

Opinion: Time to stop subsidizing religion

By David Niose, Washington Post

The arguments for taxing churches have been around for many years, but there is reason to believe that America's changing religious demographics will soon give them more traction. As more Americans abandon organized religion, many of the newly secular are unsympathetic to subsidizing religion via the tax code.

Recent polling shows that almost one in four Americans, and more than one-third of those aged 18 to 33, now claim no religious affiliation. Back when virtually everyone subscribed to a religious faith (the unaffiliated number polled in the single digits for most of the 20th century) an across-the-board tax break for all religions was arguably fair – or at least inoffensive. But times have changed, and so have attitudes about the extraordinary perks that churches enjoy.

Perhaps the most egregious example of religious privilege under the tax code is the so-called parsonage exemption. Under current tax law, “ministers of the gospel” may deduct virtually all costs associated with housing from their income. At its worst, the exemption subsidizes the unseemly: televangelists enjoying multimillion-dollar estates on the taxpayer dime. But even in a more ordinary context, the allowance represents an indefensible benefit running to organized religion, subsidized by taxpayers.

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