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Lance Dickie / Seattle Times editorial columnist

The tax man vs. religion

The Internal Revenue Service is on a mission to punish religious activities it views as political and therefore legally offensive.

Naturally, I've been worried sick about the tax status of noted Christian evangelist Luis Palau, who was photographed next to President Bush at a church in China.

The celebrated Oregon-based preacher with worldwide ministries is likely an unwitting prop in a cynical White House strategy to play to Bush's political base. Even the Vatican was reportedly miffed at the president's showboating in Beijing on religion.

Maybe presidential guests are off-limits for the IRS, but an Episcopal congregation in Pasadena, Calif., has drawn the agency's wrath.

All Saints Church is under investigation for a sermon delivered by its retired rector the Sunday before the 2004 presidential election. Titled "If Jesus Debated Senator Kerry and President Bush," the talk goes four paragraphs, and fewer than a hundred words, before the Rev. Dr. George F. Regas declares:

"Jesus does win. And I don't intend to tell you how to vote."

A Los Angeles Times story of church activity nationwide that October weekend said the sermon "delivered a searing indictment of the Bush administration's policies in Iraq." Throw in a denunciation of nuclear weapons and tax cuts and, unmentioned in the story, a blistering lecture on the failure of both candidates to talk about the poor.

Elsewhere in America, the article noted, preachers were rallying the faithful with circumscribed cheerleading for the president and pointing to stacks of voters' guides for the conservative faithful to grab on the way out.

The IRS — officially mum on the Pasadena case — was apparently alerted to the sermon via the newspaper. The agency sent a letter in June to All Saints asking a series of blood-draining questions about how the church conducts its business, and how the sermon came to be.

Offered a chance to admit its guilt and repent, All Saints chose to energetically respond with a team of Washington lawyers to make its case.

The IRS is arguing "any sermon which states a church's core values, when proclaimed during an election season, can be subjectively deemed to be campaign intervention," the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon told his congregation in a

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Nov. 13 sermon. "If the IRS interpretation stands, that means that a preacher cannot speak boldly about the core values of his or her faith community without fear of government recrimination."

A field agent offended by something in the newspaper can make a federal case out of it. A bullying, intimidating, expensive case out of it.

All Saints is not challenging IRS regulations it has worked with for years and describes as "healthy for our democracy and which we believe protect the precious principles of freedom of speech and freedom of religion." The church rightfully bristles at what it sees as a subjective invasion of its nonpartisan holy space.

Let me acknowledge my condition as a lifelong Episcopalian, the U.S. branch of the worldwide Anglican church. In the early days of the nation, if those who wanted a state religion had prevailed, it would have been Anglican — the Church of England.

In recent years, the Episcopal Church and other mainline denominations have lost membership. More than a few parishes might welcome extended on-site investigations.

An IRS auditor would run a gantlet of greeters, welcomers and ushers; be asked to sign the guest book, pointed toward the Book of Common Prayer (the red book), chatted up for a work party, invited to the social hour, offered a cup of Fair Trade coffee and officially included in the head count sent to the bishop. They would not come back, but they would be called.

People of good conscience? Yes. Piety with a political agenda? No.

The good folks at All Saints are being supported by leaders of conservative, nondenominational mega-churches who are appalled by what they see and can anticipate. We should all be scared by what this IRS challenge represents to religious freedom.

Maybe Luis Palau should brace for the worst from the IRS. He and the president stood in front of Gangwashi Church, founded by Anglican missionaries in 1921. The church was closed during the Cultural Revolution. I bet it was something somebody said.

Lance Dickie's column appears regularly on editorial pages of The Times. His e-mail address is ldickie@seattletimes.com

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