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Court rules Scientology teachings not protected

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LOS ANGELES — A federal appeals court has ruled that the Church of Scientology's confidential teachings are not protected by California trade secrets law, dealing a blow to the organization's hard-fought campaign to block former members from operating rival churches where courses are offered at a fraction of the cost.

In its unanimous opinion issued Friday, a three-judge panel of the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals said the state law protects economic, but not religious secrets.

The ruling represents a second major setback in less than a month for the controversial group. On July 22, a Los Angeles jury awarded \$30 million to a disaffected member who claimed the church wrecked him mentally and financially.

Friday's ruling stemmed from an unusual lawsuit the church filed in Los Angeles federal court last year against a Santa Barbara, Calif.-based

Scientology splinter group called the Advanced Ability Center. The suit accused the center and others of entering into a conspiracy to disseminate certain confidential church teachings stolen in 1983 from a Scientology branch in Denmark.

The stolen materials were returned, and Danish authorities jailed the man who took them. However, the church contended in its lawsuit that copies were unlawfully sent to the splinter Scientology groups in the United States.

The Church of Scientology not only contended that the confidential materials, called NOTS, were stolen and distributed in violation of federal racketeering laws but that the materials were protected against use by others under California's commercial trade secrets law.

In its 38-page opinion, the appeals court said, "We hold that the California courts would conclude that sacred scriptures do not meet the definition of a trade secret under California law."