Is Scientology in *Your* Schools?

by Robin Jacobs

For obvious reasons, the lauding of religious leaders isn't supposed to be practiced in U.S. public schools, at least not as a class activity. Yet one widely used school program concludes by having students applaud Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard. The program is called Narconon, and it has notable Scientology links.

The state of California is now in the midst of a three-month investigation of the Narconon Drug Prevention and Education program with an eye to possibly barring it from the state's public schools. School districts in Los Angeles and San Francisco are conducting reviews of their own, calling on schools to avoid using it in the interim. Meanwhile, one school district in Los Angeles County and two in Orange County have already expressed intentions to ban Narconon. These actions come in the wake of an article by Nanette Asimov, published in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on June 9, 2004, examining associations between Narconon and Scientology and quoting specialists in the addictions field to the effect that some of Narconon's teachings are pseudoscientific.

Such official challenges to Narconon have occurred on a smaller scale in the past. For example, the Pinellas County School Board in Florida blocked the program in 1999. But nationwide, Narconon instructors have been giving lectures and courses in public schools, grades three through twelve, for twenty years and in prisons since Narconon's creation in 1966. Furthermore, according to the website of Narconon International (www.narconon.org), in 1998 the Narconon Utah NewLife Juvenile Center in Provo began working with the Utah juvenile court system to provide a court-ordered rehabilitation program for juvenile offenders ages thirteen through seventeen. This included the training of probation officers in Narconon principles.

Narconon public school programs have been reported in at least twenty school districts in California. As for other states, the *Humanist* inquired of Narconon International President Clark Carr, who responded that lectures have been given "to over 2 million children and adults over several decades (440,000 last year worldwide, 44,000 in California)." He added that "Narconon drug prevention lectures are currently being delivered across the United States" in "all New England states, Washington D.C., Georgia, Florida, Oklahoma and surrounding states, Michigan and Illinois, Texas, New Mexico, Idaho, California, Nevada, Hawaii, and possibly others I am not remembering at the moment." Research points to at least twenty-four states, also including Maryland, Virginia, and Wisconsin. Carr went on to indicate over twenty foreign countries, including Canada and Mexico, "from which statistics of Narconon drug prevention presentations are reported weekly to us." On its website, Narconon boasts a network of over one hundred drug prevention and rehabilitation centers worldwide, thirteen in the United States, reaching hundreds of thousands of people annually.

Looking closer at what statistics like this can mean locally, on March 3, 1998, the *Boston Herald* reported that, according to federal income tax documents, Narconon, Inc., of Everett, Massachusetts, had been paid at least $942,853 in taxpayer funds "over an eight-year period for delivering anti-drug lectures at public and parochial schools throughout the region." And the *Albuquerque Journal* reported on August 28, 2002, that Narconon Rio Grande, Inc., had received a $7,500 grant from the Public Service Company of New Mexico Foundation. The money was directed toward expanding Narconon programs in Bernalillo and Sandoval county schools.

NARCONON AND SCIENTOLOGY

The Scientology connection raises the possibility of church-state separation violations. Founded in 1954 by science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard, the Church of Scientology advances the belief that humans are naturally good, non-material spiritual beings. It is the church's doctrine that a lack of knowledge and awareness about the self, or lack of clarity, leads to unhappiness. Scientologists are greatly concerned about drug abuse because, in their view, drugs keep humans from achieving mental clarity and realizing themselves as spiritual beings. The name *Scientology* is defined by Scientologists as "knowing how to know" and Scientology practice includes processes aimed at clearing harmful three-dimensional sensory images, or *engrams*, from the mind.

As for Scientology's connection with Narconon, the Narconon website states that the program was first established in the Arizona State Prison by Scientology volunteers using a drug rehabilitation methodology developed by Hubbard. This was at the request of inmate William Benitez who had written directly to Hubbard for help. Today, says the website, and since the time of the organization's founding, most Narconon facilities are developed with the volunteer work and financial support of Scientologists. Specifically, individual Scientology churches actively encourage member support for Narconon and its activities, often running fundraising campaigns. And Narconon International as well as individual Narconon centers have received funding from the Church of Scientology and the International Association of Scientologists.

Consistent with all this, the March 30, 2003, *St. Petersburg Times* reports that the drug treatment center in Clearwater, Florida, "is financed by private Scientologists... and when volunteers are needed" the director "simply calls the church. With one exception, every Narconon in the country is run by a Scientologist."

The Narconon site does make mention of other funding from more traditional churches, civic volunteer organizations, corporations, foundations, and volunteer agencies. But the entities referenced online all exist outside the United States. The *San Francisco Chronicle* article fills in a bit of detail in this regard, noting that "of the 15 small businesses that pay for Narconon lectures in San Francisco schools, the owners or employees of at least 10 tout Scientology on the Web or have completed courses."

Tory Christman, who was an employee of Narconon and a thirty-year veteran of Scientology before leaving the church in 2000, stated to the *Chronicle* that "Narconon's orders come from the Church of Scientology's senior management.... Their programs, policies—it's all church policy. There's no question about this to anyone involved."

But structurally Narconon and the Church of Scientology remain separate. Narconon, in fact, is under the umbrella of the Association for Better Living and Education (ABLE), an organization that critics maintain was created to spread Scientology religious ideas through secular channels, the better to recruit new Scientologists. ABLE's website at www.able.org states that it serves four independent organizations. Besides Narconon these are Applied Scholastics, which licenses private schools, provides tutoring and teacher training, and offers a public school program called "Study Technology"; Criminon, a criminal rehabilitation program; and the Way to Happiness Foundation, which aims to teach people, particularly children, how to be happy. All are based on writings by Hubbard.

Kurt Weiland, director of the Church of Scientology International, addressing the possibility of church-state problems with any of the secular organizations under ABLE, was quoted in the February 20, 2001, *New York Times* as saying that "nobody who does anything in drug rehabilitation or in literacy programs has to formulate that belief [in Scientology doctrines] in order to go through the program." But critics claim that 50 to 75 percent of those who complete the Narconon training end up joining Scientology. Countering this, Carr is reported in the *St. Petersburg Times* as giving an estimate of 10 to 15 percent. In this connection, the *Boston Herald* reported that "Narconon tries to hire and train students from many of the high schools it visits."

Strong individual, personal, and institutional links between social welfare programs and religious organizations don't necessarily violate the separation of church and state, however. Many other religions directly and indirectly sponsor secular charities and social programs that have legitimate interactions with government. But with Narconon there seems to be more at issue. In exploring different sides of the debate, the *San Francisco Chronicle* noted

that Narconon instruction is "delivered in language purged of most church parlance but includes 'all the Scientology and Dianetics Handbook basics,' according to Scientology correspondence" obtained by the paper. And this is where concern rises.

SCIENTOLOGY OR SCIENCE?

Because Narconon lecturers often approach individual schools rather than school districts in order to secure a public school audience for the program, the possibility is increased that individual administrators and teachers will be unfamiliar not only with the Scientology connection but with specific ideas that show up in Narconon lectures which appear to be unique or integral to Scientology teachings. As a result, elements that might be questioned if subjected to broader scrutiny often pass beneath the radar at the local level.

For example, how much of the public is familiar with the idea of a "tone scale" of emotions? Yet this Scientology idea has been included in Narconon public school lectures. How many have heard of the "communication drill," a Scientology activity designed to create a comfort zone for students? This too has frequently been reported as part of the Narconon approach.

One of the fundamental elements of the Narconon rehabilitation and prevention program is the claim that drugs are stored in fat and can thus remain in the body and create drug cravings and flashbacks for years. According to the *St. Petersburg Times,* to deal with this problem Narconon offers "a detoxification program mirroring a Scientology ritual called the purification rundown." In order to rid clients' bodies of drugs, saunas and exercise equipment are used to induce heavy sweating and thus sweat the drugs out. Vitamin treatments with niacin are also part of this effort. The *Boston Herald,* checking this claim, interviewed William Jarvis, a professor of public health at Loma Linda University in Southern California. Jarvis said, "The idea of sweating out poisons is kind of an old wives' tale. It's all pretty hokey." He added that, according to a 1990 report from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, salt and water are the only substances that the regimen would remove from the body.

The October 12, 1990, *Daily Oklahoman* reported on an evaluation of Narconon conducted by psychiatrist John Chelf, who concluded: "No scientifically well-controlled, independent, long-term, outcome studies were found that directly and clearly established the effectiveness of the entire Narconon program in the treatment of chemical dependency." Two years later the Oklahoma Board of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services declared that "Narconon's program is not safe" and declined state certification for the Chilocco New Life Center, a Narconon residential facility on an Indian reservation near Newkirk.

In response to allegations of pseudoscience, Narconon provides supporting commentary from James Dahlgren, M.D., of the UCLA School of Medicine; G. Megan Shields, M.D., Narconon's medical director; and other physicians. Cited are assorted professional papers that give support to at least parts of Narconon's claims. And Narconon offers testimonials from numbers of people who have benefited from the program, one of the more famous being Kirstie Alley of "Cheers" fame. "A longtime Scientologist, she says the anti-drug program's Purification Rundown saved her life by helping her kick a cocaine habit," the *Boston Herald* reported. The *St. Petersburg Times* added,

> Narconon has done numerous internal studies to verify its claims, but Carr acknowledged they "are really not that solid." Narconon never has submitted in its 37 years in the United States to independent, clinical study necessary to silence critics, Carr said.

Shortly after the stories in the *San Francisco Chronicle* appeared, the *Humanist* interviewed Carr, who explained that he has worked with Narconon for eighteen years and that he ran a Narconon center for ten. He noted that during his stint at the center he had helped people through harrowing addictions. What Narconon does is "joyous" good work, he said and cited Narconon's "spotless" record with parents and students as well as "inches" of studies and conferences backing up the scientific validity of the program. Carr also accused the *San Francisco Chronicle* of running a campaign with an agenda against Scientology, describing some contributors to the *Chronicle* story as "hatemongers" who disparage Narconon's program. "It just makes me want to punch someone in the nose," he said. According to Carr, Asimov's article "is creating controversy where there is not one."

Regarding other drug information offered in Narconon public school lectures and programs, Asimov (a niece of the late Isaac Asimov) informed the *Humanist* that, at a school lecture she attended, Narconon presenter Tony Bylsma told students that forty-three chemicals in tobacco cause cancer. The actual number, according to a spokesperson at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Studies consulted by the *Humanist,* is sixty-nine. Bylsma also warned students that 400 chemicals enter the body when one smokes marijuana (1,400 if the paper is counted), and sixty of these cause cancer. Countering this, Marijuana Policy Project spokesperson Bruce Mirken told the *Humanist* that no research data leads to the conclusion that there are sixty cancer-causing chemicals in marijuana. Although it would seem reasonable that smoking marijuana in the same quantities as tobacco might cause lung cancer, numerous

sources—including the website of the National Academy of Sciences Institute of Medicine—post reports saying that there is no epidemiological evidence for increased risk among chronic marijuana users. A report on the World Health Organization website indicates that case-controlled experiments are still needed to determine whether or not marijuana causes cancer.

Other parts of Narconon lectures have parallels in Scientology doctrines. Students have been told that one problem with drugs is that they "scramble mental pictures," these pictures being another name for Scientology's engrams. But perhaps most revealing is the practice at the conclusion of lectures when students are asked to give a round of applause for Hubbard and Benitez. This is such a standard feature that, in Florida in 1999, when a member of the Pinellas County School District's Family Life Education Committee asked if Narconon presentations could be given without it, the answer was a clear "No." Dave Troutzkey, a research professor in the Computer Science Department at Carnegie Mellon University, and an online free speech advocate who has had several run-ins with the Church of Scientology for his website critiques at www.stop-narconon.org, recently elaborated on this for the *Humanist*:

> Thanking L. Ron Hubbard by clapping is a ritual practiced in every Scientology church in the world. It's called "flowing power to Source." I have personally stood in a Church of Scientology building in Los Angeles, faced a photo of L. Ron Hubbard on the wall, and clapped.

To grasp why this practice poses a church-state separation problem, one only need imagine the complaints that would arise if public school students were asked at the conclusion of any other ostensibly secular lecture to applaud Moses, the Buddha, Jesus, Mohammad, Joseph Smith, or Mary Baker Eddy.

A SCIENTOLOGY FAITH-BASED INITIATIVE

While questions remain as to the extent of ties between Narconon and Scientology, a growing number of civil libertarians have expressed concern that Scientology religious beliefs and ceremonies impermissibly color Narconon's public school presentations.

But the line between church and state has been blurred lately. For example, in January 2004 President George W. Bush expressed public approval of the Bible as a handbook for social services when he told an audience, "This church receives federal funding for child care.... The handbook of this particular child care is a universal handbook, it's been around for a long time. It doesn't need to be invented." Then pointing to an audience member's Bible he said, "Let me see your handbook there."

But if the Bible is allowed to stand as a handbook for government funded Christian childcare, equality and fairness would seem to demand that the Scientologists of Narconon be allowed to use Hubbard's *Clear Body, Clear Mind* as their handbook for public school anti-drug programs. When asked directly about this during his 2000 presidential campaign—whether he would fund a program supported by the Church of Scientology—Bush told the *New York Times* on February 20, "I have a problem with the teachings of Scientology being viewed on the same par as Judaism or Christianity. That just happens to be a personal point of view. But I am interested in results. I am not focused onthe process."

Since Narconon programs have received public funding in the past, their receiving such funding in the future under Bush's faith-based initiative isn't far fetched. Last year the director of Narconon's state-licensed drug treatment center in Clearwater, Florida, voiced an intention to seek federal and state grant monies. The same is true for the Scientology-linked Applied Scholastics. A Salt Lake City group called Innovations in Education, part of the Applied Scholastics network, managed this year to get the Utah state legislature to redirect $1 million to place aspects of its program in the state's public schools. According to the June 7, 2004, *Deseret Morning News*, this could have included "giving schoolchildren nutritional supplements to boost academic performance" and "detoxifying alternative high school students through exercise in saunas." But the governor vetoed the action.

In the light of all this, perhaps more people would come to better appreciate the importance of church-state separation if they were made aware that Scientology religious ideas could be infiltrating their public schools. To increase this awareness, citizens might want to contact their local elementary, middle, and high schools and ask if either Narconon or Applied Scholastics are providing programs there. If such are found, administrators could then be provided with information on the institutional connection and curriculum similarities with Scientology. Education officials would likely appreciate this, since, reportedly, promoters of these programs have, unless asked, failed to volunteer information on the Scientology connections. With matters thus transparent, the facts could speak for themselves.

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