

Why is John Oliver's televangelism segment about the IRS?

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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It's Monday, so it must be time for everyone to share last night's main John Oliver segment and talk about how correct and funny and amazing he is. To be clear, I generally agree with this left-of-center consensus: Oliver's longform takes on the old *Daily Show* template are informative, impassioned, and hilarious.

I had a mixed response, however, to last night's segment. It's on a subject more than worthy of Oliver's scornful outrage: televangelists who fleece the faithful. Watch, if somehow you haven't already:

The best part is Oliver's months-long correspondence with Robert Tilton's people, which reveals some of the despicable fundraising tactics these guys employ. After successfully hitting up Oliver for a series of donations—e.g., “Send [the enclosed \$1 bill] back to me with your best Prove God tithes or offering”—Tilton then

sent me three small packets of colored oil that I was instructed to pour on letters and send back to him, by specific dates, along with more money. So I did that. And in April, I got a letter in a manila envelope with the message, “check enclosed,” and I thought, “Fantastic! I've seeded and I've seeded and I've seeded; here comes my harvest.” Then I opened it—and this is true—it was a check *from me*, made out to Pastor Tilton's church.

I should mention that Oliver's earlier mockery of Tilton for speaking in tongues is a bit gratuitous, as if *glossolalia* were simply a charlatan's affectation and not a spiritual practice of millions of people across the world. It's always a shame when the well-deserved criticism of some sleazy Pentecostal-Charismatic leader slips into making fun of that Christian movement generally.

More crucially, the elaborate punchline the segment leads to—an Oliver trademark—doesn't hit nearly as hard as what comes before. He zeroes in on religious tax exemption, specifically the fact that the IRS doesn't do much in the way

of determining whether a church is legit. To illustrate this, Oliver founds his own church, [Our Lady of Perpetual Exemption](#).^{*} It's an absurd and transparently mercenary endeavor, yet the IRS does nothing to stop it from operating tax free!

But the government is almost always reluctant to distinguish between naughty churches and nice ones, and for a really good reason: the separation of church and state. What's more, the logical consequences of such an approach are already among us, from ordination mills to [pasta strainer hats in driver's license pics](#). We may all agree that these things are, for better or for worse, ridiculous; many of us may agree that tax exemptions for money-hungry televangelists are worse than merely ridiculous. The question is whether all this is an acceptable price to pay for a government that declines to say whether my church is better than yours. I tend to think it is.

The question of religious tax exemption *generally* is more complicated. Some defend it based on a high view of what the IRS calls "public charities"; others simply maintain that the government has no power to tax churches in the first place. Lots of us think the housing allowance, which Oliver brings up briefly, should be more strictly defined, [a goal we took a step toward a couple years back](#). And many people, of course, don't defend the religious exemption all—including those who argue that [ending the exemption is the best way to get the IRS out of the church-definition business altogether](#).

But Oliver seems less interested in criticizing the exemption itself than in highlighting the fact that it extends to manipulative sleazeballs. He's right; it does.^{**} It's just that this doesn't really amount to an argument that the IRS's approach is anything worse than the least-bad available option.

Oliver's criticism of Tilton's fundraising itself, however, is spot-on. It's his pivot to IRS policy that's unhelpful. After all, not every moral problem has a straightforward regulatory solution.

** Interesting that the comedy show liberals currently love most [basically stole a joke from one they now love to hate](#) and changed one word.*

*** Of course, Christian-televangelist sleaze is [not the only variety available](#).*