

CENSORS GET ACTIVE IN MISSOURI

Maurice S. Owens, a Washington lawyer, filed a complaint with the IRS against the Missouri Catholic Conference alleging “illegal political interference.” The Catholic group was urging candidates for state office to return contributions received from an organization, Supporters of Health Research and Treatment, that promotes embryonic stem cell research and human cloning.

The ruthlessness of this IRS complaint, which is bogus on the face of it, should mobilize all principled civil libertarians to protest its implications for free speech. Regardless of whether one supports or objects to the intentional killing of human embryos, the immediate issue is a First Amendment matter: All non-profit organizations that speak to public policy issues have a stake in this debate.

The IRS issued a fact sheet in February regarding “Election Year Activities and the Prohibition on Political Campaign Intervention for Section 501(c)(3) Organizations.” There is nothing in that document that suggests that it is a violation of the IRS tax-exempt code for a religious group to urge candidates for public office to return contributions from any individual or organization. Indeed, it would be impossible to mandate such a stricture without trespassing on the First Amendment guarantees of free speech and religious liberty.

If the Missouri Catholic Conference were advocating that candidates for public office return monies donated by the Klan, no IRS complaint would have been filed. But because the Catholic group is fighting the fat cats—millions have been raised in Missouri by political action committees promoting all kinds of genetic research—the censors are out in force. Not only do they seek to advance a utilitarian agenda, they

seek to promote a gag rule on those who disagree with them.

Missouri is blessed to have such courageous bishops and an equally courageous Catholic Conference.