Contemporary Fictional Representations of Anglican Clergy on British Public Service Television

Sherer, W.

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Wendy S. Sherer

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Abstract

Fictional clergy on British television have come a long way since the bumbling priests portrayed by the likes of Derreck Nimmo and Rowan Atkinson. Motivated by curiosity about both the impetus for and creative development of more recent programmes depicting Anglican vicars with depth and authenticity, this research presents three detailed production studies of television series appearing in the period of the mid 1990s and following.

The programmes selected as case studies are *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC One, 1994-2007); *Rev.* (BBC Two, 2010-14); and the Welsh drama *Parch* (S4C, 2015-18), each of which represents a significant progression in British entertainment media's depiction of Anglican clergy.

The study is contextualised within a consideration of the Church of England's evolving status within British society over the past century, as well as an accompanying summary of the Church in Wales and its distinct origins. It is also grounded in an exploration of the development of public service broadcasting, specifically as a medium charged with producing programmes to a high standard on a variety of subjects, including those dealing with religion.

This research stands alone as a production study specifically focused on fictional priest portrayals created for British public service broadcasting. The resulting discussion connects depictions of clergy with the social and religious contexts in which they arise, illuminates the potential of well-produced entertainment to impact how the public perceive the plight of priests as real people, and emphasises the value of public media as disseminator of quality, socially relevant entertainment.

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Acknowledgements

To the people in my life, the *sine qua non* of everything I do, but in particular:

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Declaration

I declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.

Wendy Sherer

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Introduction

...the daily manufacture of fictionalised versions of our lives has unnoticeably become the essential background against which we conduct our own.

David Hare (2002)

Inspiration

I saw myself on television for the first time in 1997. Granted, the programme was about an urban Catholic priest in Chicago and I was a Lutheran seminary intern serving in remotest rural South Dakota at the time, but the instant I encountered the new ABC drama, *Nothing Sacred*, I felt like something remarkable had happened. Namely, that someone had taken the trouble to present a member of the clergy in a refreshingly authentic way. And whilst Father Ray (the show's protagonist), with his rather confrontational style and occasional loose language, was by no means a mirror reflection of myself, I could certainly identify with his central dilemma: the experience of a calling that occurred—in equal parts—as blessing and curse.

Sadly for me (and for colleagues who had been equally captivated by the programme), my internship year actually endured longer than that fledgling priest drama. Affronted by a show which 'denigrate[d] the official teachings of the Church by unfavorably contrasting them to the trendy positions of dissenting Catholics,' a religious anti-defamation group[1] began opposing the programme before it had even aired to the public, and over the course of its first (and only) series led a progressively successful boycott campaign against the show's advertising sponsors which resulted in US network

[1] Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights (https://www.catholicleague.org)

ABC's cancelling *Nothing Sacred* before its final five episodes could even be broadcast (Armbrust, 1997).

Despite being critically acclaimed, receiving fourteen industry nominations and winning four awards (including a Peabody for excellence in telling 'stories that matter,')[2] the programme additionally suffered from rather low ratings. In the wake of its premature cancellation, at least one reviewer surmised that even though the gritty priest drama may have been dramatically superior to many shows which enjoyed far greater popularity, it simply didn't 'catch on' to a sufficient degree in order to survive the competitive television climate (Cuprisin, 1998).

The preempting of the first significantly compelling fictional clergy depiction I could recall ever having seen lingered long in my memory as I completed seminary training and began ordained ministry. As the child, grandchild and niece of Lutheran pastors I'd seen the profession close-up my entire life, but never portrayed very faithfully on screen. My youth was suffused with overly earnest fictional clergymen like the Rev. Alden on *Little House on the Prairie* (NBC, 1974-83), kindly yet rather bland men of God who seemed to have little discernable life beyond the church doors. Even twenty years on, mainstream television was still turning out implausible, somewhat sanctimonious do-gooders like Rev. Eric Camden of *7^{h} Heaven* (The WB, 1996-2006), who seemed so out of touch with contemporary life I could hardly bear to watch.[3] It seemed obvious that the makers of such programmes must never have troubled themselves to find out what being an ordained minister was truly like.

Nothing Sacred had been, in my opinion, possibly the first reasonable attempt at portraying an authentic experience of ministry on US network television. Why could such a programme not even survive its inaugural series?

My curiosity was further raised by the discovery, later that same year, of a riveting British drama called *Ballykissangel* (BBC One, 1996-2001), which chronicled the joys and

[2] http://www.peabodyawards.com/

[3] In an embarrassing ironic twist, the actor portraying the squeaky clean Rev. Camden was revealed to have molested at least three underage girls in the years prior to his appearance as the fictional clergyman (Prokupecz and Almasy, 2014).

trials of an Irish Catholic priest and aired in reruns on my local PBS channel.[4] Much like Father Ray, Peter Clifford struggled with the oddity of the church in the midst of secular society, as well as romantic feelings for a local woman with whom he was forbidden to pursue a relationship due to the obligatory celibacy of his priestly commitment. It was no less a critique of church and culture with a complex and troubled priest at its centre, resembling the failed ABC drama in its essential perspective, if not in its rural Irish setting. But *Ballykissangel* had succeeded where *Nothing Sacred* had not, enduring for five series and securing air time in four different countries. I found myself puzzled by the apparent discrepancy.

These thoughts sharpened after 2011 when I relocated to London for a change of scenery and to broaden my career by studying media and broadcasting. Noting the favourable reception of priest-focussed programmes such as *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC One, 1994-2007) and *Rev.* (BBC Two, 2010-14), both featuring Anglican vicars closer to my own Protestant tradition than the earlier (albeit exemplary) Catholic portrayals cited, I began to formulate an informal hypothesis based on the experience of having lived both here and in the States, as a clergywoman and media scholar.

Refining and Defining the Study

Having completed an MA thesis project exploring Christianity in Britain and how UK citizens seem to regard religion in general (Sherer, 2014), I surmised that there was less preoccupation with church related topics here than in the United States, where perhaps there also exists a heightened concern about the relationship between organised religion and society in general. Observing how clergy and the church are regarded (or perhaps overlooked) in Britain suggested to me that this country was less sensitive about portraying religious professionals who more closely resemble their real life counterparts, either due to less formal contact with actual clerics (and thus fewer preconceptions) or

[4] The Public Broadcasting Service is a non-profit organisation which provides non-commercial, free-to-air educational and entertainment programming to public stations throughout the United States. PBS is supported by private individuals and corporate donors, as well as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, an entity created and funded by the government to ensure universal access to high quality content and telecommunications services. (https://www.pbs.org; https://www.cpb.org)

simply less attachment to—and subsequent anxiety about—how the church and its leaders were being represented.

At the same time I suspected that more authentic (or controversial) clergy portrayals did not hold enough public interest to survive the market in my native country, either due to viewers (or special interest groups) taking offense at showing pastors, priests and others as flawed characters, or perhaps a lack of desire by the general public for looking too deeply into church leaders' 'real' lives, lest such an exploration compromise ingrained suppositions about what clergy are like—or supposed to be like. This view was informed by my own observations that laypersons frequently regarded their real-life clergy as not-quite-human subjects, (or if human, at least held to a higher standard than themselves).

The apparent contrast between these two contexts kindled my interest in comparing clergy portrayals in the US with those in the UK. At first the field was rather wide: a transcultural examination of both fictional and factual media representing clergy of any faith tradition.

Whilst the initial idea of a comparative study was compelling, the sheer contextual scope of such a proposal soon revealed the unfeasibility of this approach, especially given the dissimilar nature of British public service broadcasting (on which most of the programmes of interest had aired) and the US commercial entertainment market, where so-called 'public media' occupies a decidedly different (and much smaller) place in the overall media landscape. Furthermore, a study which included representations of different religious groups—such as Roman Catholics and Anglicans—would require at least two separate contextual surveys of faith traditions with quite divergent histories, not to mention varying expressions in different countries.

The project was ultimately narrowed and defined by more precise parameters, focussing finally on fictional depictions of Anglican clergy appearing on British public service television with particular emphasis on programmes appearing from the mid 1990s and following.

Fact v. Fiction

Although I initially intended to study both factual and fictional representations of clergy, it rapidly became clear that including an in-depth investigation of news coverage and other sources generally considered 'non-fiction' (at least in the era prior to the propagation of so-called 'fake news') was not ideal for my specific focus. Whilst an examination of the perception of religious leaders as represented in news and current affairs would make an interesting study of its own, this approach actually falls wide of my primary interest in storytelling (being a dramatic writer myself) and its potential influence on public understanding of church professionals. Scholars such as Morgan et al. (2007) affirm that entertainment media is actually processed in a different way from factual information, namely that audience members allow themselves to become so involved in the narrative that they are likely to suspend the sort of counterargument which usually arises whilst viewing fact-based programming (Green and Brock, 2000, Kellermann, 1984, Slater and Rouner, 1996). There is further evidence that fictional entertainment directly affects the judgments viewers make about people (Kim and Vishak, 2008). The impact of specific programming on public perceptions of various professions will be explored at length in Chapter Four.

A Question of Faith

The choice to focus on Anglican depictions rather than clergy of other religious groups made sense in light of my Protestant Lutheran background (not materially so different in beliefs or practice from the Church of England) but also because my current residence in the UK enables more direct access to Anglican clergy. In addition, the established church has a unique relationship within British society (including media), thus placing it in an intriguing position for study, a discussion which begins in the following chapter.

Public v. Public Service

Not having grown up influenced by the culture of UK public service broadcasting (hereafter referred to as PSB) situates me as both student and somewhat objective observer of the phenomenon. As already mentioned, 'public broadcasting' in the US,

whilst distinguishing itself as quality/educational programming, is considerably limited in scope due to funding constraints and its position within a strongly commercial media market. In my native country there is no direct equivalent to the public service broadcasting which has developed and currently exists in Britain, and which is the subject of Chapter Three.

The process by which programmes are produced for PSB—i.e. the research and development which generates a quality final product—is a subject of acute interest for me, and which I was eager to explore in much greater depth with this research given that my concern is for topically relevant programmes with high production value. This particular interest in PSB is also why I chose not to include film depictions in my study, as their development, production and distribution processes are somewhat different from television.

Chronological and Case Study Focus

Casual observation of televised fictional Anglican clergy depictions in Britain strongly suggested that they became markedly more nuanced around the era of the 1990s and following. I was curious as to why this was the case, and what potential contributing factors could be at work. Thus the decision to situate my research within the wider cultural/historical context of both church and PSB, but confine more detailed programme examination to this latter period of television's evolution.

In discussing project scope with advisors, I considered featuring only one in-depth case study, examining its development and production processes in an effort to determine exactly what comprises an exemplary model of clergy drama and what makes such a product possible. In the process of evaluating several candidates for selection, however, three programmes stood out as equally significant in demonstrating a progression in priest portrayals which then appeared to set the stage, as it were, for other quality offerings to follow.

The programmes which this research will explore as case studies are *The Vicar of Dibley* and *Rev.* (mentioned earlier), plus a Welsh drama called *Parch* which aired on public service broadcaster S4C.

Research Questions

My preliminary exploration of this topic suggested the following items for investigation:

> Q1- Has the changing status of the Anglican Church in recent decades been reflected in the way fictional clergy have been represented on British public service television and if so, how?
>
> Q2- Does public service broadcasting in Britain provide a platform for the creation of 'quality' programmes featuring clergy as main characters, and if so, how?
>
> Q3- What creative considerations and production factors are involved in the development of programmes centred on fictional clerics and their world?
>
> Q4- How are contemporary fictional vicars viewed by the real-life professionals they are meant to represent?

Organisation of the Thesis

This study is comprised of two primary sections: contextual background (Chapter 2-4) and original production research (Chapter 6-8), bridged by an exploration of various media concepts pertinent to this study, as well as an explanation of the methods employed (Chapter 5).

Context

Brief historical overviews of the Church of England, British PSB, and televised priest depictions in the UK comprise the contextual portion of this research.

Chapter Two explores the church primarily in relation to its position within culture and how both the institution and its professional leaders have been regarded by society, especially in more recent decades. This background sets the stage for the more focussed discussions of how clergy are perceived by the viewing public, which arise to varying degrees in each of the three case studies.

Chapter Three surveys the evolution of public service broadcasting in Britain, particularly in its remit to bring attention to religious affairs and topics, as well as its peculiar historical relationship with the Church of England and how that association has altered from the beginning of television to the present time. As fictional dramas represent

a percentage of public service broadcasters' mandatory religious output, this background is helpful in understanding the context in which programme creators operate and to whom they are accountable throughout their production process. It also provides an understanding of the established church's experience of seeing itself portrayed on British television and contextualises ecclesial reactions to more contemporary fictional offerings featuring depictions of the church and its leaders.

The first part of Chapter Four highlights relevant scholarship—both quantitative and qualitative—which draws connections between television portrayals of specific professions and how the viewing public regards those occupations, followed by a review of literature addressing fictional clergy portrayals, a portion of which overlaps with this study's focus period and context. The chapter concludes with a survey of fictional clergy portrayals appearing on British PSB from the early days of television to the 2010s, observing how the character of the Anglican priest has evolved in significance, centrality and complexity over time, and setting the stage for the case studies featured in this research.

Original Research and Discussion

Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight each represent a case study of a single programme depicting an Anglican priest as its primary character. The studies reveal the factors and motivations which brought each programme into being, follow the process of production with a focus on how the main characters were created and developed, and finally gauge how each programme was received by viewers, particularly the Anglican church and its clergy.

The case studies explore why these three programmes emerged at the particular time when they did, as well as some of the cultural, ecclesial and social issues which arise in each, in an effort to contextualise them and further understand their impact.

The concluding discussion of this thesis (Chapter Nine) addresses the reciprocal relationship between media and culture and links the three featured programmes with their particular contexts, speculating about the social influences upon their creation as well as the potential impact resulting from their respective positions in the progression of fictional priest portrayals.

It then takes each case study in turn and evaluates it according to a determined set of criteria for defining a 'quality' programme depicting Anglican clergy, explores the connection between the medium of British public service broadcasting and its creative output, and draws conclusions about the calibre of programming made possible by this particular agent, as exemplified by the case studies.

Finally, the discussion considers some potential limitations of this study, as well as proposals for future application of the research and suggestions for further investigation.

Summary and Purpose

My original curiosity over the lack of authentic clergy portrayals on television led to the discovery of three particular programmes created for British public service broadcasting which I believe to be both socially significant and largely faithful representations of Anglican vicars and the issues they face. Analysis of their creation processes and specific contexts is offered with the intention of highlighting the quality of topical material enabled by PSB as well the potential ability of such programmes to influence public opinion of a particular profession. Perhaps the conclusions of this research could become a catalyst for equivalent explorations of other similarly misunderstood roles and identities. Additionally, this study optimistically stands as one offering in the case for continued support for the creative vehicle of public service broadcasting.

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The State of the Church and the Church of the State: A Summary Perspective on Established Religion in England and Wales

This chapter and the next provide a social, religious, and media context for the research, focusing first on the status of the Church of England and Church in Wales in British society, as well as how their clergy are perceived. Chapter Three will highlight British public service broadcasting—specifically the BBC and S4C— and its history of religious programming and association with the Anglican Church. The intention is to show how the established churches in Britain have steadily declined in prominence over the course of the 20th Century, whilst the same era saw the birth, growth, and development of broadcasting, and the impact these simultaneous trends have had on society at large. These contextual studies also shed some light on the current configuration—both of the official church and of public service broadcasting—and discuss the environment in which the three specified case study programmes have arisen.

The following chapter gives a context for Research Question One:

Q1- Has the changing status of the Anglican Church in recent decades been reflected in the way fictional clergy have been represented on British public service television and if so, how?

The Church of England

The Anglican Church has existed for nearly five centuries as the undisputed official religion of state. However, there can be little argument that its prominence in society has declined significantly since the 1500s. What follows is an overview summary of how the church has evolved to its present state, with a particular focus on more recent

developments in the areas of faith and society, which situate the Church of England within its current context.

Losing Faith

The release of the 2011 UK Census data concerning religious trends confirmed numerically what many had already surmised through observation: membership and participation in the formerly predominant church of the land has decreased steadily—and somewhat dramatically—in recent decades. Indeed, the number of persons identifying themselves as 'Christian' fell from 71.6 per cent to 59.3 per cent in just ten years, with a significant decline in those under 60 years of age. In addition, the number of people reporting 'no religion' as their preference increased across all age groups (ONS, 16 May 2013).

Aside from this general decrease in identified Christians, the Church of England in particular has seen what might be considered a debilitating decline in recent years, with a 27 per cent loss of membership in the period from 1980 to 2000 (Furlong, 2000). Grace Davie gives a stark summary of this trend, asserting that '[i]t is not exaggerated to conclude that between 1960 and 1985 the Church Of England…was effectively reduced to not much more than half its previous size' (Hastings, 1986, p603).

But the numbers only tell one part of the story. Whilst conducting interviews for my MA thesis project exploring the status and opinion of Christianity in Great Britain, in speaking with clergy and laypersons of widely differing religious affiliations (including those who didn't claim any faith at all), I was somewhat surprised at the responses given, especially from those who didn't consider themselves members of the official state religion.

Most of those interviewed conceded that Britain has historically been Christian and currently maintains an official state religion which is headed—at least by tradition and position—by the monarch of the land. Relative enthusiasm toward this state of affairs did vary slightly, but very few felt strongly that it *should* be otherwise. Notably, a devout Jewish interviewee asserted that there was nothing wrong with Britain maintaining its identity as a Christian nation, and personally felt that this mere fact posed no ostensible threat to those who, like himself, happened to practice another religion (Sherer, 2014).

Additionally, both religious and non religious Britons recognised that actual numbers of persons practicing their faith has declined significantly in recent years, and respondents varied in their opinions about this trend. Many acknowledged the presence of other faith groups in addition to Christianity, but observed that none of those have yet eclipsed the state religion in prominence or visibility.

In general, a benign religious presence in the background of society appears to be satisfactory—even welcomed—according to most of those interviewed, regardless of their own tradition. Much was made of the fact that Christian architecture, customs (e.g. official holidays), educational institutions and other elements are inextricably woven into British culture and society. For example, the mere existence of a church building on a prominent corner of a town appears to provide some perception of stability and continuity, whether or not one is a professed or practicing Christian, and this sentiment was expressed by more than one interview subject. The church's physical presence, in some ways, represents a 'comfort blanket,' an assurance that some things will always remain in the midst of so much in society which is changing (Sherer, 2014).

Believing Without Belonging

This generally positive but not overly engaged attitude toward the Church of England, most significantly among its professed members, has been explored by a number of writers in recent years. In her comprehensive history of the church from the 1940s to the 1990s, sociology lecturer Grace Davie coins the phrase 'believing without belonging' to describe the majority of UK citizens who choose to affiliate themselves with the Church of England and what they think it represents, without actually making a regular practice of church attendance or involvement (1994).

It's almost an 'abstract membership,' this approval of an official church which is always present in the background of life and society, to comfort or reassure (similar to how the visual presence of police on the streets theoretically makes one feel safer). But such belief is rather impotent—perhaps holding certain virtues as moral or desirable, but ultimately demanding neither action nor response to the imperatives of the Gospel. At the effect of this often benign regard is the somewhat awkward position which the Church of England now occupies within the greater culture, and aside from predictable initiatives by

active members and leaders inside the organisation itself, there isn't a significant societal pull to alter it.

Alongside Davie's rather matter-of-fact historical/sociological analysis, journalist Monica Furlong presents a seemingly more sympathetic summary of the same statistical evidence in her own examination of the Church of England. For Furlong, these numbers are external signifiers of the story underneath, a tale not likely to conclude in a happy ending:

> A report on youth [was] published for the General Synod Board of Education in 1996, which says that the total Sunday attendance at Anglican Churches amongst 14- to 17-year-olds is 60,739, a drop of 34.9 per cent since 1987...If the same rate continues to apply, there may be no young people at all in the church in twenty years' time (2000, p210).

The author describes the Church of England as being 'between a rock and a hard place,' given this downward trend of membership and subsequent financial instability, taking little comfort from the recent unexpected spike in candidates for professional ministry.

> 'Much is made of the increase in the numbers of ordinands (those training for the priesthood), but this, the only good news on the table at the time of writing, seems an odd criterion of renewed life - many chiefs and few Indians [sic] will scarcely solve the problem' (Furlong, 2000, p1).

Although Furlong herself was not raised as a participating church member, she cringes at what passes for religious commentary in British public life, particularly from other journalists whose comments 'suggest that even the basic Christian ideas are no longer understood by university-educated people, still less by others,' and she includes many churchgoers in this latter group (2000, p3).

Fellow journalist Jeremy Paxman echoes this sentiment. In his 1999 cultural and historical overview of England he gives the following, somewhat grim report:

> When I asked the Very Reverend David Edwards, the author of over thirty books on modern Christianity, for his assessment of the state of spirituality in England, he just told me bleakly that 'The English have lost any sense of what religion is' (1999, p105).

Paxman argues that the Church of England finds itself in this current state because, as indicated earlier, 'that is how the English like their religion -- pragmatic, comfortable and unobtrusive'. He connects this to the circumstances in which the church was originally 'established,' i.e. as a convenient invention of King Henry VIII to suit his own ends, a political establishment which didn't demand anything particular of its members, and therefore found a welcome within the existing culture of politeness. That the church has remained married to politics in some ways which remain unique to Great Britain signifies to the author that the current state of affairs somehow still 'suits mutually convenient purposes for state and Church' (Paxman, 1999, p99-100).

Royalty and Religion

A state where the monarch is still the unquestioned (if mostly symbolic) head of the established church can occur as an oddity to outsiders in the contemporary world. Reverend John Hall, Dean of Westminster, has presented a detailed interpretation of Queen Elizabeth's role in the various official observances of the Abbey, and his own analysis of her particular place in religious society. Hall describes the many official observances which the Queen oversees, and interprets her participation and presence as an undisputed example of 'servant leadership,' drawing clear parallels, for instance, between the coronation ceremony and the holy ordination of a religious professional (2012).

Some theological scholars may reasonably take issue with considering a monarch a 'servant leader,' arguing that the attributions implicit in this designation—mainly those of humility and self-denial—are inappropriate to someone who has lived the entirety of her life in privilege, with every need generously and continuously provided by the state she is charged to serve. Hall, however, would counter that at least in Elizabeth's case, the Queen has made a conscious choice to give her life in complete and willing service to the role into which she was born, and has over the course of her reign become a fully responsible and exemplary leader (2012).

Politics and Religion

Does this acceptance (or perhaps tolerance) of an intermingling of secular, monarchic and religious symbolism extend to contemporary political matters? How are religious leaders' public opinions on current affairs generally received? In my masters thesis project interviews, there was a less accepting attitude toward religion mingled with politics. Whilst spiritual references made by the Queen in her annual Christmas message were generally accepted (or at least tolerated) somewhat by interviewees, Prime Minister David Cameron's overt claims in annual Easter addresses that Britain is a 'Christian nation' drew more disapproving responses, rooted in a suspicion as to 'just what sort of Christianity' he might be referring, given his stance on various social issues. And amongst those interviewed for the project, the only significant voice in vigorous support of retaining senior Anglican Bishops in the House of Lords—and thereby in matters of public policy—was himself one of those bishops (Sherer, 2014).

This general distaste for making religious assertions in the context of political debate—especially those perceived to be favoring one party's policies over another—is evident in Iain Duncan Smith's response to the House of Bishops letter at the time of the 2015 general elections, which called upon politicians to rise above partisanship, seek for the common good, and direct their concern to those in society who have been marginalised and overlooked, lest they risk being perceived as separate and unconcerned about their constituents. Taking offense at what he considered a personal attack, the work and pensions secretary replied, 'When I heard the bishops' comments about alienation and dwindling relevance I thought they were talking about Church of England congregations. It's ironic that despite claiming to be non-partisan, they only produce these reports when Conservatives are in government' (Coman, 2015).

Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby received similar criticism after his speech to the House of Lords and subsequent New Year's message in January 2016, asserting that the UK needs to be far more proactive in their efforts to welcome and resettle Syrian refugees. Tory MP David Davies argued that 'huge financial costs' and difficulties with culturally integrating refugees rendered Welby's assertion unreasonable, and that 'nothing will be enough for campaigning clerics who contrast our policy unfavourably with that of the Good Samaritan' (Parfitt, 2016). In an increasingly diverse society, as long as

religious leaders feel compelled to speak their minds and apply faith principles to public issues, there will always be some resistance from politicians who would prefer that religion either support and undergird their views or simply keep silent.

Thus, the state of the Church of England is unmoved and unyielding in one way—it is and has been the established religion of the land since 1534. Yet in other respects it is virtually unrecognisable from its former self: still official in ceremonial and symbolic ways, but in practice exists as one offering among many religious alternatives in a society which has steadily become a place where a large percentage of the population is perfectly content to espouse no religion at all.

* * *

Established Clergy

In addition to the changing status of the church, this research is concerned with the place of clergy in public life: how public perception and expectations of them may have shifted over the years, as well as the responsibilities implicit to their role. There appear to be parallels between how society views religious professionals and the ways in which they have been—and are being—portrayed on television. To explore this in more depth, one must first look at the evolving role of the Anglican clergy person in a likewise changing society.

In the context of a country where the church once enjoyed a central influential place, but whose importance has been sidelined and de-emphasised over the centuries, it follows that the professionals representing this institution might also experience a significant decline in the inherent respect and social prominence once freely bestowed upon their position in society.

The turnover of the 20th Century saw a marked shift in the traditional vicar's role. With many of the church's official formal powers being assumed by secular government, clergy also became less central—and thus less crucial—to the civic community. (For instance, the church had once played a primary role in such areas as education or commenting on social conditions, about which vicars would have had particular insights given their contact with so many of the lower classes.) The parish system also eroded over

time, public funding of churches declined, and religious professionals were no longer at the heart of public policy and influence (Tomlinson, 2007).

This continuous gradual shifting of parish priests away from the focus of public life, in addition to a growing majority of decentralised rural parishes located further from centres of governance, resulted in an overall perception by the clergy that they were being 'squeezed out of society,' and therefore needed to find new ways of validating their own profession. As a consequence, priests became more focused on exclusively religious matters within their own diminishing worshipping communities (Russell, 1980) and far less on the greater society which had once been their context. For a profession which has at its core the radical evangelisation of culture as a particular voice of faith amongst all other competing societal messages, this shift was not perceived as favourable for the church, nor did it seem to bode well for future growth of the institution (Tomlinson, 2007).

Not only were clergy impacted by the loss of societal centrality as secularism increased, but some of their functional significance also diminished alongside the development of other professions (particularly in the latter part of the twentieth century), making the priest seem even less relevant:

> A number of roles which well-intentioned if not always well-qualified clergy had tried to play in the past had been lost or were being lost to rival professions, few of whose members were in holy orders: doctors and psychiatrists, marriage guidance counsellors and social caseworkers, solicitors and schoolteachers. Sociologists detected a sense of what was called 'role uncertainty' among the English clergy, and a feeling that in future they should be trained in new skills such as counselling. [Thus] the value of the Christian ministry in the eyes of the laity was falling behind that of more 'useful' professions such as medicine and the law (Green, 1989, p 249).

Green adds to this picture of the diminished vicar a circumstance common to many sectors, not just professional ministry: the more traditional functions of the role (ie. priest, pastor, preacher) being sidelined by the administrative and organisational demands of the job. Too much managing and not enough ministering (1989).

Diversity

In addition to role expectation and social status, the demographic profile of British clergy has also evolved over time, particularly in the areas of gender, ethnic and sexual diversity. On the surface this is not surprising, as religious professionals are also individual members of society, ideally reflecting the populations in which they are living and ministering. However, the institution of the church—its traditional practices, views and theological understandings—often finds itself behind secular society in making these advances. The glacial pace of change within ecclesial structures in the midst of a more rapidly shifting culture can be yet another factor which drives the church into further irrelevancy in the eyes of the outside world.

Two of the three fictional vicars highlighted in this research are women, representing the most significant visible shift in the face of contemporary Anglican clergy. The relatively recent introduction of female vicars, beginning in the mid 1990s, is the primary rationale for the indicated time parameters of this dissertation. A significant factor in the changing perception of the clergy is the undeniable fact that one can no longer look toward the pulpit and expect to always see a man behind it. Although this may seem like a non-issue to those whose professions have been integrated for decades (or indeed to a contemporary society where workplace equality, if not a measurable reality, is at least an ideal worthy of championing) the advent of women clergy in the Church of England was neither a foregone conclusion nor a simple achievement.

The General Synod approved the provision for female vicars by the necessary two-thirds majority in 1992, and two years later the first women vicars were ordained at Bristol Cathedral. For supporters of the provision, and the women whose ministry was enabled by its approval, it was a victory nearly twenty years in the making.

The issue had first been debated at the 1975 General Synod, with the conclusion that there was 'no fundamental theological objection' to the ordination of women as Anglican priests. However, years of debate and disagreement between those on differing sides meant that the actual vote enabling the amended policy wouldn't succeed for another two decades (Darnton, 1994), and even when it did, there were measures written into the resolution which attempted to forestall the backlash which was likely to erupt in its wake.

Essentially, whilst the General Synod technically proposed to remove the barriers to women being ordained, there remained a persistent presence within the church which wanted nothing to do with the new provision. Thus, through careful wording and presentation of the measure, 'No parish was obliged to receive women priests, no male priest was obliged to work with them, no bishop was obliged to ordain them' (Mayland, 1998, p71). And thus the proposal finally achieved the required votes in all three houses to effect its passage.

Unsurprisingly, objection remained strong in certain segments of the Church of England, notably amongst the 700-odd clergy who initially declared their intention to convert to Roman Catholicism as a response to the church's decision (far fewer actually followed through). Dissent and threat of schism is not unusual in the aftermath of a historic vote, and it repeated to a lesser degree twenty years after the first ordinations of women took place, when the General Synod finally agreed in 2014 that they could also serve as bishops. Despite the predictably recurring voices of protest, there was greater acceptance of this development amongst the church and the wider culture than there had been for the initial vote allowing women's ordination.

BBC Religious Affairs Correspondent Robert Pigott summed up the sentiment of many when he asserted that the decision in favour of women bishops was the Church's way of 'acknowledging the importance secular society places on equality, signaling that it wants to end its isolation from the lives of the people it serves' (2014).

Journalist Helen Coffey reflected on the church 20 years after the original ordination vote, both on how it has changed because of this development and how the introduction of women priests has been neither destructive nor disastrous, as some opponents might have predicted at the time. For example, a Telegraph poll conducted in the mid nineties found that about one third of people did not favour the idea of having a woman as their priest, whereas this figure had dropped drastically to only about six percent after two decades. The numerical increase of female ordinands over those twenty years has also been impressive, beginning with just three women to their 44 male counterparts in the earliest days, progressing to a near 50/50 split in more recent years (Coffey, 2014).

Coffey proposes that the Anglican Church, at least in this particular regard, is now a fairly accurate reflection of the society at large. That is, the advancement of women among its professionals demonstrates a significant leap forward for the organisation overall, but issues of inequality still remain, as they do in the secular arena (2014). Some of the more complex and ongoing issues faced by women clergy are explored further in Chapter Six, looking at the BBC One programme, *The Vicar of Dibley*.

It can scarcely be denied, however, that the face of the clergy has been forever altered by the gender integration of its ordained priesthood.

The latest controversial issue to date involves clergy who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered in their self understanding. As it currently stands, priests and other religious professionals in same sex relationships are banned from marrying their partners whilst they are in active rostered ministry within the church. As the secular society has seen major reforms in this area—namely the legalisation of same-sex marriage in England, Wales, and Scotland in 2014—it follows that there are also those within the church calling for similar changes.

In April of 2015 the Bishop of Buckingham, Rev. Alan Wilson, spoke publicly to encourage UK politicians to intervene and end what he said was a 'manifest injustice' against clergy who had suffered 'harassment and victimisation' (Bingham, 2015b). The Anglican Church is currently exempt from public legislation allowing gay marriages and reserves the right to determine its own policies regarding both its members and its clergy. Reform groups continue to advocate for change within the church itself as well as secular society, just as they did in the case of women clergy. However they face regular challenges from conservatives within the leadership, such as the January 2016 declaration of sanctions by the Anglican Primates against the Episcopal Church (USA) because of their progress in allowing same-sex unions.[5] Shortly afterwards, Archbishop Welby made a public apology to LGBTQ people and the suffering which the church, past and present, had inflicted upon them (Davies and Schjonberg, 2016). Most recently, the Anglican Communion announced that bishops with same sex spouses would be welcome at the 2020 Lambeth Conference of Bishops, but their partners would not (Becket, 2019), in an

[5] http://www.primates2016.org/articles/2016/01/14/statement-primates-2016/

attempt to walk a frail tightrope between competing views of marriage within the communion's primary members.

Leading Without Believing

It is further illuminating to consider how, if at all, the advancement of secularisation within British society has affected those whose livelihoods depend upon maintaining an open and public profession of faith. In 2013 Jessica Abrahams examined the potentially controversial trend of clergy who remain in their public role while doubting (or outright disbelieving) the existence of God. She cites the Clergy Project, an online group of religious professionals who claim to be atheist. This international, multi-faith collective is currently over 500 members strong and receives about 50 new applicants each month. One member cited conflict with the basic principles he learned from his clerical training (and was then expected to embody and teach), but also a feeling of obligation to continue in his profession. "I'd been on that track for so long," said the now former Anglican priest, "[but] I found myself with more and more unsatisfying situations where I couldn't, with what I had been taught, find an adequate answer" (Abrahams, 2014).

Is this attitude characteristic of many clergy, and if so what does it say about the current state of the church in Britain? Certainly, one can find a mirror between the declining numbers of so-called "believers" amongst the lay population and this (most likely underreported) segment of religious professionals themselves. It stands to reason that at least some of those who have made their life's work within the church, compelled to study theology in depth and probe the extent of their own personal faith and belief system, might find themselves as challenged as their parishioners to fully accept the tenets which they have been taught since early childhood, and with which they have had a lifetime to grapple.

Daniel Dennett and Linda Scola conducted interviews with some of these Clergy Project members, and in 2010 published a study entitled, "Preachers Who Are Not Believers." Many of those interviewed believed that they were just 'the tip of the iceberg,' meaning that a larger percentage of non-believing clergy existed within the church, but

feared exposure and risk to their jobs and livelihood, as well as public and professional scrutiny once their views became known (Abrahams, 2014).

Building on this reality, case studies two and three both feature fictional vicars going through crises of faith and struggling with their understanding of God, religion, and their own place in the larger universe of the church. In light of the above study, these plot developments are perhaps a truer reflection of the real-life dilemmas faced by professional clerics, but which they may be hesitant to share.

* * *

The Church in Wales

Because the third case study programme is produced for a Welsh audience and concerns an Anglican vicar, here follows a brief context for the Church in Wales as it stands today, and how it relates to the culture of the country at large. The contemporary Church in Wales occupies a position in society not entirely dissimilar to the current Church of England. However, the journey from its origins to the present has been somewhat different.

Christianity in Wales traces its roots to the third century Roman occupation, its faith communities surviving the pagan invasion of the fourth century unlike most of their English counterparts (Morgan, 2013). During the medieval period the Welsh churches came under the jurisdiction of Canterbury, and were thus subject to all the proscriptions of the subsequent Reformation, ie. the eradication of most Roman Catholic practices and a new emphasis on Scripture being available in the local vernacular. For Wales these reforms became a significant factor in the preservation of language and culture, resulting in a surprisingly high degree of linguistic and spiritual literacy amongst the population. Further influence of Lutheran and Calvinistic theology fostered a growing number of nonconformist (Congregationalist, Baptist and Methodist) worshipping communities, which eventually superceded the established Anglican Church in Wales both in number and prominence, as Taylor notes: ‘By the time of the 1851 census, 77% of those attending

worship in Wales did so in the nonconformist chapels that formed 70% of the places of worship in Wales' (2003, p228).

By the end of the 1800s there was a growing movement to disestablish the official church, which had become for many a distant entity mostly associated with the domination of the English (Morgan, 2013). But disestablishment, which did come about in 1920, had an unanticipated effect on the fortunes of the Church in Wales. No longer connected to English oppression, the reorganised institution capitalised on its assets—namely guardianship of Welsh language, liturgy and culture, and a parochial system which necessarily provided the sacraments and services of the church to all who desired them, whether they were regular members or not. The church became an independent province of the Anglican Communion and Welsh bishops no longer sat in the House of Lords (Morgan, 2013). Whilst nonconformist membership began to decline, the Church in Wales grew into its identity as national symbol and institution, a distinction which holds true to this day:

> The Church in Wales particularly, compared to other denominations in Wales, has invested a great deal of resources into promoting the Welsh language in liturgy and pastoral work. Ironically for a church that was seen as an 'English' institution, the disestablishment and partial disendowment of the Church in Wales in 1920 created the space to forge a new identity that is both Anglican and Welsh. In many ways, it is the Church in Wales, now the largest denomination in Wales, rather than the traditional Nonconformist denominations, that has become in the public mind 'the official face of Welsh Christianity' (Chambers and Thompson, 2005, p342).

Of course there were also challenges inherent in disestablishment, namely the accompanying disendowment which required the church to raise its own revenue. This was accomplished through major appeals to members from the 1930s through the 1950s, and the Church in Wales remains solvent to this day, although somewhat modestly so (Morgan, 2013).

In recent years the official disestablished church has come to resemble its English counterpart in many practical ways. The widespread decline in membership which the Anglican church has experienced in recent decades is mirrored to an even greater degree in Wales. This necessitates some creative strategising by churches in order to remain relevant and essential within their predominantly secular society. Religious facilities are

increasingly being offered as venues for social, artistic, and other community purposes, making them essential in many cases to the survival of voluntary organisations, for instance (Morgan, 2013). This reality is reflected in the third case study programme, *Parch*, where the local church plays host to art classes, musical evenings, and other events which aren't specifically religious.

Clergy within the Church in Wales are uniquely positioned to be valuable to their communities. The church provides them with local housing in every case, placing them in the centre of the people whom they serve. Chaplains are appointed to most public sectors such as prisons, hospitals, businesses and fire brigades, to name only a few (Morgan, 2013). Additionally, the national ecclesial governing body has prioritised rural and environmental issues as well as ecumenical relationships, making the church further relevant to the general population of the country, and affirming that 'religious institutions in Wales are increasingly opting to reject a privatized role by a revitalized commitment to issues of social justice (Chambers and Thompson, 2005, p348).

Barry Morgan's overview chapter in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to the Anglican Communion* summarises some of the shortcomings of the Welsh national church. Aside from the aforementioned decline in membership, Morgan observes that the church in its present form is too reliant upon their ordained clergy, the overall number of whom is also steadily decreasing. Additionally, he offers the critique that the Church in Wales is 'often prepared to think radically, but it is reluctant to implement consequent recommendations.' For instance,

> Wales was one of the first provinces to ordain women to the diaconate in 1980, but it was not until 1997 that the canon to ordain them priests was passed, having failed in 1994, and so Wales was the last Anglican province in the British Isles to ordain them. That was finally achieved...only by appointing a provincial assistant bishop offering episcopal ministry to those who could not accept the priestly ministry of women (Morgan, 2013, p461).

Taylor further observes that the Church in Wales may be headed for serious financial crisis if it simply continues on its present trajectory: 'Re-endowment and subsequent efforts to raise capital have not provided it with means of keeping it up which

are sufficient in a secular society where falling membership reduces the total contributions made by local church members' (2003, p237).

In spite of its cultural particularity and history of disestablishment, the Church in Wales still shares many similarities with its English cousin and for the most part retains its essential Anglican character, marked by traditional liturgy and practices, official ties with the government of the land, and retention of a primary ecclesial role – regarding functions such as marriages and burials – within the lives of both members and non-members alike. 'Though no longer established, the Church in Wales retains the mission of an established church in a society which is secular and whose culture is postmodern' (Harris and Startup, 1999, ix).

* * *

Summary

It is perhaps difficult to accurately summarise the current state of the Anglican Church – whether Welsh or English – without some subjectivity about how one thinks it 'should' be. Should a church which continues to enjoy an established, official religious status be required to justify this position with stronger overall support and commitment from the general population? Or should there be less 'official' involvement and visibility from a clearly declining religious body in matters of state, for example, whilst increasing numbers of citizens are separating themselves from participation in or affiliation with religion of any kind? In the absence of consensus, there remains only the spectre of an instititution which dominates the landscape with its centuries old spires and imposing edifices, many of which either no longer serve their original intended function, or find themselves greatly diminished from the glory of former days. Nonetheless, like those same stone buildings, the church itself endures, and so do its ordained clergy.

3

The Quality of Mercy:
Religion and Faith on British Public Service Television

With the previous chapter having explored how the official religion of the land has seen both an evolution and a decline over the past century (which may potentially influence the public opinion and reception of clergy characters), the following discussion highlights the ecclesiastical influences which shaped the formation of public service broadcasting and summarises the evolution of PSB's religious remit and its impact on both the nature and quantity of programmes which one might consider 'faith based.' It focuses mainly on the BBC (case studies one and two), but also includes a brief overview of Welsh broadcaster S4C (case study three).

This chapter begins to address the second research question:

Q2- Does public service broadcasting in Britain provide a platform for the creation of 'quality' programmes featuring clergy as main characters, and if so, how?

* * *

Public Service Broadcasting in Britain

With the emergence of radio as a public medium in the early 1920s, it became necessary to devise principles by which to guide the practices of the first official broadcaster. This entity was, in essence, a consortium of manufacturers distributing the new receiving equipment, authorised by the Post Office (who managed the frequencies), and forming what was initially the British Broadcasting Company (eventually becoming a public corporation and changing its name to reflect this). Baron John Reith was first

appointed its general manager, then later the corporation's first director general, and he became known for his strong opinions regarding the broadcasting values which would come to shape the mission and purpose of the new organisation (Crisell, 2002).

Reith outlined the characteristics which he felt were essential to this phenomenon of public broadcasting:

1. Universal availability
2. The highest possible standard of programming
3. A monopoly, to avoid compromising quality
4. Funded by a licence fee to protect all varieties of programmes
5. Independent of both commercial and governmental influence

(Crisell, 2002, p19)

As to the nature of programming itself, the new manager felt strongly that it should 'educate, inform, and entertain'—a formula largely applicable even to the public service channels of the present day. This ethos has become Reith's lasting legacy (in addition to his strongly held religious views which were undisguised and overtly reflected in the earliest programming decisions, and which will be discussed further in the next section.)

Of course, the precise way in which actual broadcast output should conform to this traditional formula remains open to interpretation. From time to time the BBC has faced criticism that many of its offerings could be considered culturally elitist, yet the standards which have persisted for the decades of its existence have been defended on the basis that they are 'grounded on intangible values associated with Western-style democracy, such as diversity, pluralism, universal service, and the maintenance of cultural identity' (Steemers, 2001, p73).

Reith's original aims of 'educating, informing and entertaining' have seen some refining and clarification over the decades, but the founder's original, essential intent remains the guiding framework for the so-called 'main terrestrial TV channels.' In Ofcom's first review of public service television broadcasting, the regulator restates PSB's primary purposes in the following way:

> • to deal with a wide range of subjects;
> • to cater for the widest possible range of audiences – across different times of day and through different types of programme; and
> • to maintain high standards of programme-making
> (Ofcom, 2004, p22)

The advent of television predictably changed the landscape of public service programming, particularly with the addition of a second broadcaster—Independent Television (ITV)—in 1955. While some (especially those not native to Britain) have mistakenly assumed that because ITV is a commercial channel it is not therefore under a similar service remit as the BBC, in fact '[t]he terms under which commercial broadcasting was established by government made it part of the public service system from the beginning.' ITV was intended as an extension of, not an alternative to, to the existing output of its non-commercial predecessor (Scannell, 1990, p51).

Over time, five primary channels would come to represent the majority (though not the entirety) of British public television[6]: BBC (One and Two); ITV; Channel Four, commissioned in 1980 'to develop a service that catered for all those interests presently under-represented or excluded in the output of the BBC and ITV' (Scannell, 1990, p53); and Channel Five, launched in 1997 with a less specific remit (*Communications Act.* 2003) but which has become known for the scope of its internationally imported programmes. Joining this public broadcasting universe are lower profile members such as the Welsh language S4C, which will be profiled later.

This research does not set out to provide a comprehensive history of public service broadcasting in Britain, nor a definitive discussion of the myriad arguments for or against its continued existence in its present form, which have been taking place for years. Rather, the primary concern is with the remit of these broadcasters, and how their unique position ideally contains the potential for producing high quality output with minimal concern for matters of ultimate popularity or loss of funding (although these

[6] BBC Three, created to provide 'innovative programming' to viewers aged 16-23, aired as a terrestrial channel for only thirteen years (2003-2016) before permanently becoming an online only service (Mayer, 2015).

considerations have certainly played a part in the overall discourse about public service broadcasting).

Suffice it to say, amidst ever increasing private commercial and niche subscription channels, public service broadcasters have remained major players in the British television spectrum. They have survived, in part, 'by reinventing themselves to meet the challenges of new technology, competition and regulatory change' (Steemers, 2003, p123). Andrew Crisell further asserts,

> ...if the public service ideal can survive in an era of relentless and often trivial entertainment, providing a forum for the nation among all those narrowcast pay channels, its insistence that broadcasting can serve higher needs and that value is not merely to be judged by popularity could prove to be more eloquent than ever (2002, p292).

Religion on the BBC

Specific to this research, what follows is an examination of how religious broadcasting has evolved on the BBC, how the corporation has regarded its own responsibility toward the subject, and the various ways in which outside groups have sought to influence these efforts.

At the time of its inception in 1922 the British Broadcasting Corporation had strong and undeniable ties with the Church of England. Its aforementioned founder, Baron Reith, was the son of a Scottish Presbyterian minister and grew to be unapologetically Christian in his personal practice and outlook, suffering no personal conflict whatsoever with the state's official broadcaster being, in some respects, a mouthpiece for the Anglican faith. In his book, *Broadcast Over Britain*, he defends this "right" to promote Christianity (1924), and Reith's passion for his faith has been widely documented by media scholars.

> These moral and improving values of the BBC reflected the first Director General's belief that his job was a 'calling' from God. John Reith felt that broadcasting had a divine purpose and assumed it was his duty, as an educated and enlightened member of the elite, to make sure that the new medium would serve the public well. (Harrison, 2000, p4)

The earliest religious transmissions were mainly addresses on moral topics and instructive messages, as both the BBC and the established church of that day shared the apparent concern that airing Sunday worship services would decrease attendance in actual churches (McDonnell, 2009). In fact, the first complete live broadcast of a religious ceremony did not take place until the late 1940s (Viney, 1999).

Cardiff University lecturer Dr. Caitriona Noonan has made a rigorous study of the BBC's religious broadcasting history, and explains that the organisation's original and clear aim was "to promote and protect the Christian faith and give a greater appreciation of faith and religious doctrine to listeners, combining education and proselytism within the mission" (2013). This description may indeed land as extraordinary on contemporary ears, given the current widespread mistrust for public proselytising of any sort. One can hardly imagine the nation's official broadcaster stating such objectives today without being accused of inappropriate bias in favour of one faith group. However, this was the sociological and cultural environment in which the BBC arose, and must be understood as the definitive context for its unfolding history. Furthermore it was very much in line with the general assumption that Britain was still a Christian nation and this should be reflected in its media (McDonnell, 2009).

A New View on Faith

The advent of television in the 1950s saw a new medium for broadcasting faith, even as culture was just beginning to pull for an alternative to the monopoly that Christianity had previously enjoyed in the official transmission of religious topics. This demand for diversity would only gain momentum in the socially turbulent decades to come (Noonan, 2013). Nevertheless, by the mid fifties a monthly Christian worship service was included in the broadcast schedule, and both the BBC and Britain's first commercial television station, ITV, agreed to air only religious programming from 6:40-7:30pm on Sunday evenings.

> The 'closed period' or the 'God Slot' was a specific concession...at that time in order to maintain the support of the church...Although the control was lifted in 1972, both the BBC and ITV continued to schedule religious programmes during this slot for many years after (Noonan, 2013, p209).

From the 1960s onward, the insistence that other religious views be given a voice, as well as controversial opinions or debates (which had heretofore been avoided), would forever alter Christian broadcasting as the BBC felt external pressures to stay in step with where culture appeared to be heading (Wolfe, 1984). By this time television had become the dominant form of broadcasting, Davie's 'believing without belonging' phenomenon had taken hold in earnest, and the trend toward secularisation and alternative spiritualities were beginning to gain significant ground.

In the midst of a culture much more open to challenge and controversy where faith is concerned, the BBC sought to redefine the nature of its ongoing commitment to religious broadcasting. The 1961 handbook articulates the broadcaster's revised priorities regarding faith as:

> 1) representing mainstream Christianity
> 2) relating Christian faith to the modern world
> 3) reaching those on the fringe of organised religious life
> (*BBC Handbook.* 1961, p52).

Although the language has clearly evolved from Reith's overt proselytism of the 1920s, this description gives the impression that a commitment to evangelism of some sort still underlies the BBC's religious objectives.

The 1970s saw further expansion in the concern for diversity of output with analysis from the acting head of religious broadcasting, Rev. John Lang, advice meant to serve as a guideline for a comprehensive study being undertaken with resulting recommendations for religious broadcasters. In his 1975 report Lang adapts the wording of the previous BBC objectives, but the changes he makes are significant in their implications, proposing that the three aims of religious broadcasting should be:

> 1) To seek to reflect the worship, thoughts and action of the principal religious traditions represented in Britain, recognising that those are mainly, if not exclusively, Christian;
> 2) To seek to present to viewers and listeners those beliefs, ideas, issues and experiences in the contemporary world which are related to a religious interpretation or dimension of life;
> 3) To seek also to meet the religious interests, concerns and needs of those on the fringe of, or outside, the organised life of the Churches.

The 1977 Annan Report follows directly from these recommendations, and represents an irreversible trend in religious broadcasting, recognising an increase in religious pluralism in society and the consideration of the audience's perceived interests and needs rather than what professionals felt would benefit their audience, which had been the standard practice up until this point. (Note the relaxing of the relative paternalism which had characterised the BBC's early days.) This is also one step further along the road towards competition in television content, which will come into full bloom in the following decade (Annan, 1977, Harrison, 2000).

Course Alteration

The BBC of the 1970s also saw a shift in personnel responsible for producing religious content. The first crop of religious producers were exclusively Anglican clergy, whereas by 1975 that percentage had fallen by half, in a continuing downward trend. This development was regarded positively by the BBC, as the 1976 handbook clearly expresses in its praise of the new more experienced professionals, but the trend was also seemingly (and perhaps surprisingly) accepted by the religious community (Noonan, 2013).

One possible reason for the absence of criticism might simply have been that the church did not fully register the effect that these changes would have on the eventual relationship between the C of E and the BBC. One of the remaining religious producers during this decade, David Winter, noticed the gradual turning of the tide at this time but didn't really feel its impact until many years later. In his memoir he observes:

> This was the beginning of the new era in broadcasting, one in which religion had to compete on no better than level terms with every other kind of programme (and sometimes, especially on television, not even on level terms). There was still plenty of religious output, but probably for the first time I began to reali[s]e that the broadcasting environment was changing, even if for the present slowly and gently. Such matters of broadcasting politics concerned me very little at the time, I must confess, though they were later to haunt my days (2001, p118).

The church's own influence in matters of religious broadcasting would continue to diminish over time. Ensuing decades reveal an organisation which once enjoyed unquestioned representation eventually finding that it had 'moved from being a valued

partner to yet another interest group concerned with the role of the media' (Noonan, 2013, p208). Later in the chapter this phenomenon will be illustrated more specifically, as a church feeling marginalised by comparison with its former favoured status begins to voice its own concerns in earnest.

Noonan succinctly sums up her analysis of these two critical decades:

> The two biggest changes between the aims in 1961 and those which ended the 1970s were that religious broadcasting shifted from promoter and defender to being a more objective commentator and forum for criticism. This increased the BBC's distance from the Church which in turn had a knock-on effect in relation to editorial policy and scheduling. The Christian monopoly which had dominated religious policy to this time was also radically revised to the chagrin of some in the BBC and its audience (2013, p201-2).

The implications of Margaret Thatcher's government and the 1980s popular notion of a market driven economy manifested in the debate over whether or not religious broadcasting still belonged under the traditional umbrella of public broadcasting, or if it weren't perhaps time for a shift towards more competition (as mentioned earlier) as well as audience demand dictating the shape of faith on television (McDonnell, 2009). These prolonged discussions finally culminated in the Broadcasting Act of 1990 which essentially required broadcasters to provide a minimum amount of religious content, but without stipulating when in the schedule it was to air. The Act also prohibited religious ownership of terrestrial television channels as well as on air fundraising, which seemed to upset evangelical Christians moreso than mainline Anglicans.

The effective result of the newly articulated regulations in this legislation, as some church professionals had feared, was that ITV chose to air their 'required' religious content in increasingly marginalised slots, which effectively spelled the end of any serious commitment to faith on commercial television. It also put the BBC in competition with more commercially appealing programmes during the closed period on Sunday evenings (McDonnell, 2009). The eventual unintended effect of 'statutory protection' for religious programming was, therefore, that such offerings drew progressively smaller audiences over the years.

Distancing from Religion

The producers of faith programming on the BBC were dealt another blow in 1994 with the relocation of the Religious Broadcasting Department away from the centrality of London, to new headquarters in Manchester. The stated interest of the move was to extend the corporation's visibility and viability to regions beyond the perceived insularity of the capital, at a predictably critical time when the BBC's charter was once again under review. Compiling interviews with more than twenty current or former professionals who were directly affected by the move, Noonan surmises that not only was it an unsuccessful attempt at demonstrating regional support through strategic decentralisation, but the department's relocation had also in fact resulted in further marginalisation of religious programming by cutting it off from consistent cross-fertilisation with other departments and central commissioning, as well as depriving it of essential experienced personnel who did not opt to follow their migrating jobs (2012).

In 1996 the Central Religious Advisory Committee (CRAC), the independent group which provides oversight to the BBC and other broadcasters with regard to their faith-based content, expounded on the Annan Report of twenty years earlier. Principally the committee affirmed the Report's original objectives of greater concern for diversity and further stipulated that religious broadcasting has an ongoing obligation 'to explore the core, the variety and the fringes of religious expression and its impact on the world' (CRAC, 1996). The new report set out descriptions of what could now be considered a 'religious' programme, namely one which:

- presents conventional religious belief and practice, worship and ceremonial, the reality and significance of being a believer;
- reflects, scrutinises, proclaims or challenges aspects of the world of faith and the impact of faith (and non-faith) on the world;
- keeps the audience in touch with issues which shape the world of belief and which are shaped by the world of belief;
- addresses itself to questions and concerns which religions (but not necessarily religions alone) address, and affirms values which religions also affirm;
- deals with a view of life not enclosable by the visible world;
- acknowledges the spiritual dimension in human experience; and
- does not fail to bring a religious perspective to bear on its subject matter, be it (for example) social justice, ethics, suffering or celebration

(CRAC, 1996).

By these guidelines the umbrella of 'religious programming' had now become very wide indeed, and one could almost predict a response of some sort from the church, which must likely be perceiving their own particular interests all but evaporating from the realm of public broadcasting.

And in fact, that response does come, in the form of a private member's motion to the Church of England General Synod (Holmes, 2000). In it, former BBC producer Nigel Holmes sets out a detailed critique of the way established religious programming has gradually been pushed to the margins in favour of more watered-down, vaguely spiritual offerings. The acting head of religious broadcasting at the time exchanged several public letters with Holmes in the *Guardian*, defending the BBC's efforts towards diversification and citing the large proportion of non-Christians (and non practicing Christians) among the viewing audience (Holmes and Rea, 2000).

The tension over specifically Christian versus more general 'faith oriented' programming was to continue throughout the early years of the new century. This rift was further emphasised by two significant moves by the BBC during that same year: appointing Alan Bookbinder—the first non-Christian/agnostic head of religious programming—and changing the Religious Broadcasting Department's name to BBC Religion and Ethics. 'For many critics in the [c]hurches,' asserts McDonnell, 'this seemed the final confirmation that the BBC had turned its back on its legacy' (2009, p158-9).

One Among Many

Thus the nation's primary public service broadcaster entered the Millennium looking markedly different from its comparatively simple, audio- and Christian-centric beginnings. The challenge for so-called religious programming now becomes somehow finding a balance between a number of significant forces: declining but still vocal mainline churches, diverse religions as well as non-religious populations seeking fair representation, commercial competition versus a continued commitment to producing quality material, and finally, the spectre of the BBC's own heritage as an organisation now approaching 80 years of existence (albeit in ever evolving formats).

Thirteen years after the Broadcasting Act of 1990 a new communications bill was proposed and a new regulator appointed to monitor broadcasters, the Office of

Communications (Ofcom). This revised legislation set out specific requirements for public service broadcasters, including their output dealing with religion and other beliefs, stipulating that it be comprised of:

> (i) programmes providing news and other information about different religions and other beliefs;
> (ii) programmes about the history of different religions and other beliefs; and
> (iii)programmes showing acts of worship and other ceremonies and practices, including some showing acts of worship and other ceremonies in their entirety (*Communications Act.* 2003, p264).

The new act appears to increase protection of religious programming in theory, but McDonnell notes that actual faith-based content continued its decline on the major public service broacasters, which was noted in the following year in a report by Ofcom itself (McDonnell, 2009, p161).

Also in 2004, the BBC Governors undertook an internal review of religious output, a report entitled, 'Taking Belief Seriously.' In it they recognise the united concerns of various diverse faith groups, primarily over increased marginalisation of religious programming within broadcast schedules and the tendency of news and entertainment shows to reinforce negative religious stereotypes. The report reinforced a general desire by the viewing public to see more equitable coverage of multifaith issues in addition to more positive representation of religion overall (BBC Governance Unit, 2005).

<u>No Offence Intended</u>

An illustrative example of how the BBC wrestled with issues surrounding religious broadcasting is the case of *Popetown*, a satirical animated programme with obvious cultural references to Catholicism, originally scheduled to be broadcast on BBC3 in September 2004 but never actually making it to air. The channel's controller Stuart Murphy apologised for the decision not to broadcast the already created programme and offered the following explanation: 'Despite all of the creative energy that has gone into this project and the best efforts of everyone involved, the comic impact of the delivered series does not outweigh the potential offence it will cause' (Norris, 2010, p2).

This concern not to affront viewers, especially those of a particular religious persuasion, is a refrain that will become more common in subsequent years, as we can see clearly stated in the BBC's current editorial policy regarding religion:

> We should take care to avoid unjustified offence. We aim to achieve this by ensuring our output is not used to denigrate the religious beliefs of others, while upholding the right to freedom of expression. (BBC, 2016, 12.1)

In fact, the word 'offence' is mentioned eight times in under three pages of text, emphasising the level of concern by the editorial department and implying a preference for avoiding controversy over dealing with potential backlash from the viewing public, especially where it appears to be preventable.

However, the tightrope of concerns and the multiplicity of interests around religious broadcasting is one which the BBC seems resigned to walking, knowing full well the impossibility of pleasing everyone. Former Director General Mark Thompson voiced this dilemma in a speech to a Catholic conference in 2005:

> Last autumn, after much reflection, we decided not to show the animated comedy *Popetown*. As a result many commentators, especially those who seem to have a humanist or anti-religious agenda, concluded that we were bowing in a rather craven way to pressure from the religious lobby. A few weeks later, after at least as much reflection, we decided to show a televised version of Jerry Springer: The Opera. Now a different group of commentators tried to convince the world that the BBC had finally taken off its mask and revealed itself as the arch-secularist they'd always suspected it to be (2005).

Indeed, sometimes that two-pronged criticism even comes from the same source. Torin Douglas, a former BBC media correspondent and subsequent member of the Sanford St. Martin Trust (whose stated aim is to promote excellence in faith related broadcasting), has both praised and criticised the current organisation for its handling of religious affairs. In a 2014 article encouragingly titled, '*Religion is Alive and Well in British TV,'* whilst citing specific programmes and an impressive variety of offerings, he argues:

> Reports of the decline in religious broadcasting have been exaggerated... I suspect that many people in 'the faith industry' simply aren't aware of the range of programmes on offer, while many in broadcasting have little personal knowledge of people and issues of faith (2014).

The very next year finds the same journalist singing a rather different tune, criticising the BBC 'for its failure to take seriously its obligations' in the area of religion, 'at a time when it is widely acknowledged that religious literacy has never been more important' (Douglas, 2015).

The criticism came, in part, as a result of what Douglas and other Anglicans interpreted as an unfortunate yet unsurprising further demotion of faith programming: the corporation's decision to eliminate the Head of Religion position held by Aaqil Ahmed, who also happened to be the first Muslim to occupy it. Motivated by ongoing pressure to cut costs across all departments, the BBC chose to combine faith with scientific, business and historical issues under the new heading of 'Factual Programming.' Whilst the corporation insisted that their 'commitment to Religion & Ethics output' was 'unequivocal,' Leeds Bishop Nick Baines articulated the church's concern that **'**at a time when it has become obvious how important understanding of religion is in the interpretation and understanding of world events, it is staggering that [it] is downplayed' (Bingham, 2015a).

Olive Branch

After subsequent consideration of audience and stakeholder feedback, the BBC eventually responded with their 2017 internal review of religion and ethics, declaring a renewed commitment to expanding offerings—both fictional and factual—dealing with issues of religion, faith, belief, and ethics, and making it clear that they intended to feature a wide range of viewpoints (including those who hold no faith beliefs or who self-define as spiritual but not religious). In addition—perhaps in tacit reply to the unpopular staff reconfiguration of 2015—the corporation announced the promotion of their existing Religious Affairs Correspondent to the position of Religion Editor (BBC, 2017).

Following on these promises, the BBC declared 2019 a 'Year of Beliefs,' putting forth programming offerings such as documentaries on The Vatican, holy sites around the globe, the origins of the 1989 fatwa, and a special Easter edition of *Songs of Praise* from the Holy Land. Explorations of surrogacy, medical ethical dilemmas, the morality of wealth, and what it's like to be gay in the church also appeared in the line-up. Content Director Charlotte Moore expressed the broadcaster's intention:

> ...to capture the complex variety of faiths and beliefs in modern Britain. Not only do we continue to offer our audiences a place they can celebrate and share their own personal beliefs, but we also want to help them understand better the meaning of other faiths and beliefs as well as exploring important ethical issues that impact so many people's lives (BBC Factual, 2019).

This latest initiative illustrates the ongoing efforts of the UK's largest public service broadcaster to walk the tightrope of maintaining a manifest commitment to faith communities and issues without favouring any one religion nor excluding atheists and other non conforming practitioners from conversations about ethics and belief.

Observing the evolution of religious broadcasting's status on the BBC, one can see the breadth of the organisation's transformation and how altered it now appears since the pious days of its inception. Lord Reith might well be thankful that he didn't live to see such times. Nevertheless, the fact that the Church of England and the BBC no longer walk hand in hand may well be an inevitable and not necessarily unfavorable development given how Britain has matured over the past century. The radical changes in culture and society since the 1920s make more sense of the current state of religious media output, and future producers of faith-based content in public service broadcasting will necessarily have to navigate a multiplicity of factors in creating programmes which not only represent Britain's diverse religious and ethical terrain, but which viewers also find enlightening and interesting enough to capture their attention.

* * *

The Birth of S4C

Case studies one and two are both programmes produced for the BBC (Channels One and Two, respectively). Because the third was not a BBC production, but still comes under the umbrella of public service output, here follows a brief overview of the Welsh language channel which commissioned and aired *Parch,* a drama with comedic elements centred around a female Church in Wales vicar.

The Welsh Academy Encyclopaedia of Wales states simply that 'S4C (Sianel Pedwar Cymru: Channel Four Wales) was launched on 1 November 1982 after a long and often bitter struggle' (S4C. 2008). That 'long and bitter struggle' was actually a protracted campaign over the space of a decade comprised of protests, rallies, sit-ins, licence

burnings and damage to various broadcast transmitters. The issue at the centre of the conflict was the long-standing promise to Welsh speakers that they would have a channel broadcasting original programming in their own language.

Both political parties had included assurances of this pledge in their 1979 general election campaign platforms, but hope for its fulfillment dried up once the Conservative government came into power. Instead, a fourth public service outlet was proposed—another English language channel with a different remit from the existing three.

In response, the protest effort escalated in 1980 with the threat of a hunger strike by MP Gwynfor Evans, the president of Plaid Cymru. Finally, the conservative government relented, resulting in the establishment of the first dedicated Welsh television channel (Bayly, 1983), one day before the new public service Channel Four was scheduled to launch in the rest of the country.

The official remit of S4C is 'to provide a comprehensive Welsh language television service, of high quality, which reflects and enhances life in Wales'[7] (although a review in 2018 proposed the redefinition of the channel's output to include multimedia platforms beyond the medium of television and the geographical region of the UK).[8] The channel currently represents the largest share of airtime and per capita financial investment on behalf of any minority language in Europe (Bayly, 1983), a status which has frequently drawn criticism over the decades of its existence, especially given the steadily decreasing ratings the channel has experienced since its initial establishment.

There are some crossovers between S4C and Channel Four, with many of the latter's most popular programmes also appearing on the former, although peak hours have always been reserved for Welsh language programming (S4C. 2008). Also like its English counterpart, S4C does not itself produce original content, but prefers to commission programmes from BBC Cymru Wales and other independent producers (Green, 2012) as in the case of *Parch*, the third programme examined by this research.

* * *

[7] http://www.s4c.cymru/production/downloads/guidelines/S4C-programme-guidelines-10-03-10.pdf
[8] https://www.s4c.cymru/gwthiorffiniau/pdf/S4C-Review.pdf

Summary

Public service broadcasting in Britain, specifically exemplified by the BBC, has long standing historical ties with the established church of the land. This relationship began as a symbiotic intersection of purpose and perspective, but has gradually evolved over the decades with the rise of both secular and non-Christian influences within society. The Church of England, which once enjoyed a respected position of primacy on both radio and television in the PSB world, has now become one amongst many contenders for programme hours allotted to the presentation of 'faith, belief and ethics.' This may either be regarded as an unfortunate loss of privilege or a welcome challenge to seek new ways of portraying Christianity—and specifically its clerics—in a unique and heretofore unexplored manner.

The next chapter will highlight research suggesting that television portrayals influence public opinion of specific professions. It will also examine the earliest portrayals of fictional clerics in the decades leading up to the target period of this research—the mid 1990s to the 2010s—as well as briefly outlining some of the more contemporary programmes, as a means of exploring how the character of the fictional vicar on public service broadcasting has changed over the years and theorising as to why this may be the case.

4

Professional Development:
The Evolving Priest on Public Service Broadcasting

Chapter Two explored the apparent declining status of both the established church in Britain and its clergy, and how their reception and perception altered significantly over the course of the 20th Century. It focused on the comparatively recent expansion of the secular mindset in British society and the corresponding cooling towards religion and its public expressions, a context which is reflected, to some degree, in each of the three case study programmes examined in this research. Because a primary feature of this latter era is the recession of all things religious, it provides a fertile backdrop for clergy characters who are struggling with the diminishing of the church's relevance—and their own—within culture.

It is the contention of this study that the most recent fictional vicars—particularly those which are closely examined here—are largely respectable representations of the profession as well as entertaining characters in their own right. But these later representations came about, in part, as a response to the ways in which their earlier clerical ancestors were portrayed.

The legacy of fictional clerics dates back to the beginning of television itself, when British public service broadcasting was only beginning to find its way under a mandate to deliver quality programming which 'informed, educated and entertained.' And although they haven't always been so nuanced or complex, vicars have long appeared on the small screen, serving various functions within the narrative structure. Their development reflects, in a way, the changing nature of the society, religion, and entertainment trends of the times in which they arose.

Applying direct text analysis as well as the somewhat limited academic material available addressing the stated research parameters, this chapter explores how the

televised vicar has evolved over the decades—from the 1960s to the present day—both to give perspective to the subsequent case studies and to propose a connection between shifting cultural views and the world of fictional priests.

Preceding this discussion is an examination of the effect which the medium of television may have on public perception, illuminating the issue of why fictional representations of any particular profession are significant in the first place.

* * *

The Impact of Television

From a larger societal perspective, does it matter if the vicar is primarily a stock character or a laughing stock? Do fictional characters really influence public views? Surely any profession generally desires respect and prefers media representation which ennobles rather than denigrates their chosen field. But is this simply an individualised concern for looking good, or is there a measurable relationship between fictional portrayals of various occupations and the general public's overall view of that profession? In fact, there is a significant body of research to suggest a credible connection between the two.

Whilst this particular dissertation is not a quantitative study, there is merit in at least summarising some of the more measurable analyses of the interaction between television and its audience, and to consider the potential impact of various character portrayals on societal views. Before sampling the numerous studies which focus on media representations of specific professionals, it makes sense to begin with a foundation of basic theory regarding television's influence on public opinion. Although much empirical work has been focused on this topic, only a few significant findings will be referenced here.

Whilst it may be intuitively logical that what one views repeatedly and receives rather passively from a medium which occupies a prominent place in one's home would inevitably have some influence on one's attitude towards the wider world, demonstrable research also supports this notion. The theory of 'cultivation analysis' proposes that television has the power to create 'shared conceptions of reality' within larger

populations, even amongst fairly diverse groups of people who might not otherwise have much association with one another (Gerbner et al., 1986). Proponents of this theory contend that fictional television drama, in particular, has a measurable influence on viewers' attitudes toward various societal issues, as well as the principles which govern the world outside their sitting rooms. The result is that the viewers of these dramas—especially those who consume the most—are more likely to believe a 'television reality' of the world, even if that version conflicts with provable reality. This phenomenon seems to be most pronounced in areas where the audience has limited first-hand knowledge or experience (Gerbner et al., 1980, Gerbner and Gross, 1976).

These findings are relevant to the present study insofar as those with no significant contact with either the church or its clergy may indeed find that their views on clerical matters are primarily shaped by what the media is feeding them. This becomes even more likely with the progressive decline of the church's influence in society, as discussed in Chapter Two. In such an environment, public service broadcasting's particular obligation to 'educate' becomes yet more crucial, that is if one has serious concerns for how vicars and their domain are viewed.

The 1970s and 80s saw a proliferation of scholars looking critically at television's impact on society from a number of multidisciplinary angles. In 1982 the National Institute of Mental Health published the results of a ten year intensive study on the subject, with the following conclusion:

> The research findings of the past decade have reaffirmed the powerful influence of television on the viewers. Almost all the evidence testifies to television's role as a formidable educator whose effects are both pervasive and cumulative (Pearl et al., 1982, p87).

Over a decade later, McCombs and Bell affirmed the power of mass media to impose a filter through which so-called ordinary people are inclined to view their world (1996). The perspectives influenced by this filter can have significant social and political consequences.

On issues with a profound public impact such as organ donation, for instance, negative or sensationalistic plot lines related to the topic can actually have a significant

effect, both upon the general public's attitude towards the subject and their willingness to volunteer as potential donors (Morgan et al., 2007). In a similar way, Sieff concluded that many of the media frames applied to various mental health issues have a tendency to reinforce simplistic and unhelpful images of the conditions with which real people struggle and which call for complex solutions (2003).

Regarding another issue capable of stirring up controversy, two particular studies tested the potential effect of programmes which portrayed same-sex relationships in a positive light, and their observable influence—if any—upon the wider population's corresponding social views. One found that the use of framing in support of traditional values, in a pro-gay context, actually increased perceived support for gay rights and related issues, even within a predominantly conservative culture (Zhang and Min, 2013).

Another group of researchers found that increased viewing of the popular 1990s sitcom *Will & Grace* correlated with 'lower levels of sexual prejudice, a relationship that was most pronounced for those with the least amount of social contact with lesbians and gay men' (Schiappa et al., 2006, p15). Schiappa and his colleagues employed the 'parasocial interaction hypothesis,' a theory that viewers form beliefs and attitudes about people they know only through television, regardless of whether such people are fictional characters or real people (2006), and an echo of prior studies suggesting the development of a strong affinity between television viewers and the fictional personae they choose to watch frequently (Conway and Rubin, 1991). Thus a curious 'bond' is formed between viewer and character, with qualities mirroring an actual (albeit one-directional) real-life friendship in which one person may have a deep and lasting impact on another. This shines another particularly interesting light upon the possible influence which clerical characters may have on viewers, especially those who have no close relationships with priests or other 'churchy' people.

If fictional television can influence viewers' perceptions of social issues, it follows that the way in which the small screen portrays specific occupations may not only draw attention to these fields, but also affect public attitudes about them (Parenti, 1999).

Interest groups representing a wide variety of careers have been conducting studies around televised content and its perceived impact for decades, monitoring portrayals of

specific professions such as nurses (Jackson, 2009) and physicians (Chory-Assad and Tamborini, 2001), school teachers (Mayerle and Rarick, 1989) and principals (i.e. head teachers) (Glanz, 1997), forensic scientists (Friedman et al., 2011) and female attorneys (Klein, 1997).

Each group clearly has its own set of interests, not least of which is simply wishing to be represented with a degree of fairness and accuracy. Persistent concern was also expressed for the possible impact of negative or unrealistic portrayals on potential recruitment to particular careers such as social work (Gibelman, 2004) or public relations (Yoon and Black, 2011), fields whose televised characters frequently bear little actual resemblance to their real-life counterparts. Although dating back to the earlier days of the medium, a 1964 study did in fact confirm how occupational roles portrayed on fictional programmes can influence children's desire to pursue various careers (DeFleur, p73).

Beyond the obvious desire of most fields to attract interested new recruits, there often lie deeper concerns for potential public welfare resulting from assumptions about various fields. For instance, when depictions of the criminal justice system offer skewed portraits of violent crime, its frequency and nature, and those likely to be involved, there is a subsequent risk that viewers might develop misguided and potentially detrimental views of reality—specifically the perceived effectiveness and assumed role of law enforcement and how much power they should be allowed (Eschholz et al., 2004).

Concerning the field of education, inaccurate or exaggerated portrayals of teachers can have the effect of creating unreasonable expectations of their real-life counterparts, as well as potentially hindering support for legitimate educators, an issue which is already plagued by polarising debate (Swetnam, 1992).

The empirical research suggesting that television depictions do, in fact, appear to have a demonstrable influence on viewer perceptions of professionals is rather compelling. Various quantitative studies have concluded, for instance, that characters in medical dramas impact the public's view of physicians (Pfau et al., 1995) and that people seem to form impressions of real-life attorneys based on fictional narratives (Jarvis and Joseph, 1998). Whilst these representations were frequently negative at worst and simply inaccurate at best, there were cases where fictional characters had a more positive impact on public opinion.

One study found that popular legal dramas such as *Ally McBeal* and *The Practice* portrayed lawyers as more human and accessible than in previous programmes (Kitei, 1999), and another discovered that overall viewer affinity for the character of the US President on *The West Wing* surprisingly created an upswing in public approval for the actual president of the day, regardless of which political party he represented (Holbert et al., 2003). This potential for television drama to actually improve people's opinions of a real-life occupation is worth noting, as it emphasizes that the influence of media can work either way.

In a comparative study of medical characters on popular television, Kalisch and Kalisch were disappointed by the tendency of plot lines to downplay the crucial role of nurses in the hospital setting (whilst simultaneously glorifying the doctor's role) highlighting the potential of mass media to transform identifiable groups such as nurses and physicians into 'smaller than life' or 'bigger than life' (1986, p193).

In other words, programme makers can choose to use their influence to present a more or less balanced picture of any given professional sphere, which could mean improving the overall opinion of a historically maligned field or endeavouring to portray a frequently distorted or misunderstood occupation in a more accurate light. One way to accomplish this is by soliciting input from the professionals whom they are attempting to dramatise. In the world of British public service broadcasting, such a gesture may occur as a natural practice in lending credibility to the creation of consistently high quality programming which properly represents various populations. But this ethos cannot be assumed in the world of commercial entertainment television (such as the US market), and in that sphere it remains incumbent upon any specific interest group to find ways of influencing media professionals to portray their field in a more favourable light (Henderson and Franklin, 2007, p149). The issue of professional consultants will be revisited in the final discussion of this dissertation.

To conclude, there is convincing scholarship to indicate that mass media in general—and television dramatic fiction in particular—has a measurable influence on the views of its targeted audience. Members of a specific professional group may find themselves at any time glorified, vilified, distorted, exaggerated, marginalised, or erased altogether by the dramatic narrative. Such portrayals frequently have an effect on the

viewing public's opinion of these occupations overall.

Building upon this premise, this research now turns to focus specifically upon fictional television clerics and what sort of treatment they have received since the inception of the medium, up to the targeted period of the mid-nineties and following.

* * *

A Literature Review of Media Clerics

Specific scholarly studies of fictional clergy on television are somewhat few and far between. Focused discussions of specifically Anglican characters, let alone those appearing on British public service television, are rarer still. Thus, the field is ripe for deeper exploration.

One of the earliest such reviews was an examination of protestant ministers appearing in US film from 1951-1960 (Worden, 1962). The researcher was himself theologically trained, but employed in the field of psychology rather than professional ministry, and so brings an interest but perhaps not so personal a perspective as the present study, for better or for worse.

Worden surveys over two hundred films featuring protestant ministers as either leading or supporting characters, and applies an exhaustive textual reading which categorises traits pertaining to each persona, including nearly everything from preaching style, theology, personal goals and habits—down to hairstyle and manner of dress. By this the researcher attempts to form a detailed profile of the recurring themes and features that films apply to clerical characters, and what potential stereotypes might also be inferred from them.

Worden asserts that the recurring clichés and assumptions of ordained clergy common to motion pictures of that time are reflective of both the views of film producers and those who consume them as entertainment. He notes a fair number of instances where ministers appear either as comic characters or plot devices within comic situations, in clear violation of the Production Code applicable to motion pictures made in the US during that era, in which comic portrayals of clergy were specifically forbidden in order to

avoid 'casting disrespect on religion'[9] (1962, p185-6). The author attributes the apparent shortage of candidates interested in training for protestant ministry in the 1960s in part to the way the profession had been presented both in media and culture as a 'less desirable' career pursuit, not being regarded with the respect which it once enjoyed (p192). (Interestingly enough, this is a regret which the church still expresses in the present day, as though it were a recent development).

Worden contends that it is the responsibility of both film makers and the church itself to bolster the overall perception of the clerical profession, by the former agreeing to promote more respectful portrayals and fewer stereotypes, and the latter moving 'to alter the image of itself before the world' (p 193). Worden's boldest recommendation is that the church develop a more focussed ministry directed towards the motion picture industry:

> Unless the people who produce the films-- script writers, directors, actors, and producers--have experienced the ministry of the Church, then only superficial changes in the portrayal can come out of written reports like this one or conversations initiated by the Film Commission (p203).

The notion of a ministry initiative aimed at the film or television industry might have seemed viable in 1960s US culture (or perhaps not even then), but one imagines that such an effort could scarcely occur in present day Britain without significant objection. Still, there is a kernel of truth in the argument that closer association with the church and its personnel may very well result in creatives producing content which accurately represents such settings. Such contact, in the form of intentionally employing clergy consultants, figures heavily in the three case studies presented in this research.

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[9] The 'code' here referenced (the predecessor to the MPAA film rating system now in use) was the industry's attempt to regulate itself in the face of growing political opposition (and threat of legislation) against the perceived immorality of motion pictures in the 1920s. The Code was shaped by several influential, religiously moralistic (also openly anti-Semitic) executives who determined where the limits of film content should be drawn. Portrayals of such predictable offenses such as profanity and drug trafficking were forbidden, but so also were interracial relationships and scenes depicting childbirth, for instance. Productions largely complied with these regulations from the 1930s, but by the late 60s the system had broken down with many film makers simply ignoring the guidelines in favour of their own dramatic choices (Vaughn, 1990).

Over thirty years after Worden's work, media researchers from the University of Dayton published companion studies examining how US network television portrayed religion and spirituality—as well as church professionals—in fictional programmes. The first study monitored general references to religious beliefs and behaviours over a wide cross section of shows (Skill et al., 1994), whilst the second specifically examined the frequency of appearance, types of behavior and dispositional traits of clergy characters (Skill and Robinson, 1994).

The resulting analysis found the exploration of religion and spiritual matters to be 'nearly invisible' on network television, and responded to arguments that Christianity and faith were being negatively portrayed by asserting that they were scarcely being portrayed at all (Skill et al., 1994, p265).

Regarding fictional church leaders, the researchers discovered them to be frequently engaged in so-called 'unlawful' activities, and found that their portrayals, on the whole, were not only less compassionate and appealing than their non-religious counterparts, but in fact considerably more bland and shallow:

> ...one might contend that in the world of television, Christian leaders are little more than convenient mechanisms for moving a story around other more interesting, attractive, and nonreligious characters. In the final analysis, we must conclude that Christian leaders on television rarely behave as Christians or exhibit a capacity for leadership (Skill and Robinson, 1994, p83).

Two more extensive explorations of fictional clergy have been undertaken by North American scholars and published as books. Both examine a large number of depictions over several decades, and attempt to situate portrayals of church professionals within cultural/contextual frameworks which the authors identify and define.

Associate Professor of English Literature Sue Sorensen has a particular interest in clerics as she is married to one, and thus has a front row seat to the struggles and peculiarities of the profession. As an academic she has written a book focussing primarily (and extensively) on literary church leaders and provides extensive treatments on novels about vicars and other clergy. Of somewhat secondary importance in Sorensen's book are films and television programmes featuring church leaders, mostly based in North America with a few British exceptions (2014).

A particular strength of the work is the author's deeply thoughtful analysis on the subject itself. Her own premise is that real-life clergy are certainly human and flawed, but also compassionate and nearly always well-meaning. As for their fictional counterparts, Sorensen acknowledges that the ministry is a profession 'rife with provocative stereotypes and about which everyone has an opinion' (2014, p3), and that this in itself makes ministers natural subjects for dramatic portrayal.

The peculiar and paradoxical nature of the clergy's position also lends literary interest to their profession, according to Sorensen, who refers to the historical situation of parsons in English society:

> They are an intriguing mixture of the exalted and the humble. In centuries past they were among the few men accorded the status of gentleman, but they were also, in England at any rate, considered the representative, accessible gentlemen of a parish. Often the only literate person for miles around, the cleric would be the go-to person for a large variety of needs: not only to officiate at solemn occasions and preside over the sacraments, but to teach, keep a community's records, and distribute charitable aid. This combination of privileged status with familiarity and availability makes the character of the pastor endlessly interesting to us (p4-5).

Sorensen has organised her research primarily around themes which describe different approaches used to portray men and women of the cloth, such as heroism, frustration, passion and foolishness. In her analysis we see a wide variety of characters with varying degrees of both plausible and unrealistic qualities, in the author's pursuit of painting the fictional cleric from as many different angles as possible.

Sorensen is transparent about her motives in exploring this topic and echoes Wordon's desire to examine factors within the culture which might contribute to careers in ministry being such 'a hard sell' (in an era of declining seminary enrollment in North America). She also seeks to determine whether inaccurate or misleading portrayals of clergy on page and screen have become harmful to the profession. The author asserts that the generally unrealistic expectations that pastors often encounter in their role weigh heavily upon what viewers will and will not accept in their fictional characters, asserting that '[o]ur desire to be preached to by the godly, to have the sacraments administered by mortals who approach perfection is deeply entrenched. Pastors will never be free from the stress of living up to standards that no mortal can truly attain' (Sorensen, 2014, p139).

Given its preference for Canadian subjects as well as written literature, Sorensen's work does not offer extensive treatment of British television, aside from brief reflections on both *The Vicar of Dibley* and *Rev.*, which feature in Chapters Six and Seven.

As a fellow academic interested in media and communications, and also trained in theology, Richard Wolff takes a similar interest in how clergy—and church personnel of all sorts—are represented on US television programmes. With an approach more systematic and less personal than Sorensen's, Wolff's fairly comprehensive study devises a system of categorisation which places so-called 'church set' programmes into three historical/social eras in US ecclesial history. Based on when they were produced and aired, Wolff argues that the overall aims and concerns of these programmes more or less correspond with their emergence during a particular time frame (2010).

Wolff identifies three distinct social periods for the purpose of his analysis. The first occurs during the 1960s and 70s, when programmes focused largely on the Roman Catholic Church and various internal conflicts within it. The author highlights shows such as *The Flying Nun*, a fantasy/sitcom starring Sally Field about a convent in Puerto Rico, and *Going My Way*, a comedy/drama featuring Gene Kelly as a young urban priest in New York City. Both of these programmes feature two generations of clerics and their differing views on how church and life should be handled. The author surmises that the election of John F. Kennedy (the first Catholic US president) as well as the rather groundbreaking reforms of the Second Vatican Council in the early 60s had the effect of turning the world's—and therefore the television audience's—attention toward the Catholic Church in particular. This, he explains, is why most of the church related programmes of this era take place in Catholic settings (Wolff, 2010).

The second historical period designated by Wolff's study spans the late 70s to the 1990s. During this time most mainline[10] churches were in the position of attempting to retain their relevance within modern society, and thus the situation features prominently in the programmes of this era. Urban settings become popular backdrops for drama, where a multitude of social issues can be played out. Programmes such as *Hell Town* (depicting a rough-edged Catholic priest in a crime-ridden Los Angeles neighborhood),

[10] 'Mainline' is a designation which includes the traditionally largest Protestant denominations, ie. Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, American Baptists, et al.

Sister Kate (about a nun overseeing a diverse group of orphans), and *Nothing Sacred* (discussed in the Introduction) are representative of this trend (Wolff, 2010).

Wolff's final category concentrates on the 1990s with the emergence of more 'family centred' programmes such as *Amen* (based on a bachelor Southern Baptist priest and the family of his most vocal deacon), *7th Heaven* (also discussed in the Introduction), and *The Book of Daniel* (about a modern Catholic priest dealing with personal issues). Matters of morality and a closer look at the family lives of clergy brought Protestant churches into greater prominence on television, given that Catholic priests were not permitted to marry or have families of their own (Wolff, 2010).

Wolff's meticulous cataloguing and subsequent analysis of shows dealing with church professionals is very thorough, and his study concludes that viewers, in general, aren't concerned about realism so much as the perpetuation of some ideal image of clergy and their ministry practice:

> ...while the church's depiction on television follows trends in church history and developments in television programming, successful programs steer clear of contentious social issues and shortcomings of clerics and instead present a cheery, inoffensive portrait of the church and its leaders. While controversial subject matter helps television programs depicting other social institutions succeed, challenging content in the context of ecclesiastic settings is discouraged. The sacred nature of the church leads the public to expect popular portrayals of the church on television to maintain ideals (p216).

More closely approaching the parameters of this study, Rev. Lissa Scott, an Anglican vicar serving in Durham, has reviewed a large number of books, films and television programmes featuring British clerics, but hasn't at this point formally published her reflections (Walker, 2014). She has, however, made thorough notes on each portrayal and fictional work in which they feature, offering a detailed comparative analysis of qualities, traits, and issues pertaining to these characters and the contexts which they occupy. Scott also highlights various historical periods and significant cultural factors influencing the church and clergy, much as the previous two researchers have done. She concludes that vicar portrayals have grown more nuanced and respectable as the decades have progressed, notwithstanding the gradual decline of all things religious:

> ...despite all the talk of a secular society and the church's irrelevance, in a lot of modern texts–including popular television dramas, sitcoms and soaps– vicars are still seen to have an important role in their communities and in individual lives. And this role, even when bound up in individual weaknesses, is usually portrayed as a lot more powerful and meaningful than the rather self-satisfied, often lazy, self-seeking and hypocritical, ineffectual and irrelevant stereotypes of previous generations (Scott, 2014, 'Conclusions' p3).

Lastly, self-confessed 'telly addict' Bryony Taylor—an Anglican ministry trainee who has subsequently become ordained—explored 'how and why Christians are portrayed on British television' (2015, p16) in a book which reads largely as entertainment with some reflection interspersed.

Issued by an independent publisher specialising in spirituality, contemporary issues and humour, Taylor's book targets Christian readers interested in how they are being represented in popular media, and invites them to consider what sort of response believers might make to various fictional portrayals of churchpeople and clergy.

Taylor's categorises her chosen fictional subjects into three groups (good, bad and quirky) and then arbitrarily scores each individual character in the areas of longevity, endearment, offence, vices, popularity and realism. The result is more of an index than an in-depth exploration of any single programme or character. Although branded as a television study, Taylor does include several examples from film, and also widens her scope beyond just Anglican characters.

The author intersperses a discussion of British culture and satirical tradition throughout her book, but keeps the argument mostly at speculation level, open to readers inserting their own thoughts, and thus it reads much like a study guide perhaps useful for a church discussion group or Sunday morning adult class. In her final chapter Taylor compares the tradition of British comedic satire with Jesus' own tendency to use subversive storytelling and humour in his teaching and ministry, and concludes with the notion that society is 'becoming curious about people of faith because [Christians] are in more of a minority' (p144).

* * *

The existing published literature on fictional clerics spans several types of media (novels, film and television), traditions (Protestant/Catholic), and markets (North America and Britain). Most has been written by Christians with a particular interest in how clergy (and other people of faith) have been portrayed, and what this might suggest about the status of the church in culture and the public's changing views about priests in particular and religious people in general, as well as speculation on how people of faith might respond to such perceptions. The cited research is almost exclusively qualitative, as the nature of the subject appears to invite.

What sets this present study apart is its examination of the production process intrinsic to television drama within the context of British public service broadcasting, and what that subsequently makes possible for portrayals of Anglican clergy. Diving deeply into three exemplary programmes, the present research aims to scrutinise the life cycle of a priest drama from inception to critical reception. Thus it occupies a unique position as production study in the context of a particular facet of British culture (ie. society's regard for C of E priests) how it has been—and continues to be—reflected through fictional media.

The next logical step in this process is to look critically at individual portrayals of Anglican vicars over the history of British television, specifically those occurring on public service broadcasting.

Early Vicar Portrayals on PSB

Vicars have featured on British television, in one form or another, for many decades. Although not frequently appearing as main characters, these clerics are often part of an ensemble cast, representing an element of society that viewers would expect to be present in the community.

What follows is a brief summary of British programmes on public service broadcasting which feature vicars as either prominent or recurring characters, in the era from television's early days up until the mid 1990s. Because this research study deals solely with television rather than novels or film, and particularly focusses on Anglicans

instead of Catholics or any other Christian/faith group, only those characters conforming to this profile are included below. There may also be programmes in which a C of E clergyman appeared, but so infrequently or insignificantly as to not be included in this review, effectively making it a summary rather than an exhaustive list.

The texts have been viewed and read mostly for the overall impression which the viewer is likely to form about the character of the vicar being portrayed, including any stereotypes or patterns which appear to emerge. As will become clear from the analysis, the audience is left with neither a completely positive nor fully negative picture of any of these characters. Rather, the recurring qualities across varied portrayals illustrate the more conventional priest motifs to which creators tended to default during this time period, thus perhaps reinforcing already existing biases within their viewers.

All Gas and Gaiters (BBC One, 1966-71)

Figure 1: The Archdeacon, the Dean, the Chaplain and the Bishop

This half-hour comedy was somewhat unique in that it featured not a single vicar, but rather a cohabitating community of clergy—a somewhat pompous but affable Bishop; a gentle, funny and tipple-loving Archdeacon; and a naïve young chaplain—who live next door to an intimidating and often domineering Dean with a habit of making frequent

(mostly unwelcome) visits to his neighboring colleagues. The character of the chaplain, Reverend Mervyn Noote, comes across as an earnest, likeable hero in most of the plots, yet is also nervous and awkward with a pronounced stammer.

This was Derek Nimmo's famed debut in a clerical role which he would reprise in a number of subsequent programmes, two of which featured Catholic churchmen, *Oh, Brother!* (BBC, 1968-1970) and *Oh, Father!* (BBC, 1973), and so are not reviewed here. It was, however a fictional identity with which Nimmo would come to be strongly associated.

The interaction amongst the clerics is the main focus of this programme, and although they may discuss incidents involving laypersons, we rarely see parishioners portrayed on screen. Most of the plot centres on the clergy's private reactions to or opinions about what is happening out in the parish or even in the secular world. Aside from the Dean's overly moralistic manner, none of them appear particularly pious in personal outlook or behaviour. The Bishop quotes Scripture mostly as justification when seeking to pass off an unappealing task to one of his colleagues, and even once quips, 'I have a feeling some times that they devote too much time to religious broadcasting,' when the radio plays Choral Evensong rather than the cricket test match he wants to hear (S04E03).

The comedic tone of the programme is fed by the absurd situations into which the clerics often land, e.g. spending the night in the cathedral cloisters on 'ghost patrol' (S01E04) or riding across the countryside on horseback dressed as medieval friars to satisfy the wishes of a generous benefactor (pilot episode). There is perhaps an argument to be made that such portrayals reduce the clergy to figures of fun or caricatured comic devices. Given that the show is, indeed, a comedy, one might well expect occasional buffoonery for entertainment purposes. But these more extreme follies do not seem to have the effect of humiliating the characters to the degree that the viewer necessarily regards them as fools; there is plenty of humanity evoked within their portrayals over five series, that the more slapstick sequences almost serve to heighten one's sympathy for already likeable personalities.

The overall impression one gets from these clergy characters is that, whilst very different in disposition, they occupy a fairly innocuous position within their rather small

world. Most of their attempts at intimidation are aimed at each other; the wider neighborhood (what we actually see of it) seems to considers them as merely functional, perhaps useful when there are parish matters to be addressed—overall, a rather 'harmless' lot. They may play an assumed role within the community, but at day's end are mostly just relieved to be out of sight, reclining on a leather couch with a glass of sherry in hand.

***Dad's Army* (BBC One, 1968-77)**

Figure 2: The Verger and the Vicar

When the rather ragtag Home Guard of Walmington-on-Sea establish their base in the local church hall, the resident vicar has little recourse but to put up with them. The Rev. Timothy Farthing comes across as a somewhat ineffectual cleric who doesn't command much respect or notice from those around him. However, despite the war's intrusion upon his small town parish, his heart appears to be well-meaning as he attempts to carry out his duties.

The vicar is seen planning events such as the church bazaar, organising an outing for elderly parishioners and occupying a visible role at occasions such as weddings and public observances. He even conducts a worship service out in a local field for the harvest blessing, complete with altar, formal vestments and live organ accompaniment. The men,

however, are so drunk on homemade potato wine that a brawl breaks out during the first hymn, with even the verger getting caught up in the fray; thus the vicar completely loses control of the affair (S05E08).

Much of the time, Rev. Farthing seems resigned to his less than ideal situation, more inclined to complain or sulk when something displeases him rather than demanding compliance with his wishes. The verger seems to be his sole defender, chastising anyone who insults 'his holiness' or makes inappropriate use of the church hall, for instance. However, even the vicar seems to have little patience for his sycophantic steward, frequently correcting his disproportionate reactions with an atypical display of authority apparently reserved only for the verger.

The vicar's character appears to reflect a stock stereotype of the gullible, tippling, perpetually single clergyman, with the adversarial Chief Warden Hodges frequently implying that he is gay. The gag is furthered when a French general makes an official visit, kissing each of the leaders at the welcome ceremony on both cheeks but passing over the vicar, who is left in an absurd pose with closed eyes and pursed lips (S07E05).

Rev. Farthing frequently comes across as silly, immature, and somewhat unsophisticated, and seems to not even be particularly gifted as a pastoral counselor (S05E08). Yet, there are moments where unexpected aspects of his character are revealed, such as his decorated military history (Christmas Special 1971) or his skill as an archer (S05E13). And whilst the vicar is not portrayed as heroic or virtuous by any measure (and perhaps not even very skilled as a clergyman) his character is comically in line with the rest of the cast, none of whom are terribly effective in their roles, but who still come across as earnest and sympathetic in their own way.

Actor Frank Williams found his greatest career success and popularity on *Dad's Army*, seemingly not bothered at being somewhat 'type cast' in the years which followed, portraying many vicars (*The Worker*, ITV, 1970) (*Hallelujah!* ITV, 1984) (*Hi-de-Hi!* BBC One, 1988) (*Bad Boyes*, BBC One, 1988), an archdeacon (*Vanity Fair*, BBC, 1987), and even a bishop (*You Rang, M'Lord?*, BBC One, 1988-93).

To the Manor Born **(BBC One, 1979-81)**

Figure 3: The Rector and Richard DeVere, enjoying the 'peace and quiet'

Upon first appearance, Gerald Sim's character in this series (identified simply as 'the rector') seems harmless, affable and dedicated to his profession. Indeed he is mostly functional and agreeable, occupying the expected role of a small village priest. However we soon learn that he is inclined to favour some parishioners over others, specifically newcomer Richard DeVere over Audrey, former occupant of the local manor. The clergyman appears to have long suffered Audrey's controlling ways in church and village matters, dearly hopes that her departure from the stately home will also mean her exit from town, and is visibly disappointed to learn that she is staying (S01E02). In what could be considered behavior unbecoming for a priest, who is generally expected to be impartial and not speak ill of one parishioner to another, the rector remarks to Richard after learning of Audrey's apparent departure on holiday: 'That would account for the peace and quiet. We must all enjoy it while we can' (S01E06).

For her part, Audrey makes it clear that she bears an equal dislike towards the rector, criticizing his cooking after he's had her over for dinner, and nearly preempting his meal blessing when she invites him to hers to 'return the favour.' She also insults him by suggesting his status as 'cloth' means he doesn't count as a man when they are

determining seating for dinner (S02E01). Later when Audrey attempts to enlist the clergyman in her campaign to save the local hedgerows, he claims he can't take sides, saying, 'I can't go around offending people' [ie Richard], to which she replies, 'You do it all the time!' Audrey is clearly aware of the rector's favoritism towards Mr. DeVere (S02E05).

Sims' priest also comes across as a bit of a Nosey Parker—wanting to know peoples' private business just as any other villager might—thus not exactly holding himself to a higher principle of living as a member of the clergy. When he comes asking for the church collection he feels the need to inform Richard that Audrey is having estimates for refurbishment at the lodge, creating suspicion that she has more money than she lets on (S02E03).

As a character, the rector doesn't come across particularly favourably. He is frequently heard quoting Scripture which he deems appropriate to the situation at hand, but this mostly has the effect of annoying the villagers towards whom his words are directed, and somewhat reinforcing a clerical stereotype that vicars enjoy throwing platitudes at people. There is an implication that his sermons often run too long, and he also makes little effort at moderation in his intake of drink. The clergyman is portrayed as unsurprisingly incompetent in practical tasks when he takes joists out of the scout hut to use in a raft which the boys are building, and the entire hut collapses as a result (S03E01).

The rector does come across as potentially progressive in his apparent attempts to implement a more modern liturgy at the request of some of his parishioners, a move which is predictably distasteful to the excessively traditional Audrey (S03E07). Additionally he appears to be somewhat successful in his fundraising attempts on behalf of the church. He makes an effort to integrate himself within village life and regularly participates in public events and local initiatives. However, other than Richard's generally welcoming disposition towards the priest, this nameless rector does not occur as a character to be taken very seriously, nor do we see him being particularly sought out in times of specific crisis or need.

***Keeping Up Appearances* (BBC One, 1990-95)**

Figure 4: The fearful vicar avoiding Hyacinth

New vicar Michael Partridge arrives in the second episode of the series, and appears to be a fairly decent, well-adjusted person upon first introduction. Young and handsome, he soon attracts the attention of main character Hyacinth Bucket's man-chasing sister Rose, and becomes the recurring target of her interest and inappropriate pursuit, given his married status. A recurring gag has the clergyman landing in what look like compromising positions with Rose (who calls him 'that dishy vicar'), only to be discovered by his mortified and somewhat jealous wife.

The vicar quickly discovers how insufferably haughty Hyacinth is and begins to take any measures necessary to avoid 'that Bucket woman.' Another recurring joke occurs whenever he learns that she is either in the vicinity or scheduled to be present at some event where he will also be—he instantly breaks or drops whatever is in his hand at the moment. In one episode her greeting so startles him that he falls off his bike (S05E07).

Although an obvious concession to humour, the gag makes the vicar appear timid and unable to manage himself at the suggestion of unpleasant company, a quality not terribly befitting the clergy, who are expected to find ways of dealing with all their parishioners, whether or not they personally prefer them.

Rev. Partridge's dislike for Hyacinth leads him to occasionally discuss her in an unflattering way with others—calling her neighbor Elizabeth 'brave' for sharing a van with her on an outing (S05E01). The vicar also speaks rather poorly about Hyacinth to her own husband (eg, 'How do you cope?'), presumably under the guise of compassionate sympathy, although Richard never seeks any pastoral counsel concerning the matter.

For her part, Hyacinth speaks often of needing to 'protect' the vicar from her sister Rose's advances, and both she and her sister Daisy seem to have some concern about speaking or acting inappropriately in front of him, as though he wouldn't be able to handle such things. In fact, the clergyman does indeed come across as a bit prudish at times, unable to tolerate strong language when he overhears pageant cast members' personal arguments, believing it to be actual lines of dialogue. The vicar declares it 'very unsuitable,' and ends up axing the whole production altogether the instant Hyacinth coyly shows a bit of her stocking on stage (Christmas 1995).

The clergyman also curiously appears wearing his clerical shirt and collar with a pair of shorts whilst exercising on a stationary bike at home, suggesting that priests don't truly relax or dress down even in their private residences (S02E06).

The reverend occurs a bit sanctimonious when he somewhat hypocritically chides his wife for having 'impure thoughts,' ie. uncharitable notions towards Hyacinth, whom he clearly also dislikes (S02E10). Mrs. Partridge responds in kind at her husband's strategy to stick a very queasy old woman and an obnoxiously amorous man in Mrs. Bucket's van on a seniors' outing, telling him it's 'wicked.' He responds 'Yes, isn't it? I'll make up for it on Sunday' (S05E01). He is seen one week rehearsing a sermon on 'love thy neighbor,' but it becomes all too clear that where his least favourite parishioner is concerned, he is unable to follow his own words and so chooses to alter his preaching text (S03E04). At his most uncharitable, the vicar offers a quiet prayer of thanks when Hyacinth gets showered with water from a river dredger (S05E04).

The young priest does respond to those who call on him, but sometimes doesn't appear terribly equal to the assignment, as when Daisy is convinced there is a ghost in her father's bedroom and needs a priest to 'exorcise' it. The clergyman shows up, but is a bundle of nerves at the thought of encountering a spirit (which simply turns out to be the father's lady friend) (S05E03). He only comes across as firm and authoritative in rare moments where he sees himself upholding a basic moral principle, such as the aforementioned pageant dialogue, or when Hyacinth's father shows up to the elders' holiday party drunk and behaving lasciviously toward other guests (Christmas 1991).

There are a few times where we see a rather 'non-clerical' side of the vicar, as when he sings popular music whilst doing house or garden work (S05E05), attends an art exhibition (S03E06), or shows off his singing and dancing talents (S05E08).

In his more charitable moments, the vicar does give a lift to Hyacinth and Richard at least twice when they are stranded without help, and also offers to rescue Mrs. Bucket from the unwanted advances of an overamorous commodore (S02E10), (S04E04). In what is perhaps his most thoughtful reflection, he muses at the prospect of meeting a parishioner in need, 'My job is not without its satisfactions. People come in dismay and despair, and sometimes you can help' (S05E05).

***Last of the Summer Wine* (BBC One, 1973-2010)**

Figure 5: The vicar eagerly recruiting acts for the church variety show

This very long-running sitcom featured a series of vicars through the years, characters serving primarily as functional fixtures within the community. They are rarely referred to as anything other than 'vicar,' effectively disqualifying them from the sort of personal interest evoked by the other characters in the show.

The vicar is nearly always depicted in the church or vicarage, and sometimes not even shown but merely referred to, as when the three primary characters are expelled from a worship service because they have brought ferrets into church, where the vicar is reported to have swatted at the animals with his prayer book (S03E03). Aside from Sunday morning, vicars generally appear when there is a village event to organise or when required for funerals and weddings where they usually come across as rather bland

and amiable, delivering liturgy in a singsongy fashion and remaining patiently insignificant when some plot deviation distracts from the ceremony at hand (S03E06).

In the occasional plots where the priest plays a significant role he is mostly portrayed as a fusty and irritable sort, fed up with the endless maintenance needs of the vicarage or reluctant to deal with parishioners whom he considers insufferable, even when the individuals in question also hold the same view of the vicar (S09E10). The clergyman frequently comes across as difficult and impatient—especially with his wife—as when he insists, despite her obvious reluctance, that she drive the Jubilee parade float, even stomping on and destroying a wooden crate in anger, forcing her eventual compliance and subsequent reckless operation of the tractor which ends up destroying the entire float (S04E03).

The vicar also appears irked at his wife's concern that he is tired and overworked, obsessed as he is with recruiting acts for the fundraising show and generally displeased at the talent's lack of 'pizzazz' (S07E06). In a later series we again see the priest consumed by the details of a dramatic production, this time a film marking the new millennium, in which he appears as demanding and self-important as any Hollywood director with constant criticism for those attempting to assist him (S21E01).

The vicar in this programme doesn't come across as very personable or pastoral, as with the one who makes the excuse, 'I'm terrible at names' (7/6) or prefers to amuse himself with a model train rather than answering the vicarage door (S09E10). The entire world of these fictional clergy is the church and they frequently appear to find it tiresome. When not actively performing obligatory liturgical acts, the priests in question often seem to be either seeking after some elusive grandeur or desiring to be left alone with their own private diversions.

In the overall context of the programme, religion in general and clergymen in particular are regularly a source of whimsical reflection, as when Clegg muses, 'It must be very hard for vicars' wives to believe in religion; when you're married to the salesman, you tend to learn all the snags in the product' (S04E03), or when the priest himself, in the very first episode of the series, explains the dilemma of his struggle to quit smoking: 'I'm supposed to be stopping, but then on the other hand it's hardly fitting for me to be seen trying to live forever, is it?' (S01E01).

The vicars in *Last of the Summer Wine* are typical of clergy characters appearing on television in this particular era, perhaps even reflecting a general opinion of priests held by viewers at this time: diligent souls mostly concerned with church affairs but perhaps also a bit lazy and self-indulgent. They are expected to turn up for compulsory occasions and function competently, but are equally unnecessary for the rest of life's concerns. And whilst the programme extended well into the new century, where culture and society had radically altered since the series' debut over thirty years prior, the clergy themselves don't appear to have changed significantly over this time span. Their characters remain static for the most part, confined to their stereotypical vicarages, perhaps just craving a moment of peace in a chaotic and unpredictable world.

* * *

This sampling of televised vicar portrayals ranging primarily from the 1960s to the 1990s features a number of recurring stereotypes. Arranged graphically, the traits most common to fictional clergy of this era would look something like this:

Figure 6: Recurring Characteristics of Early Fictional Vicars

Although the above qualities are not exclusively negative, taken as a whole they do not present a particularly complimentary image of the clerical role or society's overall perception of it, if indeed fictional characters can be considered at least partial reflections of common cultural suppositions. Presuming the best possible intentions—that the aforementioned programmes did not expressly set out to portray the profession in a decidedly unfavourable manner—at the very least the persona of the vicar seems to exist as fair game for satirising, trivialising, or as a plot device primarily to entertain.

It is reasonable to surmise that no actual priests would see these characters as faithful or fair representations of themselves. It also follows that none of the programmes here reviewed could be construed as authentic portrayals of clergy, as they have taken care neither to research their subjects nor depict them in a largely sympathetic (or accurate) manner. To be fair, only one of the productions in question (*All Gas and Gaiters*) even qualifies as a show which features priests as main characters, so comparisons with the more sophisticated portrayals which follow are perhaps inequitable. On the other hand, the very fact that there are so few examples of clergy-centric programmes from this era also suggests that focussing on such characters was not a particular concern of creatives during this time.

Virtually every scholar studying fictional clergy—as well as creative professionals working on the three programmes examined for this research—alluded to the ubiquity of the caricatured priest, summarised by Paietta's introduction to her detailed index of faith-related characters in film and television:

> Over the years, religious figures have been portrayed as heroes, villains, mad men, ineffectual buffoons, money grubbers, snobs, humanitarians, drunks, saints, saviors, weak-willed molesters, and murderers…in both movies and television [they] tend toward being either miraculously pure or despicably evil and hypocritical (2005, p1).

In either case, the clergy characters in question are exaggerated to serve some sort of plot purpose other than presented as complex or compelling human beings worthy of true examination or emulation. Sorensen also acknowledges these extreme depictions of religious leaders, but attempts a more optimistic interpretation of the situation:

> Literature and film and especially television are full of clerical court jesters. Many of these portrayals are humiliating for the church, or at their least harmful they merely make clergy look weak and ineffectual (p70)... Nevertheless, there would be no purpose in creating a clergy buffoon or charlatan if the church no longer mattered. We are still here, and still breathing (2014, p12).

Sorensen's 'better to be ridiculed than ignored' defence may not ultimately satisfy those seeking accurate representations of clergy on screen, unless perhaps one chooses to apply the rationale commonly offered for the existence of stereotypes in general: the argument that such traits are actually present, to some degree, in the subjects whom they describe. By this logic one might honestly ask if such a clichéd version of the television cleric might have any basis in reality, no matter how slight.

In the chapter which profiles *The Vicar of Dibley*, reference is made to the numerous comical vicars created by Richard Curtis and portrayed by Rowan Atkinson during the years of their collaboration. Although the characters are obviously exaggerated for humorous effect, the actor betrays his own prejudice that the unflattering treatment was justified:

> ...so many of the clerics that I've met, particularly the Church of England clerics, are people of such extraordinary smugness and arrogance and conceitedness who are extraordinarily presumptuous about the significance of their position in society. Increasingly, I believe that all the mud that Richard Curtis and I threw at them through endless sketches that we've done is more than deserved (Taylor, 2011).

Such stereotypes or 'distorted representations' of specific societal groups (such as vicars) can be understood as 'attribut[ing] certain characteristics to the group as a whole, rather than examining the variety of attributes within that group (Casey et al., 2007, p199). Arguably vicars—like members of any other profession—comprise a varied lot, some of whom undoubtedly come across as pompous and self-important. One certainly encounters such personalities when one is amongst clergy colleagues, particularly in contexts where opportunities for self-advancement or recognition present themselves. Such favours are just as tempting to men or women of the cloth as they are to laypersons. But just as common amongst the clergy are many humbler souls, faithfully carrying out duties and caring for parishioners week on week without much fanfare or glory. And

whilst this more 'ordinary' version of a vicar may be just as true to life, it is admittedly a less glamorous, less entertaining personality on which to base a sitcom character.

One can scarcely deny that the fictional realm is replete with satirical clergy during this early period of television's history. They exist mostly to make the audience laugh, and occur primarily in sitcoms as light entertainment. Profound, dramatic portrayals of Anglican priests are virtually non-existant during this time. Could the sociological environment in which they arose also be a contributing factor in these characters' lack of depth, or indeed in the absence of significantly serious depictions altogether?

Chapter Two explored how this era also corresponds with a slow but steady decline in the established church, resulting in an institution that no longer commands the respect or regard it might have done in earlier centuries. One might theorise that ineffectual vicars on television are simply a reflection of a general perception that religion on the whole has lost its influence and significance in wider culture, and that the general public prefers the church (and by extension, its leaders) to remain in the comfortable background of the overall landscape, available when needed and inconspicuous when not.

> Secular culture appreciates the beauty and history of the church—or, more precisely, secular culture values church buildings and church ceremonies—and wants priests in attendance to provide blessings and go through appropriate celebratory motions whenever there is a commencement or inauguration (Sorensen, 2014, p69).

In such an environment, unless a specific occasion requires the presence of a vicar, perhaps there's no reason to include a clergy character at all, let alone develop one as a complex dramatic personality.

Coming of Age

As we enter the target research timeframe of the mid 1990s and beyond, there begin to emerge fictional vicars who represent more credible—even inspiring—examples of their profession, characters of increasing complexity and interest.

Since *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC One, 1994-2007), *Rev.* (BBC Two, 2010-14), and *Parch* (S4C, 2015-18) will each receive extensive analysis in their respective case study

chapters, they are briefly referenced here to situate them chronologically within this wider discussion of clergy characters, representing significant developments in priest portrayals which bear a similarity to (and may well have influenced) their contemporaries during this later period.

Three years after the debut of *Rev.*, a new drama called *Broadchurch* (ITV, 2013-2017) emerged on the scene. Whilst not centred on a clergy character, it featured a vicar serving in a small seaside town which becomes disrupted by the murder of a local child. In the first series of the programme, Rev. Paul Coates becomes a key player in the unfolding drama, remaining a suspect throughout the investigation due to his association with the murdered child and his lack of alibi on account of living alone. The vicar, presented equitably alongside other suspects, is not ultimately guilty of the crime, but does serve as a key figure in helping the townspeople deal with their grief and the breakdown of relationships over this tragic event. He is one of the few people in whom the bereaved parents confide, despite not being professed believers. The reverend shows conviction during his funeral sermon for an older townsperson whom the villagers had driven to suicide with their paranoid accusations, calling them to account and admitting the community's failure. He treats people fairly and displays sensitivity and perception amidst the town's grieving, finally helping organise a moving seaside memorial involving neighboring towns as well. Rev. Coates is yet another example of a recent vicar portrayal which takes the role seriously and presents the cleric as a flawed yet respected and valuable member of the community.

On the heels of *Broadchurch*, the same network soon followed with another drama (*Grantchester*, ITV, 2014-present), this one based on James Runcie's crime fiction series,[11] adopting the curiously popular concept of the 'theologian turned criminal investigator' popularised by such fictional Catholic sleuths as G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown and Ellis Peters' Brother Cadfael. Although Rev. Sidney Chambers' apparent aptitude for helping his police friend solve murder cases isn't his most typically clerical trait, *Grantchester*'s vicar does come across as a devout, perceptive, compassionate, believably flawed and sometimes misguided man of the cloth. The programme focusses on his daily struggles to navigate the joys and challenges of serving the church as he deals with issues

[11] Runcie, J 2013-2018, *The Grantchester Mysteries*, Bloomsbury, London.

within the community (aside from the inordinately high volume of suspicious deaths). Sidney also has his share of personal dramas, including a recurring romantic storyline which causes him to grapple with his call to ministry in an Anglican church which does not yet allow its clergy to divorce or to marry those who have. Interestingly set in 1950s Britain, the programme actually feels quite contemporary in the way it deals with social situations, refreshingly featuring none of the caricatured clergy figures more common to that actual era in television history (e.g. his quirky, potentially farcical curate is never truly mocked and is later found to be struggling with deep personal issues).

Even comedic vicar portrayals seem to have successfully turned a corner in this latter era, with newer sitcoms no longer resorting to the shallow figures of folly common to the previous decades' offerings. Two recent programmes airing on BBC Three are prime examples of the overall refinement applied to fictional comedy vicars appearing within a larger ensemble cast, *Bluestone 42* (2013-2015) and *This Country* (2017-present).

The first is a somewhat dark comedy about a British bomb disposal unit stationed in Afghanistan, containing within their ranks Rev. Mary Greenstock, an attractive young padre (military chaplain) tasked with serving the spiritual needs of the soldiers and generally keeping up morale. *Bluestone 42* is a decidedly comedic programme (despite its very serious context), whose characters frequently say and do ridiculous things. However, the padre is no more or less absurd than her counterparts, and often comes across as a voice of sanity and reason when others are becoming somewhat unravelled by the challenges of their situation or personal lives. Squadron members frequently seek her advice or listening ear, and Mary often reminds them that she is available to them if they desire.

Being a young, attractive woman, the padre does sometimes receive unwanted advances, especially from the unit's captain, Nick Medhurst (S01), but she deflects it skillfully and never comes across as simply an object of sexual desire. Most of the other squad members treat Mary with respect, and she seems to fit in well with the group. There is some reference to a gambling addiction in her past, which further humanises her within the context of a rather motley team of officers, each with their own idiosyncrasies.

Compared with military themed comedy of an earlier age, such as *Dad's Army*, the clergywoman featured in *Bluestone 42* occurs as neither irrelevant nor otherwise deficient in carrying out her role, as perhaps Rev. Timothy Farthing sometimes does.

A second example of a more contemporary comedic priest portrayal (launched after BBC Three had become an online only service) is *This Country*, a 'mockumentary' style satirical profile of two teenagers feeling somewhat stuck in their hometown village in the Cotswalds. Local parish vicar, the Rev. Francis Seaton, features rather prominently in the adventures of Kerry and Kurtan as they receive little support from most of the other adults in their lives.

Although kind and concerned for his parishioners, the vicar admittedly occurs as a bit unsophisticated in the beginning. However, his character deepens over the course of the series as we not only learn that he used to sing in a rock band, but that he's struggled helping his own son with a substance abuse problem (S02E04).

Rev. Seaton's earnest monologues to the camera about his concern for Kerry and Kurtan are certainly meant to be humorous, but his genuine commitment and generosity to both of them makes his character one of the few which actually does not come across as ridiculous in this programme. He functions, in turn, as spiritual advisor, career counselor, chauffeur, disciplinarian, arbitrator, and virtual surrogate parent to each of them at various times, and they clearly appreciate and respect him even though they often poke fun at him behind his back, as they do with everyone else in the village.

Much like the previous programme, *This Country* finds a way to create entertaining humour involving a priest character without lowering itself to cheap gags or comedy without compassion. Far from being irrelevant or silly, the vicar is actually a crucial element keeping plot and characters from unravelling.

* * *

Summary

Initially dismissed by literary critics as a 'vulgar medium' in its infancy (Hartley, 1998), television has arguably improved the quality of its narrative output over the past seven decades, particularly in its depiction of fictionalised vicars. In the beginning they existed primarily as ensemble cast members, their characters often figures of folly and not much credit to their profession. Forster's distinction between characters who are 'flat' (two-dimensional and uncomplicated) and 'round' (complex, engaging and capable of growth) (1985) can be applied to the evolution of televised priest portrayals in that the most recent characters not only occur as 'rounder' and more interesting than their predecessors, but also more frequently occupy a central place within the plot rather than making occasional supporting appearances on someone else's stage. The next chapter explores some of the ways in which comedy and drama bring characters and their worlds to life, and introduces the methods used in this research.

5

Faithful Fiction: Creating the Televised Vicar

The methods employed in this study are a combination of textual analysis (considering elements of genre, representation, and the notion of quality programming) and production study via semi-structured interviews. As the research questions are primarily contextual (seeking connections between media and culture) and interpretive (how and why priests are being represented in a particular way, and how viewers understand these representations), this particular analysis is more concerned with questions of process and reflection than with quantifying measurable effects of the programmes in question.[12]

For these reasons, a qualitative approach seemed appropriate as it contains tools for formulating theories and judgments about overarching issues and factors influencing media and how it resonates with people (Berger, 2018). Furthermore, qualitative analysis helps 'capture the context within which a media text becomes meaningful (Newbold et al., 2002, p84) as well as understand the deeper implications and likely interpretations, which Macnamara proposes as 'the ultimate goal of analysing media content' (2005, p5).

This chapter explores several industry aspects of producing fiction from factual subject matter (i.e. vicars and the church)—specifically the genre of comedy/sitcom, realism/representation, and quality/aesthetics—and also provides a basis for choosing semi-structured interviews as a primary means of production study.

* * *

[12] Quantitative findings from relevant media impact studies have been acknowledged and cited in the previous chapter.

Television Comedy and the Sitcom as Genre

The three case studies examined here do not all conform to a single classification of genre. The first, whilst possessing the characteristics of a 'classic sitcom,' takes particular liberties in its presentation of character and subject matter in a socially significant way. The second employs elements of comedy and drama in equal measure, with a specific narrative intention and desired impact upon the viewer. And the third, whilst resembling a serial drama, regularly inserts comedy elements to lighten the heavy subject matter and illustrate the mental confusion experienced by the protagonist.

Indeed, White and others have highlighted some of the limitations of genre studies 'where conventional categories have become blurred, [and] [i]n the process...traditional designations lose force both as a standard of coherence with respect to individual programs, and as a principle of differentiation among programs' (1985, p41). Nevertheless, a textual analysis of these three (albeit differently presented) examples of priest portrayals can still be usefully informed by an examination of comedy in general, and the sitcom in particular.

In Glen Creeber's edited volume exploring television genre, Brett Mills admits to the inexact science of theorising about comedy, citing its wide breadth of expression, its struggle to be taken seriously as a discipline, and the elusive nature of humour itself (2015, p89). This challenge has not, however, discouraged him from embracing and advocating for the study of a genre which he feels 'offers valuable insights into broadcasting, media industries, television audiences, and contemporary society' (Mills 2009 p8).

Scholars have repeatedly drawn attention to the notion that a sense of humour appears to be intrinsic to the British sense of national identity, even meriting inclusion in the mandatory test for those seeking citizenship in the UK (Easthope, 2000, Fox, 2004, Medhurst, 2007). The nation's most prominent public service broadcaster has also assigned significant value to comedic output and its perceived importance to viewers:

> [When] Jana Bennett became the BBC's Director of Television in 2006, she examined comedy in her first speech espousing her vision for the Corporation's social worth. She noted that: 'Comedy, particularly the British variety, has a

> unique ability to be subversive, to reflect the state of the nation and bring people together all at once. People identify and define themselves by their comedy' (Mills, 2010, pp66-67).

Whilst Mills is skeptical of how the concept of 'nation' is derived and employed in the service of politics, he nevertheless concludes that 'the British sense of humour is one predominantly defined by comedy broadcasting' (2010, p68).

A significant portion of British comedy broadcasting hours are occupied by the sitcom (situation comedy), a narrative genre generally understood to have emerged in the 1950s (in both the US and the UK) as a way of presenting already popular radio comedies on the new medium of television. The programmes, like their radio predecessors, featured recurring characters facing a new situation each episode which would subsequently find its resolution in the space of thirty minutes (Wagg, 1998, Marc, 2005). The most common technical traits of the sitcom are 'the use of more than one camera for filming, a soundstage used as a stable set and the existence of a laugh track within the soundtrack, normally a recording of the live audience present when the episodes are being filmed' (Savorelli, 2010, p132).

Whilst these practical aspects may be the most familiar identifiers of a 'sitcom,' Mills prioritises the comedy inherent to the genre in formulating his own definition:

> [T]he sitcom can be most usefully defined as a form of programming which foregrounds its comic intent…The other aspects…which are commonly noted in definitions of it—its length, its domestic setting, its character types, its shooting style—can therefore be understood as conventions through which that comic impetus is expressed and demonstrated rather than tropes which define and characterise the genre (2009, p49).

The sitcom has sometimes been considered a rather simplistic format which 'signals its comic intent clearly and offers itself to the mass audience as mere light entertainment' (Williamson, 2008, p110). Mills would agree that the sitcom as a creative

endeavour is 'often perceived to be of less worth, of less invention and of less social value than many more "serious" forms of programming' (2009, p2).

Another criticism of sitcom is the notion that it exploits worn out stereotypes and takes too much delight in derision at its characters' expense (Olson and Douglas 1997; Littlewood and Pickering 1998; Brassfield 2006). There is plenty of evidence to support this indictment, and indeed examples have been given in the previous chapter's historical overview of fictional television vicars, occurring primarily in sitcoms.

But even in cases where a character's plight evokes laughter, Owens argues that such plots also simultaneously allow us to sympathise with those at whom we are laughing, the comedic situation serving as cathartic release at a situation we ourselves are grateful to not be in, and at the same time tapping into the common feeling it elicits within ourselves, given that we are all humans having similarly human experiences (Owens, 2018).

Mills makes a similar point concerning comic characters with whom viewers may build up a rapport over the course of many episodes (2009, p17):

> Audiences, then, find pleasure in sitcom in a manner similar to most narrative television, while the text constantly reminds them of its artificiality; audiences are simultaneously distanced and engaged. Such a contradictory position is one vital to comedy generally, in which laughter requires an involvement with, and a detachment from, that which is funny (2004, p68).

Some scholars have even posited that sitcom may have a disarming influence upon its audience (which the follow chapter will confirm) in a manner distinct from more serious drama, precisely because of its comedic format:

> The viewer is imbricated as 'part of' the scene rather than functioning as a separate 'audience' to be performed to/for, because 'naturalistic' comedy involves a more casual activity of 'eavesdropping.' In its communalizing activity the sitcom can be seen to extend the 'bonding activity' of joke-telling (Krutnik and Neale, 2018, p141).

By this logic it is not the fault of the genre itself that clergy have often been made light of via its structure. Rather it seems to suggest that sitcom might actually be a device by

which an audience could be made to 'warm to' a character who is presented as central and mostly sympathetic, as are those in the case studies.

In the *The Vicar of Dibley*, the sitcom featured in the next chapter, a church's receiving a female priest for the first time is an opportunity to highlight the parishioners' awkward responses to their new arrival, in a manner which might actually have mirrored some viewers' own discomfort with the ecclesial change which had only just occurred in Britain. In this situation, telling an otherwise serious story with humour can produce a cathartic release of thoughts and opinions which a person might not feel comfortable expressing directly, according to the 'relief theory' of comedy (Westwood, 2004, Nielsen, 2008, Perks, 2012). And in the process it is the parishioners—rather than the vicar herself—who become the object of the joke.

Potentially controversial situations of significant social change or upheaval (such as the ordination of women) have often been dealt with via the medium of sitcom (Krutnik and Neale, 2018, p137-138, Marx and Sienkiewicz, 2018, p11), which provides an ideal format for highlighting issues whilst still entertaining its viewers (Creeber, 2015, p101). Savorelli affirms this more serious role into which the genre has often cast itself:

> [S]itcom has been a carrier of discourses on very sensitive cultural and social matters: from racism to war, from intergenerational clashes to sexual identity. Even some less conspicuous shows may have had relevant roles as pressure valves, as fields of debate, as sources of inspiration (2010, p176).

In such situations, the genre somehow gets away with pushing the limits of humour by what is known as 'transgressive comedy;' rather than avoiding controversy, it puts something potentially volatile right in the viewer's face (Tueth, 2005). Admittedly, not every audience takes well to this approach, as is exemplified in Chapter Six's discussion of Richard Curtis' frequent choice to address social issues within the *Dibley* narrative. But Curtis is not alone in the inclusion of such ideological content within a comedy format, and in fact many programme makers believe that these issues are both important to their audience and that the viewers actually want to see them represented on their screens, with the sitcom 'consciously and unconsciously…express[ing] the audience's values, attitudes, dispositions, fears, and hopes' (Mintz, 1985, p50).

Mills attributes the genre's capacity for positive social influence to the creatives working in the industry, and prioritises their voices (as does this research) in conversations about the possible merits of broadcast output:

> The idea that comedy can be a force for good shows the sitcom industry works to quite a different agenda than that of academic analysis...[this] demonstrates the value in examining the discourses within which creative communities function. It also shows that the definition of 'sitcom' which the creative community works from is one which incorporates an idea of social worth, and this mirrors the ideals espoused by the broadcasting industry in the UK as a whole' (2009, p65-66).

An emerging trend in the production of shows which may be classified as 'sitcom' has seen programme makers dispense with the classic formulaic aspects to which audiences have become accustomed, and instead import characteristics traditionally associated with other genres, resulting in shows which strive, perhaps, to deepen the viewing experience beyond simple entertainment and push the medium to more meaningful expressions of comedy television (Chunovic, 1999, Mills, 2004). Such programmes as *The Larry Sanders Show* (1992-1998) and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-present) have been produced by US cable television network HBO, distinguishing it as a fore-runner of this 'new' style of 'hybridised' sitcom, although many others have since followed suit (Williamson, 2008). Austerlitz and Yates attribute this gradual metamorphosis of genre to the broadcast medium coming of age in recent decades:

> [T]he strict parameters of the form itself—the thirty-minute length, the laugh track, and so forth—proved surprisingly mutable...the seemingly impervious boundary between television comedy and drama is actually quite porous. As television matured, drama proved itself susceptible to the wooing of comedy, and comedy proved itself open to moments of uninflected drama (2014, p3-4).

Classification proves more difficult with this combination of form and feature, with programme makers preferring descriptions such as comedy drama or 'dramedy' to the term sitcom, which potentially brings with it ingrained viewer expectations or assumptions.

Tom Hollander and James Wood, the creators of the second case study in this research (*Rev*, BBC Two, 2010-14), emphasised in their interviews that they wanted their

subject matter to be taken seriously and distinguish their fictional priest from the comic portrayals of past sitcoms (see Chapter Seven). Still, they deliberately chose to use humour throughout the programme as a sympathetic device in favour of their troubled protagonist, exemplifying 'comedy's ability to address the joys and terrors of being a solitary human being in a vast, complex, and often deeply confusing universe' (Marx and Sienkiewicz, 2018, p14). This mixing of generic elements to enhance depth and meaning will be further discussed in the next section dealing with realism and television.

The significant evolution of form and element has led some to declare the 'death' of sitcom as it has classically been understood. David Liddiment has explored the history and what he considers to be the demise of the genre due to shifts in society, class, family life and the nature of television itself in his 2006 documentary (C4). He cites the 88 per cent drop in sitcom commissions by British terrestrial television from 1984 to 2004 as evidence, attributing the decline—at least in part—to the emergence of multi-channel television and the decrease in communal family viewing habits (Liddiment, C4, 2006).

As both a scholar and champion of the genre, however, Brett Mills is not convinced that sitcom is dead. Rather, he still considers it a 'potent force within television' (2009, p146), pointing to its structural changes as evidence of the 'remarkable fluidity and adaptability in the ways in which narrative comedy is made for television' (p144). Savorelli concurs:

> The public's mere need for laughter could not explain the success of a genre that remained for decades, if not unchanged, at least firmly anchored to its own productive principles. After the end-of-century signs of change, the will to experiment is becoming more and more an evolutionary step, which can be explained with the need of comic genres to grow, overcoming their own stereotypes (2010, p176).

Realism in Television Representations

The previous chapter surveyed the history of clergy portrayals on television with particular focus on those occurring as 'flatter' and more stereotypical examples of the genre. A common judgment of these early vicar representations—from viewers with

personal experience of the church and those actually working within it—was that they just didn't seem *real*. But to what degree can realism actually be applied to fictional television, and how relevant is it to the particular cases selected for this study?

The concept of *realism* as it applies to media has been defined as 'close resemblance to what is real; fidelity of representation, rendering the precise details of the real thing or scene.'[13] At first glance this seems straightforward enough, yet an agreed method of both describing and measuring the concept as it pertains to television has proven somewhat elusive for media scholars (Hall, 2003, Haggins, 2013). This may have to do with the deceptive nature of realism itself, a concept which is perhaps not so apparent as its dictionary definition implies:

> However powerful its effects, realism is only a convention. Television may appear to be a window on the world, but it is not really transparent. What it offers is essentially a construction of the world, a version of reality (Abercrombie, 1996, p28).

Even for more factual genres such as news, documentary and so-called 'reality television,' the ideal of broadcasting the world as it 'truly' exists is not realistically achievable given the intrusive presence of the camera and its resulting effect upon human perception and behaviours (Fiske and Hartley, 2003).

Despite the challenges of analysing realism in television, Hall (2003) and Haggins (2013) have each formulated a set of criteria for doing just that, based on their respective studies: a series of audience focus group interviews and an examination of the police drama *Homicide: Life on the Streets* (NBC, 1993–1999). Interestingly, both studies resulted in five coinciding markers by which viewers might deem a television program to be realistic:

- plausibility (*Could* this actually happen?)
- typicality (Is it *likely* to happen to this character?)
- factuality (Is the narrative based on a real event or person?)
- emotional involvement (Does the audience relate/respond to the story?)
- perceptual persuasiveness (Does it *look* real?)

[13] https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/158931

Alice Hall included a sixth criteria in her findings: narrative consistency, meaning that the plot is internally coherent with *itself*, a feature which, if present, can enable even a fantasy-based story which could never occur in real life to evoke a sense of realism in viewers (2003, p636). This finding suggests that factual content is not a prerequisite for authenticity, which Casey et al. have affirmed:

> ...it can be argued that our judgment of whether a text is realistic or not relies on the quality of the text, even if it is fictional. In other words, we can evaluate the extent of a text's truthfulness or lifelike qualities, whether or not the story is based on a real event (2007, p194).

Savorelli distinguishes between a strict sense of reality and the value of an 'other' sort of world which fiction creates, which can enhance a programme's narrative power:

> [D]rama stages worlds that may or may not represent a portion of the real. Even when there is a lower degree of similitude, from a thematic and figurative point of view, such as in science fiction series, or in those that feature paranormal or supernatural elements in an otherwise 'normal' world, drama tends to reproduce models of behavior coherent with those of the empiric world. The operation it performs is a sort of substitution of experienced reality with its representation: once one suspends any judgment on the veridicality of the latter, one accepts its internal rules, or lack thereof, which in turn constitutes a rule...the literality of the utterance in relation to the world it creates within itself is enough to give the text meaning (2010, p173).

Ien Ang's examination of audience reaction to and perception of the programme *Dallas* (CBS, 1978-1991) determined that the highly unrealistic soap opera possessed a psychological (rather than empirical) reality for its viewers, giving it almost mythical properties (1985). The programme forged an emotional connection with its audience, causing them to perceive what they experienced as 'real,' even though they were clear that such things rarely—if ever—happen in the way they were portrayed by the drama, a phenomenon which convincingly suggests that fiction is not to be underestimated as a conveyor of meaning for its consumers.

Haggins has further determined four elements which a fictional programme might employ to communicate realism in portraying characters and events: dynamic

narrative/dialogue, historical/social verisimilitude, complex and diverse characters, and generic hybridisation (2013, p14). The second and fourth items merit further mention here.

One aspect of sitcom, for instance, which has been routinely criticised is the genre's historical reputation for stereotypical or outmoded representations of various groups of people or social settings (Mills, 2004), which was explored in the previous chapter's discussion of early clerical and ecclesial portrayals. Viewers who enjoy watching a particular programme but identify inaccuracies of setting or glaring oversights within the cultural context may not otherwise be able to 'buy into' the world of the fictional narrative.

This proved the case, to some degree, when the otherwise popular sitcom *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984-1992) presented an upper middle class African American family who appeared to exist in a world seemingly devoid of the race inequalities/injustices which were happening in the US over the period in which the programme aired. For this reason, it received criticism from activists concerned about the potential damage it might be doing to such political causes as affirmative action, given the show's enormous popularity and high profile (Coleman, 1998, Acham, 2013, Jhally, 2019).

Haggins also gives particular weight to the realistic impact provided to a narrative by the aforementioned device of generic hybridisation. In the drama series *Homicide*, similar to its predecessor *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-1987), a melding of serious and humorous elements such as dialogue and plot twists help to convey the conflicted everyday world of a police squad with its inherent joys, frustrations and extraordinary events alongside those which are more mundane (White, 1985, Haggins, 2013).

The way a series handles difficult subject matter (such as homicide in the previous examples) can provide a measure of how realistically it comes across to viewers. Specifically in the second and third case studies of this research the priest protagonist faces a number of challenging personal circumstances (e.g. grave illness, clinical depression, loss of role, loss of faith), in addition to dealing with the daily issues presented by the context of parish ministry. Both programmes employ a mixture of comic and dramatic elements in their narratives, a device which mimics the often contradictory and paradoxical nature of life in general, and a priest's life in particular.

Given the multiplicity of potential evaluative factors for reading realism in a television text, this research has distilled the analysis to two general categories, summarised by Bignell as identification (how closely actual vicars would relate to a given character) and redundancy (how consistent the surrounding context is with its corresponding real-life setting) (2012, pp95-97) to help form an overall standard for authenticity of representation within the chosen texts (cf. Burton, 2000, p151).

Defining Quality Television

Another consideration in the examination of priest portrayals on television is the quality of the productions themselves—are they worthy of their subject matter and regarded with any respect by the industry and/or viewing audience? This particular research further questions whether or not such programmes contribute meaningfully to the catalogue of worthwhile output expected from public service broadcasting.

Implicit in the myriad discussions about PSB and its value is the assumption that it is expected to produce 'quality' programming as a feature of its unique remit to the wider population whose support it receives. But a solid working definition of this has proven elusive (Geraghty, 2003, p26), with as many different views as there are individuals with various interests at stake in the process, as Jaramillo observes:

> The term *quality* is tossed about with great frequency but little regard for its disparate meanings among the popular press and interest groups on one hand and among television industry scholars on the other (2002, p66).

With ratings, renewals, funding and creative livelihoods in the balance, it is reasonable to ask who exactly gets to decide what constitutes a 'quality' programme. Some have argued that such a debate risks becoming an 'elitist' exercise (Brunsdon, 1990) or a wildly subjective conversation where individual taste and preference take precedence over any agreed standard (McCabe and Akass, 2007, p2), which is perhaps why some academics are hesitant to engage in the discussion (Nelson, 2006).

Dasgupta has deemed disagreements over definitions of quality television texts as 'dead end debates' because they divert the conversation from the more interesting work of analysing the texts themselves (2012, p36). Nonetheless, choosing to avoid the quality

discussion altogether can also be problematic and detrimental to programme makers and industry professionals (Brunsdon, 1990).

And indeed, many scholars have added their voices to the conversation, with descriptions of quality going well beyond Robert Thompson's 'we knew it when we saw it' (McCabe and Akass, 2007, xix). Blumler prioritises the elements of freshness, imagination, authenticity, education, truth, social relevance, expressive richness, and integrity in his definition (Leggatt, 1996). Others describe offerings which are perceived as 'more expensively produced, and especially, more culturally worthwhile than other programmes' (Bignell, 2012, p18), or productions which stimulate viewers to 'think more reflectively and feel more profoundly about human life and drama' (Nelson, 1997, p230).

Thompson himself outlines at least twelve distinct components which may be present in a 'quality' production, including innovation, skilled creatives, complex plots, episodic memory, cultural significance, literary merit, endurance of criticism, and recognition by the industry (1997) (see also Garrison, 2011).

In her study of aesthetics in television drama, Geraghty proposes broad categories which could form the basis for evaluating quality, assigning importance to the calibre of the audio/visual text; writing and dialogue; performance and characterisation; and innovation of form and content (2003). Another widely agreed element is a sense of realism in character representation (Thompson, 1997, Krutnik and Neale, 2018, p138) as well as attention to detail, which seems to be of particular concern in the context of British television (Cardwell, 2007).

Whilst it has already been discussed that the combining of various generic characteristics in one programme contributes to an overall sense of realism, the same technique is also frequently cited as a feature of so-called quality productions (Thompson, 1997, Nelson, 2007, Jowett, 2011), with Fuller adding the components of 'genre self reflexivity, intertextuality…and the capacity to sustain close critical attention' (2013, p1). The widespread agreement amongst scholars on this point, however, is not an automatic dismissal of shows which follow a more standard format, such as the sitcom M*A*S*H (CBS, 1972-1983), which received both popular adoration and critical acclaim as a 'quality' production (Crowther et al., 1991, p120).

As noted earlier, definitions for quality in television are widely variant, depending, in part, upon who is being asked. Whilst media scholars tend to highlight narrative elements and production techniques, Feuer et al. note that the popular press often value features such as innovative visual style, use of film over video, actors with training in improvisation (rather than television), and a high degree of creative freedom (Feuer et al., 1984, p32).

Mills points out that commercial networks attend to concerns for promotion, audience share and sponsorship which often supersede artistic standards or issues of creative content (2009, p133), and Feuer et al. affirm that television programmes are both text and commodity, where quality may refer more to the audience which a programme 'delivers' rather than the programme itself (Feuer, 2007). Additionally, increasing competition from cable networks in recent years and changes in viewing habits through increased technological options have all influenced the ongoing conversation for quality in television (Bourdaa, 2011, p33).

Defenders of public service broadcasting are quick to focus on the dangers of allowing what is commercially or popularly desirable to determine standards for quality (Lealand, 2001). However, one risk of minimising the importance of audience preference in favour of that is which 'morally or educationally edifying' is that viewers may experience PSB 'quality' offerings as 'worthy, dull, conventional or pretentious' (Cardwell, 2007, p21). A more helpful exercise may be to seek after what is meritorious across all platforms, with Nelson's reminder that 'a cursory look at the history of television confirms that as many programmes adjudged (by various standards) to be "quality" have emerged in the commercial as in the PSB sector' (2006, p67).

A potential entanglement in the conversation for quality programming is that the exercise of defining tends to be most crucial to those whose remits come under regulation (i.e. commissioners and network executives) and who thus often find themselves in the position of needing to justify their own output using evaluative criteria of their own devising (Frith, 2000b).

An approach which might avoid this particular drawback is looking to the creative professionals whose intimate involvement in the various stages of production give them a unique perspective on exactly what elements are necessary in generating programmes of

quality (Rosengren et al., 1990, p.41, Born and Prosser, 2001, p.679, Davies, 2006, p25). Irene Meijer summarises the results of two such professional surveys (Albers, 1996, Leggatt, 1996) and amalgamates their findings into the following evaluative criteria to apply to television texts:

1. Were the craft skills that went into the making of the programme of a high standard?
2. Was the programme adequately resourced?
3. Was it serious and truthful?
4. Was it relevant to the concerns of the day?
5. Did the storytelling touch the emotions?
6. Did it appeal to curiosity/provoke thought?
7. Did the programme-maker have a clear objective? And push to achieve it?
8. Did the programme-maker have a passion/commitment that gave energy to the programme?
9. Was the programme innovative, original, or adventurous?
10. How did the audience react to it – in appreciation as well as numbers?

(Meijer, 2005, p.38)

In accordance with this same approach, the creative professionals (actors, writers, directors and producers) who were interviewed for this dissertation were each asked to define what elements they thought comprised a 'quality programme,' and their responses can be summarised as follows:

- A 'reason for being,' i.e. having something to say which is the product of someone's particular vision and driving passion
- A high calibre of creative talent (actors, writers and crew) who care about and are invested in the work
- Engaging characters with whom the audience can relate and form emotional relationships
- Authenticity of depiction and intelligent treatment of subject matter
- Relevant content which provides its audience with an expanded sense of the world
- A celebration of the human spirit and what's good in people
- Fair representation of its intended audience
- Integrity of plot and action which does not need to organise itself around ad breaks
- Optimal use of limited budget

Further distillation and analysis of this conversation for 'quality' television—especially as it pertains to PSB and the specific case studies explored here—appears in the final chapter.

Production Studies and Semi-Structured Interviews

Consideration of genre, realism and quality in relation to vicar portrayals on PSB forms a foundation for examining the three programmes featured in this research. However, television study relying solely on textual analysis risks the criticism of 'neglecting an account of who or what produced the text and in what social, historical and political circumstances, and...ignoring the question of how audiences read texts' (Casey et al., 2007, p246). Indeed, many scholars caution against 'limiting research to a clean menu of disconnected methods' (Caldwell, 2008, p3) and confining each to its own parochial territory (Ytreberg, 2006, p422), advocating instead for multi-method approaches for the overall benefit of the discipline (Frith, 2000a, p49).

The aspiration of this study to investigate the intentions behind and components of creating each of the three selected clergy characters suggested a production study of some sort. Whilst such examinations of how programmes are constructed may not occupy a central place within the area of television studies (Davies, 2006, p21), or may be regarded as a 'neglected or underdeveloped area of enquiry' (Corner, 1999, p71), Mittell asserts that 'media are imbricated within their contexts of production and reception and...work to constitute our vision of the world' (Mittell, 2001, p16), with Wood (2010) and Ellis (2004, p275) further affirming the value of studying productions for the purpose of understanding how a text is constructed and what it is trying to communicate.

Production studies generally tend to address wider social and industrial contexts rather than 'the blow by blow, nitty gritty of television production itself' (Holland, 2000, p11). And whilst the societal position of the church and its clergy has been discussed at length in Chapter Two and is certainly an aspect which permeates this research, the primary intent in examining the production processes of the programmes in question was to discover the specific factors contributing to the creation of these characters, whether

those factors be contextual, personal or otherwise. And in many cases, the programme makers did, in fact, become focused upon the smallest 'nitty gritty' details of production.

In determining the focus and structure for this production study, applying Hall's three points of view (re. representation of various groups) to depictions of television vicars proved useful:

> 1. Reflective: the view already existing 'out there' in culture
> 2. Intentional: the creator/producer's vision or design
> 3. Constructionist: the meaning received and interpreted by the viewer
> (Hall, 1997)

Whilst the reflective view was addressed to some degree by Chapter Two's contextual examination of the church in culture, this research was interested in further exploring its influence via feedback from producers, writers and others involved in creating the programmes, who could at the same time provide perspective on the second (intentional) view.

Obtaining the third point of view necessitated making choices about what this study was meant to be, and what it was not. As mentioned earlier, this research is not a quantitative assessment of audience impact, but rather a platform for exploring meanings and reactions made by individual viewers, most especially clergy. This ruled out less personal options like audience surveys or focus groups in favour of one-on-one interviews which, as Zaltman observes, 'get beyond superficial opinions and at the deeper meanings people hold, generally below their level of awareness about things (2003).

The so-called 'semi-structured' interview (SSI) is a two-way exchange between researcher and subject which 'unfold[s] in a conversational manner, offering participants the chance to explore issues they feel are important' (Longhurst, 2003, p103). Its historical predecessor was the 'focused interview,' developed in order to study the psychological effects of mass communication (Merton and Kendall, 1946); however, the contemporary semi-structured form has evolved 'from a research strategy to an independent research method...one that is increasingly used by a multiplicity of disciplines' (McIntosh and Morse, 2015, p1) and which is put to best advantage as a supplement to other methods (e.g. textual analysis) (Longhurst, 2003, p106).

A potential drawback of the SSI might be that it is 'time-consuming, labo[u]r intensive, and require[s] interviewer sophistication' (Newcomer et al., 2015, p493).

However the advantages of the method (summarised below) seem to outweigh the effort required by the researcher in preparation, execution, recording, transcription and distillation of the relevant material.

For example, the SSI enables an interviewer to follow up and focus the conversation on issues deemed to be important, as well as giving her/himself 'a greater chance of becoming visible as a knowledge-producing participant in the process' (Brinkmann, 2014, p286). Berger further affirms the value of such interviews to help explain the underlying motivations, issues, and anxieties which might have been present in the process of production (2018, p217), which would be helpful in forming a richer account of a programme's 'life span'—from inception to reception—as well as understanding the factors involved in creating a particular character.

One caveat in conducting interviews within production studies is the challenge of 'judging the validity of self-reporting by people who have shows to sell' (Davies, 2006, p23). To this concern Caldwell adds his suspicion that 'the higher one travels up the industrial food chain for insights, the more suspect and spin-driven the personal disclosures tend to become' (2008, p3). This factor was considered throughout each of the interviews conducted for this study, with some correction offered by overlapping narratives from different persons involved in the same production, as well as including the voices of those working 'below the line,' so to speak (Mayer, 2011), in production roles with less name recognition, and perhaps also less temptation to feed into the agreed 'mythology' of a programme's origin which creatives may embellish over time.

Hall's third point of view in television representation deals with viewers' reception and interpretation of a programme's meaning, a perspective chiefly represented in this research by Anglican clergy, as they were the ones whom each programme was intending to represent. The first obvious candidates were the priests who had advised on each of the three programmes, as they were also privy to the production's intentional point of view (at least to some degree). These were then supplemented with informal personal conversations and written reactions to each programme from both clergy and laypersons which had appeared in published reviews, articles, blog posts and social media sites such as online discussion forums and Twitter.

Television scholars have acknowledged a particular advantage to being 'on location' during a programme's creation as a way of accessing otherwise unknowable aspects inside of the production culture and acquiring primary material through firsthand participant observation (1999, p70, Wood, 2010). As a result of interviewing the programme's writer, this researcher was most fortunate to be invited to spend a day on the set where *Parch* (case study three) was filming its final episodes, an experience which provided opportunities to speak with crew members from every aspect of production as well as Carys Eleri, who portrayed the leading vicar.

Semi-structured interviews were sought with various personnel from each of the productions—primarily writers, actors, and producers—contacted through details obtained publicly online or via electronic introductions from those previously interviewed, the latter proving significantly more successful as a strategy. In the rare cases where significant contributors were not available or did not reply to interview requests, public domain sources of information such as published interviews and memoirs proved useful in filling in the blanks (see Davies, 2006, p29).

The majority of interviews took place in person, and in the instances where phone or video chat was the only option, there was no perceived hindrance to the conversation, affirming Cachia and Millward's assertion that interviews by phone can be just as effective as those done in person (2011). However, the one exchange which took place entirely via email (as per the subject's wishes) did, in fact, exemplify the drawbacks inherent to electronic interviews (Brinkmann, 2014): a limited capacity for requesting elaboration on points which needed clarification and the brevity of the answers provided.

Due to the amount of time which had elapsed since the creation of the first two programmes, interviewees often had difficulty recalling specific details of the productions, an inevitable circumstance which was helped, in part, by the implementation of Thomsen and Brinkmann's suggestions of allowing more space for recall after asking a question or offering prompts from related answers or the interviewer's knowledge of the subject matter (2009).

The breadth of contacts across each programme was useful, especially in comparing accounts of the same incident coming from different sources. The sampling proved large enough to gain several different perspectives on individual occurrences,

which was invaluable in forming an overall picture of how each production came together and what was important to each participant. In the comparison of narratives there didn't appear to be any outright contradictions, only slightly varying interpretations of the same events. Thus the resulting material occurs fairly reliable as an overview.

* * *

Summary

Examining the key programmes in this research through the lens of genre studies, aspects of realism, and discussions about quality programming can be helpful in placing them within their creative contexts and seeing how they relate to similar texts of comparable description and intent. Such study also highlights the potential devices employed by programme creators in communicating their characters and narratives and the way in which these aspects overlap. It is useful to note the interrelatedness of comedic and dramatic fusion within notions of realism, for instance, or the inclusion of realism and generic hybridisation as features of quality television.

Combining production study with text analysis strengthens the research and its subsequent conclusions. This examination of fictional vicar portrayals on British public service broadcasting employs the semi-structured interview as a primary method for discerning various components which contribute to creating these clerical characters, and the three chapters which follow take a detailed look at each of the selected programmes in turn, through the eyes and voices of those who invested years in their creation and production.

6

Leading Ladies:
The Vicar of Dibley makes a serious case with humour

The Vicar of Dibley was a demonstrably popular sitcom which aired on BBC One over a period of twelve years (1994-2007). It performed well in the ratings, won numerous awards, and made a name for itself as a work of entertainment which eventually earned worldwide admiration. But the creators of the programme have always maintained that regardless of how enthusiastically it was received as a comedy, *Dibley* began as a deliberate response to a very specific issue: the emergence of women vicars in the Church of England, a situation which for many was no laughing matter.

* * *

A Contentious Proposal

The 1992 vote which allowed Anglican women to be ordained as priests opened a heavy door which had been locked for centuries. But as is often the case at significant moments of change within institutions so fixed in practice and opinion as the church, adjustment to this new state of affairs came gradually. Some joyfully embarked upon the untrodden path, others treaded cautiously, and still others remained behind in tenacious resistance to the move.

Several months prior to what would be the first ordination ceremony for female candidates, debate still raged throughout the General Synod about how to handle the aftermath of the previous year's game-changing vote. Many opposing male vicars had already left the Church of England in protest, and some laypersons with them. Others

remained within the fold, but with lingering anger and dread over the implications of change.

As a conciliatory measure to forestall any further fallout, a special Act of Synod was proposed in November 1993 which would protect congregations who were opposed to having a woman vicar. Within the Act lay a further provision: special oversight for such parishes by designated clerics who agreed with them, a sort of non-geographical order known as 'flying bishops.'[14] Essentially, these would function as 'a 'safe pair of hands' for those who perceived their own bishop as having been compromised by his involvement in the ordination of women (Walsh, 2000, p6).

The proposal was a concession which drew predictably mixed responses: supported by those who saw it as a last haven for 'traditional' thought and practice within the C of E, but strongly opposed by others—especially women ordinands and their advocates—who saw it as a sad perpetuation of the division and exclusion they had struggled so long to overturn (Carroll, 2002, p128-9).

One such ordinand was Rev. Joy Carroll, who had served several years as a deacon (the highest position women could hold at the time) and had been vocal in the movement to allow female priests. Following the successful vote, although some of her colleagues felt more conciliatory about making allowances for those resisting change, Carroll couldn't see any integrity in allegedly flinging wide the door to women's ordination whilst simultaneously enacting special rules which appeared to perpetuate prejudice and imply a subordinate status for female clergy. Thus, she rose during the 1993 General Synod debate to speak against the measure (Carroll, 2002, p129-30).

* * *

In a world far removed from tedious ecclesiastical disagreements, screenwriter Richard Curtis' star was rapidly rising. Having already made a name for himself in British comedy television with such classics as *Blackadder* (BBC1, 1983-89)*, Spitting Image* (ITV, 1984-5), and *Mr. Bean* (ITV, 1990-95), Curtis was on the verge of seeing his new feature film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) shoot to international acclaim. But amidst his

[14] https://www.churchofenglandglossary.co.uk/dictionary/definition/flying_bishops

burgeoning career, something was bothering the writer—a matter which he would frequently refer to as a 'bee in his bonnet'—after attending a friend's wedding which had been officiated by a female registrar:

> It suddenly struck me as very odd that in an intimate area of life when so often it's your mother who's more interested in your romances and your children and things like that, how perverse it is that it's often middle-aged, bachelor men who are in charge of these things that would be much more suited to a woman. I then became sure of the fact that women priests were a very good and needed thing in society. I felt sure that the moment people saw a woman in a dog collar, in action, it would immediately make sense to them (Wheatcroft, 1995).

The comedy writer began to take an active interest in the unfolding drama around the Church of England's acceptance of female vicars. The rancour resulting from the original vote was not going away, but prospective female priests were already in line for ordination. Soon they would be scattered about the country as inevitable pioneers and 'test cases' for acceptance by the Anglican church; the potential onscreen drama almost wrote itself. Curtis took to his keyboard and penned episode one for a proposed sitcom originally titled *The New Vicar*, enlisting executive producer Peter Bennet Jones (with whom he had worked previously) and *Tiger Aspect Productions* to let it be publicly known that they were developing a programme about woman vicars, mostly to discourage anyone else eager to pick up on what had become a very timely issue (Hamad, 2015) (Plowman Interview 2019).

The Face of the Vicar

As difficult as it is to imagine anyone else playing Rev. Geraldine Granger, the character was not originally written specifically for comedy actress Dawn French, as many have mistakenly assumed. Granted, she did come on board very early in the process of creating the programme and significantly influenced the character's subsequent development, but initially Curtis' fictional female vicar was born as a woman with a purpose rather than a vehicle for any particular actor, as he admits:

> It is true that I technically didn't write it for Dawn, but then I hadn't written much by the time we decided to make it [with her]—I'd only written an episode or two (Mayhew-Archer, 2017).

Curtis proposed the role to his potential lead, but French wasn't automatically sold on the project. She needed more clarification on exactly what he was asking of her. Was the character serious or comedic? Was the programme sit-com or social commentary? The truth lay somewhere in between, and it was a balance with which both writer and actress would wrestle. French recalls reading the initial synopsis which Richard sent her.

> I could see it would be rural and green and British and pretty. I could see why all the characters were extremely funny. Except mine, who appeared to be a sweet, kind, wise, nurturing sort, around whom everyone's stories and troubles would swirl. She was to be the fulcrum, the heart of the village...I couldn't conceive how the lead in a sitcom could be so bloody nice and still be funny. My personal favourite sitcom characters were big ol' monsters, full of pomposity like Captain Mainwaring or misguided snobby twots like Basil Fawlty, or louche fashion victims like Edina and Patsy, not nice, kind vicars like Geraldine (French, 2008, p323-4).

In the beginning, the actor made a bid to instead play the character of Alice, the dim-witted verger, who seemed to have much more comic potential. But by then Curtis had firmly set his sights on French as his starring vicar, and allegedly coaxed her into accepting by dangling a list of other comedic actresses who were allegedly in line for the role, which remains an enduring joke between the two of them. The writer recalls:

> Dawn and I always laugh that she was seventh choice after Miriam Margolyes, Alison Steadman and various other people that either turned it down or had been unavailable...(Mayhew-Archer, 2017).

Having thus landed his lead actress, Curtis gave some deep thought to exactly how he wanted to present the face of women priests to the world. His own history of creating clergy characters was far from a ringing endorsement of the profession, nor did it seem much concerned about realism, dating back to his work on the writing team of *Not the Nine O'Clock News* (BBC2, 1979-82). The popular comedy sketch show presented priests as everything from irreverent and insensitive to condescending and clueless—with none of the affection inspired by Nimmo's earlier portrayals of the stammering clergyman.

It could be argued that Curtis' most widely recognised priest character was Rowan Atkinson's famously inept vicar appearing in *Four Weddings and a Funeral, a* bumbling neophyte who mangles every other word of the marriage service which he is attempting to conduct. The remaining clergy appearing in the film are classic examples of plot devices with little or no back story. This is glaringly illustrated by an incident which the screenwriter recounts in a BBC Academy interview:

> There was a great moment when we were auditioning for a character called 'Vicar Three' and the [actor] came in and [director] Mike [Newell] said, 'Richard, tell him about "Vicar Three",' and I said, 'Well, he comes in and the lead character is trying to decide whether or not—' and Mike said, 'No, no... why did he join the *church*?' And this was a character who only had two lines: 'What are you doing?' and 'Please hurry up' (Mayhew-Archer, 2017).

Acknowledging the importance of developing this particular cleric more deliberately, Curtis wisely sought someone who could help put a real human face on his new vicar.

> I was very keen not to write a fictional character that I was making up, but actually to have a contemporary person with the same frame of reference. Someone who knew about pop music and films and things like that, as I did (Carroll, 2002, p127-8).

It seemed to the writer that a likely place to find a real-life Anglican clergywoman was at a public church meeting, especially amidst the ongoing contentious debate over women priests. And so it happened that Richard Curtis was watching from the gallery at Church House in Westminster when Rev. Joy Carroll rose to make her impassioned speech to the General Synod, arguing against 'special' bishops for parishes intolerant of female vicars and concluding with these words:

> I have agonised about what is the most holy thing to do. Is it to be generous at all costs? Or is it to be true to a God of integrity and justice? In the end, I have decided to vote against the Act. What I am voting against is inconsistency and bad theology. I fear that the church may find herself bent so far backwards that she might fall over (Carroll, 2002p, 130).

A Wary Consultant

Joy Carroll's speech might not have been enough to convince a majority of Anglican voters to take her position (the Act was eventually passed to accommodate disagreeing parishes), but it did succeed in persuading Richard Curtis that she was the clergy consultant whom he'd been seeking.

Returning home exhausted after several days of General Synod meetings, Carroll ignored repeated answerphone messages from some 'writer' who seemed keen to talk with her, conflating him with the scores of other journalists seeking sound bytes to print beneath such derogatory headlines as the *Sun*'s 'Vicars in Knickers' which shouted from front pages immediately following the vote to ordain women (The church says yes...1992).

But Curtis persisted in his efforts to contact the outspoken vicar, who had not at first recognised his name, but who was well familiar with his successful television comedies. When she finally permitted him to explain his desire for insight into a new character he was writing, Carroll found herself intrigued by the project, but still skeptical, given some of her more negative experiences with the media around the ordination of women:

> Reporters from the *Sun* newspaper had, on one occasion, actually chased my colleague Judie and me around Westminster, trying to persuade us to talk to them...I even received what felt like an almost abusive call from the editor... accusing me of great snobbery for not taking this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to communicate with the working-class and ordinary people of England (Carroll, 2002, p130-1).

The young vicar had some apprehension about Curtis' ultimate motives in creating a fictional programme about woman priests, and worried about how they might be portrayed to a viewing public of which some were still unsure about this new development, and which had also been fed clerical caricatures for years.

> I was always a little bit kind of [hesitant] because it was the first time this had ever happened—I mean if they came to me now with a show like that, I would [ask] what is this going to entail; how have others done it before...you know, we had no experience of this whatsoever, and so we were kind of breaking ground. And that was my concern at the beginning: is it going to be creating a character that enables everybody to laugh at women priests and [is] a victim of ridicule? You know, like

> Derek Nimmo and the 'buffoony' kind of characters we see portrayed often in tv shows about clergy (Carroll Wallis Interview 2018) (Sullivan, 2012).

With these questions in the back of her mind, Carroll cautiously agreed to host Curtis and French at her home to help them learn more about the life of a real vicar (Carroll, 2002, p131). The lead actress, who was still uncertain about how to play a non-farcical yet funny vicar, was both surprised and delighted to be greeted by a young, fashionable clergywoman who appeared as 'worldly' as any of her lay contemporaries. French remembers Carroll's kitchen in particular:

> She invited us in and she had loads of 'empties' everywhere, and I thought, 'Ooh! She likes a bit of a party!' (Kenwright, 2007)

Curtis was also relieved to see the lighter side of clergy in Carroll's example, finding her 'as naughty and irreverent and "like us" as you could hope' (Kenwright, 2007). Rev. Carroll recalls a coffee mug of hers which bore the inscription, 'Lead me not into temptation...I can find it myself,' having been told that seeing it may have settled her in the writer's mind as a sufficiently 'earthy' model for his fictional vicar.

> I think he knew that I had a sense of humour and that I didn't take myself too seriously, and that gave him permission to do the same with the character (Kenwright, 2007).

Beyond the quirky details of her personal life, French and Curtis were eager to learn more about Carroll's relationship to her profession, about why a young woman would choose this somewhat unusual path. The actress showed a genuine and deep curiosity about the underlying motivations of the clergy, according to Carroll:

> Dawn French shadowed me and we would sit and have conversations in my living room; then we would meet and go out for meals and I would go to her house, and we would have this kind of relationship where she just picked my brain and wanted to get inside my head in a way, and figure out why I was even a Christian. It wasn't so much what do you wear when you're a clergy person, it was much more—she wanted to figure out what made me tick, so that she could take it and work it herself in a way (Carroll Wallis Interview 2018).

This ‘shadowing’ included observing the vicar whilst she conducted a funeral, in order to learn the subtle mannerisms of leading worship and interacting with parishioners. The only complication was trying to sneak in a widely recognised actress like Dawn French without disrupting the solemnity of the occasion, so they agreed she would wear a large floppy hat which covered her face and would sit quietly on the organist’s bench, pretending to be his ‘assistant’ (Carroll, 2002, p132).

Curtis also wanted to know about the woman behind the collar, and the personal impact which her job had upon her.

> Richard listened intently and asked his own questions about the joys and frustrations of ministry. For example, how was it that I maintained a sense of self whilst in the role of priest? I told him about the things that energised me in the job and the things that drained me; the things that made me laugh and those that made me cry (Carroll, 2002, p131-2).

The writer specifically remembers asking Joy about romantic relationships and how they figure (if at all) into the life of a vicar, an element which would become a recurring theme within the programme as Geraldine encounters and falls for various men (Kenwright, 2007).

Satisfied that the creators of the new programme were intending a sympathetic and not a disrespectful or lampooning portrayal of women clergy, Rev. Carroll offered whatever advice she was able, cautiously optimistic about meeting the new vicar about to take up residence on screens across Britain, and in the fictional Oxfordshire village of Dibley.

Collaring Comedy

Dawn French is, first and foremost, a comedic actress. Her meetings with Joy Carroll had shed some light on what a ‘real’ vicar might look like, but she still had concerns about balancing humour with compassion in the character of Geraldine. This resulted in long discussions with Richard Curtis about how exactly they were going to put a ‘wholly good’ character in the centre of a sitcom (Plowman, 2018, p163).

> The thing that Dawn found hardest (and Richard also) was keeping the seriousness of a vicar whilst matching the expectation that she should be funny and not the 'straight man.' Much time in rehearsal was spent giving Dawn comedy opportunities (Plowman Interview 2019).

One strategy for maintaining Geraldine's dignity whilst still eliciting laughs was placing her within the absurd cast of characters who were to be her new parishioners, a curious assortment of rural misfits encompassing the full range of stereotypes: crude, clueless, controlling, incompetent, stammering and smutty. Thus any resulting ridicule would find its object not in the potentially controversial woman priest, but in the oddballs she was expected to serve. Writer Paul Mayhew-Archer, whom Curtis recruited early on in the series to partner with him on scripts, recognises this quality of steadiness in the vicar they were portraying as one of the necessary parameters of her character, describing her as a comedic yet clever woman who is essentially 'parachuted in' to a village which rests just on the edge of civilisation—and sanity.

> [How] Dawn played the vicar was so important, because she is not the idiot. So from what had been *All Gas and Gaiters* and all those sitcoms...they're all completely clueless idiots cut off from the real world in every single way. But Richard's aim was to create a character who was worldly-- who lived in our world, and it was the rest of the village that couldn't quite catch up. So she was 'Mrs. Sensible' (Mayhew-Archer Interview 2019).

Curtis' new writing partner was equally committed to empowering his fictional vicar and introducing her to millions of British viewers. Although he was raised in the Anglican Church and participated actively as a server and choirboy in his youth, Mayhew-Archer was never quite able to recover his faith after his mother's painful death from cancer when he was 20. Still, his interest in presenting a savvy, likeable vicar was not dissimilar to Curtis' desire to normalise the idea of female priests, even though they never had deliberate discussions about the issue itself whilst they were writing the series. The writer also saw something unique in the comedic potential of a clergy character—but not as the stereotypical and timeworn buffoon.

> I remember I wanted to be very positive about women vicars because it never made sense to me that there weren't [any]. So I went into it wanting to do what Richard had set out to do and to work with him on that. There is something about vicar characters which makes them absolutely wonderful because you can get lots

> of comedy out of it, but also incredible pathos. They are dealing with people who are in desperate need, and it may be that their need is (to us) not desperate at all, but to them it is. And it's vicars we go and unload to (Mayhew-Archer Interview 2019).

Whilst accepting that Dibley's new clergywoman was to be the solo voice of reason amongst a chorus of absurdity, the actor was still keen to endow her character with some obvious frailties, just a few 'nuggets of eccentricity,' which wouldn't 'undermine her central goodness and decency' (Mayhew-Archer Interview 2019). These included an obsession with chocolate, periodic overindulgence in wine, and an uninhibited lust for the celebrity hunk *du jour*, whose corresponding photo would be displayed equally alongside Jesus above her desk at the vicarage.

Figure 1: All the Vicar's Men (Mel Gibson and Jesus) – S01E06

Besides adding more comedic weight to the character, these elements had the further effect of humanising her in the context of the clerical role, and making her more like her real-life inspiration. The actor recalls:

> She's not just a vicar; she's a woman. I was constantly battling to try and give her faults, and eventually [Richard] gave in and allowed me to be a bit vain and a bit doubting, and to be a bit lonely She's a bountiful character and she's got an appetite for everything: for her faith, for her interest in people, for everything—including men. And she's also confronted with all of the things that Joy was confronted with (Kenwright, 2007).

The first challenge confronting the vicar is one which the majority of her real life contemporaries would also be facing: being the first female priest ever to serve a particular parish. In Curtis' pilot episode, Geraldine arrives on a portentous stormy night, removing her sodden hooded raincoat to reveal herself for the first time to a very stunned council chair, prompting the following exchange with the man who would initially be the fiercest opponent to her presence in Dibley:

> **Geraldine:** You were expecting a bloke: beard, Bible, bad breath...
> **David Horton:** Yes, that sort of thing.
> **Geraldine:** Instead you got a babe with a bob cut and a magnificent bosom.

Paul Mayhew-Archer remembers reading the script and being powerfully struck by this introduction.

> That line said an incredible amount to me. The very fact that she would come into a room and announce that shows her to have an incredible sort of confidence about herself. She's worldly and feisty and going to stand up for herself when she can. And she's also very much a woman, and funny as well. It says all these things in this one line (Mayhew-Archer Interview 2019).

Despite her charm, David Horton is greatly displeased at the fact that their new vicar is female, and initially attempts to rally the council's support in ousting her before she's even led her first Sunday service. Thus blindsided, the clergywoman doesn't attempt to hide her disappointment.

> When they try to get rid of her in that first episode, you sort of feel for this woman. She is a pioneer, and pioneers need to be feisty and strong because they're exploring new land, but they can have their confidence knocked (Mayhew-Archer Interview 2019).

But even this degree of opposition from an influential parishioner is not enough to destroy Geraldine's optimism and drive to win over her new congregation, at which she subsequently succeeds. With the essential nature of the vicar thus defined in the very first episode, the new sitcom seemed to strike a happy mix of humour and humanity, decidedly persuading their once skeptical clergy consultant:

> When I first watched the programme, I was delighted to see that [Richard] had portrayed Geraldine…as absolutely human and quite vulnerable. It broke the myth that people [sometimes] attach to the clergy: that they're superhuman or super spiritual or on a par with God. It made her human and accessible, and it wasn't this kind of…pie in the sky outreach person that lives in a fish bowl and nobody really knows what goes on inside their hearts (Carroll, 2002, p132, Kenwright, 2007, Carroll Wallis Interview 2018).

The depiction struck Carroll as not only relatable, but in some aspects a bit *too* familiar, with the incorporation of some particular details the creative team had picked up during their study of the young vicar and her clerical environment:

> I was quite taken aback, as were many who knew me well. [Dawn] had cut her hair the same as mine, wore the same kind of clothes, and actually had taken on some of my characteristics [such as speech patterns and phrases]. Even the walls of the vicarage were painted in the same green and pink [as] my living room walls. In just a few meetings with me, Dawn had done her homework. Her great acting ability and Richard's clever writing had created a character that was sometimes uncomfortably close to home (Carroll, 2002, p132-3).

Figure 2: Joy Carroll and Dawn French in Matching Collars
(*Beneath the Cassock: The Real-life Vicar of Dibley*: cover)

Discerning the Limits

In addition to determining who and how their onscreen vicar would be, the writers found it just as important to figure out just who she wasn't. As previously stated, Geraldine was never intended to be a figure of fun or ridicule in herself, as so many past fictional vicars had been. The writers also generally agreed to present her as the 'funny but flawed' character whom French wanted to portray, striking a balance between human and humorous:

> We knew there were things that she *wouldn't* do. From very early on, I had a sense of what sort of person she was and how she would be outspoken and sometimes hasty—ready to put a foot in it because she hadn't quite understood something, but then feel remorse for doing it and have a conscience. And we would never do anything which would pointlessly undermine her faith, so that gave us parameters (Mayhew-Archer Interview 2019).

There was an incident, however, when the show's creators inadvertently discovered that they'd gone beyond the comic limits of the character they had created, primarily via the feedback of their live studio audience.

In an episode titled 'Celebrity Vicar,' Geraldine finds herself amidst a sudden rash of media recognition which rapidly escalates after the village's short-lived local radio broadcast (S02E02) leads to the vicar being featured in *The Times.* She is subsequently invited to appear on Terry Wogan's 'Pause for Thought,' Radio 4's *Any Questions?,* Channel 4's *Countdown*, and *Noel's House Party* on BBC One, in addition to several photo shoots. Unfortunately, all the attention begins to go to her head and she becomes completely caught up in her own stardom, with eventual detrimental consequences for her parishioners (S02E03). Even though the plot was reasonably in line with previous episodes, and the vicar eventually sees and repents of her unacceptable behavior, Paul Mayhew-Archer explains how they learned they had gone too far during live shooting:

> Actually we wrote lots more stuff—it was an interesting episode—we wrote quite a few scenes where she was being a cow. There was a longer scene with Alice, and I think we had a character of an agent there...and we lost it all because in front of the studio audience they didn't like her. It crossed the line, and we actually cut that back to a complete minimum. So [in the final edit] the term of her being unpleasant lasts about 90 seconds and then she's back again...it was a learning experience (Mayhew-Archer Interview 2019).

The programme makers chose to insert a simple photo sequence which immediately precedes the scene where she is confronted with the unpleasant repercussions of her actions and quickly falls back to earth. The visual device effectively and humorously illustrates the progression of the vicar's self-absorption without the unwanted effect of turning the viewing audience completely against her.

Figure 3: Geraldine's Descent into Celebrity Madness – S02E03

Comedy v. Accuracy

The artists responsible for the creation of Reverend Geraldine Granger focused on making her a decisively entertaining, even a reasonably convincing clerical figure for the benefit of the viewers—a sort of 'comic doppelganger' to her real-life inspiration. There was also a moderate attempt to inject some realism into the programme, insofar as a comedic setting is capable of standing in for the world it's pretending to represent. By producer Jon Plowman's recollection:

> A great deal of time and attention was given to accuracy…The church we used was a working church with a real vicar so the 'set' was as it was, with a bit of dressing sometimes. As I remember, Dawn went to an official church supplier for her cassocks, etc. so we tried to get things generally right (Plowman Interview 2019).

And in fact, that 'real vicar' on site at the local church did play a part behind the scenes in setting the tone for what viewers would see on screen. Rev. Paul Nicolson, who

was serving at St. Mary in Turville when the programme began filming, was instrumental in securing agreement for the project from local villagers who'd been left with less than savory memories of prior film experiences—two in particular.

> The first film had been about BP privatisation and they turned our village green into a BP shield, but they didn't tell anyone they were going to do it, so there was a row about that. And the next one added bits to [the local pub] for a war scene, and…they actually bombed it in the night without warning anybody. So people were coming out in their dressing gowns saying, 'What on earth is happening?!' (Nicolson Interview 2019).

In the wake of these fiascos, the locals only warily agreed to the filming of *Dibley* in their village (in part, or perhaps largely because each household in town was offered monetary compensation for their troubles). Rev. Nicolson, however, was particularly protective of the church building itself regarding its use as a centrepiece for the vicar focussed series. In a joint meeting between townspeople and crew, he shared his concerns:

> I read them all a letter that said, this beautiful church has been prayed in since the year 708. The first vicar was a monk from St Albans monastery [etc.]… You are hugely welcome, but do care for our beautiful church. And that went down well; they were very comfortable with that. I like to think that by making a point to welcome [the cast and crew] on behalf of the church…that seeped in and seeped out in the way that it was actually filmed. I think it's absolutely fair to say they were concerned that it was going to be respectful and correct (Nicolson Interview 2019).

The local reverend would prove valuable to the crew in matters of propriety regarding church practices and the reverent use of the church and surrounding grounds, which contained graves belonging to the townspeople's loved ones. He was also frequently consulted regarding the limits of what might be acceptable in portraying an Anglican vicar, such as whether or not it was okay for her to drink alcohol or have a boyfriend; as Joy Carroll had also done, Nicolson gave the nod to both. When Curtis asked about the appropriateness of verger Alice's baby being born in an actual barn during an onscreen nativity play, Rev. Nicolson recalls heartily giving his blessing to the idea, and found the resulting episode quite beautiful and moving. Additionally, because they were so similar in their stances on social issues, the writer actually formed quite a close personal relationship with the resident vicar. They collaborated on several

charitable causes, and he even asked Nicolson to baptise his own children, resulting in the further enhancement of Curtis' own theological understanding.

> In preparing his children for baptism I went through the normal preparation with him and Emma and so he got a bit of a dose of Christianity, which he was very easy with. They were very interested and willing to take it on board (Nicolson Interview 2019).

The vicar suspects that he and Turville's actual church may also have influenced a few of the show's fictional plot lines. At the baptism of Curtis's children, his young daughter accidentally singed her finger on a candle, and then had water sprinkled over her head which had not yet cooled down to a comfortable temperature. Afterwards, Rev. Nicolson felt a bit guilty. 'I wrote and told her there was nothing a dotty vicar could do to stand between her and Jesus Christ,' he remembers. In a subsequent episode, a 'dotty' bishop with a disturbing speech impediment shows up for the christening of Hugo and Alice's baby (S03E03), which Nicolson affectionately suggests may not have been a coincidence. Additionally, he recalls that Turville had an annual animal blessing service which could have inspired the much beloved episode featuring a parade of dogs, horses and other creatures to Dibley's church one Sunday (S01E06).

On occasion, the local vicar pointed out liturgical issues of which the writers were unaware, and his advice was heeded. Because he had requested to be shown scripts before they were produced, Rev. Nicolson made a helpful observation upon reviewing the christening scene:

> In the original script, they had a real baby and the real words blessed the water, and there was a real splashing of the baby. [Because] laity can baptise, it is a holy event, so they might have [actually] baptised the acting infant. I found myself asking, 'Has the child been baptised already, and if not does the mother know that her child would be baptised for all the world to see?' Also, in principle you cannot be baptised twice. I raised my concerns. Richard was gently responsive. So the words were done in a voice over, the water was not blessed and the baby not splashed (Nicolson Interview 2019).

Although she wasn't given any scripts to review, character consultant Joy Carroll also recalls an incident where she happened to be present during filming and spoke up to

correct an obvious biblical mistake in the aforementioned episode where the vicar welcomes the villagers and their animals to church for a special liturgy.

> When Geraldine stood up to do the blessing before the service started, she said something like, 'Dear Lord, who rode into Bethlehem on the back of a faithful donkey...' and I said, 'No no—it was Jerusalem!' and they had to change the script because somebody had just dashed that off, and that's how they remembered it. So a few [things] like that I interjected when I was there, but I wasn't always there (Carroll Wallis Interview 2018).

Whilst various suggestions offered by real vicars were regularly heeded, there were notable times when the programme took its own direction against (or in the absence of) clerical input, in favour of the comedy which was always at the heart of *Dibley*. After Rev. Nicolson had retired and left Oxfordshire, the 2004 Christmas special showed Geraldine turning up to midnight mass completely inebriated after singlehandedly consuming three bottles of wine. And although Nicolson didn't object in principle to clergy drinking alcohol, he did feel that in that particular case, having her lead worship (or attempt to) whilst very drunk was going a bit too far, admitting that he wouldn't have approved it had he still been around to advise.

> I would not have had that. It would have been very stuffy of me, but I didn't like that. It was funny, but I don't think I would have wanted Turville church used that way (Nicolson Interview 2019).

Rev. Amanda Bloor, who served in the parish during the later years when only occasional holiday episodes were being made, recalls witnessing a wedding scene being staged in the church:

> They filmed again and again coming up the aisle, then doing the various bits, and of course the wedding service itself was a strange mishmash of what would actually happen and what really wouldn't happen, or what certainly wouldn't happen in that sort of order. I'm afraid I couldn't bear it at one point and said,'You do know that we wouldn't do it this way, don't you?' and they said, 'Yeah, but this makes better television!' Which it did; they knew what they were talking about. It's that tension between portraying something as accurate and portraying something as dramatically significant or entertaining (Interview 2019).

Indeed, had the 'liturgical police' been on duty during the show's production, they could have identified a multitude of details which didn't quite reflect ecclesial reality. The alleged use of Ribena in place of communion wine, a mismatch of vestment and parament colours, irreverent handling of the vicar's surplice and stole upon disrobing, a Sunday morning service with liturgical elements completely out of order and concluding with what is clearly an evening hymn when it was still early in the day—all of this occurs in the first episode alone. The so-named 'Parish Council' acts as an odd amalgam of what would normally be two distinct bodies, one for local secular governance and the other for church matters (Parochial Church Council or PCC). The very name of Dibley's church—'St. Barnabus'—is a misspelling of the actual Barnabas, an error which even took writer Paul Mayhew-Archer by surprise when he learned of it 25 years later, and which he jokingly attributes to either an uninformed set designer or the literary ignorance of eccentric farmer (and fictional Dibley villager) Owen Newitt (Mayhew-Archer Interview 2019).

Rev. Carroll acknowledges inaccuracies within the programme, but believes that by focusing on its trivial faults it is possible to miss the essential function of the series as an entertaining comedy which also presents a decent and likeable clergy character. When informed about the depth of clerical detail and consultation given to the other two case study programmes in this research, she observes:

> *The Vicar of Dibley* didn't really pursue that accuracy. They had artistic licence to do whatever they wanted really, and did some very odd things and actually got a lot of criticism from people who wanted it to be really precise...it wasn't [the creators'] concern because they were just going for the laugh and the general portrayal and the concept. And detail was good when it worked, but if it didn't work for [Richard] to make the laugh or the point, it didn't matter because that was the more important thing (Interview 2018).

Televangelism

One element of Geraldine's portrayal about which Curtis was very deliberate was her particular social and ethical positions. Even though she was primarily meant to be a comedic character, he still wanted her to have a measure of theological depth. Not surprisingly, the Rev. Granger's own views would reflect, in part, those of the young

woman vicar whose earnest argument on the floor of the General Synod had first captured the writer's attention. Carroll recalls their early conversations:

> [Richard] asked me a lot, 'What is your one sermon that you go back to over and over again?' And my one sermon has always been that faith doesn't mean anything unless it is put into practice and makes a difference in the way you live your life, and the way you vote, and what we do with poor people and race and so on...(Carroll Wallis Interview 2018).

Joy Carroll first met her husband Jim Wallis (a prominent US religious and political activist) at a Christian arts event and has since advocated for various causes and co-founded the Wild Goose Festival, an annual gathering which merges justice, spirituality, and art (Carroll, 2002).[15]

Rev. Paul Nicolson has also made a life out of championing the underprivileged, being a long-time supporter of the Living Wage campaign[16] and now, in retirement, spearheading a non-profit which advocates for affordable housing and adequate income for all citizens[17] (Nicolson Interview 2019).

Dibley's vicar echoes her real life clergy influencers, with themes of social justice making regular appearances over the twelve years in which the programme aired. The first series especially sets the tone for Geraldine's political and religious perspective, notably in the following episodes:

> ***"Songs of Praise"*** (S01E02)- The vicar's sermon, intended to air on the popular BBC1 programme, acknowledges that there are still those within the church who oppose the ordination of women. However, she expresses deeper concern that people's preoccupation over 'little' things (like potential discomfort at a changing institution) can potentially eclipse the 'big things,' such as helping those who need it, and how we show love to others.
>
> **"The Window and the Weather"** (S01E04)- When a storm damages one of the church's stained glass windows, Geraldine launches an effort to raise the £11,000

[15] http://wildgoosefestival.org/
[16] https://www.livingwage.org.uk/
[17] http://taxpayersagainstpoverty.org.uk/

required to repair it. But after being deeply moved by a televised disaster appeal, she chooses to contribute the majority of the donations to the victims of an earthquake in Colombia, replacing the window with clear glass instead. Her explanation: 'If I'd spent the whole eleven thousand pounds on the window, every time I looked at it all I'd see was those earthquake children.'

Figure 4: Clear Solution to the Window Problem – S01E04

"Election" (S01E05)- Geraldine is encouraged by the villagers to run against the wealthy and privileged incumbent local councillor David Horton, parish council chair and erstwhile antagonist of the new vicar. She agrees because she feels that he isn't concerned for the needs of the people he's meant to protect and serve. In one exchange between the two opponents we see that Geraldine's politics are firmly based in Scripture:

David: What was that socialist tract you were spouting from the pulpit last week?
Geraldine: I've got a feeling it was the Sermon on the Mount.
David: Jesus did not tell rich people to give all their money away.
Geraldine: I think you'll find he did actually!

The fictional vicar frequently cites the Sermon on the Mount as one of her favourite texts—indeed, a primary catalyst for her entering professional ministry (S01E01)— and does not shy away from taking a decisive stand on issues in which she believes, as when she chains herself to the church for several days to protest a developer's plan to raze the village of Dibley and turn it into a reservoir (S03E04).

Whilst the programme did closely follow the theological/political leanings of its consultant priests, it cannot be overlooked that Curtis himself has also long taken a deep personal interest in various charitable efforts, as Rev. Carroll confirms.

> He's the brains behind Comic Relief. He came to the States to try and get America Gives Back (a sister organisation to Comic Relief) off the ground; that was his thing. I met him at a reception with Bill and Melinda Gates, and Bill Gates had him make a little movie about some of his work eradicating poverty and disease. So he's ongoing in his work to make the world a better place (Carroll Wallis Interview 2018).

Indeed, Curtis' passion for social advocacy writes itself into the *Vicar of Dibley* quite prominently at times. In the holiday special which aired on New Year's Day 2005, Geraldine attempts to inspire her parishioners to support the Make Poverty History campaign, a cooperative advocacy appeal aimed at influencing governments to dismantle global structures of economic injustice, and endorsed by Curtis' own Comic Relief organisation.[18] The vicar spends much of the episode trying to coordinate a letter writing campaign to the Prime Minister, insisting that 'it's time to do something about poverty once and for all.' Later, she invites the council members to join her in marching on the G8 Summit wearing white armbands to show their support, and when she sees their hesitance to take a stand, shows them a moving video of two distraught children who are losing both of their parents to the AIDS epidemic. After a couple minutes of very unsettling footage, Geraldine turns around to face her parishioners, only to find that they've already put on the white bands—an undoubtedly powerful dramatic moment, but also one which takes a decisive political stance.

[18] http://www.makepovertyhistory.org/

Figure 5: Banding Together Against Poverty – 'Happy New Year,' 1 January 2005

No official complaint of political bias was filed against the BBC regarding this episode. However it did manage to attract a page-long treatment in the Trust's 2007 impartiality review. The report cites a possible breach of policy regarding the corporation's editorial guidelines which preclude the endorsement of a charity or charitable initiative in dramatic programming,'[19] applicable in this case because Make Poverty History was not an official BBC initiative (Bridcut, 2007, p56).

Richard Curtis argued that because all the main political parties were in favour of the movement, which was not by definition a 'campaign,' it was essentially not controversial and should likewise not have been considered a breach of the corporation's commitment to impartiality. The reviewer on behalf of the Trust disagrees with the writer's assessment, making the case that issues which purport to represent 'the common good' pose a particular risk of bias born of more subtle complicity:

> There are pressures on impartiality that can build from the seductive mixture of the determination and enthusiasm of well-connected talent, the cunning plans of high-profile and well-meaning lobbyists, and the sympathetic involvement of production departments. Indeed, consensus can arguably pose a greater threat... than sharply-defined debate (Bridcut, 2007, p54,56).

[19] Editorial Guidelines: Programmes about Charitable Initiatives. Section 13, p127 (Appendix F)

But Curtis and his colleagues continue to passionately defend the New Year's Day episode, making no apology for the position it takes. James Fleet, who plays David Horton's timid son Hugo, sees the objection coming more because of the high profile which the *Vicar of Dibley* enjoyed throughout its broadcast life, automatically granting a sizable audience to any platform it might have endorsed:

> There was a lot of criticism about the Make Poverty History episode because it was a bit 'in your face.' Sort of like, this is what we should do because it's the right thing to do. It's not controversial at all; what annoys people is the fact that they should, on a very popular show, stick a political comment (Kenwright, 2007).

For his part, Curtis laughs off any claims that the show ever got 'too political,' citing his main character's essential belief in the goodness of humanity as his rationale for interspersing some serious content amidst the comedy:

> I have tried to put in moments where you really understand why Geraldine believes in these things so passionately. It's a funny thing to think that such a sweet programme should have [been thought to have] political intentions (Kenwright, 2007).

French herself was one of the more vocal supporters of the sitcom's periodic attention to social issues.

> I'm the most proud of those episodes out of any of the work we've done, because I thought that it was an extraordinary moment of TV where characters can feel and say something real. The point is, that character *would* do that. It's not as if suddenly we were jumping ship for political purposes (Kenwright, 2007).

So passionate was French about the cause that she turned up in London two weeks after the episode aired, along with Curtis and Mayhew-Archer and hundreds of 'real' female priests in a Downing Street demonstration personally requesting Tony Blair's support for Make Poverty History (Wheeler, 2005). Paul recalls that extraordinary day when fiction and reality blurred, as he and his colleagues were swept up in a tidal wave teeming with the very women who'd inspired the creation of their 'little' sitcom ten years earlier.

> Ten or fifteen women vicars went into meet Tony Blair with Richard and Dawn, and I stood outside with all the rest (singing 'Kumbaya' to the most bewildered security men I've ever seen in my life.) I remember saying to

> Richard on the walk down, 'Why do they seem so much more joyous than most of the male vicars I've come across? And he said, 'I think it's because this is their moment; this is their time. Whereas the male vicars, their time was 200 years ago and they sort of know it!' (Mayhew-Archer Interview 2019)

Figure 6: Vicars, Fictional and Real, on Downing Street – Bruno Vincent, 2005

Off-Colour Television

Because it attracted such a wide viewership, the *Vicar of Dibley* was bound to receive criticism from time to time, whether for its audacity to normalise women priests or its equally shameless promotion of social causes. However, these objections were not the only disapproval which the programme encountered. There were a number of occasions when the objections were neither religious nor political, but rather concerns of morality.

In particular, the episode where the village of Dibley receives its own radio frequency for broadcasting local shows (S02E02) provoked various audience members to complain that the show's crude humour had gone a step too far for its 8:30 pm time slot. A collection of letters received by the Broadcasting Standards Commission took issue

with the episode's frequent use of profane and 'colourful' language, with many specific examples cited. Aside from this, the most controversial points appeared to be a proposed radio debate topic about having sex with poodles, as well as elderly villager Frank Pickle's live on-air admission that he was gay and had once fallen in love with 'a young farm hand called Justin.' The majority of objectors found the references inappropriate for children, with one sardonically inquiring whether the watershed had actually been moved back an hour.

In this case the BBC defended its acclaimed sitcom in an official response to those who had taken issue with the episode:

> The scriptwriters have succeeded in providing a plot and dialogue which attract more than ten million viewers weekly. It is broadcast in the latest time-slot available before the watershed, and aims to appeal to a wider audience than those in families with young children…What was once regarded as 'vulgar language 'has now entered everyday vocabulary, which we believe can be used acceptably in a lively comedy such as this.[20]

The sitcom's creators do not deny that their programme often took bold strides over the line of decency, but they also argue that the outrageous gags and racy dialogue became part of the show's essential appeal. Dibley's vicar was a real woman with many vices, and so were her parishioners. But even a plucky comedienne with the reputation of Dawn French was surprised at times:

> We've been able to get away with things I can't believe I would ever have got away with in any other show. But then you have to remember, Richard Curtis is one of the rudest people you could ever meet (Kenwright, 2007).

The producer/writer does not attempt to refute this albeit tongue-in-cheek accusation:

> One of the great joys about *The Vicar of Dibley* is that under the soft woolly clothing of the 'sheep of niceness,' we've actually been able to be quite…sort of…rude and offensive. Until told by the BBC that I actually can't do [it] for legal reasons, nothing would stop me putting in any joke that we hoped was funny, and that [I] and the cast and Paul [Mayhew-Archer] thought was fun (Kenwright, 2007).

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[20] BBC Written Archives Centre, File ID 21300427 'Vicar of Dibley,' G/BSC/1998/Dibley, 8 January 1997.

Curtis does, however, defend his motives in producing a comedy—even one involving the church and its clergy—which was undeniably risqué:

> Dawn is very good...so that you could write lots of naughty, disrespectful stuff in the knowledge that no matter how rude she was about anybody, you would never think that there was any malice (Kenwright, 2007).

Director Gareth Carrivick confirms the essentially guileless nature of the characters' indecorous behaviour:

> Anything they do that might be 'non PC' is done out of complete innocence, not out of any viciousness, and therefore you get away with some things that you wouldn't normally get away with (Kenwright, 2007).

The programme's comedic nature was both its appeal and perhaps also its excuse for being less than pure. In the final analysis, nothing the residents of Dibley could do or say was enough to keep viewers from inviting them into their homes, year on year.

Fantasy Meets Reality

It is difficult to deny that Richard Curtis' imaginary vicar eventually assumed a stature almost larger than life, with fiction and reality appearing to coalesce in a sort of 'permeable diegesis' (Burton, 2000, p 117-18), in the wake of *Dibley*'s popularity. The lead actor recalls receiving 'written requests to perform actual christenings, weddings and exorcisms from actual people in their actual lives' (French, 2008, p328). Producer Jon Plowman confirms,

> Dawn certainly got letters from parishes asking her to be their vicar. She also was asked to events in favour of the ordination of women and was heaped with praise (Interview 2019).

French was even invited to deliver a "Thought for the Day" on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme as part of the station's designated 'character invasion' promotion, in which 'Geraldine Granger' delivers a message, written by Curtis, urging the Roman Catholic Pope and Archbishop of Canterbury to unite their influence and call for an end to worldwide poverty (whilst still managing to slip in a reference to ice cream) (Curtis, 2014).

In another odd coincidence, a Wiltshire rector whose name happened to be Richard Curtis made a public clarification in his parish newsletter, apologising that he was not, in fact, the creator/writer of *The Vicar of Dibley* as some of them had mistakenly believed (Moore, 2017).

Even with all the media attention the fictional vicar attracted over the years, the show's creators never failed to acknowledge the honest roots from which their beloved character had sprung. They refused to discuss the programme without also clarifying that their television priest had been based on a real life clergywoman, the Rev. Joy Carroll:

> [Dawn] said, 'I'm not going to do any TV interviews, no newspaper interviews unless Joy is with me.' She wanted to deflect the story onto the real priest and what the purpose of the show was that she was committed to as well. So it was great. And that's what gave me that wonderful opportunity to be introduced to the media. Because they wanted to talk to her, they had to talk to me (Carroll Wallis Interview 2018).

Some would argue that *The Vicar of Dibley* actually played a small role in raising the profile not only of women priests, but of the church itself. Even the Bishop of Reading admitted a broad ecclesiastical approval for the programme when questioned by the writer's wife Julie at a public dinner. Regarding the church's view of the show, his reply was something to the effect of, 'I think on balance it is generally regarded as what we would call a good thing' (Mayhew-Archer Interview 2019).

Beyond benign endorsement, Rev. Paul Nicolson, former vicar of Turville, suggests that *Dibley* may have presented ideas about 'faith in action' in a way which somehow made religion seem relevant beyond the sanctuary doors:

> It was extremely good in sowing seeds—Christian seeds—because it wanted to. [The creators] actually did want to do that, wide of the normal conventional boring old church that doesn't somehow communicate itself to an awful lot of people. [The programme] makes a point about what the church is. And it does it by *doing* things; it doesn't do it by *speaking* things, and I think that's been immensely effective, and very good in that it pulls the church's leg, but it says some serious things about Christianity (Interview 2019).

Rev. Carroll believes that it accomplished this even during a time where the decline of the institution was measurable and undeniable, primarily by creating a vicar with an irresistibly magnetic personality.

> Richard Curtis and Dawn and myself—we were really excited to present a character that was much more relevant and likeable [than past fictional portrayals], and that would make God 'attractive.' He wanted her to be a warm lovable character where people would [say], 'I want to go to *her* church' (Carroll Wallis Interview 2018).

Viewers did, indeed, develop an enduring affection for Geraldine Granger, one which would likely have attracted a regular influx of visitors to her quirky, rural parish of St. Barnabus...had it actually existed. Granted, the real Oxfordshire church where the series was filmed does still in fact enjoy a modest stream of tourists curious to see the place where Dibley's vicar first made a name for herself. And in yet another fusion of fact and fiction, the same church wrapped a giant white band around its tower in 2005 to support Make Poverty History.[21]

Figure 7: That's a Wrap – St. Mary's Turville, March 2005

[21] http://www.hambleden-valley-churches.org.uk/TURindex.htm

Turning the Tide

Richard Curtis never attempted to conceal his intention to normalise the idea of ordained women, wishing for his audience to regard it as not simply palatable, but as manifestly advantageous as he himself considered it to be. Dawn French, his enormously popular comedic lead, was well aware of the programme's intent when she signed on:

> He knew what he wanted to do, definitely. And he had an agenda—I would call it a 'hidden agenda,' but it wasn't hidden at all (Kenwright, 2007).

Alongside this not so secret motive, the creators of the sitcom set out to portray a feisty, funny and compassionate priest who could bring tears as well as laughs, and who never made her character an object of ridicule. In the final analysis, did Curtis and French achieve their aim of influencing hearts and minds?

Certainly in the beginning—as with the controversial vote itself—there was some backlash to the idea. Rev. Carroll remembers how the programme's producers braced themselves for the anticipated repercussions:

> It was a time when there was a lot of emotion going around. [The producers] said to me, 'We don't really want to put you on the credits because we want to protect you; we don't want you to get the same barrage of reaction that we will get.' And they did—they were right—they did get it, and I didn't (Interview 2018).

Writer Mayhew-Archer recalls being 'congratulated' by a woman on his local council for his involvement with a programme which she interpreted as 'proof—if proof were needed—that women vicars are a very bad idea.' In this particular woman's view, Geraldine was 'too silly' and frequently made inappropriate jokes, which effectively disqualified her from being taken seriously as a credible vicar and thus reinforced the opinion still held by some that women should not be ordained (Mayhew-Archer Interview 2019). Although this reading of *Dibley* stands in rather stark contrast to the creators' original intentions, it's an interpretation that sometimes surfaces amongst like-minded critics of female clerics.

Being the most visible face of the programme, Dawn French was also on the receiving end of many opponents' feedback, but these were mostly from those who saw only too clearly what the sitcom was attempting to do.

> I got a lot of mail which I've kept, actually, quite a lot of it from vicars (men) – very very angry. Angry about the situation, and very angry that we were being so up front and normalising it in such a very public way. Some very bad language... which we later went on to use in the programme, so it was useful (Kenwright, 2007).

The timeworn objections to the idea of women clergy do seem to be planted directly into the mouth of willful traditionalist David Horton, especially when Geraldine first arrives. Episode One finds him spouting the following disparagements at the 'insane joke' of having been assigned a female priest:

> 'I won't have my village used like a laboratory animal to see if woman vicars work!'
>
> 'If Jesus wanted women to spread the Gospel, he'd have appointed them.'
>
> 'It's Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, not Sharon, Tracy, Tara and Debbie!'
>
> 'Our little community does not react well to a vicar in high heels!'

Mr. Horton maintains that the idea of ordaining women is still regarded as heresy by most 'right thinking Anglicans,' and further denigrates the vicar's gender when BBC's *Songs of Praise* shows interest in featuring her and Dibley's church on its programme. He audaciously claims that the broadcaster must be trying to attract viewers who will tune in only because 'the vicar's got a nice pair of knockers' (S01E02).

Even in the face of such insults, Geraldine doesn't seem to allow the stubborn squire to get the better of her, and never becomes openly combative toward him. In fact, she remains frustratingly good natured and simply sticks to her principles without compromising who she is. And with the passing of years, even her most vocal objector gradually warms to Dibley's first woman priest, with David eventually calling her 'the best vicar we've ever had,' and actually finding himself falling in love with her (S03E03).

After the initial dust had settled, it was equally clear that once most viewers had allowed Geraldine into their sitting rooms, she'd managed to work her way into their hearts as well. Following the successful run of its first two series, *Dibley* aired four seasonally titled specials (sometimes referred to as Series Three) over the holiday period of 1999/2000 with subsequent festive offerings in 2004/5 and 2006/7, all of which rated

amongst the top ten UK programmes of the year.[22] It also received six BAFTA television nominations,[23] three British Comedy Awards (two for individual actors),[24] and ranked a respectable third in the public vote for *Britain's Best Sitcom* (BBC Two, 2004).

French is quick to emphasize that although the programme may have started with an 'un-hidden' agenda, its continued popularity was more about the comedic interactions between the characters:

> It wasn't that the series was about female priests, necessarily. It *was* initially, and then it very quickly wasn't; it was about a group of people (Kenwright, 2007).

Producer Jon Plowman concurs, further suggesting that the choice to create the *Vicar of Dibley* as a sitcom rather than a more serious drama may have played a contributing role in the fictional clergywoman's favorable reception, as well as the relatively gentle manner in which the potentially contentious issue was handled.

> I think that comedy makes some serious subjects palatable and acceptable in a way that drama can't. We were able to make it not a show about an issue but a show about a quirky community and about the difference between rural and urban Britain. I don't think that a serious drama could have done this, and our attitude to the subject of ordination was only a small part of the show. Comedy made it normal that a parish might be sent a woman vicar and that some would love her and some find it tricky; laughter is a healer and a forgiver. Also, we had to make [it] work for all the non-Christian viewers, so the comedy was always the heart of the show (Plowman Interview 2019).

Television scholars such as Lucia Krämer agree that *Dibley*'s comedic structure was potentially conducive to fulfilling on the programme's intended aim:

> Because of its comedy of superiority towards the oddball characters, it creates inclusion on the level of the audience, and the normalisation of the eccentric on the story level finally translates as a call for tolerance and inclusion in the real world, advocating the acceptance of the unconventional or unfamiliar, such as women priests (2016, p218).

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[22] Broadcasters' Audience Research Board (https://www.barb.co.uk/)
[23] http://awards.bafta.org/
[24] http://www.britishcomedyawards.com/

However, Krämer further argues that the same strategy the creators intended to 'normalise' the vicar—ie. placing her within a village of absurd but loveable characters—actually bestows upon Dibley a sort of insularity and outlandishness devoid of the acerbity intrinsic to social satire, which may have the effect of neutralising its central message to some degree (p216). Still, she affirms the popular 1990s sitcom as remarkable among most of its predecessor priest portrayals, due to the programme's comparatively 'mild and benevolent' treatment of its ecclesial lead (2016, p223).

The BFI's online screen review of the show agrees with Krämer's conclusion, calling French's 'sexy, outspoken and modern' characterisation of Geraldine 'a genuine innovation from earlier comic depictions of the clergy' (Hamad, 2015).

The Women Respond

Rev. Carroll and many of her colleagues insist that *The Vicar of Dibley* has indeed had a lasting positive effect on a national psyche coming to terms with significant changes shaking major institutions such as the Church of England.

> It really did change the culture; it changed the way people felt about women priests. People come up to them in the supermarket and say, 'You are one of those "Vicar of Dibleys!"[sic]' because that's their frame of reference now— that's what's in their living room. All my women clergy friends—I was anxious that they would be angry with me or say, 'What did you *do* to us? But most of the women felt that [the programme] did a good job and helped them to be received in a positive way by people in the communities and the parishes that they were working in (Carroll Wallis Interview 2018).

In contrast to the early negative missives from angry male vicars, French began, over time, to see the critical tide turn as ordained women made their approval known:

> I've had a very good response from people who are in the church, mostly female priests, and they really liked it. They've written for fashion advice…where did you get that jumper? (Wheatcroft, 1995).

But the appeal of French's fictional vicar went well beyond couture. Her portrayal of a clergywoman as both comedic and flawed seemed to figure heavily in Rev. Geraldine's being accepted as a trailblazer in the world of Anglican clergy, lending some

humanity to her real-life sisters of the cloth who were ever aware of how closely they were being scrutinized. Rev. Carroll explains:

> The danger was [that] all these women were being ordained and everybody was watching—especially those who were opposed or weren't sure—to make sure that they weren't going to screw up, that they were going to get it right; they were looking at every little thing. And so I felt that the show was a really good way of saying, 'Hey, you know we are all human and you can't put us on that pedestal.' Here you had an opportunity to break that a little bit and say, we are vulnerable. We do fall in love. We do get addicted to things. And we do screw up and need forgiveness; we are not these exemplary leaders that are perfect (Carroll Wallis Interview 2018).

Amanda Bloor, former vicar of 'real life' Dibley, affirms the notion that Geraldine's imperfect but good-hearted portrayal made a lasting impact on public perceptions of women priests, being preferable to unrealistic notions of 'priestly perfection.'

> [The programme] may have presented a caricature of female clericalism, with the eponymous heroine more likely to be shown gorging on chocolate or fantasising about handsome parishioners than engaged in prayer or the Occasional Offices, but her kindness, her dedication to her calling and the genuine love she displayed for her parishioners went a long way to normalising the ordination of women... and demonstrating that it was possible for clergy to be likable, caring and pastorally inclined (Bloor, 2012, p135-6).

The fictional vicar's fallibility spoke meaningfully to many clergywomen, dozens of whom gathered in 2019 at St. Paul's Cathedral to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the ordination of women to the Anglican priesthood. Presiding over the event was the Rt Revd and Rt Hon Dame Sarah Mullally, the newly elected (and first female) Bishop of London, who agrees that *The Vicar of Dibley* had an effect on the public's overall perception of women priests, saying that it made the idea 'more accessible to people' (St. Paul's Interviews 2019).

Nearly every vicar surveyed at the anniversary celebration agreed that Geraldine's humanity was her strongest asset, and that she brought a refreshing buoyancy to an issue which was—and for some, remains—quite contentious.

The Rev. Dr. Anna Poulson, incumbent for St. John in Southall (West London), still enjoys watching reruns of the now twenty-five-year-old sitcom:

> It was ahead of its time, I think. And we miss it because we need that reminder: what women have brought uniquely that was not being brought before. [Geraldine] was such a human: funny, light, ordinary, normal, simple.

The 'imperfect vicar' also appealed to Clare Dowding, rector at St. Paul's in Marylebone, where all three serving clergy are women.

> What I liked about it was the kind of vulnerability and flaws that it showed—not only in her, but also in the congregation, and the sense of community that comes out of that [shared] weakness. And in terms of our urban ministry, that's a very common story. So I think that was really helpful, portraying the rawness of ministry.

Rev. Dowding is less eager to have direct comparisons made between herself and the fictitious cleric, periodically deflecting comments such as 'You're just like the Vicar of Dibley!' but acknowledging that even those moments provide an opportunity for dialogue.

> It gives people a starting point, I think, which is quite interesting, so they have something to hook that on, particularly if they're completely outside the church. I would say that most people who make that reference—maybe at a funeral or a baptism—want to talk a little bit about ministry and are not quite sure of a way in. I think the model of ministry [Geraldine] lived out and portrayed was very different [from Dowding's urban setting]. So sometimes I have to do a little bit of taking apart what people saw in that, and putting a bit of reality on it.

One of Rev. Bloor's colleagues in Oxfordshire had similar experiences with being likened to Dibley's fictional vicar, but didn't actually take offense to the comparison because '…the fact that she's very much a parish priest is actually who I am' (Bloor, 2012, p137).

Rev. Debbie Hore, associate minister at a church just North of London, believes that Geraldine's character set a new tone for how all vicars—not only women—could be represented in fiction, given the beleaguered lampoons of the past:

> Before that, most priests on TV seemed to be bumbling idiots. So I think it's even helped with the male clergy, because it was the first one that portrayed [a vicar] just as an ordinary person.

Carroll concurs that the sitcom actually served a wider good (beyond simply normalising women's ordination) in that it went a step further and offered a refreshing alternative to *all* the tired stereotypes for clergy, where neither males nor females are truly allowed to be authentic.

> We didn't like the way it looked on men either, and we wanted to bring something new. When you're in that world, you see men who struggle to fit into that—you squeeze yourself into this expectation of a role. And I think that whatever you do, whether it's in the church or in the world, you have to be yourself and authentic, warts and all. And when we build walls around ourselves and don't let people in and see our vulnerability—which clergy often do—I think it protects you at first but then it sets you up for failure later on (Interview 2018).

By the year 2006, just twelve years after the Church of England saw its first female priests, there were slightly higher numbers of women ordained to the ministry than men. One church spokesperson put this down, in part at least, to the so-called 'Vicar of Dibley effect,' whereby candidates who might have been feeling some sort of pull to service found encouragement and reinforcement from the ongoing popularity of Dawn French's strong yet very human character (Butt, 2007).

Rev. Bloor witnessed this phenomenon when, after completing her service in Turville, she became the Director of Ordinands as well as the Dean of Women's Ministry in the Diocese of Oxford.

> I remember talking to people about why they felt they were being called to ordained ministry and they mentioned [the programme] as one of those times. Many women were feeling that they had to be so much better than the men to have any chance. You're under such scrutiny and I think many people looked at [*Dibley*] and it gave them the chance to say that perhaps the calling that they'd dismissed until that point as being impossible might be possible after all. Although Geraldine Granger was a very flawed role model and not a terribly positive example of female ministry, she was very significant in encouraging people to consider whether they had a vocation or not because I think she was so accessible. She wasn't perfect. She was good hearted. She was very pastoral, and I think a lot of people saw that and said, 'Actually, I could do that; maybe God is calling me to it.' So I think the very fact that she was a flawed model made it possible for women to consider it (Interview 2019).

This was certainly true in the case of Rev. Dr. Julia Candy, who also attended the women's ordination anniversary service in London. Once a party-loving nightclub bouncer in Belfast, the young woman could scarcely see a future for someone like herself in professional ministry, even though she'd dreamed of being a priest since the age of fourteen (Wetzel, 2013). It's hardly surprising, then, that a bodacious vicar obsessed with chocolate, wine and Hollywood hunks caught her attention. Rev. Candy, now Priest in Charge at a Northwest London parish, recalls:

> *The Vicar of Dibley* made me think, 'I can do this!' I *can*, simply, just as myself. She was a good person, and for me it's about not taking yourself too seriously. I think she showed that (St. Paul's Interviews 2019).

Even Jon Plowman, who helped create Geraldine's fictional world, had a 'real world' experience of this when his former English teacher Wendy Carey—now an Associate Priest at St. Frideswide's Church in Milton Keynes—shared with him just how important *Dibley* was for her, and for 'the cause of women priests.' (Plowman, 2018, p174).

Not So Funny After All

Whilst French's fictional vicar may have indeed played a role in encouraging a new generation of women clergy, her reception wasn't always universally positive. One dissenting view amongst the clergywomen at the 2019 anniversary celebration came from Northwest London vicar Kate Harrison, who fears that the very humour which made Geraldine so popular might also have had the effect of diminishing women priests. At the same time, Rev. Harrison—who still gets called 'priest-ess' in some settings—understands the programme's choice of comedy over drama during such a volatile era of change:

> I don't think at that time it could have been done any other way. [But] I'm not sure…I think it showed women as a bit bumbling and not quite to be taken seriously (Cathedral Interviews 2019).

Senior Lecturer Claire Walsh, who has examined representations of women in arenas such as politics, the church and the environmental movement, heard Harrison's concern echoed in at least one interview with a clergywomen who feared that Dibley's

vicar might simply have been a continuation of television's tendency to trivialise the clergy, only this time with a female as the butt of the joke.

> [The respondent] felt that the character played by French is likely to perpetuate, rather than challenge, the popular image of vicars, and in this case women vicars, as figures of fun at a time when they are striving to be taken seriously. While Geraldine is both a strong and attractive character, much of her humour is self-denigrating...Although the series has undoubtedly countered some stereotypical assumptions about women priests, it may have reinforced others (2000, p13-14).

Retired canon Hilary Wakeman believes that French's comic vicar might have succeeded overall in diffusing stereotypes of women vicars, but *only* because she stands in such implausible contrast to any real life clergywoman:

> The caricature of a forceful and aggressive woman minister seems to be fading. Possibly the sting was drawn by *The Vicar of Dibley*, television's series about a lovely but terrible woman vicar who must have been an amalgam of everyone's worst fears' (1996, p15).

It is true that Geraldine comes across as a decisively unshrinking presence, regardless of how much compassion she may feel towards the hapless villagers of Dibley. And surely she had many potentially embarrassing moments over her twelve year tenure on BBC One. The vicar is frequently unable to control her impulses, both privately and publicly, and also often betrays a terrible insecurity in spite of her outward bravado. She appears perpetually fixated on her appearance and how she's coming across to potential love interests, and falls hard when they disappoint her. But she does know how to ask forgiveness for her faults (e.g. getting swept up by celebrity, as previously noted) and eventually comes around to sanity and perspective in her personal life as well. More than anything, though, Geraldine seems to occur as relatable, as many vicars recognised themselves in her very human plight, and a generation of television viewers found themselves unexpectedly blessed by her presence.

Rev. Lucy Winkett, Incumbent at St. James's, Piccadilly, attempted to summarise the programme's essential influence:

> I gather that more people watch *The Vicar of Dibley* each week than attend church. Dawn French is possibly the most recognisably famous religious woman in the

> UK…and while her character can't be called serious, and the series has drawbacks as a public portrayal of the church, it is to my mind a not unsympathetic stereotype. She is a strong character, blessed with a life-saving sense of humour; and a genuine poignancy develops as she cares for and is cared for by the 'odd' collection of villagers she has around her (2002, p20).

The Limitations of Television

Despite significant anecdotal indications that *The Vicar of Dibley* positively influenced public views regarding women priests, it is perhaps irresponsible to overestimate the lasting impact which one sitcom can truly effect. After 'St. Barnabus' closed it doors for the last time in 2007, with cast and crew packed up and headed for new creative horizons, the real women clergy of the Anglican Church still had a long road ahead of them. And whilst many of them felt bolstered by their fictional champion's triumphs, they were also aware that no television character, regardless of popularity, could truly present the full spectrum of what female priests deal with on a daily basis.

As previously mentioned, much of the vocal opposition to female priests came from male colleagues, some of whom genuinely bore fear approaching the irrational at the implications of the change. Mayhew-Archer was invited to attend the Oxford Diocese's 25th anniversary celebration of women's ordination, and recalls hearing an anecdote involving a clergyman's anxiety that he might unexpectedly find himself at a service of worship where a woman was preaching. The vicar in question feared that such a situation would be 'exceedingly embarrassing' and that he would be obliged to walk out. In order to placate him, the diocesan staff suggested that he simply check the service information ahead of time, which would announce the preacher's name, at which he expressed further concern that the name might be 'Billy' or 'Chris' or some other androgynous moniker. When they facetiously suggested the printing of a gender symbol beside the name to denote 'male' or 'female,' the anxious vicar took them entirely seriously and seemed genuinely mollified by the proposal (Mayhew-Archer Interview 2019).

The very presence of Anglican clergywomen as visible reminders of the evolving priesthood can evoke reactions from their colleagues, as a Birmingham lecturer discovered.

> Stephanie was an area dean and was required to attend the ordination service of a member of her team. However, this occurred in a church which was opposed to women's ordination. As she narrates, 'I went to the new licensing robed, and I caused such a row that all the other clergy that had come walked out … Seeing a woman robed was so offensive' (Page, 2014, p301).

Resistance to change extends across the levels of leadership in the C of E. Nearly a decade after the vote approving the ordination of women, Clare Walsh made a somewhat discouraging observation about the hierarchy:

> The second and third most senior appointments in the church are currently held by men who do not ordain women as priests and do not have a record of appointing women to positions of responsibility (2000, p6).

Even as recently as 2017, interviews with women clergy found that they face regular opposition to their presence in the roles to which they nevertheless feel called, and in which they persevere despite ever declining resources and support. The fact that women's ordination has been going on for a quarter of a century hasn't changed everyone's minds.

> What is clear is that the implicit (and often explicit) prejudice against clergywomen and expectations of a religious minister as being situated in a male body still resonates very strongly some 20 years later (Greene, 2017, p117).

Greene's interviewees also reveal that women may feel less able to complain about the discrimination they experience, given the peculiar nature of the profession as a 'calling,' in which a degree of personal sacrifice is perhaps expected.

In some respects, as Walsh has further observed, the ongoing challenges of clergywomen may seem very removed indeed from the world of a sitcom, where problems generally resolve within the space of thirty minutes.

> Richard Curtis conceptualised Geraldine as a character who, 'in moments of conflict, has to be the soul of sweetness.' [The Times, 5 November]. Such saintly restraint may be possible for Geraldine in the face of the comic antics of the inhabitants of Dibley, but it may be much less so for the many women priests who have had to confront hostility and abuse from their parishioners (2000, p14).

One can scarcely expect a single half hour programme to completely transform the entrenched views of a long-standing institution such as the Church of England. Still, when considering the limits of television versus its actual power to affect the minds and hearts of its audience, what this fictional programme did achieve over the course of twelve years can be considered remarkable. Conceived in a heated debate over 'flying bishops,' it is somehow fitting that the programme's parting camera shot features an exultant Rev. Geraldine literally launching into the clouds and soaring over Dibley after emerging from the church, newly married. Because essentially, what Richard Curtis' brainchild managed to do was to take an issue weighed down by centuries of contentious tradition, infuse it with life and levity, and watch as their little comedy took flight—bringing scores of 'leading ladies' along for the ride.

* * *

Summary

The creators of *The Vicar of Dibley* can be regarded as largely successful in presenting a fictional clergywoman who endeared herself to audiences around the world, a character who would become one of the all time favourites in British television history. Beyond being just a figure of comic entertainment, Rev. Geraldine Granger played the role of trailblazer as one of the first highly visible woman priests (albeit a fictional one), being herself based on a real life clergywoman.

The programme sought to present a sympathetic portrayal of vicars—specifically women—which stood in contrast to prior decades of caricatured clerics on television. By centering itself on the singularly sane character of the vicar whilst highlighting the absurdity of her co-stars, the sitcom attempted to avoid making its heroine a figure of derision or ridicule.

Whilst not always presenting details regarding the church and its procedures completely accurately, *Dibley* did use humour in attempting to persuade its audience of

the merits of women priests, primarily by presenting a clergywoman who was likeable, entertaining and very human. It also took decisive positions on social issues, echoing the views both of its socially-minded creators and its clergy consultants, who were progressive theologians and activists.

The programme did receive criticism from time to time, mostly from those who felt it was too racy for its time slot, or from those who were strongly opposed to women being ordained. Overall, though, it succeeded as a popular sitcom in the eyes of its vast audience and of the women clergy whom it was attempting to represent.

Whilst *The Vicar of Dibley* may have been limited in terms of what it could reasonably accomplish as a sitcom, in addition to attaining indisputable comedic success, the positive impact it did have upon the culture's view of women priests is nonetheless impressive.

This 1990s clerical comedy also represents a first significant step in producing a show centered around a priest character who is based on a real vicar, substantially researched with input from actual clergy, and presented as a complex and sympathetic personality, a practice which the next case study adopts in a considerably more comprehensive way.

7

The Devil in the Details: BBC's *Rev.* Strikes Close to Home

The bucolic hills of Oxfordshire are a far cry from the chaos of East London. Three years after St. Barnabus, Dibley figuratively closed its doors, Adam Smallbone arrived on BBC Two's *Rev.*, the story of a country priest transplanted from rural Suffolk to the gritty intersection of traffic, addicts and funding shortfalls in his new Hackney parish. Whilst initially faced with inevitable comparisons to *Dibley*, the new half hour comedy/drama found its own place as a laboriously researched programme with prodigious input from scores of Anglican vicars for the duration of its three series. With plot lines heavily drawn from real life accounts, clergy viewers especially found *Rev.* to be surprisingly truthful— sometimes uncomfortably so—as a narrative of urban parish ministry.

* * *

More TV, Vicar?

By 2010, *The Vicar of Dibley* had settled comfortably into the nation's collective nostalgia, reappearing for annual holiday re-runs and even less frequent Comic Relief sketches, with two final 10 minute installments airing in 2013 and 2015, respectively. Rev. Geraldine's place in British comedy history was secured. But who would attempt to

follow Dawn French's inimitable woman cleric? Furthermore, did viewers even have any appetite for more priestly comedy? Tom Hollander, at least, believed they might.

Hollander was a theatre-trained actor who'd made several notable film appearances, among them *Gosford Park* (2001), *Pride & Prejudice* (2005) and two installments of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise (2006, 2007). But it is fair to say that he was still seeking a truly breakout leading role, a project which would allow him both creative autonomy and potential recognition (Interview 2019).

The actor had recently found himself somewhat bemused at several incidents involving the Anglican church and its priests, specifically regarding the still prevalent practice whereby C of E schools give priority places to students who are baptised and/or whose parents are regular church attendees. Thus parish priests often find themselves the target of unexpected importunity. Hollander explains:

> There was a vicar in Kensington who suddenly was having members of the then shadow cabinet fighting over themselves to get their children into his school, and he'd consequently become very significant socially in West London...and [I] thought that was funny, the idea of a sort of unworldly vicar suddenly being thrust into the centre of the metropolis and being fought over (Cattaneo, 2014, Commentary S01E01).

In another case, the actor was invited by his 'oldest atheist friend' to attend his child's christening as a godparent (Hollander Interview 2019), and found himself...

> ...remembering as we stood over the font that he'd rejoiced when we were at university in disproving the existence of God to his mother and made her cry over Christmas turkey, and I thought, 'Ah, what's happened to him? I don't remember his sudden conversion...' And that also was about getting his kids into school, and so that was where the predicament of an urban vicar started (Cattaneo, 2014, Commentary S01E01).

It seemed to Tom that this scenario might make an entertaining feature film, so he shared it with friend and writer James Wood, with whom he'd recently collaborated:

> [Tom] phoned me up and said, 'Why don't we do a movie about the life of an urban priest? And I said, I think this could be TV because I think there are loads of stories we could do. Why just do one? (Wood Interview 2018).

The actor wasn't initially convinced that a television series was a good idea.

> I didn't want to do a sitcom. In a way, I was the one who kept slowing it down. I kept saying, 'I don't want to do six episodes; I only want to do one—can we just do a pilot and see if it works, and if it doesn't then we don't have to embarrass ourselves? (Hollander Interview 2019)

But the project soon gathered momentum and partners who were equally enthusiastic as Wood to create a new television comedy: director Peter Cattaneo (*The Full Monty*, 1997) and producer Kenton Allen (*The Royle Family*, 1999-2000). 'It was a good idea at the right time and the right collection of talents,' recalls the writer, 'and it flew through the layers of the BBC in a way that most things don't' (Wood Interview 2018). Even Hollander had to admit that his seed of an idea was taking on a life of its own:

> It happened much faster than things normally go apparently. I didn't know that. But we got green lights pretty quickly all over the place (Interview 2019).

Not the Vicar of Dibley

The creators of *Rev.* set out, as did *Dibley*, to distinguish their character from the historical parodies of clerics woven deep within the historical fabric of British entertainment media, and to bring something new to the portrayal of a vicar.

> What we were trying to do with *Rev.* was find a world that there's a bit of a myth or misperception about. It's a good area for research because there is a very rich tradition of the British laughing at priests, especially in literature; it goes back centuries, back to Chaucer. There are really funny priests in Jane Austen. So you're very aware of all that history when you write a priest comedy. Huge amounts of the dialogue and the situations just came out of research, which is why I think it feels more authentic than certain British priest depictions—certainly comic priest depictions over the years (Wood Interview 2018).

Hollander attributes part of the ease with which the BBC approved the project to the fact that there was, in his opinion, a 'vicar-shaped vacancy' on the small screen (Interview 2019). After the dominance of *Dibley*, there had been no worthy successor to the beloved countryside clergywoman. In fact, this did have a bearing on how the new priest comedy would take shape, as network commissioners insisted upon knowing exactly how their programme would differ from BBC One's perennial viewer favourite (Grant, 2010). As much as Curtis had wanted *his* vicar to be as far removed from past

clerical caricatures as possible, so did Hollander and Wood want theirs to be distinct from Geraldine Granger.

> [*The Vicar of Dibley*] was clearly rural, a bit more of a studio sitcom, probably funnier than *Rev.* in that it's more gag-led. You might argue that it wasn't hugely interested in issues of faith; it was interested in being funny primarily. Whereas Tom and I wanted to write a show that really burrowed into what it was like to be a frontline urban priest. And we were really keen to tackle a crisis of faith, which is not a storyline I think *Dibley* would ever do (Wood Interview 2018).

Whilst Hollander also preferred a more critical exploration of clerical issues than Curtis and French had presented, the development of the character's serious side was admittedly more personally motivated for the actor. Having made a memorable portrayal of Austen's obsequious Mr. Collins, Hollander was nonetheless eager to shed the image of the ridiculous clergyman.

> I actually didn't want it to be a comedy particularly. I didn't want it to be another sitcom with a silly vicar because I didn't want to play a silly vicar. Because as an actor I was wanting to get away from playing idiots at that point, and it seems that most of the portraits of vicars involved a level of foolishness—anything from Rowan Atkinson to Derek Nimmo. We actually rather thought that even *The Vicar of Dibley* was foolish in a way that I didn't want to be foolish (Interview 2019).

In the end, however, he conceded that some of what they were trying to avoid—namely comedy—was the very thing which would rescue the programme from a sense of despondency which could have overwhelmed the plot. What had worked well for introducing the nation to women vicars could also be useful in dealing with the manifold issues plaguing an Anglican priest.

> With hindsight, we were rather cocky, frankly, thinking that we were being radically different. Because [*Dibley*] was very contemporary, and we were more sitcom-y than I was initially aspiring to be. And in [a] sense we were no different from that. [Like Geraldine], Adam was the kind of everyman who was at the centre of a bizarre collection of eccentrics. [*Rev.*] was a sitcom format, (half-hour long); it had sitcom structure. The vicar would be there; something would come into his world that he wanted to try and change and change was never available, and so you'd end up back in the place you were at the beginning of the episode (Hollander Interview 2019).

Similarities aside, the new programme played very differently to *Dibley* given its urban focus, absence of live audience or laugh track, and heavier storylines. From a genre perspective, although it may have followed a basic sitcom format, it could technically be classified as 'dramedy[25],' the punctuation of essentially serious plots with humour.

This combination of tragic and comic elements seemed particularly appropriate in depicting a real world situation which is often fraught with both. Hollander describes the clerical predicament they were attempting to portray, where the vicar is essentially...

> ...trapped in his building, trapped by the limitations of his role, trapped by the cloth that he has to wear, trapped by what's expected of him...all of that is very good for comedy. It's somebody trying to escape the limitations of their life and being unable to. And then we tried to introduce drama elements which went all the way through, and to take seriously the difficulty of it. And then it became more interesting (Interview 2019).

The series' writer likewise recognised a tragic humour in the life of an urban vicar which lends itself well to the small screen, and would be immediately recognised by any viewing clergy.

> ...most priests are far too educated for most of what they do. Occasionally doing a bit of sermonising...that's one of the central tensions that is quite interesting at the heart of a priest's life that is both funny and dramatic, is that they are massively overeducated for people basically putting on jumble sales. It's hilarious (Wood Interview 2018).

Producer Hannah Pescod discovered—in a manner roughly similar to the makers of *Dibley*—that the medium of comedy gave *Rev.* a unique platform to explore the church and its vicars in a thoughtful yet entertaining way.

> I think actually for us the subject matter gives you licence to do things that you don't a) in a comedy, or b) generally. You can ask those big questions and explore them and faith and what it's all about in a way that you'd be accused of being a bit heavy-handed or didactic if you were doing that in a different context, but because that's what the whole thing's about anyway, it gives you this amazing licence (Interview 2018).

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[25] Dramedy: A work that contains elements of both a drama and a comedy. (R.W. Kroon, A/V a to z: An encyclopedic dictionary of media, entertainment and other Audiovisual terms. [Online]. Jefferson: McFarland.)

So Many Vicars

The real life accounts of non-churchgoers vying for places at faith schools became the catalyst for the very first episode of the new sitcom. From Pescod's perspective, setting the tone in this way was fitting given that religious education is one of the significant places 'where society and religion meet' (Interview 2018). And whilst this may sound like an honest entry into exploring the world of a priest, Wood has admitted that their very first idea was to portray 'a hypocritical, social climbing vicar' based on the West London story which had originally caught Hollander's attention (Jenkins, 2014). This shallower concept was quickly abandoned once their research began in earnest, with the writer's acknowledgment that 'if you start spending any significant amount of time with vicars, you soon realise that the breadth, strangeness and uniqueness of the role is far more interesting' (Jenkins, 2014).

In order to be viable as a series, the creators needed more stories as well as defining qualities which would shape their character and his narrative. Thus began a comprehensive consultation process which would influence nearly every aspect of the programme and continue throughout its production life.

Pescod brought to *Rev.* her prior experience working on an extensively researched television show, serving several years as script editor for a long running police drama called *The Bill* (ITV, 1984-2010).

> That originally had been based on Bethnal Green police station, and so there was this close relationship with them. And as script editors we would have to go out in a police car and have a police day, and make sure we got the authenticity. And then we'd have police advisors who were full-time on the staff who would read the scripts, tell us what wasn't realistic, give us advice when we asked for it, and then if we wanted to know something specific, would find us somebody (Pescod Interview 2018).

None of *Rev.*'s creators had experience as a vicar, but most had either a direct or peripheral connection to the church which served as a starting point in identifying consultants. Pescod herself had attended a religious primary school, and had gone to Quaker meetings with her mother. Director Peter Cattaneo's children also attended a church school. Both drawing from and supplementing their own backgrounds with expert

advice was, in the producer's opinion, an effective approach to crafting a narrative about a profession which was familiar to most, but only known intimately by a few.

> There was a sort of knowledge there, but we all knew that we didn't have an 'insider's perspective,' and actually we felt it was quite good to be coming at it with an outsider's perspective, but with all these 'insiders' telling us how it was (Pescod Interview 2018).

Hollander and Wood began with those closest to them and their personal histories with the established church.

> I didn't realise how 'Anglican-ed up' my own family was. I got a lot of inspiration from my parents and my sister who are all churchgoers. So the whole family was involved in it, and James' whole family was involved (Hollander Interview 2019).

> My grandfather had been a priest and my dad grew up in a vicarage. I can remember meeting my grandfather who is a military priest, actually. And my parents had always been quite churchy and I'd been a chorister, and so I knew the Church of England pretty well (Wood Interview 2018).

From there, the creators began seeking out the vicars they knew, picking their brains and plumbing their lives for material which might feed their budding character. They found the clergy only too eager to talk about their ministry experiences.

> It was very moving the kind of conversations we had with our vicars about what people go through, because you're talking about such big things. And I think that was the thing that was amazing: everybody was so emotionally open with us. They weren't just saying, 'Oh, use this hand or do it this way'—we were trying to get all that right as well—but they did really let us into their experiences; all of them did. We were very lucky (Pescod Interview 2018).

Hollander concurs:

> The priests that we talked to...were incredibly generous with their own stories... because it seemed to me that being a vicar, your currency is storytelling, really. When you're preaching, when you're trying to tell the story of what Christ's life means and what its significance is for us, you're dealing with narrative all the time. And so they were very very good; they were very practiced at actually telling anecdotes about their own predicament (Interview 2019).

A natural first contact was the Rev. Richard Coles, a musician and journalist who became an Anglican priest at age 43 and remained prominent in the national media,

presenting Radio 4's *Saturday Live* and appearing regularly on panel shows and other popular variety programmes.[26] Hollander met with Coles to discuss life as a priest.

> He described very movingly living in a sort of ghostly version of England: enacting rites of a bygone era which sometimes seemed meaningless. He talked about reading prayers at the Cenotaph on Remembrance Sunday and people carelessly taking no notice...living in a sort of parallel, sepia tinted world. And he described walking down the road in Finedon where his parish is in Northamptonshire and being hooted at, walking down in this archaic garb. But he also talked very movingly about the connection to the past and the continuity it provides. And I found myself getting very sentimental about Anglicanism in the wider community. (Hollander Interview 2019).

The image of disregard for a public Remembrance Day observation was so poignant for Hollander that he wrote it directly into one of the scripts, where a youth's football smacks into a monument at which Adam and his reader stand with a wreath of poppies, trying to hold a minute of silence amidst a flow of impertinent questions from the young lad (S01E06). In fact, most—if not all—of the plot lines derived from real life, as Hollander recalls:

> ...Every story in it came from an anecdote that we were told by someone who was really in the field. We didn't really make much up, I don't think. It wrote itself (Interview 2019).

Writer James Wood's first clerical contact came directly from his own experience. Rev. Andrew Wickens had been on staff at St. George's School in Windsor when Wood was a pupil, and the two had kept in contact ever since. The writer decided to visit his old friend's urban parish, and his lead actor followed soon after, with a manoeuvre reminiscent of Dawn French during her own clerical research.

> James initially came up to see me in Boston (Lincolnshire) and I was pumped for quite a lot of detail about my routine, the way I respond to things. Tom Hollander came up and stayed for a couple of days and observed me in the church, Boston Stump. He actually followed me through the process of a funeral, hid behind some trees at the interment. And thereafter I was involved on a regular basis, being sent storylines, draft scripts, comment, detail...(Wickens Interview 2018).

[26] https://www.richardcoles.com/biography/

Rev. Wickens would become one of the writer's primary sources of inspiration as well as a consultant on the veracity of various plot points and clerical minutiae. His concern was that the programme be accurate wherever possible, but he also realised that the audience could not all be assumed to have 'insider' knowledge of the church and its practices.

> The nomenclature was very important to me—that it was the language that Anglican clergy like me would understand, but was still accessible to the viewing members of the public, who may or may not be acquainted with church vocab. So for me these little significant bits of detail were very important. I just went through the script with a fine toothed comb to make sure that the directions were the way the church was furnished, and things like making sure that according to the time of year, the correct liturgical colour was displayed on the altar and lectern and so forth. Just tiny little things like that (Wickens Interview 2018).

The writer also found his vicar friend useful for recalling scriptural and liturgical references where needed.

> We'd go to him and say, 'We need a bit of Latin here, Andrew, that a priest might reach for at such a time, but we don't have it.' At the end of Episode Six in Series One where [there's a scripture passage]- 'Who will go for us? Send me.' Which is obviously extremely well known by priests. But Tom and I would have spent a long time getting to that without Andrew (Wood Interview 2018).

Wood found another willing consultant closer to home: his own parish vicar in Tufnell Park, the Rev. Melanie Toogood:

> He phoned me up one day and said he was working on this program, and would I have a conversation with him about the life and times of an urban vicar. And so I gave him lots of tales of things that had happened to me (Toogood Interview 2019).

In addition to enhancing Wood's ever growing stockpile of clerical anecdotes, Toogood became part of the collection of vicars who reviewed scripts during the revision process. She also made occasional appearances on set, even managing a brief on screen cameo as one of several female vicars socialising with Adam's wife at the vicarage (S02E04), which made for some unscripted comedy when the 'vicar turned actor' turned up on set already in costume:

> I came in my gear—you know dog collar and things—and I went into makeup and this woman said, 'You've got your uniform on already; have they started dressing people?' I said, 'No, not exactly…' And she said, 'What have you been in recently?' and I said, 'The church.' It was quite funny, really (Toogood Interview 2019).

Hollander discovered an advisor of his own in the Rev. Matthew Catterick, an urban priest in Wembley who'd initially been approached by one of the production's researchers seeking verification on a plot point.

> One of the things I had to do was manage the hall bookings, and I got a phone call one day from someone who asked, 'Would you be prepared to hire your hall out to a group of Muslims?' to which I answered 'Yes.' And then he said, 'What if they were holding Ramadan prayers there?' And I just got a funny feeling about this guy (Who are you? Why are you asking these things?) Because there'd just been a thing at a colleague's church where someone who'd hired the hall was doing exorcisms of children, and there was a big documentary with hidden cameras, and I was just really wary. And so I asked and he said, 'I'm researching for a TV comedy about a priest. It's a particular story line that we're interested in—whether or not a church would be open to having another faith community use their facility. I understand that you hold an Arabic class in your hall.' And I told him that I would be very keen for something like that to happen. And a week or so went past, and I got a phone call from this nice, bright-sounding chap who said his name was Tom Hollander (Catterick Interview 2017).

Much like Joy Carroll when Curtis initially contacted her, Rev. Catterick didn't recognise the actor's name at first, nor was he exactly clear on what sort of programme was being proposed.

> [Tom] said they wanted something not really slap-sticky, actually more of a character study. Because I said there's no point in my getting involved with anything disrespectful (the latest comedy being shown at that time was *Father Ted*). And he said he had a deep respect for [the clergy]. So even though it was a comedy, he recognised that it would be counterproductive for me to get involved with anything that was going to rubbish the church (Catterick Interview 2017).

After this initial conversation, Catterick's wariness gave way to curiosity over the new fictional vicar taking shape, and a willingness to contribute however he could. The priest began receiving calls and visits from Hollander and other crew members seeking advice on church and clergy matters. He explained how a priest's clergy shirts would probably be washed out a bit from frequent launderings, and how when he was 'off duty'

and relaxing at home, he might loosen one tab from his collar and let it hang open-ended—something which Adam ends up doing quite often.

Figure 1: The Casual Vicar at Home, with Open-ended Collar– S01E01

Catterick was asked about priests on retreat, and suggested that there would probably be a stash of gin in the cupboard, another detail which eventually showed up on screen (S02E01). Production came to peruse Catterick's vicarage; he accompanied set designers to a fabric warehouse to offer suggestions on dressing the church, and either lent the team or helped them source any liturgical props they needed (Catterick Interview 2017).

Like Rev. Wickens, Catterick was sent episodes ahead of time to read with a clerical eye.

> Initially they'd sent me one script to look over and comment on, and then I ended up looking at all the scripts, and I could find a number of points. The script would say, 'Let's go and say Morning Prayers' to which I would say, 'No—he would say Morning *Prayer*.' Just how you would refer to things, and they rewrote several lines. They were talking about what [the series] might be called, and Tom said, 'We've come up with *Rev*' and I said it must be *Rev.* (with a dot), and they followed that through (Interview 2017).

The vicar combed through the scripts for the subtlest details of priestly language, such as describing a joint fundraising event as interfaith (with other religions) rather than ecumenical (with other Christian denominations). He even made note of the exact words used in baptism, which had originally been written '...in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,' and which Catterick corrected to '...in the name of the Father *and of* the Son, and *of* the Holy Spirit.' So great was the programme's concern for accuracy that they often took his suggestions on board, no matter how minute they seemed (Catterick Interview 2017).

In addition to minding script and plot details, the actor also asked Catterick to help train him in the particulars of leading worship, and found himself soon beginning to sound—and look—like a real priest.

> I thought at the time how quickly Tom learned to say mass, and how moving it was. He came to my church in Wembley and I explained how it would be, and that he had to wear a cassock if I was going to teach him how to practice saying mass. It was very funny with him in the cassock because I wanted to call him 'Father' all the time. [Later he] would walk through a churchyard, wearing it to the place they were filming, past people in sleeping bags who would say, 'Alright, Father?' (Interview 2017).

Figure 2: Practicing Priest at Wembley– Matthew Catterick, 2010

In order to perfect the gestures and motions of ministry, Hollander made a detailed study of all the priests he met and even began attending regular services during the making of the series, although he hadn't been a particularly committed churchgoer prior to that. Every mannerism, every incident was potential fodder for his fictional vicar (Hollander Interview 2019).

Particular narratives required specialist advice on specific church procedures. Bishop Stephen Cottrell in Chelmsford was consulted regarding details about the process of becoming a bishop (Catterick Interview 2017), and Wood recalls several other high-ranking clergy who assisted with various story lines the programme was developing:

> We went to see Richard Chartres about the Bishop of London. We went down to Salisbury a couple of times to see the bishop [Nicholas Holtam], and he was really good on when a priest is in trouble and there's a disciplinary process and how that is done. We went up to Cambridge at Westcott House [theological college]; [Principal] Martin Seeley really helped us out on when Nigel the lay reader is doing the application process. We wanted to make sure it was really accurate (Interview 2018).

With broad input from numerous clerical sources, the programme's creators were forming a character to wear their fictional collar. Now what the new vicar needed was a church.

St. Saviour in the Marshes

Given the sheer number of Anglican congregations in the capital city, one might imagine that the crew would be spoiled for choice of filming locations. However, the series' director had a very particular image in mind, which made seeking a parish for Adam much trickier than anticipated.

> [Peter Cattaneo] knew he wanted something that looked urban and hopefully a bit out of place. We also wanted something that looked quite beautiful (which most churches do anyway) but against the grime of London—[to] feel that juxtaposition. And it was amazing how difficult it was to find that. We went around loads of churches in London, and often they would be down a residential street and would look quite bucolic, and it just wouldn't say any of those things visually (Pescod Interview 2018).

After viewing many churches which weren't quite what they were seeking, the crew happened upon St. Leonard's in Shoreditch, where Rev. Paul Turp had served since the early days of his ministry. Initially wishing to be a solo vicar in an urban church, but still being rather new to the priesthood, Turp realised how improbable it would be to find such a situation. Thus he decided to, in his words, 'strike a deal' with God:

> I said to the Almighty, 'You get me a really grotty inner city church that is virtually derelict and I will give you ten years of everything I've got. That's the deal' (Interview 2018).

Derelict is exactly what he got. Rev. Turp remembers the early challenges of his ministry in Shoreditch:

> My first winter here, none of the twenty-two cast iron radiators actually worked. Mostly through the winter months, worship didn't happen [in the sanctuary]. It happened in a hall upstairs. All you could say about this place is that it was clean; people did sweep it and polish it. But it was awful. The great stains of water running down all the walls—it smelled like a derelict factory (Interview 2018).

But the church persisted through years of growing and shrinking attendance, serious structural issues (some left over from previous war damage), and the social challenges of the evolving neighborhood in which it was located. The building is a Grade I listed Victorian structure, and therefore required an enormous sum of money to make both essential and elective repairs.

In 2002, when Shoreditch Church had finally raised enough funds to re-decorate the sanctuary, they found themselves with a dilemma:

> The decor is [from] 1968. There is this disgusting ceiling in different bits of blue—my Auntie Dorothy had a bathroom ceiling just like this—and that was horrible. We had about £300,000, and were going to redo it. But then we sat and looked at each other...you kind of get the feeling this is not the right thing to do, because it's priorities. If we rebuild the church then...why? What are we going to do with it? So we spent our £300,000 rebuilding the Northwest corner into a drop-in centre on two floors, with a mezzanine higher up with our offices. We spent every penny we had on that. And left the church undecorated and shabby, and really not very nice (Turp Interview 2018).

Not very nice, that is, unless you're a production crew seeking a grotty-looking inner city church. As it happens, St. Leonard's had a particular look and setting which suggested to the beleaguered location scouts that they might have found a place for Adam Smallbone after all.

When Rev. Turp got the first email expressing interest in his building as a potential filming site, he was just as skeptical as previous colleagues who'd been approached by production companies, with similar concerns over the use of the church and the quality of the programme being proposed.

> There was a church not far from here, and the vicar there let some students make a film, and it was actually just some rather crude pornography which they filmed; he'd had no understanding or agreement of what they were going to do. So when people say, 'This is a professional film company,' I still want to know what it's all about. And when they said, 'We're thinking of making a programme about a clergyman who has grown up and worked in the country and is then going to come work in the city; it's a sort of comedy,' I thought, 'Blahrrgh. It's *The Vicar of Dibley* backwards!' And I realised that what it would cost the church in having to accommodate a film crew for weeks was going to be a big ask. And frankly, I was not the slightest bit interested (Turp Interview 2018).

In order to instill some trust in their production, the crew sent someone to speak to the reverend in person, explaining that their priest portrayal would be based heavily in reality and research. Having piqued the resident vicar's curiosity, they asked whether they could do a simple filming test inside the sanctuary to see how it looked on camera, which Turp felt would be 'no great burden.'

> So they wheeled in this actor called Tom Hollander. And very simply, he had to walk down the centre [aisle], turn and face the congregation and say 'Good morning.' That was it. (Before we did the film test he was here several times—he'd been watching me and getting a feel of the church.) So he goes walking down and I whispered to the director, 'It's too fast.' He was going at some hell of a rate. So he went back and walked again, and I got a tingle as he went up there and turned around, and faced what would be a congregation if there was one. It was like I'd just looked at me. He just did the building right, and I thought, this is very impressive (Turp Interview 2018).

Whilst the screen test might have persuaded Rev. Turp about the programme's potential, the primary players were not unanimously sold on the location. He received a message saying they were torn between St. Leonard's and another church which was

surrounded by residential blocks of flats and whose exterior looked more like the urban setting they were attempting to portray. But from the camera's perspective, the interior of the second option was less suitable, given its comparative beauty:

> The whole thing inside is just Victorian red brick walls. It could be in Surrey; it looks lovely. And you go to Shoreditch and it looks absolute tat, but every single thing the camera sees tells you you're in the church. [The crew is] all saying, 'You could not have got an art department to design a better thing than this!' They don't want to build it in a studio somewhere. And that is what swung the decision to film here (Turp Interview 2018).

In the end, the un-refurbished sanctuary of St. Leonard's in Shoreditch made the perfect backdrop for Adam's urban ministry woes, becoming the fictional parish of St. Saviour in the Marshes, Hackney. The state of the building was an integral part of the plot from the beginning, with the church itself almost becoming a character within the series, its needs and dysfunctions constantly plaguing the new vicar and challenging him to find solutions which aren't ultimately tenable.

During his relatively brief tenure at St. Saviour's, Rev. Smallbone contends with facility issues such as a damaged stained glass window (S01E01), thieves stealing lead from the roof and causing leaks (S01E03), a bright young curate coming in and brilliantly (but annoyingly) organising his shabby, cluttered vestry (S02E02), lack of decent toilet facilities (S02E03), inaccurate bookkeeping and potential audit (S02E05, S03E04), dangerous wiring (S03E01), excessive litter around the church grounds (S03E03), and a hulking old building whose upkeep costs far exceed the contributions of its tiny congregation, putting it in perpetual danger of being closed.

Even though St. Leonard's may not have been in pristine condition, it was still a functioning and historical church protected by English Heritage. Turp made regular appearances during filming to ensure the respectful use of the premises, which he found—to his relief—was also a top priority for the filming crew.

> All I had to say to the company was, 'This is a Grade I listed building; you may not drill holes or fix anything permanently on it.' So if to get the lighting right [they] had to black all of these windows out—and there are a load of windows at eye level—they all had to be blacked out without sticking things in the walls, so they had to have a carpenter build wooden frames on which they could hang the

> blackout stuff. And they just did. They highly respected what I said about the building and there was no problem (Interview 2018).

The church interior was mostly in ideal condition for the story which the programme was trying to tell. However, they did add a few extra touches to highlight the age and period of the building, and perhaps also for some subtle comedic flair.

> They put really grotesque statues of what I suppose were meant to be angels—I'm not quite sure—on each side of the altar. And the cross changed into a really unfortunately ugly Victorian thing. They deliberately made it look naff. And that was alright; we thought that was good fun (Turp Interview 2018).

For the vicar's office, the church's upstairs landing was converted into a deliberately untidy space, which the design team enjoyed dressing with an eccentric jumble of vestments, dusty books, old Christmas remnants and other details which would enable viewers to 'feel the layers of history' (Pescod Interview 2018). This 'carefully cluttered' area also housed an item for which the producer felt a particular fondness:

> One of our key props that for us kind of encapsulated a lot of the tone of the show was an old Coke bottle that had the label taken off it and in marker pen just said 'Holy Water,' and it sits on a window sill in our vestry. And Peter [Cattaneo] had noticed that in one of the churches that we'd looked around, and we found that so brilliant, that sense of the everyday coming up against something really special (Pescod Interview 2018).

Figure 3: Holy Water in Ordinary Vessel

Attention to the tiniest detail became part of the production team's attempt to make the space as authentic as possible, even when their efforts weren't likely to be noticed at all.

> The cameras are high-definition, and when Tom is standing facing the congregation and behind him there is a camera looking over his shoulder, that camera—frighteningly—can read what's on the notice board at the back of the church. And they would take such care as they were going to redo the notice boards. I said to them, 'What is the time of year when this is happening?' And I looked in my big book and said, 'Oh, that's [the feast of] Mary Magdalene, isn't it? Overnight the art department made a notice about Mary Magdalene, and put it on the board for 15 seconds of screen time (Turp Interview 2018).

Rev. Turp recalls being similarly impressed by the crew's assiduous care with a prop he lent to the production on the occasion of a costume miscalculation.

> We're doing Christmas Eve and someone in the production company thought, 'Well, we're still in Advent so it's going to be sort of purple stuff.' And I said, 'No—Christmas Eve is *Christmas*. You're white or gold.' And I just happened to have a white and gold chasuble [a priestly garment for the Eucharist] which was actually made in America for me. It was a gift, and if I had to buy it I could have bought a new car. So I said, 'I think Tom should wear this, because you want it to be really really special, but you've got to be really careful with it because it is pure silk, etc.' So every time the filming stopped, a girl would run up to Tom and take it off him and take it away, and he wouldn't get it back until we were filming again. They were like this (Interview 2018).

<u>City Vicar</u>

Having found their church, the crew desired a similarly rough looking environment for Adam's vicarage.

> We looked at houses and we looked at actual vicarages and we ended up filming in an actual vicarage, which wasn't the one associated with Shoreditch church. (That one is actually a beautiful old building on Hoxton Square.) The one we used was in Stoke Newington. We knew we wanted a feeling of a modern house—that the old vicarage got sold off a long time ago—again telling the story of today's church. But then finding somewhere that was big enough to get your crew in and film properly but still felt intimate and wasn't playing a grandiose big space was really hard, and actually the vicarage [we used] was perfect (Pescod Interview 2018).

And whilst the neighborhoods around their inner-city church and vicarage may have seemed ideal for the production, the very factors which made them exemplary for telling an urban story also brought unique, sometimes ironic, challenges.

> Paul [Turp] has this really difficult kind of scenario where the church yard is owned by the council rather than the Church of England. It's actually a public park as well, which means that he can't say, 'It's closed today.' So if we were filming outside and a member of the public just wanted to be in that space, we couldn't do anything about it. So normally we have people within the crew whose job it is to politely say, 'It would be really helpful if you could just sit over there out of shot, and would you mind just not shouting.' And you do have quite an unusual group of people in there; there were quite a lot of addicts who would be either drunk or on drugs and loud. So we were sort of stuck with that situation. Because it's all good to add all of that afterwards in sound, but it's not great for your continuity. So sometimes we'd be out there filming with Jimmy Akingbola's character, Mick, the [addict] who comes and knocks on the door, and then there'd be people out of shot who basically *were* Mick shouting and you couldn't do anything about it (Pescod Interview 2018).

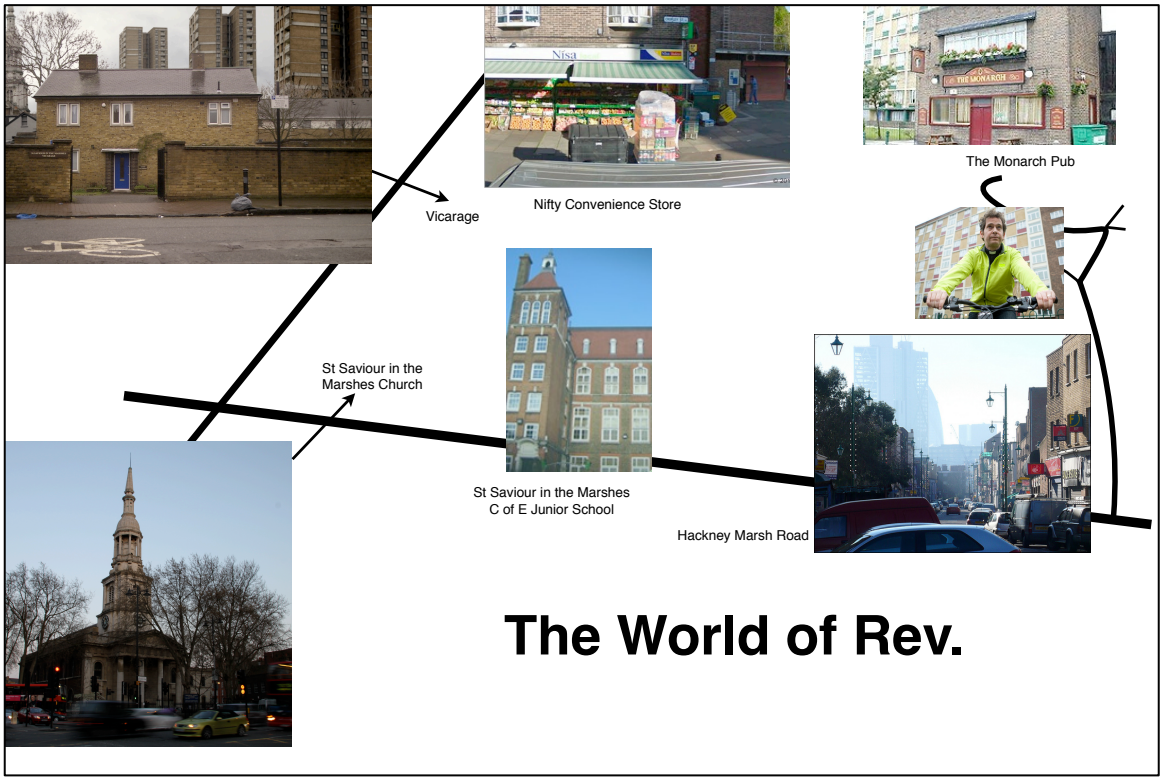


Figure 4: Shooting Locations in Adam's 'Neighborhood' – Hannah Pescod, 2010 (used with permission, Big Talk Productions)

In addition to serving as a convincing backdrop for Adam Smallbone's fictional ministry, the actual congregation of St. Leonard's in Shoreditch became an unexpectedly profound place of hospitality for cast and crew, providing them a temporary 'home base' whilst at the same time continuing its own ministry uninterrupted, something which the crew were keen to support and accommodate. The producer remembers:

> Paul's church was such a welcoming space—he was so amazing, and also in some ways represented some of the story we were telling, because there's this beautiful church, it's crumbling, and he has a very very small congregation. So it told all sorts of stories that we had going on. They have various rehab groups that go on in the rooms upstairs, and obviously that didn't stop (and shouldn't have done), but it meant that we had to be careful with our scheduling that we weren't going to shoot right next to them at that point, and give them the space and work out an entrance for them so that they still felt secure and had the privacy they needed (Pescod Interview 2018).

The resident vicar became so much a part of the filming environment that he eventually found himself being sought by crew members for more than just production details.

> By the time we were getting towards the end of the first series, I was doing a fair amount of pastoral work—people would sidle up to me and say, 'You're the vicar aren't you?' And they would want to say something, or ask something or just remind themselves of something. Some of it was really significantly serious. I was being people's unofficial 'pop-up vicar' because they've got a real church and a real vicar, and asked a lot about the church and what goes on and why it goes on. And some people, even after all the filming was done, still kept in touch with me for quite a time (Turp Interview 2018).

The crew were also moved to occasionally participate in the real ministry going on at Shoreditch church.

> He has a homeless shelter (as obviously so many churches do) and so we got people from our production company volunteering to go along and help with the breakfast, and in the evening, and then various members of the cast read at his carol service. And so it was really nice because it did feel as if we temporarily became part of the life of the church, and it was quite a mutual experience (Pescod Interview 2018).

Wood and Hollander were also affected by the time they spent at a shelter in a church near Euston, on which they based one brief scene at the beginning of the Series Two Christmas episode. The actor recalls the experience:

> What we saw in Somers Town was incredibly moving: an entire church with people asleep all through it. People from all over the world, wandering in to 'God's house,' leaving their mobile phones at the door (Cattaneo, 2014, Commentary S02E07).

Whilst the creatives were inspired by the ongoing ministries of the church in their midst, the efficiency of the series and all its production elements is what actually made an impression on the vicars. After his first visit to the set, Father Catterick even felt a bit envious at how well everyone appeared to fill their roles:

> I realised it's a bit like a model of the Body of Christ—what I was trying to do in Wembley (or wherever I've been a priest) is for different people to have different functions. There was a fundamental misunderstanding in Wembley where they all wanted to be the head, and no one wanted to be the other parts, or no one wanted to be anything at all. And here was this efficient production where there was a crew of 30-50 people, all with their own jobs (Interview 2017).

Rev. Wickens was similarly amazed, not just at how well the crew functioned, but how thoroughly the team seemed to comprehend and embody the programme's intentions.

> People involved in television production are not known for their religiosity. And the thing that struck me was just the way in which everybody completely got what it was about. Sound guys, grips, runners, and particularly the brilliant [women] from the rented office in Soho—shooting six episodes back-to-back because budgets are tight—how they just completely got it. I've never known such cohesion throughout all the levels and aspects of production, which as a Christian speaks to me of the action of the Holy Spirit to work its way—because it does. Logistically it was a marvel (Interview 2018).

Hannah Pescod confirms the rather transformative effect the production seemed to have on its participants:

> One of the things we found really interesting was that sense that lots of [the crew]—I wouldn't say they were agnostic—but it was a much more theological, theoretical, metaphorical thing than we might have as outsiders had an appreciation for, and that was really fascinating. So we all went on a real journey with it; the whole thing was so educational for us (Interview 2018).

Reflecting Reality

The producers of *Rev.* attempted to create a programme which would entertain its audience as well as hit home for viewers who were church professionals. Pescod recalls the level of concern for accuracy, and how the priests' own contributions carried a heavy weight throughout the production:

> The more outlandish stuff mainly came from the truth-- someone would tell us some crazy thing and we'd go write that. And then sometimes you'd have an external idea and then we'd say [to the advisors], 'This is what we're thinking; what would your experience be with that and where would you go?' And I think that's what lent an authenticity and probably a sympathy as well (Interview 2018).

The entire writing process began and ended with vicars, and in the middle of it were an actor and a writer who were determined to do justice to the clergy they were aiming to depict. Once Hollander and Wood had gathered their ideas the script creation process began, with the goal of balancing comedic and dramatic storylines within the narrative. The two collaborated heavily in the initial writing process, sending the script back and forth several times. Once they were sastified with the draft it was brought to the producers and director for refining. Wood admits that it was never a particularly smooth operation as there were competing interests at play:

> The essential tension in the room, which is what led to it being a really good show, was myself and Tom (quite literally) on one side of the table trying to make a slightly literary, psychologically astute, highly authentic piece about the life of a modern priest. And on the other side of the table was [director] Peter Cattaneo and a very successful producer whose job is to deliver a comedy to BBC Two; Kenton would always try and protect the comedy—a lot of the best jokes in the show are from him. Tom and I would often remove jokes that were clearly funny if we felt they were just not authentic. And equally Kenton would try and encourage [us] not to be pretentious. And [producer] Hannah [was] trying to balance these four horrendous male egos. It was a pretty unpleasant process, and out of this incredibly competitive room of personalities came a rather warm-hearted show (Interview 2018).

Pescod agrees that the painstaking process, uncharacteristically rigorous for a show of its type, was a major factor in its success:

> It was quite a volatile space, but then I think that's why it ended up good. The thing I really felt about it being that many people is [that] there are normally bits

> [of the script] that haven't had anything done to them; the writer has written it and that's fine and it sort of works. But when there's five people somebody's got an opinion on everything, so it felt like there really wasn't any stone that went unturned (Interview 2018).

Hollander suggests that some of the difficulty in reaching consensus was that their purpose was not only to entertain, but to present the topic in a way that wasn't the same tired formula of inducing laughs at the vicar's expense.

> I spent a lot of time in the first series weeding out jokes and trying to make it less silly and less stupid. When we were making the show I found it very moving and felt we had a duty to portray priests in the most positive way, and that they were at some level public servants who were undervalued and beleaguered and for the most part were motivated by the best of human nature with very little support. So we were very 'pro vicar,' and we thought that previously too much clerical comedy was just taking easy swipes. And we didn't want to take easy swipes. And I don't think we did. I think our comedy was earned, and that's why people in the church were very fond of it because they felt they were being celebrated rather than lampooned (Interview 2019).

Wood concurs that ridiculing vicars was never their aim.

> We were never going to mock the church. Tom and I were happy to be heretical but we would never be blasphemous. It's no use [mocking] and then you do that for twenty minutes, and there is nowhere to go. Writing is basically an act of empathy; otherwise it's just cruel humour. If you're not empathetic, why would viewers care, and why would they stay? And what are you saying, that these people are worth knocking? Well, they're not (Interview 2018).

Rev. Melanie Toogood concurs that the show's commitment to championing vicars extended beyond what one might expect of a television production, with its creators willing to go the extra mile for the sake of authenticity:

> I know that everybody from the producer on down was very onside, keen and proud of what they did; it wasn't a case of, 'Oh let's bang another episode out.' And Tom and James were very sincere about what they did to the extent of going off and living in a monastery for a couple of days to see how that type of spirituality worked. So there was a genuine love and sincerity for the characters that they had drawn, and I think that came across (Interview 2019).

Wood and Hollander's slavish commitment to portraying vicars sympathetically set the tone for the entire programme, and was only in danger of being compromised on

the rare occasions when the gruelling production schedule necessitated commissioning a guest writer. During the middle of Series Two, in the one episode for which Wood was not responsible (S02E05), Rev. Toogood recalls noticing a rather significant discrepancy in the vicar's character:

> There was a script that was written by a guy who I don't think liked the church very much, and so he didn't like priests and had [Adam] pocketing some of the the congregation's money (not a lot). And I said, 'Do you know what, I've known lots of vicars who have done lots of things but Adam Smallbone wouldn't do that. He has a very strong conscience about him' (Interview 2019).

In the episode in question, the vicar takes a small note out of the collection plate after worship, justifying the act by saying that most of the weekly offering comes from him anyway, and that he's using it to buy chocolate for the parishioners. Later, he must find a way to balance the parish's poorly managed account books and after exhausting all other options, impulsively chooses to make up the deficit by stealing £250 from the wallet of an obnoxious, drug-addicted executive with whom he has been compelled to spend a tedious afternoon. And whilst the audience does sympathise with Adam's financial predicament (and sigh in relief when he is tempted but opts not to spend an envelope of charity money at the episode's end) there is something about his behaviour in these instances which doesn't quite ring true to his essential nature, as previously portrayed. Perhaps this episode serves as further emphasis of the creators' pledge to give priests a fair treatment, if only by illustrating what is possible when those with their particular commitment aren't driving the narrative.

Whilst various plot directions and details were heavily shaped by clergy input, there were times, naturally, when the production favoured its own concerns over those of their consultant priests. Ever aware of the narrative he wanted to get across, the writer and his team enthusiastically welcomed input and did indeed have many vicars reviewing each script with close scrutiny, but also had a sense of when it was more advantageous for them to assert artistic licence.

> You have to learn when to say, 'Well thanks, but I'm not going to do that because I know this is right for the story.' And James was very confident that way in the writing, very clear on 'I know what I want to say and what I'm trying to tell here and I'm not going to let [outside opinions] get in my way.' And that was really

> helpful because it meant that he wasn't intimidated by it. So he would start with what he wanted to do and then we'd go and say to [the advisors], 'How can we make this work?' And that is a lot easier because [otherwise] you can end up stopping before you've begun (Pescod Interview 2018).

The editing process was never truly finished. Even during filming, Hollander preferred to have a pair of clerical eyes on the proceedings so that nothing was missed:

> I was always very concerned that we should have a vicar there on the day because I didn't want the carelessness of some showbiz outfit getting it wrong, which would just be lazy and also would undermine our sort of high-minded notion that our stuff was real, that it was true. So then to muck up where you hold the chalice would have been preposterous (Interview 2019).

Pescod recalls the increased pressure on the production crew to get every detail right, given the programme's avowed commitment to accuracy.

> I'm quite a stickler for detail generally, so that was kind of helpful. Things like costume, I'd be asking them, 'Hang on, are you sure that's the right coloured stole that he is wearing today? And we had to decide, because obviously there were certain episodes where it was Easter (or whatever) but most episodes—who knows what month it is? So we had to decide where we were in the calendar so that we got the right colours at the right time. And we had to make decisions about what kind of shirt he would wear, what kind of collar, and what those things meant. And so for costume there was quite a lot of pressure on them because there were all these things that they had to be thinking about beyond the normal aesthetic and character (Interview 2018).

REV: STORY DAYS/LITURGICAL CALENDAR

Episode One

Story Day	Actual Date	Colour	Ecclesiastical Action
Day X	Sun 16th Jan	Green	Sunday Eucharist
Day 1	Mon 17th Jan	Green	Morning Prayers
Day 2	Sun 23rd Jan	Green	Sunday Eucharist
Day 3	Fri 29th Jan	Green	
Day 4	Mon 1st Feb	Green	
Day 5	Tues 2nd Feb	White	Adam prays alone in church

Episode Two

Story Day	Actual Date	Colour	Ecclesiastical Action
Day 1	Wed 3rd Feb	Green	
Day 2	Sun 7th Feb	Green	Sunday Eucharist
Day 3	Mon 15th Feb	Green	
Day 4	Tuesday 16th Feb	Green	(Shrove Tuesday)
Day 5	Thurs 18th Feb	Violet	
Day 6	Fri 19th Feb	Violet	Adam and Roland pray together

Episode Three

Story Day	Actual Date	Colour	Ecclesiastical Action
Day 1	Sun 21st Feb	Violet	Sunday Eucharist
Day 2	Mon 22nd Feb	Violet	Adam prays alone in church
Day 3	Sun 28th Feb	Violet	
Day 4	Mon 1st March	Violet	Evangelical service
Day 5	Thurs 4th March	Violet	
Day 6	Fri 5th March	Violet	
Day 7	Sun 7th March	Violet	Evangelical service
Day 8	Sun 14th March	Violet	Sunday Eucharist

Episode Four

Story Day	Actual Date	Colour	Ecclesiastical Action
Day 1	Tues 16th March	Violet	Funeral (outside)
Day 2	Wed 17th March	Violet	Morning prayers
Day 3	Sat 20th March	Violet	Muslim prayers
Day 4	Wed 24th March	Violet	School assembly
Day 5	Sun 28th March	Red	Sunday Eucharist
Day 6	Tues 30th March	Violet	
Day 7	Wed 31st March	Violet	Adam prays alone in church
Day 8	Thurs 1st April	White	

Episode Five

Story Day	Actual Date	Colour	Ecclesiastical Action
Day 1	Mon 5th April	White	Bereavement visit
Day 2	Tuesday 6th April	White	Wedding meeting
Day 3	Friday 9th April	White	
Day 4	Mon 19th April	White	
Day 5	Sat 1st May	White	
Day 6	Thurs 6th May	White	Nigel singing Eucharist
Day 7	Sat 8th May	White	Wedding (preparation)

Episode Six

Story Day	Actual Date	Colour	Ecclesiastical Action
Day 1	Thurs 11th Nov	White	Remembrance Day Service at a war memorial
Day 2	Fri 12th Nov	Red	School assembly
Day 3	Mon 15th Nov	Green	
Day 4	Tues 16th Nov	Green	
Day 5	Fri 20th Nov	Green	

Figure 5: Producer Notes on Liturgical Colours – Hannah Pescod, 2010 (used with permission, Big Talk Productions)

Vicars Matthew Catterick and Paul Turp were frequently on set during filming to offer minor liturgical adjustments or catch any unintentional slip-ups. A rule that the crew had made was that anyone who interrupted filming for any reason was required to put £5 into the church's charity box—except for a vicar, who could step in and speak up any time there was something out of place. Turp remembers doing this once during a wedding scene:

> We had a bride and groom, the best man and the bride's dad; they walked in, lined up and then Dad went and sat down with the others. And I said, 'No, Dad and best man have to stay with them until they are married. Then they can go and sit down. That's how it works.' So they filmed that bit again (Interview 2018).

Rev. Toogood also recalls offering the occasional suggestion when she witnessed something on set which didn't quite ring true. During the filming of an episode where Adam is assigned a young female curate who instantly wins over the parishioners with her personal warmth and natural gifts for ministry, Toogood shared an observation about the clergywoman's position whilst leading worship:

> She was kind of hiding behind the lectern and I said, 'Well, given her personality which is bright and outgoing, she would have come towards the congregation and opened her arms and talked more naturally.' And they said, 'Oh, that's a brilliant idea; we'll have her do that' (Interview 2019).

There were occasionally times where a consultant's advice was considered but not heeded, in favour of an overriding dramatic element or scene perspective. For instance, when Adam is conducting midnight mass on Christmas Eve, a number of parishioners turn up to worship heavily drunk, causing more than the average amount of disruption during the service. There arose a debate as to which direction the vicar should face whilst celebrating the Eucharist. Catterick recalls:

> If you're filming and the priest is facing East [away from the people], then you can do what you want—get the priest's face and the intensity of that, and also the people getting pissed at midnight mass over his shoulder. But I said, 'Would he be facing East?' For me, and I think for people watching, that would be a profound thing, because this is a person who would want to face the people (Interview 2017).

Hollander has a similar recollection of that particular dilemma:

> Sometimes you have to do things for the camera in a way that wasn't necessarily accurate. We had [Adam] standing looking through the East window as if he were in the Brompton Oratory and he was a very high Catholic priest. And that was so we could film him and the congregation behind him in the same shot, so you can see his prayer being disrupted. So at that point he was standing in a way that he wouldn't be standing for an Anglican vicar of his level, but it works for the camera and so we took artistic licence (Interview 2019).

Figure 6: The Vicar Tries to Celebrate Eucharist
Despite Inebriated Revellers at Midnight Mass — S02E07

Sometimes the crew tried out a vicar's suggestion but then backtracked when it didn't produce the desired effect. When Adam faces ecclesial investigation and awaits the church's verdict on his conduct, he is suspended from clerical duties and temporarily removed from the world which once centered around him (S03E06). Further emphasising the vicar's feeling of ostracism, a 'Stations of the Cross' walk goes past the cafe window where he and his wife are eating, a sudden and painful reminder that the observance of Holy Week is taking place without his leadership. When Paul Turp explained that actual participants in one such walk had all been required by the local police to wear hi-vis jackets, the idea was trialled but eventually nixed for dramatic reasons:

> When they tried it on they realised it looked silly and very funny. And they said, 'This is actually going to be very sad because he's going to see this and he's not part of it anymore. We don't want anyone to laugh.' So all the comedy gets stripped, and it sort of sinks into this very dark place (Turp Interview 2018).

On rare occasions, there would be two priests on set at the same time with differing views on how something should be done. Rather than being annoyed by liturgical debates amongst their consultants, Hollander and Wood found themselves somewhat entertained at how strong the opinions could be.

> Of course there were hilarious disagreements, because depending on where you are 'up and down the candle,' it changes. So we were very amused by that. James and I laughed about that quite a lot, about how you wouldn't get the same answer from two different people. Some people were more egotistical about it than others. But Matthew was extremely relaxed and generous about it. I daresay we did make mistakes, but he was very good about saying, 'Some people do this, some people do that; no it's alright you can do that, nobody would care' (Hollander Interview 2019).

As an example of an instance where 'nobody would care,' Catterick recalls being asked to demonstrate exactly how a priest would hand a lit baptismal candle over to the baby's godparents, a gesture which isn't specifically liturgical and therefore looks no different from one person handing an object to another. The vicar found being consulted on this level of detail somewhat amusing, but acknowledges that this was the degree of accuracy for which the production strove (Interview 2017).

In contrast, Pescod recalls a situation where the two vicars present on set had rather different—and strongly held—liturgical views, during the filming of the final episode which takes place on Easter Sunday:

> I remember there being quite a row over a baptism scene, where Matthew was very clear that [Adam] would use a baptismal shell, and very kindly lending us the shell in question. But Paul said, 'I would never use a sort of implement; I would use my hands for the water,'—that intimacy with the baby—he felt really strongly about it. And I think it was the only time that I felt, this is his church and his font and he felt really uncomfortable about something being done in a different way in that space, which I really sympathised with because, you know, we're not talking about [just] a workplace—it's something very different to that and he's been there a very long time. But that's occasionally what you'd have, where people felt very strongly on either side. I've tried not to have two [advisors] at once because everyone did have a different way of doing things. And it is very emotional and emotive, and it's about your belief system isn't it? (Interview 2018)

Emotions did occasionally run high during filming, but not always due to disagreements. As most of the stories were based on true events, sometimes the fictional reenactment had a deeply moving effect on clergy and crew alike, bringing them face to face with parallel experiences in their real lives.

Matthew Catterick recalled an instance from his own ministry during a particularly poignant segment where Adam is administering last rites to an elderly parishioner, one which touched a nerve with director Peter Cattaneo as well:

> In the scene where the old woman was going to die, if Adam was going to anoint [her], I suggested he look around the kitchen (I related a time when I anointed someone in hospice and found a bowl and poured some water in it). I showed him what I would do with the anointing, and it was all so moving. And after we filmed it, the director got up and quietly walked out, and someone said that his mother had just died a month before (Interview 2017).

Thus the programme was crafted from real life and had a real impact upon its creators before it even hit the screen, boding well for how it would be received by viewers. The honest depiction of Adam Smallbone and his floundering but truthful ministry were about to change television priest portrayals for good.

The Priest's Posse

Because a vicar does not exist in isolation, the makers of *Rev.* desired to paint an equally compelling portrait of the people closest in proximity to their main character, three of whom are highlighted here: Adam's wife Alex, his closest colleague Nigel, and the area archdeacon. Their particular roles within the vicar's context provide contrast to his distinct personality and underscore the peculiarity of his position as a solo Anglican priest in an urban setting.

Alex

Unlike Rev. Geraldine, who seemed to be perpetually 'single but seeking,' Adam Smallbone arrives in his new parish already married—and to a formidable character. When Matthew Catterick was in early creative discussions with Tom Hollander, one of

the first things which concerned him was whether or not the fictional vicar's home life would be portrayed credibly.

> I asked if the priest were going to be married, thinking about how much my own marriage means to me—my wife is a beautiful Asian woman who works in media for an advertising agency—she's funky and she shops all the time. And so the idea of a frumpy vicar's wife in a flowery dress baking scones and saying, 'Oh dear, the archdeacon's slipped on a carrot!' isn't really funny these days. And Tom said, 'Oh no, he's going to be married to a lawyer who's very committed to her husband, though not always to his job.' And I thought that sounded far more like London might be (Interview 2017, Catterick, 2010).

Adam's wife Alexandra (played by Olivia Colman) was specifically inspired by a particular clergy spouse whom the programme creators discovered in their early research.

> The character of Alex really came about when we met a priest whose wife is a successful lawyer and found the life of being married to a priest pretty tough: constant open vicarage door, the hours, the fact that you can never turn it off, the annoying congregation…We had one very entertaining lunch with her (Wood Interview 2018).

Rev. presents the relationship between Adam and Alex as a lively, contemporary partnership between two professionals each contending with their own career concerns, but with the added challenge that various elements of the priest's job often end up disrupting his home life. The neighborhood junkie, Mick, is constantly knocking on the vicarage door with some new money-seeking scam, usually at the most inopportune moments. Colin, a particularly needy member of the parish, tends to treat Adam's house as his own, doing things like using the vicar's toilet for his morning business, helping himself to any available food, and walking in on Alex uninvited as she stands wrapped in a towel in her own kitchen (S01E03).

And then there is the perennial complaint that a priest scarcely has any time on weekends to spend with his spouse when she is actually off work, a frustration which finally pushes his normally calm wife over the edge when Adam assumes she will be accompanying him on a Saturday seaside trip with some of the church's school pupils:

> **Alex:** You've now decided you'd like to spend the one day a week we have together in a shit bit of Kent with fifteen of other people's children?! Do you know the last time I got to have a weekend with you Adam, all to myself? No, neither do I. Why is that? Oh yes that's right, because it's NEVER HAPPENED...I'm fed up with never seeing you...I'm fed up with your congregants saying to you, "What a shame Alex couldn't make it today," like they've got some Masters degree in passive aggression, just because I happened to be busy at work. I'm fed up with coming back from work and then having to make yet another mushroom stroganoff for a sodding church meeting of pedantic bores who want to sit around for four hours in my home discussing how to put in some fire exits or whatever...I want to have a child with you because I don't just want to be a solicitor my whole life, but you don't shag me enough...because this house is permanently full of people who make unceasing demands on your time because they've got nothing else in their lives. Except a need to organise the latest church event—some wank fete thing that I have to make sponge fingers for—because your world is obsessed with correlating excruciating social events with religious devotion! (S02E01)

Aside from rare moments when she cannot contain her frustration, and the fact that she does not share her husband's depth of spiritual conviction, Alex nonetheless makes an effort to support him and his work, frequently attending events at the church and troubleshooting the odd pastoral issue that happens to turn up at her doorstep. However, some of Adam's parishioners would still prefer her to fulfill a rather outmoded stereotype of the 'vicar's wife,' an assumption which likely resonated with any clergy spouses who might have been viewing, and a circumstance which was specifically considered when creating her character's particular role within the story.

> The wife was expected always to be making cakes and running tea afternoons and having knitting circles or whatever it is, and [Alex] said 'No, I've got a career. Get somebody else to do that' (Toogood Interview 2019).

'I love that Alex isn't a paisley-wearing, jam-making cliché,' admitted Olivia Colman in a *Telegraph* interview, 'I love that she has needs and a job and a marriage that isn't always easy' (Fox, 2011).

Rev. Wickens goes as far as to suggest that Alex's professional significance may well supersede that of her husband:

> There she is doing her human rights work, maybe *pro bono*. There was a tension there certainly for me, and maybe for other people: in the scheme of things, who's

> doing the more good? This well meaning but slightly haphazard and slightly incompetent vicar or this lawyer who probably would have a global career if she weren't in some way tied down by the strings of the clergy house? And it was rather nice that she was almost like a critical Greek chorus to what was going on in [Adam's] life (Wickens Interview 2018).

As the quintessential 21st Century professional woman, Adam's partner often occurs as more balanced, fulfilled and competent than her beleaguered clergy husband, who hits a brick wall nearly every time he tries to move forward. And even though his job frequently puts a strain on their personal relationship, she eventually finds a way to transcend her own albeit justified resentment in order to save him tumbling down the rabbit hole of despair.

Throughout the three series, Adam and Alex have their share of disagreements, joys, triumphs and trials, and they are each, in turn, stretched to their emotional limits. After discovering that her husband shared a kiss with the school headmistress, Alex needs some distance before she is able to forgive him. And when Adam later resigns his ministry position and is paralysed with depression (S03E06), the vicar's wife uncharacteristically address God in her bewilderment:

> **Alex:** Dear Lord, I know we don't speak very often, but I'm worried about Adam. I know I'm always complaining about being married to a vicar but I don't really mean it. You know that, don't you? I'd much rather be married to a happy vicar than a man who can't get out of bed.

In the end, she is the one who rallies his congregants in search of some form of redemption for her disconsolate husband, reminding him why she fell in love with him and why he entered ministry in the first place. Of all those in Adam Smallbone's inner circle, Alex is clearly the one whom he holds most dear, and indeed the one who sticks by him when nearly everyone else turns away.

Nigel

Although Adam frequently stands alone in his opinions and principles, he still seems perpetually surrounded by other people, mostly eccentric parishioners with whom he must find a way to co-exist. Chief amongst his challenges is quirky colleague Nigel McCall, who shares his cramped, untidy church office.

> Tom wonder[ed] if they could introduce a young person into the cast [as] a lay reader, and I said 'Yes, but they're only called readers now.' And he asked if it could be sort of a difficult awkward person who's a bit of a jobsworth (Catterick Interview 2017).

Originally, the character of Nigel was intended to be much older, but when 30-year-old Miles Jupp was cast in the role he seemed somehow perfect. The son of a URC (United Reformed Church) minister, and also a former divinity student, Jupp was well-versed in the religious world, which proved useful in portraying his obnoxious character. According to the producer,

> He was absolutely brilliant on that stuff, and of course because his character was pedantically constantly quoting things, Miles would often provide those things and add them. Because we had quite a long rehearsal period, he would say, 'I really think you should get this in there,' and that was just fantastic (Pescod Interview 2018).

An example of Jupp's contribution to Nigel's character is one of his earliest exchanges with Adam in Episode One, a 'quiz session' role-play designed to weed out unsatisfactory parents from getting their children a church school place, to which the actor added a question or two of his own:

Adam: So you want little Peter to get into Ellie's school, don't you?
Nigel: Desperately. My entire self-worth depends upon it.
Adam: Right. So tell me...which was the first of the Gospels to be written?
Nigel: Mark. AD 65 to 80. Easy.
Adam: Where was the Epistle of Philemon written? And by who...whom?
Nigel: By Saint Paul, in prison. Too easy. It's fun, though.
Adam: Who is the Gospel of Luke written to?
Nigel: My dear Theophilus.
Adam: Where, today, would you find—
Nigel: Modern day Iraq.
Adam: Okay...who sold Joseph into captivity?
Nigel: Good one. Uh, the Midianites.
Adam: (Buzzer sound) No, it wasn't! It was the Ishmaelites. Wasn't it?
Nigel: I think you'll find it was the Midianites. (S01E01)

Adam's reader is as ubiquitous as Rev. Geraldine's verger Alice, but not remotely as supportive of his vicar, opting instead to challenge him on most things and make his job more difficult than it already is. The priest's persnickety sidekick is more concerned with doing things correctly and with maintaining his own prominent place in the church, given that readers are allowed to preach and occasionally lead services when the vicar is unavailable. Andrew Wickens—although often cited as a primary influence for Adam's character—actually sees more of himself in Nigel:

> In terms of body language and quirks and quips, I see far more of me in Miles Jupp's script then I do in Tom's, actually. I used to teach Miles; I've known him since he was nine years old. And just the way he speaks, the way he moves—I'd like to think that quite a lot of his act is copying his old teacher from choir school (Interview 2018).

At the end of Series Two we learn that Nigel is seeking to become an ordained priest, but is not able to secure the necessary diocesan approval (S02E06). Even though he is meant to be a somewhat exaggerated character, his plight mirrors that of many whom Rev. Toogood has come across in her own ministry:

> He thought he *was* the church, and then when he didn't get through the selection process was absolutely devastated. I've known a lot of people who were convinced they were just going to sail through because that's what God wanted, and then God changed his mind, clearly, as they [didn't] (Interview 2019).

In the aftermath of his failure to become ordained, the audience is actually encouraged to feel some sympathy for the otherwise annoying Nigel, as he is clearly crushed by the decision.

Likewise, viewers may have more compassion for the reader once they begin to see that he is a repressed gay man, closeted to everyone around him (and seemingly also to himself). His attempt at inventing an imaginary girlfriend named Cherry to persuade others of his heterosexuality is, according to the writer, both 'funny and pathetic' (Wood Interview 2018). Considering how harshly he judges everyone else, one suspects that Nigel may, in fact, reserve the strongest judgment for himself and his own unacceptable attraction to men, which he can't seem to square with his strict religious views.

When Adam is stung by Nigel's reporting him to the diocese for inappropriate behaviour with headteacher Ellie, which leads to a disciplinary suspension and the vicar's subsequent resignation concurrent with the closure of St. Saviour's, he unleashes a furious tirade against his perennial opponent after Nigel has just accused him of letting everyone in the church down (S03E06):

> **Adam:** I just wanted to point out that you destroyed the thing you love. *You* destroyed it, that church. You did. Not me. And that pitiful stuff you say about Cherry, it's pathetic. You don't even have the courage to admit to yourself who you are...

Although the words are anything but pastoral, they do seem to land powerfully, as we next see Nigel browsing a dating website for gay Christians. Predictably, he has nothing but disparaging things to say about the men in the profiles, but the vicar's admonishment has clearly prompted him to at least begin exploring this repressed side of himself.

The Archdeacon

Simon McBurney was cast in what was probably the most controversial role in the series: the menacing archdeacon known only as 'Robert,' but rarely referred to by anything other than his clerical title. This particular character would be a regular thorn in the vicar's side, routinely hounding him about his Sunday attendance and financial shortfalls, stranding him at busy traffic intersections, and pouring the (presumably inferior) coffee he is offered down the drain, untouched.

A classically trained thespian, McBurney played a large part in creating his character, with a strong emphasis on costume, as director Peter Cattaneo recalls:

> I think [he] really got into his role with relish; particularly once he'd gone through his wardrobe fitting, he seemed to suddenly turn into the archdeacon. Once he put those gloves on and that scarf on and the big cross, it seemed to really settle him in, and he came to rehearsal saying, 'Ah, I feel I've found the archdeacon now' (Cattaneo, 2014, Commentary S01E01).

But every single consultant vicar was quick to point out that the fictional church official was inappropriately dressed for his position. Their reactions play a bit like a broken record on the subject:

> The thing they *didn't* get from me—the character of the archdeacon, wearing his pectoral cross and scarf—it's because the actor wanted to do his own thing, and they were all just in awe of him, so they let him. And it wasn't terribly well thought out. I think he might have Googled images of 'scary clergy' and came up with a sort of Roman Catholic bishop's look (Catterick Interview 2017).

> I know that Simon McBurney put quite a bit of his own spin on the role. For example, it's not normal for an archdeacon to wear a pectoral cross; that's the reserve of [the bishop]. And I've got my hat and black leather gloves, but I won't be dumping people out of taxis on random occasions. I wasn't happy and other clergy picked up on the inauthenticity of the archdeacon's role. But we all recognised it (Wickens Interview 2018).

> I think the archdeacon insisted upon wearing a pectoral cross, and I said archdeacons don't wear pectoral crosses; bishops do. It was sort of a prop along with black gloves. So he refused to take that off (Toogood Interview 2019).

And as he sat down to be interviewed, the first words out of Rev. Turp's mouth were, 'No archdeacon in the nation ever wears black gloves...' Nevertheless, this was one of the rare instances where the programme makers put aside their meticulous concern for ecclesiastical accuracy and let the actor take liberties with his costume. In fact, he became so immersed in his role that he couldn't help himself—ala Miles Jupp—altering the script where he saw fit. Hollander confirms that this was part of what gave the programme such a rich texture:

> Simon McBurney rewrote a lot of his stuff as well [as Miles]. He's a genius. So our rehearsals became a further part of script writing. It was a very organic process. It never stopped, really (Interview 2019).

Nor did the archdeacon's torture of Adam Smallbone ever stop, it seemed. The moment he appears on screen is enough to send a shiver up the viewer's spine, and this was quite intentional, as Wood explains:

> Tom and I have heard from various people that archdeacons got a bit upset by the show, but then we also hear from all the vicars we meet as we do research that they all seem to have had an archdeacon rather like him. I was worried that he was going to be a bit pantomime and a bit big, but actually we keep meeting priests who say, 'Well you clearly based that on my archdeacon.' So they're obviously out there. He's meant to represent the worst aspects of the church as a hierarchy and institution, and as a hypocritical organisation. Someone said to me the archdeacon is effectively the bishop's 'attack dog,' and once I heard that I thought I sort of knew how to write him (Cattaneo, 2014, Commentary S01E01).

Even though Robert does indeed occur as every vicar's nightmare, the writer resisted the temptation to make him one dimensional and purely evil, giving the archdeacon some fleeting moments of decency, even compassion. He actually sides with

Adam in defending a parishioner who is socially awkward and sometimes inappropriate (Colin), although it means losing the financial support of the local evangelical congregation (S01E02). When his Christmas holiday flight is cancelled Robert returns to St. Saviour's and repays Adam the £50 cab fare he'd previously stuck him with (S02E07). When Adam decides to leaves the ministry, the archdeacon's honest prayer is not without compassion, even a rare flash of self doubt: 'I tried to help Adam but he failed to help himself. I did everything I could, didn't I, Lord?' (S03E06)

And at the end of Series Two, Robert does not try to conceal the fact that he is in a committed relationship with another man, even though it is the one circumstance standing between him and his desire to become a bishop (S02E06). In this instance, as with Nigel's disappointed clerical aspirations, the audience is prompted to a bit of sympathy for an otherwise prickly character, having actually glimpsed the vulnerable man beneath the collar and oversized cross.

Taking Issue with the Church

Whether intentional or not, the ceaseless effort to represent truth based on the stories of real vicars resulted in the creators of *Rev.* depicting nearly every major controversial issue with which the contemporary Church of England and its clergy currently struggle. The table below illustrates the breadth of topics addressed in just three series and nineteen episodes.

	SERIES ONE						SERIES TWO							SERIES THREE					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	2	3	4	5	6
Secularism	†		†							†			†						
Church Schools	†						†			†									
Evangelicalism		†																	
Interfaith Relations			†	†						†				†					
Financial Shortfalls	†	†							†		†			†	†	†	†	†	†
Homosexuality				†								†			†				
Paeodphilia																	†		
Urban Issues (e.g. Homelessness, Addiction, Crime)		†	†				†	†			†		†	†		†		†	
Clerical Isolation					†	†	†					†	†				†	†	†
Collegiality/ Competition		†		†				†		†					†				
Advancement				†			†					†							
Clergy Misconduct						†										†	†	†	
Crisis of Faith						†		†										†	†
Depression						†												†	†
Work v. Family		†					†	†			†	†	†	†			†		

Table 1: Church/Clergy Issues Addressed in *Rev.*, By Episode

Whilst the production was clear that they never intended to lampoon the church, neither did they desire to make any definite moral statements regarding it. Thus, they took a particular approach in portraying potentially controversial issues:

> One of the things I like as a writer (and I think *Rev.* does really well) is to not be didactic: tread a constant line of ambiguity in certain areas, and leave it up to [the viewer]. So we were never trying to make an advert for Christianity, nor were we

> trying to condemn it; we were just saying, here is how it is (Wood Interview 2018).

Pescod explains Hollander's similar view about depicting the church's more contentious side, using humour as an entry into rather serious topics:

> I think it would be wrong to say he hadn't thought about the depth of [church issues], because Tom thinks about everything very thoroughly, so I think he knew that we were going to be able to explore moral questions in a relatively light-hearted way, but actually sneak some really big questions into the show. But I think a lot of that came as it unfolded, and we sort of encountered these things as we came along. There was never a real agenda to say something specifically about the Church; it was more of an exploration of what it's like to be in that situation (Interview 2018).

For example, in Series Three Adam lands in the middle of a dilemma when two of his gay friends ask him to officiate at their wedding, even though the church itself does not, at that moment in time, have any allowance or ritual for such an event. Although he is personally supportive of gay marriage, the vicar tries to accommodate both his friends and church policy by simply blessing their union following a midweek service, insisting that it isn't 'actually' a wedding. He ends up—not surprisingly—displeasing both sides equally for not taking a definitive stand either way (S03E02). The writer explains,

> We definitely wanted to tackle the fact that the church just didn't know what to do with itself over gay marriage, which most priests morally felt that they should be doing, but it clearly was going to offend certain sections of the Christian church. So the leadership had to square themselves with that circle (Wood Interview 2018).

Another theme which frequently arose in conversations with priests was the difficulty of 'advancing' in the profession, (i.e., moving to a higher level of leadership within the church), given the relatively few positions available. Wood found it both comedic and tragic, and therefore included two such story lines in the aforementioned episode when Nigel and the archdeacon set their sights on becoming a priest and a bishop, respectively (S02E06).

> It's absolutely accurate to how the church is in that when the archdeacon wants to become a bishop, he mustn't be seen to be chasing preferment. That's hilarious, but also sort of pathetic and interesting about the church as an institution: one of the

> central problems is that you're never allowed to talk [about promotion], because obviously it's appalling. So you shouldn't want to be ambitious, and yet you've got—what?—10,000 priests, very few archdeacons and bishops, and so only a very very tiny percentage are going to [progress]. It lacks, in a way what the army and the military and the police have: a promotional structure where people can aspire to the next rung. Most people are not going to get any sense of advancement, and it's human nature to feel frustrated by that, I think. And the church has no solution for it, but it needs one; otherwise it's going to have a lot of depressed people (Wood Interview 2018).

Because the programme made a habit of 'speaking the unspoken' in the lives of the clergy, *Rev.* was instantly compelling viewing for many church professionals as an edgy exposé of their peculiar role. The episodes which seemed to strike the deepest chords were those dealing with the most personal matters they face as priests: issues not often—if ever—explored by prior fictional vicar portrayals short on research and clerical input. For example, a clergyperson's feeling of isolation—lacking any 'real' friends or truly supportive colleagues—is a recurring theme in Adam's life and ministry, and one to which Rev. Catterick could readily relate:

> Your life is full of people but you don't have friendship; that can really be neglected. Long term ministry where there's not a lot of balance in life can leave you a bit scarred in all sorts of ways. I'm thinking, there's Adam Smallbone craving friendship and community around him. There's a scene where he comes into the pub and everyone's there with their mates, and the only one he's got to socialise with is [parishioner] Colin tapping on the window outside. And I absolutely believe in collegiality, but I recognise that [competition] is very much a part of our work culture, and they get that right in the series. You'd think there would be colleagues, but who are they? The archdeacon. And Nigel, who's such hard work (Interview 2017).

Rev. Wickens agrees that isolation is an inevitable, perhaps even requisite component of professional ministry:

> I think that a lot of Anglican clergy are not naturally collaborative creatures; there is an element of competitiveness and uncertainty and doubt among many. Adam very much stands alone in that house that is literally set apart from the rest of the community. You *are* alone, and it's there in the [orders for ordination]: our task as priests. It has to be a lonely place at times because there is a prophetic dimension to priestly ministry, and the priests always stand outside looking in, particularly upon the people whom they're called to pastor (Interview 2018).

Adam's feelings of isolation are frequently illustrated by informal prayers to God interwoven with the events of his day: the vicar's inner thoughts amplified as a window through which the audience catches a glimpse of his ongoing struggle. Turp thought those moments were some of the character's most authentic:

> In every programme there was a time where there was absolutely no comedy whatsoever, and [Adam] was usually in [church], sometimes just lying on the pew, telling God what he feels or what's going on. And you start to see this man's devotion turn into frustration [then] into resentment. And I think a lot of people—not clergy—didn't get that. It got very dark. And in becoming dark it became much more realistic. Clergy would know this; a lot of [us] have just spent days sitting at home staring at the wall not doing anything. I've been totally disheartened at times (Turp Interview 2018).

Wood admits that *Rev.* might have lost a bit of audience enthusiasm once the challenge of being a priest began to take a serious toll on Adam's mental health. But since their research had revealed that this scenario was an unfortunate yet realistic liability of the profession, they were resolved that their clerical drama would neither ignore nor sugar-coat the issue.

> By Series Three it became a show about depression, which is very common in priests. Tom was very keen to make sure that we depicted it with a degree of absolute honesty. So all that stuff with him being unable to get out of bed, it's not normal comedy material. And because we were successful we were allowed to go into those areas in a way that a broadcaster wouldn't normally let you, but we'd earned the right to get to there (Wood Interview 2018).

From Scripture to Script

Viewers with any rudimentary knowledge of biblical or Christian themes would recognise some of the elements used in *Rev.* to create both a sacred and dramatic feel. Unlike most clergy themed shows before it, its main character is frequently seen in acts of worship and the sacraments of the office, and therefore its creators relied heavily upon real vicars to achieve the accuracy they desired. Nonetheless, the programme did take some artistic liberties with religious images and symbols, providing the keen-eyed viewer with periodic aesthetic payoffs and also enhancing the impact of the plot.

Series Two concludes with a holiday episode where most of the primary characters end up finding their way, for various reasons, to the church's Christmas dinner prepared for those with nowhere else to go. The final camera shot punctuates the moment with a moving tableau of Leonardo's *The Last Supper*.

Figure 7: Christmas Lunch or Last Supper? – S02E07

The third and final series of the programme draws to a close with a dramatic portrayal of Adam's struggle with misconduct accusations and the probable closure of his church, employing an allegory of Jesus' Holy Week journey of betrayal, crucifixion and resurrection (Figure 8). The plot action mirrors the biblical story—almost to the point of absurdity—culminating with Adam literally dragging a heavy wooden cross through the streets of town (allegedly for the purpose of lending it to another local congregation) in a memorable sequence which gives the programme a quality of 'magic realism and comedy' as the main character ascends to the pinnacle of his crisis, then quickly drops to the depths of despair (Wood Interview 2018).

Plot Action	**Parallel Scripture Event**
Nigel reports Adam to church leaders	Judas betrays Jesus to the Romans
Shop girl and others insult Adam	Crowd ridicules/accuses Jesus
Bishop declares Adam innocent; washes chocolate off hands	Pilate washes his hands of responsibility for Jesus' fate
Colin denies knowing Adam	Peter denies Jesus three times
Burglar alarm goes off at chicken shop	Cock crows after Peter's denial
Adam carries a large cross through town	Jesus carries his cross to crucifixion
Drunks in street taunt Adam	Spectators taunt Jesus along the road
Adam falls	Jesus falls
Passerby offers to help Adam	Simon helps Jesus carry his cross
Adam's parishioners all turn against him	All of the disciples desert Jesus
Adam meets a mysterious man on top of the hill who says, 'I'll always be here'	Jesus is crucified atop a hill; asks God, 'Why have you forsaken me?'
Alex is the only one who stays by Adam	Women stay with Jesus until the end
The church is emptied and darkened	Jesus is laid in a dark tomb
Sound of three knocks after church door is permanently closed/ Adam is confined to bed with debilitating depression	Jesus is three days dead in the tomb
Adam and congregation re-gather for Easter dawn service at empty church	Jesus appears risen to disciples after leaving tomb empty on Easter Sunday

Table 2: Series Three Finale Holy Week/Easter Themes – S03E05 and 06

The final two episodes correspond with the biblical events of Holy Week and Easter, respectively, and were intended as an intentional final punctuation mark after which further continuation of the programme would be unlikely. The show creator's were keen to end the series on a memorable and somewhat realistic note, illustrating actual challenges which face the church and its ministers. And although Hollander fully stands behind their efforts in these final episodes, he admits they were tricky to execute considering the ancient narrative on which they were based:

> We tried to do this resurrection structure at the end, which was a great aspiration; I don't know that we did it quite as well [as Good Friday]. Some people loved the final episode. Some people didn't really get it and felt that that the penultimate episode was the strongest. The final resurrection bit was understandably harder to write—I mean, even in the Bible story you're not quite sure what's real and what isn't, so it's kind of floaty. There isn't the drama of Pontius Pilate and a crucifixion and all the rest of it. There's a stone and some sort of presence (Interview 2019).

Adam's own 'Good Friday' ends with his church doors closed and boarded up like the sealed tomb, and with himself wrung out from the judgments of parishioners and church alike, to the point where he can no longer function in his role and indeed can hardly get out of bed. Like Hollander, the writer found this mirroring of Jesus' three days of darkness in the stillness of death to be the hardest part of the story to depict:

> The problem with Easter as a story is that it's incredibly dramatic, and then there's a lull…It left us with a really difficult Episode Six. We knew what the end was going to be, that the church was going to be reopened, but there was another twenty-five minutes of screen time to fill before that, in the dark (Wood Interview 2018).

On the other side of the darkness is the faint glow of a Paschal candle around which the remnant of Adam's congregation gathers for one last time, breaking into their boarded up and emptied church for a celebration of Christ's resurrection and the long overdue baptism of the vicar's young daughter. This poignant final image of St. Saviour's lingered long in the memories of viewers, particularly Rev. Turp who was keenly reminded of his own congregation's real structural and financial struggles:

> We took all the pews out—we stripped it all. We took everything out. We blacked out all the windows and filmed in darkness; we just had one light shining through one window up on the South side—there was this little pool of light. And for me, I could hardly bear to look at it; this is how close we had come to actually losing this building (Interview 2018).

Figure 8: A Subversive Resurrection at St. Saviour's – S03E06

Clerical Reaction

Rev. Adam Smallbone was birthed from the travails of countless real-life vicars. But how did his fictional ordeals translate onto the small screen, and did viewers—particularly priests—accept him as a credible colleague? The production's creators as well as public reviews affirm that BBC 2's *Rev.* enjoyed a largely favorable reception throughout its run, with accolades generally outweighing criticism.

At the conclusion of its first series, a C of E spokesman hailed the arrival of a church drama on television that did not fall back on 'tired old stereotypes' and instead gave 'an edgy insight' into the work of contemporary clergy (Butt, 2010). The Archbishop of Canterbury himself admitted to liking the programme for the fact that it 'reveal[ed] something about the continuing commitment of the church to run down and challenging areas' and depicted someone who 'prays honestly' (Collins, 2010).

The Bishop of Buckinghamshire devoted an extended blog post to the series, giving it high praise in spite of some minor ecclesial inconsistencies and arguing that the creators hadn't missed the mark in its essential portrayal:

> I like *Rev.* It's a noble enterprise. Those who wrote it know whereof they speak. Adam Smallbone is engaging, with real spiritual depth. [The challenge of urban ministry]deserves more understanding and respect than it sometimes gets, and this show does acknowledge its reality and worth. For all *Rev.*'s occasional TV simplification, full marks to writers, cast and crew for trying to capture it, and occasionally succeeding (Wilson, 2010).

It was perhaps inevitable that a show dealing with the inner world of church life—with its peculiar rituals, language, and vestments—would draw keen scrutiny from the so-called 'Green Ink Brigade:' churchy types inspecting the programme's every frame for inaccuracies, even in spite of the production's laborious attention to detail all throughout filming (Turp Interview). Wood recalls:

> We got a prayer book wrong in one episode; I can remember it was just a slip; there were so many things going on in the filming. Instantly there was a barrage of Twitter from loads of priests. I sort of took it as flattery that everyone was saying, 'Well you won't find that song in that book.' At least you're all watching it and bothered by that… (Interview 2019)

One such critic was Rev. Gillean Craig of St. Mary Abbots in Kensington, who wrote some of the first reviews in the *Church Times*, which quickly became a forum for ongoing, lively debate about the programme throughout its three series run. Rev. Craig seemed to delight in flagging up perceived faux pas such as the misplacement of a side altar (which was in fact an accurate reflection of many churches' designs) or what he felt were unrealistic depictions of both Nigel and Robert in their ecclesial roles. His defense for dwelling on such details was that 'realistic comedy, as opposed to farce, must get its background facts absolutely solid' (Craig, 2010a), dismissing the main character as 'too naïve' and the plots as 'paper thin' (Craig, 2010b).

Rev. Craig's critique unleashed a barrage of responses defending the fledgling comedy-drama, such as the following from a vicar on the Isle of Wight:

> Despite Gillean Craig's picky and generally damning criticisms in his column, I'm sure I'm not the only one who has enjoyed *Rev*. these past six weeks. I think it highlighted what a lonely, isolated but ultimately glorious vocation we have. It was also shot through with a profound Christian spirituality quite rare to find in the media, and led to interesting conversations about my calling, not only with my family but a couple of non-Christians at a party recently. I believe the BBC should be congratulated (Wright, 2010).

Dorset vicar Philip Martin concurred, dismissing Craig's nitpicking of the programme as he would a literal reading of the Bible, and extolling the sitcom's portrayal of the often contradictory elements which comprise a priest's reality: 'good intentions and crap ideas, decisiveness and dithering, rage and gentleness, intelligence and foolishness, calculation and generosity, love and loneliness (2010).

Even Rev. Craig himself conceded that the programme was not entirely without merit:

> I pay tribute to the show's essentially kindly spirit, to its sense that things of God are real and do matter, and might even have some bearing on the dilemmas of city life, that prayer is not merely a pious fraud. For all its many and great flaws, this comedy takes Central London Church of England ministry seriously' (2010b).

This 'serious' side of *Rev.*'s priest portrayal seemed to have an even bigger impact than its comedy for many viewers. Series consultant Matthew Catterick found that he and his colleagues were very moved by Adam's frequent conversations with God which

featured in nearly every episode (Interview 2017) and also caught the attention of secular media, as in this *Telegraph* review:

> One of the remarkable things about *Rev.* is that it manages to temper the laughs with moments of real seriousness, ponderings on the nature of faith, and even straight-faced prayers (Grant, 2010).

Having been raised in a vicarage himself, *Guardian* arts writer Ben Dowell found the programme groundbreaking, claiming it 'rewrote the rule book about depicting clergy on the small screen and captures, for perhaps the first time in UK television, what it is actually like to be a vicar (2011).

Given the show's significant input from real clergy, it was perhaps inevitable that vicars would naturally see themselves reflected in Adam's weekly trials. What the cast and crew didn't fully expect was the avalanche of clerical feedback from individuals convinced that various situations had been based on their own situations.

> We constantly got, 'Oh my god, this is like my life! Where did you get that?' We had an awful lot of people coming up and going, 'Did you base that on my dad?' or 'Did you base that on my uncle?' which spoke to the consistency of the experiences of all these vicars (Hollander Interview 2019).

Even Rev. Wickens, upon whom some of the character was actually based, found it difficult to trace with precision what had come from his situation and what might be attributed to others, given the programme's extensive integration of so many sources.

> I recognise a lot of the scenarios, obviously because I had some input into the storylines and script. I recognise how they relate to my ministerial experience, but I think I can say—hand on heart—because it was so well researched, my response was pretty much the same as many Anglican clergy that saw it: they saw themselves in what was depicted on the television (Interview 2018).

Some viewers' experience of *Rev.* went well beyond simply recognising a familiar situation in their own lives, as with the vicar who confessed to Hollander that the episode in which Adam first experiences a crisis of faith (S01E06) had spoken to his own experience of having a breakdown, and that the story's conclusion had 'restored his conviction in what he had dedicated his life to' (Fox, 2011).

The new sitcom enjoyed waves of praise from critics both inside and outside of the church, such as the *Independent*'s television writer Gerard Gilbert, who found it 'refreshingly intent on finding comedy in the real issues facing the modern vicar' (2010). Not all clergy were universally approving, though, especially given that some sectors of the church were portrayed less favorably than others.

Evangelicals predictably bristled at the depiction of charismatic/contemporary worship and ministry, when an enthusiastic but ultimately unsavory young priest takes over Adam's building with a smoothie bar, absurd Christian rapping, and a sea of fresh young (mostly beautiful) faces in an episode entitled, 'Jesus is Awesome' (S01E02).

After the programme aired, consultant Melanie Toogood heard from a colleague in the East end whose neighboring vicar was evangelical, and who'd expressed concern about the episode, asking, 'Do people really see us like that?' (Interview 2019).

Evangelical Bishop Pete Broadbent of Willesden took a particular dislike to the programme, describing it as 'utterly ghastly' and tweeting: 'It's a load of wet liberals working out their angst about C of E and not being very funny. Sad & not Dibley league' (Collins, 2010). The Bishop's insistence that no priest as ineffectual as Adam would ever be appointed in the diocese of London drew arguments from clergy in defense of the fictional vicar's commitment to mission, a interpretation which Rev. Broadbent would simply not accept (Catterick Interview 2019). Toogood speculates on the driving force behind his aversion to the programme in general, and specifically that episode:

> I think it was loathed by this particular bishop because it didn't portray the church as outgoing and fabulous and having glorious services—you know, doubling the congregation size in five minutes—which is true for a lot of the evangelical churches, but it's not for a lot of ordinary [vicars] struggling to keep the roof on or to keep the organ going...and have a private life. It's not the way that I operate, and it's not the way that Adam operated. He was very much with the outcast: the slightly odd, slightly bizarre, 'out of the circle' type of people (Interview 2019).

Evangelical journalist and youth worker Martin Saunders had similar criticism for the way charismatic Christianity was presented:

> [Evangelical priest] Derren's [sic] rapid unmasking as a money-crazed tyrant is heavy-handed; we may have an unfortunate number of charlatans in the church,

> but the real-life 'Derren's' [sic] are usually well-meaning men and women trying to engage relevantly with youth culture (2010).

However, the reviewer still considered Adam Smallbone to be groundbreaking in contrast with his fictional predecessors, a 'character with a believable, three-dimensional faith,' whose dog collar 'doesn't turn him into a saint.' Saunders found *Rev.* useful both as a caveat re. setting expectations of church leaders and a catalyst for conversation beyond narrow ecclesiastical circles:

> Against the odds, the BBC has made a show about church that has theological and cultural teeth; that's a suitable backdrop for proper, grown-up discussions about faith and church with non-Christians. If we simply reject it, then we reject a gritty portrayal of the Church which the public has found intriguing (2010).

David Hilborn, a self-described 'evangelical who likes *Rev.*,' chose to evaluate the programme as entertainment rather than a definitive statement on Anglicanism as others might have been tempted to do. Although he admits that he wouldn't attend Adam Smallbone's church if given the choice, Hilborn does acknowledge powerful motifs in the misadventures of the show's perpetually ill-fated main character:

> There was a message in *Rev.* But it was a message best discerned not so much through the lens of Church Growth Theory as through the lens of a classic British sitcom genre which finds humour in our thwarted ambitions, vanity and pride, yet which nonetheless shows affection and even compassion for those caught up in such things. Applied as deftly as they were here to the life of a deeply flawed yet prayerful minister and his deeply flawed yet loveable congregation, those tragi-comic conventions unexpectedly facilitated the telling of a much richer, more authentic and more challenging story – the story of a God whose grace is so free and extravagant that it can heal even the most lost of vocations, and even the most hopeless of churches (2014).

By the end of its first series, *Rev.* had firmly hooked its viewers and sparked intense debates among lay and clergy across the country. It even caught some celebrity attention, exemplified by the following tweet:

From an industry standpoint the programme was undeniably successful, debuting to an audience of 2.18 million (10.74% of total viewers) and managing to maintain these numbers throughout Series One and beyond (Life's Too Short... 2011). As a sitcom, *Rev.* received some the highest honours of its industry, winning a BAFTA award for Best Sitcom[27] and a South Bank Sky Arts Award for Best Comedy (Deans, 2011). The programme and Hollander also received nominations from the Royal Television Society Programme Awards.[28]

The show's creators were genuinely astounded at the reception their little sitcom inspired. Suddenly they were being offered invitations for drinks at Lambeth Palace (which they couldn't attend due to filming commitments), and being 'mobbed' by vicars attending a presentation about *Rev.* at Greenbelt, a popular annual festival of 'artistry, activism and belief' in rural Northamptonshire,[29] (Fox, 2011), an event at which Hollander remembers being thanked by one clergywoman for making her 'proud to wear [her] dog collar again' (Grant, 2011).

The shower of public attention from the church in particular was unexpected, but not unwelcome, as the actor recalls:

> For a time we felt like we were sort of adjunct to the Church of England. Rowan Williams decided that he was a fan of it and we were the 'Anglican TV channel.' So it was really very sweet, to be honest (Hollander Interview 2019).

[27] http://www.bafta.org/television/awards/television-awards-winners-in-2011#jump19
[28] https://rts.org.uk/award/rts-programme-awards-2011
[29] https://www.greenbelt.org.uk/

But there was one particular down side of receiving mostly glowing reviews, as producer Pescod reflects:

> To be honest, I was unnerved by it because I kind of liked criticism. [The show] wasn't by any means perfect, and there were lots of things that we would have done differently with more time, and so when you just get this sort of universal admiration, I didn't find it massively productive. Obviously it helps you get the commission for the second series, but it then means we all felt a lot of pressure—that sort of 'second album syndrome.' There is all this affection that we hadn't really anticipated and now it felt like there was an expectation from the Church, because we hadn't expected such an intimate connection with them (Interview 2018).

Back in the Pulpit

Having secured a second series and uncomfortably aware of how greatly it was anticipated, the show creators decided to capitalise off of Season One's popularity with clergy for the purpose of gathering feedback and more story ideas. Hollander and Wood arranged to meet, round table style, with 26 vicars in Salisbury in order to get a sense of where they might go with the next installment. 'We asked them what they felt had rung true in Series One and what areas they felt we might have neglected,' Hollander explains (Fox, 2011).

Taking this feedback into account, the writing team filled notebooks with new ideas; potential story lines were never in short supply. In fact, Wood and Hollander reached a point where they couldn't stop the flow of input from clergy everywhere, many of whom eagerly 'hurled' anecdotes at them: true stories which these priests believed would make good plot lines for Adam Smallbone (Hollander Interview 2019).

Rev.'s second series debut saw a slight rise in ratings from the first, opening to 2.29 million and a 9.5% audience share, with another 83,700 watching on BBC HD (Life's Too Short... 2011). Subsequent episodes went on to average 1.5 million viewers (Farber, 2012).

As with Series One, the accolades continued in reviews, television media, blogs and online forums. Atheists and believers alike could see the value in *Rev.*'s attempt to portray ecclesial issues without easily rushing to condemn the entire institution and its leadership. Secular entertainment journalist David Stubbs articulated this:

> The church justly takes a bad rap nowadays, for instances of institutional bigotry, hypocrisy and cover-ups of child abuse. However, Adam Smallbone represents a facet of the church that's just as real – a moral example of social responsibility, of "just doing good" (2014).

Church insiders continued to praise *Rev.* for its 'credibility and poignant moments,' as a series 'rich with characters and the humour of real life' (Walker, 2013). Some clerics even waxed theological in their interpretation of the programme's 'spirituality' (even though its writers were neither theologians nor professed believers), as in this blog excerpt from the Dean of Kings College, Cambridge:

> At one level there are Adam's voice-over prayers: naïve, honest, basic and mostly believable. At another level are moments of what I want to call—in vicar speak—'the sacramental sublime.' It's hard to get the grace of this across on the telly, just as it is hard to get the truth of vicarage life across on the telly. But *Rev.* got frightening close. And it pointed us in the right direction. And that, essentially, is the best any of us can do when we see something full of grace and truth. We can just point (Cherry, 2011).

The Universal Cleric

In a *Guardian* interview Hollander discussed his understanding of Adam's dogged dedication to a sense of 'call'—a persistent loyalty to his priestly vocation—which the actor described as 'an endless source of humiliation' for the fictional vicar. He also proposed that much of the programme's appeal was its 'defeated sensibility,' which Hollander believed was a characteristically English aesthetic which wouldn't easily translate to an outside audience such as viewers across the pond (Stubbs, 2014).

Anecdotal feedback, however, suggested that he was perhaps mistaken in this conclusion. A review in *Sojourners*, the progressive US Christian publication established by Joy Carroll's husband Jim Wallace, raved, 'I adore this show. It's clever and funny and spiritually intriguing without being goofy, snarky, or facile (Falsani, 2012).

A Stateside layman and theological scholar also had positive words for the show, which was only available to US viewers via dvd or on streaming services such as Hulu:

> I found myself constantly drawn back to the crumbling sanctuary of St. Saviour's week after week to watch the quiet drama of God's love unfold. In a way, that's what makes *Rev.* one of the best gospel stories being told today: its argument is ultimately that the church is not a country club for the properly religious, but rather a vital source of life for the messy and the outcast (Marshall, 2013).

In fact, *Rev.*'s creators did have discussions with the ABC network in 2012 about a US version of the programme centred on a similarly transplanted rural priest to urban Chicago, but the project didn't make it past the development stage in the competitive commercial market across the pond (Allen Interview 2019).

Resurrected Vicar

The intense activity of creating two successful series back to back precipitated a longer gap before the final installment of *Rev.*, given the level of research which each episode required and the resulting exhaustion of cast and crew (Stubbs, 2014).

Series Three debuted to a slight smaller audience than the previous two (1.5 million viewers), but still rated well about the average for its BBC Two time slot (TV Critics: Rev, 2014). By this time the programme had a solid following on social media with public forums such as Ship of Fools[30] and Twitter's new hashtag, #RevsforRev, where clergy weighed in with their reactions—mostly positive—to their now favourite television vicar, and at series' end registered devastation at both the show's emotional ending and the fact that it was ending at all[31].

The new Archbishop of Canterbury, joined his predecessor in endorsing the programme, though not without condition. 'The show amusingly depicts some of the challenges facing clergy up and down the country,' affirmed the pontiff, 'but while it's great entertainment, it doesn't truly tell the whole story' (Welby, 2014). He goes on to highlight various settings around the country where vital ministry is taking place, indicating that whilst Adam's unfortunate circumstances may be realistic to a degree, they are apparently not representative of a majority of Anglican congregations. The

[30] http://forum.ship-of-fools.com/cgi-bin/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic;f=70;t=027272;p=1

[31] https://twitter.com/hashtag/RevsforRev?src=hashtag_click

archbishop's inevitable conclusion is that 'while *Rev.* is great viewing, it doesn't depress me quite as much as you might think!' (Welby, 2014).

The new series' debut resurrected the adulation of previous years. After just one episode, critics across the media were again extolling the award-winning programme's cleverly crafted approach to its subject matter:

> The *Rev.* team keeps pushing the story into new worlds, within which there is no weak link. As a comedy [it] gets the balance perfectly: of humour, humanity and honesty. If only church could be consistently this rewarding (Hardy, 2014).
>
> *Rev.*'s willingness to get stuck in has always set it apart from the bucolic likes of *The Vicar of Dibley* but also the funnier, yet surrealist, *Father Ted*. Most admirable is that it never scruples to offend the churchy set in the front pews in pursuit of a punch line (Jones, 2014).
>
> *Rev.* tickles but stops before it might hurt anyone. But then maybe that's no bad thing—an actual good thing, even, in a world that sometimes tries too hard to be bad. Relevant too, it may even say something, not just about a profession struggling for relevancy itself in the modern world, but about a place and a time: Britain today. With nice little human insights along the way (Wollaston, 2014).
>
> The secret to appreciating *Rev.* lies in accepting it's about the journey rather than the destination. The series offers a payload of breezy laughs without any big comic pay-off. No comic miracles then but lots to keep even the initially sceptical viewer tuned in for the rest of the season (Power, 2014).

Apart from these initial raves, the first episode of Series Three also became the catalyst for an unforeseen interfaith debate when London imam Ajmal Masroor, writing in the *Evening Standard*'s comment section, cited Adam Smallbone's insecurity alongside the thriving ministry of his neighboring mosque as evidence of Christianity becoming 'obsolete' in the capital's East end. Masroor expressed 'sympathy' for his Christian friends and their 'deserted churches,' asserting that their religion had clearly 'failed to fill the spiritual vacuum in the lives of British people' when compared with its more successful Muslim neighbors (2014).

This public opinion piece predictably set off an avalanche of responses from Anglicans in the East end, most of whom were quick to give numerous examples of churches there who were in fact carrying out vibrant ministry (Thorpe et al., 2014), and

further pointing out that '*Rev.* is not a fly on the wall documentary, but a comedy, in which exaggeration is a tool for getting at truths with laughter' (Green, 2014a).

An East end vicar's response to the imam's opinion piece also sought to defend the church's ministry, but further inferred something of a theological agenda behind the sitcom's approach to humour, which the vicar felt contrasted with his own views about church growth (hearkening back to the Series One complaints by evangelicals):

> Smallbone stands in a long line of comically ineffectual Anglican clergy. It's not a coincidence that one of the most memorable villains of the first series was a clergyman with a thriving congregation. In fact, there are barely any positive mentions of anyone with the gifts or inclination to help the church to grow. We must be wary of an uncritical theology of failure which uses the language of 'vulnerability' and 'powerlessness' to justify structures and practices which have outlived their usefulness. We must not confuse Christ-like vulnerability with plain, old-fashioned ineffectiveness (Ritchie, 2014).

'By Series Three it became a bit fashionable to dislike it,' admits Wood, citing viewers who felt uncomfortable at Adam's perceived weaknesses and his crisis of faith which punctuated the final two episodes framed by Holy Week and Easter (Interview 2018). Before even viewing the series' 'resurrection finale,' academic and churchgoer James Mumford summed up all the reasons he believed the programme was 'insidious,' especially because it was so well loved:

> *Rev.* is 'a subtly damaging depiction of the church…it is an outsider's imaginative construction of an insider viewpoint, a secular take on the sacred. An insider view of the church would, by contrast, revolve around the reality of shared faith. From the outset, *Rev.*'s operating assumption is that faith is individual' (2014).

One of Mumford's primary reasons for attributing an 'outsider' viewpoint to the programme is that it appeared not to agree with the official church policy forbidding the blessing of same-sex marriage—implicitly assuming that a true 'insider' would be one who agrees with the policy, although reality shows that at best the church is deeply divided in its opinion on the matter, as reflected in Adam's own struggle. The reviewer then proposes a rather odd example of what an 'insider' storyline might look like, involving an instant miracle faith healing (the likes of which are rarely seen in day to day parish ministry).

Responses to this particular critique of *Rev.* drew legions of the programme's defenders, one of whom took issue with reviewer's essential thesis that *Rev.* was a 'brilliant comedy that undermines the church' (Mumford, 2014), arguing instead that 'it's a comedy-drama, not a PR film from the C of E, so it shouldn't be aiming to prop up or undermine the church; it should be aiming to be funny/dramatic' (Bloomfield, 2014).

Disagreeing with Mumford's 'outsider' assessment of *Rev.* as well as his interpretation of 'shared faith,' a vicar from the West Midlands countered:

> Apart from its lack of acknowledgment of the number of 'insiders' on *Rev.*'s writing and advisory teams…what really annoyed me about James Mumford's review is its complete inability to acknowledge faith, personal and shared, as written all over, and under, every moment of drama and comedy in *Rev.* It's particularly ironic, in fact, that Mumford was so impatient to criticise the programme that he couldn't even wait for its Easter morning to come (Barrett, 2014).

A Nottingham professor concurs with Rev. Barrett:

> Why isn't Colin and Adam's continual morning meeting and conversation about religion regarded as a 'shared faith?' It's not pretty or indeed very nice or morally pleasant a lot of the time, but that is two people who regularly meet and talk about God. It's almost the textbook example of a religious practice, yet it was curiously missed by the reviewer (Bloomfield, 2014).

In a comment on Bloomfield's blog post, Manchester based writer A.J. Hall expressed similar discontent with what he felt was Mumford's 'our way or the highway' approach to faith, implying that Adam's (or any of his congregants') doubts or failings somehow signify that they weren't sufficiently 'spiritual.'

> Faith is a gift, and a somewhat fragile one, and if one loses one's faith it probably wasn't because one wasn't trying hard enough. Which is the very part that *Rev.* gets so brilliantly' (Bloomfield, 2014).

As Mumford's strong criticism indicates, much of the harsher opposition to the BBC Two sitcom came from Christian conservatives who didn't consider themselves or their interpretation of spirituality to be well represented on the programme, such as this review in the evangelical *Christian Today* by a Scottish Free Church minister:

> I hated the programme…because it was far too close to the bone of what much of the church in Britain actually is: a church without God, without Christ and without the Holy Spirit. The BBC (and apparently some professing Christians) might like a pathetic, wimpy vicar who swears like a trooper and has the same values as the dominant elites and mobs of our culture. But I prefer a vicar of Christ (Robertson, 2014).

There was also at least one letter to the *Church Times* complaining that on the occasions where minority characters were portrayed in the sitcom they were negatively stereotyped (Gnanadoss, 2014). This was one issue that had initially concerned the production during casting, as Pescod explains:

> It was a really interesting process with the auditioning, this question of how you represent the multicultural nature of Britain. [The 'cassock chaser'] Adoah in the first version was a white elderly woman called Mary, and I was saying, 'Well, where I live the majority of people I see going to church are sort of middle-aged black women, so I kind of think we should be representing that' (Interview 2018).

Likewise the character of Mick, the drug addict who constantly hounds the vicar for a handout at his front door, was initially meant to be a colorblind audition.

> If anything we would have veered towards white because that was quite frightening that you would represent the one crackhead in the show as a black character. But then Jimmy [Akingbola] came in and was so brilliant. He totally got it and was really fast and crazy with it. So Peter [Cattaneo] and I in particular talked about it a lot and really kind of agonised—is this the right thing to do? But he was the best, and in the end you've got to go for the best person. And so that's one that over the years people have questioned with me, and I've said, 'I know; we felt the same.' I still don't know what the right answer is to it, but it felt like the right thing to do at the time (Pescod Interview 2018).

Church youth minister Ali Campbell didn't have criticism for the programme, but rather an explanation for why he had chosen not to watch it when others were giving such rave reviews.

> I know the church is led by vulnerable, broken people – I'm not sure I want to watch a drama about what is just a lived reality for so many. Also, if I watch a bit of telly, I like escapism. I actually don't want to be reminded of the church every five minutes, never mind for half an hour! (Bloomfield, 2014)

The negative critiques of *Rev.* stand out somewhat in that they were significantly outweighed by those in support of the show. The overwhelming response was one of praise for the way the writers navigated the balance of serious and funny, managing to attract a following of viewers both from inside the church and out, as expressed by the *New Statesman*:

> Somehow, it presents a nuanced view of faith while still being funny. It's become much more than a sitcom about a funny vicar; it's become about humanity. But paradoxically, it's also the first church-based sitcom to properly concern itself with matters deeply ecumenical. Why the show works for anyone, religious or not, is because Adam's 'crowd of lost, hopeless and annoying people' has become community, and being part of a community is something that we all seek (Landreth, 2014).

Similarly, a Methodist believer found the fictional vicar's version of spirituality to be widely appealing as well as an invitation into conversation about faith amongst those of her own circle with widely divergent views:

> The endearing thing about Rev Adam Smallbone is that he's always sincere. And he does what we're all told to and 'prays continually.' Out loud. In a sitcom. How's that for witness, Mr. 'he's not scriptural enough?' My friends-and-family straw poll (an Anglican, an agnostic and an atheist) all say it's one of their favourite programmes. It got people talking. Talking about God. At Easter. And without being part of the 'God slot.' No, not your average vicar sitcom (Kiley, 2014).

A Surrey vicar blogged his support for the series, albeit having been somewhat let down by Series Three and its heavier plot lines, surmising that it had become 'driven by the events it wanted to portray, and forgot that they needed a few laughs' (Wallace, 2014). But his final analysis affirms the authentic feel of the programme and the service it provides to the clergy:

> The characters are realistic and recognisable, and the situations ring very true. Here is a real man in often very extraordinary situations, trying to hold on to his own faith in God while constantly facing distractions. If people can see that this is who their ministers are and these are the things with which they deal, then maybe *Rev.* has done its job well (Wallace, 2014).

Wood confirmed that many viewers found the end of Series Three to be a bit bleak for comedy, following Adam's personal crisis and eventual descent into profound depression:

> A lot of people I think checked out of the show at that point, when it stopped being funny. There were a few who said, '*Rev.* used to be fun but now it's dark.' But I think it was very honest, and I think people within the church and who know priests recognised it and liked it (Interview 2018).

An Oxfordshire rector affirms this:

> Sometimes I stare at the screen in disbelief because certain moments hit a little close to home...I'm hardly alone in the clerical world in sharing Adam's experiences of breakdown for real. It was strange watching what took eighteen months for me play out over two half-hour episodes of a comedy. It was doubly strange because although many of the characters and events of my story were here seen in caricature, yet here they were. That's what happens: you lose your reality, and I think the TV show put this across well (Green, 2014b) (Vallely, 2014).

The parting shot of Adam's remnant congregation subversively celebrating Easter inside a dark church struck some as a bit of a defeated resurrection, but most viewers, including writer and professor Paul Vallely, were moved by it's simplicity and power, wrapping up a series which 'touch[ed] the pulse of church life with disturbing accuracy' and dealt with Adam's faith 'in a direct and uncynical way:'

> 'Is this what resurrection is?' the hero asks, before he sings the Easter Exultet with a breathless beauty. It was not a happy ending, but it finally rejected the suggestion that the series had seemed to be outlining, that you can survive in the Church only if you are a conformist, careerist, legalist, pedant, or hypocrite. The light of a weak dawn flickered, but it offered the prospect of a new start. And perhaps that is all we can hope for (2014).

<u>Professor Smallbone</u>

If seasoned clerics recognised seeds of truth and even found consolation in Adam's misadventures, it perhaps follows that future vicars might also benefit from observing the fictional priest as a glimpse into what might be waiting for them in professional ministry. Every consultant vicar interviewed for this research (as well as Tom Hollander) mentioned that the series has been used as a resource in Anglican seminaries, including

Westcott House in Cambridge, to help prepare ordinands for the world beyond ivied institutional walls (Stubbs, 2014).

Phill Sacre, who was a divinity student at the time, enjoyed watching the programme for its genuine characters and plot which he found alternately touching and entertaining. But the ministry trainee was also astonished by much of what he saw, particularly an episode where Adam alone had been willing to forgive someone who had been convicted of possessing child pornography, but the rest of his congregation rejected the man, instead clinging to a sense of moral superiority (S03E04). 'Forgiveness is what the church is supposed to be about,' the ordinand opines (2014), confounded by a scenario which most experienced priests would recognise as all too believable in an institution comprised of mere human beings. Additionally, the future priest couldn't stomach something with which so many practicing priests, by contrast, had closely identified and had appreciated seeing on screen: the unapologetic portrayal of the fictional vicar's fallibility and less attractive traits, ie. personal vices and occasional vulgar language (Arnold, 2011).

> I think the writer took so much trouble to paint a picture of Adam as an ordinary person that he just comes across as someone who is no different at all from 'the world'... I'm not entirely sure I saw the holiness in Adam which I would like to see in any Christian, and particularly a minister of religion (Sacre, 2014).

This shattering of ideals about ministry, the church, and its professionals seems a likely objective in seminaries' choosing to expose ordinands to a story like *Rev.*, as the case of this particular student (who now serves a parish in Essex) well illustrates. Turp concurs that a dose of what priesthood is 'really like' is valuable fodder for those considering that life for themselves:

> When you hear that theological colleges are showing this and using it for discussions, and then their ordinands are saying, 'Is this what it's like?!'...No, you don't just turn up and tell them what hymn to sing. Some of it is really tough. In fact some of it is much tougher and much harder than you could ever show on a television screen (Interview 2018).

The idea of *Rev.*'s expanded role in the classroom first struck Toogood as a bit surreal: the factually-informed fictional programme informing real world ministry praxis.

> It's taken very seriously as a sort of teaching aid, which I found quite bizarre, but I suppose I can see why. It occupies a strange space where the church is looked at, I think; it's a human space as opposed to just an entertainment space, and that's very refreshing (Interview 2019).

Besides unwittingly educating theology students, Adam Smallbone has also informed scholarly research in fields such as gender studies and cultural sociology. Exploring the concept of masculinity in clerical institutions, Alexander Ornella posits that the male church professionals in the BBC sitcom tend to subvert and satirise traditional gender roles in their struggle to embody them, allowing their characters to be perceived as more accessible by viewers. In the scholar's words,

> [The programme] shows that being a man in an institutional setting is as much a performance as it is a more or less successful negotiation of other people's expectations and one's own worldview. The main male clerical characters in *Rev.* inhabit a position of power but all have their flaws. They can best be understood as losers whose clash with masculine systems renders them more human (2016, p100).

The researcher hopes that the church, through such examples, might be a forerunner in giving space to different manifestations of masculinity, as well as acknowledging the burdens often imposed upon clergy in the form of 'expectations and stereotypes' (2016, p118).

Sociologist Simon Speck interprets *Rev.* as an example of what he calls 'reflexive religiosity,' a comic-critical response to enlightened secular modernity. In his analysis Speck recognises Adam's (and the church's) struggle with relevance in society, as well as the series' refreshing take on religion: rationally based but personally and communally engaged, finding its humour in the struggle to maintain active faith in a culture where such things are mostly regarded as superstitious or useless (2019, p243), and in an ecclesial context which often seems to contradict itself:

> The narrative ridicules institutionalized religion in that the Church is both too worldly (most emphatically, in its obsessive preoccupation with revenue-raising) and too unworldly (viz. its dogmatic intolerance as evinced in the proscription on same-sex marriage), yet also questions 'individualized' religiosity as expressed in the bathetic attempt of frail humanity to live up to Christ's example of universal

> love. Nonetheless, *Rev.* remains eminently sympathetic to the flailing efforts of its central character to minister to human needs and to address individuals in their full humanity (Speck, 2019, p243-4).

Whereas religion is often popularly regarded as 'unenlightened,' Speck sees *Rev.*'s protagonist essentially succeeding in embodying the very 'modern' principles of human dignity and commitment to community which the current secular environment mostly fails to provide, a reading which the programme's writers may not have fully consciously intended, but of which they could hardly disapprove.

Lasting Impressions

By its final year of broadcast *Rev.* ranked as BBC Two's highest rated sitcom and was being sold to 140 countries (Preston, 2014). Its industry success was undeniable, but what of its lasting legacy as a priest comedy? Did Adam Smallbone soften anyone's heart toward the CofE in general, or priests specifically? School chaplain Robert Stanier was divided on the issue:

> I think as a result of the show, people will like the clergy more, but will they be attracted to the church? Would you want to go to that church? A church where the roof still isn't fixed and the organ is a bit crap. Maybe not (Arnold, 2011).

Oddly enough, independent market agency Christian Research conducted a survey in 2014 asking just that question, and discovered that of the nearly 2000 Christians participating, 68 percent would in fact choose to attend St. Saviour in the Marshes (if it really existed), with 62 per cent believing that Adam would have a positive effect on the perception of Christian ministers amongst non-churchgoers, and an overwhelming three fourths finding his character believable.[32]

Similar to the way in which *The Vicar of Dibley* enjoyed a somewhat 'larger than life' status within both church and culture, the '*Rev.* effect' lingered long after the fictional church had closed its doors. For years after the programme had concluded, Wood found himself regularly invited to clerical events such as diocesan gatherings, being interviewed

[32] https://www.christian-research.org/reports/recent-research/bbc2s-rev-aunty-beeb-subverts-stereotypes/

by bishops and priests, with no credential other than being 'the writer of *Rev.*,' a phenomenon which never ceased to amuse him (Interview 2018).

For his own part, Hollander felt himself genuinely transformed by the experience of playing Adam Smallbone, even though the regular church attendance he'd cultivated for the purpose of research during production tailed off after the show finished (Interview 2019). 'It's been wonderful, feeding my mind,' the actor told *The Telegraph*, 'I've been able to live a life that I haven't been able to live before and it's felt really good' (Fox, 2011). Through his visits to homeless shelters and other ministries, he felt that he'd learned much 'about what the work of the church actually is' (Stubbs, 2014).

Hollander shared how the experience of spending hour upon hour with clergy, studying their movements and opening the floodgates of anecdotes from their everyday ministries altered his perspective on the church and its priests:

> [I learned] to have huge respect for them. I didn't know them before. Now I won't have it when people make silly stupid comments about them. I feel an affectionate loyalty to the institution because they were so kind to us and they created the show, really. So it would be ridiculous to not have a lasting sense of affection and respect for [it] (Interview 2019).

Although they weren't pleased with every single choice the programme made in the final cuts, the series' consultant vicars were at least able to acknowledge that a television producer will sometimes favour entertainment over accuracy. 'It's not a documentary,' concedes Rev. Catterick, 'It's comedy, so you've got to allow some of that in' (Interview 2017). However, all of the clergy advisers featured in this research were overwhelmingly united in their satisfaction with the show's primary intent and subsequent impact.

Rev. Toogood feels that even years later, Adam's lasting legacy is showing the world an honest priest who led from his heart, regardless of whether or not his professional success was measurable:

> He was concerned to be a good pastor and a good advocate for the Christian faith and way of life. And he was concerned that he was doing it for others and people were enabled to see God through what he was doing in the community. So I think that that came through well (Interview 2019).

Rev. Wickens was grateful for the programme's unflinching portrayal of a vicar clothed in flesh and blood, not just a cassock:

> Clergy are human beings, first and foremost, and I think that's what we wanted to do with *Rev.* We are full of the same hopes and fears and doubts and loves as anybody else, but there is a lot that is projected onto us (Interview 2018).

Toogood seconds her colleague's assessment of Adam's fallible character, which she views as a valuable affirmation that 'priests don't walk six inches above the ground; behind that dog collar is a fragile, sometimes broken human being' (Interview 2019).

* * *

Summary

When Tom Hollander and James Wood first discussed the idea of portraying an urban priest, they could not have anticipated just how successful the resulting comedy/drama would be, nor its staggering reception by both priests and the institutional church.

By intentionally seeking story and character inspiration as well as detailed script critique and production coaching from actual vicars throughout the entire life of their series, the creators of *Rev.* were able to achieve the (arguably unprecedented) feat of developing a clergy character who was at once convincing, sympathetic, believably flawed and decisively entertaining. With seasoned producers advancing comedic elements and the writing team protecting the integrity and respectability of their character, the team successfully delivered a sitcom that both entertained its audience—clergy, lay, and secular alike—and didn't take unwarranted potshots at priests or make religious faith appear ridiculous.

Throughout its three series run, *Rev.* captured the predicament of an inner city priest facing matters such as urban decline, social issues, building maintenance, and personal/spiritual crises. One device used to illustrate Adam Smallbone's struggles was his frequent conversation with God—presented as voiceover—where he expressed his

frustration, pleasure, dilemmas and despair as he navigated the joys, tedium and crises which comprised his day to day ministry.

Due to the extensive contribution of Anglican priests to the BBC Two programme, it is perhaps unsurprising that it resonated so deeply with clergy viewers in particular. A great majority of the feedback was positive, with occasional criticism arising particularly from evangelicals who didn't see themselves represented favourably, as well as theologians who held a more idealistic vision of ministry and found Adam Smallbone too flawed, doubtful, liberal, or earthy for their liking.

Overall, *Rev.* was well received by its industry and audience as both a realistic picture of an Anglican priest's situation and an entertaining half hour of comedy about a human character with whom virtually anyone could identify.

This programme represents a significant step forward in fictional clergy portrayals, employing scores of professional advisors (beyond *Dibley*'s one official and several unofficial consultants) and aspiring to levels of accuracy and detail far exceeding Richard Curtis' production, whist delving deeply into the psyche of a human being who has taken on the role of a priest without being unforgivably morbid or abandoning comedy altogether. Clergy viewers in particular found Adam Smallbone to be a welcome representation of their profession, perhaps long overdue and thankfully bearing little resemblance to his stereotyped fictional predecessors.

8

A Woman First, a Vicar Second: Creating a New Brand of Television Cleric in S4C's *Parch*

Parch is a comedic drama which aired from 2015-2018 on the Welsh language channel S4C. It features a Church in Wales vicar who discovers in Episode One that she has a life-threatening brain abnormality. The seriousness of the diagnosis and the critical questions it precipitates for the heroine intensify areas of her life which are already somewhat off balance. The gravity of the vicar's situation is oddly but entertainingly offset by the primary symptom of her medical condition: bizarre, often humorous hallucinogenic visions of people who have died, and with whom she can interact. Thus, the programme could also be considered a 'dramedy' which—like its English counterpart, *Rev.*—presents a complex main character capable of growth and self-reflection coupled with a certain amount of absurdity.

Somewhat unlike *Rev.,* however, this programme is not so entirely centred on the church, its internal workings and issues, and the impact of those factors upon the clergy. Instead, *Parch* takes the subtle turn of making the character of the vicar its primary focus, whilst all her surrounding circumstances effectively radiate outward from this centre like spokes of a wheel. Amongst these 'spokes' are her job, spouse, children, father, and a few significant friends. Thus whilst maintaining a critical and realistic view of what it's like to be a church professional, the show is more concerned with portraying a real woman facing many extraordinary challenges, and who 'just happens to be a vicar.' In fact, the unfolding plot eventually takes its lead character some distance away from the centre of clerical life before her three year adventure comes to a close. In this way *Parch* represents a further step in the progression of vicars as main characters in a television show: people with interesting lives, both in and out of the church, and complex humans with whom any viewer—cleric or otherwise—might identify and potentially admire.

* * *

In the Beginning

In the Spring of 2013, Welsh author, poet and lecturer Fflur Dafydd was approached by a development executive from Cardiff-based production company Boom Cymru, seeking new programme ideas for S4C. They wanted a show that was specifically 'female-driven, rural and centred on a family.' (Dafydd Interview 2017). Fortunately for them, Fflur had already been contemplating writing a story which could potentially combine three distinctive elements: her particular interest in Welsh vicar R.S. Thomas, her own experience of being a nonconformist minister's granddaughter, and the desire to write a strong female lead character. And so from the marriage of these two visions—the network's and the writer's—sprang a new original Welsh language series which was to be christened *Parch*.

The programme's title is a Welsh word meaning 'respect': a sort of reverence or admiration bestowed upon someone or something due to perceived merit.[33] The same word serves as the official form of address for vicars, synonymous with 'reverend' in English, and so *Parch* as a series could, in a way, be considered the Welsh counterpart to BBC2's *Rev.*, although as already mentioned, there are some essential differences between the two programmes.

At the show's centre is Rev. Myfanwy Elfed (also known as Myf), a woman who discovers from a routine medical scan, prompted by a minor bump on the head, the existence of a far more serious situation. The vicar learns, to her astonishment, that she has been living with a long-dormant, potentially fatal brain condition: an abnormal tangle of cranial blood vessels known as an arteriovenous malformation. She slowly begins to make sense of the odd hallucinations—one symptom of her condition—which had only recently begun to manifest, and are about to disrupt nearly every part of her life. And being a solo vicar in a rural parish with two school-aged children and somewhat inconvenient romantic feelings for the local undertaker means that her life is fairly complicated to begin with. Add jealous spouses, a scheming doctoral student, and teen

[33] https://glosbe.com/cy/en/parch

pregnancy, and it's a recipe for a riveting drama which occupied S4C's coveted 9 pm Sunday viewing slot for each of its three series, absorbing Welsh viewers in an addictive story line and introducing them to a compelling, conflicted woman with whom they were soon to fall in love.

Dafydd had long desired to dramatise the life of a cleric as a flawed, layered, ultimately sympathetic character. Her research on R.S. Thomas provided the initial spark, coupled with her own non-conformist upbringing.

> [Thomas] was a priest who had a very problematic identity, growing up not speaking Welsh, and then in his 30s became a very passionate Welsh nationalist, so he was at odds with the establishment, with the church—with everybody, really—the Welsh and the English. I did a lot of work in trying to discover his identity as a priest... Because I come from a chapel background, I found it quite fascinating how different the chapel and the church are, because I tend to think of the chapel as being a very Welsh thing, especially Welsh speaking. My grandfather was a minister. So he also [was] trying to be everything to everybody, trying to look after the parish, and he was a great minister... [but] I didn't want to make it about the chapel, because I felt like that was too close to my own experience... I'd started to develop a film about RS Thomas and his life, and his problematic relationship with his wife, and that [project] didn't quite work out, so that's there in the background somewhere as well. And then Myfanwy Elfed came to be, and all these ideas started to fall into place... what she could be as a vicar, and what did she mean to her community, her husband, her family, and the problems that she could have trying to get people into the church (Interview 2017).

Pastoral Advice

Because her knowledge of the Church in Wales was somewhat limited, Dr. Dafydd sought input from a true insider, and found what she was looking for in Rev. Manon Ceridwen James, whom she'd discovered on Twitter.

> I saw that there was this vicar who was writing interesting blogs—she was into poetry, was very contemporary in outlook, and seemed like the kind of vicar you'd want to be your best mate (go to the pub with, have a laugh with)—and I was quite nervous sending her a private message on Twitter to see how she would respond to the idea that I was going to create this female character. So I got in touch with her hesitantly and asked if she wanted to meet just to hear more about the idea. And through a weird coincidence she was writing a PhD on representations of women in the church, and she'd written a study of my mother's poetry... So she was thrilled then to make that connection with me...and she was really easy-going and easy to talk to (Dafydd Interview 2017).

Reverend James, an experienced, Cambridge-educated vicar now working in a ministry oversight position, was similarly pleased to make the connection with Dafydd. She recalls having been aware of the social media connection for many months before the writer made the eventual inquiry which revealed her true agenda:

> I didn't realise it at the time, but she was 'following' me because she wanted to see what it was like to be a vicar. So she contacted me after about a year and asked if I'd be willing to be a consultant on this programme. In part, the character of Myfanwy is—not based on me, but because she'd been following me and trying to find out how I thought and felt about things—she thought of me as part of the inspiration for the character. Fflur's background is in the chapel, and part of the conversation between us was us trying to make Myfanwy more 'churchy' rather than 'chapel-y,' and I think she succeeded (Interview 2017).

Together they created a central character who was meant to be realistic and believable as both a contemporary woman and a Welsh vicar— loyal but conflicted, flawed but loveable.

> [Manon] stressed the notion of just being an ordinary woman, of wanting Myfanwy to come across as someone quite fallible—a woman who would go to the pub, and not appear 'holier than thou,' but who'd also have to deal with an older generation expecting a vicar to conduct herself in a particular way. So she helped a lot with trying to find that balance so that the portrayal could be realistic, while also showing the contemporary side of the church...I think she also suggested that it would be a good idea to make [Myfanwy's] best friend, Llinor, a confidant who's an atheist. They have funny conversations where her best friend thinks she's a bit mad for wanting be a vicar. Manon really helped with all of those things because she felt it was true to her experience (Dafydd Interview 2017).

Most of these 'churchy' details sit somewhere in the background, as Myf's personal struggles take centre stage. She occurs first as a woman, and second as a vicar—a theme which was echoed repeatedly throughout the interviews conducted with *Parch* cast and crew. The character who emerges is a mother, wife, friend and co-worker at the crossroads of her personal and professional life, further challenged by the unwelcome news of what could potentially be a terminal diagnosis, and which sets the stage for the unfolding drama. Who, then, could embody all of these things and bring them to the small screen in a believable yet endearing way?

Breathing Life Into the Vicar

Welsh actor Carys Eleri was 26 when she was cast as the 41-year-old Myfanwy Elfed. Whilst her sensitivity to the complexity of this character expressed itself in a performance which soon made the age gap irrelevant, the show's writer needed some initial convincing as to Eleri's appropriateness for the role.

> I've known Carys since she was twelve years old as I was great friends with her sister in school. I remember seeing her—she was always performing and singing, and she became an actress, and I followed her on TV, etc. When Paul [the producer] said she was coming in to audition, he asked me if I thought she might be right for the part. My first thought was, Carys is far too young for this role! I was quite biased about it. But then Paul [insisted], 'We've found our Myfanwy,' and [urged me] to watch her audition tapes. And I saw one of her on her own, and was impressed—she is able to act more mature, somehow, [she] just carries it. I think that's why it's good sometimes to take the writer out of the casting conversation, especially if they know the actors, because they will have some idea in their head. I'd imagined older actors doing it. But Carys was totally brilliant and totally right for the part. (Dafydd Interview 2017)

Producer Paul Jones confirms this.

> You sometimes have to put aside any preconceptions you might have when casting. Sometimes an actor who doesn't initially strike you as the character (based on whatever superficial qualities you might have in mind), will bring something that no one else does. [Carys] basically had the part after four lines (Interview 2017).

Eleri herself was initially quite surprised that she was cast, being only seven years older than the actress meant to play her teenage daughter.

> In the beginning, I never expected to even get the part, as I'm quite a bit younger than the character is meant to be. Also I'm just naturally quite bubbly and happy as a person, and Myfanwy is definitely more serious, especially in dealing with life crises—both her own and those of her parishioners. However, there must have been something there which they were looking for that I was able to communicate in my audition, which worked for them (Eleri Interview 2017).

Although she does not consider herself a religious person, Eleri brings to the role an affection for and familiarity with the world of the church.

> My family was (and still is) very active in the chapel [non-conformist] tradition, and even though I'm not now a believer, I have definitely been influenced by this background and still think very highly of those people and how they live out love in their lives. When various hymns come up in the series, for instance, I'm not just acting—I know them all! Most of the clergy I knew growing up were kind, good people, but also rather political. So I very much bring this to Myfanwy's character and she has this heart of compassion for her community. That's something that I personally feel, too—beyond just playing a role (Interview 2017).

The actor's heart for people is clearly evident in her interactions with other cast and crew on the set of *Parch*, stopping frequently to ask them for updates about their lives, and showing concern for what they're dealing with. Obviously some strong connections have been made within the ensemble after three years' working together. And when Eleri translates her own deeply felt compassion into her on-screen character, it's clearly more than just an act.

> I'm really struck by how connected church people can be to their community, meeting needs that no one else is meeting. There a was a notice on the board outside the church where we film, and it basically said, 'Thanks to all of you who visited and took care of me when I was ill. I owe you my life.' That really moved me. It feels like there's this epidemic of loneliness in society, and not too many out there are doing anything about it. (Eleri Interview 2017)

As a vicar, Myfanwy Elfed's concern for the plight of others—especially the disadvantaged and downtrodden—often lands her in trouble. Her actions are sometimes seen as meddling, especially when they intrude upon the personal lives which individuals would prefer to keep to themselves. This is a theme which weaves throughout all three seasons, in one way or another, even though her official profile as a vicar diminishes somewhat with each passing year, mostly due to the physical and mental constraints imposed by her advancing illness.

'I think the main difference between me and Myfanwy is that she is much more of a workaholic,' shares Rev. James, in recognition of the character's tendency to sometimes overreach. In a way which does, in fact, reflect the behavior of many working clerics, Myf finds herself stretched between the perceived demands of her private and professional lives. If she sometimes comes across as a bit of a martyr in the eyes of some, there is still an essentially honest heart at the root of her actions, which the viewers can readily recognise. And some of her rougher qualities are what make her most endearing.

This matter of just how 'human' a vicar could actually be portrayed was explored at the onset of the show's creation, as preliminary discussions between Dafydd and James considered.

> I think Fflur had made an assumption that even though Myfanwy was a modern vicar, she would be a bit more straight-laced or a bit more concerned about her image than I thought she would be, or indeed am myself. Her attitude towards language and profanity, for example—I felt that she wouldn't be too concerned about stuff like that (James Interview 2017).

Although Dafydd took James's advice to heart and gave her vicar some rather colourful language, in the end the network decided that it was perhaps a step too far for the Welsh viewing public to accept from a cleric. Eleri recalls:

> There was far more swearing in the original script, which was cut by the commissioners; the cuts tended to be made so that I wouldn't ever swear while in the church. I can remember at one point, Myfanwy looks at an unsavoury member of the congregation and calls him a 'little shit' in her head via a voice over. I can't quite remember what substitute [the network] used, but personally I didn't find it as funny. I think in between all the stuff I did (strip off naked, fancy an undertaker, etc.) swearing in the church was a bit too much for [S4C]-- even though it wouldn't have been audible to the congregation. But I've met many a priest and vicar, and as they are all pretty human, I think that it would've been okay (Interview 2017).

Network censorship aside, Myf got away with plenty of questionable behavior, things which might have made viewers wonder, 'Would a real vicar actually do this?' And the response of the programme's official clergy consultant, based on her own experience, was an enthusiastic affirmative.

> There was a story in series two where Myfanwy's friend hosts an Ann Summers party at the vicar's house [to cheer her up], and I'd told Fflur about how after I'd got divorced, a friend of mine took me to one of their shops. [Fflur] also used her own experience of a similar thing happening. So that made it into the plot. (James Interview 2017).

And that's not all the vicar got up to. By the second episode of the first series she was already pushing the boundaries of her role: daring to dance naked around the house when everyone else was out, sometimes drinking too much, fleeing from a romantic weekend planned by her husband at a city hotel—dressed in little more than a trench

coat—when she suspected (wrongly) that he was cheating. And of course, the most controversial (but perhaps most human) of Myf's shortcomings: falling for the undertaker who also happened to be her spouse's long-time school friend. This plot twist might have led *Parch* down the path of a more soap-opera style drama, but the show still managed to maintain a modicum of respect (in keeping with its title) even throughout its often extreme plot twists.

In the centre of it all was Myfanwy: a woman of the cloth, but a woman first and foremost. So how were the show's creators to keep their leading lady true to her clerical identity in the midst of all her crazy circumstances? In the beginning, at least, the process was carried out in very close collaboration with the writer's chosen consultant. James explains:

> To begin with we just emailed back and forth about the sort of person that she was. And then when [Fflur] started to write, I would go through each script and I would mark up what I thought she would say (or wouldn't say) in that situation. I would tell her that even though the character's different from me, I would say what I thought she would do based on my knowledge of women clergy in different situations (Interview 2017).

The real-life vicar also offered details about official church practice, and suggested that some plot features were more realistic than others.

> Because Myfanwy worked in another diocese [from my own], I tried to mention how things would've worked over there. So if their talk about church structures was way off, I would mention that. There were lots of technical things—I'm not big into the the Church in Wales constitution, but there were some things that [Fflur] asked me about weddings, about banns, about where and when you could do baptisms and this kind of thing. So I would say my piece if something didn't really work. If it was an essential part of the plot, they would keep it in, and I understood that that's part of the deal, in a way. But people have told me that they feel it's quite realistic. One of the things I was quite pleased about that Fflur was able to put in was how the church was going through a lot of changes. That [Myf] was non-parochial and trying out different ways of engaging with the community. I was glad that she did that, and it felt a bit more realistic [for] certainly where we are in Wales. I spoke to a friend of mine who works in prisons and asked if they would bring someone in who spoke Welsh to work with Welsh prisoners, and she said that they would. So that part of the story is based on what potentially could happen (James Interview 2017).

The writer confirms the value of having such extensive consultation with a woman of the cloth who knew the inner workings of church practice and its everyday theological applications.

> [Manon] read every script. She would include tiny details that would make it more realistic. Some of the things that she suggested that were factually correct about church procedures were then fed into scripts in quite funny ways (Dafydd Interview 2017).

Here Dafydd cites a particular scene which occurs in series one, as Myfanwy is becoming increasingly aware of her attraction to Eurig, the local undertaker with whom she works closely and who is also among the few parishioners who attend her Sunday services. The vicar becomes so distracted by her inner dialogue that she accidently spills wine on him whilst serving communion (S01E03). After worship, the following conversation takes place by the sink in the vestry:

> **Eurig:** (dabbing his trousers dry) No one will employ an undertaker who wets himself.
> **Myfanwy:** Technically, I should bury those trousers. Christ's blood is on them.

To which Eurig replies:

Figure 1: Vestry Conversation – S01E03

In this way, humour and plot were sometimes enhanced by the addition of expert knowledge on ecclesiastical minutiae. Dafydd explains:

> In Series Two, the fact that [Myf] wouldn't be sitting in meetings of the PCC because she's now a vicar in the community, and she tries to go to one but the church warden has already dealt with things and is trying to shut her out of the discussion: those things are down to Manon. (Interview 2017)

As much as Rev. James' advice was sought and valued, there were also instances where the writer or producer chose to prioritise plot over realism, a predictable liability in the medium of television which the vicar fully understood, but still found frustrating at times.

> In the first series, I didn't want them to get parts relating to the church wrong, but there were a few times where they did. There was a scene where Myf was in hospital, and her son wanted to be baptised. I told her I didn't think that she would've waited that long to baptise him in the first place—it was just inconceivable, really, that it would've got to that stage. We had a conversation about this—the excuse was that her mother had died around the time when they had meant to baptise him. And then when she actually did do it, I don't think it would've happened in that way. But because it was such a lovely part of the plot, it stayed. So that's an example of how the story line can be more important than realism, really (Interview 2017).

Myfanwy does indeed baptise her 11-year-old son Gwern—rather informally—right before she goes into a potentially life-threatening surgery, using the water pitcher in her hospital room. The scene is first touching then humorous, as he subsequently grabs the pitcher and pours its remaining contents over his head:

Figure 2: Impromptu Baptism – S01E08

There were other occasions where Rev. James felt that certain plot details weren't exactly true to the situation of a present-day Welsh vicar, but still acknowledged their contribution to the overall dramatic development.

> One thing that I banged on about which never made it into the series at all was the sense that yes, [Myfanwy] would be busy, but she wouldn't be busy in [just] the one church—it would be *four* churches, and she would be pulled in all sorts of different directions. Also it was as though she'd always lived in that part of the world, and I tried to say that it would be quite unusual for her to end up living next door to one of her closest friends. So it wasn't just about what she would say, but it was her experiences and where she would've been living and where she would've moved. That was one of the things I felt wasn't totally realistic, as well as the fact that she knew the undertaker so well over the years. But it was important as part of the story, so it wasn't changed (Interview 2017).

However, the producer and his team did value the advice of their clergy consultant, and heeded it wherever feasible. James recalls a situation where they deferred to her expertise in official vestments, for instance:

> There was one disagreement—over Mr. Jarman's outfit. He wanted to wear a cassock, but I explained that he was the church warden and so wouldn't be wearing distinctive dress (the actor came from a cathedral context, where such a person would have done). So I think I won that argument (Interview 2017).

Whereas some of the lesser details were occasionally subject to plot concerns, the more essential components of a vicar, such as her informal exchanges with parishioners and formal movements around official rites, were carefully studied and incorporated by the woman who played her. Carys Eleri spent a day—much like the actors in the previous case studies—observing Rev. James in her ministry context of Northern Wales.

> I did meet with Carys and she watched me do a service and interact with people, and we had lunch afterwards. It was quite uncanny as I felt that she'd even taken on some of my mannerisms [in her acting] (James Interview 2017).

Eleri also has fond memories of that day, which she confirms made a lasting impression on her personally, and her subsequent interpretation of Myfanwy.

> I was just blown away by the personal care [Rev. James] offered those people—such a human interaction. It impressed me very much. There's definitely a particular presence that a woman brings to the role of vicar (Interview 2017).

Figure 3: Holy Trinity- Rev. Myfanwy's Three Creators (Carys Eleri, Manon Ceridwen James, and Fflur Dafydd) Field Questions During Series Launch Event at Vue Cinema, Carmarthen – Celf Calon, 2015

Clothed in Meaning

Through the collaboration of these three key women: writer, actor, and real-life cleric, Rev. Myfanwy Elfed slowly took shape. But there was one final element to handle before bringing her to the screen: the vicar's wardrobe. Once again, the crew turned to Rev. James.

> The costume designer [Shân James] and I would talk a lot about clothing, and I even told her where to buy some of the stuff. She asked what Myfanwy would wear, and I would ask her, 'What are you wearing now?' So she would tell me—boots, miniskirt, jumper, whatever—and I would say, 'Well, that's the kind of thing that Myf would wear...but just with a collar.' And also she wore a lot of black—that seemed right as well, as the actress looks good in black (James Interview 2017).

Actor Carys Eleri also had some input on her character's wardrobe:

> A month or two before shooting, Shân and I threw ideas back and forth. She'd found some online shops selling clothing for vicars, some recommended by Manon. It was so much fun to see clergy couture on the internet! We both wanted to keep it quite contemporary, but we had a bit of an added problem as I am 10 years younger than the character I play, so while we strived for a modern look, we popped on some unshapely cardigans to make me look more 'mumsy' as I was a mother of two. I find Myfanwy's wardrobe quite funny; it can be quite drab sometimes and every now and again she strives to liven it up—even in the most recent series we addressed her 'fashion' in the script. People tend to comment when she steps it up a gear, and it really stands out. It's always quite practical clothing, though, to juggle all the running around she does. (Interview 2017).

Figure 4: 'Vicar Chic' - The Many Looks of Myfanwy Elfed – *Parch,* S4C

Some the most enduring images of *Parch*'s vicar are those where the collar—and indeed any clothing whatsoever—is absent. Episode two of the first series has Myf's freewheeling friend asking her if she's ever stripped naked 'just to feel alive.' On a whim the vicar decides to give it a go, which makes for some tricky camera work and a bit of comedic drama when her husband returns home unexpectedly with one of his doctoral students. Makeup designer Steve Williams recalls:

> It's interesting, actually, that the very first scene we shot on the very first day of shooting was one in which Myfanwy is home alone, strips off all her clothing and dances around the house in a sort of liberated rebellion after learning of her life-threatening illness. I guess we just chose to get the nudity out of the way right at the beginning (Interview 2017).

Figure 5: Defrocked- The vicar's quest for Eden in her own back garden – S01E02

More than simply 'getting it out of the way,' this image of the naked vicar beginning a three year roller coaster ride which sees her defying death, redefining her personal and professional roles, and taking risks she might not otherwise have dared under more 'ordinary' circumstances portrays her in the most elemental human state: unclothed, and with nothing to hide. And much like a uniform, Myfanwy will put on and take off her own clergy mantle many times over the span of three series, looking at it from different angles to see whether or not it still fits.

Network Oversight

Although the production company exercised a great deal of creativity in bringing *Parch* to life, they still bore a burden of accountability to the network which had commissioned them, and this was particularly evident in the beginning. Whilst Dafydd admits that they did allow her a great deal of freedom in creating Myfanwy the way she wanted to, there was still strong oversight from S4C.

> The drama commissioner sits in on every episode before it airs, so they do actually have notes at times to try and tighten up an episode to make it more exciting or to take things out, or to flag up things. They also come to script read-throughs, if there's anything they think is controversial or politically challenging, something that is going to shock viewers. With S4C there is this issue in creating any kind of drama for a smaller audience that you have to try and cater to everybody's needs—apparently people from 10-80 years old were watching *Parch*. So that's quite interesting. They read the scripts and they're in on the edits. They become executive producers then (Interview 2017).

As mentioned earlier, the network had strong opinions about the sort of vicar viewers would be able to accept, and in some cases made changes to plot or dialogue. However, as the programme gained an enthusiastic audience as well as industry recognition, Boom Cymru found themselves with considerably more autonomy in their creative process, receiving less and less input both from S4C and their designated clergy consultant.

> In the first series I was giving loads of feedback on things, and by the third not so much at all. There was hardly anything I was feeding back. So I think Fflur's really got into the mindset of how we look at things from a Church in Wales perspective (James Interview 2017).

While this may indeed be true, in fact Dafydd explains that the producer consciously chose not to include a consultant vicar as part of the production process for series three, as he felt they were fine to 'go it alone.' She adds that it was 'his decision, not mine.' Nonetheless, the programme continued to strike a chord of truth within any vicar whose good intentions have ever been unrecognised or unappreciated, or who's planned an event which no one attended. The episodes in this last series find Myfanwy further away from the centre of church life than she has been at any point in her professional career. Thus her relationship with ecclesial structures and events take on the form of an estrangement, despite her continued efforts at staying connected.

> In series three [Myf] tries to have an open church night for homeless people, but nobody turns up. The producer and I talked for a long time: is this scene really boring or is it quite crucial? I'm watching this and it's a total non-event. And he says, well that's the point—it's a non-event! (Dafydd Interview 2017)

Network oversight also relaxed somewhat in the final series of the programme, partly due to personnel and industry factors.

> Our drama commissioner's gone on maternity, so her replacement saw the first four episodes and he had no notes. I think once you've had a couple of BAFTA nominations, commissioners get a bit more relaxed. They trust us a bit more now (Dafydd Interview 2017).

Faith on the Screen

Parch's main character experiences more than her share of crises in three years. In that short time she faces her own mortality, critical brain surgery, the man she loves nearly dying, the erosion of her marriage, and a steady decrease in her professional role. In addition to these major life crises, other dramas arise within her world that she endeavors to support others through. Writer Fflur Dafydd knew that she was throwing a lot at her heroine, but also wanted to depict a strong character who deals with every presumed foundation of her life being shaken—including her faith.

> When I think about where [Myfanwy] started and all the way through to series three, she's changed massively and you can see and sense it, and I hope that it's just a reflection of how anybody's life changes in that moment of diagnosis. It's Myf's awakening—with everything—her whole relationship with faith, God, her husband, family—everything (Dafydd Interview 2017).

In the very beginning, the vicar carries out a near constant dialogue with God—mostly inside her own head via voiceovers—but sometimes out loud as well. As her situation intensifies, so does the conversation, becoming more desperate and angry at times. Myfanwy becomes painfully and increasingly aware that she doesn't know exactly what to do anymore, whereas she used to rely on an inner compass which no longer seems consistent or true. The precipitating event of her illness has sent her life in a completely new direction, which the writer fully intended.

> The idea that you don't just have to have one life—that's what I'm also trying to portray in this programme. In a way, Myf has several [potential] lives—the one that actually happened to her, and the one which would've gone on had she never got the diagnosis. And as a result she experiences things she never would have otherwise. And while she follows down these new paths with a sense of being

> offered a sort of 'second life' in a way, after the surgery, she still is very conscious of how precious life is and how it could end at any time (Dafydd Interview 2017).

In the later episodes the internal voiceovers have all but disappeared, mirroring the main character's feeling of alienation from her clerical role and the entity of the church itself, but also the producer's own choice to 'distance' the process somewhat from direct input by a professional cleric, as mentioned earlier. The influence of Myfanwy's faith now becomes implied rather than overt.

> In the third series I wanted it to be more about her questioning everything—maybe not actually being part of the church, being a bit lost. I think when you're away from a role for awhile, you do question why you were doing it and how you were doing it. It's more abstract in the way that the story is told. The voiceovers with God have disappeared. I'm asking more of the audience in series three. It's much more succinct and sparse and giving them room—'What is she thinking? Well, maybe she is talking to God in her head, but it's anyone's guess what it is (Dafydd Interview 2017).

Although *Parch* is not an overtly religious programme per se, its main character and subject matter do lend themselves to spiritual themes, and this was intentional from the outset. The first series introduced each episode with a tag line of sorts—a Bible verse or a quote from a hymn, which became a frame for the action and reflection occurring that week (Table 1).

> We wanted the series to have a strong identity, for people to know exactly what it was, and to remind people of Myfanwy's questioning of her faith. I came up with the idea of using Biblical quotes and originally wanted every episode to be an exploration of the quote. In the end it was the other way around: I would find my themes in writing the episode and then would try to come up with a quote that fitted! But this has worked quite well in a way; it has deepened the context of the episode for those watching. Some people really liked the exploration 'For I am fearfully and wonderfully made' – in Welsh it reads more like 'For I am strangely and terribly made!' Which makes for even more interesting reading of Myfanwy's plight (Dafydd Interview 2017).

Episode	Tagline	Citation	Application
S01E01	*For I am fearfully and wonderfully made*	Psalm 139:14	Myf receives her diagnosis
S01E02	*They were both naked and felt no shame*	Genesis 2:25	Myf resolves to live fully
S01E03	*Do not stand at my grave and weep I am not there I do not sleep*	Poem- Mary Elizabeth Frye	Myf ponders her own death
S01E04	*Counting our Blessings*	Hymn- Johnson Oatman, Jr	Myf makes peace with her visions
S01E05	*I am the resurrection and the life*	John 11:25	Myf questions her life choices
S01E06	*Who can find a good wife?*	Proverbs 31:10	Myf's husband discovers her disloyal feelings
S01E07	*I tell you the truth: one of you is going to betray me*	John 13:21	Disastrous 'Last Supper' reenactment
S01E08	*You gave me joy anew the race to run*	Hymn- Reverend W. Rhys Nicholas	Myf chooses to live or die

Table 1: *Parch* Series One Episode Taglines

Whilst the following two series continue to portray Myfanwy's faith journey, the themed taglines—much like the internal conversations with God—have disappeared. Dafydd explains:

> When it came to Series Two I think we decided (or I decided perhaps) to leave the quotes as they were becoming a burden to the storytelling, and was also perhaps influenced by some critics who found the show 'too religious.' I wanted to see what we could achieve without them, anyway. I think the quotes were quite good, looking back. If we'd had enough time, it would have been good to make all of the 24 episodes an exploration of a Biblical theme (Interview, 2017).

Straddling the line of creating a secular drama for an audience of mixed perspectives and keeping faithful to the show's central plot and character was a challenge which the production found tricky at times. Whether or not they succeeded is evidenced in their mostly affirmative reception by viewers and critics, with one reviewer specifically finding the programme's religious content well presented:

> Whatever your beliefs, it is interesting to see religion receiving such treatment on S4C...it feels timely to explore a faith crisis in a world that is a fleet of atheists (Cooke, 2015).

Dafydd and her team carefully constructed *Parch,* set it afloat amongst this 'fleet,' and were pleasantly surprised how well it fared.

Viewing the Church on Television

The quirky Welsh language dramedy about a well-intentioned, frequently unstable female vicar facing the extraordinary challenges of her life has managed to retain a fiercely loyal viewership over the course of its three years. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, and despite its very occasional inaccuracies, Reverend James believes the series portrays the clergy—and the Church in Wales—in a truthful and sympathetic light.

> I liked that it shows what the Church in Wales is like today as opposed to some stereotype, and it's definitely been good PR for us...Personally, I've had many opportunities to talk on radio—even television once—because people have got to know about me. I got invited on the Welsh form of *Question Time* because I was better known by then, not to give a 'church view' but just as a person. The fact that they're seeing Christians and clergy as ordinary people with a contribution to make has been a great leap forward for us. There is a sort of stereotype of clergy, particularly ministers, as dour and straight-laced. Anything that breaks down that stereotype is a good thing (Interview 2017).

The Church in Wales endorsed the series with two consecutive press releases on their official website, describing it as 'a realistic insight into the work of a woman vicar in rural Wales' and allowing Rev. James to describe at length her experience as a programme advisor with an 'insider's view' of the drama (Morrell, 2015, Morrell, 2016).

Dafydd has also received enthusiastic reviews for *Parch,* her first television series as a writer.

> I think it's really made an impact. I've had people coming up to me in the street saying how much they've enjoyed it. I've had people write to me who've picked it up off the BBC iPlayer, from Sussex to the Isle of Man. It's got a great response on Twitter. Just people enthusiastically writing to me. We've been so lucky, really, I don't think we've had any negative criticism. I've been overwhelmed by the response (Interview 2017).

After only one episode, reviewers began to take notice of S4C's fresh take on a small screen vicar. A media lecturer, broadcast researcher and producer asserted that the fledgling programme well satisfied the 'endless desire of the television screen' for images which adequately guide the audience through the internal world of its promising new protagonist, a vicar who 'combines the traditional and contemporary' (Vaughan Williams, 2015).

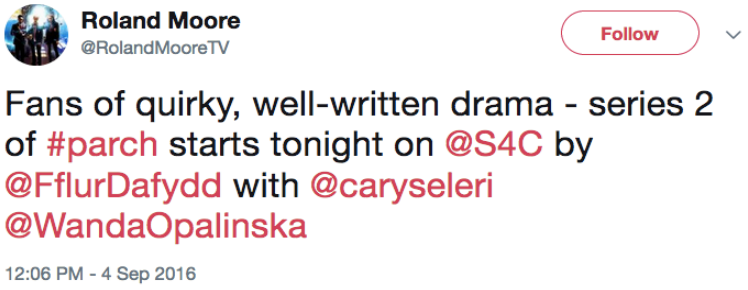
Her accolades were echoed by another Welsh writer/broadcaster, who insisted that *Parch* 'own[ed] its distinctive identity,' being neither 'the Welsh *Vicar of Dibley*,' nor the female *Rev.*, regardless of having similar comic pacing at times:

> The script by Fflur Dafydd is contemporary and original, and emphasizes the absurdity of everyday life; it also balances the intense and humorous with dexterity (Cooke, 2015).

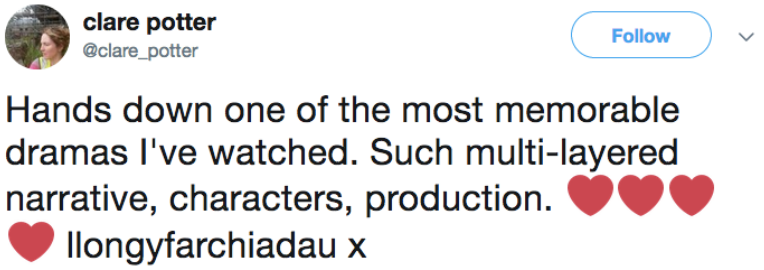
Given that the programme aired on a Welsh channel in the native language of its targeted S4C audience, most of its strongest accolades come from Wales, where Dafydd's brainchild attracted the attention of other creatives, such as an award winning dramatic writer:

[Translation: 'I suppose that this is my favorite program ever in any language. Warm and funny and sensitive and painfully real.']

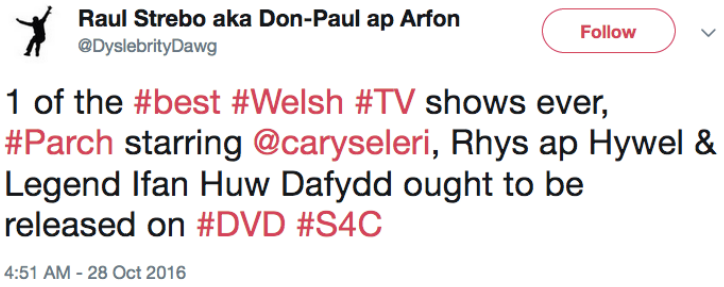
Other artists who appreciated the programme include a television writer:



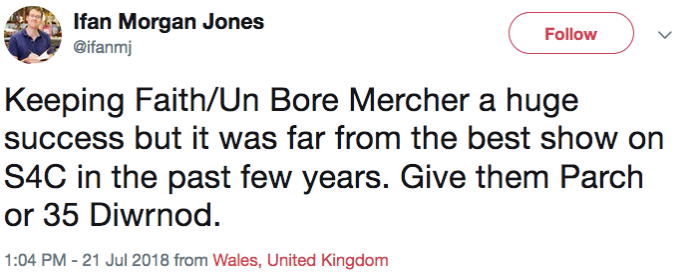
A poet, performer, and director who concludes her praise with ‘congratulations’ :



And a writer/filmmaker who alerted the network to the desire expressed by many enthusiasts that the programme be distributed beyond its target audience:



Journalists also took note of *Parch.* A news editor/media lecturer ranked the programme amongst the best on the network:



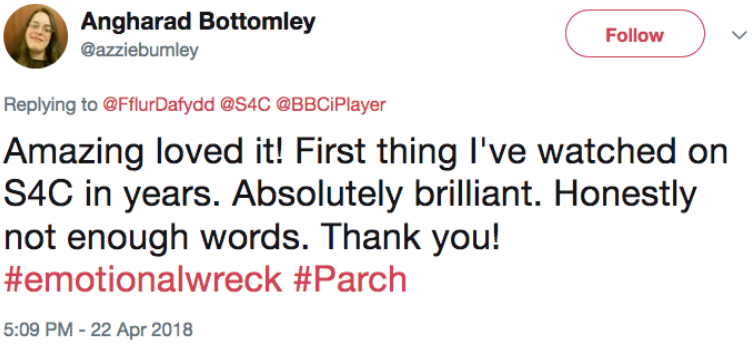
A BBC Wales reporter echoed other viewers' strong sense of attachment to the lead character:

[Translation: 'Late note (just finished watching) Series that will stay in the memory. Ending came with many tears. I think I know Myf as a personal friend and that is the power of the story. Thank you']

Given that Wales, like the rest of Britain, has also faced a general decline in the prominence of religion in recent decades, it is significant to note how *Parch* was received by those not professing any faith connection. As implied earlier, a general audience will not always tolerate a programme which takes too heavy-handed an approach to religious themes and personnel. And whilst Dafydd and her colleagues did take this issue very seriously in what they chose to include in the final edit, the resulting presentation of the vicar and her milieu appears to have largely avoided that pitfall. Some secular viewers even found themselves surprisingly caught up in the central character's struggles with faith, vocation, and the ever present spectre of her own mortality:

[End Translation: 'Very good, Fflur Dafydd']

Beyond being a well-produced drama with wide public appeal, *Parch* also found resonance with those within the church whom it sought, in part, to represent. An Anglican laywoman found herself overwhelmed after the emotive finale:



Vicars especially seem to respond to Myfanwy's plight, which mirrored their own experiences in a way not seen before on Welsh television.

> In Wales the only other religious drama that's been on was a sitcom called *Teulu'r Mans* ['The Family in the Manse'], and it was a total farce—ridiculous and totally over the top, ala *Father Ted*. So you worry that people are going to think that you're just taking the mick out of these people, that it's not going to be a serious drama. (Dafydd Interview 2017).

Figure 6: Rev. J.S. Jones, the Manic Street Preacher of *Teulu'r Mans* – HTV Wales.

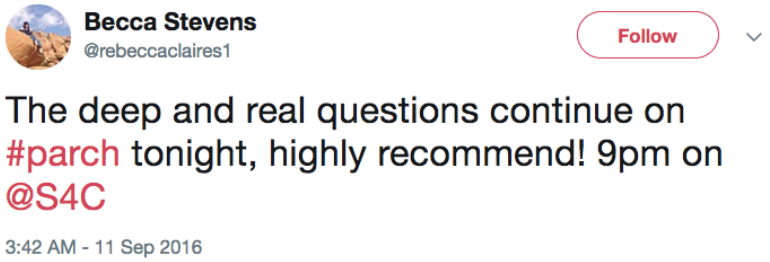
The actual reception of Dafydd's modern vicar was quite the opposite. The clergy couldn't get enough of Myfanwy, whose conflicted and often comical responses to whatever life threw her way struck a chord too close to home.

> My local chapel's minister…came to the very first premiere and was laughing the whole way through. You could see her head in her hands, 'Oh, that's me!' So that pleases me enormously, that even though she's a minister and not a vicar she still sees herself, that it's her story (Dafydd Interview 2017).

Rev. James has had a similar response from her Church in Wales colleagues, who are of course concerned with how their profession is portrayed in the media, but who also like to be entertained as much as anyone else.

> I think clergy friends like it because it represents their reality, in a way. But they also like the story and the fact that it's a good drama. Almost universally I've had a positive response (Interview 2017).

The assistant curate of the Rectorial Benefice of Cwmbran appreciated the programme for the gravity which balanced its entertainment value:



One of the show's most vocal clergy advocates was a vicar identifying as a 'Yorkshireman in exile.' Rev. Ellis, who has been learning Welsh in order to more effectively serve in his current location of Amlwch, published frequent 'adverts' for new episodes during the time when the series was on the air, hoping perhaps that others—vicars and laypersons alike—would catch his enthusiasm:

Ellis' campaign was at least in part successful, catching the attention of the Plaid Cymru Assembly Member for Anglesey:

A television columnist for *Barn* (a monthly current affairs magazine meaning 'Opinion' in Welsh), followed Myfanwy's journey for the duration of the three series and at the conclusion of each offered plaudits for writer, actress and directors alike:

> Fflur Dafydd's literary work has a strong film element, and her ability to create catchy, natural and lean dialogue, striking images and motifs, and characters that exist in a credible world were integral to the success of *Parch*. In the hands of a less able actress, 'Parch Myf' could have been a sitcom character. However, Carys Eleri's subtle performance successfully conveyed the pressure of coping with the demands of job and family, [as well as her] deeper physical and emotional

> torment. *Parch*… succeeded in combining good writing, inventive and slick direction, memorable visual images, and at the same time reflecting the life of contemporary Wales (Williams, 2015).
>
> It is good to see, as the first series, that the new series also succeeds in combining fairly light family themes with a creative exploration of important issues: loss, grief, forgiveness and the crisis of faith (Williams, 2016).
>
> The third and final series of this unique and fun drama did not disappoint. Myfanwy Elfed, Fflur Dafydd's unique and unforgettable creation will remain as one of the iconic figures of Welsh television drama (Williams, 2018b).

If there was any negative criticism for *Parch*, this study could not find it. The most common disappointment expressed was that, given the death of its beloved main character in the final episode, the program would definitely not be returning for another series. Most critics echoed the commenters previously cited in their gratitude for having been able to spend an hour each Sunday evening in Rev. Myfanwy's company, and concurred that bidding her farewell genuinely felt like losing a friend.

Shortly after the final episode aired, an arts reviewer praised the dramatist's ability to create a show which not only drew the audience into the absorbing crises of its 'veracious female lead,' but also presented her surrounding world as equally engaging:

> It is testament to the strength of Fflur Dafydd's writing that, over the course of these three series, the focus has been as much on the other characters as the cleric of the title. As such, although initially a contemporary representation of a female priest within the Church in Wales, the series has also seen a broader focus on the trials and tribulations of the Elfed family and those around them (Williams, 2018a).

This further affirms the notion that *Parch* successfully turns the corner from being simply a 'vicar show,' and becomes compelling television in its own right: similar to *Dibley* and *Rev.* in its wide audience appeal, but departing somewhat from these former shows in variance of plot and dramatic focus, and exploring a world well beyond the church doors.

Overall, Dafydd is satisfied with what her 'gravely whimsical' Welsh dramedy achieved. It attracted a fiercely loyal following, received luminous reviews and garnered

three BAFTA nominations over its brief lifespan.[34] Most importantly, however, *Parch* fulfilled its creator's original aim of shining a light on the life and trials of an entirely believable woman of the cloth.

> I hope it's changed people's minds about vicars, because that was the intention: to see them as normal people struggling with everyday issues like everybody else, and not people who are on a pedestal. I hope it comes across as a serious drama that is honest and raw and all of these things. And vicars like it, so that's what's pleased me most (Dafydd Interview 2017).

* * *

Summary

The Welsh-language series *Parch* was an attempt to portray a vicar as a complex character whose life drama took centre stage, and whose clergy status represented but one of her many circumstances. To all appearances it succeeded in that aim, and perhaps because of this approach enjoyed as much success as a small scale niche market programme could hope to achieve.

Reception was almost universally positive, concurring that Myfanwy Elfed comes across as an endearing, flawed, and convincing portrayal of a vicar in contemporary Wales. The programme was considered to be entertaining, moving, and in some instances enlightening, making it an asset to the broadcaster who sponsored it and a valuable contribution to the catalogue of original Welsh language programming produced for public service channel S4C.

In the context of this study, *Parch* represents a further step in the progression of realistic television vicars: a woman informed and influenced by her clerical role, but whose unique personality drives her character—independent of her professional identity—and whose story appeals to lay and clergy viewers alike.

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[34] *Parch* was nominated by BAFTA Cymru in the Television Drama category in 2017 and 2018, and Carys Eleri in 2017 for her portrayal of Rev. Myfanwy Elfed. (http://awards.bafta.org/keyword-search?keywords=Parch)

9

Discussion and Conclusion

Before undertaking this study, I was particularly haunted by the question: does anyone but the clergy care how fictional priests are portrayed on television—and should they? Granted, we all have a degree of preoccupation with how our own sort is represented, as it's part of human nature to be self-concerned. But does the way ordained ministers are characterised on television have a meaningful impact on those not actually in the profession, or on the greater culture itself?

Admittedly, this research arose out of dissatisfaction over the way I and my colleagues were showing up in fictional depictions, coupled with a concern that most laypersons appeared both oblivious to the essential humanity of their clergy and uninformed about what it was actually like to embody such a role. This gap in understanding seemed only to be widened by the unrealistic portrayals of our profession on television. The inquiry was further heightened by the discovery of a new, seemingly more authentic depiction of fictional clergy: one which was finding its way onto screens across the pond, but not surviving the fickle commercial network environment in my native country.

Whilst conducting the research, however, I developed an appreciation both for the multilayered process of actually producing a well-crafted priest drama and for the medium of British public service broadcasting which made such programmes possible.

As the interviews progressed, I began to see areas where such a study might be usefully applied in exploring perceptions of other occupations in addition to professional ministry. The research findings also seemed relevant to the larger contexts of production, broadcasting and their impact on society.

Cultural Reflections

The theory of functionalism, as it pertains to television representations of various populations, asserts that media simply reflect the attitudes already existing within culture, and thus are merely portraying what people already want to see. Furthermore, if such depictions are seen to evolve over time, then it must simply be a function of public attitudes having already changed (Burton, 2000, p172). Somewhat conversely, Chapter Four reviewed scholarship arguing that dramatic representations of specific professions have a measurable impact on the public's subsequent perception of those belonging to particular occupational groups. A more nuanced way of comprehending the media/culture link is the 'two way mirror' hypothesis suggested by some scholars, whereby fictional portrayals exist both as *products of* the cultural context in which they arise and *influencers of* that same culture (Corner, 1999, Spitz, 1999, Gibelman, 2004). This dynamic correlation can be applied in the investigation of how clergy depictions relate to the larger context in which they occur, and with which they are in dialogue.

How, exactly, has British culture affected the nature of Anglican priest portrayals on television? Chapter Two explored how the overall influence and pervasiveness of the Church of England and its clergy have steadily declined over the last half-century. This research has demonstrated that over the same period of time clergy depictions have seen a progression from rather shallow, mostly comical depictions to a rather more profound dramatisation of the profession. Simply put, the status of the role decreased whilst its fictional representation improved. What accounts for this apparent juxtaposition?

As the advantaged position which the established church had enjoyed for centuries began to diminish, vicars were no longer central to civic life, but rather compelled to manufacture a sense of importance around their clerical roles and activities (see Tomlinson, 2007). It is possible that the priest's overall demotion in social significance by the mid-twentieth century set the stage, in part, for the sort of fictional depictions which emerged in the early decades of television—i.e. those reviewed in Chapter Four—of the rather ineffectual pontificating vicar, preoccupied with fetes and jumble sales but not terribly essential to everyday life outside of 'marrying and burying.' A comic portrayal plausibly arises from such an understanding of the role, which could now be perceived as a somewhat insignificant shadow of a once privileged profession.

What then accounts for the shift around the 1990s and following, a more intentional move toward creating the fictional vicar as essentially protagonist, a character with whom the audience (both clergy and otherwise) may sympathetically relate, and whose victories are worthy of championing no matter how minor they may be? Is it possible, as Taylor suggests (2015), that the church and its clergy have been pushed to the margins of popular culture to such a degree that their world is now considered 'edgy' or otherwise interesting in a way worth exploring dramatically? Is it further possible that the viewing public is finally ready to look at vicars with both honestly critical and reasonably compassionate eyes, whereas they may not have been in an era where priests still seemed a bit odd and out of touch with modern society due to their apparent preoccupation with esoteric and 'churchy' matters?

Wood maintains that writers and producers are constantly seeking subjects which possess an air of the unknown or the misunderstood, or about which the public has some sort of preconception which could potentially be dismantled through closer investigation (Interview 2018). Was this move toward exploring my professional colleagues through more intelligent fiction an inevitable one, and was it simply 'our turn' to be put under the dramatic microscope? Or were the real stories suggested by real life clerics simply too compelling to be ignored, as happened during the creation process of *Rev.*?

It can be argued that this more recent generation of televised vicar portrayals has emerged from a combination of societal and artistic/industry factors.

Certainly *The Vicar of Dibley*'s creators have always maintained that the advent of women's ordination within the Church of England was the original raison d'être for their programme. Likewise the rise of secularism, religious pluralism and social crises are clearly at play in Adam Smallbone's world. And Myfanwy Elfed also struggles to stay relevant as a promoter of an ancient faith in the context of modern day Wales, even as both her husband and her best female friend identify as atheists.

But there can be little doubt that a main selling point for *Dibley*'s commissioners was its tried and tested female lead, and many insiders confirm that it was Dawn French's irresistible charisma which caused the programme to grow so popular that even its initial social motivation became somewhat diminished—perhaps even eclipsed altogether—by its comic appeal (Plowman Interview 2019, Kenwright, 2007).

Additionally, for all the idealism about portraying priests differently which infused the creation of *Rev.*, its celebrated lead actor concedes that in the initial phase of pitching, personal professional motives were a factor for each of the major participants, whose solid track records within the industry played a crucial role in the programme's swift commissioning (Hollander Interview 2019).

Parch was also the lucky coincidence of a writer's particular interest in creating both a fictional vicar and a strong female lead and a network's timely request for a female-driven, rural and family-centred drama, coming together at just the right moment to bring Myfanwy Elfed into being (Daffyd Interview 2018).

Thus, reflecting Corner's notion of 'multiple intentions' within the production process (1999, p70), these three exemplary priest portrayals can each be considered as co-products of social and creative concerns. Further using the frame of the 'two-way mirror,' this discussion has argued that all three have been influenced, to varying degrees, by their contexts. Can these depictions also be considered to be influencers of culture in their own right?

Of the three case studies in this research, *The Vicar of Dibley* may be said to have made the most obvious impact upon society, given its intentionally targeted time frame and topic. Indeed, scores of female vicars reported being compared to (or even addressed as) Dawn French's celebrated character. Whilst its industry success has led some to consider the programme as mere entertainment, Joy Carroll and other clergy colleagues remain convinced that it was instrumental in turning the tide of public opinion in favour of women priests in the Anglican Church (Interview 2018).

The creators of *Rev.* could also make a case for having influenced public views about vicars in general and the challenge their role presents. Such rawness in a priest character had been rare up to that point, and vicars who suddenly now saw something recognisable of their profession on screen were both delighted and also somewhat uncomfortable at its veracity. Above all, Adam Smallbone represented a human being genuinely concerned for doing the right thing in the context of a calling which admittedly tried his every last nerve, and gave viewers a true 'insider's look' at a profession which only a small percentage of the population would have otherwise experienced firsthand.

To a slightly lesser degree, *Parch* made an impact within its more limited market of S4C's Welsh speaking audience. It portrayed a professional woman who took her calling seriously without becoming completely lost in her clerical identity. It also presented a multi-faceted, believably human character facing an atypical and diverse set of life circumstances, something which rarely happens with priest depictions. Furthermore, as was the case with *Dibley*, the programme raised the profile of the Church in Wales by drawing attention to its professional advisor, who was then provided media platforms which would not otherwise have been available (James Interview 2017).

From the critical acclaim received by each of these programmes, as well as individual feedback through interviews and social media, one begins to form a picture of the impact that a thoughtfully produced characterisation of a fictional priest can have on viewers, potentially changing (or at the very least broadening) popular views on who the clergy are or what people think they should be.

Case Study Evaluation re. 'Quality'

The previous discussion in Chapter Five (particularly concerning the notions of quality and realism) inform the evaluative task which follows. Giving primary weight to responses distilled from the production interviews, the following criteria for quality--pertaining to depictions of fictional clergy—have been formulated and defined for the purpose of evaluating the three primary case studies:

1. Professional Consultation
Seeks clerical advice to inform and shape its content

2. Authentic Portrayal
Represents priests and their milieu with accuracy and consistency

3. Sympathetic Character
Depicts a cleric with whom the audience can readily identify

4. Innovative Approach
Presents an original perspective on life as a vicar

5. Broad Appeal
Attracts a wide audience both inside and outside the church

The productions in question are assessed according to the above criteria using a ten point scale where, for instance, 'ten' represents a show which fulfills the particular item to the highest possible degree, 'five' indicates the achievement of some aspects but not others, and a score of 'one' signifies an element mostly lacking in the production being considered. This numerical method of assessment is used to indicate the degree to which the programmes in question either have or have not fulfilled each criterion, rather than simply determining whether or not they 'tick the box' of a given element.

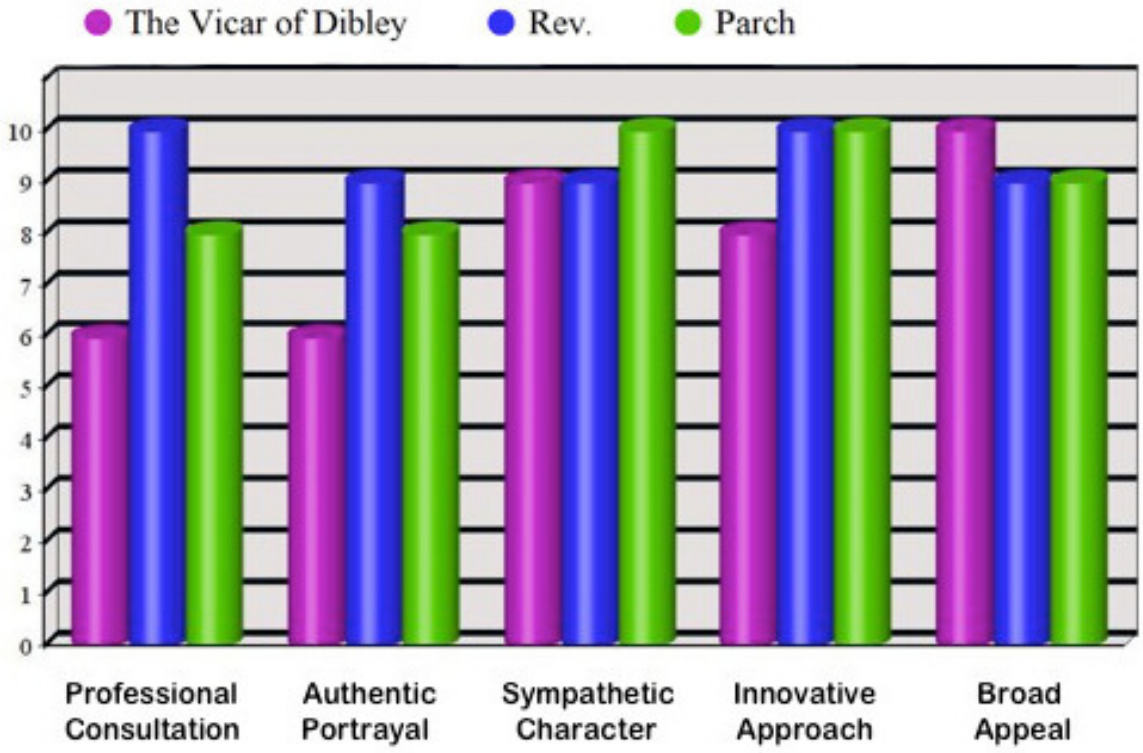

Table 1: Evaluation of Case Study Programmes for Quality

The table indicates how the three case studies explored by this research measure up according to the proposed standards. A quick visual scan reveals that all three programmes score above the halfway mark in each category, and thus each could be

considered ‘quality’ products of public service broadcasting, which is not surprising given their selection for study. However the finer distinctions of their assessment are detailed below.

Although possibly the first programme of its kind to actually seek significant input from a clergy consultant, *The Vicar of Dibley* scores at most a six in this area because Joy Carroll, whose real life qualities and views contributed meaningfully to the creation of the title character, was only consulted at the beginning of the production process and was not actively involved in reviewing scripts and storylines. There were some occasions on which the programme took advice from a vicar who happened to be present on set during filming and noticed an error in plot or procedure, but such instances were mostly by chance. The production also regularly took liberties with accuracy in favour of its comedic aims.

This admitted prioritisation of humour over authenticity is also why *Dibley* does not occur as believable as the other two programmes, but it does score authenticity points for presenting actual situations which concern a vicar, such as the pettiness or prejudice of parishioners, church funding matters, social justice issues or personal life crises.

Geraldine Granger was undoubtedly a character whom viewers loved and genuinely wanted to succeed in the face of challenges like serving as Dibley’s first female vicar or experiencing a series of unsuccessful romantic relationships. She also endeared herself to the audience by the disarming effect of her foibles and weaknesses. Only a very small minority of viewers actively expressed dislike for her, some of whom pointed to her flaws as evidence for why women shouldn’t be ordained.

The first prominent fictional portrayal of a female vicar is by its very nature innovative. *Dibley* misses full marks in this category for the sole reason that some of its slapstick comedy hearkens back to an earlier age of lampooning vicars. However, in spite of how exaggerated some of her comic sequences may be, it is worth noting that the clergywoman herself is never intended as an object of ridicule, which some may consider to be an innovation of its own sort.

The Vicar of Dibley’s strongest feature is its sustained appeal with a wide variety of viewers—religious adherents and non-believers alike. Within the treasury of British

comedy it still ranks as a popular favourite and continues to endure the test of passing years.

Going strictly by the numbers, *Rev.* achieves the highest score for quality programming of the three evaluated, due in large part to the sheer effort it exerted in striving for accuracy. A staggering number of professionals were consulted at every stage of production, which resulted in the programme's authentic feel and wide appeal, especially to clergy viewers.

Adam Smallbone felt very real to vicars, his experiences reflecting their own with uncanny verisimilitude. Given that so many factual stories were used in the creation of its plot lines, the programme tended to resonate with clergy regardless of whether or not they themselves had been the actual contributors of such anecdotes.

Being the perpetual underdog, it follows that Adam would easily capture the sympathy of his audience. Whilst this was overwhelmingly the case in both formal and informal reviews, there was a minority of clergy who took issue with both his political stance and manner of carrying out his ministry, and were therefore relatively unmoved by his plight.

Another great strength of the BBC Two programme was its rather unique approach to portraying the inner world of a vicar by weaving informal, voiced-over prayers throughout each episode, which exposed his every thought and struggle. The unvarnished depiction of Adam's frequent self-doubt and wrestling with his faith and sense of call was refreshing for many who could not recall seeing such an honest representation of the profession on television prior to that time.

Although *Rev.* received a torrent of glowing reviews from priests, laypersons and more than a few high ranking clergy in the Church of England, it lost a bit of enthusiasm from supporters when its protagonist descended into clinical depression, especially those who did not have insider experience of ministry (Wood Interview 2018, Turp Interview 2018). Because of this and its aforementioned unpopularity with some evangelicals and more conservative believers, *Rev.* earns high (but not full) marks for audience appeal.

In spite of its smaller market reach, Welsh drama *Parch* measures up well to its English predecessors. Having consulted extensively with a professional vicar for its first two series, seeking input in the areas of character creation, set, wardrobe, and church procedure as well as feedback on scripts, the programme scores highly for clerical influence. However, the choice to produce its final series with no further professional input accounts for its not quite perfect rating in this area.

The Welsh drama's main character captures the viewer's compassion almost from the first frame of the programme. The audience is with her through every surprise, disappointment, heartache and small victory, and the shock and sadness resulting from the series' finale was palpable in social media reactions and resonated with unmistakable impact. In the most extreme moments of its drama, I confess to having temporarily forgotten my role as researcher, simply desperate as any other viewer to know what was going to happen next in Myfanwy's world.

In the judgment of this researcher as well as that of many viewers who weighed in during its run, one of *Parch*'s greatest strengths was its unique approach in creating a priest drama that was distinctive, idiosyncratic and riveting. Its leading woman faces many of the same challenges as her real life clergy counterparts, in addition to some highly unusual circumstances peculiar to her own character such as the discovery of a rare brain condition. Many of her choices and reactions to her situation are simply human responses to extraordinary challenges rather than 'typical' clergy behaviour. However, she values and treasures her professional role, taking seriously her responsibility to parishioners and trying her best to serve them even when her own health and sanity become compromised. This programme scores full marks for innovation largely because its adventurous plot direction renders Myf's experience fairly 'outside the box' of a conventional ministry situation without compromising the authenticity of her clerical character.

The dramatic mastery of *Parch* as a work of entertainment is why it excelled at reaching a varied range of viewers within its target market, appealing to an impressive range of ages and backgrounds (Daffyd Interview 2018). It is only unfortunate that S4C's original Welsh language programming is not widely promoted beyond a limited geographical area. The series is not currently available on any discoverable streaming

service, for instance, nor has it been issued as a DVD for international consumption, even though there was vocal public enthusiasm for such a release at the programme's conclusion. Given that the episodes are fully subtitled, there is no reason to believe that this unique priest drama with its universal human themes and unpredictable plot twists wouldn't also be welcomed by scores of non-Welsh speaking viewers both religious and secular, much as it was by its original audience.

Doing the Public a Service

One of the working hypotheses of this research was the notion that there is something unique in the ethos of public service broadcasting which enables it to successfully launch and/or sustain quality programmes portraying clergy. The productions chosen as case studies appeared to be worthy examples of such quality, and close scrutiny has affirmed this. Whilst this particular study does not represent a comprehensive examination of British public service broadcasting itself, the medium is essential to the research findings as a crucial vehicle by which the sort of programmes highlighted here are made possible.

Exactly what is it about PSB which makes it ideal for producing quality output in general, and priest dramas in particular?

Analysis has revealed that each of the case studies was shaped, to some degree, by the involvement of professional consultants, a practice common to PSB programmes depicting various specialised topics or occupational worlds (Kirby, 2013, Henderson, 2018, Pescod Interview, 2018). The vicars who advised on matters of clerical and ecclesial accuracy often had significant influence on the credibility of story lines, dialogue, actions and blocking, as well as costumes and set dressing. Minus their input, the resulting programmes would probably not have rung as true with actual priests, much as the fictional clergy of my original US television environment never seemed very believable to the daughter of a Lutheran pastor training to become one herself.

The PSB remit to educate as well as entertain is another strength of the medium, even when the programme in question is not factual by definition. In fact, there is sufficient evidence that fictional drama does play an instructional role, both in introducing viewers to lesser known worlds and helping them interpret the realities of

their social context (Van Zoonen, 2005, Coleman, 2008). This study of fictional priest depictions and their apparent significance to the public's perception of clergy contributes to Klein's argument for the value of entertainment programmes which serve an additional pedagogic function (2011), and which public service broadcasters are perfectly positioned to disseminate.

Additionally, the case studies examined here exemplify faithful portrayals of what may be considered an otherwise underrepresented segment of the population (ie. religious believers and leaders) which is also part of the PSB remit (*Communications Act.* 2003). Each of the three featured programmes were initiated by creatives with a concern for representing clergy fairly, rather than as a result of any lobbying by the church or its professionals to produce favourable portrayals, whereas such an action might actually be necessary in the environment of US entertainment media, for instance, in order for various professional groups to feel that they are being presented accurately (Worden, 1962, Gibelman, 2004).

Perhaps the most compelling defence for the value of PSB is that despite facing ever increasing commercial pressures and broadcast market competition, the fact that PSB is still largely funded by a licence fee enables it to focus on programme content instead of profit (Steemers, 2003), facilitating the production of the sort of quality programmes presented in this research. Whilst the degree to which PSB continues to faithfully fulfill its remit—as well as the necessity for a universal licence fee—still finds its way into political and other public debates (Bignell, 2012, Ageh, 2015), the British system of publicly funded media is still the envy of many broadcasters in other countries (Blumler et al., 1986). How this translates, in the view of this particular study, is that there is a high probability that these three quality depictions of fictional priests—and others like them—would have had significant difficulty either being launched or succeeding on US network television, for instance, where honest, yet potentially controversial, professional depictions risk premature cancellation in an environment heavily influenced by advertising sponsors and special interest groups, such as happened with the aforementioned *Nothing Sacred* (Cuprisin, 1998, Andrews, 1987, CBS, 2006).

It is reasonable to conclude that the nature and structure of British public service broadcasting has been instrumental in facilitating high quality programmes depicting

clergy as complex and convincing characters, productions which—without the existence of a medium such as PSB—might never have made it to screen, let alone experienced the success which they demonstrably enjoyed.

Potential Limitations and Drawbacks

One disadvantage in focussing this research only on Anglican vicars is the exclusion of similar programmes portraying Catholic clergy, for instance, such as the previously mentioned *Ballykissangel* or the more recent (and outstanding) depiction of an emotionally traumatised priest in the North of England struggling to deal with the crises of his parishioners alongside his own personal issues with the church and the terminal illness of his mother (*Broken*, BBC One, 2017). Although these programmes fall outside the parameters of this research, they nonetheless stand as stellar examples of clergy portrayals during this same latter period, and reinforcement of this dissertation's overall argument for the quality of PSB productions.

Another conceivable limitation of this study is its identification with and approval of programmes championing a predominantly liberal view of church and society. Whilst there is certainly an argument to be made for the institution representing one of the most radical leaders in history (i.e. Jesus) promoting his decided preference for the needs of the poor, disadvantaged and marginalised in society (n.b. a classically 'liberal' theological stance), it should also be noted that there are many believers who consider themselves Christian—present within most every denomination—who would not resonate with the private or political leanings of the three main clergy characters featured here. Evangelicals and theologically conservative church people did sometimes voice objections to how the programmes in question presented issues such as women in ministry, same-sex marriage or the Church Growth movement, insisting that all Christians do not agree on these matters, which is indeed the case. Such persons might well propose different criteria from those presented here to determine a 'quality' clerical depiction, and such differing standards may indeed disqualify the selected programmes from contention, a possibility duly noted by this researcher.

A potential unintended consequence of drawing attention to the personal/private lives of clergy is the undermining of respect for their sacred office, caused by exposing the

so-called 'backstage behaviours' of those who occupy a particular profession (Meyrowitz, 1986, Goffman, 2002, Giddens, 2013). Granted, it is the position of this study that contemporary audiences are not as susceptible to such a risk, given the degree to which the institutional church has already declined in prominence and status within society. Viewers may in fact be more likely to experience new respect for what vicars actually face in their everyday lives than become disillusioned by the dismantling of some idealistic notion of the role. Still, given that social science research has shown that this is one possible outcome of such raw representations, it is mentioned here.

Summary and Possible Applications of the Research

This study has considered the contemporary situation of the Anglican Church in British culture, as well as the nature of public service broadcasting and how both may have contributed to recent improvements in fictional portrayals of clergy on television. It has also taken a comprehensive look at three examples of quality priest depictions occurring during the mid-1990s and following, examining their production processes through individual interviews with the creators of each programme, in order to reveal the considerations involved in bringing these particular characters to life.

It is hoped that several groups will regard this examination to be a positive contribution to their particular contexts. Those who obviously stand to gain the most from authentic priest portrayals are clergy themselves, as well as the church in general. Considering the evidence that television's influence on public opinion is especially augmented in areas where viewers have little direct personal experience (Gerbner and Gross, 1976), faithful representations become even more significant in the context of declining religious participation when considering laypersons' understanding of—and potential sympathy for—those engaged in professional ministry. Additionally, clergy like myself are satisfied by no longer being 'invisible' as a population represented in television entertainment, and pleased at actually being considered interesting subjects for dramatic depiction. Whether or not such programmes actually succeed at attracting increased engagement with Christianity remains debatable (aside from those viewers who expressed

an interest in attending the fictional vicars' churches, had they existed in real life). Perhaps this could be a matter for further study.

Another potential beneficiary of this research is the medium of PSB and those who advocate on its behalf. With the three programmes explored in depth standing as compelling examples of quality representations of a particular population within the larger society, and with the meticulousness of their approaches to production and characterisation detailed here, this study is offered as one credible justification for continued support of PSB's output: high value programming with additional potential to beneficially influence public opinion. Additionally, this research offers one system for evaluating quality in a more targeted way, using criteria strongly influenced by the views of programme creators themselves. These specific terms could also potentially be adapted, if desired, and applied to future television studies in other areas.

There may be other populations—religious or otherwise—who may be advantaged by conducting similar research on television portrayals of specific groups. Other professions may be interested in production studies in the development of characters representing themselves, or may seek to make themselves available as consultants for specialised programmes featuring those of their occupation.

From a church perspective, advocates of LGBTQ clergy (and now bishops) may seek to develop a fictional character representing these populations, with the hope of furthering their acceptance within ecclesiastical circles or the wider public. In the course of her interview, Rev. Joy Carroll Wallis saw the potential in just such an approach, given the powerful societal effect of the programme to which she herself had contributed (2018). In a slight variation of the 'two way mirror,' Kalisch and Kalisch's 'mirror and lamp' theory proposes that the media may both reflect the current reality of a profession (and how it is perceived) and light the way to new expressions or understandings of it (1986). If this is true, then the programme creators of the future may indeed see their efforts illuminating a path toward improved understanding of marginalised groups and misunderstood populations of ever increasing diversity.

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Appendix – Project Interview Details

Programme	Interviewee (Role)	Date	Location / Medium
The Vicar of Dibley	Rev. Amanda Bloor (Clergy Consultant)	27 June 2019	Telephone
	Paul Mayhew-Archer (Writer)	19 June 2019	ODEON Cinema lounge Leicester Square, London
	Rev. Paul Nicolson (Clergy Consultant)	28 June 2019	Interviewee residence Tottenham, London
	Jon Plowman (Producer/Executive Producer)	28 February-12 April 2019	Email exchanges
	Rev. Joy Carroll Wallis (Clergy Consultant)	29 January 2018	The Poetry Café Covent Garden, London
Rev.	Kenton Allen (Executive Producer/Producer)	13 November 2019	Telephone
	Rev. Matthew Catterick (Clergy Consultant)	12 October 2017	St. Saviour's Church Pimlico, London
	Tom Hollander (Writer/Actor/Producer)	22 May 2019	Video call
	Hannah Pescod (Producer/Executive Producer)	26 September 2018	The House of St. Barnabas Soho, London
	Rev. Melanie Toogood (Clergy Consultant/Extra)	26 July 2019	Telephone
	Rev. Paul Turp (Clergy Consultant)	12 October 2018	St. Leonard's Church Shoreditch, London
	Rev. Andrew Wickens (Clergy Consultant)	22 November 2018	RSA House Charing Cross, London
	James Wood (Writer)	6 November 2018	Kin Café Fitzrovia, London
Parch	Fflur Dafydd (Writer)	20 November 2017	Candid Café Angel (Islington), London
	Carys Eleri (Actor)	13 November 2017	Location shoot Brigend, Wales
	Rev. Manon Ceridwen James (Clergy Consultant)	23 August 2017	Video call
	Paul Jones (Producer/Director)	13 November 2017	Location shoot Brigend, Wales
	Steve Williams (Makeup Designer)	13 November 2017	Location shoot Brigend, Wales

(All live interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, with interviewees' permission.)