

RELIGION

The Church of Scientology obtains official religious recognition in Britain

The British government has officially recognized the Church of Scientology as a religion, more than 40 years after the first Church was opened in Britain. This was made known by a spokesman for the British Home Office this week in a statement published by the national newspaper, the Daily Telegraph, and other media in the United Kingdom.

Earlier this year, Scientology was already recognized as a religion by the British Armed Forces and Britain's Independent Television Commission which acknowledged Scientology's religious bona fides when it added the Church to the religious permitted to air TV spots on British TV.

"We are elated about this decision. The British government is showing commendable leadership in bringing religious freedom and pluralism to Europe which so far has been dominated by a few state churches," said Heber C. Jentsch, President of the Church of Scientology International, the mother church of the religion.

The news about this latest recognition was announced at a New Year's Eve gathering of over 7,000 Scientologists at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles which satelited to Scientology congregations around the world. In Portland, more than 200 Scientologists saw this satellite transmission, receiving the news with cheers and a standing ovation. Other Scientologists will gather in Portland to see a video taping of the broadcasting later this week.

States, entered the Church of Scientology into its register of recognized religions. The recognition not only reflects Scientology's rapid growth in Asian nations, but is the first recognition by a government of

a predominantly Muslim country.

The Church has become well-known in the United States, Canada, Australia, Latin America, western Europe and Africa over the last four decades, but it is not well-known that Scientology flourishes also in areas such as Pakistan, Taiwan, Indonesia, India, Hong Kong, Rumania, Hungary, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, Latvia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Zaire, Botswana, Canary Islands, Slovakia and even Croatia. In the Commonwealth of Independent States alone there are 54 Scientology missions spread throughout twelve states. The newest Scientology missions were established last week in Kathmandu, Nepal and three other Nepalese cities.

Assisting in the expansion was this year's release of the Scientology websites on the World Wide Web. At the launching of the Internet sites last March 13, Scientology's site received 330,000 "hits" per week on average. As 1996 comes to a close, the Scientology sites have increased this number to a remarkable 400,000 "hits" per week. This is classed in the top ten percent on the Internet. As a comparison, in December of 1995, the Vatican opened its own internet site. In its first year, that site attracted 1.5 million hits.

The Scientology site, in nine months, attracted 12 million hits. It has also been awarded over 30 Internet site awards, including the Top 5% of All Websites Award from Starting Point, the EZ Connect Best of the Net Award, the Quiet Revolution Winning Site Eje-Star Award, Walking on the World Wide Web Premiere Site, and the Magellan Four-Star Site Award.

As the Washington Post described the site: "The most elaborate religious site of all belongs to the Church

of Scientology. As a model of the craft of creating a web site, the Scientology site is one of the best in existence today."

In commenting on the rapid international expansion, the President of the Church of Scientology International, Rev. Heber Jentsch stated, "Scientology is expanding as it represents the brightest hope for man in the last 2,000 years by fulfilling people's most important needs. We keep growing because people can experience the benefits of Scientology in the here and now. The daily miracles we see in Scientology are those that people have dreamed of for centuries. With the technologies of Scientology we can not only repair broken marriages, rehabilitate drug addicts, and restore literacy, but, very importantly, bring the individual to a recognition of his own spiritual nature and potential. This is what religion is about, and, like all religions, we seek the better world around us."

Scientology is an applied religious philosophy which recognizes that man is a spiritual being and offers a practical methodology usable by anyone to become happier and more able. Founded by author and humanitarian, L. Ron Hubbard, Scientology provides exact principles for improving spiritual awareness, self-confidence, intelligence and ability.

The first Church of Scientology was founded in 1954 in Los Angeles. It has grown to more than 3,000 churches, missions and groups in 113 countries, with over 8 million members around the world.

There are two Churches of Scientology in Portland, including the Celebrity Centre, which is dedicated to assist in the field of the arts. Both were started in the late 60's and early 70's.

Church breaks with Milosevic

After decades of following Communist rulers, leaders of the Serbian Orthodox Church have broken their alliance with President Slobodan Milosevic, shaking his rule and boosting their own standing with believers.

"Milosevic must go if Serbia wants to live," Father Sava, a priest in Belgrade's Bezaniska Church, said Monday, the eve of Tuesday's Orthodox Christmas. Worshipers in the church held candles and prayed to a choir's velvet sound.

Yugoslavia's Orthodox churches have joined the chorus of protesters who have rallied against Milosevic since he annulled Nov. 17 local elections won by the opposition.

In their strongest attack ever, Serbian Orthodox Church leaders assailed Milosevic last week for "crushing the will of the people" and fomenting civil strife.

"He has already placed us against the whole world, and now he wants to set us against each other and trigger bloodshed just to preserve power," the leaders said in a statement.

Sava said he once believed that Milosevic was the only one who could "save Serbia from evil powers."

"Even though he is a Communist, I trusted him like he was my brother. I thought he was Serbia's savior against Western influence, Croats and all others," Sava said. "But now I see that whatever he touched, he destroyed. Like Satan."

The church's alliance with Serbian Communists followed World War II, when some priests openly sided with Communist partisans even as churches were shut down and clergymen were ousted.

Under Communist rule, Serbia officially was atheist and churchgoers could risk being fired from their jobs or even arrested.

As a matter of survival, church

leaders fell in line behind their Communist leaders. They earned the tacit support of former Yugoslav Communist strongman Josip Broz Tito.

Tolerance of religion increased in the 1980s when Milosevic switched to nationalism to retain power while communism crumbled elsewhere.

Church leaders backed Milosevic when he instigated wars in neighboring Croatia and Bosnia. Some priests even rode atop Serbian tanks as they rolled into Croatia.

They supported Bosnian Serb leaders, including war crimes suspects Radovan Karadzic and Gen. Ratko Mladic. Today, a large poster of Karadzic still decorates a side entrance of the Belgrade office of the church's leader, Patriarch Pavle.

"The church has always been nationalist in Serbia, as in most other Balkan states," said Zorana Vljakovic, of Belgrade's Institute of Sociology. "It didn't care too much about other nations, human and

democratic rights — not to speak of elections. Now, something seems to be changing."

Following the Bosnian war, Orthodox clergy split over what degree of nationalism they wished to follow and Pavle struggled to find a balance between the two factions.

Last week's statement indicated the faction supporting modern democratic reforms — and a more benign interpretation of national interests — had won.

It was a victory cheered by Serbian faithful — about 40 percent of the population — as well as by opposition protesters. Along with signs of discontent in Yugoslavia's army, the statement indicated that some of Milosevic's traditional pillars of support may be crumbling.

"There is no hope for Milosevic if he doesn't take our statement seriously," said Metropolitan Amfilohije, head of the church in the Yugoslav republic of Montenegro.

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Pope to visit Cuba

Vatican officials chose a symbolic place to announce Pope John Paul II's first visit to Cuba next year: the Havana cathedral.

Cardinal Jaime Ortega, head of the Cuban Bishops' Conference, announced the January 1998 visit late Friday just before his Italian counterpart offered Mass there to celebrate World Peace Day.

"The holy father is desirous of visiting our country," Ortega said in a statement before he and Italian Cardinal Camillo Ruini celebrated Mass in the 18th century stone cathedral. Ruini is head of the Italian Bishop's Conference, which donated medical equipment to the island.

Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls confirmed today the pope would go to Cuba in the second half of January 1998. He gave no other details.

"He would have liked to do so before the end of 1997, but the Christmas holidays of that time oblige him to postpone the trip until January of 1998," Ortega said.

Both Cuba and the Vatican had agreed to postpone the Cuban visit because of the 76-year-old pontiff's fragile health, the Mexican news agency Notimex reported.

The official Cuban newspaper Granma said the Bishop of Rome would be received "with all the consideration and respect that the supreme pontiff of the Catholic Church and sovereignty of the state of the Vatican City deserves."

Officials in the Vatican reiterated Friday that the trip reflected improving relations with the Communist island, which were helped by Castro's unprecedented visit to the Holy See in November.

Among conditions for the papal visit, the Vatican has insisted on greater liberty for the church in Cuba, including permission for foreign priests to aid the island's 200 clergymen.

Despite tensions over the government's official rejection of religion, Cuba has maintained diplomatic relations with the Vatican since 1935.

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