

THE STATE VS. THE SUPREMACISTS

Chicago Tribune - July 16, 1999

This much is certain. If Matthew Hale, the white supremacist leader of the World Church of the Creator, aided or participated in or even knew in advance of Benjamin Smith's deadly shooting spree through Illinois and Indiana, Hale should be prosecuted and hauled off to prison for a long time.

But that is not certain. And there is something troubling about the government's attempt to squeeze Hale and his organization on other grounds.

Illinois Atty. Gen. Jim Ryan has filed a civil lawsuit against the World Church of the Creator, claiming that the white supremacist organization is not a church but an unregistered charity. The attorney general will ask the court to freeze the assets of the group--in effect, shutting it down.

"We want to shine a light on the financial dealings of this organization," Ryan said this week.

If the court determines that this group raises and distributes funds as a charity, it can be required to register with the attorney general and provide a public accounting of its finances.

A charity? There hardly seems anything charitable about the World Church of the Creator. It might more aptly be described as a business, a business that prospers on hatred.

It may be that this group meets the legal test of an organization that would be required to file financial reports with the state. But it seems that what's going on here has little to do with the rules of charitable organizations, and everything to do with the words and actions of Matthew Hale and Benjamin Smith.

The police and prosecutors investigating Smith's shooting spree should be encouraged to take every step necessary to find out who was involved, from the suppliers of his firearms to anyone who financed or supported his actions.

But at the same time, the attorney general must be careful that it doesn't punish the organization for its message, vile though it is.

That would only justify the contention of Hale and other fringe groups that the government harasses and persecutes them for their beliefs.

Public officials have good cause to speak loudly and clearly in opposition to messages of hate and discrimination, and to encourage their constituents to do so as well. And the attorney general has the authority to apply the law equally, including the financial disclosure rules for charitable organizations.

But be careful not to make the vile Matthew Hale into a martyr. That would be to give him a gift.

Edition: CHICAGO SPORTS FINAL

Section: EDITORIAL

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Index Terms: ISSUE ; ILLINOIS ; STATE ; GROUP ; RELIGION ; CULT RIGHTS ; ABUSE ; ETHNIC VIOLENCE

Record Number: CTR9907160078

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