

MATT HALE'S RIGHTS--AND OURS

Chicago Tribune - February 10, 2000

The notion of Matthew Hale as a martyr for the 1st Amendment is only slightly less repugnant than the racist "theology" he peddles as the foundation of his World Church of the Creator.

But 1st Amendment martyr is what Illinois Atty. Gen. Jim Ryan almost made of Hale, albeit unintentionally, with his ill-advised lawsuit challenging the tax-exempt status of Hale's "church" and demanding that it register as a charity.

Cook County Circuit Judge Julia Nowicki dismissed the suit Tuesday, holding that the law under which it was brought was unconstitutionally vague.

Whether or not Nowicki's decision stands up on a promised appeal by the attorney general, it ought to be instructive to all who seek to combat noxious doctrines like those of Matthew Hale and his ilk: You cannot fight their evil by attempting to curtail their civil liberties. Because in curtailing their liberties, you curtail those of all of us. And, as with Ryan's case against Hale, you also can turn the bad guy into a martyr for a noble ideal.

Ryan filed the suit against the World Church of the Creator in the flush of outrage after white supremacist Benjamin Smith's bi-state shooting spree last Fourth of July weekend. Smith murdered former Northwestern University basketball coach Ricky Byrdsong and a Korean graduate student at Indiana University before killing himself as police closed in.

It turned out that Smith had been a member of Hale's East Peoria-based "church" and Hale, while disavowing any current connection with Smith, used the occasion to call attention to his group. He lauded Smith's action and lamented his death--while pointedly avoiding expressing grief for Smith's victims.

Hale on Tuesday lauded Judge Nowicki's decision and labeled Ryan's lawsuit a "political ploy." As if Ryan, had making political hay been his only concern, could not have found an easier way. As if the attorney general could not have let the whole thing pass without doing anything.

No, Jim Ryan's intention was as honorable as Matt Hale is odious. It was Ryan's choice of weapon that was faulty. Better that a Matt Hale and his band of misfits should go unpunished than that the law be overstretched and the liberties of all be curtailed in an effort to get at him.

Edition: CHICAGO SPORTS FINAL

Section: EDITORIAL

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Index Terms: RELIGION ; RIGHTS ; REACTION ; LAWSUIT ; TAX ; SHOOTING ; MURDER

Record Number: CTR0002100128

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