

# Hate Crimes, Scientology and Television

## American and International Contexts

Massimo Introvigne  
CESNUR 2019 Conference  
Torino, September 5, 2019

LEAH REMINI:  
SCIENTOLOGY  
AND THE AFTERMATH

WE ARE **A&E**



# Waco and the FBI



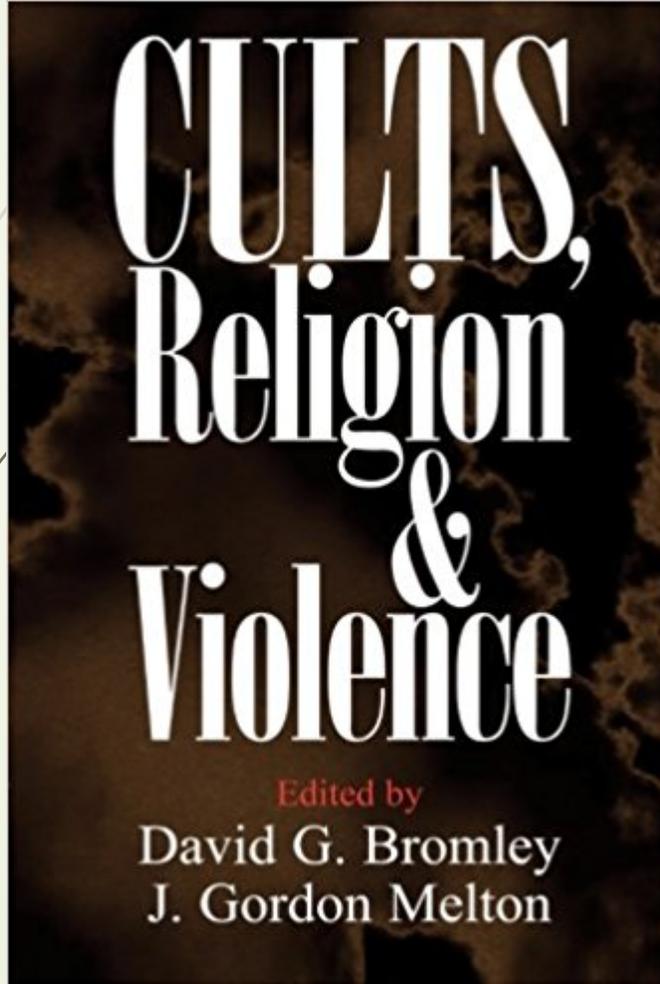
- In 1993, the FBI siege of the headquarters of the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, ended up in the death of 80 members of the group, including 22 children (left). The FBI's Critical Incidents Response Group started studying what went wrong in Waco, seeking the cooperation of academic scholars of new religious movements. I myself co-organized and chaired a seminar for FBI agents in 1998 in Fredericksburg, Virginia, where Eileen Barker and Gordon Melton also spoke

# “Cults” and Violence

- At the seminar (right), it was immediately clear to us that the FBI wanted to know how the phenomenon of “cults” (a word the scholars did not use, preferring “new religious movements,” NRMs) may be related to eruptions of violence. Scholars proposed various tentative criteria, and the conversation continued for several years



# *Cults, Religion, and Violence*



- ▶ In 2001-2002, several leading scholars of new religious movements from Europe and United States joined in a project called “Cults, Religion, and Violence,” which included seminars and sessions at conferences and culminated in 2002 in the publication of a book with the same title, of which I was a co-author, by Cambridge University Press. The project did consider the ongoing dialogue between some scholars and the FBI

# The Aftermath of 9/11

- ▶ While the project “Cults, Religion, and Violence” was developing, 9/11 occurred. It created a new urgency in governments and scholars all over the world to further study the relationship between religion and violence. This study led to an important conclusion: that violent and criminal groups exist **within traditional religions as well**. In fact, violence is **more prevalent** in (or at the fringe of) traditional religions than within NRMs. There are more pedophile priests than pedophile members of NRMs, and more terrorists acting in the name of radical Islam than in the name of NRMs



## Focus on *Physical* Violence

- ▶ After 9/11, the attention of law enforcement agencies, including the FBI, focused on *physical* violence rather than on elusive notions of *psychological* violence, aka brainwashing (denounced by NRM scholars as an imaginary crime), on beating or murdering members and opponents rather than on threatening them with the flames of hell in the afterlife, and so on. However, it was recognized that *hate speech*, i.e. *advocating* physical violence and inciting others to commit violent acts, is also a real form of violence



Above: Japan's Shoko Asahara (1955-2018) ordered the murder of opponents of his group Aum Shinrikyo before organizing a deadly gas attack with sarin gas in the Tokyo subway in 1995, although most members of his movements ignored his criminal activities



# Violence and NRMs: Three Areas

- ▶ Twenty years after the CESNUR-FBI seminar, the study of the relationship between NRMs and violence has evolved. It has also identified three different areas of this relationship:
    1. Violence perpetrated by NRMs
    2. Violence falsely ascribed to NRMs
    3. Violence against NRMs, fueled by hate speech
- I will examine these three areas, focusing on a case study of Scientology



NETFLIX

*Wild Wild Country*

# 1. Violence Perpetrated by NRMs

- ▶ Although NRMs are not inherently more violent than certain groups within mainline religions, some NRMs are or become violent. Violence always derives from multiple causes, and in some cases may be a consequence of social pressure against NRMs
- ▶ For instance, the TV series *Wild Wild Country* made many Americans familiar with the 1984 case, when devotees of Osho Rajneesh (1931–1990) infected with salmonella the salad bars of local restaurants in Oregon's Wasco County, where they had established their commune, Rajneeshpuram. Rather than mystical, the purpose was mundane, as it was aimed at preventing local voters from participating in the election, so that the commune's own candidates would win

# Mostly Against Members

- ▶ While groups such as Synanon or Aum Shinrikyo carried out murderous attacks against their opponents or society at large, looking at the number of casualties overwhelmingly the violence of certain NRMs targeted their own members
- ▶ With few exceptions, members of the respective movements rather than outsiders died in the suicides and homicides involving the Peoples Temple (Jonestown, Guyana, 1978), the Order of the Solar Temple (Switzerland, France, and Quebec, Canada, 1994–1997), Heaven's Gate (Rancho Santa Fe, California, 1997), and the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God (Uganda 2000)



Above: Charred remains of members of the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God, a Ugandan NRM that self-destroyed itself in 2000 in a frenzy of homicides and suicides, which made more than 700 victims

# Scientology: Inherently *Not* Violent



Between 1997 and 2002, anti-Scientologist Gerry Armstrong was repeatedly sued in the U.S. by Scientology for breach of a previous settlement agreement. He was sentenced to fines and a jail term

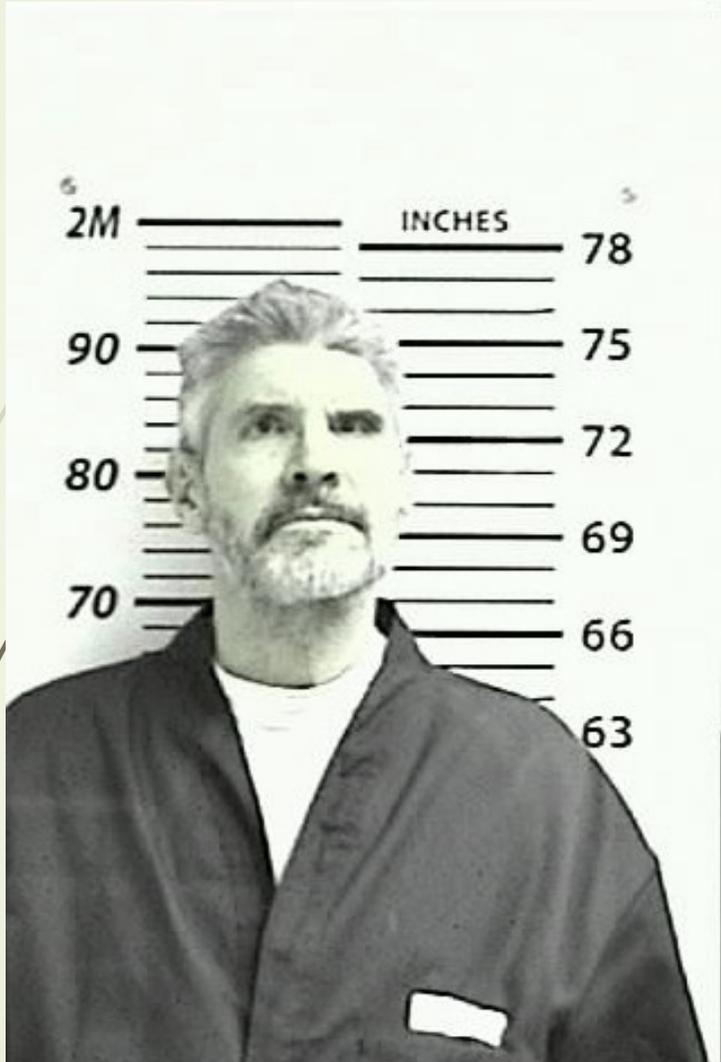
- ▶ Anti-cultists like to lump together different NRMs, predicting that many of them may one day produce “another Jonestown.” There is no evidence supporting this theory. Among thousands of NRMs, only a tiny minority was accused of violence
- ▶ It is indeed remarkable that, faced with fierce opposition and, in some countries, persecution, Scientologists did not react through violence. Some critics would call “violence” the fact that private detectives investigated their peccadillos and they were repeatedly sued by Scientology. Whatever the facts of these matters, Scientology’s worldview is basically *optimistic*. While pessimistic-apocalyptic groups may resort to physical violence, Scientology believes that justice may be obtained through courts of law

## 2. Violence Ascribed to NRMs

- Often, NRMs are accused of acts of violence they have *not* committed. Some are imaginary crimes, others were committed by others or had nothing to do with the accused NRM. One egregious case was the murder of a woman in a McDonald's in Zhaoyuan, China in 2014. Chinese authorities ascribed it to The Church of Almighty God, to justify their persecution of this NRM. In fact, it had been committed by a *different*, smaller NRM



# Ascription of Violence to Scientology



- ▶ In 2011, William Rex Fowler was convicted in Colorado for fatally shooting his ex-business partner Thomas Ciancio (after which, he tried unsuccessfully to commit suicide). Anti-cultists argued, falsely, that Fowler, a Scientologist, killed Ciancio because the latter did not approve of his donations to Scientology. The prosecutor, however, clearly stated that “Scientology didn’t play a role at all in this,” and the judge “blocked lawyers on either side from mentioning Scientology” in their arguments. This is a typical case of blaming an NRM for a crime committed by an individual member for mundane reasons totally unrelated to the movement

# The Thompson Case

- ▶ Even more preposterous was the 2019 case of Kenneth Wayne Thompson, who murdered his sister-in-law and her boyfriend in Prescott Valley, Arizona. In a desperate attempt to avoid a conviction for first-degree murder and the death penalty, Thompson's attorneys claimed that he committed the crime because he was "brainwashed" by Scientology into believing that the couple was hurting one of their children, who was being treated with psychiatric drugs. Unfortunately for Thompson, the prosecutor was able to prove that he was *not* a Scientologist (although his mother was) and in fact self-described himself as "an atheist"

## Scientology defense fails as jury returns first-degree murder verdicts in Prescott trial

Richard Ruelas | Arizona Republic  
Published 2:43 PM EST Feb 20, 2019



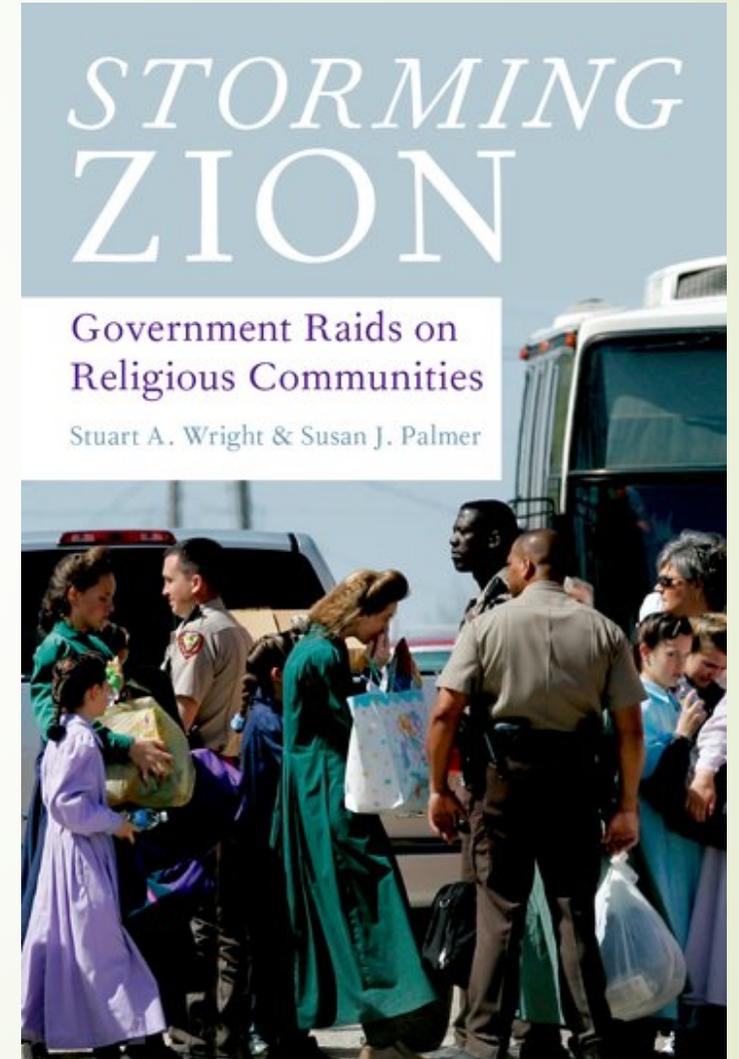


## The Jury Didn't Buy It

- ▶ Thompson's attorneys quoted Leah Remini's anti-Scientology TV serial and had Dr Susan Raine, a Canadian scholar and an associate of veteran anti-Scientologist Stephen Kent, testify for ninety minutes about her preferred theory, that Scientologists are obsessed by space aliens. Since Thompson was not a Scientologist, this was irrelevant. Thompson's lawyer and his "experts" were easily thrown out of court. It took only two hours for the jury to find Thompson guilty of first-degree murder. On April 4, 2019, he was sentenced to death
- ▶ The prosecutor (who won a national award for his handling of the case) aptly summarized what happened: "Why is Scientology even injected into this trial? Scientology is not on trial; the defendant is. Scientology did not kill the victims; the defendant did"

### 3. Violence Against NRMs

- Some studies about the relationship between violence and NRMs neglect the fact that there are more victims of violence *against* NRMs than *by* NRMs. Most of these are victims of persecution, torture, and extra-judicial murder by non-democratic governments, with China leading the list with its repression of Falun Gong and The Church of Almighty God. As Susan Palmer and Stuart Wright mentioned in their book *Storming Zion*, raids against NRMs are often conducted with unnecessary real and symbolic violence even in democratic countries – and Scientology is the most raided NRM on an international scale



# Torture in Russia?



Security officers conducting a raid on Church of Scientology facilities in Moscow on March 28, 2019

- ▶ Russia is another country persecuting some NRMs, including Scientology. In 2018, Western media reported that in St Petersburg, lawyers of incarcerated members of the Church of Scientology were given materials of the criminal investigation that included comments by the FSB investigator. The comments included: “He knows a lot, but keeps quiet – **reinterrogate with an electric aid to memory.**” There is no evidence that actual torture occurred, but the fact it was contemplated as a possibility is disturbing, also in view of allegations of torture by Russian Jehovah’s Witnesses

# Private Violence Against Scientology

## Police: Woman drove car into Scientology doors because church is 'evil'



### Never Miss A Story

Subscribe to Austin American-Statesman

Subscribe Now

### OUR PICKS



▲ HIDE CAPTION

Erin McMurtry, 31, was charged with criminal mischief at a place of worship and was booked into Travis County Jail after she drove through the glass doors of the Church of Scientology of Texas, across the street from the University of Texas, on Dec. 14, 2015.

- ▶ In other cases, anti-NRMs violence is committed by private individuals. Only between 2016-2018, Scientology has reported to the authorities more than 500 violent crimes and threats against persons and premises of the Church (and more in 2019). On December 14, 2015, Erin McMurtry drove her car through the front of the Church of Scientology of Austin, Texas

# The Reisdorf Case



- ▶ On April 23, 2016, Brandon Reisdorf, a young man with psychiatric problems whose parents are vocal Scientology ex-members and critics, was caught on a security camera smashing with a hammer the front window of the Church of Scientology of Los Angeles. He was also identified as the source of death threats to several prominent Scientologists. He was arrested and sentenced to three years probation, mandatory psychiatric care, and a ban to go more than 100 yards near any Scientology premise in Southern California

# The Barkanov Case

Los Angeles Times

ADVERTISEMENT



CALIFORNIA

Man accused of threatening to kill David Miscavige, Church of Scientology members



- On January 5, 2016, Andre Barkanov was arrested in Los Angeles and charged with 12 felony counts of making criminal threats against the Church of Scientology and his leaders and one count of stalking. He had issued death threats against Scientology leader David Miscavige and others for more than five months

# The Sydney Murder

- It was only a matter of time before casualties will follow. In 2019, they did. On January 3, a 16-year-old boy who wanted to “rescue” her mother from Scientology entered the premises of Scientology in Sydney, Australia. While he was escorted outside, he stabbed to death 24-year old Taiwanese Scientologist Chih-Jen Yeh with a large kitchen knife



# The Inglewood Incident



The screenshot shows a news broadcast from ABC 7 Eyewitness News. The top navigation bar includes the station's logo, the text "WATCH VIDEOS", and location options for "Los Angeles" and "Orange C". Below the navigation bar, there are social media sharing options for Facebook (SHARE), Twitter (TWEET), and Email (EMAIL). The main headline reads: "Inglewood police shooting: Suspect drove Bentley to Church of Scientology wielding sword, officials say". The video player shows a female news anchor in a blue dress speaking, with a city skyline at night in the background. The video player interface includes a play button, a progress bar showing 00:00 / 01:55, and icons for volume, settings, and full screen.

- On April 3, 2019, a man tried to enter the Scientology church in Inglewood, California. He was stopped by police officers and the confrontation left the man dead and two policemen seriously wounded

# Hate Speech

Chairmanship

Home  
At a glance  
Overview  
Chairperson-in-Office  
Contacts  
Our work  
The V to V Dialogues  
The Corfu Process  
Personal representatives  
Library  
Documents  
Photos  
Multimedia



## CIO Representatives to promote tolerance

**Personal Representatives of the Chairperson-in-Office to promote greater tolerance and combat racism, xenophobia and discrimination**

**Rabbi Andrew Baker**  
Personal Representative on Combating Anti-Semitism

Rabbi Andrew Baker is director of International Jewish Affairs at the American Jewish Committee (AJC), which he joined in 1979. A leading expert on anti-Semitism in Europe, he travels extensively to strengthen relations between the AJC and Jewish communities worldwide. Throughout most of the 1990s, as director of European Affairs, Rabbi Baker promoted tolerance in the emerging democracies of Central and Eastern Europe. He is active in Holocaust restitution issues and in 2003 was awarded the Officer's Cross of the Order of Merit by Germany for his work in German-Jewish relations.



**Ambassador Adil Akhmetov**  
Personal Representative on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims

Following a decision by the Chairperson-in-Office, Ambassador Adil Akhmetov of Kazakhstan was appointed as Personal Representative on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims in April 2009. Ambassador Akhmetov is Secretary of the Committee on International Relations, Defence and Security, and a Member of the Senate of the Parliament of Kazakhstan. His previous positions include First Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Chairman of the Committee on Education of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Healthcare, and Envoy Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Kazakhstan to the UK.



**Massimo Introvigne**  
Personal Representative on Combating Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination, also focusing on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians and Members of Other Religions

Massimo Introvigne was born in Rome in 1955. A sociologist of religion, he has lectured in several universities both in Italy and abroad, and is the author of more than sixty books and more than one hundred articles in academic

**Links**

- Documents and resources related to the Personal Representatives, available on the Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Information System (TANDIS)

**Contacts**

**Press and Public Information Section, OSCE Secretariat**  
Press and Public Information Section  
OSCE Secretariat  
Wallnerstrasse 6  
A-1010 Vienna  
Austria  
Office: +43 1 514 36 6180  
Fax: +43 1 514 36 6105  
info@osce.org

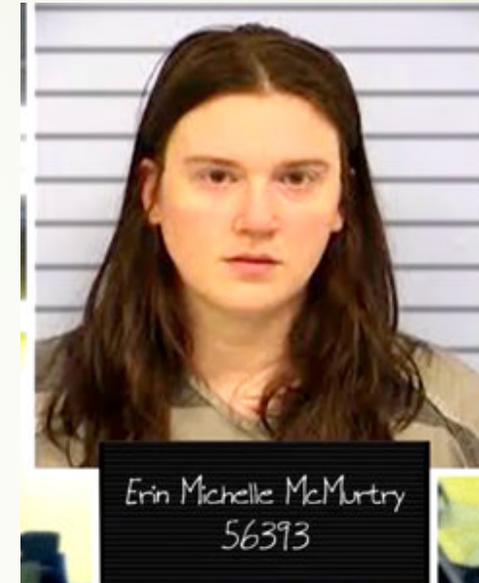
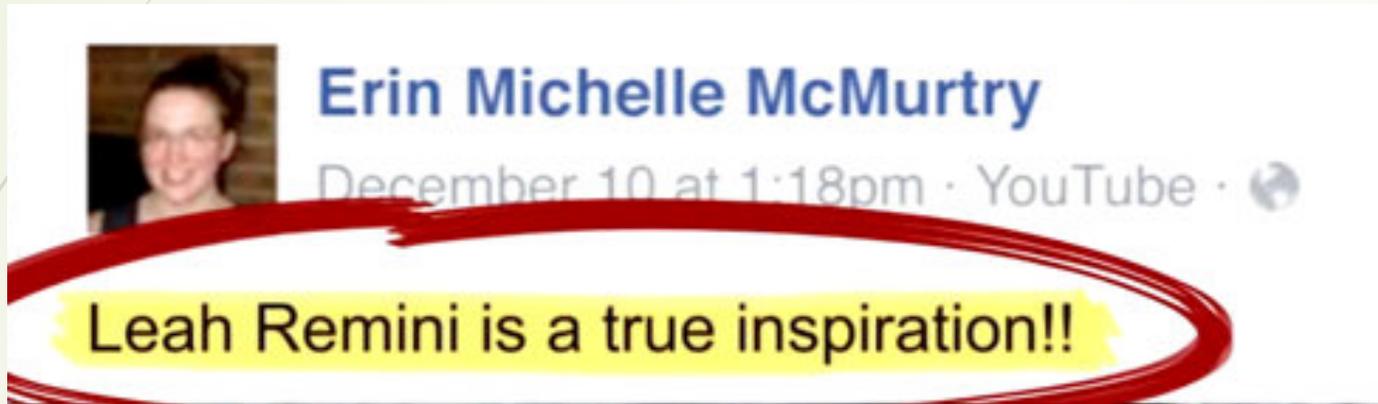
- In 2011, I served as Representative of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, of which the United States are also a participating state) for combating racism, xenophobia, and intolerance and discrimination against Christians and members of other religions. Part of my portfolio was combating hate speech
- It was very difficult to reconcile the stricter European position and the American one, which would protect under the First Amendment much of what in Europe would be proscribed as hate speech. Particularly in the religious field, legitimate religious criticism should be distinguished from incitement to violence, but the problem is that the latter may be both explicit and implicit

# Reisdorf and Leah Remini

- The Reisdorf incident is a case in point. *After his hammer attack against the Scientology church in Los Angeles, he appeared in Leah Remini's anti-Scientology TV show and was lionized by anti-cultists as an anti-Scientology hero*
- It is not unreasonable to assume that this emboldened him to enter illegally yet another Scientology church, this time in San Diego, which led him to be returned to jail on February 9, 2019



# Other Remini Connections



- ▶ Unlike Reisdorf, reportedly Eric McMurtry and Andre Barkanov had no personal or family connections with Scientology. They both proclaimed their admiration for Leah Remini and her anti-Scientology show. Developments about the Sydney case are kept confidential by the authorities because the murderer is a minor. However, it is not that difficult to guess what the sources were of his persuasion that his mother was "in serious danger" because she was going through a Purification Rundown in the Church of Scientology

# Blaming the Victims



The image shows a screenshot of a news article from the Daily Beast. At the top left, there is a red circular badge that says "CHEAT SHEET". The "DAILY BEAST" logo is in the top right. Below the logo is a navigation bar with links for POLITICS, ENTERTAINMENT, WORLD NEWS, HALF FULL, CULTURE, U.S. NEWS, INNOVATION, SCOUTED, and TRAVEL. The article is categorized under "DOUBLE EDGED". The title is "Scientology Has a Long, Weird History With Sword Deaths". Below the title is a sub-headline: "L. Ron Hubbard claimed a book he wrote about swords was so good it killed people. Is this why people keep attacking the church with swords?". The author is Kelly Weill, a Reporter, with a small profile picture. To the right of the author's name is the text "Updated 03.30.19 12:39PM ET / Published 03.29.19 4:55AM ET". At the bottom right of the article preview are social media sharing icons for Facebook, Twitter, Email, and RSS.

- Part of the media reporting about the crimes against Scientology criticized the Church for what happened, a classical case of blaming the victims. In this *Daily Beast* article, for example, a false quote attributed by L. Ron Hubbard is seen as the source for Scientology's "history" with "sword deaths." By reading the article, one understands that Scientology's "problem" is that men armed with swords or knives tried to kill (and, in Australia, actually killed) Scientologists...

# Conclusion: Hate Speech and Violence

- ▶ We cannot easily solve the very delicate questions of where freedom of speech ends and hate speech starts. However, there are clear signs of a connection between campaigns and TV shows dehumanizing Scientologists as “evil cultists” and criminals and actual violence, even if Leah Remini and others stay prudently away from actual incitement to commit crimes. In the cases of white supremacists and anti-Semitic campaigns, even U.S. courts seem now more aware of the fact that hate speech can actually and literally kill



Brandon Reisdorf appearing in Remini's TV show with Leah Remini and her co-host Mike Rinder

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a large, rectangular sign made of brown cardboard. The sign has the words "NO FREEDOM FOR HATE SPEECH" written on it in large, black, hand-drawn capital letters. The person is wearing black gloves. The background is a blurred city street with multi-story buildings and windows. The lighting is bright, suggesting it is daytime.

NO  
FREEDOM  
FOR  
HATE  
SPEECH

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:  
[MAXINTROVIGNE@GMAIL.COM](mailto:MAXINTROVIGNE@GMAIL.COM)**