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The Search for Truth at Ananda

By Erik Espe

The Palo Alto-based religious "colony" has a new \$2 million church, an expansive new site for its East-West Book Shop and plans to expand its school. But charges raised concerning its leader, J. Donald Walters, are threatening its foundation.

"Remember, all this is a dream." It is late on Super Bowl Sunday. While much of the nation is still congregated around TV sets, 200 rapt church-goers sit in the pews of the Ananda Church of Self-Realization on El Camino Real at College Avenue in Palo Alto. They have gathered to hear their spiritual leader, "Kriyananda," speak about God and life. It is a rare local appearance for the man named Kriyananda, the author of more than 60 books and a profound leader in the "new age" movement for the past 28 years. "You see, the ultimate aim of life is finally to withdraw from all of it," he says in his trademark, smooth, soothing monotone, "and merge into the infinite."

Members of the multi-racial, multi-generational crowd laugh at his jokes during his address. They shut their eyes and meditate as he reads passages from his latest book and, when his speech is over, they line up to be blessed by him.

To his followers, Kriyananda is a "swami," the Hindu equivalent of a monk. As a member priest of an Indian monastic order, Kriyananda is believed to have gained spiritual power and insights into the nature of life through renouncing worldly desires, including those sexual. He is believed to be a pure channel for God. He is, as local follower Mary Bicknell puts it, "very tuned in to the truth." The truth, according to the Ananda church, is a combination of Hinduism and Christianity, in which the purpose of life is to find God and eventually gain freedom at the end of many lifetimes. To those outside the church, Kriyananda is better known as J. Donald Walters, a 69-year-old author and eloquent speaker who lives at the central "Ananda Village" in Nevada City near Grass Valley, Calif. He has set up Ananda churches and living communities in Seattle, Portland and Dallas as well as in Palo Alto. He also has an Ananda retreat and community in Assisi, Italy and meditation centers and religious sites in Africa, South America and Canada. And he has plans to expand into Australia, India and the East Coast. Walters is considered the emotional and spiritual center of his 29-year-old religious empire, which has thousands of followers. But he is also at the heart of a legal battle that some former Ananda members say threatens Walters' credibility and the future of the institution he has built. Living a life of celibacy and simplicity is a fundamental tenant for Kriyananda, according to his writings and church members.

But four women, all former Ananda members, swear in court documents filed last year in San Mateo County Superior Court that Walters abused his authority as a spiritual leader to have sex with them.

"While we were together he would tell me to 'tune into (his) consciousness,' meaning I should take advantage of my close contact with him and the spiritual benefits gained as a devotee," wrote one woman.

Three other women note in similar court declarations, filed under penalty of perjury, that he fondled them or sought sexual favors. Most of the encounters, which occurred between the late 1960s and the early 1980s in Ananda Village or at an Ananda Community in San Francisco, began with a request for a back rub or foot massage.

All of the declarations support a civil complaint by Palo Alto resident Anne-Marie Bertolucci, a former member and employee of the church, who left Ananda Village in late 1993. She is suing Ananda, Walters and a church minister, claiming sexual harassment, wrongful discharge, and fraud, among other charges.

She accuses Walters of using his authority toward "the creation of an environment hostile to women and as a mechanism for the sexual exploitation of women. . ."

Walters calls the charges "lies" and has filed a countersuit against Bertolucci claiming defamation of character. That suit is also pending in San Mateo County Superior Court. "We filed it because she has talked to people outside of the lawsuit, saying Walters sexually uses women and hands them down to his ministers," said Ananda's attorney, Jon Parsons of Palo Alto. "There is nothing like that that has happened. He's just not that kind of guy." Walters says the lawsuit is being secretly funded by his former church, the similar-sounding but much larger Self-Realization Fellowship, based in Los Angeles. That church lost a trademark lawsuit over Ananda's decision in 1990 to start using the term "self-realization" in its title.

"They've lost that, but they're still trying to get us through this second lawsuit," Walters said. Bertolucci and the Fellowship deny the charges. Bertolucci's case is expected to go to trial this spring. But critics of the church say who wins is far less important than the issues that are being raised. "The issue is Walters' misrepresenting himself," said Eric Estep, a Mountain View resident and a member of Ananda for 13 years. Estep now is part of a support network for disenchanted ex-members like himself. "It is a very important part of yoga, of his own teachings, to be celibate," he said. "His own teachings say it's incredibly important to be honest. Being truthful is the basis of the spiritual path he is teaching." What is without question is Ananda's growing attachment to the Palo Alto area. In September 1994, Ananda (which in Sanskrit means "divine bliss") caught much local attention when it bought the former St. Aloysius Catholic Church, a large, Spanish-style place of worship at 2171 El Camino Real at College Avenue. The Catholic Archdiocese needed to sell the 45-year-old structure after a merger of its Palo Alto parishes. Ananda bought it for \$2.14 million. Prior to that, local supporters of Ananda had gathered in one floor of an office complex on California Avenue in Palo Alto. But since its move to El Camino Real, the Ananda church has experienced growth, expanding from a membership of less than 100 to more than 200.

The church holds religious ceremonies every Friday night and Sunday morning.

Ananda also has bought a house to the rear of the church on College Avenue with hopes of tearing it down and expanding the Ananda School, a private K-4 school. The city approved Ananda's use permit earlier this month, but the plans still need to be reviewed by the Architectural Review Board. The church hopes to have a new 6,000-square-foot school, which will include four to five classrooms and a fellowship hall located below ground, finished by next year. "We've grown enormously since buying the church," said Ananda's enthusiastic Palo Alto minister David Prayer. "The beauty of the location reflects the beauty of the teachings." In addition, the Ananda church owns and operates: The East-West Book Shop at 324 Castro St. in Mountain View. The store, which has been run by the church since 1980, moved last October from its location on El Camino in Menlo Park to the site of the former Central Stationers in downtown Mountain View. The massive 8,000-square-foot store offers more than 20,000 religious titles as well as a place to meditate by a waterfall shaped from black rocks and topped by a statue of Buddha.

The store does \$1 million in business every year, according to store manager Norm Snitkin. Ananda has set up similar East-West businesses in Seattle and Sacramento. Ananda BookBuyers at 317 Castro St., located across the street from East-West. Formerly the Palo Alto-based BookBuyers, this Ananda-owned shop is one of the largest used book stores on the Peninsula.

The store was sold to Ananda in 1994 by church member Roger Reed, who still manages the business. The store has more than 250,000 books. Ananda Counseling Center, located at the church, has been in operation since 1993. Full-time counselor JoAn Steinmetz is also a minister with the church.

Ananda School has an enrollment of 32 students and a tuition of \$6,000 a year. The students and their parents do not need to be members of the church. With its building plans, Ananda hopes to expand to 60 students. Ananda Builders Guild, also based out of the church, is a collection of Ananda-member building contractors. Ananda Community at 240 Monroe Drive in Mountain View. More than 100 local Anandans live in Mountain View's Ananda Community, a 5-acre apartment complex just east of El Camino near the border of Palo Alto. The complex has its own meditation room, pool, community dining room and outdoor statues of Indian saints. Ananda and some other private investors purchased the complex in 1989. Since opening the Mountain View facility, the church has closed its Ananda community in San Francisco. "Here we are in this huge metropolis, and we have our own city," said church employee and Ananda community resident Spring LaMear. "You live and work with people you know. Everyone is rooting for you." "Everything has taken place much faster than we thought," Prayer said. "East-West's new location, our church, the beginning of our school . . . We never expected to be expanding so quickly." Many in Ananda's burgeoning local membership credit the church for giving them a better life. "Ananda is the only way there is," said local member Bicknell, a Fremont resident who is considering moving to Palo Alto just to be closer to the church. "It's real. It's a way of life." "My life has gotten better and better," said 20-year Ananda veteran Snitkin, manager of East-West. "I'm a happier person. I never

got onto the money track, but I've always had anything I've needed. I'm on the happiness track. My life is a good life. "All of us are colleagues. You're working with your friends. You're working for a greater good." They also credit Kriyananda, whom Snitkin calls "the kindest man I've ever met," for showing them the path to happiness.

Born in Romania of American parents, Walters studied literature at Brown University, while dreaming of becoming a playwright. That changed one day in 1948 when he picked up a copy of "Autobiography of a Yogi" by the Indian mystic Paramahansa Yogananda. "Three days later he was on a bus going to Los Angeles to meet Yogananda," said Prayer. Walters often refers to his status as a direct disciple of Yogananda, an Indian swami regarded as a major spiritual figure of the 20th century. (Some believe Yogananda was a divine being. When he died in 1952, followers said his corpse didn't decay for more than 20 days, a sign, they believe, of the yogi's heavenly status.)

Walters joined Yogananda's Los Angeles-based spiritual organization, Self-Realization Fellowship and became a swami in 1955. In a ceremony at the Fellowship, he symbolically cremated his body in sacrificial flames, signifying that he looked upon himself as dead to the world, and alive only to God. He was now a swami, a monk pledged to a life of celibacy, simplicity and selfless service. Celibacy is what brings the swami freedom to uplift humanity and commune with God, according to Yogananda's own teachings. "To be enslaved by sex is to lose health, self-control and peace of mind--everything that man needs to be happy," Yogananda wrote in his book "Man's Eternal Quest." Known for his powerful charisma and persuasive speaking abilities, Walters ascended to the vice-presidency of the Fellowship in 1959. But in 1962, the Fellowship fired him. "When they threw me out, it was of course very hard on me," Walters said during a lecture to his followers last fall. "I didn't feel it was just. In fact, it wasn't just. To dismiss a monk without even giving him a hearing, without allowing him to speak." The Fellowship to this day won't say why they dismissed him. In his interview with the Weekly, Walters said it was over different operating styles. Armed with Yogananda's teachings and status as a direct disciple, the swami started his own religious community. In 1968, he and six followers founded the Ananda World Brotherhood Village, a commune on 72 acres in the pine forests and mountain vistas of Nevada City. "I had this idea as a child to start a community," he said. "I felt it was something I had to do."

That community had its trials. A fire in 1976 nearly destroyed the entire village. Six years later an attempt to have Ananda incorporated as a city raised ugly comparisons in the local area between Walters and the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, the Rolls Royce-driving guru whose sect took over a city government in Oregon. The cityhood campaign failed, but Ananda survived and thrived. Today it has 400 people living on 900 acres.

Eventually, Walters began sending ministers to other states and other countries, setting up Ananda colonies and meditation centers. In 1980, his vision came to the Midpeninsula. Walters' parents, Gertrude and Ray Walters, spent their last years in Menlo Park and Atherton. When the swami visited them he often bought metaphysical books at a small Menlo Park store on El Camino Real called East-West. Ananda purchased the store in 1980. "I felt somehow God wanted me to do it," Walters said. He gave the store's new employees one piece of advice: "Love your customers, learn from them." The advice appears to have

paid off. Today, East-West ranks as one of the largest New Age shops in the nation. The local store has attracted dozens to Ananda, helping the organization to acquire its church and apartment center and to set up other businesses. Brochures and copies of the church's magazine "Ananda," advertising religious services and meditation classes, are also available in many stores and restaurants throughout the Midpeninsula.

In 1991, one of those handouts caught the eye of 28-year-old Anne-Marie Bertolucci of Palo Alto. She signed up for an Ananda meditation class and was soon attending Sunday services in Ananda's then cramped quarters on California Avenue. In a matter of months she had left her job and her marriage and moved to Ananda Village. It was there, she said, that problems began. In her lawsuit filed Nov. 21, 1994, she claims that she was manipulated by a married senior minister named Danny Levin, who served as vice president of Crystal Clarity Publishing, the Ananda publishing house where Bertolucci went to work in January 1993. The suit alleges that Levin used his authority as one of her employers and ministers to manipulate her into having a sexual relationship with him. Bertolucci also filed a charge of sex discrimination with the state Department of Fair Employment and Housing, which gave her a "right to sue" letter but did not investigate the case.

But Bertolucci also is charging that Walters used his authority as a spiritual leader to systematically seduce young female congregation members.

She said that in 1993 she was asked to massage Walters alone and watch a video with an "erotic sex scene." "(Bertolucci) was confused at the time as to why this 'Saint' Swami would be watching erotic movies . . .," the suit states.

In her claim of "fraud and deceit," she said Walters held himself as qualified to act in her own best interests "because he practices sexual celibacy."

But after complaining about what was happening, she said she was told to leave Ananda Village. "I lost my job," she said during a recent interview in her attorney's Marin County office. "I was fired because they said I was interfering with Levin's marriage."

She left in December 1993 and moved into the Ananda Community in Mountain View. But she was not welcome, she said. "I was ostracized at the local center. I was shunned to the point where it became so painful I left."

She saw a professional cult deprogrammer. She also saw an attorney. In her suit, she is seeking more than \$1 million in damages. Levin, who is still at Ananda Village and is still a minister, declined to be interviewed for this story. But Walters' attorney, Parsons, argues that Bertolucci is acting out of spite, because she couldn't steal Levin's heart. She was bitter when Levin rejected her for his wife, he claims. "There is no question that she was very upset when that relationship was terminated," he said.

In what is likely to be a key aspect of the case, Parsons also says that Levin had no authority over her, either as a minister or a superior at Crystal Clarity Publishing.

Walters responded to the charges in December 1994 by filing his countersuit for defamation. To combat the countersuit, seven other women, from various backgrounds and connections to the church, have come forward saying that Walters had indeed sexually "used" them or approached them for favors of a sexual nature. Their declarations, and several others filed by people who say they have first-hand knowledge of these or similar claims about Walters and the church, are now public documents in the Bertolucci case. "At first, I thought I was alone," Bertolucci said. "I think the women who have come forward are very brave."

Attorneys on both sides say this is the first civil case concerning sexual charges ever filed against Ananda or Walters. "A lawsuit was really the only way to stop it," Bertolucci said. "I felt it would be a way of warning other people, especially young women."

For Don Price, a former Ananda monk and now one of the organization's biggest critics, the declarations were not a surprise.

"There is light on the skeletons in the closet at Ananda," he said.

The women's declarations are explicit. Among other things, they recount stories of obliging requests to "service" the swami, sometimes in trysts with two women at once. At least one claims he justified his encounters, calling them a transference of "energy." Most say they also were discouraged from discussing their encounters with Walters in public and then shunned once they left the church. All said they once revered the swami. "In my journals, I referred to him as my beloved father," wrote one woman. The encounters date back nearly 30 years. Thora McDonnell of Nevada City said that sometime between 1967 and 1969, as a young yoga student, she visited Ananda village for two weeks with her 4-year-old son. "I really idolized him," she said of Walters. But when she, her son and a group of Ananda members went "skinny-dipping" with him, she said Walters swam up from behind and grabbed her breasts. He touched her sexually again later, she said.

She confronted the swami about the incidents, telling him, "You should be ashamed of yourself," she wrote. "He said, 'You went along with it.' I didn't though. I didn't go along with it," said McDonnell in a recent interview. "I went home the next day. I didn't want to have anything to do with him again." Another woman, who left the church in 1976 and has asked to remain anonymous, wrote that the swami "used" her for sex during a tour of college campuses in 1969. She indicated they had similar encounters on two other occasions. Denise Petersen was in her early 20s when she met Walters in 1981. Petersen wrote that she started out massaging him and then was asked to do more. "For me, it was not a sexual experience but one of surrender of my preferences and 'service' to the 'Swami,'" she wrote. One day she showed Walters a letter she composed in which she discussed their sexual encounters, some of which occurred at the San Francisco Ananda Community, where she lived from about 1982-1984. "To my surprise the 'Swami' immediately became agitated, with a shaking hand spilled coffee on my letter, and began talking to me in a very intense, loud voice," she wrote in her declaration. "Once in private his voice calmed and as we continued to talk he very calculatingly said 'you seduced me.' That statement was like a knife through my heart because I knew he was lying, and I had never heard him lie before." She never sent the letter. But she left Ananda in 1988. Like many others, Karen (not her real name)

connected with Walters after reading Yogananda's "Autobiography of a Yogi." She was a student at San Jose State at the time in the early 1980s. She started out cleaning Walters' house at Ananda Village. One evening Kriyananda asked her to give him a back rub. "In a few moments he asked me to take off my clothes, as they were irritating his skin while I gave him the back rub," she wrote. "I was extremely surprised, but, he said some things which assured me . . ." Encounters became more sexual from that point on. She wrote that Walters' core followers encouraged her to "service" their guru, to "view him as Krishna, and let him have his way, whatever he wanted. In none of these encounters did I participate as a full sexual partner, the sexual contacts were for his pleasure only . . ."

Karen wrote that he later invited a fellow nun to "be present in the encounters." When she voiced concerns to other members, she was pressured by core followers to leave, she wrote. She left in 1982 and now resides in New England. "It is my wish that those at Ananda, who go there with open hearts and minds know the truth about the man they are following, and not excuse his behavior on any grounds," Karen wrote in her declaration. Although her real name is on the declaration, she had asked to remain anonymous. Deborah Donie-Seligson, an avowed celibate "nun" at Ananda from 1980 to 1983, wrote that she also was disillusioned after Walters made sexual advances. "I spent several months praying and agonizing over what this all meant -- loyalty to Swami and the community had been drilled into my head," she wrote. "It took me almost another year of working a side job to earn the money to leave. (I had given all of my money to Ananda when I had become a member and earned no or very little salary for the work I did there.)"

Ananda attorney Parsons said the women's court declarations are rife with falsehoods. He compared the charges to false allegations made in a repressed memory case. "I don't know whereby hypnosis whether they've recreated memories," he said.

Others charges were distorted or blown out of proportion, he said. "Some of the stuff in there might be a difference in perception as to what actually happened," he said. "We're talking about stuff that happened from the late 1960s to the early 1980s."

Although he referred to the case as "rather a souffle: mostly air" in a letter to the community shortly after Bertolucci filed it, Walters today isn't taking the case lightly.

"They're willing to go as far as they have to to destroy me and us," Walters warned his followers during a taped lecture last fall.

In the same lecture, Walters referred to Bertolucci's attorneys as "evil" and in another talk compared Ananda's troubles to a spiritual battle, similar to the one waged in the Hindu spiritual bible, "The Bhagavad Gita." Walters wrote about Bertolucci in a public letter to the community over a year ago. "My own impression of her was, and remains to this day, that there is much sweetness in her, but that this quality in her vies with a hardness that borders on ruthlessness," he wrote. Don Price, who leads a support group for ex-Ananda members, said Bertolucci's lawsuit has become a major issue at the Nevada City village. It has helped convince up to 14 village members to leave. To Bertolucci's Marin County-based attorney, Ford Greene, the case against Ananda is simple. "Walters, who held himself out as a celibate

swami and monk, used his position as the leader as a means of seducing and exploiting young female Ananda members," Greene said. "In my client's relying on and entrusting in the integrity of Walters, she was subjected to a process of thought reform, also known as brainwashing, which stripped her of her independent judgment. After her independent judgment had been stripped from her, she was exploited." What was the most open of the relationships described in the court documents began in 1981, when Walters returned from a trip with a 26-year-old woman named Kimberly Moore. As Walters described it in an article that appeared in "Yoga Journal," he met her in Hawaii.

Price said the incident sparked some members to leave the village at Nevada City. "Everyone was flabbergasted because he was the celibate holy man," Price remembers. "It was like the pope coming back from a trip to Hawaii, swinging a 26-year-old girl on his arm." Walters at one point announced plans to marry the young woman, proclaiming his love for her in the "Yoga Journal" article. "In the magnetic influence of her presence, I soon found a vibrant joy rising from my heart chakra to the Christ Center (the seat of spiritual vision between the eyebrows)," he wrote. He also wrote that his relationship with Moore didn't mean he would have to lose his "swami" moniker. "In fact swami, in many Indian languages, is also the word for husband," he wrote. "What then, about my monastic vows? I feel that, in a very real sense, I have completed them." But some, like Price, weren't convinced. He left the village.

"I saw it for what it was," Price said. "It wasn't his kundalini rising. He had the hots for this girl. It was a mid-life crisis." "When Kriyananda came back from Hawaii with Kimberly Moore, I and the other members were shocked and angry," wrote Naomi Estep in her declaration. Naomi, wife of Eric Estep, is also now a supporter of ex-Ananda members. "This directly went against his teachings and his claims about being a monk. Within two weeks, the main community leaders were organized to meet with us in small groups to convince us this was 'right.' They succeeded because we are conditioned at Ananda to believe that Kriyananda is always right."

According to her declaration, Moore also saw it for what it was. "In late fall, (Swami Kriyananda) took me and a group of members to Half Moon Bay," she wrote in her declaration, which has been added to the Bertolucci case. "(He) had written a poem and so had I. My poem was about spiritual friendship, his was about the spiritual path and we recited our poems to each other. Later he claimed that we recited holy vows of marriage. He said this to the community at a community meeting. I was shocked! I had never agreed to marry him! I wasn't legally divorced from my husband." Moore left the community too, about six months after joining.

"I was a 'blithering idiot' when I left Ananda," she wrote in her declaration. "I believe that Ananda is a cult," she added. "Its core members and ministers do much to keep the fraudulent image of (Swami Kriyananda) alive."

Ananda's attorney Parsons said much of what appears in Moore's declaration is not true. But he does admit that Walters has had some celibacy problems.

"He had a sexual relationship with that woman (Moore). We're not denying that," Parsons

said. But he argues that Walters' sexual relationship with her doesn't discredit Ananda as a religious institution. "Maybe some popes did have mistresses," he said. "Does that mean the Catholic religion is fallible? Don't say that to the millions of Catholic people around the world."

Price and other critics also question whether Walters today should even be calling himself a "swami." Walters formally dissolved his lifetime nonmarriage and celibacy vows in 1985 to marry another woman named Rosanna Golia. That marriage ended, however, and Praver said Walters recently went to India to "renew" his vows.

Experts on Hinduism say that's impossible.

"Some people do renounce their vows, but that's a karmic blunder," said Sadhaka Jothinatha, a monk with the Hawaii-based Saiva Siddhanta Church, which publishes Hinduism Today. "It's a lifetime vow. The ability to maintain vows is the first step of a spiritual leader."

But Praver and Walters maintain that it is possible for a swami to "renew" his vows.

"It was really between me, God and my guru," Walters said.

While sipping tea in Praver's Mountain View apartment, Walters explains why his church has grown all of these years. He said Ananda thrives because of its leadership structure. At Ananda, members must, as a condition of joining, pledge their obedience "above all, to the living representative of the Ananda line of gurus: the Spiritual Director of Ananda World Brotherhood Village," according to Ananda's own written membership vows. In other words, they pledge obedience to Walters.

Ananda is not a democracy, Walters admits. "Democratic is not the word. It is a theocracy. . . It's not based on desires. Democracy is basically a question of people wanting this or wanting that. None of us, myself included, is interested in working from desire." Walters' power extends beyond a simple ability to make decisions about the future of Ananda. He designed the rituals that followers practice at the local church and wrote much of the music they perform. In addition to being the author of more than 60 books, Walters has put out seven new age music albums, and hundreds of lecture tapes. And his followers genuinely love him. They hold weekend-long celebrations of his birthday at the village. In Palo Alto this May, the church will hold a special service in honor of his birth. While minister Praver doesn't see Walters as an avatar (a perfect, desire-free, Christ-like being) he does believe Walters is "closer to that."

Bicknell agrees. "Walters is as close as I've ever seen to someone being enlightened," she said. "He's very tuned in to the truth."

Some ex-members say that they, too, once believed Walters had a special connection to God. "It's a weird thing, but I'm still under the spell," said former Ananda member Jerry Haslam, a Los Altos Hills resident who left the group last April.

Haslam says that after spending more than a decade at Ananda, he was "shunned" by church members when he began to question Walters' judgment. He said he's now in "recovery" from the years he spent there.

"Walters is still in my dreams all of the time," said Haslam. "I can't say I'm out of it. I thought of him as a stepping stone in my relationship to God for so long. It's hard for me to break out of that." Praver said it's the disciple's responsibility if his reverence for a spiritual leader gets out of hand. "Swami Walters is a strong leader," Praver said. "Some people don't like the fact that he has strong influence over people's lives--if they give him the ability to have that influence." Haslam, however, said he left the group because it was "going in the direction of a cult." Some of Walters' former followers who feel the same way have set up a peer support group, the Ananda Awareness Network, and a hotline number (1-800-273-9321) to offer support for ex-members and people who want to leave the village.

"You'll meet members, and they're very nice people, sweet people," said Mountain View's Eric Estep, a member of Ananda from 1969 to 1982. "In a sense, these people are sincere. They're really trying to lead a spiritual life. But the leadership has gotten so pulled into defending this guy, because if they lose faith in him, their life has no meaning. They've spent their whole lives serving this guy." Parsons brushes off the cult accusations. "Ananda is far, far less of a cult than the Roman Catholic Church. And I don't believe the Roman Catholic Church is a cult," he said. Praver, meanwhile, just sees the Ananda Awareness Network as a collection of dissidents. "For whatever reason, these people got disenchanted," Praver said. "For whatever reason, most of the things they've done with their lives have been reactive and negative to Ananda." For his part, Walters said he is being truthful. The "lies" in the case are the allegations leveled against him by the women. "My comment is no comment," he said with his trademark smooth and soft voice. "We're pushing for trial and let it all get settled in the courts. Meanwhile, I don't really care what happens. "Anyone in my position is going to get that kind of thing thrown at him, and I figure I might as well not lose any sleep over it," he said. "Am I commenting on whether it's true? It's a lie." Although he wrote in a letter to the community of "strong evidence" that the Self-Realization Fellowship was backing the case, Walters would not say during his interview with the Weekly what that evidence was.

"It's really their money that's behind it," he said. "We're absolutely certain. We do not have the facts to present before a court. But there's just no other way it would be."

The Fellowship, which has its closest branch in San Francisco, does not support the case in any way, said Fellowship spokesperson Lauren Landress. She called Walters' accusation "unfortunate." Some of the Ananda critics mentioned in this story are affiliated with the Fellowship, but contend they are not being supported in their cause against Ananda. Kimberly Moore, Denise Petersen and Naomi Estep, three of the women who have filed declarations, take a correspondence course on Yogananda's teachings through the Fellowship. Eric Estep is also a member. Some women who filed declarations, however, have filed sworn statements that they are not associated with the Fellowship. Bertolucci said she did meet with some members of the Fellowship before filing her lawsuit. But she said she was trying to get another perspective of Yogananda after her experience at Ananda. Bertolucci said she is not a member of the Fellowship and no longer practices any form of

religion.

"It's a smoke screen," Bertolucci said. "It's a way of creating an alibi so Walters can get away with what he's doing."

What effect the disputes will have on the growth of the Palo Alto "colony" is unknown. But Walters points to his Palo Alto followers as the best references of his character.

"The best people to ask are the people who live here," he said. "They know me. They are the ones to speak for me. With a thing like this, you can't speak for yourself. You can never win, no matter what you say." The local followers the Weekly talked to don't doubt their swami's total innocence in the case. "It's as if your best friend were accused of something you knew couldn't be true," said 20-year Ananda member Snitkin. "He's the kindest man I've ever met." "We all support Swami," said Mary Bicknell. "People being harassed by this church, I mean, it's kind of funny. Everyone here respects everyone from where they are coming. It's just not part of the culture here at all."

Ananda does not have a sexual harassment code or policy here or in Nevada City. And no one in the Palo Alto congregation is suggesting they adopt one either, said Ananda minister Prayer. "We have nothing here related to that," Prayer said. "People feel there has been nothing that would concern them or create an issue for that."

Despite the accusations leveled against him, Walters comes across as cheerful and defiant when discussing the court case. During the interview, he brought out a copy of his latest compact disc and put it on. He wrote the new age music in conjunction with a book of Yogananda's writings he's edited, called "Rubaiyat." As the music played, he talked about the difficult year he has had. "I've had three operations on my hips, and then just a year ago I had my heart operated on," he said. "This whole year came at a real interesting time. I was supposed to do nothing for a year. "But I still say it was a great year," he said. "Many wonderful things came out of it." And the verdict in the case, whatever it is, won't upset his serenity, he claimed. "Whatever God's will is is our definition of what's fine. Whatever God wants is what I want. If he wants to destroy me, it's not destruction. It's a blessing."