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The FDA Versus Scientology

The oldest active case in the District of Columbia Courts comes to trial once again June 7. Way back in January, 1963, the Food and Drug Administration raided the local Scientology church and seized its counseling aid known as the E-meter, charging that it was a false and misleading device. During ensuing trials Scientologists claimed infringement of their freedom of religion and insisted that the E-meter was not used fraudulently or harmfully. The case is not yet settled.

We do not endorse the religion which is known as the Church of Scientology. It claims to be concerned primarily with man's day-to-day life, and does not have dogmatic beliefs about the nature of God or eternal salvation. Therefore, Scientologists say that one can remain an adherent of some other religion while also identifying with them. Their use of the word "church" is like that of the Buddhist Churches of America, or of the entry "Churches—Jewish" in the yellow pages of many telephone directories. In other words, "church" is the conventional term for a Western religious organization and is not restricted to groups that are specifically Christian. Indeed, Scientology boasts that it is "the spiritual heir of Buddhism in the Western world."

Anyone who believes, as we do, that in Christ "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness of life in him. . ." (Col. 2:9, 10), cannot endorse or participate in a religious system that professes neutrality on the claim that Jesus of Nazareth is God incarnate. But it seems clear that Scientology is indeed a religion, and we believe in freedom of religion (and from religion) for everyone. Only in the gravest of situations, such as religiously motivated human sacrifice or torture, should the state act to prohibit or restrain the free exercise of religion.

No such case can be made against the E-meter. With all the faith healing that goes on, or is attempted, in the name of Roman Catholicism, Christian Science, and roving tent evangelists—sometimes to the accompaniment of devices much more bizarre than the E-meter—we cannot understand why the federal government has picked on this one small religion. There are only some 500 full-time ministers in the country and about 100 local churches and missions (a third of the world total).

Undoubtedly Scientology has created enemies by its attacks on secular psychiatry and psychology. Its short creed includes the belief "that the study of the mind and the healing of mentally caused ills should not be alienated from religion or condoned in non-religious fields." But Christian Science goes much further than this by believing that *all* illnesses and injuries, not just those that are mentally caused, should be treated religiously. Scientologists do send people to physicians and surgeons for non-mental illness. And Scientologists claim that they are much better at curing mental problems—major or minor—than secular practitioners. They so emphasize the practical results of their method that it is hard to see why people would long continue in it unless they felt they were receiving benefits. But Scientology has apparently made itself socially useful by providing free rehabilitation programs for drug addicts.

Given the wide debate within secular medicine over the nature and treatment of mental illness, may it not be that in bringing charges against Scientology's E-meter the FDA has overreached itself? Will not religious freedom suffer if the court sustains the charges? □

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