

# Clergy has a political role to play

Thursday, March 29, 1984 O&E (OJ58)

"Clergy should stay out of politics." This is what the person who called me wanted to say. The call was prompted by a reference to a sermon to the fact that many of the people who are supporting Gary Hart are looking for a new direction for our nation.

I was illustrating the idea that there is a hunger for new direction. My remarks were seen as those of a minister who had entered into politics.

This view, that clergy should stay out of politics, is an especially strong tradition among evangelical Protestant Christians.

The phrase arouses old fears that someone will get into office from another denomination, and impose their religion upon us. I come with a fear that political involvement by the clergy will divide the church.

**THIS VIEWPOINT** is that clergy have a privileged position which they should not use of political purposes. It also comes out of the belief that clergy should stick to the things of faith, but should stay out of practical matters about which they know nothing.

Regardless of all such warnings, clergy become involved in politics. Often the costs are high, such as when a nun is forced to leave her order to hold a political office, or a minister is attacked because he/she takes action regarding the arms race. It is sensitive issue for clergy.

The problem is that no one clearly determine where to draw the line between the secular and the sacred. Does debate on prayer in public schools belong in the U.S. Senate or in the church? Is the issue of Las Vegas style

## moral perspectives

**Rev. David Strong**

gambling in Detroit a political or a religious concern? Alcohol consumption and pornography are typically items for the preacher to speak about. Because they deal with individual morality. What about the political policies which advance or slow the arms race? Where is the line which separates the secular from the sacred?

I WAS ONCE very involved in supporting a public school millage campaign. I do not remember anyone criticizing me for this action. Another time I was involved in a workshop which opposed the institution of a peacetime draft.

Interestingly enough, widespread conscription in Europe was the major reason that many immigrated to America to find freedom of conscience and freedom of their religious practice concerning war. Yet, active involvement of clergy in such issues as peace and war are often met with the phrase, "Clergy stay out of politics."

First, we have to acknowledge the fact that there are no longer clear-cut lines. There is no place where we can say that this issue is a sacred issue, and that one is secular.

Our American tradition in recent year is to err upon the side of being

careful and cautious about the sacred imposing its belief upon the secular: no religion in the public schools, and nothing of what we find in Europe, a party associated with a religious position. This careful and cautious position is probably good, but it is being challenged.

Second, if clergy are involved in any of the concerns which affect people on a daily basis, they will be involved in politics.

**THE SAFEST** issue are social service, where we distribute used clothing, canned goods, and provide counseling and health care. However, once one moves from the perspective of a local community to a world view, it is obvious that feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and providing medical care are all political issues.

We are among the 10 percent who use 40 percent of the world's resources. One clergyman has observed that we cannot continue to do this without militarily opposing those who would seek to change this imbalance. This quickly becomes a political issue.

Third, the most interesting phenomenon is the manner in which the issue gets turned around. Political figures can use religious issues to further their own position or to challenge the elec-

tion of a political foe. Religious groups vow to defeat those senators who voted against prayer in the public schools.

There is a certain hypocrisy here, that clergy are encouraged to speak about prayer in the public schools and are told to stay away from the issue of the arms race or Central America.

**WE HAVE TO** admit that clergy themselves lives in a very political role. It's not much whether they are right or wrong morally, but whether the people in their parish support or oppose their stand. Billy Graham supported President Nixon. This did not particularly bother Graham's constituency. It did bother his conservative constituency when he went to the Soviet Union and spoke about peace.

When clergy say only those things which are liked by the constituents, they destroy the prophetic nature of their call. Jeremiah was imprisoned because he called his nation to repent. Bonhoeffer was hung because he became involved in a plot to kill Hitler.

The prophetic element in religion is essential to its integrity. The prophetic elements reflects the nature of God as one who acts to change history. Clergy cannot totally stay out of politics if they decide to be true to their own religious roots. They must risk the displeasure of misunderstanding of persons in order to exercise their proper role and authority. The must be true to their calling.

Clergy and their political involvement is a sensitive issue. It will continue to attract controversy. It appears to be an increasingly important issue in our time.

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