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CIA vs. Clergy

The church as "cover"?

The CIA has no secret paid or contractual relationship with any American clergyman or missionary. This practice will be continued as a matter of policy." So stated the executive guidelines of the Central Intelligence Agency, set in 1976 after a furor over alleged CIA use of some overseas missionaries. CIA policy also prohibits agents from using religious organizations as "cover" for intelligence work.

Now the U.S. Senate is working on a bill that would prohibit such cover, though it would not ban contractual or voluntary relations with individual missionaries. Though President Carter is very missionary-minded, his Administration favors the present method of self-regulation by the agency and is opposed to any legal ban on either cover or contracts. CIA Director Stansfield Turner stirred renewed controversy by admitting in testimony before a Senate committee that on three occasions he had already agreed to waive the CIA's rule against contracts with missionaries. There can be "unique circumstances," Turner said, in which clergymen are "the only means available" to operate "in a situation of the highest urgency and national importance."

Most religious organizations oppose both Admiral Turner's view and the proposed Senate bill, since it does not entirely forbid use of clergymen. Noting that in many Third World nations missionaries "are already seen as agents of imperialism," the Rev. Dean Kelley, the religious-liberty director of the National Council of Churches, is afraid that "the whole profession can be tainted if it is known that they can be a front for intelligence agencies." ■