

City/Canada

Church of Scientology targets U of A professor for criticizing its practices

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The Church of Scientology has launched a countrywide personal attack against a University of Alberta professor who has publicly criticized some of their practices.

Sociology professor Stephen Kent was the subject of a scathing article in a 16-page Church of Scientology supplement entitled Freedom that was distributed with the *Globe and Mail* newspaper Friday.

In the two-page article, Kent is compared to well-known neo-Nazi hater Ernst Zundel and is referred to "as the academic point man for the voices of hate against new religions."

The article also questions the validity of Kent's academic research and suggests he should be disqualified from receiving any more government research grants.

"Freedom of speech demands that Stephen Kent be permitted to hold his unorthodox views of religion, in the same vein that Ernst Zundel does," the article states. "But his support of discrimination and intolerance which has led to human-rights violations and even violence — in Germany as well as in Canada — should disqualify him totally from any government support or funding."

The attack appears to be related to Kent's work as an expert witness for a German parliamentary committee. Many German government officials believe Scientology is not a

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religion, but rather a business based on what they perceive as dangerous totalitarian ideology. In response, the government ordered close monitoring of the organization while a commission gathers information about its activities in Germany and around the world.

Kent travelled to Germany three times last summer to speak to German legislators and mainstream church groups about Scientology practices, including forced labour and a form of brainwashing.

Kent expected some kind of attack from Scientology for his work in Germany.

"Scientology has policies, which are public and well known, to undertake character assassination against their perceived enemies and this article is simply a demonstration of that Scientology policy," said Kent, adding that he was never interviewed for the article, and that it doesn't quote from any of his published work.

"They can't quote anything from my work that would suggest I propagate hate against

new religious groups because I never have. I am not a religious bigot. These are libellous allegations that have no substance in reality," Kent said.

Kent said he's being attacked for two reasons. The first is because he acted as a consultant to the German government, which is about to publish its findings on sectarian and psychological groups that are "probably going to be very critical of Scientology and its probable human-rights abuses."

"The second reason is that I am the most vocal academic in the world when it comes to discussing issues of Scientology's probable human-rights abuses."

Kent has been the target of Scientology attacks in the past. In September, Scientologists picketed at the University of Alberta and formally accused Kent of harassment.

The university rejected the accusation and defended Kent's right to academic freedom.

Doug Owrarn, the University of Alberta's academic vice-president, said the university fully stands behind Kent and his research. Kent's work on Scientology is peer reviewed and meets all internal scholarly guidelines.

The university will probably not respond to the article.

"We've seen these sorts of attacks before and to get into a mud-slinging match with them goes nowhere," Owrarn said. "I guess people will just have to judge the reputation of the Church of Scientology versus Stephen Kent and the University of Alberta. I'm not terribly concerned about the outcome."