

GOD DISCUSSION

for the rest of us, who don't go to church. News-Opinions-Reviews for spiritual seekers and activists who cherish freedom of conscience.

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Is it time to start taxing churches? ProCon.org explores the arguments.

November 18, 2011 By [God Discussion Reporter](#) [Leave a Comment](#)

ProCon.org, a non-profit organization that provides critical thinking on controversial issues, has revealed some interesting [research about the tax-exempt status of churches](#):



1. The first recorded tax exemption for churches was during the Roman Empire, when Constantine, Emperor of Rome from 306-337, granted the Christian church a complete exemption from all forms of taxation following his conversion to Christianity circa 312.
2. The law against churches intervening in political campaigns was passed by the US Congress in 1954. Since then, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) has been successful in using the law to revoke the tax-exempt status of only one church: the Church at Pierce Creek in Binghamton, NY, which had placed an advertisement in USA Today and the Washington Times rebuking Bill Clinton four days before the 1992 presidential election.
3. In spring 2010, the state of Oklahoma awarded tax-exempt status to a Satanist group called The Church of the IV Majesties.
4. According to former White House senior policy analyst Jeff Schweitzer, PhD, US churches own \$300-\$500 billion in untaxed property. New York City alone loses \$627 million in annual property tax revenue due to 9,500 churches being tax-exempt, according to a July 2011 analysis by New York's nonpartisan Independent Budget Office.

Among numerous issues surrounding the debate, [ProCon.org](#) notes that Reverend Robert Jeffress, a Dallas pastor who endorsed Gov. Rick Perry, made waves when he called Mormonism a "cult" on Oct. 7, 2011. The IRS has been asked to investigate whether Jeffress endangered the tax-exempt status of his church just by endorsing the Texas Republican. While US churches are protected under federal income and property tax exemptions, a 1954 law prohibits churches from "directly or indirectly participating in, or intervening in, any political campaign." The IRS used this law to revoke the tax-exempt status of a church that in 1992 ran an advertisement criticizing Bill Clinton's views. And now the IRS is being asked to review whether Jeffress's church violated the same law.

Another topic explored is the "parsonage exemption" (or "parish exemption"), whereby "licensed, commissioned, or ordained" ministers of religion may deduct most of the money they spend on housing from their federal income tax. While some religious leaders live humbly, others enjoy several multi-million dollar homes with their expenses partially or entirely offset by tax exemptions.

Still another controversy explored is whether churches should remain tax-exempt when the economy is struggling. Proponents argue that a tax exemption keeps the government out of church finances and thus upholds the separation of church and state. They say that churches deserve a tax break because they provide crucial social services, and that 200 years of church



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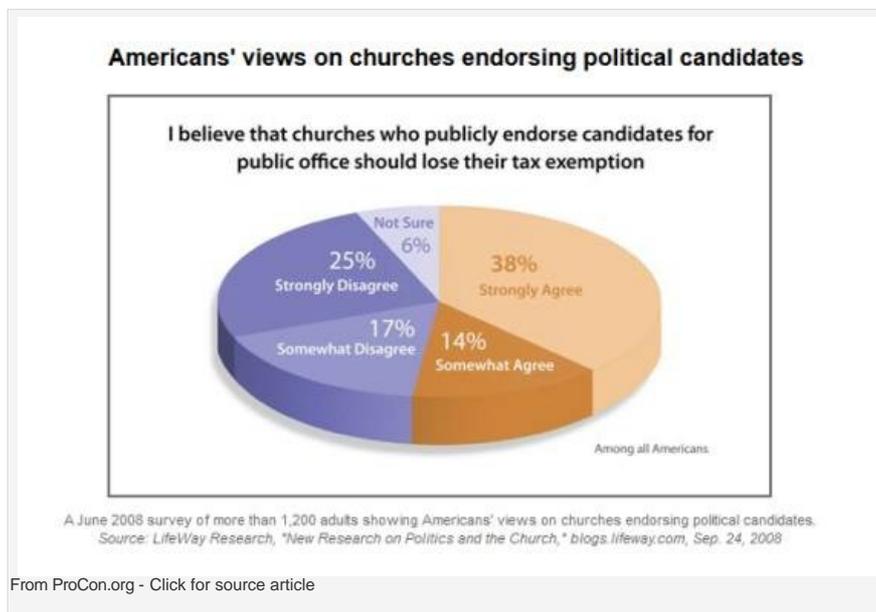
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tax exemptions have not turned America into a theocracy.

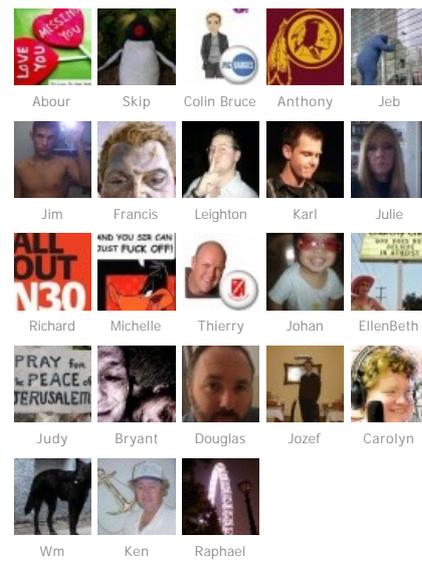
Opponents argue that giving churches special tax exemptions violates the separation of church and state, and that tax exemptions are a privilege, not a constitutional right. They say that in tough economic times the government cannot afford what amounts to a subsidy worth billions of dollars every year.

Eleven "Pro & Con Arguments" concerning whether churches (defined as churches, temples, mosques, synagogues, etc.) remain tax-exempt are presented on [ProCon.org's website](http://ProCon.org).

Amongst the data cited by ProCon.org is a 2008 survey which found that 38% Americans strongly agreed that churches that publicly endorse political candidates should lose their tax exemptions, while 25% strongly disagreed.



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God Discussion Reporter



Deborah is the owner and administrator of the site, starting it in February 2009. She received her business education at the University of Texas and operates a number of websites and small businesses. She hosts the God Discussion show and handles the site's technical work and editing.

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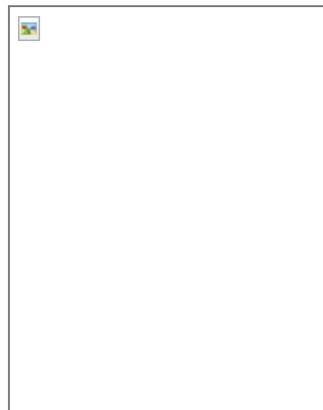
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