

## A Preacher Advocates Church Taxation

by

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One of the most amazing and paradoxical of modern Political situations is that of the United States committed fundamentally to the absolute divorce of church and state, and yet contributing indirectly, by means of the exemption of church property from taxation, more than \$250,000,000 annually to the support of the church. Theoretically in America we maintain that the aim of taxation is "to secure the equal distribution of the burden of civil society." Theoretically we maintain that our government is founded on the principle of the separation of church and state. The fundamental law of the land states explicitly that "Congress shall make no laws respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." But it is pure hypocrisy to maintain that we carry out these principles in practice. The exemption of church property from taxation is a plain denial of these principles. And incidentally we might mention many other evidences of a too close connection between Christianity and government in America, as, for instance, the employment of chaplains in legislative bodies, in the army, and in other government institutions, the appropriation of public money for charitable and educational institutions of a sectarian character, the compulsory reading of the Christian Bible in the public schools of a number of states, the appointment of religious festivals and holidays by the President of the United States and governors of the various states, laws compelling the keeping of Sunday as the Sabbath, and many other such regulations.

It is claimed for the church that it ought to be exempt from taxation because of the, valuable social service which it renders to human suffering. It is well just to keep in mind two facts: first, that very few churches are actually engaged in ministering to the poor (other agencies render such services much more efficiently), and, second, that the churches so engaged never do so from the highest motives; they are always thinking of winning supporters and members.

But granting that the church is a useful institution, "if you were to exempt that which is useful," to quote the wisdom of Ingersoll, "You would exempt every trade and every profession." Or, to use the words of James F. Morton, Jr., in his recent book 'Exempting the Churches,' "Our great philanthropists, scientists, inventors, and educators are not exempt from taxation on the ground of the great good they are doing."

The church contributes services to the state as a police power more valuable than the mere pittance it might pay on its tax exempt property, the friends of religion claim. But does it? I ask this question in all sincerity. It may be there was a time when people could be frightened into being good by the fear of hell. It may be that Voltaire was right in his day when he said that he didn't believe in hell, but he wanted his servants to believe in it. But that time is gone, for hell has been abolished and the church has lost its power (if it ever possessed it) to keep "bad people" in order. It is illuminating in this connection to read the statistics with respect to the religion of criminals confined in our penitentiaries.

To tax church property would put many churches out of existence, the defenders of the exemption of church property say. If an organization cannot pay its way, if it hasn't members and friends who believe in it sufficiently to support it, why should those of us who do not believe in it at all, who believe, in fact, that it is a vicious, superstitious institution, be compelled to support it?

We all agree that there may be some excuse for exempting schools, orphanages, and hospitals from taxation, for they are performing functions the state would be obliged to perform. But religion is another matter -- a very personal and private matter which is no affair of the state.

It cannot be said too frequently to the American people that religion is a strictly private affair, and that it is never the duty of the state to interest itself in either the life or death of the church. The church is not a public institution in the sense that it performs any duties which the state would have to perform in the absence of the church,

To tax church property is "robbery of God," we are told by the defenders of the faith. But which God? The Methodist, Baptist, Catholic, or Jewish, Fundamentalist, or Modernist?

Since the churches are subsidized by the whole community -- by means of tax exemption -- one would suppose that they would be community institutions. But such is not the case -- they are very exclusive and are quick to deny their privileges to the public except upon very exacting conditions.

It is rather illuminating to note that, though all of the states of the Union exempt church property from taxation, there is expressed in the legislation (pertaining to this matter of church property) in many states a suspicion that religions institutions might speculate in land or might use their buildings and property for profit in the name of religion.

In many states, limitations are placed upon the amount of church property which can be exempted from taxation. In some states, churches are limited to one acre (on which exemption can be claimed) within the city, and to five acres a mile or more from the city,

In the state of New Hampshire, the amount of church property exempt from taxation is limited to \$150,000. In Iowa, church land is exempt up to, but not exceeding, 160 acres; in North Dakota, the limit is one acre. In Missouri, the exemption is restricted to one acre within the municipality or within one mile of the municipality, and to five acres if one or more miles from the municipality. In Kansas, exemption applies only to buildings used exclusively for religious purposes and "grounds not to exceed 10 acres." Montana places the exemption of church property on the following basis: "Such property as is used exclusively as places of actual religious worship, but no more than is necessary for such purposes."

The state of Washington exempts all churches, built and supported by donations, whose seats are free, and ground not exceeding 120 feet by 200 feet, together with parsonage. and "the area of unoccupied ground exempted in connection with both church and parsonage shall not exceed 120 feet by 120 feet and the grounds are to be used wholly for religious purposes."

Some of the states place no limit on the property exempted if the property is used exclusively for religious purposes. The statutes in such states read; "all buildings and grounds, when used solely and exclusively for religious purposes," or "when not used for profit," or "when not held by way of investment."

It would be interesting to investigate the enforcement of these statutes, to discover, if possible, how law-abiding church organizations (so loud in their defense of the 18th Amendment and the Volstead Act) really are. I dare say that it would be very easy to find many instances of religious organizations exceeding the limit of church property exempt or evading taxes on property used for other than religious purposes,

What one of our leading weekly magazines called "saintly profiteering" is quite common among religious organizations. Look at New York City, for instance, where more than \$500,000,000 worth of church property is exempt from taxation! The Madison Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church of New York City recently made \$650,000 profit by selling its church property for an apartment house site. A Jewish synagogue, Temple Emanu.El, made \$1,000,000 clear from the sale of its property a few years ago. St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York City, is said to be located on property worth \$10,000,000. The fabulous wealth of Trinity Church, located at the head of Wall Street, is familiar to everyone. But New York is not the only city where such conditions prevail, though its case is extreme. There is, for instance, the case of a great midwestern religious organization which recently won from the Federal government the right to have its income exempt from taxation -- and the income involved in this contest with the government amounted to several million dollars. I refer to the Unity society of Practical Christianity with International headquarters in Kansas City, Mo.

A commission on taxation reported to Governor Pinchot of Pennsylvania a few years ago that in the city of Philadelphia, 14.77 percent of the total property was exempt from taxation, and of this 14.25: percent consisted of churches, parochial schools, and buildings for teachers of parochial schools. The commission reported that it was convinced that this condition constitutes a subtle and dangerous form of securing a state subsidy for religious institutions. "However commendable the purposes of these institutions may be," the committee recorded, "it is nevertheless a fact that the rapid increase in welfare facilities and the generous donations to welfare work are gradually creating a non- taxed class of property which is increasing more rapidly than the wealth of the community, thereby forcing additional tax burdens upon the taxable wealth to an unfair degree."

The commission recommended, therefore, that religious and charitable institutions be required to pay taxes on their land values, leaving improvements exempt.

Very few of our political leaders have ever had the courage to speak out on this matter of taxing church property. Be it said to the glory of General Ulysses S. Grant that while he was President he gave expression to prophetic wisdom in the following words contained in a message to Congress (in 1875):

I would call your attention to the importance of correcting an evil, that if permitted to continue, will probably lead to great trouble in our land before the close of the nineteenth century. It is the acquisition of vast amounts of untaxed church property. In 1850, I believe, the church property of the United states which paid no taxes, municipal or state, amounted to \$87,000,000. in 1860 the amount had doubled. In 1870 it was \$354,483,587. BY 1900, without a check, it is safe to say, this property will reach a sum exceeding \$3,000,000,000. So vast a sum, receiving all the protection and benefits of a government, without bearing its proportion of the burdens and expenses of the same, will not be looked upon acquiescently by those who have to pay the taxes. In a growing country, where real estate enhances so rapidly with time, as in the United States, there is scarcely a limit to the wealth that may be acquired by Corporations, religious or otherwise, If allowed to retain real estate without taxation. The contemplation of so vast a property as here alluded to, without taxation, may lead to sequestration. without constitutional authority, and through blood. I would suggest the taxation of all property equally.

It would be almost impossible to get any sort of a political, intellectual or social leader of today to speak with such boldness concerning the church and its failings.

"One of the clearest and most audacious of the few recent utterances on the taxation of church property has been made by Professor Harry Elmor Barnes in his 'The Twilight of Christianity.' If he is not severely punished by the church for so forthright a condemnation of the church, then I am no prophet. Barnes wrote:

One aspect of the economics of religion is the economic waste connected with the maintenance of ecclesiastical edifices and their operation. One could conceive of a type of religion for which large expenditures would be economically justifiable on the ground that the churches were rendering a very valuable social, economic and ethical service to the community, but the activities of orthodox churches in America must be regarded as rather worse than useless.

The hypothetical adjustment of man to an imaginary supernatural world and the salvation of mankind from a non-existent hell cannot be regarded as a service of any merit whatever. The churches may incidentally offer some relief to the poor, but it is a moot question as to whether, in the long run, this sort of charity is not socially disastrous.

By 1926, the annual expenditures of religious organizations in America for salaries, repairs, payments on debts and benevolence were \$814,370,000. To this sum should be added large donations to the cause of foreign missions. The writer of these lines is well known to be a person of pacifist leanings who earnestly deplores our present excessive expenditures for modern armaments, but it is certainly more justifiable to expend large sums of money to protect ourselves against potential earthly enemies, than to appropriate infinitely greater amounts to protect ourselves from wholly imaginary enemies in the postulated spirit world. We may be in no danger from Japan or Great Britain, but they certainly menace us more than the devil.

In 1926, the value of church edifices was \$3,842,500,000. These are free from taxation, though they benefit by all sorts of public expenditures such as fire protection, transportation facilities, police protection and the like. Probably no other step would be allowed with such definite practical consequences as the reasonable taxation of church property.

In addition to the churches, we must consider the parochial schools which are maintained at great expense by the faithful, though in many cases parents can ill-afford to make the necessary contributions.

The annual expenditures in America today for this purpose of adjusting Americans to supernatural powers certainly total far more than a billion dollars. One can scarcely refrain from remarking upon what might be done with this money if wisely and directly expended for the secular betterment of mankind, or even used to support modernized religious cults and organizations whose aims are chiefly related to social improvement and aesthetic appreciation.

The present economic status of the American Church -- rightly characterized as "a tax-dodging and tax-eating institution" -- defies the courage and sagacity of liberals. As liberals -- theists, atheists, agnostics, humanists -- we are contributing to the support of religious institutions which are founded upon superstition and whose influence is vicious. This is certainly a violation of the fundamental human liberties and decencies. By no sort of sophistry can we establish any significant difference between appropriating money for a sect and relieving it of taxation. The church at present is enjoying a form of legalized graft, for it is in no sense rendering a service equal to the benefits it enjoys under our liberal laws. The separation of church and state is, so far, merely theoretical. The church is subsidized to the extent of more than \$250,000,000 annually by relief from taxation. Its property has increased in value until today it totals more than \$6,000,000,000, though some conservative students put the figure at \$4,000,000,000.

If the church hasn't the decency to come forward and confess that it has been enjoying special privileges which it did not deserve, and voluntarily give up these privileges, have we liberals the courage to say that the church's abuses of our liberties must cease? And have we the boldness and skill to put the church in its proper place?

This is one of the most challenging labors confronting liberals today.