

John Oliver's Real Target is Your Church

In 2004, Jon Stewart, host of *The Daily Show*, famously appeared on CNN's Crossfire and accused the hosts of "hurting America." He excoriated the show's hosts for being "partisan hacks" who suck up to politicians and spin the news for partisan ends. Stewart then spent the next ten years hurting America by being a partisan hack that sucked up to politicians and spun the news for partisan ends.

That so many Americans get their news from opinion shows on cable news like Crossfire has always been depressing. But even more disturbing is the fact that for years a relatively small number (about 12 percent) cited Stewart's *The Daily Show* as a place they learned about what was going on in the world.

When Stewart and his show retired earlier this month, many of us sighed with relief. Finally, we thought, thirtysomething, college-educated liberals will be forced to turn somewhere else besides a third-rate comedy show to get their information about current events. Alas, that was not to be. Stewart passed the baton to his former correspondent John Oliver who has his own current events show on HBO called *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*.

If you've been on social media in the past year you've likely seen one of your liberal friends post a clip from Oliver's show. There's nothing particularly insightful about Oliver, but he has a British accent which leads Americans to assume he's intelligent and profound.

Earlier this month, Oliver did a segment on televangelists. He can be forgiven for being late to the topic since he was still a teenager in England when America got bored of talking about predatory preachers on television. The "prosperity gospel"

frauds are still a problem, of course, and should be called out for it. But Oliver (or whoever writes for his teleprompter) isn't really concerned about televangelists. The real goal of the segment is to promote the idea that the IRS should determine what is and is not a legitimate church.

To show how easy it is to form a "false" church, Oliver created his own church, Our Lady of Perpetual Exemption, and asked for donations. As a comedy bit it's pretty lame; as a critique of government oversight of religion it's downright idiotic.

Again, Oliver is from England, so his ignorance about things like the First Amendment and freedom of religious can be excused. But many Americans who should know better agree that the IRS should have the power to determine what beliefs constitute a legitimate religion.

A few folks have attempted to provide the education Oliver and his acolytes are lacking. Rabbi Jack Moline of the Interfaith Alliance has even invited Oliver's church to join his group. In his letter, Moline writes:

Interfaith Alliance is a national organization that draws support from individuals who identify with more than 75 faith traditions and philosophies. We hope that with the establishment of your church we can now say "more than 76 faith traditions." I would welcome you and any other members of the Church of Our Lady of the Perpetual Exemption (COOLPERX?) to join us.

You seemed surprised at how easy it was for you to open your church, register it, and ensure its legal protection. We understand what made you shake your head at what the IRS allows as a house of worship. The only way we can be absolutely sure that mosques, synagogues, churches and temples are able to serve communities across the country is to protect the rights of new and unique churches like Our

Lady of the Perpetual Exemption.

If the IRS were truly empowered to regulate religion in this country, every sermon would be written in red-ink, our prophets would all be living in the Caymans and we'd have to file our prayers at a processing center in Peoria. Religious life thrives in America precisely because the government plays no role in deciding what is or is not a legitimate faith.

Call us crazy, but we believe that the common sense of most people will alert them to the absurdities of religious practitioners who take advantage of these freedoms. And when that fails, we count on you to point out those who are misusing the trappings of faith for personal or political gain.

I hope that Interfaith Alliance can count on your wit, intellect and support as we continue the hard work of balancing religious freedom and the government's interest in preventing abuse and protecting the rights of all Americans. And I give you my personal promise that no donation you might send us will go toward mansions or private jets. (That's what government contracts are for, and that's where the real money is anyway).

While I appreciate Moline's response, I think he misses the point of Oliver's critique, and why it's been embraced by so many on the American left. Unlike Moline, they aren't all that interested in seeing religion in America "thrive." And they certainly aren't all that concerned about the preachers on TV channels they don't watch. What they are really worried about are the preachers in their communities, especially the conservative ministers and priests who challenge a libertine, secular worldview. And what they really want is for the IRS to use the government's power to take away the tax exemption of any church that dares disagree with their ideology.

As Naomi Schaeffer Riley recently wrote:

We've seen in the past two years how ideological the IRS can be, how prone its bureaucracy has been to political influence. Just imagine if Lois Lerner had been sent out to determine which churches were legitimate and which ones weren't.

Church doesn't perform gay marriages? It can pay taxes. Your church doesn't allow women to be pastors? We'll send you a bill tomorrow. What, you don't give sermons about the dangers of income inequality? We'll be in touch mid-April.

In fact, the idea of taxing non-gay-marriage-performing churches is floating in a few circles right now.

Oliver and his acolytes claim all they want is for the IRS to act against “ridiculous” churches. No doubt that’s true. But it won’t be long before their definition of what constitutes a “ridiculous” church includes every conservative Catholic and evangelical congregation in America.

*This article was originally published by the **Acton Institute**.*