

VIEWPOINT

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Faith Dealers

Hijacking the Holocaust

Scientology's defenders got it wrong. So did the Bavarian government

DEAR CHANCELLOR KOHL," THE OPEN LETTER STARTED politely enough. But then, the appeal proceeded to spin an obscene comparison. Plastered over an entire page of the *International Herald Tribune*, the letter stated: "In the Germany of the 1930s...Jews were at first marginalized, then excluded from many activities, then vilified and ultimately subjected to unspeakable horrors...In the 1930s, it was the Jews. Today, it is the Scientologists."

Signed: Dustin Hoffman, Goldie Hawn, Larry King, Oliver Stone, Gore Vidal, Mario Puzo plus 28 other luminaries from the U.S. film and media world—none of them a Scientologist. Still, one wonders who persuaded Dustin, Goldie and Larry to write in. Present-day Germany is doing to the Scientologists what the Nazis inflicted on the Jews? With this odious analogy, Hollywood's finest managed to hijack the Holocaust for a public-relations stunt while insulting both Helmut Kohl and the memory of millions of murdered Jews.

Plus, they had not done their homework. For instance, the Kohl critics claim that "Scientologists cannot obtain employment by your government or contracts with that government." The Federal Government has decreed nothing of the kind. So who is persecuting the Scientologists? In the murky battle of Germany vs. Scientology, it is difficult to separate fact from fancy, let alone unearth how much real discrimination the bombastic threats of German politicians have actually engendered.

This much, at least, is true. The Bavarian state government has announced that applicants for public jobs and contracts will have to fill out questionnaires about their affiliation with Scientology. State guidelines suggest that a bigwig of the Church of Scientology won't be hired—though we can be sure that if and when somebody is denied employment, he or she will take the Bavarian government to court and probably win on constitutional grounds. Second, the state's domestic intelligence agency is keeping tabs on the Church—but out in the open. Third, other German states—like Baden-Württemberg—are planning to do so clandestinely, as if the Scientologists were a latter-day version of the Baader-Meinhoff terror gang.

So far, however, nobody has apparently been denied a job, and nobody has lost one. Even the fiercest enemy of Scientology, Bavarian Internal Affairs Minister Günther Beckstein, concedes that Scientology won't be outlawed (as the Communists were in the 1950s). None has been harsher in his verbal assaults than Beckstein, but none has been more circumspect when it comes to actually doing to the Scientol-

ogists what their Hollywood helpers believe. Could Scientology be prosecuted if accused of entrapping the unwary in "psychic dependence?" Beckstein: "It would be quite difficult to define what exactly constitutes criminal culpability in this case." Quite so, Mr. Minister.

In short, there is a lot of smoke and almost no fire here. Nonetheless, the smoke is worrisome enough.

True, Scientology has not enjoyed the best press of late. There are too many harrowing tales of mental and financial exploitation. Late last year a Munich court forced Scientology to pay back \$20,000 of the \$110,000 a former faithful had shelled out to achieve "happiness" and a "higher IQ." In November, a court in Lyons sent a functionary of the Church to jail for his part in the suicide of a member. Even Gore Vidal, a co-signer of the open letter, is quoted by the German weekly magazine *Die Woche* as describing the founder of the cult, L. Ron Hubbard, as a "money-grabber" and the "ugliest character I have ever met." But the reaction of German politicians is almost as ugly.

Listening to their invective, you would think that the 30,000 Scientologists in Germany (out of a population of 80 million) are a bunch of subversive lunatics. Scientology, the chorus claims, is not a "church," but a "business." The favorite comparison is with the Nazis who allegedly started out as a cult, but ended up with the entire nation in thrall. Hence, Scientology must be exposed and stopped while there is still time.

This assessment ranges somewhere between silly and hysterical. It is easy to understand though why Americans are so sensitive to what they see in Germany. Hoffman, Hawn, King et al were quite right in reminding the German Chancellor: "The issue is not whether one approves or disapproves of the teachings of Scientology. Organized governmental discrimination against any group on the basis of its beliefs is abhorrent even where the majority disagree with those beliefs."

For Americans who have imbibed the First Amendment ("Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion") with their mothers' milk, it is inconceivable that governments should have the power to distinguish between "good" and "bad" churches. Germans are at the opposite extreme. Their country is one of the few where there are indeed "established religions"—Catholics, Lutherans and Jews, who form a state-supported oligopoly. Yet Muslims and Methodists have to fend for themselves while Scientology and other minority faiths are disparaged as sects and worse.

This is an anachronism which has no place in a liberal

democracy; the sacred idea of religious freedom rings hollow when the state arrogates unto itself the right to certify religions the way it hands out licenses to drivers. Do Scientologists corrupt, exploit and ruin their flock? If so, this is a matter for the police and the courts. Otherwise the state should stay out of the church, and vice versa. ■

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