

# Branson firm hired to help 'sinister' cult

by Richard Palmer

RICHARD BRANSON's Virgin company has been distributing thousands of newspapers and magazines for the Church of Scientology.

The publications, containing propaganda and articles encouraging people to buy the cult's controversial and expensive courses, have been packaged at Virgin's distribution centre at Crawley, West Sussex, and sent to homes in Britain and abroad.

Virgin won the contract to distribute the publications, Good News and Source magazine, through an agent in Los Angeles who used Branson's cargo company to fly in thousands of copies in February and April.

The Church of Scientology, described by a judge in 1984 as "corrupt, sinister and dangerous", sends the papers to members and uses them to try to recruit more people to its lucrative "therapy" courses. The danger of people getting hooked on the courses was highlighted two weeks ago when Adrian Hayman, a Sussex computer expert, appeared at a bankruptcy hearing after admitting giving £175,000 to the cult over 14 years.

Ian Haworth, director of the Cult Information Centre, which monitors scientology and other cults accused of brain-washing and breaking up families, was shocked to find the Virgin label on scientology newspapers sent to his office in Bromley, south London.

He said: "I am astonished that a company like Virgin should become associated with such an organisation. This isn't going to do Virgin's credibility any good. On the other hand, the Virgin label lends credibility to scientology."

Branson, who has won a reputation for combining moral crusades with his business activities, was clearly embarrassed yester-

day. He said he had been personally unaware of the contract and added: "I know nothing about scientology but what I have heard about it sounds very unpleasant. Now I know about this we will review our contracts with the agent in America and make absolutely sure we do not deal with the Church of Scientology again."

VIP Distribution, which handled the publications, is a subsidiary of Virgin Atlantic Airways, Branson's private company. In April, it received 25,000 copies of Good News and in February an



Branson: embarrassed

unknown quantity of Source. Bob Holden, distribution director, said the firm realised they were scientology papers only when they arrived at Crawley.

He said Virgin had never dealt directly with scientology and handling the publications had accounted for only a tiny portion of the company's business.

The papers were sent to 5,562 addresses in Britain and a further 20,000 were sent to countries as far apart as Australia, South Africa, Denmark, Sweden and Yugoslavia. The church has stepped up its global propaganda campaign in recent months following a number of setbacks, including its failure to stop The Sunday Times printing a critical biography of its founder, the late L Ron Hubbard.