

## **Confronting a Clergyman**

Senator Barack Obama is not the first one to have dealt with an unruly clergyman within his midst. How best to deal with a man or woman of the cloth whose behavior is disagreeable or even outrageous to you?

I once had the unpleasant experience of being the President of a Congregation whose long-term clergyman died. In a hiatus before another man of the cloth arrived, we had an interim “spiritual leader” who was not ordained. Mr. Doe, shall we call him, had some religious training and wrote several prescient books on Islamic fundamentalism.

Much to my surprise, Mr. Doe was a controversial figure in the community. Some were confused and upset by Doe’s admixture of charismatic Christian fundamentalism, warnings about Islamic entrusts and adherence to Jewish observance. Those on the left were extremely uncomfortable with what they considered to be political polemics, while those on the right were anxious about the unfamiliar religious mixture. The time came after a sermon, however, when it was obvious to me that it was time for our “interim spiritual leader” to move on. It was a particularly difficult task, because I had known the man since seventh grade and brought him to my community to assist us during a difficult time.

Nevertheless, I found that honesty was not only the best policy, but the only policy. I told Mr. Doe how I felt, the rift it was causing in the community, and although I understood his angst, background, trials and tribulations, there simply were certain statements, comments and views that could not be tolerated.

Perhaps our friendship has suffered, although I hope not.

When and in what way should a congregant confront a clergyman whom the attendee believes is off course? Did Senator Obama, at the time that he heard Reverend Wright, really believe that the Reverend was inappropriately denouncing America, whites, and exhibiting bigotry himself? If so, what was the Senator's responsibility, and will he show that proper responsibility as President of the United States?

The Christians, preach that we should render unto Cesar what is Cesar's, and keep the Kingdom of God separately. This derives from an ancient Jewish tradition which teaches that there is danger whenever the government and religion become intertwined. The *Pirkei Avot* warns its adherents to be careful of government "lest it swallows you up whole like a fish." When a clergyman becomes not a religious leader alone, but rather a political entertainer ranting and raving in an unpatriotic and racist way, is there an obligation to remind that spiritual leader that he too must operate by certain rules of reasonable decorum?

In deciding whether to confront the off-the-reservation clergyman, we all have the same problem that Senator Obama did. On the one hand, we may be drawn to and even captivated by the religious message. On the other hand, we know that what the religious leader is doing may be divisive or just plain wrong. I am reminded of a Holocaust forum I once attended with a Lutheran minister. One of his congregants asked how in the future heinous behavior could be prevented such as the type which caused the Holocaust to occur. The minister did not go into a lengthy speech about the roots of anti-Semitism, which he could have done, but rather counseled his congregant to speak up whenever she sees or hears something which she knows from her own moral sense is simply repugnant. On one level, the answer was too simple,

but the years have proven to me that it is the correct advice.

Making excuses for bad behavior and explaining the historical past simply will not work. As Senator Obama himself pointed out, everyone in the country can have an excuse for disliking or being suspicious of someone else. At some point, the excuses stop and responsibility starts.

There may even be times when an ambitious political would-be Presidential candidate must stand up to his spiritual leader and say, "Sir, you are wrong." Scripture not only permits this, but in fact may command it.

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