

ORDAINED MINISTRY IN THE PUBLIC WORLD

By ALAN NICHOLS

IN EVERY CHRISTIAN TRADITION there is debate about the involvement of priests and ministers in the political realm. Many a government leader has been heard to say in the 1980s and 1990s the equivalent of Henry II's cry, 'Will no one free me of this turbulent priest?' Church leaders have often been in the same quandary: when will these priests leave the streets and return to the sanctuary?

The thesis of this article – that Christian principles of the common good and high ethical standards *can* be argued in the 'market-place', and that clergy have a legitimate place in this – is based more on personal experience than on the reading of many books.

I have been in public and political debate in Australia for twenty-five years, as an official spokesman for the Anglican Church in Sydney and then in Melbourne, as a member of various government committees, as chairman of a state inquiry into poverty in co-ordination with non-government welfare organizations, as a refugee worker and as an individual member of ethics committees of various institutions. Examples from this experience in influencing policy and practice will be used in this article.

Theological issues

Theology must be our starting-point. There is much more agreement between Catholics, Protestants and other Christians in this area than there used to be. Why should the Church be in the public arena? The current Patriarch of the Armenian Orthodox Church of Lebanon, Patriarch Karekin II, has said:

Our God is a God who cares. He is the One who after creating the world and man, never ceased to be concerned for them; He constantly looks after them; He continuously takes care of them through His messengers, the prophets and, in a unique and unprecedented and supremely perfect manner, through the gift of His Son, the Saviour, Jesus Christ.¹

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In the Middle East, the patriarch will not allow the western divide of public and private life to persist; there is too much at stake. Increasingly, thinkers in the West are saying the same thing. Paul Rowntree Clifford in England writes:

What kind of a society do we want to see emerging from the confusion of our times? On what principles should our common life be ordered? How far are our popular aspirations and attitudes responsible for social disintegration? Is the disillusionment with politicians and political parties based on confusion about the values which should inform their policies or even on false values which for one reason or another have come to be widely adopted? Christians cannot escape these questions; for they have to do with God's purpose for His creation.²

An even wider view is taken by Lesslie Newbigin:

In the resurrection of Jesus, the original covenant with creation and with all human life, the covenant with Noah and his descendants, is reaffirmed. The world of human culture rejects God and is under God's judgments. But God in his patient and long-suffering love sustains the created world, and the world of human culture in being, in order that there may still be time and space for repentance and for the coming into being of new creation within the womb of the old.³

There is an argument for 'natural order'. Oliver O'Donovan writes: 'Christian ethics looks both backwards and forwards, to the origins and to the end of the created order. It respects the natural structures of life in the world, while looking forward to their transformation.'⁴

Then there is the social justice theological stream. Practical ministry on the ground, in parish and community, leads to practical love which uncovers greed, racism and oppression of minorities. Advocacy to remove injustice naturally follows in pastoral work. Samuel Escobar describes what happens when missionaries moved from a presence with the poor to an alignment with them.⁵ They were accused of 'open interference in the secular affairs of the communities where they worked'. Escobar believes their actions were right, and that there was more biblical warrant for them than even the missionaries realized at the time.

Oliver O'Donovan warns that our social justice ministry must not be divorced from genuine love for our fellow human beings. He says 'managerial philanthropy' is a form of corruption, and we need to exercise 'true neighbourliness', which takes seriously the thought that the neighbour, like ourselves, is a being whose end is in God.⁶ Emil

Brunner, in his classic on justice, wrote that 'where there are systems, justice is as indispensable as love'.⁷

There are other biblical themes which tend towards the same point: the image of God is defaced in the behaviour of human beings towards one another, and needs restoring and transforming. There is such a thing as 'public right action' and it is appropriate for Christians to call for governments to work towards it. Public conscience can be informed by private Christian conscience. However the tension between church and state is resolved, religious commitment must have some influence over public policy.

Case study: Catholic ethicist in Melbourne, Nicholas Tonti-Filipinni, was invited by the Health Department to rewrite a Bill for Parliament which would define the moment of brain death, provide for guardians for people in a coma, and allow for people with a terminal condition to die with dignity. His amendments were incorporated into the legislation and are now in force. The invitation came because he had worked hard in public debate to elucidate the issues, and he is a trained philosopher.

To me, there can be no doubt that Christians individually and the Church corporately have both responsibility and opportunity in the modern world to influence the state, and they should. But should clergy participate?

'Keep politics out of the pulpit'

There is an understanding in both Catholic and Anglican worlds that ordained clergy should keep politics out of the pulpit. Some pastoral leaders have extended this principle to advising clergy to keep out of direct personal involvement in politics. This is said to have been for two reasons: so as not to divide parishioners by political alignments; and so as to avoid 'getting their hands dirty'.

A British member of parliament, Teddy Taylor, expresses this view clearly:

I believe that, while individual Christians have a duty to play an active part in politics as one of the vehicles for showing concern for their fellow men, it is pointless and contrary to the teachings of Scripture for the Church, and those holding leadership within the Church and for organisations within the Church to seek to arrive at so-called 'Christian policies' to deal with political problems.⁸

It is a forlorn hope. Archbishops will speak; social responsibility committees will deplore government policy when it threatens the poor;

martyrs like Archbishop Oscar Romero will give their lives for democracy and justice. There is an inner drive here which Taylor does not recognize, and it was anticipated in the biblical prophets – Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, Ezekiel. Some people cannot but speak what they perceive to be the mind of God in the face of intolerance or oppression or élitism.

But Taylor certainly has a point about arriving at ‘Christian’ policies, since many opinions can be expressed by Christians on any single issue. Consciences are formed differently. In particular, the conscience of an ‘established church’ will be formed quite differently from the corporate conscience of a ‘nonconforming’ or minority church. One may be concerned about the will of the majority being expressed by government; the other about upholding the rights and needs of minorities.

Case study: In 1981–82 when I was director of a church welfare agency, I chaired a State Government Inquiry into Social Security, which re-defined the Poverty Line, made recommendations on detailed improvements to national social security provisions, and defined two new allowances: a supplementary rent allowance for low income families, and a State subsidy for public transport for pensioners. These came into effect in 1983. The reason why the inquiry had such results was that we had many public consultations in areas where poor people lived, and we allowed verbal as well as written submissions. Over 1,500 people responded.⁹

The reason for the positive impact of the agency I was with was the credibility of the welfare services it provided and its level of commitment to the poor.

An important issue at this point is whether clergy have the *same* duty as other Christians in the public realm – or are they to be muzzled, and their consciences kept quiet, because they are preachers? Contemporary examples seem to indicate that clergy may have *more* responsibility, not less, than ‘ordinary’ Christians. Take Jean-Baptiste Aristide, former Catholic priest now reinstated as president of Haiti. He endured misunderstanding and exile before he took his place again as elected president. Or take Archbishop Desmond Tutu: while Nelson Mandela still had ten years of jail to go, Tutu, at great personal risk to himself, said,

We have a vicious, evil, unchristian policy in South Africa and it is causing suffering to many people. It produces banned people, detained

without trial people, uprooted and dumped people in the resettlement areas, starving people, it produces hostel people, delinquent people and pensioners who can't make ends meet.¹⁰

The list of Christian martyrs at the hands of tyrannical governments grows: Archbishop Janani Luwum under Idi Amin in Uganda, Bishop Alexander Muge in Kenya, the six Jesuits at the university in El Salvador.

Ecclesiastical issues

One difficulty for church leaders such as archbishops is that when a priest exercises right of private conscience to engage in political debate, he places himself outside the authority of canon law. He acts as a private citizen, in which capacity his informed conscience is beyond the reach of orthodox doctrine or canonical obedience. This produces many pastoral stresses between priest and bishop, especially when their politics have been personally at variance. Classically, as in El Salvador, the politics of the leadership had been conservative, working with the military government, making the best of things, while the parish clergy who were closer to the people had been energized and politicized by their people's poverty. That is when Oscar Romero started to act, and in the end paid the price.

What is ordination anyway? Does it 'set aside' clergy from secular affairs in such a way that they take no further part in the way society is organized? It cannot mean that. It certainly does mean, in all Christian traditions, a dedication to the sacred ministry, to preaching and teaching, to celebrating the sacraments, to the pastoral care of their people. It is this latter task which sometimes politicizes them. To live with the people in many societies is to experience their disempowerment.

The division of ministers into 'secular' priests and 'religious' does not help us. It has often been the religious such as Jesuits who have been at the forefront of racial reconciliation, refugee work and other 'political' ministries. Another variation has been the emergence in Europe and Australia of 'industrial chaplains', bridging the gap between the Church and industry. But, strangely, these have often been the conservative elements in the ministry, not daring to challenge the safety, industrial or wage policies of the bosses who pay them. It seems to me that the Church has much further to go in defining a Christian doctrine of work, and a modern work ethic, in the face of contract labour, buy-outs and retrenchments, early retirement, loss of skills, and the emergence of high technology. None of this, however, resolves our dilemma.

Dilemmas and difficulties of being in ministry in the public world

Another way of examining the question is to identify the special tasks facing Christians who participate in the public arena and see what special problems would arise for clergy.

The most significant task facing Christians in public life is the practice of discernment. For example, it is not easy sometimes to discern the difference between moral legality and ethical illegality. As Enrique Dussel points out,¹¹ positive law can be unjust, but so can 'natural law'. In bourgeois society private property has come to be regarded as a right guaranteed by 'natural law', but this was not the view of the early church Fathers or of Thomas Aquinas. Laws can appear to be fair in providing for specific cases, but then can be unfairly applied. What is legal, then, is not necessarily moral. The decriminalization of prostitution would be an example of this. A case can be made that clergy, with their special theological training, might have developed a high sense of discernment in moral questions, and should exercise this for the common good in the public arena.

A particular area of such discernment is needed in what is called in ethics the principle of 'double effect'. As Oliver O'Donovan explains,¹² this principle was first formulated to identify the nuances in murder and other killings. It was used by some Catholics to justify a hysterectomy which had the effect of an abortion but avoided a direct surgical attack on the foetus. These distinctions are not common any more, but the principle remains that certain laws and regulations can have unintended effects. This is, as a matter of fact, precisely why with many parliamentary laws, the detail of their application is regulated separately after more consideration by a government department or committee.

Case study: In the State of Victoria in Australia, a law which decriminalized prostitution in groups had the unintended effect of isolating girls working alone, or on the streets, leading to an increase in violence towards them. I chaired an official ecumenical group which pressed for more protection for sex workers, but this was misunderstood as approval of the trade. We tried to separate our distaste for the business from our concern for the young women who get caught up in drugs and prostitution.

These are not easy matters to discern, and require thorough understanding of how legislation works, and what effects can occur in the complexity of human behaviour. They also require a lot of intellectual

hard work, and a willingness to have one's principles debated in the market-place. Not many are willing.

One complication is that most western societies are pluriform and embrace multicultural and multifaith elements which look back to different origins and practices. To what extent should Christians work to maintain 'Christendom' views of morality when fundamentalist Muslims see themselves as presenting a perfectly viable alternative? Now, we would hope that, despite Christian variety, there would be a common virtue of character which emerges from the different backgrounds. Hope, truth, integrity of character – these should be uniformly exhibited to the world. Are they also virtues we can press for in the public political order?

Another question pertinent to Christian participation in public debate is whether we are representative. Even for official spokespersons, the Church these days tends to be so cautious that it puts blockages in the way of reaching consensus on particular issues, argues the various positions in detail with a reluctance to come to a conclusion, and then the leadership tends to assert its authority against the freedom of conscience of individual church members. A conflict emerges here between the freedom of a community to render corporate obedience to the gospel as the ground of its authority over the individual member (particularly in religious orders) and the freedom of the individual to render obedience to the gospel in immediate responsibility to God. This conflict will be even sharper for the priest who has an extra responsibility of canonical obedience to his superior or bishop. It makes ministry in the public arena very complex indeed. The priest who participates needs a clear mandate from his community or superior, and then needs to keep checking that all is well: that either he is seen as truly representative, or that the community is happy for him to be personally provocative in the interest of the general welfare of the public. The permission to be provocative is important; otherwise the pressure builds up. At the same time, the individual Christian participating by conscience in the political arena, such as a member of parliament, faces similar tensions – between loyalty to Party, constituency, conscience and Church. Any of these loyalties can be in conflict with the others on a particular issue.

Within these tensions, the Christian, whether priest or lay, must learn how to compromise, when to yield a minor matter for a larger principle, when to withdraw an amendment for the sake of having the law passed, how to build agreements by working together even on areas of little interest to him- or herself. Politics is the art of the

possible, and is often sharply at variance with the ideals and absolutes of the minister. Access to political power often comes at a certain price of supporting perhaps distasteful issues. An individual may vote 'no' by conscience within a party room or a boardroom, and then be bound by corporate loyalty to the decision which he or she may have vehemently opposed on camera. This group loyalty is easily misunderstood by a public who cannot know what happened behind closed doors. This process has got a lot of Christians into trouble, and poses a particular problem for clergy who want, from the pulpit, to hold on to absolutes.

Participation in public life requires being accurate in analysis of the issues under debate. Clergy unfortunately sometimes pontificate from the pulpit about principles, but have little idea what it would mean to put them into practice. How can clergy know, when they themselves are not in the 'market-place'? One answer is for them to test their views with trusted lay people who are in the workplace or in public life. But another answer is for the minister to get into public life him- or herself. The market-place of ideas is just as valid as the market-place of commerce. It will put the minister into the arena of university debate, editorials and features in newspapers, government committees, hospital ethics committees and such forums. In Australia, laws in each state governing health departments provide that every hospital and research institution must have its own ethics committee, and that every ethics committee must have at least one priest or minister as a member. In some committees, there is also provision for a philosopher. Both these provisions are golden opportunities for direct clergy participation in, as it were, their own roles.

Case study: From 1988 to 1991 I was a government-appointed board member of the Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital in Melbourne. It was not in the category of priest, but with a mandate for social justice: to increase the proportion of public patients compared to private, and to reduce waiting times. I then became chair of the Board's Research and Ethics Committee, responsible for developing a new animal-testing laboratory. This involved animal welfare, ethical issues and priorities in research, and accountability of medical professionals. The doctors on staff greatly appreciated the non-controversial way our committee did its business, and they were willing to be accountable with regular reports on their research.

There is a temptation for clergy in public life in that they will be expected to press for concessions such as tax deductibility for the

Church. In western societies this is nearly always seen as unacceptable self-serving. To stand for justice and equality in public life could ultimately lead to the end of such privileges for the churches. There will be pressure on clergy not to let this happen.

Another area of ethical debate in which ordained ministers might have special experience and skill is the identification of what are called 'primary' and 'secondary' truths. John Habgood, Anglican Archbishop of York, maintains that international Roman Catholicism uses this distinction to overcome what appears to be relativism in ethical judgements. He says: 'A high degree of relativism is acknowledged, but it is a relativism which is not felt to touch the central faith or institutions of the church, and so does not imperil its essential unity.'¹³ Others call this the science of casuistry – defining long-term greater goals for which certain concessions are worth it. It is the art of ethics.

Do we really make a difference anyway?

Case study: A Community Council Against Violence in 1990 investigated the rise of violence in and around licensed discos and nightclubs in Melbourne. At the time over 100,000 young people were going to discos every week, and in the previous year 240 cases of violence requiring hospital treatment had been recorded. After visiting 20 discos, meeting with proprietors and talking with 'bouncers' (door-men), the Council made these recommendations:

- *bouncers need training in nonviolent ways of resolving conflict;*
- *food should be served with alcohol;*
- *uniformed police should be seen on the street;*
- *there should be no free alcoholic drinks;*
- *stricter enforcement to ensure only people over 18 years of age enter;*
- *there should be video surveillance of front doors and streets, where most of the violence had been occurring.*

When all these recommendations were put into regulations and implemented, there was an immediate 75 per cent drop in reported violence. On the Council were a Uniting (Methodist) minister, an Anglican priest and a Catholic sister, all appointed to 'represent the community', not their denominations.

Did they make a difference? Yes, their presence strengthened ethical debates in the Council, and made a significant difference to several recommendations.

Why was this difference made? The Christian voices often combined both in debating and voting on issues to take a moderating position in

the interest of the 'victims'. Several recommendations were shaped by this voting bloc.

There were I think three characteristics to this contribution: clergy are seen in the Australian context to be representative of their Church and therefore to speak with some 'authority'; they are more dedicated to the task of applied theology than you would normally expect lay people to be; and clergy feel more accountable to the Church at large for their opinions and the consequences of them in public life.

In western cultures such as Australia, many clergy are seen to be people with a wide experience of life and death. If they are also professionals in the sense of welfare workers or psychologists or educationalists, that is a double qualification to participate in public life. A country like Australia is as open to their participation as the clergy want to be available. The 'proof of the pudding is in the eating': that is, if ministers participate reasonably and successfully, they are welcome. If they simply represent an ideological position espoused by their church, they are less welcome. This distinction will be clearest in the areas of medical ethics, where some clergy will naturally feel obliged to voice an anti-abortion and pro-life position without compromise.

This concept of 'double qualification' has been exploited very successfully by the Jesuit Refugee Service, which searches for clergy and religious who are also university lecturers, psychologists, mental health counsellors and lawyers, in order to provide the combination of pastoral and professional health-care in refugee camps. This policy has been practised for over fifteen years in Asia where the Jesuits have been working with Vietnamese and Cambodians and now with Burmese refugees. The extra professional skill is often what is most needed, even to the extent of JRS workers being welcomed by the Malaysian Red Crescent Society because of the human needs of the Vietnamese refugees in camps there. Naturally, the workers have to be culturally and religiously sensitive.

In countries where the Church still has an established or quasi-established position in society, there remain opportunities for involvement in public life which are still conceded by the culture and reflected by political parties. John Gladwin, now Anglican Bishop of Guildford, served on the Social Justice Commission of the late John Smith, the Labour Party leader at the time. The Commission's report, *Social justice: strategies for national renewal*,¹⁴ is intended to be a non-partisan blueprint for the recovery of British national morale, but it will probably be ignored by the Conservative government. John Gladwin,

as the only ordained minister on the Commission, contributed significantly to the ethical framework in sections such as 'The intelligent welfare state'. His contribution was welcome.

Conclusions

The anecdotes are numerous – foreign policies, immigration and refugee policies, budget priorities – all have been affected by lobbying from church representatives and from individual ordained ministers with a public conscience. Whatever official church policy might be to keep clergy out of politics, this is being largely ignored. What is more, these are the clergy who are making public impact, both for the gospel and for the common good. Even when the statements or interventions of ministers are at cross purposes with one another, the effect is to illustrate that at least these clergy believe that the gospel has immediate relevance to the society around them. This itself is a witness.

Words written by John Henry Newman in 1833, but referring to the Church in the fourth century, are appropriate:

Since there is a popular misconception that Christians, and especially the Clergy, as such, have no concern in temporal affairs, it is expedient to take every opportunity of formally denying the position, and demanding proof of it. In truth, the Church was framed for the express purpose of interfering or (as irreligious men will say) meddling with the world. It is the plain duty of its members, not only to associate internally, but also to develop that internal union in an external warfare with the spirit of evil, whether in Kings' courts or among the mixed multitude; and, if they can do nothing else, at least they can suffer for the truth, and remind men of it, by inflicting on them the task of persecution.¹⁵

What perhaps is yet to be developed is a spirituality of public participation: a way of keeping close to Christ, in communion with one's church, in fellowship with other Christians, while still focusing on the common good and being able to judge when to intervene, and what to say and do. This is the very kind of spirituality that can only be developed as we do it: learning by participating, and then, in Jesuit fashion, reflecting on the action and assessing its value, before plunging in again. That is one thing I learned working with the Jesuits for two years on the Burma border: action, reflection, then more action. John Habgood calls this 'the discovery of meaning arising out of wrestling and conflict between the religious tradition and what is actually being experienced'.¹⁶ It is then a discovery, a disclosure, not a mere application of some truth already known.

Clergy, then, may join with the rest of the people of God to act as moral agents in the world: moderating behaviour, transforming communities, eradicating poverty, bringing in the kingdom of God. 'God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure' (Phil 2:13). For the ordained minister, as for every other Christian, participation in public life will involve us in ambiguity and hesitation as to which policy to support, which choice to make, which is the absolute and which the lesser of two evils. Living with ambiguity will imply leaving behind dogmatic certainties and going on a journey of discovery to find how the gospel applies to the public world. And that, for the ordained minister, is a new vulnerability.

NOTES

¹ Patriarch Karekin II, *In search of spiritual life* (Lebanon, 1994), p 35.

² Paul Rowntree Clifford, *Politics and the Christian vision* (London, 1984), p 3.

³ Lesslie Newbigin, *The gospel in a pluralist society* (Grand Rapids, 1989), p 194.

⁴ Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and moral order* (Leicester, 1986), p 58.

⁵ Samuel Escobar and John Driver, *Christian mission and social justice* (Scottsdale, 1978), p 41.

⁶ O'Donovan, *op. cit.*, p 229.

⁷ Emil Brunner, *Justice and the social order* (London, 1945), p 117.

⁸ Donald Reeves (ed), *The Church and the state* (London, 1984), p 79.

⁹ Alan Nichols (chair), Peter Allen, Kim Windsor, *Income security for Victorians* (Melbourne, 1982).

¹⁰ Desmond Tutu, *Hope and suffering* (Grand Rapids, 1985), p 152.

¹¹ Enrique Dussel, *Ethics and community* (Maryknoll, 1988), p 70.

¹² O'Donovan, *op. cit.*, p 193.

¹³ John Habgood, *Church and nation in a secular age* (London, 1983), p 67.

¹⁴ Report of the Commission on Social Justice, *Social justice: strategies for national renewal* (London, 1994).

¹⁵ John Henry Newman, *The Arians of the fourth century* (1833).

¹⁶ Habgood, *Church and nation*, p 73.