

File sharing group seen as religious in Sweden

January 5 2012, By MALIN RISING , Associated Press

(AP) -- A file-sharing group that considers itself a spiritual organization said Thursday that Sweden has recognized it as a religious community.

According to documents provided by spiritual leader Isak Gerson, 20, his Church of Kopimism received that approval in late December. The public authority responsible for such decisions was closed for the day and couldn't be reached to confirm the approval, which comes amid a global crackdown on file-sharing websites often used to illegally download movies, TV shows and music.

Gerson said in an interview that some of the church's roughly 3,000 members meet every week to share files of music, films and other content they consider holy and regard copying as a sacrament. He said the church's philosophy opposes copyrights in all forms and encourages piracy of all types of media, including music, movies, TV shows, and software.

The recognition of the Church of Kopimism follows a fierce debate in Sweden about illegal file-sharing over the Internet of copyright-protected films and music. This Nordic country - home to the men behind the file-sharing hub The Pirate Bay - already has a political party called The Pirate Party that seeks to reform copyright laws and holds a seat in the European Parliament.

Gerson, a philosophy student, has also been involved in the Pirate Party's youth organization.

Sweden's government defines religious communities as ones that conduct religious activities and services, entitling them to file separate applications for state funding and the right to marry couples. The country also has recognized believers of Norse paganism, elves and gnomes as religious communities.

Gerson said the Church of Kopimism feels strengthened by the government's recognition but that he doesn't think it can stop the law from charging members for illegal file-sharing.

"Being recognized by the state of Sweden is a large step for all of Kopimi. Hopefully, this is one step toward the day when we can live out our faith without fear of persecution," he said.

The group said it had sent in three applications to the Kammarkollegiet agency to gain approval as a religious community because the agency had been "strict with formalities."

"I think it might have something to do with the governmental organizations abiding by a very copyright friendly attitude, with a twisted view on copying," said Gustav Nipe, the chairman of the Church of Kopimism's board.

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