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John "Jack" Parsons, left, died in a mysterious explosion in this mansion in 1952. Some say the rocket scientist was murdered.

Life as Satanist Propelled Rocketeer

I height [sic] Don Quixote, I live on peyote, marijuana, morphine and cocaine.

I never knew sadness, but only a madness that burns at the heart and the brain.

—John Whiteside Parsons

He was an unorthodox genius, a poet and rocket scientist who helped give birth to an institution that would become mankind's window on the universe.

He was also a devotee of the black arts, a sci-fi junkie and host of backyard orgies on Pasadena's stately Millionaires' Row.

John "Jack" Whiteside Parsons, a founder of the legendary Jet Propulsion Laboratory and a maverick visionary honored with a moon crater bearing his name, gave no early hint of the inner stirrings that propelled him to worship the devil and lead an extraordinary double life: respected scientist by day, dedicated occultist by night.

Over a little more than a decade, the tall and vainly handsome Parsons skillfully twinned his two existences as rocketeer and antichrist leader of the occult Ordo Templi Orientis.

His mysterious death in an explosion in 1952 left many wondering whether Parsons was a victim of murder or suicide—or simply of an accident at his own momentarily careless hands.

Born Marvel Whiteside Parsons in 1914, he was a mama's boy who hated authority and detested social mores. He was reared by his aging, wealthy grandparents and his mother, Ruth. Embittered by her adulterous husband, also named Marvel, who abandoned his family, Ruth began calling her son John.

Young John found his companions in poetry, which he read the way other boys read comic books. He also gulped down the space and sci-fi fantasies of Jules Verne. He and his childhood pal, the mechanically gifted Ed Forman, tinkered with black-powder rockets and pocked their backyards with craters.

Parsons was at USC when word of Caltech graduate student Frank Malina's project on rocket propulsion and high-altitude rockets reached him and Forman. The young duo brazenly offered to help. Even though neither youth had a degree, Theodore von Karman, the director of Caltech's Guggenheim Aeronautical Laboratory and one of the world's leading scientists, took them up on their offer.

Unencumbered by academic knowledge, Parsons was a cookbook chemist obsessed with things that go bang, while Forman helped turn designs into hardware. On Halloween 1936, the rocketeers dug trenches and piled up sandbags in the Arroyo Seco and attempted to test a rocket motor they had

built. Fueled with a brew of gaseous oxygen and methyl alcohol, the motor burned for three seconds.

This inauspicious beginning marked the start of rocketry in California at a time when America still saw space exploration as pulp fiction. The test site in the Arroyo Seco later became JPL.

Von Karman allocated campus lab space to the rocketry project. But after two lab explosions, the group—by then dubbed the "Suicide Squad"—was kicked off campus and headed back to the Arroyo Seco.

Parsons' new fame as Caltech's best explosives expert took him to the courtroom as an expert witness. In 1938, he testified against Los Angeles Police Department Lt. Earl Kynette, a mayoral crony accused in the car bombing of an ex-LAPD detective-turned-private eye.

Parsons earned his bread and butter working on a jet-assisted takeoff unit that developed into a solid-fuel rocket that would help win World War II.

Early in the war, in 1942, Parsons and his wife, Helen, moved into an aging Pasadena mansion. The house on South Orange Grove Boulevard was next door to the former estate of beer baron Adolphus Busch with its famous gardens.

But Millionaires' Row had never seen anything like Parsons and his friends.

Parsons converted the rooms into 19 apartments, and invited in an odd mix of Bohemian artists, writers, scientists and occultists. The residents mockingly named the place "the Parsonage," for it was anything but.

Before dropping out of USC, the poetry-loving Parsons had cultivated an interest in the writings of Aleister Crowley, the English sorcerer and Satanist who called himself "Beast 666" and "the wickedest man in the world."

Soon the house on South Orange Grove was a laboratory of another sort—for black magic.

In 1944, Parsons resigned from JPL in favor of whizzing through time and space via peyote, mescaline, marijuana, opiates and hallucinogens.

Soon, the marriage began to unravel. Helen became pregnant by another member of the Parsonage circle, and Parsons took up with Helen's beautiful 18-year-old sister, Sara Northrup, before divorcing Helen.

Mutual curiosity about the mind's power led Parsons into a friendship in 1946 with L. Ron Hubbard, the future founder of Scientology. Hubbard moved into the house and later married Sara, Parsons' lover and sister-in-law, before divorcing his first wife.

According to "Sex and Rockets: The Occult

World of Jack Parsons," a new book by John Carter (a pseudonym), Hubbard chanted incantations while Parsons and his new lover, Marjorie Cameron, tried to produce a "moon child," a "magical child" with superior intellect and powers whose birth would occur on the astral plane, not the physical one.

The ceremony was to span 12 consecutive nights. But when rituals called for a naked pregnant woman to jump nine times through fire to ensure a safe delivery, the neighbors began protesting. The police looked into the matter, but nothing came of their investigation.

Parsons and Hubbard, who had united to take on Christianity, fell out over more trivial matters. Carter writes that the two argued over a sailboat venture that ended in a court dispute.

Disillusioned with Hubbard, Parsons resigned from the Ordo Templi Orientis, married Cameron and began exploring the unknown on his own. After one reputed out-of-body experience, he acquired the name "Belarion Armiluss Al Dajjal, antichrist."

But even the antichrist had to eat. Low on funds, he worked for various local aviation companies, including Hughes Aircraft, and bootlegged nitroglycerin.

It was after he left the mansion and moved with his wife into a rented room over the garage at the Cruikshank Estate on South Orange Grove that life began to unravel.

The FBI was investigating him on suspicion of espionage, consorting with communists, including some allegedly at Caltech, and cult activities; the scrutiny cost Parsons his government security clearance.

In June 1952, while his wife shopped for groceries for a planned vacation to Mexico, Parsons mixed chemicals from his arsenal of illegal explosives.

Police reports say the explosives expert dropped the concoction of fulminate of mercury. A deadly blast that could be felt a mile away ripped through Parsons' garage lab, blowing off his right arm, breaking his other arm and both legs, and leaving a gaping hole in his jaw.

He died 45 minutes later. When his mother heard the news, she joined him in death, gulping down a bottle of sleeping pills.

Authorities concluded that his death was a drug-induced accident or suicide. His wife and others believed he was killed by the recently paroled Kynette, whom Parsons had helped put in prison.

To this day, there's a joke in the aerospace community that JPL stands for "Jack Parsons' Laboratory" or "Jack Parsons Lives." The Crater Parsons, named in his honor, happens to be on the moon's dark side.

Los Angeles Times

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TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 29, 2000

Report Urges Dissolution of Scientology Church in France

■ **Europe: Panel calls group a danger to the public and a threat to national security.**

By JOHN THOR DAHLBURG
TIMES STAFF WRITER

PARIS—Scientology, the Los Angeles-based religion treated with suspicion and hostility by several Western European governments, is now under siege in France, where an official report has called for disbanding church operations here.

A blue-ribbon government panel studying what French officials define as "sects" has concluded that the faith, founded by the late U.S. science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard, is a "vast enterprise of transnational character" with its own private police force run clandestinely from the United States.

"They have a clear strategy of infiltrating and of trying to influence the state, and the will to do it," said Denis Barthelemy, a career magistrate serving as secretary-general of the panel, the Interministerial Mission on Combating Sects. "This goes beyond being an ordinary pressure group. For the internal security of the state, we are afraid."

Panel Also Targets Cult Tied to Suicides

In the report to Prime Minister Lionel Jospin published this month, the panel contends that Scientology is, in fact, a moneymaking venture. The report goes to the extraordinary length of proposing the dissolution here of Scientology and another religious group, the Order of the Solar Temple, which lost 74 members to murder-suicides in France, Switzerland and Canada between 1994 and 1997.

It is the latest controversy to embroil Scientology in Europe, where the actions of courts and governments threaten to put some countries on a collision course with the Clinton administration. A 1998 U.S. law makes ensuring freedom of religion a priority in foreign policy, and the State Department's worldwide survey of human rights practices released Friday criticized some French conduct.

Tax claims brought against some Scientology churches in France in 1994-95 forced them into bankruptcy, the State Department said. The survey also found that the

classification of Scientology and 172 other groups as sects by a French parliamentary committee four years ago contributed to "an atmosphere of intolerance and bias against minority religions."

"We are in a climate of terror and witch hunts," said Daniele Gounord, spokeswoman for the Paris Church of Scientology. She noted that the panel's report is short on specifics to buttress its charges and said Scientologists were never asked to give their side of the story.

"France is dealing with us the exact same way the Chinese deal with the Falun Gong," she said, referring to a religious movement banned by leaders in Beijing.

However, in the view of the government panel—which was chaired by Alain Vivien, a former member of Parliament—Scientology constitutes a clear and present danger to "public order" and the "dignity of the human person."

Some former Scientologists agree. "I was turned into a robot," said Mona Vasquez, a 40-year-old Frenchwoman who spent seven years in the organization. "They made me leave my studies, my boyfriend, my family."

France is far from the only European country where Scientology, which was founded in 1954 and claims 8 million members worldwide, faces official pressure. In Belgium, police in October raided the local church headquarters and 24 other locations, including affiliated businesses. Thousands of documents were carted away in that country's largest investigation of Scientology's operations to date.

In Germany, where the government has denounced Scientology's "totalitarian structure and methods" as a threat to democracy, church activities are being probed by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution. In the southern state of Bavaria, applicants for civil service jobs are required to disclose any ties to Scientology. According to the German Embassy in Washington, no applications have been rejected on those grounds so far.

"What's happening in Europe is that more and more countries are expressing concern about the proliferation of groups commonly known as cults and doing more to protect their citizens," said Ian Haworth, secretary-general of the South London-based Cult Information Center. Among critics of controversial religions, Haworth said, there is broad consensus that Scientology is the "worst group, the most sinister."

In June, the parliamentary as-

sembly of the Council of Europe, an organization of 41 countries that promotes European cooperation, recommended formation of a continentwide agency to watch over fringe "religious, esoteric or spiritual groups" and facilitate the exchange of information.

In December, the French Senate—with Scientology as one of the potential targets in mind—unanimously approved a bill that would empower the government to dissolve religious sects if they disturb public order or present a "major peril" for their members. The lower house of Parliament is expected to examine similar legislation.

Paris Mayor Jean Tiberi has called for a ban on recruitment efforts by sects near schools, retirement homes, drug-treatment centers and other locales where, he said, society's "most vulnerable elements" are targeted.

French 'Are Putting a Religion on Trial'

French officials "are putting a religion on trial," charged Bill Walsh, a Washington attorney who represents the Church of Scientology International. "They are saying Scientology is a criminal enterprise and should be banned and shut down."

French authorities, however, maintain that they are not attacking religious beliefs, which are protected by law, but illegal conduct. In November, a Marseilles court found five current or former members of the church guilty of swindling. In 1996, a Lyons court found the former local Scientology director guilty of swindling and involuntary manslaughter in the death of a man who committed suicide after his wife was pressured by the church official to take out a loan to finance \$8,000 of church teachings for him.

France also appears to be the only country to have convicted the creator of Scientology of a criminal offense. In 1978, Hubbard was found guilty in absentia of swindling and sentenced to four years in prison. The author, who never came to France, died in 1986.

Leaders of France's Scientologists indignantly deny the charges against them. They plan to issue a detailed rebuttal.

"These are total hate campaigns," Gounord said. "We are people who obey the law."

According to the spokeswoman, the organization's members in France—she put their number at 50,000—are subject to increasing of-

EXCLUSIVE

DICAPRIO'S WILL

FEBRUARY 1, 2000

Star

TWO-DAY BINGE ...with strip & bo

NOBODY KNOWS THE STARS LIKE THE STAR!

All the hot gossip direct from Hollywood

Janet
Charlton

Catherine gets some hot wheels!

Catherine Zeta-Jones is in for a happy surprise. Her fiancé Michael Douglas bought her a new \$130,000 black BMW 750iL with an elaborate security system. He had the car delivered to his L.A. penthouse so it's ready to go when they return to town. Incidentally, Catherine hasn't driven for years and she's never even owned a new car. ★

at the L.A. blues club
t know what to
oseanne appeared
our Thursday night
e didn't disappoint.
d through just five
e admitted she did-
ords and quit. Just
trons left during
Rosey's entourage
ty to cheer wildly,
ning out the awful
e stage.

sprinkles it on her food to keep from overeating! Oprah learned about this diet trick from a staffer who lost 20 pounds. After enjoying a few bites of her favorite treat, Oprah sprinkles on the red pepper and can barely stomach another bite. She's hoping to spice herself down a few dress sizes.

Planet Scientology

John Travolta has come up with a scheme to save the troubled Planet Hollywood restaurant chain — he wants to turn it into Planet Scientology! He'd like to change the show biz theme and concentrate on sci-fi memorabilia. Prominently featured would be books and items from the science-fiction writing career of the founder of Scientology, L. Ron Hubbard. John feels this would be an ideal way to introduce the principles of Scientology to the masses, but so far the restaurant chain's celebrity backers aren't so sure.

Big game (show) hunter

Jerry Springer's been bitten by the game show bug and he won't rest until he has one of his own. Right now, Jerry's negotiating a multimillion-dollar deal that will have him hosting a syndicated, after-hours show with a mature edge — this won't be family fare.



Jerry Springer wants to bag a game show.

"I didn't have the whole blond flipped hair or the curves. I was skinny with a bad haircut, which didn't



g
er

Master Zen-Dao Meow™ The Great American Comic Strip Koan

Collector Ad #7
©1999 Patrick Schaefer
Art by Brent Ward

Quacky

Ambition:
"Quack-Howdy!
To master the
ways of the mystic,
just like Zen-Dao
and Master Mu!"

Master Mu

Ambition:
"mu"

Elroar

Ambition:
"To become
one with the
universe,
make that
#1 with the
universe!"

Manchla

Ambition:
"Oh, I just
want everyone
to feel peaceful
and safe."
(snicker)

**The
Napping
Cat**

Hollis

Ambition:
"I've dedicated my life
to fighting crime
& injustice -- and you
can too! We may not all
have super powers, but we
each have certain gifts
which await discovery.
Find yours and let
the hero awaken."

Brund

Ambition:
"To bench 400
by next year."

**Furillus
Pitch**

Ambition:
"Forget my ambition!
It's your ambition I'm
here to satisfy.
Want wealth? Happiness?
Success? Furillus Pitch,
Interdimensional Salesfox
is at your service!"

Sevrin

Ambition:
"I have no personal
ambitions. I am a
warrior whose sword
shall not waver
in service
to my master."

Ambition

"To welcome you
to my dream."

Waldo

Ambition:
"Ambition?! You ask me
about ambition? Look, I'm a dog
living inside a cat's dream.
And it's become depressingly clear
that this world was not conceived
with my interest in mind."

Pigham

Ambition:
"My dear friends, I do not
mind that you laugh --
quite the contrary --
I encourage mirth. I realize
that I may look fat and foolish,
but I shall tell you one thing that
you will never forget. There are,
indeed, items of magic power
out there, and those who run
the machines do not want
them found. I intend to
obtain them all."

Wendy

Ambition:
"Zen-Dao and the
rest are always
chasing after this,
then that -- never
appreciating what's
right in front of them.
But does anyone
listen to me?
All they see is
another pretty face.
What do
you see?"

Zen-Dao Meow

Ambition:
"Gotta solve that
damn koan!"

**Val aka
The Dancing Yin**

Ambition:
"Wouldn't you
like to know?
But The Dancing Yin
does not reveal
her naked ambition
to just anyone."

a weekly online comic for
the mystically inclined www.MasterZDM.com

LA WEEKLY DECEMBER 31, 1999 - JANUARY 6, 2000

BEST OF 1999 IN FILM, TV, THEATER, BOOKS,
ART, DANCE, MUSIC AND FOOD

LA WEEKLY

FREE

2000

VIP Treatment

Mr. Costner, Would You Like a Film Deal With That Martini?

Owner of Hip L.A. Nightclubs Mines Celebrity Patrons, Launching Movie Career Hype at the Dry Cleaners

By BRUCE ORWALL

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

LOS ANGELES—As Elie Samaha navigates through his packed Hollywood club, the Sunset Room, he takes careful note of the amenities he offers a celebrity clientele: private entrances, VIP rooms, enclosed cabanas on the patio. And then there are the extras: throngs of gorgeous women in tight pants and tummy-baring tank tops, who tonight make up about two-thirds of a group of 1,100 that also includes stars such as Kevin Costner.

"There's some candy here tonight, baby," Mr. Samaha says with a satisfied smile. After two decades in the club business, Mr. Samaha knows that perks and a hip crowd are just elaborate gimmicks to appeal to a stellar guest list. "But," he adds, "I give them what they want."

These days, Mr. Samaha (pronounced SAH-ma-ha) is applying some of his nightclub gimmicks to the movie business—and making an unlikely run for glory by exploiting a big shift in Hollywood. Battered by the high risks of film production, the major studios have lost much of their appetite for financing the movies that are their lifeblood. As studios increasingly evolve into distribution and marketing machines, Hollywood's door is more open than ever for outsiders, flush with foreign financing, to rush in and take their shot as producers.

Few are making more of this opportunity than Mr. Samaha. A 43-year-old Lebanese immigrant, he is a former Studio 54 bouncer who went on to own a small empire of nightclubs, dry cleaners and commercial real estate in L.A.

He is now five years into a drive to recast himself as a movie mogul, but until recently Mr. Samaha was still better known for his marriage to "Wayne's World" actress Tia Carrère than for the low-budget films he produced. In one of his own movies, "20 Dates," he allowed his profane tirades at the director to be recorded and used in the film, resulting in a satirical portrait that matched how Hollywood actually saw him—as a loud, small-time hack.



Elie Samaha

That image is in transition. His marriage has ended in divorce, but Mr. Samaha's Franchise Pictures will soon release films starring Sylvester Stallone, Wesley Snipes, Mr. Costner and others—many of whom have patronized his popular nightspots. Franchise Pictures, in which Mr. Samaha is majority partner with Andrew Stevens and Gerard Guez, is also behind the recent Bruce Willis comedy "The Whole Nine Yards," a surprise hit that recently topped the box office.

As in his clubs, Mr. Samaha gives the stars what they want. He sometimes buys scripts that actors have been unable to get the studios to make, then puts them into production as is, bypassing expensive, never-ending rewrites.

Explains Cuba Gooding Jr., the Academy Award-winning actor, "Elie goes to people—entertainers like Bruce Willis, Sylvester Stallone and smaller entertainers like myself—and says, 'What's your pet project?' Then he says, 'OK, let's do it.'" Mr. Samaha produced Mr. Gooding's 1999 film, "A Murder of Crows," which ran on cable TV before video distribution.

The trade-off: Big stars usually have to cut their fees by half or more, accepting instead profit-participation that in some cases reaches an enormous 40%, after costs have been recouped. And they usually have to shoot the films in Montreal or Vancouver, where Mr. Samaha works almost exclusively to slash budgets and collect Canadian tax breaks.

Mr. Samaha's strategy is just weeks away from its biggest test yet, the May 12 release of a science-fiction epic called "Battlefield Earth." The film is the pet project of John Travolta, whose superstar clout failed to get it made for a dozen years. Script problems and a projected \$100 million budget were often blamed, but many movie executives thought another big factor was the film's source material—a 1982 novel by L. Ron Hubbard, late founder of the controversial Church of Scientology, which counts Mr. Travolta as a longtime member.

"Battlefield" is the first screen adaptation of any Hubbard science-fiction work, an achievement Mr. Travolta says is "like putting Tennessee Williams's first works on the screen. It's a big deal." Mr. Samaha, he adds, was "smart to trust the artist."

Many thought otherwise. "Everyone thought I was crazy or mentally retarded" for tackling the project, Mr. Samaha says. Though the film has nothing to do with Scientology, some feared the Hubbard connection could provoke a backlash and make the film difficult to sell in places such as Germany and France, where Scientology has come under government attack. Even Mr. Travolta, Mr. Samaha recalls, warned that "lots of people are going to come to

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VIP Treatment: Mr. Samaha's Shot at Hollywood Glory

Continued From First Page

you and try and persuade you and be negative about it."

Franchise got it made by using a formula usually reserved for tiny independent films. Imperial Bank in Los Angeles provided loans to pay the production costs, which were slashed to a planned \$50 million, but about 80% of that was to be covered by the presale of foreign distribution rights. For "Battlefield Earth," that has created a notable irony: The biggest single financier, besides Franchise itself, is a German public company called Intertainment AG.

Franchise also has a so-called rent-a-system deal that allows it to distribute films, for a fee, through a major studio—in this case, Time Warner Inc.'s Warner Bros. Reflecting the mood of major studios today, Warner Bros. President Alan Horn says the studio's risk on "Battlefield Earth" is "essentially zero," and adds: "My feeling is that if he puts up the money for the movies, we'll distribute them."

Some in Hollywood believe Mr. Samaha's cheap-and-dirty approach to production can result only in mediocre films—and unlike a deep-pocketed studio, Franchise can scarcely afford many money-losing bombs. Its upside is also somewhat limited, given the high percentage of the films' take that is doled out to

stars and distributors. Yet since most of the money for Mr. Samaha's films is generally raised from overseas sources, his plan can work as long as the production budgets don't go wildly off-course.

The Gamble

But the \$50 million budget for "Battlefield Earth" has crept past \$70 million, and if the film doesn't play overseas, foreign financiers could balk at future work with Franchise. His gamble could cost him in other ways, too: If his run of star-vehicle movies this year doesn't produce hits, or results in big losses for his backers, the industry will return to ignoring him.

Mr. Samaha is open, if a bit rueful, about his days as a Hollywood nobody. "The happiest day of my life," he says, came last summer, when Warner Bros. Chairmen and Co-Chief Executives Bob Daly and Terry Semel left the studio. "They didn't know who the f— I was!" he says. "They were on another planet."

Elie Samaha's path to the verge of Hollywood success began when he moved to New York in his late teens. A competitive kick boxer in his youth—who today bears a passing resemblance to his friend Mr. Stallone—Mr. Samaha worked in security at several clubs. "If you're working the rope to the VIP area, you call the shots about who gets in," he says. That taste for controlling the scene led him to begin promoting his own clubs.

He migrated to L.A. in 1982, and after reading an article listing "the five most successful businesses to be in," he opened his first dry-cleaning store in West Hollywood. Showing his skill for hype, he dubbed the place 'Celebrity Cleaners' and rounded up autographed photos from actor friends whether they had used the business or not. He still holds a 50% interest in six dry-cleaning stores.

The late 1980s drew him back into clubs, and with a few old partners from New York, Mr. Samaha opened the Roxbury on Sunset Strip. The place exploded into a playground for L.A.'s party crowd. "Beverly Hills 90210" star Shannen Doherty got into a ballyhooed fight there one night. She wasn't the only one: Mr. Samaha says that, in the mid-1990s, the club paid more than \$200,000 to settle a dispute after he was accused of assaulting a club patron. Mr. Samaha says he and other employees were simply trying to "restrain" the man.

Roxbury, and several other clubs that followed it, gave Mr. Samaha what he most needed to take a stab at the film industry: access to people in the business, from minor celebrities to megastars. Indeed, the stars seem comfortable hanging out with Mr. Samaha. On a recent Friday night at the Sunset Room, Mr. Gooding—nodding to a dazzling array of young women nearby—joked that he was just telling a reporter "about the prostitution ring you use to finance your films."

VIP Passes

Rather than recoil, Mr. Samaha ruffed for a while on how much an evening with some of the women might cost. He later explained that the women at his parties are actually rounded up from modeling and casting agencies, where the club hands out VIP passes.

In 1995, Mr. Samaha began to convert his star relationships into small movie projects—\$2 million to \$5 million films that he made in partnership with other production companies. A number of the films starred Ms. Carrere, whom Mr. Samaha married in 1992. Despite their friendships with him, however, many in Hollywood were suspicious of Mr. Samaha's nightclub roots and financing formulas. When Mr. Samaha first tried to persuade Bruce Willis to sign on for "The Whole Nine Yards," Mr. Samaha says that the actor told him: "Listen man, I'm doing your movie. But people don't think you've got the money to finance it."

Mr. Samaha got a break when he hooked up with Cassian Elwes, an agent at William Morris who specializes in packaging independent film projects. After some modest successes, Mr. Elwes wanted to apply indie financing formulas to bigger projects. "What I needed was to make some films happen that no one else in town wanted to make," Mr. Elwes says.

His first meeting with Mr. Samaha, he remembers, "literally almost came to blows" as Mr. Samaha shouted his demands. But Mr. Elwes admired Mr. Samaha's moxie in "trying to make things happen when maybe there was nothing behind him."

Near the end of 1998, Mr. Elwes offered Mr. Samaha a crack at financing one of William Morris's biggest and most troublesome orphan projects, Mr. Travolta's beloved "Battlefield Earth." Mr. Travolta had been keen to make the project since the mid-1980s, when he first lent his name to screenplay adaptations of the 1,050-page L. Ron Hubbard novel.

Mr. Travolta says the film has nothing to do with Scientology and figures those early efforts faltered because the scripts weren't that good. The project lost momentum for a time, as did Mr. Travolta's career, but both seemed to get back on track

in the mid-1990s after the MGM studio bought the film rights to "Battlefield Earth" from Author Services Inc., a Los Angeles firm that licenses all of Mr. Hubbard's written works. A couple of years later, the project was dropped by MGM, but picked up by News Corp.'s 20th Century Fox unit—only to be dropped again in 1998.

The Hubbard Connection

Mr. Elwes and others say that the Hubbard tie is the main reason "Battlefield" has never been made. Asked if he believes that the Hubbard connection placed extra hurdles in the film's way, Mr. Travolta says: "I'll never know." He adds that, "if it were an issue secretly to someone, it would not be politically correct to voice it."

By the time "Battlefield Earth" came to Mr. Samaha, it had taken so long that Mr. Travolta had to shift from playing the film's strapping young hero, Jonnie Goodboy Tyler, to its alien villain Teri Messers. Travolta and his manager, Jonathan Krane, had never heard of Elie Samaha, who during the first phone conversation promised to greenlight the project, with plans to slash costs to \$50 million.

Then Mr. Samaha set to work persuading foreign financiers to pay for most of the production costs. The Scientology question was raised numerous times and batted down by Mr. Samaha, who says he would bark: "This is what the movie is about: It's 'Planet of the Apes' starring John Travolta. You're either in or you're the f— out."

One financier that came to the table was Intertainment, which buys the right to distribute films in European countries. Intertainment President Barry Baeres says that, given the controversy over Scientology in Germany, "at first sight, you would say no to it." But he succumbed to Mr. Samaha's insistence that "Battlefield Earth" was Scientology-free.

There is still much risk in using independent financing formulas for films as large as "Battlefield Earth," especially since the final financing often doesn't arrive until the last minute. Mr. Travolta says that, even as Mr. Samaha got his money together, he implored Mr. Krane to have a backup plan: "I said, 'Jonathan, I really don't want to miss this opportunity in time. Please, I don't want to start over again.'"

With the production costs creeping upward, the stakes are higher for everyone. Mr. Travolta has contributed some of his own money—more than \$5 million, according to Mr. Samaha. Yet Mr. Samaha himself seems unfazed; he claims that his risk is so low that he will come out all right even if the film performs only modestly in the U.S. "Battlefield Earth" is "going to make people in Hollywood take notice of Elie Samaha," he says. "I'm not going to be the laughingstock anymore."

As Mr. Samaha waits to see how the market reacts, he has also been ramping up his efforts to link his movie and nightclub businesses. When he and his partners opened the Sunset Room last year, they allowed about 50 top agents, film executives and Hollywood lawyers to buy a piece of the action. Mr. Samaha has taken a smaller stake in the new club to focus on the film business. And before "The Whole Nine Yards" opened, he put posters promoting the film in the bathroom at the Sunset Room. He also arranged for an L.A. radio-station giveaway, with prizes that included free dry cleaning.

And then there's Heaven, an upscale spa he plans one day to open on Sunset Strip property he owns. Mr. Samaha is already bragging that it will outdo every spa in Hollywood and help him further secure connections with the right people: "I'm pretty sure they will all be there."

LETTERS TO THE TIMES



TAYLOR JONES, Augusta, Ga.

President Mohammad Khatami

Iran Policy

■ The report on Iran by Robin Wright (Opinion, Feb. 27) was fine, but she only paid passing reference to the third force, the "guardians of the revolution," ostensibly under orders of the conservative clergy. The problem with them can succinctly be explained by an analogy in the sequel to Orwell's "Animal Farm," where the guardian dogs terrorize both the ruling and servant animals.

The collective "guardians of the revolution"—Basij, Pasdaran and Hezbollah—are out of control, and followers of both liberal [President Mohammad] Khatami and conservative [Ayatollah Ali] Khamenei fear them, even for their lives. An understanding of this danger will aid us in formulating policy toward Iran.

RICHARD N. FRYE
Emeritus Prof. of Iranian
Harvard University
Los Angeles

■ With the result of the recent national election in Iran overwhelmingly defeating the hard-line clerics, this would be the perfect opportunity for the U.S. government to attempt to normalize relations with Iran for several reasons—the large numbers of Iranians living in the U.S., particularly California, and also to blunt any further aggression by Saddam Hussein of Iraq.

GARY TRAXLER
Oxnard

Scientologists in France

■ So the French want to disband the Church of Scientology (Feb. 29). Which of the other 172 "sects" on the French list will be next? The French action is a blatant human rights violation that is opposed by many religious and human rights groups. The French government claims the right to dissolve religious organizations that have never been charged with a crime and never provided with due process of law. Apparently the French want the government to protect them from "false" and "dangerous" religion.

I used to think that Europeans were cynical about politics and would not trust their politicians to tell them which religions were good or bad for them. Maybe times have changed.

ALAN J. REINACH, Director
Seventh-day Adventist Church
State Council, Westlake Village

■ As a Scientologist who left France 10 years ago because of my country's totalitarian bent, I know that discrimination there against religions such as mine (not to mention Jews, Baptists, Mormons, Muslims and others) is fomented primarily by an irresponsible media. While I am fortunate enough to have a loving (non-Scientology) family whom I visit every year, many of my Scientology friends still living in France must constantly reassure their families that they are OK after the latest wild stories and preposterous accusations appear. And some have even lost their jobs simply because of their religion. These are real people—among the most decent I know—and this is real intolerance that is affecting every aspect of their lives. Religious discrimination and bigotry are alive and well in my country.

CORRINE SIMON-DUNEAU
Los Angeles

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Report Urges Dissolution of Scientology Church in France

official harassment, including tax audits, the closing of their schools and police pressure on other French not to do business with them.

French officials reject accusations of harassment. Like some of those who have left Scientology, they paint an unsavory picture of a globe-girdling organization, obsessed with making money that uses blackmail, harassment and smear campaigns to keep former members or opponents in line.

According to the French officials and former Scientologists, tight control is exercised from the mother church, located on Hollywood street, renamed in 1998 to honor Hubbard, and from a command center at Gilman Hot Springs in Riverside County.

"All directives, everything we did, was ordered by missionaries from the United States," said Vasquez, the former member. "Every Thursday, we collected the money from all over Europe and sent it to the United States. Copenhagen [site of Scientology's European headquarters] obeyed; everything they did was decided by the Americans."

Barthelemy, the government panel's secretary-general, said former Scientologists have told French authorities that information collected by the church, including potentially embarrassing or compromising data gleaned from questionnaires and interviews with members, is forwarded to the U.S.

Local Annual Revenue Said to Be \$9.2 Million

In June, a French parliamentary commission investigating the finances of religious groups classified here as sects estimated Scientology's annual revenue in France at more than \$9.2 million, and worldwide at between \$1.5 billion and \$3 billion.

Gounord, Scientology's Paris spokeswoman, said the only connection the churches in France have with Los Angeles is the training of pastors and auditors, who carry out question-and-answer counseling sessions the church calls auditing.

The French report makes special mention of Scientology's Office of Special Affairs, which it labels a

private police. Stacy Brooks, a former member now working with an anti-Scientology organization in Clearwater, Fla., described the OSA as a dirty-tricks squad that targets the church's critics.

"I know all about these people," Brooks said. "They tried to smear and harass me and my husband after I left in 1989."

Karin Pouw, spokeswoman for the Church of Scientology International, called Brooks a "liar for hire." Pouw, a member of the OSA, said the office functions as a "pub-

lic affairs office.

Faced with the mounting pressure in France, Scientologists said they will call on other countries, including the U.S., and international bodies for help. On Thursday, they plan to hold an international conference in Paris to examine limits placed on religious freedom here.

Gounord said the court cases and official criticism have only increased the French members' determination. "We always win," she said. "In Scientology, we believe in what we are doing."