

From the Pulpit to the Womb:
The Role of Clergy in Abortion Discussions

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Abstract

Many scholars study how growing political progressivism translates to religious beliefs and how this impacts religious individuals' ideas on social issues. However, surprisingly little research focuses on the clergy. As integral parts of parishioner's lives, clergy are at the center of religious teachings, discussions, and decisions about a multitude of issues, such as abortion. This research aims to find how clergy members reconcile their personal views on abortion in relation to their religious affiliation, and how these individuals deal with matters of abortion in their pastoral roles. To accomplish this, I conducted three interviews with clergy members in Bloomington, Indiana. These interviews shed light on the complex relationship between personal beliefs, religious doctrine, and pastoral responsibility surrounding abortion.

Keywords: Religiosity, Progressivism, Religious Individualism, Religious Institutionalism

From the Pulpit to the Womb: The Role of Clergy in Abortion Discussions

The recent Supreme Court Dobbs decision overturning Roe v. Wade has reignited the debate around the highly polarizing topic of abortion. For many abortion attitudes are intertwined with, and shaped by religious values (Jelen, 2014, 551). Though no religious literature specifically mentions abortion by name, the concepts of abortion are addressed in scripture relating to conception, pregnancy, and the sanctity of life. Various religious denominations interpret these concepts differently, and discussions surrounding abortion often involve moral, ethical, and theological considerations (Jelen, 2014). This diverse interpretation across religious backgrounds highlights the complexity of the abortion debate, as individuals grapple with how to apply their faith's teachings to the deeply personal decision of abortion.

This can be particularly true for members of the clergy, who must remain true to the teachings of their faith, while balancing their own lived experiences and ideas when counseling congregants on social issues, such as abortion. Research on religious attitudes towards abortion focuses particularly on the opinions of individuals within certain denominations but has not asked the opinions of the clergy or explored how those opinions influence congregation members. By researching the attitudes of this influential group, we can gain a deeper understanding not only of the attitudes of religious adherents but how clergy members influence those attitudes and the broader public discourse through the guidance they provide within their pastoral roles. For clergy members with significant influence, their views may extend beyond their congregation, impacting community policy, and even influencing societal social attitudes towards reproductive rights. This honors thesis uses a series of clergy member interviews to explore how clergy members use their religious beliefs to reconcile their views on abortions, and how these individuals deal with matters of abortion within their pastoral roles.

Key Concepts

Before discussing previous research, it is important to define the key concepts relevant to this literature. Religiosity is used as a measure in multiple studies and can be defined as how religious an individual is, which in the case of one study, was measured based on self-reported church attendance and personal convictions of the strength of their faith (Harris and Mills, 1985, 143). Through these measures, religiosity can be broken down into two different concepts: social religiosity based on individual attendance levels, and psychological religiosity based on one's affirmations of their religious identity (Harris and Mills, 1985, 145).

Further literature that looks at the cross-section of political ideology and religiosity looking to the relevance of progressivism in an individual's thought process. Progressivism is defined as "a form of moral authority that is uniquely shaped by and oriented toward legitimating the prevailing zeitgeist or spirit of the age" (Uecker and Froese 2019, 284). In the context of this thesis, progressivism can impact an individual's interpretations of religious messages delivered by clergy members, as well as interpretations of scripture. Furthermore, the literature highlights how individuals must find a balance between religious institutionalism and religious individualism when looking at religious scripture within a modern context.

While the literature does not outright define these terms, within the context of my thesis, I have defined religious institutionalism as the organized and structured aspects of religious belief systems and practices within society. I have defined religious individualism as an approach to religious beliefs and practices that emphasizes autonomy, individual choice, and a subjective, personal relationship with spirituality/faith. These concepts are relevant within my research as clergy members must find a way to balance religious individualism and institutionalism in their own life, and in their work as clergy.

Literature Review

This literature review aims to provide an overview of existing research surrounding religious views on social issues, including but not limited to abortion. By examining diverse range of religious groups, we are able to gain a deeper understanding of how religious texts can influence abortion opinions. This literature review will look specifically at clergy members, how they are involved politically, and how they provide religious guidance on abortion to their congregation. I will then provide context on how opinions of abortion have changed over time for different denominations. This literature review will serve as background information and act as a precursor to the research I will conduct within my honors thesis.

Clerical Influence

It is widely accepted that clergy play an important role in the lives of their parishioners. While the sources of influence are myriad, previous research has highlighted the significance of both religious guidance or counseling within their role. However, there is also significance in looking at the clergy's political speech and activism both inside and outside their congregation.

Political Speech and Activism

Clergy are seen as reliable leaders with traits that allow them to connect, and build trust with members of their community, often enabling them to hold political influence (Smidt, 2002, 496). Corwin Smidt explores these traits in his 2002 article stating that clergy members have the ability to "engage in more ideological thinking" while framing political issues from a moral perspective, creating a distinct moral authority (496). In turn, this moral authority can morph into political authority, allowing clergy members to play vital roles of influence within their congregation (Smidt, 2002, 496).

When looking at Smidt's claims in conjunction with Kathleen Beatty and Oliver Walter's 1989 study, a strong relationship between clergy members, political activeness, and domination is found. This is seen through rates of clergy political participation compared against members of the general public, where clergy members had higher rates of political participation (Beatty & Walter, 1989:137). The authors measure political participation through voting records, campaign participation, donations made to campaigns, as well as attendance at political rallies (Beatty & Walter, 1989, 137). This study used data collected through their own national survey of two hundred ministers from nine religious denominations, those being Baptists, Southern Baptists, Pentecostals, Methodists, Seventh-Day Adventists, Episcopalians, Congregationalists (United Church of Christ), Catholics, and Mormons (Beatty & Walter, 1989, 132). Beatty and Walter hypothesized denomination would play a critical role in the relationship between political ideology, political participation, and whether an individual delivers a political sermon (1989, 143).

The study found "prominent denominational differences in campaign participation...that defy the theological explanation", in which denomination itself was the strongest indicator of a clergy member's political participation, as well as disclosing if they deliver political messages in church (Beatty & Walter, 1989, 144). These political messages were more closely tied to 'moral issues' which in this study referred to abortion, a women's role, prayer in schools, and pornography, as opposed to issues like civil rights, and government assistance (Beatty & Walter, 1989, 144). While this study does not specifically give insight into the specific political positions of these clergy members, it indicates that denomination affects political participation in clergy members. The study also showcases the nuanced relationship between denomination affiliation, political participation, and the content of religious preaching.

Religious Guidance

Benson et al. (1973) analyzed the link between theological teachings and political views by surveying three hundred and eight-two ministers from rural churches within Missouri, alongside one hundred and fifty ministers in Springfield, Missouri (Benson et al., 1973, 2). Questions were categorized by theological position, social-political perspectives such as social and moral concerns, and ministerial perspectives (Benson et al., 1973, 2). Benson et al. (1973) found a relationship between those who are theologically liberal and those with liberal “political views, social concerns, and moral orientations” (Benson et al., 1973, 10). Theological liberalism is often used interchangeably with religious progressivism, with theological liberalism regarded as the leading influence of Protestantism between the mid-1600s and the 1920s (“Theological liberalism”, n.d). Theology can be influenced by place of birth, social background, and the location of one’s upbringing. In the context of abortion, this could provide answers as to why religious individuals hold views in conflict with their religious teachings.

Ted Jelen (1992) examines specific abortion beliefs in rural Midwest clergy members. Jelen compared the attitudes of evangelical pastors to those of mainline, or mainstream, protestant pastors within the same area, observing the differences in perspectives as well as the extent to which each clergy member attempts to influence their congregations' views on abortion (1992, 132). Jelen collected his data through conducting seventeen interviews between January and April of 1989, with interviews ranging from forty-five minutes to two hours (1992, 134).

Jelen found that no respondents took a hardline pro-life or pro-choice position, as the consensus was that there are certain instances where abortion could be permissible, but all ministers agreed that abortion creates a deep moral issue (1992, 135). Consequently, evangelical clergy members were more likely to discuss abortion with their congregations due to their

perception of their high authority, thus giving these individuals the ‘moral authority’ to address political issues of all kinds, from the confidence of their pulpit (Jelen, 1992, 139). Jelen suggests that due to the growing membership of evangelical churches, they could become a large provider of resources and participants in the politicization of abortion (1992, 146). This conclusion reads as an ironic precursor to the modern era, where evangelicals are considered the leaders of the pro-life movement. Jelen’s research provides valuable insight into the individual views of clergy members about abortion and opens the door for further research to be conducted on clergy members of different religious denominations, their views on abortion, and their role within discussions surrounding the topic.

Research on Abortion Attitudes

Religiosity and the Theological Divide

In his 2014 study, Ted Jelen examines the basis of theological attitudes on abortion across six major religious groups, Roman Catholics, Protestants, Eastern Orthodox, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims, through data retrieved from the World Values Study of 1999– 2007, hypothesizing that considerations of the sanctity of life and attitudes of sexual morality create the basis for religious positions on abortion (2014, 554). Within this study, the sanctity of life was measured through participant’s attitudes towards euthanasia, as both abortion and euthanasia threaten the innocence of a human life (Jelen, 2014, 555). The practice allowed Jelen to understand how each individual interprets their religious text, as though many openly and explicitly discuss divine creation, teachings, interpretation can vary within dominations and congregations. While religious texts vary within the six groups studied, despite their diverse traditions, Jelen found that abortion attitudes are primarily based on the attitudes toward sex, as it is widely believed abortion is a result of sexual promiscuity (2014, 563). Jelen found that the

value individuals placed on the sanctity of human life was more consistent across religious groups than attitudes of sex. However, the data indicated that opinions of the sanctity of life are a weaker indicator of attitudes towards abortion, as other variables such as opinions on sex and sexual promiscuity, were a stronger predictor of an individual's attitudes on abortion (Jelen, 2014, 563).

While Jelen's conclusions focus on specific religious groups, Richard Harris and Edgar Mills' 1985 study looks at religious groups as a whole, viewing them as social systems. The authors used data from the National Opinion Research Center's Gen Surveys for 1974 and 1982 to see how religious values impact attitudes towards abortion focusing particularly on "religiosity" (1985).

Harris and Mills hypothesized that social religiosity will be a stronger predictor of negative abortion attitudes than psychological religiosity, and they were correct, concluding that "the social network of religion is the principal mechanism" impacting abortion attitudes (Harris and Mills, 1985, 146). Both Jelen, Harris, and Mills' conclusions demonstrate that despite diverse religious teachings, there are strong indicators of attitudes toward abortion, those being social religiosity and attitudes toward sex. With more than twenty-five years between these two studies, the concept of religiosity has evolved in response to a dynamic, modern society. This begs the question, how does the societal shift in the significance of religion impact views on abortion?

Religious Progressivism and Abortion

Ideas of progressivism both inside and outside of systems of religion are tackled in recent studies by Jeremy Uecker and Paul Froese's 2019 research, as well as Deckman et al's 2023 study, focusing on contemporary attitudes towards abortion and the influence of religion in the twenty-first century. Uecker and Froese assert that progressivism in the modern era, and the

rise of individualism have changed the American decision-making process, in which individuals look inwards to solve questions of moral authority, as opposed to looking to institutions such as religion (2019, 283). The 2019 study uses data from the fourth wave of the Baylor Religion Survey conducted by the Gallup Organization (Uecker and Froese, 289). In addition to questions about the morality of abortion, participants were asked about same-sex marriage, divorce, and pre-marital sex.

Uecker and Froese hypothesize that individuals who align themselves with religious individualism, as opposed to religious institutionalism, will possess more progressive moral attitudes, despite varying measures of “religious identity and involvement” (2019, 289). Overall, the findings of the study support the hypothesis concerning the progressive attitudes toward pre-marital sex, same-sex marriage, and divorce, for individuals who align themselves with religious individualism, but these progressive attitudes do not translate to the issue of abortion (Uecker and Froese, 2019). These findings reveal that progressive ideologies do not translate to abortion, as abortion is a distinct and complex issue, causing it not to follow the trends of the progressive nature of religious individuals on issues of moral authority. This could be attributed to the fact that moral authority is something a religious individual feels “rather than dictated by a religious leader or sacred text” (Uecker and Froese, 2019, 288). This challenges the notion that clergy members possess a significant influence on the members of their congregation, in which it is the individual themselves that draws conclusions on their faith and how it applies to greater societal issues.

Contemporary interpretations of moral authority, which in this context refers to the recognition and submission to a higher power, are further questioned in Deckman et al’s 2023 study. This study concentrates on the association between racial attitudes and abortion. Racial

attitudes and moral authority are intrinsically connected, as individuals' beliefs regarding race often reflect their perception of the credibility of racial equity discourse (Deckman et al., 2023, 145). The issues examined in this study, racial attitudes, moral authority, and abortion, intersect in complex ways, as for many, the moral aspects of abortion often involve considerations of race. This reflects the broader societal dynamics that can influence both individual and institutional attitudes. Within this study, Deckman et al. specifically look at the perceptions of white evangelicals on the topics of race and abortion, who have subsequently become the leaders of the current pro-life movement. Some argue that this movement acts as a proxy for racial resentment of white evangelicals, as many scholars have found a correlation between efforts to oppose civil rights, and a rise in evangelical political activism (Deckman et al., 2023, 142).

This study hypothesizes that the relationship between abortion and racial attitudes has not only strengthened within the current political landscape, but that racial resentment is a “strong predictor of abortion policy attitudes for white evangelicals” (Deckman et al., 2023, 143). This study uses data collected from the 2020 American National Election Study, and PRRI 2020 American Values Survey to measure abortion attitudes (Deckman et al., 2023, 144). The study found support for the first hypothesis, that the relationship between abortion and racial attitudes has become increasingly strengthened and radicalized, however, did not find any empirical evidence to support that racial attitudes are “uniquely correlated with pro-life attitudes” of white evangelicals (Deckman et al., 2023, 148).

While a strong relationship exists between abortion and racial attitudes, Deckman prefaces that this research can relate not just to white evangelicals, but to Americans “across the political, religious, and geographic spectrum” (2023, 148). This research gives a unique

perspective on the factors that exist outside of, yet in conjunction with religion, and how these factors can shape perspectives on abortion.

Theory

With previous research in mind, I hypothesize that the opinions of clergy members regarding abortion will follow that of their religious teachings. Clergy members are individuals who have specifically chosen to devote their lives to their religious text and live in accordance with that text. Any departure from these teachings could signify that these individuals are not truly devoted to their God and his teachings. However, individuals could have stricter or looser interpretations of these texts, creating a more complex relationship between a clergy member and their opinions on abortion (Benson et al., 1973, 16). It is widely accepted that an individual's interpretation of text can be influenced by a myriad of things, such as the culture that they have surrounded themselves with, or even the structure of their congregations. I hypothesize that cultural differences and different lived experiences will impact an individual's relationship with their faith and abortion.

Regarding my second research question, how do these individuals deal with matters of abortion in their pastoral roles, I hypothesize that when advising members of their congregation, clergy members will focus on providing moral guidance as opposed to offering specific solutions, such as recommending that an individual consult Planned Parenthood. Historically, clergy members exist to provide religious guidance to members within their congregation, not offer clear-cut solutions, typically offering support through open dialogue and prayer. However, in the years following the 1970s and 1980s election cycles, clergy became more active political advocates, in which theologically liberal ministers began giving sermons focused on anti-Vietnam War demonstrations and issues of civil rights, while more theologically conservative

ministers were less likely to speak on politics (Beatty & Walter, 1989, 9). The historical presence and continuation of clerical political activism and greater religious activism directly juxtapose my second hypothesis and could provide valuable perspectives into the current political climate, how religious individuals interface with varying political ideologies and the political landscape as a whole.

Methods

I conducted in-depth interviews with three clergy members in Bloomington, Indiana. By engaging with clergy members through open-ended questions, I was able to uncover the nuanced ideas of each clergy member, and gain insight into how religious teachings can influence clerical abortion attitudes. Bloomington is a politically democratic city within a staunch republican state. In the context of my thesis, this political polarization causes individuals within Bloomington are multifaceted, offering unique perspectives that could challenge each hypothesis of my thesis, due to external environmental factors such as income, upbringing, education, and peer influence.

Clergy members were chosen through a stratified method to ensure multiple religions and denominations were represented within the data. Each religious organization within Bloomington was grouped via religious affiliation and denomination. I used the Religious Organizations database produced by the Monroe County Public Library, filtering for places of worship, to identify and sort these religious organizations within Bloomington. With all organizations having been grouped within their particular denomination, I then randomly selected one location from each denominational category. There were over 50 religious organizations within my sample pool, with anywhere from one to ten religious organizations in each denominational category.

For this random selection, I assigned a number to each organization and then used a random number generator to select a number within each denomination. I randomly selected

fifteen organizations across Bloomington. Due to the nature of my research, I understand many clergy members will be unwilling to discuss such a controversial and intimate topic. Therefore, I selected these fifteen organizations with the expectation that more than half would decline to participate or would ignore me.

Interviewees were contacted via both email and phone. Not all religious organizations that I contacted regarding an interview had available emails. Some organizations had general contact emails, while some religious groups had their clergy member's emails listed on their websites. The email prompt was standardized across possible interviewees, with necessary changes made to tailor each email to a specific clergy member.¹ For organizations without accessible email addresses, I called the organization. For organizations that needed to be called, I read the same email prompt.

Data and Analysis

Interviews were conducted between February and March of 2024, in which, clergy members were asked a multitude of questions, ranging from their relationship with their congregations to current political issues.² Interviews were recorded and ranged from 30 to 45 minutes. Two clergy members were male, while one was female. The religious denominations represented within this study were the Catholic Church, The Seventh-Day Adventist Church, and Reform Judaism. This qualitative method of data collection allowed each clergy member to produce in-depth answers, based on their personal experiences, religious beliefs, and emotions.

¹ See Appendix A

² See Appendix B

Interview Results

Catholic Priest

The Catholic Priest I interviewed has been ordained for 27 years and is specifically of the Dominican order. As a Priest of primarily a younger demographic, his main goal is to connect with his congregants, stating that tries to “meet them where they are” instead of where the church wants them to be (Personal Conversation, February 24, 2024). He stated that being a Priest means seeing individuals at their worst and their best, and everywhere in between.

When specifically discussing the issue of abortion he stated that he opposes abortion as part of his obligation to uphold Catholic teachings and tradition. As a Catholic he is pro-life, meaning he does not believe in abortion, the death penalty, or euthanasia, referred to as the “consistent ethic of life”, described by both the late Pope John Paul II and the late Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago (Jelen, 1992). When I asked his opinion on abortion bans and differing legislation within the U.S., he replied that within the conversation the rights of one individual are not considered, those being the rights of the child. He stated that as a leader of the church he is obligated to teach the faith, as this is not a political issue but one related to morality and faith.

The Priest also opened up to me that he has had first-hand experience with parishioners going to him either prior to getting an abortion, or after receiving an abortion. He described one instance to me when he was working in Denver, Colorado. A woman was on the way to receive an abortion and went to the church before her appointment for guidance. In this particular instance, the woman was a seventeen-year-old that was raped. After receiving guidance from the Father, she decided not to go through with the abortion and later made the Father the godfather of her child.

He also stated that he has had many parishioners come to him and confided that they have received an abortion. In these situations, he said his job is not to condemn, but to listen. Having a conversation, listening, and asking questions, without judgment, are important when someone confides in him. He stated that he emphasizes to these individuals that the church will not abandon them, as if he neglected every sinner that came into the church, he would not have anyone to talk to because all humans are sinners in the eyes of God. It is important to him to lead with compassion within these conversations, make his parishioners see that God does love them, and help them feel God's love.

Within our conversation, the Father discussed the resources he recommends to women, depending on their situation. He highlighted Project Rachel Ministry, which provides religious guidance for women who have had an abortion, attempting to help them heal from post-abortion trauma. He also highlighted the Women's Care Center in Bloomington, which provides free pre and postnatal care, as well as providing adoption resources for new mothers. He stated that he provides these recourses to members within his congregation only when he is specifically asked for guidance by a parishioner and does not include this information in his sermons.

Seventh-Day Adventist Pastor

The Seventh-Day Adventist Pastor I interviewed became a clergy member in the Philippines in 2001. He later gained a Master of Divinity from Andrews University, along with an MBA. He told me he is currently working toward an MA in Mission and Wellness. Despite not growing up around any form of organized religion, he believed the best way he could serve humanity would be to join the church and become a Pastor.

Before becoming a Pastor, he spent time working with troubled youth, particularly prisoners. He stated his job was to listen to these individuals and provide them with

encouragement. This experience allowed him to see areas of society that exist, but are forgotten, highlighting that it is these individuals and communities that need the most help. This also highlighted his own implicit biases that at the time he was unaware of, further pushing him to join the church in hopes that he could play a pivotal role in developing and promoting peace in humanity, while building up individuals. He stated that his main goal is to not only serve his community and to provide guidance, but to be the eyes for the blind, ears for the deaf, a voice for those who cannot speak, be strength for the weak, and for his body to be for the handicapped.

When discussing abortion, he stated that throughout his personal life, he has focused on saving the lives of people, referencing his work with individuals who suffer from depression and other mental illnesses. He stated that for many, opinions on abortion are based on when life starts. He specifically mentioned that biology teaches us that life does not exclusively begin in the womb, as so much of life already exists outside of the womb. “So, in a way, you can say that you know, life begins when a man and woman meet” (Personal Conversation, February 28, 2024).

His perspective on life was very interesting to me, something that I had not heard before. He continued by saying that life is not something humans can give. Despite all of our scientific advancements, even if we are able to use the right elements and mix the right chemicals, we are not able to “put life into it” (Personal Conversation, February 28, 2024). While he stated that he believes he does not have the right to decide whether to take a life or not, that decision is up to the individual.

He continued, stating that God gave humans the freedom of choice, in which we have the innate ability to do something or not do something. In these situations, governments get involved and force individuals to conform, which he believes is dangerous. In the moment, I felt slightly

confused about where exactly he stands on abortion, but I think the Pastor's answers echo the feelings and opinions of many across the country, where many individuals do not have a hardline opinion on abortion.

When asked "If someone came to you and confided that they had recently received an abortion, how would you counsel them?", he stated that his main goal would be to first listen to this individual and to let them know that having an abortion does not make them a lesser person. Focusing on showing her love is his key, he stated, as although he may not be able to fully understand the journey of life she is on, he still respects her and empathizes with her.

Reform Rabbi

The Rabbi I interviewed initially did not intend to become a Rabbi. She attended Indiana University where she majored in Social Work. She stated that she always knew she wanted to spend her life helping others, which is why she decided to study social work. She stated within her time at IU, she experienced a situation that she referred to as "spiritual rape", in which another undergraduate student invited her to have a conversation so said individual could learn more about Judaism (Personal Conversation, March 22, 2024). The Rabbi was thrilled to teach the individual about the Jewish religion and culture, however, in this meeting, the student tried to convert her to Christianity. After this experience, she felt hurt, but the conversation also highlighted how little she felt she truly knew about her religion.

Throughout college, she became more connected to her Jewish identity. She stated that the more she studied, the more she believed being a Rabbi was the right job for her. As a Rabbi, she believes her job is to help students on campus feel comfortable in their Jewish identity, as well as to educate students on campus about Judaism, working to make Indiana University's campus a safer space for Jewish students. Because she felt uncomfortable being Jewish on

campus, when she became a Rabbi, she knew she wanted to help students who feel the same way she did.

Regarding abortion, the Rabbi stated that she is pro-choice. She defended her position citing that Jewish law says if the fetus is not viable, can harm the mother's life, or causes extreme emotional distress, abortion is permitted. When asked about current abortion legislation, she said that she is terrified for Jewish mothers who have to decide to go against Jewish Law or to go against state law and that these women should not have to cross state borders to practice Jewish law. This opinion is something she and other Rabbis have discussed, in which they have all expressed concerns that Jewish Americans cannot freely follow Jewish Law in certain states, which goes against their religious freedoms as American citizens.

When asked "What would you do if someone came to you and confided that they had recently received an abortion", she stated that her main goal is to provide support for these individuals. This support can come in different forms depending on the situation at hand. She would not expect these individuals to seek religious guidance as abortion is supported by Jewish Law.

Analysis

Despite a large difference in religious practices between the Catholic Priest, Seventh-Day Adventist Pastor, and the Reform Jewish Rabbi, each shared their unique perspective on their role as a clergy member, their stance on current issues in America, and their thoughts on advising parishioners on abortion. In regard to the latter, the Catholic Priest and Rabbi strictly adhered to the teachings of their respective religions, while the Seventh-Day Adventist Pastor took a more nuanced view, not relying on any particular scripture.

Both Christian clergy members stated that making their parishioners feel welcome, comfortable, understood, and loved is the highest priority in their position. Within their pastoral approaches, each clergy member stated that they listen to the needs of individuals in their congregation with an open mind and open heart, and demonstrated that they support all individuals, regardless of an individual's circumstances. The Rabbi stated that due to her past experiences and the current state of the world, she believes her greatest task as a clergy member is to be a helping hand to the Jewish community, specifically Jewish students, in Bloomington.

When asked "In your view, what is the most important problem facing the U.S. today?", in their own unique way, each Christian clergy member pointed out that there is currently a large disconnect and divide within America. The Catholic Priest stated that individuals have lost the ability to listen to each other as individuals have taken a hardline approach to their beliefs. The Seventh-Day Adventist Pastor stated that this disconnect can be seen generationally as society has lost intergenerational bonds due to the rise of individualism. He also stated that within these generations, there is a large shift in values. The values of older generations are shaped by Judeo-Christian values, while that does not hold true for younger Americans.

The Seventh-Day Adventist Pastor also highlighted that this friction in society can be seen within Congress as our elected officials cannot come to a common ground to pass legislation for the common good of the American people. Both Christian clergy members stated that they do not identify as a Republican or Democrat, both stating they vote for members of both parties and did not feel as though they could be put into a box. Each also stated that they did not identify with the terms liberal or conservative. Contrastingly, the Rabbi stated she typically identifies as a Democrat but feels as though if there was a candidate on the other side of the aisle that she aligns with, she would consider voting for them. I found that overall, my interview with

the Seventh-Day Adventist Pastor had more ‘political’ themes than then my conversation with the Catholic Priest and Reform Rabbi.

The Rabbi took a very different approach to the question, “In your view, what is the most important problem facing the U.S. today?”, specifically discussing antisemitism in the United States and how that has extended to the rest of the world. She stated that there has been a lot of dehumanization as well as marginalization of the Jewish community. She discussed that as a Rabbi, she has not felt support from her fellow clergy members. Her perspective is relevant to the greater discussion of the current U.S. political climate as she was the only clergy member that stated they were pro-choice. Within her position as a Rabbi, she might not feel the same friction described by the Priest and Pastor, as a core principle of Jewish belief is to question what you have been taught, and not to blindly accept your religious doctrine. Because there is more room for conflicting ideas and open conversation within Judaism, they may see this ‘political friction’ in a different light.

Only the Rabbi discussed how she’s addressing the post-Dobbs legal landscape in her congregation, stating that she’s now recommending congregants to cross state lines for an abortion. The Priest’s opinion was supportive of anti-abortion laws, consistent with the teachings of the Catholic Church. The Seventh-Day Adventist Pastor stated that inconsistencies in these laws can present danger as each state has differencing legislation, which can become increasingly confusing for its inhabitants. He also said that danger can come from these laws as they promote differing levels of freedom of choice across the United States. The Pastor states that our free will and thus freedom of choice is derived from God therefore, when governments pass differing resolutions that individuals must conform to, our divine freedom becomes limited and creates a dangerous precedent.

While comparing these results to Jelen (1992) is slightly difficult due to the smaller interview sample, the answers of these clergy members display large similarities to the answers of the clergy sample in Jelen's research. Jelen found that his respondents did not take a hardline pro-life or pro-choice stance on abortion (1992, 135). Within my research, the Seventh-Day Adventist Pastor's interview answers echo Jelen's results, alluding to his position on abortion, but never taking a hard stance on the issue.

In contrast, the Catholic Priest took a hardline pro-life stance while the Rabbi took a hardline pro-choice position, however, Jelen did not interview any Priests or Rabbis within his research. Historically, Catholicism teaches a consistent ethic of life, as represented by the Priest I interviewed, who openly stated he was anti-abortion as well as anti-death penalty and anti-euthanasia. Additionally, Jewish law teaches that abortion is not only permitted but recommended in cases where the pregnancy is not viable, or the mother is in extreme emotional distress. While these answers are a diversion from Jelen's findings, they are aligned with the teachings of their respective religious groups.

I believe that I was able to get slightly more nuanced answers from the Seventh-Day Adventist Pastor due to his background. The Pastor was born outside the U.S. in the majority Buddhist nation of Myanmar and did not grow up religious. Additionally, he first became a clergy member outside of the United States, in the Philippines, practicing his ministry for 5 years there before moving to Michigan. There are vast cultural differences between Myanmar, the Philippines, and each state within the continental United States, that influence an individual's beliefs, values, and outlook on life.

I found my interview with the Rabbi to have a much different tone than my previous two interviews with the Priest and Pastor. The interview was not as solemn, and much livelier than the

other two. Additionally, there was much more conversation, resulting in a less structured interview. I believe the reason for this is that I felt much more comfortable talking to a female Rabbi, as I grew up with a female Rabbi. The conversation was also very different because the Rabbi had such a contrasting position on abortion when compared to the Christian clergy members I spoke to.

Within the literature discussed in this thesis, a Jewish perspective is notably missing. In survey research, such as the World Values Survey, there were not enough Jewish individuals included in the studies for statistically significant conclusions. This makes it extremely difficult to analyze my interview results, as research that focuses on the intersection of religion and abortion heavily focuses on the branches of Christianity.

Conclusion

There is both supporting and contradicting evidence for my hypotheses. The interview results support my first hypothesis, that clergy members' opinions on abortion will be aligned with their religious teachings. The strongest evidence in support of this hypothesis comes from my interview with the Catholic Priest and Rabbi. In his interview, the Priest stated that as a Priest he has an obligation to uphold the traditions and teachings of the Church, in which all Priests must be opposed to abortion. In her interview, the Rabbi stated that Jewish law teaches that abortion is not only allowed but recommended in the case of extreme emotional distress, or if a pregnancy is not viable. This conclusion could be complicated by the answers of the Seventh-Day Adventist Pastor, who did not seem to take a strong stance either way. However, in reflecting on my conversation with the Pastor, it seemed as though he would not choose to have an abortion due to his view on the sanctity of human life but understands and respects an individual's choice to have one.

I believe that differences in each clergy member's answer, specifically between the Catholic Priest and Seventh-Day Adventist Pastor, stem from cultural differences. While Catholicism is regarded as having a stricter interpretation of the Bible, the deviations in answers from each clergy member were followed by examples from their life experiences, not just the Bible, that made them reach these conclusions. This evidence supports my hypothesis that cultural differences and different lived experiences will impact an individual's relationship with their faith and abortion.

Regarding my second hypothesis, that when advising members of their congregation about abortion, clergy members will focus on providing moral guidance as opposed to offering specific solutions, there is some conflicting evidence. This again comes from my interview with the Catholic Priest, as he explicitly stated that in addition to providing moral guidance, he would highlight Project Rachel Ministry or Bloomington's Women Care Center, depending on what the individual needed. Both the Rabbi and Seventh-Day Adventist Pastor also stated that their job in any given situation is to provide an individual with comfort and guidance. The answers given by all clergy members support this hypothesis however, the additional answers provided by the Catholic Priest reject the hypothesis.

Limitations

Due to the short timeline for data collection, and thus the small sample size of data, I believe it is difficult to draw large conclusions about clergy members in the context of the greater American political landscape. If I were to try to improve upon and replicate this data, I would aim to interview at least 30 clergy members, allowing me to not only complete a more in-depth analysis of their answers, but also complete a comparative analysis between clergy members of different religions, races, and genders.

This expansion in the number of clergy members interviewed as well as interviewing clergy members from a multitude of different backgrounds could highlight to what extent cultural differences and differences in lived experiences impact a clergy member's relationship and interpretation of their religious doctrine. Additional interviews would also allow me to say more about variation or similarity among Protestant clergy, as the Seventh-Day Adventist Pastor may not be representative of other Protestant groups.

Implications

When looking further at the data, the answers given by each interviewee underscore that clergy members are not politically neutral beings, as each clergy member is politically active as private citizens. In their public role, they may not openly identify with the Republican or Democratic party, but each clergy member showed consistency within their answers about current political turmoil in the United States, spotlighting that they believe that our current polarization is unsustainable for our country. Each stated that communities must begin to bridge the gap and come together, and not let the current political divide continue to tear communities apart. The consistency within the answers to the politically driven questions, provided specifically by the Priest and Pastor, indicate that despite the differences in interpretations of the Bible, both share a holistic view of the Bible's teachings, and how to apply those teaching within the American geopolitical landscape.

These nuanced answers provided by clergy members align with the core of their profession, solving conflict, whether that be internal or external conflict. Because these political answers were so uniform, the begs the question: Do clergy members' political views influence their religious views? Or do their religious views influence their political views? As seen by the interviews provided within this thesis, some clergy members specifically referenced scripture

and religious teachings as their basis for abortion views, while others did not echo this same message, the answer to this question most likely lies somewhere in between.

A key takeaway from this thesis is that the positions of clergy members are not only underappreciated but often assumed, leading to these vital perspectives being under-researched. The answers provided by the clergy members within this study were nuanced, complex, and candid. Each clergy member was incredibly grateful that I was specifically researching clergy members, stating that they felt clergy are misunderstood due to the media's oversimplification of the opinions of religious institutions and their members, emphasizing how difficult it is to place individuals into a box. Despite the limitations within this thesis, such as the inability to draw firm conclusions due to the small sample size, this research can be used as a reference within discussions surrounding religion and abortion. Additionally, the research conducted can serve as a valuable starting point for further exploration into the role of clergy members in shaping public opinion and policy debates.

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Appendix

A. Email Prompt

Good afternoon,

My name is Shauna Mahoney, and I am currently doing research at IU within the O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs.

My research focuses on clergy members within Bloomington, in order to understand the different religious groups within Bloomington, as well as looking at the relationship between religion and social issues. I am collecting my data by interviewing clergy members throughout Bloomington, and I was wondering if you would be willing to participate in an interview.

This interview would be about 30 - 45 minutes long and will be confidential. Please let me know if you would be interested in being a part of my research, or if you have any questions prior to agreeing to be interviewed.

Thank you so much for your time and I am looking forward to your response!

Best,
Shauna Mahoney

B. Interview Questions

- Why did you first decide to become a clergy member?
 - How long have you been a clergy member?
 - How large is your congregation?
- What do you consider to be your most important task as a clergy member?
- What is the most rewarding aspect of your practice?
- What would you say is your greatest frustration ?
- Is there a larger organization of which your church is a part, such as a national office?
 - (IF YES) Are you generally in agreement with this parent organization, or are there differences?
- In your view, what is the most important problem facing the U.S. today?
- Generally speaking, would you consider yourself a Democrat, a Republican, or what?
- What do you think when you hear the terms liberal and conservative?
 - What do these terms mean to you?

- Abortion is hot topic issues, with each state passing its own legislation, some putting forth absolute bans with no exceptions some with expectations in the case of incest or rape, some putting forth 15 week bans etc. Where do you feel you stand on this?
- Do you think your peers in the clergy share your views?
- Do you think your view puts you at odds with your role in your church?
 - If so, how do you deal with that?
 - For your peers that you know hold a more liberal view on abortion how do you think others deal with that in terms of your religious teachings
- The late Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago endorsed a "consistent ethic of life," involving a "pro-life" position on abortion, as well as a stand against capital punishment and nuclear weapons. How do you interpret this?
 - (IF NOT ALREADY APPARENT) What do you see as the connection between your religious principles and your political opinions?
 - Do you think this position is relevant today?
- If someone came to you and confided that they had recently received an abortion, how would you counsel them?