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## Religious Incursion Tempts Faithful To Overreact

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"The Scientologists are coming! The Scientologists are coming!" So seems to be the cry from some in Plant City over a deal for the Clearwater-based Church of Scientology to buy a downtown business.

It's not so much the conversion of this building for use by the church that concerns the locals; it's more the prospect of converting citizens into Scientologists.

Frenchman's Market is the property being purchased to house a "Scientology and Dianetic Life Improvement Center," according to The Courier, the Tribune's Plant City publication. Many of the small vendors using space in Frenchman's naturally are concerned by the impact the deal may have on their businesses.

Aside from the economics of it, the building presumably will be used as an outreach center for Scientology, a religion clouded in mystery and suspicion. Some of the church's celebrity followers - Tom Cruise with his controversial assertions about psychiatric drugs and Isaac Hayes through his departure from the television show "South Park," among recent examples - have contributed to its public relations problems.

Plant City is a predominantly Christian town, and many want to keep it that way.

As a member of a Christian church in Plant City, I too am concerned about the influence Scientologists would have on the community. The problem comes when people who, like me, are reluctant to see them move into town go the next step and try to use government to prevent it from happening.

Too many people seem to think it's OK to pressure public officials to violate private property rights and religious freedom. Such people are all for religious freedom when it comes to their particular religion, but not when they want keep out groups such as the Scientologists.

The seller of Frenchman's, David Hawthorne, probably had it right when he said, "Our country was founded upon certain freedoms. I wonder if people would object if a representative of a synagogue or mosque was considering the purchase of property in this area."

Giving government, even at the local level, authority to usurp private property transactions and religious freedom is

a dangerous misstep. I would be uncomfortable living in a community that allowed a majority to ban certain religions.

Hawthorne has every right to sell his property to Scientologists. And Scientologists, like members of every other religion, have every right to practice their religion and even to proselytize.

Those Christians worried about the prospect of Scientologists converting Plant City residents - and I include myself - should put every effort into proving Christianity to be the truth, not use an overreaching government to block them.

Adam Fowler of Plant City has a degree in political science and is a member of a local Baptist church. Keyword: Community Columnists, to read other recent columns.

Photo credit: Tribune photo by GREG FIGHT

Photo: The purchase of Frenchman's Market by the Church of Scientology has implications for the community beyond just displacing the merchants.

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