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Bush critics get goon treatment

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Is the Internal Revenue Service starting to police free speech in America? Has it, in this administration of cronies and corruption, become an arm of the White House, using tax law to squelch those who would question the president? The IRS pursuit of All Saints Church in Pasadena makes you wonder if our tax agency is turning itself into Big Brother.

On Oct. 31, 2004, the Rev. George F. Regas, a retired rector of All Saints, returned to the pulpit to deliver a probing sermon on morality. He posed an imaginary debate between Jesus on one side and John F. Kerry and President Bush on the other. At the outset, he told his parishioners that "I don't intend to tell you how to vote." He went on to describe how the Jesus he knew from the Bible would have been saddened by the war in Iraq and the untended poverty in the United States.

He imagined Jesus saying, "Shame on those conservative politicians in the nation's Congress and in state legislatures who have for years so proudly proclaimed their love for children when they were only fetuses but ignored their needs after they were born." His Jesus rebuked Bush, saying, "Your doctrine of pre-emptive war is a failed doctrine." The Los Angeles Times reported his sermon as a "searing indictment" of the Bush policies on Iraq.

On June 9, after the election, the IRS sent an initial letter to the church, citing the newspaper article. This was part of some 60 inquiries launched by the IRS into churches after the 2004 election, about three times the historic average.

This is an era when Catholic priests and bishops are telling believers that it is a sin to vote for Kerry or others who are pro-choice. Pat Robertson, the president's ally, has called for the assassination of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez. Jerry Falwell, famed for his Moral Majority political operation, has routinely lashed out at Democratic leaders from his pulpit. The Christian Coalition has taken it a step further, distributing millions of slanted voter guides, all designed to gin up a vote against Democrats. Republican tacticians like Karl Rove now count the conservative evangelical churches as central to their political base.

Yet there is no sign that the IRS is investigating right-wing churches as well as All Saints. As the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon Jr., rector of All Saints, asked, "I'm very interested to know whether the IRS is taking a look only at churches that are critical of the war in Iraq, or also at the churches that are supportive of the war and the president."

The church, sensibly, has decided to fight this inquisition in public. The National Council of Churches and the National Association of Evangelicals have come to the defense of All Saints Church. Notably silent have been prominent right-wing church leaders whose sermons are often far more directly political than anything Regas preached.

The All Saints investigation raises a profound threat to speech in the United States. This is a president who employs religious language and often claims a mandate from above for his policies. The president says his

favorite philosopher is Jesus.

But his policies directly offend the teachings we have from Jesus: waging aggressive war in Iraq; providing tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans while cutting support for the most vulnerable -- slashing health care, depriving the hungry of food stamps, slashing student loans for those who need them. Most recently, he vowed to issue his first veto to stop legislators from reviving the Army's standards against torture.

Each of these policies offends basic morality. On each, ministers and rabbis should be teaching, challenging their audiences to consider the terrible gulf between the president's policies and the basic teachings of the Bible, the Quran or the Torah.

The IRS pursuit of All Saints Church clearly will have the effect of chilling that inquiry and muting that challenge. If the IRS becomes the country's political police force, dissenters will face official investigation and possible indictment. Democracy and freedom of speech will be crucified by the imperial legions of the modern day.

It is vital that the IRS hear from religious and secular leaders. This president's policies deserve debate. The church cannot turn its back on the society around it. And this country doesn't need an inquisition run from the bureaucratic warrens of the Internal Revenue Service.

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