

Legality of new religion fraud bill challenged

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A new bill, designed to control fraud by religious organizations, was criticized Monday by an attorney for the Church of Scientology who said it still may be unconstitutional.

Lee Boothby, the lawyer for the church, told the Senate Judiciary Committee some sections of SB343 may conflict with doctrines of the Catholic and Mormon churches, putting it in possible conflict with the First Amendment.

SB343 is a replacement for an earlier bill which singled out religious cults which could be sued for triple damages if they did not deliver what they promised in their instructional courses. That bill was said to be unconstitutional because of its effort to regulate churches.

The new bill does not mention religion but carries many of the same penalties for an organization failing to live up to an agreement.

The bill was sponsored by Sen. William Hensoldt, D-Las Vegas, whose daughter joined the Church of Scientology in Portland, Ore., paying in advance for many courses and also loaning money to associates in the church. She eventually got back most of the \$50,000 she shelled out.

The new bill permits a member to sue for damages if the organization promises psychological benefits and then has no licensed psychologist or psychiatrist to provide them.

Erica Heffman, a former member of the Unification Church, told the committee that as a "Moonie" she was indoctrinated to use "heavenly deception" to swindle people out of money. She said solicitation teams lied to people to get them to contribute.

They would tell the public the money was going for a drug abuse treatment program when none existed. The lying was referred to as "heavenly deception." She said church officials justified it because people controlled by Satan were giving their money to the church.

Religious fraud bill revamped

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