

CHAPTER 1

A Tale of Two Pastors

To begin to understand the choices clergy make about becoming involved in politics, it is helpful to consider an average day in their lives. Where, on a typical weekday afternoon, might they be found? Perhaps they are visiting elderly members of their congregations, or leading Bible study groups in their churches. Perhaps they are preparing sermons about the relationship between the week's scriptural lessons and current politics. Or perhaps they are at city hall, lobbying public officials to pass gun control legislation. Religious leaders make a wide variety of choices when it comes to managing their time and other resources. Some of them choose to include some form of political involvement in their busy schedules, while others shun politics.

All clergy would likely consider themselves to be, as the Book of Micah encourages, *filled with spirit and power*, but they express the presence of these forces in their lives in many different ways. What impulses guide them toward, or away from, the political realm? Under what circumstances do clergy decide to act as links between the people they serve and the American political system? It is of great importance to understand clergy's orientations toward political involvement. Clergy have the potential to mobilize hundreds of people, should they choose to do so, and to make significant contributions to the political agendas of the communities in which they serve. Little is known about what drives some clergy to become deeply involved in politics, or what leads others to avoid the political realm altogether. This study adds to the overall understanding of the choices religious leaders make about political involvement by telling the stories of forty-six clergy and their political decisions.

Just as the religious traditions over which they preside are characterized by great diversity, so too the political involvement of religious leaders varies tremendously. All clergy must reconcile the institutional rules and expectations of the organizations they serve with their own goals and preferences when they decide whether to include political involvement as an element of their official roles as clergy. Some reject the idea of translating their religious authority into political authority. Others opt to present an agenda of important issues for their congrega-

tions to consider. Still others have both the desire and the opportunity to lead their congregations in political endeavors. This book is an exploration of the variety of orientations urban Protestant clergy display regarding political involvement, as well as the many factors that shape their activity. I show that in an urban setting, the choices pastors make about political involvement are shaped in a profound way not only by their specific religious traditions, but also by the socioeconomic status of the neighborhoods in which they serve.

The setting for the study is Milwaukee, Wisconsin and its suburbs: a metropolitan area with a population of over one million people. Milwaukee is a city of much more than its trademark beer, bratwurst, and cheese. It is also home to hundreds of religious communities. Since its founding, Milwaukee has been an ethnic melting pot, and this fact is clearly reflected in its organized religious life. The clergy who lead Milwaukee's congregations have traditionally played a visible role in both the culture and politics of their city. The diversity of Milwaukee's religious leadership is reflected in myriad ways among its pastors, but a brief tale of two Protestant clergy illustrates this variety particularly well.

A casual observer might expect that of the hundreds of Protestant pastors in Milwaukee, Louis Bound and Alan Rickover¹ should be among the most similar. Both are middle-aged, with thinning hair and wrinkled brows. Like many Milwaukeeans, both are of German descent. The Protestant denomination in which they both serve claims the upper Midwest as a stronghold, yet both Reverend Bound and Reverend Rickover were born and raised in other regions. Both share what could be considered a moderately liberal theological outlook, and both identify with the Democratic Party. In 1964 both participated in the pro-civil rights Freedom Summer in Mississippi. Since these two pastors seem to share so much in common, it would be very easy to assume that their orientations to political involvement would be similar too.

Their tale, however, tells as much of difference as it does of similarity. It took Reverend Bound an hour in an interview setting to provide a mere thumbnail sketch of his political activities in the past week. He was particularly proud of the fact that because of the efforts of a coalition in which he is active, a tavern in his church's immediate neighborhood had recently been stripped of its liquor license.² On many occasions police had discovered drugs, weapons, and underage patrons in this tavern. He said that "The city attorney told us it couldn't be done, but we worked hard and we shut down that tavern. I personally lobbied four of the city alderpersons" (M4).³ Reverend Rickover, however, said of his lack of political involvement: "I have decided that it isn't working. I don't know what works. I don't know what's right" (M14).

Bound was proud that people join his church specifically because of its political agenda: "They know that we take very strong justice stands on social issues" (M4). Rickover, though, expressed a belief that "The purpose of a sermon is not to advocate political action or to push a certain political agenda" (M14).

This tale of two pastors, along with that of forty-four of their counterparts, forms the basis of this study. I explain the circumstances under which some leaders (clergy) of "nonpolitical," and certainly extragovernmental, social institutions (churches) choose to extend their spheres of influence into the political realm while others do not. What is responsible for the dissimilarity between Bound and Rickover, each of whom asserted that he was typical of the denomination in which they both serve? As it turns out, one important element of this divergence lies in the fact that Bound serves a congregation located in one of Milwaukee's most economically stressed neighborhoods, while Rickover is employed by a church situated in one of the city's wealthiest suburbs.

Pastors face a variety of demands on their time and energy. They must balance these demands in such a way as to maximize their ability to meet the externally defined expectations of their position, as well as to implement their own agendas. Among the goals of some pastors is political involvement, either in their community or on a larger scale. Others prefer to steer themselves and their congregations away from the political realm. In either event, it is crucial that clergy present their preferences to their congregations in such a way as to rally support for these goals. Some clergy *value* such activity more than others, and some are *more successful* at it than others. Erving Goffman has argued that "When an individual appears before others his actions will influence the definition of the situation which they come to have."⁴ Some who define social realities do so in a conscious, calculating fashion, while others are less aware of their ability to shape their group's circumstances. Clergy have the capability to shape their congregations in many ways. Some pastors are able to present themselves as *political* leaders for their congregations, while others are not—or choose not to try.

In an urban setting, the choices pastors make about political involvement are shaped in a profound way by the socioeconomic characteristics of the neighborhoods in which they serve. The type and frequency of pastors' political activities differ depending on whether they serve in economically challenged central city congregations or wealthy suburban churches. Moreover, pastors who work in central city neighborhoods embrace different issue agendas and ideological orientations than their counterparts in outlying areas, regardless of denominational affiliation. A pastor in the central city may look out of his or her office window and see drug houses, the scenes of violent crimes, and homeless

people. As one of the central city pastors I interviewed pointed out, "I'm sure you've noticed the poor living conditions we have here in Milwaukee's inner city. Some of the people around here live in awful rat holes" (A9). The same would not be true for a pastor in an affluent outlying area. He or she would see a large parking lot, expensive homes, and attractive scenery. These circumstances have important ramifications for the political choices such clergy make.

THE UNBREAKABLE LINK BETWEEN RELIGION AND POLITICS

Despite the constitutional maintenance of "separation of church and state" in the United States, religious groups have not avoided political involvement. After all, as Alexis de Tocqueville observed, "By the side of every religion is a political opinion, which is connected with it by affinity."⁵ This observation is perhaps more true today than it was when de Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830s. The constant presence of religious voices in debates about such issues as abortion, prayer in school, and capital punishment provides plenty of evidence that religion and politics are profoundly intertwined in the American political culture. The political visibility of religious leaders as different as Jerry Falwell and Jesse Jackson highlights the broad sweep of organized religion's role in American politics.

The 1940s brought about a blurring of legal boundaries between church and state as the Supreme Court incorporated the First Amendment's religion clauses.⁶ From the 1950s through the 1970s, churches served as rallying points for history-making social movements.⁷ By the 1980s, previously inactive evangelical Protestants began to emerge as a potent electoral force,⁸ and in 1988, two major presidential contenders were ordained Protestant clergy.⁹ Most recently, politically active Christian groups have been important players in the political struggle to define American morality.¹⁰ Thus it should come as no surprise that clergy often find themselves under pressure to participate in politics. As the tale of two pastors illustrates, however, widely divergent views about both the desirability and scope of pastoral political involvement coexist within the world of American clergy.

Several important studies of clergy involvement in politics were undertaken in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Harold Quinley, Jeffrey Hadden, and Rodney Stark and his colleagues were all concerned with documenting and exploring the radicalization of mainline Protestant clergy during the civil rights movement.¹¹ Taken together, their studies came to represent the benchmark of scholarship in the area of clergy and

politics for two decades. Only recently has scholarly attention again been paid to the political involvement of clergy. James Guth and his colleagues have amassed and analyzed the results of thousands of surveys about clergy and their political beliefs and practices, and Ted Jelen has undertaken pioneering ethnographic work by interviewing clergy and visiting their churches.¹² Before these studies appeared, though, much was being made of the political mobilization of religious people, yet there was little discussion of the role of the pastor in this process. In their path-breaking studies of political mobilization in churches, for example, Kenneth Wald and his colleagues discussed the "political tenor" of various religious communities at length, but they did not focus much attention on the roles clergy play in shaping political context for their congregations.¹³ This is surprising given that religiopolitical activism is really an example of the broader phenomenon of political involvement by the leaders of nonpolitical social institutions. It has, however, never been treated as such. Nowhere are the motivations of nonpolitical leaders to take on political roles analyzed in detail.

The recent large-scale study of the political involvement of clergy by Guth and his colleagues represents a major step forward. Guth in particular has been a pioneer of the recent study of clergy involvement in politics; his work on Southern Baptist clergy has paved the way for other research.¹⁴ In their body of work, Guth and his colleagues argue that "social theology" is the central determinant of political activism among clergy. They have compiled an enormous amount of data in the course of their research, but they have not written the final theoretical chapter on the subject of clergy and politics.¹⁵ Jelen's work on clergy and politics is also valuable because it provides some rich contextual detail of the circumstances under which clergy make political choices, but its generalizability to urban settings is limited because it is based on research in rural Indiana. Moreover, Jelen's study is tightly organized around the various denominational groupings to which the clergy belong. As a result, the study is primarily descriptive, carrying with it normative conclusions.¹⁶

THE SETTING: METROPOLITAN MILWAUKEE

Milwaukee is located in the southeastern corner of Wisconsin on the west shore of Lake Michigan. The city is divided geographically by the industrial valley of the Menomonee River. This geographical division corresponds to strong patterns of de facto racial segregation.¹⁷ While Caucasians reside in all parts of the metropolitan area, residents of the near north side are predominantly African American, and Hispanic Americans are most likely to live on the near south side.¹⁸ Suburban

sprawl has proceeded to the north, west, and south; Milwaukee's wealthiest residents live in suburbs on the far north side. The downtown area has enjoyed a renaissance in the late twentieth century, and during the summer months a host of ethnic festivals celebrate the city's cultural diversity. For this reason residents of "the city of festivals" are often said to be filled with *Gemütlichkeit*: a spirit of social friendliness.

As the twin nineteenth-century impulses of immigration and westward expansion progressed, so too Milwaukee grew.¹⁹ In 1818, the French Canadian Laurent Solomon Juneau arrived in the Northwest Territory and established a trading outpost on the southwestern banks of Lake Michigan. By 1834, Native Americans had ceded all lands in and around the Milwaukee River, and European Americans, particularly German immigrants, began moving into the area. The impact of German immigration on Milwaukee's history cannot be understated. Milwaukee's economic base grew rapidly thanks to the beer industry, which was spurred by such notable German Americans as Jacob Best, Frederick Pabst, and Joseph Schlitz. To this day the culture of Milwaukee retains a distinctly German American flavor.

At the same time, Milwaukee has been a melting pot for various ethnic groups. Polish immigration began in force around 1850 and continued into the twentieth century. Polish Americans settled on the south side of the city, while German-born residents lived on the north side. Over time, the arrival of more ethnic groups, together with assimilation and intermarriage, resulted in more mixed housing patterns among European Americans. Some neighborhoods, however, retain their distinct ethnic character to this day. African Americans began moving to Milwaukee in the mid-1850s, some making their way north through the Underground Railroad. Following emancipation and well into the twentieth century, African Americans continued to move north to urban centers like Milwaukee in search of employment. Peter Eisinger argues that the great speed with which African Americans moved into the metropolitan area created a stress on the city. Milwaukee, says Eisinger, was not prepared to face this rapid demographic shift, and has suffered from difficult race relations for decades as a result.²⁰

Religion and politics have been intimately interconnected in Milwaukee throughout its history. Solomon Juneau was Catholic, and the Roman Catholic Church retains a strong presence and influence in Milwaukee. However, Juneau also encouraged the growth of Protestant churches. Ground was broken by Presbyterians for the city's first church on April 13, 1837, and the Milwaukee Catholic Archdiocese was established in 1844. The first clash between religion and politics in Milwaukee sprang from tensions between Catholics and Protestants. During a period of labor unrest in the mid-nineteenth century, a lecturer and for-

mer monk named E. M. Leahy gave a talk that was highly critical of the Catholic Church at the Spring Street Methodist Episcopal Church. This incited a riot between Methodists and Catholics, causing a great deal of damage to the church building. Pew railings were broken off and used as clubs. As a result of this melee, the Milwaukee Common Council, in its first documented entanglement with religion, voted to award the Methodists \$150 to repair their church.

More recent and far more significant were the political efforts of the late Father James Groppi, a Catholic priest and civil rights activist who led African Americans in demanding fair and equitable housing policy. In the wake of bloody riots in Watts, California, and Newark, New Jersey, a similar crisis began in Milwaukee on July 31, 1967. Father Groppi and his followers defiantly violated curfews imposed by the city government, and Mayor Henry Maier was soon forced to the bargaining table with the Conference on Religion and Race, a group of clergy organized by Groppi. Later Groppi led a series of marches and protests designed to force the issue of fair housing continually before the eyes of the city government. Groppi encouraged a spirit of cooperation between Catholics and Protestants, and perhaps more significantly, between white and black clergy.

Cooperation between white and black clergy was also in evidence in the early 1980s in Milwaukee under the auspices of the Coalition for Justice for Ernest Lacy.²¹ Ernest Lacy was an African American man who died in police custody, raising serious questions in the community about police brutality. Laura Woliver demonstrates that “the religious element in the Coalition grew, becoming more than the personal faith of the [Lacy] family, [and took] on a dimension of its own as more and more clergy and religious activists joined the Coalition.”²² These legacies live on today.

THE CLERGY AND THEIR CHURCHES

I considered only Protestants in this study to establish a baseline; all interviewees, at a minimum, shared in common the fact that they were clergy in Protestant churches. The largely white mainline Protestant denominations, which advocate a nonliteral approach to Scripture, have long-standing roots in the United States. Mainline churches were indisputably the most socially influential through the nineteenth century of American history, but they began adapting to religious pluralism—and thus lost their position of social hegemony—when the Catholic Church expanded during the second great wave of European immigration from 1890 to 1920.²³ While mainline clergy tend to endorse a liberal political

agenda, their laity have often been characterized as politically conservative.²⁴ This has created a political “gap” between mainline clergy and their laity that has stifled the mainline’s potential for mass political activism.²⁵ Many mainline clergy embrace the “social gospel,” which is a politicized interpretation of Scripture that emphasizes extensive welfare programs, world peace, and human rights. I interviewed sixteen mainline clergy who represented the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Episcopal Church, and the American Baptist Church.

Evangelical Protestants are predominantly white, and they strictly interpret Scripture as the word of God—and in some cases, the *literal* word of God. They also stress the importance of each individual’s personal salvation experience with Jesus Christ. The evangelical sector of Protestantism encompasses fundamentalists, who interpret the Bible literally and often adopt a separatist stance toward society; evangelicals, who are less literal in their interpretation of Scripture and focus a great deal of energy on spreading the word of God; and Pentecostals, who believe in “gifts of the spirit” such as speaking in tongues and miracles. The evangelical sector encompasses a large number of denominations, and some evangelical churches operate independently of super-church organizations. The source of evangelicals’ national political strength lies in the strong grassroots networks they developed for political activism in the late 1970s. The political organizations that arose to represent evangelical Protestants, such as Jerry Falwell’s now-defunct Moral Majority and Pat Robertson’s Christian Coalition, advocate Christian activity to combat what they perceive as the advanced moral decay of American society. They seek to place politicians in office who share this goal. The issues on their agenda reflect an underlying concern for the moral fiber of America: they oppose abortion, support prayer in public schools, and deplore pornography and violence on television. I interviewed sixteen evangelical clergy who represented the Assemblies of God, the Southern Baptist Convention, the Evangelical Free Church, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, the Church of the Nazarene, the Church of God, and several churches with no denominational affiliations.

African Americans constitute a separate category within Protestantism. African American Protestantism has had its own unique experience and as such stands apart from predominantly white Protestant traditions. Many African American clergy share a commitment to a strict interpretation of Scripture with white evangelicals, but the two groups are politically dissimilar. On some issues African American Protestants adopt conservative positions, but they are politically liberal

on other matters.²⁶ African American clergy enjoy a great deal of social—and often political—influence, particularly because of the traditional centrality of the church in the black community. African American Protestants have long been politically active, and historically black churches have been an important locus of mobilization for civil rights protests. At the same time, there is great diversity within African American Protestantism, which presents challenges for political cohesion and effectiveness. While most African American Protestants belong to traditionally black denominations, there are some black or multiracial congregations in urban areas like Milwaukee that are affiliated with traditionally white denominations. Such congregations and their clergy are often distinctly African American, or even Afrocentric, in nature. I interviewed fourteen African American clergy who represented the National Baptist Convention (U.S.A.), which is by far the largest black church body in the Milwaukee area, the Church of God in Christ, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and three traditionally white denominations.²⁷

LOOKING AHEAD

This book is an exploration of the choices religious leaders make about involving themselves in politics. I will argue that in an urban setting, the choices pastors make about political involvement are shaped not only by their religious traditions but also by the socioeconomic realities of the neighborhoods in which they serve. In chapter 2, I explain the variety of strategies Protestant clergy employ in approaching political involvement. Just as the religious groups over which these clergy preside are characterized by great diversity, so too their own political involvement varies tremendously. Ultimately all pastors must reconcile the expectations of others with their own personal goals and preferences when they decide whether to include political involvement among their official roles. Pastors who become involved in politics do so in different ways and with varying intensities.

In chapters 3 and 4, I explore several possible explanations for the choices pastors make about becoming politically involved. These explanations are rooted in personal and contextual factors that shape the political involvement of clergy. Chapter 3 focuses on a set of personal resources, including attitudes about the normative propriety of political involvement by clergy; feelings of political efficacy; gender; and career stage. In chapter 4, I turn to two central contextual factors: denomination and the socioeconomic status of church neighborhoods. The principal theme that emerges from these two chapters is the complex interplay

between personal convictions and political context that marks the decision-making process clergy undertake with regard to political involvement.

The focus of chapter 3 is the importance of personal resources for the facilitation of political action. Pastors' attitudes about the propriety of political involvement by clergy constitute a definitive and central element of their overall orientation to politics. It would be highly unusual, for instance, to find clergy who believe that they ought to steer clear of the political realm leading marches or organizing protests. Moreover, clergy who are positively oriented to political involvement may be expected to feel a strong sense of political efficacy, while pastors who believe that they have little effect on politics and policy may limit their own political involvement as a result. Personal circumstances may also be expected to structure the choices clergy make about becoming politically involved. It is more difficult for women clergy, for example, to establish themselves as political leaders. Career stage is also important; clergy who are at mid-career enjoy certain advantages if they choose to become politically involved.

Chapter 4 contains the heart of my argument: neighborhood circumstances play a crucial role in structuring the choices clergy make about political involvement. I consider two contextual factors, one—denominational tradition—that has been stressed heavily in previous studies of clergy involvement in politics, and another—church neighborhood socioeconomic status—that has not received such attention. Because tremendous attitudinal differences exist along denominational, theological, and racial lines, it is important to explore the ramifications of these factors for pastors' political involvement. Some Protestant traditions encourage political leadership while others scorn it. Neighborhood context, however, also matters. The socioeconomic status of a church's neighborhood is actually much more indicative than its denominational affiliation of the choices its pastor will make about political involvement. Differences in neighborhood political context translate into differences in the political involvement levels of the clergy whose churches are located within them. Members of churches in affluent areas are often active in their communities on their own or through secular organizations. Their clergy often have little incentive to provide them with a stimulus for political involvement. On the other hand, members of central city churches may spend proportionately more time concerning themselves with basic survival needs. Thus their pastors may have an incentive to engage in political activity on their behalf. Political leadership is in fact *imperative* for some pastors regardless of their denomination, their theology, or even their race, as politically active pastors tend to be those whose congregants face the most trying economic circumstances.

Political activity must be motivated by some issue or set of issues. In chapter 5, I consider the specific issues the pastors identified as most important to them and discuss the extent to which their political agendas are related to the choices they make about political involvement. Among the most frequently mentioned issues were abortion and racism. Less frequently mentioned issues included gambling and the environment. These issues, which they identified “off the top of their heads,” are a good indication of the pastors’ political agendas. Specifically, clergy who were less politically involved focused most heavily on issues concerning morality, family, and the human body, while clergy who were deeply involved in politics displayed most concern about issues affecting Milwaukee’s immediate economic situation and the issues of crime and violence that plague it. Again this illustrates the importance of the context provided by pastors’ neighborhoods in structuring their orientations to politics.

In chapters 6, 7, and 8, I explore the relationship between pastors’ political involvement and their views on three front-burner issues of the 1990s: abortion, crime and violence, and “family values.” Surprisingly, neither the degree of importance the pastors assigned to the issue of abortion nor the substantive content of their comments about it was related to their level of political involvement. Consistent with the argument that neighborhood socioeconomic status matters, however, the ways in which pastors framed the issue of crime and violence were related to their level of political involvement. Clergy who were least directly critical of those who commit crimes were the most politically involved. The pastors did not agree about the importance of family values in American political discourse. The pastors’ comments on the subject of family values were especially diverse and colorful. Many pastors perceived this debate as a fabrication of the political Right, while others were quite sure that the fabric of the family needed to be strengthened through stiffer discipline.

In chapter 9, I summarize the findings of the study and consider the directions future research ought to take. Specifically, I discuss the need to incorporate measures of external political context into all explanations of the choices clergy—or any other nonpolitical social elites—make about translating their authority into the political realm.