

Cleric says \$39 million verdict not threat to freedom of religion

By SURA RUBENSTEIN
of The Oregonian staff

Local religious spokesmen Saturday disputed statements by Scientologists that a \$39 million court judgment against the Church of Scientology represented a threat to freedom of religion.

"This is not a freedom of religion issue at all," the Rev. Rodney I. Page, executive director of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, said Saturday of the punitive damages awarded Julie Christofferson Titchbourne, who sued the Church of Scientology and its founder, L. Ron Hubbard, for fraud.

"This was a case in which someone's civil rights were being violated and in which there was a charge of fraud," said Page, whose organization represents some 1,000 churches of 13 Christian denominations.

"The Church of Scientology is viewed by many as a business enterprise. When the church gets into business enterprises, promising and raising people's expectations for certain goods or services, they had better deliver on those promises or face the consequences."

His statements were echoed by Robert Castagna, an attorney who is executive director of the Oregon Catholic

Conference.

Emphasizing that he was not familiar with all elements of the case, Castagna said the main issues seemed to be ones of commercial rather than religious practice. "It comes across as a fraud claim, not a religious issue," he said.

Titchbourne, a 27-year-old Portland resident who first became involved with Scientology 10 years ago, won a \$2 million judgment in 1979, but that was reversed in 1982 by the Oregon Court of Appeals. Scientology officials have said they will appeal the latest verdict, which came Friday after a 10-week trial and 2½ days of deliberations by a Multnomah County Circuit Court jury.

Portland attorney Paul Meyer, a member of the national executive committee and the national board of the American Civil Liberties Union, said he did not have enough information about the verdict to comment on whether religious freedom was indeed the issue. He said neither the local nor national ACLU leadership had had time to discuss the verdict or to determine what action the civil liberties group might take.

The ACLU had filed a friend of the court brief on behalf of the Church of

Scientology during the 1979 trial.

Bent Corydon, executive director of Personal Efficiency Center in Riverside, Calif., which he described as an organization for disaffected Scientologists, said in a telephone interview that he was delighted with the verdict.

"This is good news for religion," said Corydon, who split from the Church of Scientology in 1982. "If someone patently abuses religion to terrorize and defraud people all the time just by hiding behind First Amendment rights, it gives religion as a whole a bad name.

"This give Scientology a tremendous blow that hopefully will register," he said of the \$39 million award.

In the fraud claim, Titchbourne alleged that the church made more than two dozen misrepresentations about Hubbard's personal background and about potential benefits of Scientology that induced her to sign up for introductory courses in 1975.

Within two weeks after paying \$50 for the first course, Titchbourne alleged, Scientology officials used what were described as high-pressure tactics to drain her bank account of \$3,200 and encouraged her to seek money from her parents and friends.

Her attorneys also presented evidence that after Titchbourne sought a

refund the church responded by suing her unsuccessfully on two occasions and by launching an investigation to find evidence of criminal conduct on her part.

Scientology officials argued that all of the representations made to Titchbourne were made for a religious purpose and thus were protected by the constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion.

They said that all church officials who made representations to Titchbourne believed them at the time, so there was no fraudulent action on their parts.

They also argued that Titchbourne did not rely on those representations in

her decision to join the church, thus further weakening her case.

Church officials also said Titchbourne knew Scientology was a church and that one of the purposes of the church was to put individuals in touch with their immortal spirit.

Further, they introduced evidence that several of the former Scientologists who testified on Titchbourne's behalf were involved in lawsuits seeking \$365 million in damages from the Church of Scientology. The defense claimed these witnesses were part of an attempt to take over the church in 1981 and were laying "economic siege" to the church in retaliation for the failed takeover attempt.

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