoming and loving but not accept those in the LGBTQ+ community? I refused to bring my confusion up for a long time because I knew it would result in another fight. However, about two years ago, I came out to my mom, which forced me to have those dreaded conversations.

I love my mom, and she’s my best friend, so I made it a point not to let our disagreement get in the way of our relationship. We talked about our points of view, and it became evident that we were coming from two very different places. We learned so much through these talks, even though they resulted in disputes. I realized



she was just confused. What my friends and I were being told online was vastly different from what she was told growing up in the church. The conversation around gay people has changed from hostile and antagonistic to acceptance and encouragement in the last decade. As humans, our first reaction is to shy away from what we do not know or understand. My mom had unintentionally avoided conversations surrounding the LGBTQ+ community for her whole life, and none of her friends held her accountable because they were doing the same. But bringing up *Being Jazz* released a giant wave of confusion through frustration and resistance. Everything surrounding LGBTQ+ people had a negative connotation in her life until that point. The combination of Christianity discouraging the existence of gay people and no one in her life disputing it caused her to think negatively about the whole community. She genuinely did not know any better. Up until that point, she had been in an echo chamber, surrounded by like-minded people who never challenged or questioned their opinions. If you’re constantly surrounded by people who think the same way, it’s impossible to learn something new.

None of this is to say that homophobia does not exist and is not highly prevalent in Christianity. Homophobia and religion have been intertwined for years, although there is no valid reason. However, it is vital that when we hear something we disagree with, to take a step back and think about where this person is coming from. Is it coming from a place of hatred, anger, or confusion? Take a moment to have a civil conversation with them, not to change them, but to learn from them and understand their perspective. And maybe, just maybe, they'll get it and open their mind to you.*



Where's Our New Religion?

by Eve Kaplan

Religion holds a grasp on our world, it is systemically built into society. Religion holds an immense amount of power within politics, education, and every single one of our world's systems. This bodes the question...how did it start? There is no tangible proof that God is real but is there tangible proof of when these cultures and belief systems began.

The earliest forms of religion are almost indistinguishable from early forms of culture. What we see as religious practices were just activities everyone in tribes did communally. Systems began to immerge from these rituals, such as healing rituals, which appear to be the earliest form of religion. Religions, as humans did from animals, evolved over time.

There are two different ways specific religions can be formed. One through a merging of elements and practices becoming systematic, organized, and involved with the state. A few examples of that are Shinto and Hindusim. Then there are religions that can be traced back to a single founder, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, and Mormonism.

Indonesia in modern history has alone seen 600 movements of new religions. New religions spring up everywhere in Canada, the United States of

America, Russia, and everywhere the government is flexible enough to allow it. Even with the rise of these small new religions, our globe is still dominated by Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. According to a Pew Study in 2012, 92% of the religiously affiliated people on the globe belong to one of those four religions.

Susan Palmer, a sociologist and scholar of new religions at Concordia University in Montreal states "We're capable of accepting Muhammad's claims of hearing God and Jesus's claims of being the son of God because it happened 1,000 or 2,000 years ago. The mist of time lends its authenticity. If someone today says these things, we'll say he used to be a vacuum salesman or something." This demonstrates why small and rising religions never seem to rise on a large scale, like Scientology, Mormonism, and Baha'i, are a few examples of the many.

It seems almost contradictory. Almost silly. How humans won't believe the same stories created in the modern-day but will follow those made thousands of years ago, those formed by ancient practices. It reminds us of why we separate religion and politics, religion and education, it gives perspective to the beliefs that hold so much weight. Religion provides comfort, it provides safety, but it doesn't derive from proven facts. Just as our parents did before us, we accept what

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so much weight. Religion provides comfort, it provides safety, but it doesn't derive from proven facts. Just as our parents did before us, we accept what each of our ancestors has believed, without needing evidence.

My God: A Personal Piece

by Sabine Fuchs

Religion has always played an important role in my life, but not in the usual way. When you say religion had a big impact on you, people assume that your family was hyper religious. Mine was anything but. Although my dad always encouraged me to make a vague connection with God, never pressuring me to read the Bible or attend church every Sunday, he did encourage me to pray. He was trying to let me define religion for myself, but it left me feeling confused. Who was my god? There is such a big difference between different religions and their gods' roles in a person's life. However, my god remained undefined. When I was young, my family was struggling so my mom hired a nanny to take care of me and my brothers. She gave us Bibles and brought us to church. I thought I had found my god and that he was the Christian god. So I pursued my faith, and made some close friends that were Christian. We all went to a Christian after school club called Awana, where we memorized parts of the Bible and studied the teachings of Jesus. I liked being part of a community, but I also felt disconnected. I tried incredibly hard to embody the "Christian" way, and yet, I felt a deep disconnect between my non religious family and my chosen devotedness. I continued to struggle with my idea of faith, until best friend came out as gay to her religious family and went through conversion. The god I had seen as a fatherly figure, as the guiding hand through my life, had just put my friend through the most traumatic experience of her life causing me to suddenly stop feeling connected to a Christian god. I had also grown up around a lot of Jewish people and been to different services. I decided that maybe if only my friend had been raised Jewish she wouldn't have to go through conversion.



But I had surrounded myself with people that were Christian and I could hardly announce a change in faith, despite so desperately wanting one. But even converting to Judaism didn't feel quite right, it felt rushed and insincere. A connection with God shouldn't be chosen. So then I started introducing myself as atheist to others. It felt like a sort of rejection of the thing that had caused me so much pain. Then I was agnostic. And honestly I don't know what I am right now, but I also feel like I shouldn't choose a religion because I'm afraid of what my community will say, or, because I might "go to hell" for who I love. I decided to wait, for what I don't know, but I'm just waiting for something.*

The Interconnectedness and Separation of Judaism and Zionism

by Alex Wexler

What's ironic about this article, is there's really no inherent connection between Judaism and Zionism. I write about this topic, however, because in my experience as a Jewish person, the idea of Zionism has forced me to confront an intersection in my religious identity, and in my political alignment. The state of Israel has been relevant to my Jewish experience and I've been aware of its religious significance since before I could remember. However, it wasn't something I thought much about or really formed opinions on until much later, when I became more aware of the controversy that surrounds Israel's right to exist. Growing up, I learned about Israel in Hebrew School, I celebrated Yom Ha'atzmaut (Israeli Independence Day) in school, and sang the Hatikvah (Israeli national anthem) every morning at camp. I was always told that Israel is my homeland, and as I began to understand the Jews' history of persecution, I began valuing Israel as a staple in the Jewish religion. When Israel began to make headlines, and as my idea of the peaceful homeland where Jews were free of persecution became clouded with the actions of a deplorable leader and with a relentless war, I felt confused. Prior to this, I never "formed an opinion" on Israel's existence, as it never seemed like there was any opinion to be formed. When I became aware of the violence, however, I felt as though I had to choose a side.

This feeling was only exacerbated by Israel making national headlines once again in 2020, a year fueled by heated disputes and social media political armies. The pressure from within the temple to support Israel unquestioningly was met with pressure from peers to denounce Israel and to align myself with "Free Palestine" movements. With all this political chaos, I felt the need to either

disclaim and explain my stance despite my Jewish identity, or to defend, and speak on behalf of the land I was raised to believe was my homeland and safe haven. It seemed as though people expected me to have a valuable opinion, or to be armed with the facts because of my Jewish identity; when in reality, I was just as confused as everyone else.



What followed these feelings, and what added to my sense of being stuck and unable to decide, was the guilt that came with aligning myself. The guilt of either letting down my religion and going against the beliefs of many of my relatives and peers, or the guilt of supporting a country which was committing acts which are antithetical to my beliefs. This complexity made it not only difficult to align myself, but to form an opinion, let alone share one.

The pressure to be a source of information, and to have some clarity in all of the chaos was harmful because of the confusion and uncertainty it evoked, but it also allowed people to pin blame on Jewish people. As I mentioned above, the

“Free Palestine” comments left on Jewish people’s posts were telling of an attitude that many had, which was that Jewish people somehow held responsibility for the events taking place in Israel and Palestine. This ideology, which has deep, antisemitic roots, is scary to witness as Jewish scapegoatism has materialized into very harmful consequences in the past. Even now, hate crimes against Jewish people often have something to do with Jewish scapegoatism, blaming Jewish people for current issues that have nothing to do with them. Perhaps, then, to go about addressing this issue, we must separate Jews from Israel all together.

But how do we do this when Israel holds such significance in the story of Judaism, and in modern-day Jewish practices? We must allow people to connect themselves with the issues, rather than to enforce the idea that they must feel one way or another. The burden placed on marginalized people to speak about issues that face their communities is unnecessary and unfair. It’s time we give people the space to speak about issues which they feel passionate about, but we must let go of the expectation that people are ready, willing, and wanting to speak about issues that affect them personally. *

Recovery and Religion

by Lily Kramon

Recently, I took part in a 2-week course at my school called “Grassroots Activism.” We spent time in Skid Row, Los Angeles, as well as other low-income communities, and explored how different grassroots organizations work with communities in need. I had the opportunity to speak with people who were recovering drug addicts, previously unhoused, or ex-gang members. Throughout all of these powerful conversations, I was particularly struck by how each person stressed that their faith had helped them turn their life around.

We visited an organization called Homeboy Industries that focuses on gang intervention. Their program provides job counseling, tattoo removal, therapy, and careers for former gang members. During my visit to Homeboy Industries, I spoke with a former gang member who now utilizes the services provided by this organization. He said he wouldn’t be alive if it weren’t for his faith, and that the church helped him find a new purpose in his life. The founder of Homeboy Industries is a pastor, and his guidance has helped former gang members use religion to find new values in their life. The jobs provided at Homeboy Industries, as well as the

the founder’s confidence in each member, have helped ex-gang members find a new path in life. Homeboy Industries has helped thousands of former gang members with its services, but it is also important to highlight how religion was a factor in their recovery. For many of these former gang members, their faith has allowed them to be part of a community that shares the same religious beliefs and it helps them rediscover their purpose in life.

Another organization we visited is called Proyecto Pastoral. They are a grassroots organization in East Los Angeles, and they serve the Boyle Heights community with their education programs, shelters, and other services. Their offices are located near the Dolores Mission Church, a center for the community and where Father Greg Boyle began his work many years ago. They use the church facilities for education, shelter, and food services. Proyecto Pastoral encompasses many values that resonate with Catholic communities. They intend to instill a sense of wholeness in shelter members through their sense of community, which is something that members of Churches experience as well. Dignity and support are core values in this organization, which can similarly be seen as core values of religious congregations. When I visited Proyecto

Pastoral, I felt a sense of warmth throughout the place, and I felt welcomed and cared for. This is in part because of the staff who are dedicated to serving the Boyle Heights area, but it is also because of the sense of community that is connected with the church that is located near the organization. Passionate religious groups can bring about a unique sincerity and affection that adds a welcoming effect to non-profits such as Proyecto Pastoral.

My visits to these two organizations were extraordinary, and it was inspiring to witness the power that grassroots organizations have on communities in need in the greater Los Angeles area.*

The Truth Behind the “Religion” of Scientology

by Gemma Luber

It's human nature to make mistakes, there is no denying that. We slip up and our minds go into panic mode where we think that it has to be fixed. If we have a problem or worry, we want it to be solved, right then and there. We try to think of every possible answer there is and if it could work, but we never take it too far, at least some of us. People have been using the solution of Scientology to try and help deal with past or ongoing trauma, however, in the moment of panic they don't realize the terrifying history of it and the dangerous future it holds for them. Scientology was created by L Ron. Hubbard, a science fiction writer who wrote the book “Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health.” It was designed to make people think that all their experiences, good or bad, stayed in their brain and were known as ‘engrams.’ After paying and going through a process called auditing, the goal was to achieve the state of being clear where all unwanted emotions, unreasonable fears, and insecurities apparently go away. This is why people join, they join to get rid of any pain from the past, they join thinking that it will fix any mistakes, they join to forget. People don't realize that it won't help you forget, it will only make you relive your traumas.

Many members of the organization who sought help when they were struggling found that, along with the services from the organization, their faith kept them on track for a better future. Being a part of a community that shares similar beliefs to yours can be beyond empowering. Religion can inspire an increase in gratitude for the world around you and can help one find peace and strength inside themselves that they may not have had before. Grassroots organizations such as Proyecto Pastoral and Homeboy Industries have been able to incorporate these values into their work, and it works wonders for the people seeking services from them.



Auditing is using a machine called the E-meter to detect where the trauma in your brain is located through a series of questions. It's a ton of money and is a big part of what Scientology does. Auditing sounds like something you'd see in a movie, it's beyond reality and is completely ridiculous. Auditing is making tons of money off people's traumas which is messed up in so many ways. Not only does the process actively say that they are against psychiatry, but the questions that the people are asking are completely intrusive and unprofessional. Scientology is very expensive and at times very manipulative. Its history is very concerning considering who it was built by and the principles it was based off of.

I'll never understand how L Ron Hubbard could build a “religion” when he has done many cruel things in his

Starting within his home, he had three wives over the course of his life. His first wife, Margrett Grubb, gave him two kids. Later, his son helped him with the church and eventually showed us how it was all a lie, "Scientology is a power- and money- and intelligence-gathering game," Hubbard Jr. said once in an interview. This is just one of times that somebody clearly stated what Scientology really was, a scheme. His second wife, Sara Hubbard, was constantly assaulted and he threatened her using the safety of their own daughter. Not only did he kidnap his daughter when Sara threatened to leave him, but hurt her for even the smallest things like smiling in her sleep. Even with these cold hard facts people still felt that this man could be trusted, which is just heartbreaking to think about; this shows how he was a master manipulator. His third wife, Mary Hubbard, gave him four more children. Mary played a role in the church as Scientology was just coming to light. However, she was sentenced to four years in federal prison for stealing government documents and apparently bugging at least one government meeting.

L Ron Hubbard wasn't a good father figure, he never was a role model to his kids for how to treat people. He was a narcissist and an insecure man who blamed his trust issues on others. People trusted this manipulative science fiction writer who based an entire religion off of his writings. Looking at his past and the amount of people he has brainwashed, it worries me how it was so easy for someone to have that much control over so many people. Scientology was supposed to be a place where you could start over and clear your past experiences. While some of us have the understanding of the craziness the "religion" of Scientology really is, some haven't gone through that realization. Somehow they are so desperate that they have looked past Hubbard's history and how he based the "religion" off a book he wrote, a science fiction book. People don't seem to see how it sucks you in and makes you believe all these crazy things just so that you can forget the past instead of dealing with it. Scientology is not a solution to a problem, it's not going to help you with your past; Scientology is no true religion, it's a cult.*

