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The Los Angeles Times asked the following question: Why should churches be tax exempt in the first place? Wouldn't it be a better approach to deny the tax exemption to all churches?

Two replies were published. First a response from Erik Stanley, legal counsel for the Alliance Defense Fund, who is in favor of protecting the church's tax exempt status, followed by a rebuttal from Barry Lynn, director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

"Hands off our churches, IRS"

by Erik Stanley

Erik, even the title of your essay drips with Christian arrogance and intimidation. What is it with 'you people' anyway?

*There is said to be an old Arabian proverb: "If the camel once gets his nose in the tent, his body will soon follow."*

Erik, you just gave a great example why one should not get their inspiration from old Arabian proverbs. In modern Western logic we call that the "Slippery Slope" logical fallacy.

*This expression is especially pertinent in the tax exemption context.*

Erik, logical fallacies are never pertinent in *any* context.

*Churches are tax exempt under the principle that there is no surer way to destroy the free exercise of religion than to tax it.*

Erik, I'll bet I can guess the source of that *principle*.

*If the government is allowed to tax churches (or to condition a tax exemption on a church refraining from the free exercise of religion), the camel's nose is under the tent, and its body is sure to follow.*

Erik, repeating a logical fallacy makes it no less fallacious. Unless you have something else to offer, you're done; because an argument based on a logical fallacy is an invalid argument.

*But that's not just my opinion; it's the understanding of the U.S. Supreme Court. In its 1970 opinion in Walz vs. Tax Commission of the City of New York, the high court stated that a tax exemption for churches "creates only a minimal and remote involvement between church and state and far less than taxation of churches. An exemption restricts the fiscal relationship between church and state, and tends to complement and reinforce the desired separation insulating each from the other."*

Erik, millions of Christians claim that our country was founded on Christian principles and that a separation of Church and State was never intended. I'm glad to see that you agree that those Christians are lying sacks of shit.

*The Supreme Court also said that "the power to tax involves the power to destroy." Taxing churches breaks down the healthy separation of church and state and leads to the destruction of the free exercise of religion.*

Erik, that's another slippery slope argument. Also, you gave no supporting evidence that the free exercise of religion would be destroyed by taxation ... you simply asserted it.

Now Erik addresses Barry Lynn, who will be giving a rebuttal shortly:

*Barry, as someone who claims to be devoted to the separation of church and state, surely you can agree that exempting churches from taxes is a better way to separate state and church than taxing them.*

Erik, if he did, we wouldn't all be waiting to hear his rebuttal.

*I agree with the Supreme Court that an exemption for churches from taxes tends to reinforce a very healthy separation between church and state. That's why your opposition to the Pulpit Initiative doesn't square with your approach to church-state relations. Let's look at the facts: The 1954 federal Johnson Amendment prohibits a pastor from talking about candidates from the pulpit in light of Scripture. Thus, based on what a pastor says about an election from the pulpit, the tax code allows the government to tax a church.*

Erik, you couldn't have a clearer definition of the separation of church and state than the Johnson Amendment. The churches are to keep their noses out of politics (that's the state), and in return, the government will give the church, tax exemptions.

But 'you people' don't want to separate church and state - you want to control the state. You want your tax exemptions AND you want to meddle in state affairs. The proof is in the thousands of articles written by Christians, proclaiming this a Christian nation; and by the lies of Christian leaders who dishonestly claim that our Founding Fathers wanted this to be a Christian government based on Christian principles. Unfortunately for them, the Constitution is in writing, and it very clearly proves them wrong.

*Consider that, in light of the Internal Revenue Service's increasingly vague regulations, and you have a recipe for the censorship of religion.*

Erik, censorship of religion is prohibited by the First Amendment - camel or no camel.

*The IRS, through those vague regulations, reserves for itself tremendous discretion and power to decide which churches to punish for violations of the Johnson Amendment and which not to punish.*

Unfortunately Erik, the IRS lacks the courage to enforce those regulations, knowing full well that pastors would mobilize their congregations against the hated IRS.

*Barry, I know you've seen this because you report a lot of churches to the IRS for alleged violations, but the IRS only acts on a minuscule portion of your complaints.*

Erik, thanks for proving my last point, and showing that 'you people' are getting away with pulling a lot of illegal crap. Your own statement is proof that only the most egregious cases are prosecuted while the vast majority are ignored.

*What standard does it use? Who knows why it chooses to go after some churches and not others? When does a pastor's sermon somehow cross the line?*

Erik, pastors have publicly stated that they will intentionally cross the line in order to challenge the law. 'You people' are the least patriotic and least law-abiding people in our nation because you believe you are only responsible to a higher power; one that always agrees, coincidentally, with what you want.

*Conditioning tax exemption for churches on refraining from speaking about certain things is just as dangerous as taxing churches outright.*

Erik, earlier you had nothing but praise for the separation of Church and State (when you were trying to use it to your advantage), now all of a sudden, you argue against Church and State separation, and claim that pastors should be allowed to endorse political candidates and speak about State issues. So the truth is, that you don't support the separation.

That's the thing about dishonesty Erik, as you just proved, eventually ... you are bound to trip on your own meat.

*Those conditions break down the healthy "wall of separation between state and church" articulated by Thomas Jefferson in his letter to the Danbury Baptists.*

Erik, you are calling "black" ... "white." Those conditions are what keep the two separated. How in your logic(?) do you figure that allowing pastors to attempt to influence their congregations about politics, supports a separation?

That doesn't make any logical sense at all, Erik.

*The conditions allow the state, through its discretion and power, to punish disfavored views and to reward favored ones.*

No Erik, it allows the State to punish those who violate the separation by entering into politics when they are supposing to be preaching the Gospel.

*The free exercise of religion cannot survive in such conditions.*

Erik, why is a Christian, like you, in favor of freedom of religion? That is in direct violation of your God's first commandment: "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me."

The answer is that you are being dishonest ... again. You would never tolerate a large Islamic presence. You don't seek freedom of religion because we already have that. You are seeking Christian domination. You want to convert our Democracy into a Christian Theocracy.

And rather than having the honesty to admit it, 'you people' constantly lie about the Founders in a dishonest attempt to convince people that the Founders too, wanted a Christian government.

*The camel has had its nose under the flaps of the church tent for far too long. It's time to push him outside, where he belongs.*

Erik, if you people had stayed out of politics as you were supposed to, Barry wouldn't have had to file *any* complaints.

*Erik Stanley is senior legal counsel and head of the Pulpit Initiative for the Alliance Defense Fund, a legal alliance of Christian attorneys and like-minded organizations defending the right of people to freely live out their faith.*

I just have a few questions about the Alliance Defense Fund: if they defend the rights of Christians to freely live out their faith, how do they react when Christians actually do attempt to live out their faith according to the Bible? What do they do if someone stones to death an adulterer or a disobedient child? What about owning slaves? Is that okay as long as the slave is well-treated? What about parents who allow their children to die of curable diseases while waiting for their invisible ghost to save them? Does the Alliance Defense Fund represent those people too?

Just askin' Eric.

Now for the rebuttal from Barry Lynn.

"Tax exemption is a privilege, not a right"

See Erik, that's the way to title an essay. No threat; no arrogance; just a simple positional statement. Compare that to your title "Hands off our churches, IRS," which, when written honestly translates to "Hands off our money, IRS."

*When any group accepts a tax exemption, it agrees to play by certain rules and accept a certain degree of oversight. Federal law actually makes it more difficult for the IRS to audit churches than other charities. In addition to this modest "no electioneering" rule, for example, tax-exempt groups cannot collect money for a "charitable" purpose and then use it all for the personal benefit of the director and her family (or the pastor and his family). Do you seriously believe that the IRS and possibly even criminal investigative bodies have no right to try to scrutinize possible misbehavior?*

*Second, government at the local, state and federal level made a decision early in our history to grant tax exemptions to churches and other bodies. The Constitution does not mandate it; and indeed, even the decision you cite -- the Walz case -- doesn't say that tax exemptions are required by the 1st Amendment. In general, governments believed that churches along with other types of community groups enhanced and supplemented government services such as feeding the hungry, housing those in need of shelter and in general using private funds for public good. (Although this is a debate for another time, I note that more and more religious groups are now asking for a government bailout through the "faith-based initiative" and to keep their tax exemptions.)*

*I do concur with you, Erik, that the power to tax does have the potential power to destroy. However, I see no evidence that restricting the ability of a pastor to convert his church into a political action committee is intended to cause, or has caused, the destruction of religious enterprises. Although your effort this coming Sunday to have pastors flout the law against electioneering seems focused on pulpit rhetoric, why not have a few of them say, "And we are taking up a second collection today for the McCain-Palin ticket"? After all, the Supreme Court has frequently equated "speech" with "money" in rulings on campaign financing.*

*One of the principal jobs of the law is to draw lines about what is and isn't permissible. In my judgment, the IRS has gotten this piece of its work correct almost all of the time. More cases and guidelines help inform church leaders about what is and is not acceptable when it comes to exercising the privilege of a tax exemption. If a pastor wants to know whether something he or she is about to do will violate the prohibition against aid "in support of or in opposition to a candidate," the best start is to ask this question: Am I doing or saying this to help elect or defeat my favored candidate? If the answer is yes, then don't do it.*

Erik, see how easy it was for Barry to write a fallacy-free, honest essay? No, I guess for you that wouldn't be easy. Without deception and logical fallacies you people would be speechless.

My assertion for the week: The antidote to religious lunacy is the development of critical thinking skills, and ... honesty.

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THE SCIENCE SEGMENT

Pigeons Fly Home With a Map in Their Heads

It is a fascinating phenomenon that homing pigeons always find their way home. Scientists have now carried out experiments proving that pigeons have a spatial map and thus possess cognitive capabilities. In unknown territories, they recognize where they are in relation to their loft and are able to choose their targets themselves.

Homing pigeons fly off from an unknown place in unfamiliar territory and still manage to find their way home. Their ability to find their way home has always been fascinating to us humans. Despite intensive research, it is not yet definitively clear where this unusual gift comes from. All we know is that homing pigeons and migratory birds determine their flight direction with the help of Earth's magnetic field, the stars, and the position of the sun. Homing pigeons navigate using a mental map.

Researchers propose two approaches to explain how homing pigeons can find their home loft when released from an unfamiliar place. The first version assumes that pigeons compare the coordinates of their current location with those of the home loft and then systematically reduce the difference between the two until they have brought the two points together. If this version is accurate, it would mean that pigeons navigate like flying robots.

The second version accords the pigeons a spatial understanding and "knowledge" of their position in space relative to their home loft. This would presuppose a type of mental map in their brain and thus cognitive capabilities. Up until now, there has not been any clear evidence to support the two navigation variants proposed.

Scientists fitted homing pigeons with miniature GPS loggers in order to monitor the birds' flight paths. Beforehand the researchers trained the pigeons not to obtain food in the home loft, as was normally the case. They fed the pigeons in a second loft around thirty kilometers away, from where they each had to fly back to their home loft. The scientists then brought the pigeons to a third place unknown to the pigeons in completely unfamiliar territory. This release site was in turn thirty kilometers from the home loft and the food loft. Natural obstacles obscured visual contact between the release site and the two lofts. One group of pigeons was allowed to eat until satiated before flying home. The other group was kept hungry before starting off. With this arrangement, researchers wanted to find out whether the hungry pigeons fly first to the home loft and from there to the food loft, or whether they are able to fly directly to the food loft.

As expected, the satiated pigeons flew directly to the home loft. They already started on course for their loft and only deviated from that course for a short time to make topography-induced detours. The hungry pigeons behaved quite differently, setting off on course for the food loft from the very beginning and flying directly to that target. They also flew around topographical obstacles and then immediately adjusted again to their original course. Based on this procedure, researchers concluded that pigeons can determine their location and their direction of flight relative to the target and can choose between several targets. They thus have a type of cognitive navigational map in their heads and have cognitive capabilities.

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FAMOUS QUOTES

Penn Fraser Jillette (born 1955) 58 years old

He is an American illusionist, comedian, musician, actor, and best-selling author known for his work with fellow magician Teller in the team Penn & Teller. He is also known for his advocacy of atheism, scientific skepticism, libertarianism and free-market capitalism.

"If every trace of any single religion

were wiped out and nothing were passed on,

it would never be created exactly that way again.

There might be some other nonsense in its place,

but not that exact nonsense.

But if all of science were wiped out, it would still be true,

and someone would find a way to figure it all out again."