



Secularism is growing obstacle for Mormon Church

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An attorney for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints predicts secularism will be one of the most significant obstacles facing the LDS Church over the coming decade.

William F. Atkin, associate general counsel for the LDS Church, made the prognostication Saturday during an address at the 2010 J. Reuben Clark Law Society Conference on the University of Utah campus.

"When governments become neutral towards religion, we see less and less protection of religion and religious activities," he said. "Secularism in the world is neutral at best towards religions and hostile at worst. We're seeing more and more that it is hostile, not just neutral, towards religion."

In the United States, secularism could result in changing how the tax code treats nonprofit religious organizations.

"We think there's going to be a tightening now of what kind of entities get tax-exempt status," Atkin said. "Maybe churches are no longer going to be viewed as such a positive influence in society -- therefore (maybe) they're not going to be granted tax-exempt status."

Abroad, secularism is manifesting itself in a wave of anti-discrimination measures in Europe that could, for example, prevent the LDS Church from requiring its employees to adhere to a basic level of personal worthiness and moral conduct.

"We're seeing more and more, particularly in Western Europe, the countries who are very secular are pushing anti-discrimination and not permitting any religious exclusions," he said.

According to Atkin, additional "trends that are here and coming in the next 5-10 years that have the possibility of impacting the church adversely" include an increase in audits of church financial records as governments searching for more revenue during a global economic downturn and immigration restrictions that stand to severely limit the number of visas available to the church for full-time missionaries.

He also provided some context for the wide range of issues the LDS Church's Office of General Counsel routinely confronts. "The Office of General Counsel takes care of the legal affairs of the church. We want the church to be legal wherever we are so that the enemies of the kingdom cannot attack us because we've done something incorrectly."

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