The Holy Buffoon in the Living Room: Contemporary British Religious Sitcoms 1982-2014

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Abstract

Since the 1980s, one of the most quietly persistent sitcom sub-genres on British television have been 'religious' sitcoms, including *All in Good Faith* (1985-1988), *The Vicar of Dibley* (1994-2007), *Father Ted* (1995-1998), and *Rev.* (2010-2014). These vicar- or priest-led sitcoms received broadcast audiences of up to 16 million, especially significant considering that during this period church attendance and self-identifying Christians dropped to record lows. Even though these sitcoms are 'religious', they are not currently contributors to public service broadcasters' remit to provide religious programming. Also, despite their frequency in British televisual history, academic study has largely ignored the shows, stemming from a lack of study into popular sitcom and a tendency to prioritise 'quality' sitcoms over traditional. The religious sitcom's very existence is questionable as some humour and religious scholarship deems religion too serious and humour too light for mutual benefit. This thesis addresses three points through a textual analysis of the above sitcoms: 1. the establishment of 'religious sitcoms' as a sub-genre; 2. the intersection of humour and religion; and 3. the representation of religion. This thesis offers the first definition of the religious sitcom, contributing to our understanding of the sitcom genre as a whole, relating existing debates on the complexities of humour and religion to practical examples of intersection, and arguing that the range of religious representations and discussions in these sitcoms firmly fulfils the PSB remit to provide religious programming. The thesis, therefore, combines both synchronic and diachronic aims and approaches in seeking to identify key tropes of the religious sitcom sub-genre, whilst situating key developments in relation to shifting and intersecting creative and cultural contexts. Ultimately, this will shed a light on this under-the-radar mainstay of the British airwaves, to give the religious sitcom some well-deserved and overdue academic attention.

Access Condition and Agreement

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set up my life so I could live in it; and to Victor, who almost literally travelled through all these TV and film worlds with me. And to my partner Sam, I would not and could not be here without you. This was all for me, but you can have it too.

Introduction

A Bunch of 'Rogues or Idiots': The British Religious Sitcom

Among the many sub-genres of sitcom that have aired on British television, one of the most quietly persistent has been the religious sitcom. Starring a vicar or priest as a main character, religious sitcoms usually follow the characters' work and home life, ranging from daily church services to dealing with family troubles and even the occasional infamous over-indulgence of Christmas lunches.[1] It is no exaggeration to say that religious sitcoms usually perform well, whether judged in terms of popularity or longevity. *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC1, 1994-2007),[2] for example, ticks all of these boxes; it drew audiences of over 14 million[3] and has returned multiple times for specials – most recently in 2020 – despite finishing its final series in 2007.[4] Similarly, *Father Ted* (C4, 1995-1998)[5] won a BAFTA for 'Best Comedy on Television' in 1996 and 1999[6] and was voted the top Channel 4 sitcom by viewers in 2012, nearly 15 years after its final episode aired.[7] Despite the religious sitcoms' popularity and frequency on British airwaves, both the sitcoms in this generic category and the category itself remain academically under-researched.

How important is the religious sitcom to religion? After all, as Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz recognise, the stereotype of religious engagement is that "theological debate happens in the church".[8] In the past this may have been the case, but according to the 2011 UK Consensus nearly half of the 60% of the population who self-identify as Christian have stopped going to church on a Sunday since 1979.[9] In fact, only 875,600 people claim to regularly attend services.[10] In comparison, *The Vicar of*

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[1] 1X.02 "The Christmas Lunch Incident", *The Vicar of Dibley,* cr. Richard Curtis and Paul Mayhew-Archer (25 December 1996). The code 1.02 indicates the episode's series (1) and episode number (.02), while the 'X' indicates that it was a special episode that was not a part of a series run. For a complete list of all case study episodes see the Appendix.

[2] *The Vicar of Dibley,* cr. Richard Curtis and Paul Mayhew-Archer (BBC1, 1994-2007).

[3] "Top 10 TV since 1981", *BARB.co.uk* <https://www.barb.co.uk/resources/tv-facts/tv-since-1981/1999/top10/> [accessed 11/02/2022].

[4] "The Vicar of Dibley in Lockdown: Compilation", *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC1, 23 December 2020).

[5] *Father Ted,* cr. Graham Linehan and Arthur Mathews (C4, 1995-1998).

[6] "'Father Ted' wins a British Academy Award", *Irish Times* (22 April 1996) <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/father-ted-wins-a-british-academy-award-1.41832#:~:text=The%20series%2C%20starring%20Dermot%20Morgan,One%20Foot%20in%20the-%20Grave> [accessed 15/03/2022].

[7] "Channel 4's 30 Greatest Comedy Shows", *British Comedy Guide* <https://www.comedy.co.uk/tv/channel_4_30_greatest_comedies/> [accessed 15/03/2022].

[8] Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, *Explorations in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 1.

[9] "Religion in the United Kingdom: Diversity, Trends and Decline", *Vexen.co.uk* <http://www.vexen.co.uk/UK/religion.html#Sunday%20Attendance> [accessed 11/12/16].

[10] Ibid.

Dibley at its height drew in over 14 million viewers.[11] The clear disparity shows that more people are watching religious sitcoms than attending church. Despite this, there have been very few academic studies investigating how religion is represented on television and fewer still that examine television comedy. This is especially surprising since one of the most popular sitcoms on BBC1 in the last 40 years is *The Vicar of Dibley* – a sitcom that blatantly reveals its religious connection from the title alone.

As well as the evident importance as a visible site for religious representation, religious television continues to have relevance to Britain's negotiation of public service broadcasting. According to the Ofcom Broadcasting Code, the BBC and other channels with public service broadcasting responsibilities (ITV and Channel 4) are required to produce religious programming, which they define as "a programme which deals with matters of religion as the central subject, or as a significant part",[12] as a part of their "mix of different genres and output".[13] As it stands, however, the BBC only considers a select group of television programmes to fit this definition, such religious documentaries, recordings of church services, and other factual shows like *Songs of Praise* (BBC, 1961-present).[14] [15] Even outside the BBC, comedy or sitcoms are rarely considered 'religious' enough to qualify as religious programming. The Sandford St. Martin Trust for example, who hold annual award ceremonies for the best of religious broadcasting, seldom nominate comedies.[16] By Ofcom's definition, it is entirely possible that religious sitcoms have religion as a 'central subject' and could count as part of public service broadcasters' religious programming provision. Indeed, the December 2017 "BBC Religion and Ethics" report suggests the BBC is already keen to explore the possibilities of reflecting "the everyday role of faith or diversity of communities in our mainstream… comedy" (which currently 'stakeholders' feel is absent).[17] The first port of call for the

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[11] "Top 10 TV since 1981".
[12] "Section Four: Religion", *Ofcom* <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/broadcast-codes/broadcast-code/section-four-religion> [accessed 21/03/2022].
[13] "Operating licence for the BBC's UK Public Services", *Ofcom* <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0023/199040/bbc-operating-licence-july-20.pdf> [accessed 21/02/2022], p. 8.
[14] *Songs of Praise,* cr. Donald Braverstock (BBC1, 1961-present).
[15] See examples of religious programming from the BBC at "Programmes: Religion and Ethics", *BBC* <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/genres/religionandethics/all> [accessed 21/03/2022].
[16] "Awards Archive", *The Sandford St. Martin Trust* <https://sandfordawards.org.uk/the-awards/awards-archive/#tab-id-10> [accessed 21/03/2022].
[17] "BBC Religion and Ethics Review", *BBC* (December 2017) <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/howwework/reports/pdf/religion_and_ethics_review.pdf> [accessed 09/03/2022].

BBC would be to look back on what they have already produced to create new religious comedy in the future.

There are many reasons why religious sitcoms may have been ignored thus far by academic study, but one of the key reasons is the persisting viewpoint that sitcom is inherently lower culture or more frivolous than other, more 'realist', forms of television. Indeed, despite the frequency of religious sitcoms on television, there have been few academic studies that address either religious sitcoms or the programmes that fall into this category. Brett Mills suggests this lack of academic attention stems from the erroneous assumption that sitcom is simplistic, unimportant, and lacking in social commentary – in other words, from the assumption that sitcom is low culture.[18] Where sitcom study does exist it often focuses on particular types of sitcoms more than others, especially the single-cam, genre-hybrid, or transgressive sitcoms that are in some form 'different' from the traditional.[19] The religious sitcom, which typically follows a traditional format, is usually too 'middle of the road' and safe to draw this academic attention.

Outside of sitcom study, even the ability to combine 'religion' and 'humour' in an entertainment format is a hotly contested debate. Some critics argue that due to religion's inherent "seriousness" and importance it cannot be taken lightly, while humour is too entertaining and silly to be taken seriously (see Chapter 1).[20] There has been ample evidence of religion and humour intersecting in the arts, ranging from Greek comedies to Rabelais, but it is assumed by those critics against intersection that it will always result in the denigration of one or the other – it can never be mutually beneficial.[21] The mere existence of religious sitcoms demonstrates that the intersection *can* happen, but not to what extent, or to whose benefit. Connected to this is the question of whether *religion* is important to religious sitcoms, as just because 'religion' is part of its definition does not automatically mean religion is anything more than a backdrop for humorous activities. The frequency, quality, and variety of religious engagement and representation will impact the methods of intersection between religion and humour.

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[18] Brett Mills, *Television Sitcom* (London: BFI, 2005), pp. 2-3.
[19] For example, single-cam mockumentary *The Office,* cr. Stephen Merchant and Ricky Gervais (BBC2/1, 2001-2003) has received a lot of academic attention, while *The Vicar of Dibley* has not.
[20] This will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 1, but a good starting point is Donald Capps' summary article "Religion and Humor: Estranged Bedfellows", *Pastoral Psychology*, 54:5 (1 June 2006), pp. 413-438.
[21] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Boston: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1984).

A final point to highlight is the comedy vicar, a popular presence on British television (whether religious sitcoms or not) for decades. From Geraldine Granger in *The Vicar of Dibley* to *Blackadder'*s (BBC1, 1983-1989)[22] Baby-Eating Bishop of Bath and Wells, the comedy vicar pops up surprisingly frequently and in a variety of guises. However, the sitcom vicar is not universally beloved. In 2022, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby (in opposition to earlier praise from the former Archbishop, Dr. Rowan Williams)[23] claimed that television's fictional vicars were all portrayed as "rogues or idiots", rather than "hard-working normal people, caring deeply about what they do and working all the hours there are to do it".[24] Initially, this viewpoint is logical. A sitcom is intended to be funny and often uses stereotypes or surreal, fantastical scenarios in pursuit of this intention. Yet, this comment embodies the same assumptions found when discussing sitcom – that the comedy vicar is not realistic or complex enough to portray the experiences of the modern vicar. It also dismisses the potential range in clerical representation, even across the four religious sitcoms that have aired since the 1980s. Is *Dibley'*s Geraldine simply a 'rogue', and is *Father Ted'*s eponymous priest nothing more than an 'idiot', or do these sitcoms have more to say?

Based on the discussion so far, three research questions emerged, all relating to British television sitcoms:

1. What is the definition of the 'religious sitcom' sub-genre and what does it contain?
2. How are religion and religious characters represented in religious sitcoms?
3. How, and to what extent, do humour and religion intersect in religious sitcoms?

To analyse religious representation in particular, case studies were chosen because they feature a religious professional (such as a vicar or priest) as the main character. This ensures that religion is always a major part of the programme, not only because through their job the priest is likely to be shown engaging in religious activities like prayers or services, but also because the vocational choice to become a priest

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[22] *Blackadder,* cr. Richard Curtis and Rowan Atkinson (BBC1, 1983-1989).
[23] Riazat Butt, "Rev 'rather good' says Archbishop of Canterbury", *The Guardian* (1 Aug 2010) <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2010/aug/01/senior-church-figures-rev-bbc> [accessed 19/10/2017].
[24] Harriet Sherwood, "'Rogues or idiots': Justin Welby condemns TV portrayal of clergy", *The Guardian* (24 November 2021) <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/nov/24/rogues-or-idiots-justin-welby-condemns-tv-portrayal-of-clergy> [accessed 11/03/2022].

means the subject will always be *seen* to represent their religion, morality, and institution even when not performing their role. In other words, the priest is always associated with religion, whether at home or at work. These are the sitcoms that have colloquially been called 'religious sitcoms' in the media, and are also the only sitcoms to engage with religion in every episode, partially because these sitcoms engage with religion through setting and profession even when religion is not explicitly discussed.[25] The establishment of Channel 4 in November 1982 was chosen as the beginning of the research's time period, because Channel 4 was the last of the four major public service broadcasting channels in the UK to arrive. Channel 4 began with a commitment to produce diverse programming that, at least in the 1980s, would not have a space on other channels.[26] Channel 4 also brought the first examples of alternative comedy on television, a movement that began around 1979 in stand-up clubs in London (though this is contested) and emerged on television shortly after.[27] In essence, then, this period of 1982 covers not only the establishment of four PSB channels in the UK but also a period of change in comedy impacting the television sitcom in multiple ways, including format, character, representation and humour (see Chapters 1 and 6).

Using the above criteria, there are four sitcoms that fit these parameters. The first is *All in Good Faith* (1985-1988),[28] an ITV sitcom starring Richard Briers about country vicar Philip who moves to a challenging inner-city parish with his family.[29] A relatively unknown sitcom, *All in Good Faith* was cancelled after a tumultuous third series and has remained off-air (and off streaming services) ever since. The much more well-known and popular second sitcom is *The Vicar of Dibley*, the BBC1 Dawn French-led ensemble sitcom about Geraldine, Dibley's first woman vicar, broadcast at a time when women vicars had only recently been ordained. *Dibley*'s third and final series aired in 1999, but a few full-length holiday episodes aired sporadically until 2007 and the show continued to revive the characters for shorter, often charity-

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[25] The use of 'religious sitcom' across media ranges from a review in *The New* Statesman (Jenny Landreth, "Praising at the altar of Rev.: why does a religious sitcom work so well for atheists?", *The New Statesman* (29 April 2014) <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2014/04/praising-altar-rev-why-does-religious-sitcom-work-so-well-atheists> [accessed 15/03/2022]) to a round in an episode of daytime quiz show *Pointless* (pr. Pam Cavannagh, Tom Blakeson and David Flynn, BBC1, 3 April 2018).

[26] Sylvia Harvey, "4. Channel Four Television: From Annan to Grade" in Edward Buscombe (eds), *British Television: A Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 105.

[27] Chrissie MacDonald, *That's Anarchy! The Story of a Revolution in the World of TV Comedy* (Hartwell, Victoria: Temple House Pty Ltd, 2003), p. 12.

[28] *All in Good Faith,* cr. John Kane (ITV, 1985-1988).

[29] All four of the sitcoms refer to their priests as either 'vicar', 'father', or by their first name, so during discussions first names will be used to avoid confusion.

related specials afterwards. Airing during *Dibley*'s run, the third religious sitcom is Channel 4's *Father Ted*, the only sitcom from the four that is Catholic, set in Ireland, and has multiple priests as main characters – Fathers Ted (Dermot Morgan), Dougal (Ardal O'Hanlon), and Jack (Frank Kelly). After the end of its three series run in 1998, the cult sitcom continues to remain popular, with frequent repeats, victories in sitcom popularity polls,[30] a dedicated annual 'Tedfest',[31] and even talk of a musical revival.[32] Finally, the fourth sitcom is BBC2's *Rev.* (2010-2014)[33] starring Tom Hollander as London-based vicar Adam desperately trying to keep his financially struggling church afloat. The only single-camera sitcom, *Rev.* is a more serious (whilst still comedic) look at the work and struggles of an inner-city vicar, ranging from dealing with church roof theft to mental breakdowns from overwork. The end of *Rev.* also marks the end of the research's time period, as there have been no British religious sitcoms to date after 2014. By coincidence, the four case studies are spread throughout the time period and across all four main British terrestrial broadcast channels – BBC1, BBC2, ITV (formerly ITV1), and Channel 4. They are also all easily accessible, either through broadcast, DVDs, or streaming services – something that cannot be said of earlier religious sitcoms like the 1960s sitcom *All Gas and Gaiters* (BBC, 1968-1971)*,[34]* for which only 11 episodes survive on DVD.[35] Inadvertently, these four case studies already share another factor; they are all Christian-based. This is not surprising, given the UK's lengthy historical (and current) relationship with Christianity, but this was not a factor used to determine which case studies should be chosen. However, only religious sitcoms about Christian vicars or priests, of either Protestant or Catholic denominations, have been produced in the UK since 1982. Other British sitcoms do address non-Christian religions, a recent example being *Citizen Khan* (BBC, 2012-2016),[36] about a Muslim family in Birmingham, but there are no other sitcoms that have a 'religious

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[30] Nick Bramhill, "Feck: 'Father Ted' is pipped to crown of best ever sitcom", *Independent.ie* (10 April 2019) <https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/television/tv-news/feck-father-ted-is-pipped-to-crown-of-best-ever-sitcom-38000238.html> [accessed 21/03/2022].
[31] "Welcome to Tedfest", *Tedfest* <http://tedfest.org/ted.php?Action=Home> [accessed 21/03/2022].
[32] Patrick Clarke, "'Father Ted The Musical' is "almost finished" says The Divine Comedy's Neil Hannon", *NME* (10 June 2019) <https://www.nme.com/news/music/divine-comedys-neil-hannon-writing-songs-father-ted-musical-2506902> [accessed 21/03/2022].
[33] *Rev.* cr. James Wood and Tom Hollander (BBC2, 2010-2014).
[34] *All Gas and Gaiters*, cr. Pauline Devaney and Edwin Apps (BBC1, 1966-1971).
[35] "All Gas and Gaiters", *BBC Comedy* <https://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/allgasandgaiters/> [accessed 15/03/2022].
[36] *Citizen Khan*, cr. Adil Ray (BBC1, 2012-2016).

professional' – regardless of religion – other than the four aforementioned case studies.

Chapter 1 will address the plethora of literature related to the project's research questions, especially addressing three main areas: representation, the humour vs. religion debate, and the television sitcom genre in the UK. First this chapter considers iterations of the three major understandings of humour theory – superiority, relief, and incongruity – and directly relates these to discussions of the intersection of humour and religion. Second, this chapter explores the definition and history of the sitcom genre on British television, with attention paid to the 'low culture' status of the genre and on which texts previous academic attention has focused. Third, the chapter discusses the importance of public service broadcasting and the 'public sphere' for televisual representation, relating these factors to the requirement for public service broadcasters to provide religious programming.

Chapters 2 to 5 are in-depth textual analyses of each of the four case studies, in chronological order of broadcast – Chapter 2 on *All in Good Faith*, Chapter 3 on *The Vicar of Dibley*, Chapter 4 on *Father Ted*, and Chapter 5 on *Rev.*[37] Each of these chapters looks at the broad strokes of how genre, humour and religion, and representation present in all four case studies (focusing on generic tropes like prayer and religious services), but also on significant areas of difference, such as clerical gender in Chapter 3, surrealism in Chapter 4 and 'interior voiceover' in Chapter 5. These chapters will also provide contextualisation for the shows in relation to its place in sitcom history and the impact of its choice of star(s). The textual analysis in these central chapters performs close analysis of multiple textual elements, including characterisation and performance, mise-en-scene, dialogue, and the wider narrative, utilising approaches such as discourse and narrative analysis, and an analysis of systems of representation. Characterisation is of particular importance to the question of representation, and in this case the analysis focuses largely on the characterisation of the vicar or priest main characters(s) and a select few other main characters where relevant. As well as looking at sites of humour and religious intersection, this analysis studies moments that are 'just' religious or humorous, as

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[37] From here on these texts will be referred to by shortened titles: *Good Faith*, *Dibley*, *Ted*, and *Rev.* respectively.

serious moments of religion and jokes outside of a religious context are also relevant to the definition of the religious sitcom.

To perform this textual analysis, I first watched every episode of each of the case studies and made copious, general notes to establish key themes and trends across the series. The purpose of this step was to become familiar with the series as a whole and view every episode in chronological (air-date) order to establish key themes, overarching trends, the presence or lack of serial narrative, and character development. This step also identified the presence of common sub-generic traits, such as church services and prayer, that could be picked out for further investigation. From this initial analysis I developed a framework for research in the form of an analysis table, which could be used to study any of the case study episodes individually.[38]

This analysis table included basic information – for example, the episode's plot, air date, and cast members – and provided structure for the textual analysis, such as key themes; sections on all three research questions, informed by the literary research outlined in Chapter 1; and connections to other case study episodes, either from the same show or from another case study.[39] The sections addressing research questions were particularly important, such as the entries on the intersection of religion and humour, because they were more specific to this project than the general plot summaries or list of cast members. In addition, the advantage of developing an episode-based analysis table was that it allowed for engagement with both episodic and serial narrative trends. As will be discussed in Chapter 1, sitcom typically conforms to the former rather than the latter – episodes have self-contained narratives that could theoretically be watched in 'any order' because narrative or character development does not carry over to the next chronological episode.[40] However, because in three of the case studies there are some overarching narratives or long-form developments, the table allowed room for identifying serial narratives as well. This table was then used as the framework for the second round of textual analysis, which focused on answering the research

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[38] See Appendix (2) for the empty Textual Analysis Table Template, which was used during the second round of analysis and completed for each episode.
[39] An example table is included in Appendix (3) from *Vicar of Dibley*'s 1.04 "The Wind and the Weather". This textual analysis table was chosen at random from the 82 completed tables.
[40] See Chapter 1, and Stephen Wagg, *Because I Tell a Joke or Two*: *Comedy Politics and Social Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 3.

questions, investigating the particulars of the sub-genre, and finally identifying key episodes and scenes that could be discussed in each chapter.

The various episodes included in the final analysis in Chapters 2 to 5 were chosen for one of two reasons, apart from the obvious reason of relevance to the research questions and arguments. The first is that the episode was a 'typical' example from the series, which could represent similar frequent scenes in the shows. For example, Chapter 5 discussed a couple 'typical' examples of Adam's prayers in *Rev.,* which happened almost every episode and, while differing in content, often took the same format of hearing Adam's voice in a voiceover while Adam remains vocally silent.[41] The second choice for episode or scene inclusion were 'atypical' examples, when particular elements only occur once or twice across the whole series and demonstrate difference. Returning to Chapter 5, the end of Chapter 5 explores a scene in *Rev.* where the other main characters' prayers are heard in a voiceover, which only happens on this one occasion throughout *Rev.*[42] It is also important to add that, while humour and religion are integral to the project, a lack of religious or humorous engagement did not rule out an episode from study, nor from its potential use in write-up. In other words, the analysis did not *only* look at scenes that were humorous, religious, or both, because more dramatic or non-religious scenes could still be vital to the representation of religion, character development, or the definition of the religious sitcom sub-genre. However, it should also be noted that each of these chapters included examples from across the TV series and from the majority of episodes, demonstrating overarching themes and narrative trends as well as the frequency of certain sub-generic tropes like prayer.

The textual analysis methodology used during this thesis is particularly apt because of its value in studying social meanings and understandings. Martin W. Bauer writes that textual analysis, especially narrative analysis, "focuses on the ways in which people represent themselves and their worlds to position themselves in the social space and to construct identity", demonstrating how textual analysis in particular is concerned with representation and identity.[43] At the heart of this thesis is the study of religious representation, which is not only a key aspect in the definition of the

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[41] See Chapter 5 for more details on the interior voiceover.
[42] See Chapter 5, and 3.06 "Episode 6", *Rev.* (BBC2, 28 April 2014).
[43] Martin W. Bauer et al., *Textual Analysis, Volume I* (London: SAGE Productions, 2014), p. xli.

religious sitcom sub-genre but also vital to the analysis of the 'vicar' figure. As such, textual analysis can be used as a tool to understand how the sitcoms construct the identities of religious characters. Similarly, James Paul Gee argues that discourse analysis can examine how texts might reinforce notions considered "social good" such as a "religion person, Christian, Jewish person, Islamic person, or what have you, is a social good for you".[44] Therefore, Bauer argues, "texts represent values, beliefs, rituals and practices in a community", employing aptly religious terminology in their discussion of textual analysis to highlight how texts can represent society and social structures.[45] Hall builds on this point, suggesting that using a method such as textual analysis can explore diverse, cultural "shared meanings" through examining representative "signs and symbols… sounds, written words, [and] electronically produced images".[46] While Bauer is correct to argue that texts can reinforce 'social goods', Hall adds that "there is always a great diversity of meanings on any topic, and more than one way of interpreting or representing it".[47] Consequently, textual analysis can allow for multiple interpretations of representation, especially when taking into account other factors such as socio-historical context. Textual analysis alone does not indicate how the *audience* received these texts and representations, either at time of broadcast or in the intervening years, but textual analysis *does* demonstrate how the text itself interprets religious identity, either singularly or varied.

As well as representation, the textual analysis methodology, especially a combination of narrative and discourse analysis, is appropriate for the study of a previously explored genre like the religious sitcom. By looking at the sitcoms' basic building blocks, such as the inclusion of particular settings, scenes, characters, dialogue, or situations in detail, textual analysis can identify common elements that contribute to the recognition of a religious sitcom. Equally, textual analysis is useful for understanding comedy and jokes through the study of discourse, because discourse analysis is concerned with the study of "language in use", the "content" of language, and their structure[48] – all components of the 'joke'.[49] Indeed, the

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[44] James Paul Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 6.
[45] Bauer et al., *Textual Analysis, Volume I*, p. xxiv.
[46] Stuart Hall, *Representation* (London: SAGE, 1997), p. 1.
[47] Hall, *Representation,* p. 7.
[48] Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis,* p. 8.
[49] Brett Mills, *The Sitcom* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 15.

distinction between 'content' and 'context' is especially important in the framework of the religious joke, examined in detail in Chapter 6.

However, textual analysis on its own does not paint a full picture of the socio-historical and televisual contexts of the time period. Chapter 6 will collate all the literary research and textual analysis from Chapters 1 to 5 and situate them within the changing British religious landscape, broadcast channel particulars, and the evolving nature of the British sitcom genre. Chapter 6 will be the culmination of the research questions, summarising the findings on the case studies' representation, the intersection of humour and religion, and the definition of the religious sitcom sub-genre. This chapter uses a combination of genre theory and socio-cultural contextualisation to identify a working definition for the religious sitcom, incorporating general sitcom studies and specific findings from the religious sitcom case studies. The in-depth analysis of these case studies will provide unique insight into the representation of religion in these sitcoms, the intersection of humour and religion in real, media examples rather than theoretical debate, and develop an encompassing definition of the religious sitcom as it has manifested since 1982. The thesis, therefore, combines both synchronic and diachronic aims and approaches in seeking to identify key tropes of the religious sitcom sub-genre, whilst situating key developments within the sub-genre in relation to a range of shifting and intersecting creative, clerical, and cultural contexts. Ultimately, this project aims to shed a light on this under-the-radar mainstay of the British airwaves, to give the religious sitcom some well-deserved and overdue academic attention.

The Holy Buffoon in the Living Room: Humour Theories, the Intersection of Religion and Humour, and the Sitcom Genre

The religious sitcom, as discussed in the Introduction, is specifically connected to four key research areas: the sitcom genre; humour theories; the intersection of humour and religion; and television history. To find a definition of the religious sitcom, for example, it is first necessary to find a definition for the *sitcom*, while an understanding of how religion and humour have historically intersected will inform the study of how they have intersected in the religious sitcom. Before proceeding with a close analysis of the religious sitcom, this chapter will explore these research areas and intersect with relevant key debates to provide a framework for the subsequent textual analysis. Therefore, this literature review will draw together research from television theory and religious studies to answer questions that arise from these points of connection. First, while the study of different humour theories is useful to the understanding of television sitcom on its own, the application of humour theories to the existing debate about the relationship between humour and religion will shed new light on how these two areas may intersect within the case studies. This should also all be placed within the context of the television sitcom. For example, does the fact these programmes are on television rather than in a face to face context affect the application of humour theories? Equally, does the viewpoint that sitcom is low-culture and under-researched affect its potential as a site for religious representation? Finally, this representation will be situated in the British interpretation of public service broadcasting, relating its origins to the conceptualisation of the 'public sphere' and its applicability to modern broadcast television.

The discussion of humour involves the use of a few key comedic terms, which are also vital to the understanding of sitcom; 'comedy', 'joke', 'laughter', and 'humour', as well as another important term for the religious sitcom, 'religion'. For this analysis these definitions are sourced from Brett Mills' *Television Sitcom,* as they were expressly intended for use in the analysis of humour theories *and* the sitcom.[50] First,

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[50] Mills, *Television Sitcom.*

"comedy" refers to "material whose primary purpose is one of funniness", which must be blatantly identifiable as such by both the comedic performer and the audience.[51] Therefore, comedy must not only *try* to be funny; it must also be clear to those listening that it aims to be funny. Within comedy is the "joke", the "smallest possible unit" that intends to have "a comic effect".[52] Regardless of effect, the joke can often be identified from its typical format of "a set-up and a punchline".[53] Both of these terms, which refer to attempts to by funny, differ from the physical reaction of 'laughter'. Laughter refers purely to "the noise made by the combination of the vocal cords and a release of carbon dioxide", within which there can be varying levels of intensity or enjoyment."[54] The distinction between 'comedy' or 'joke' and 'laughter', therefore, is a difference between a material and a physical reaction *to* that material. For the sitcom, comedy and jokes are likely to refer to performances within the sitcom (such as when actors tell a joke) while laughter is often heard from the studio audience through the laugh track.[55] The non-comedic term that is imperative for this project is 'religion', referring to an organised system of faith and worship concerning beliefs in spiritual beings.[56] The final term, "humour", is much more difficult to define, and the struggle to identify a holistic, all-encompassing theory of humour is traceable through the numerous humour theories that have been suggested. There is, however, a general acceptance that laughter is the intended result of humour, and humour theories aim to either explain the catalyst for this reaction or the psychological and biological incentive to laugh. The most influential humour theories according to John Morreall are split into three main categories; Superiority Theory, Relief Theory, and Incongruity Theory.[57]

Superiority Theory, as identified by Plato,[58] Aristotle,[59] and Henri Bergson,[60] relies on the creation or reinforcement of dominant-submissive power structures amongst the laugher and the subject of the joke. Plato argues laughter can only emerge from the powerful at the powerless, referring to these jokes as vulgar and unkind because

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[51] Ibid., p. 17.
[52] Ibid., pp. 14-15.
[53] Ibid., pp. 14-15.
[54] Ibid., p. 13.
[55] This will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter, but see also Mills, *Television Sitcom,* p. 13.
[56] "Penguin Dictionary of Religions", *Religion Facts* <https://religionfacts.com/religion> [accessed 11/01/2022].
[57] John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: University of New York Press, 1983), pp. 4-37.
[58] Plato, *The Republic* (London: Penguin Ltd, 2007).
[59] Aristotle, *Poetics* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1996).
[60] Henri Bergson, *Laughter* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956).

it mocks "someone else's sufferings".[61] As such, laughter can also only exist when someone is being mocked. The laugher, Plato explains, need not be the person who made the joke, as "giving rein to your comic instinct" includes laughing at jokes "you would be ashamed to make yourself".[62] Plato's interpretation of Superiority Theory is absolute and does not allow for anomalies; Plato suggests there may be other uses for comedy but did not elaborate on what these could include.[63] Important for the application of Superiority Theory to television, though, is that Plato loosely applies Superiority Theory to instances of humour in society and those appearing on stage, and suggests that representation leads to internalization – Plato argues that witnessing "bad taste in the theatre" can lead to "becoming a buffoon at home".[64] Consequently, Plato suggests Superiority Theory is not only confined to humorous situations occurring in society. This opinion is echoed by Aristotle, who argues that "comedy is… an imitation of inferior people", thereby positioning the imitator as dominant.[65] From the perspective of Superiority Theory, then, humour concerns mockery, idiocy, and – crucially – an imbalance of social power. However, Francis Hutcheson took issue with the idea humour is entirely about superiority and ridicule, specifically citing Thomas Hobbes' assumption in *Leviathan* that humour required a selfish realisation of "sudden glory",[66] or a feeling of superiority over another.[67] This echoes Aristotle's sentiment in *Poetics* that comedy is merely "an imitation of inferior people", and that comedy is therefore always at the expense of the less powerful.[68] If this interpretation of Superiority Theory was holistic, Hutcheson argues, then any situation with an uneven power dynamic would elicit laughter from the more powerful.[69]

Bergson's version of Superiority Theory aligns with Plato's assertion that comedy stems from mockery but differs on purpose, and is more specific about the type of person who is mocked. According to Morreall, Bergson's Superiority Theory suggests that laughter mocks those who "are not behaving in a flexible context-

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[61] Plato, *The Republic*, Book X, Part X, p. 550.
[62] Ibid*.,* p. 550.
[63] Ibid*.,* p. 550.
[64] Ibid., p. 550.
[65] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 9.
[66] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 43.
[67] Ibid., p. 97.
[68] Aristotle, *Poetics,* p. 9.
[69] Peter Kivy, *Francis Hutcheson: An Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design* (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijoff, 1973).

sensitive way",[70] and laughter serves to highlight those who stray from, in Bergson's own words, the "common centre [of] society".[71] Humour consequently reinforces, rather than challenges, societal norms. Bergson specifies that comedy can only be produced when a person (Bergson is quick to point out comedy is a "strictly *human*" phenomenon)[72] experiences an "absence of feeling", an emotional separation from any potential consequences to the joke or investment in that being mocked.[73] Unlike Plato, however, Bergson relates his Superiority Theory exclusively for use in society, laughter's "natural environment", as laughter's function is "a social one".[74] This calls into question whether Bergson's Superiority Theory can apply outside of face-to-face social contact.

Relief Theory differs from Superiority Theory because it concerns the purpose of laughing rather than analysing the rationality behind comedy. The most prevalent Relief Theory, proposed by Sigmund Freud, is based on an economy of psychical effort.[75] Jokes release psychical energy that would have otherwise been used to constrain the laugher's "aggressive instincts", which are unacceptable in polite society, and thus provide a "saving" in energy.[76] Psychical energy is equally saved with "innocuous", childish jokes that, as John Carey describes, avoid "the effort of critical, discriminatory thought".[77] The quality and enjoyment of the joke directly impacts the amount of psychical saving, as Freud argues that "it is reasonable to assume that this gain in pleasure corresponds to the saving in psychical expenditure."[78] Freud's theory of psychical constraint is reminiscent of Plato's reining of comic instinct, which suggests that humour releases the comic instinct by inhibiting the fear of "playing the fool".[79] In addition, many of the jokes in Freud's *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* are mocking or at the expense of the person laughed at, which again bears a resemblance to Superiority Theory.[80] Nevertheless, Relief Theory emphasises the importance of psychological health and pleasure in the laugher rather than the power relationship between the laugher and

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[70] John Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour* (Albany: University of New York Press, 1987), p. 117.
[71] Bergson, *Laughter*, p. 73-74.
[72] Ibid., p. 62.
[73] Ibid., p. 63.
[74] Ibid., p. 65.
[75] Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious,* translation by Joyce Crick (London: Penguin Classics, 2002).
[76] John Carey, "Introduction", in Freud, *The Joke,* p. viii.
[77] Ibid., p. viii.
[78] Freud, *The Joke,* p. 116.
[79] Plato, *Republic*, p. 550.
[80] Freud, *The Joke.*

the subject. In addition, Freud highlights the social gain that can result from a popular joke; "the motive behind the production of innocuous jokes", Freud claims, "is… to show off how clever one is",[81] a sentiment that is completely opposed to the connection between humour and "the buffoon" of Plato's Superiority Theory.[82]

Morreall's primary criticism of Freud's Relief Theory is that it simply does not account for all examples of humour, as not all humorous scenarios involve "the venting of energy".[83] As such, Relief Theory, like Superiority Theory, cannot be considered universally applicable. Elliot Oring adds Freud "perpetuates classificatory muddles, displays some remarkable blindness, and rides roughshod over data" to find proof of his theory, underlining that it would be nearly impossible to quantify and test the extent to which psychical energy can be saved, so as a scientific model it remains unfalsifiable.[84] The saving of energy does not hint at the importance of content, beyond asserting that childish or aggressive jokes can lead to the avoidance of energy expenditure. In summary, Freud's theory only addresses why there is pleasure to be gained from laughing rather than what can motivate the release of energy. To account for this, Oring argues that Freud's theory should instead be viewed as a theory for the avoidance of 'sentiment' – "feelings of goodness, affection, tenderness, admiration, sympathy, and compassion" that values emotion, attachment, and was associated with aggression.[85] Humour allows for distance and perspective, and for the joker to release unwelcome emotions. Thus, the energy saved is energy reverted from emotional expenditure. In this state, the theory could be applied to humour that aims to make light of a serious subject, or to shift an emotional state from attached to detached. Still, Relief Theory does not address *why* something is funny as much as suggest why people would benefit *from* humour.

The pursuit of a single, holistic theory of humour appears to be more attainable with iterations of the third option, Incongruity Theory. Each version of Incongruity Theory attempts to incorporate as many extraneous examples as possible of comedy that were excluded from the former. An early version of Incongruity Theory from Francis Hutcheson (motivated by the failure of Hobbes' Superiority Theory in *Leviathan* to

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[81] Freud, *The Joke,* p. 140.
[82] Plato, *Republic*, p. 550.
[83] Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour*, p. 6.
[84] Elliott Oring, *Engaging Humor* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), p. 116.
[85] Oring, *Engaging Humor,* pp. 73-79.

account for humour that was not egocentric)[86] is that the cause of laughter "is the bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas".[87] This allowed for comedy that does not require a selfish "comparison to ourselves" and relieves comedy of its ultimately cruel intentions.[88] However this theory, too, is flawed. While Hutcheson lists some ideas that, when contrasted, could elicit laughter – "grandeur, dignity, sanctity, perfections, and ideas of meanness", for example – Hutcheson fails to establish why some contrasts are funny and why some are not, and does not account for differences in culture or taste.[89] To this end, Kant enhances Incongruity Theory by proposing that an absurd, incongruous juxtaposition must involve the release of a "strained expectation".[90] The word "strained" implies emotional investment or seriousness is released by humour "into nothing",[91] a transformation of energy comparable to Freud's Relief Theory, but additionally providing a scenario which could catalyse the energy transformation.[92]

Schopenhauer, echoing Kant, describes laughter as "[arising] from nothing other than the sudden perception of an incongruity between a concept and the real objects that are… thought through the concept", with the humour emerging from a comparison between an original object and a facsimile.[93] The larger the difference between these, the greater the laughter. Morreall suggests that because of their involvement of an "emotional release", Kant and Schopenhauer's theories are a hybrid of Incongruity and Relief Theories.[94] Still, unlike Freud's Relief Theory, Kant and Schopenhauer identify a definite catalyst for the emotional release rather than simply observing the benefits of its occurrence. Similarly, for Kierkegaard, the key word for humour is "contradiction".[95] Kierkegaard highlights that "wit always depends upon an association of ideas", but it is the incongruity found between the two that causes laughter.[96] Like Hutcheson, though, these Incongruity Theories

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[86] Hobbes, *Leviathan.*
[87] Francis Hutcheson, "Reflections Upon Laughter", in Kivy, *Francis Hutcheson,* p. 103.
[88] Ibid., pp. 109, 103.
[89] Ibid., p. 109.
[90] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (New York: Hafner Publishing, 1951), p. 177.
[91] Freud, *The Joke.*
[92] Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, p. 177.
[93] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 84.
[94] Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p. 16.
[95] Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers, Volume 2 F-K* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), p. 266.
[96] Hong and Hong, *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals,* p. 263.

struggle to account for when a release of strained expectation, or a contradiction caused by difference between an original and an approximation, is not humorous.

Morreall's own theory attempts to narrow the parameters of this 'contradiction' by specifying an emotional feeling as a catalyst. Morreall suggests that "laughter results from a Pleasant Psychological Shift", a definition that incorporates the desire to entertain as well as its intention to surprise, and argues that comedy emerges when someone breaks with social or conversational rules.[97] Though he brings conversational rules and surprise into his definition, Morreall does not explicitly reference incongruity as the only cause of a 'pleasant psychological shift'. Also, the valuation of originality and pleasant surprise in Morreall's theory leaves little room for repetitive jokes or catchphrases, which Morreall writes off as "unimaginative" and thus the theory's applicability to such situations is immaterial. One example Morreall uses is when a sitcom uses "the same jokes over and over",[98] a justification for his disdain for the "pitifully childish" shows.[99] Still, dismissing repetitive jokes because of personal distaste does not justify ignoring such jokes, as the enduring popularity of catchphrases and repetition on sitcoms demonstrates that humour can be found in these situations. The reason for this exclusion may lie in Morreall's own definition of incongruity; in *Taking Laughter Seriously,* Morreall states that laughing at incongruity is an intellectual reaction to "something that is unexpected, illogical, or inappropriate in some way", of which only 'unexpected' can denote a surprise.[100] Instead, if incongruity is viewed merely illogical or inappropriate, catchphrases can be included, as the constant repetition of certain phrases can be deemed illogical and potentially used inappropriately. As with previous iterations, this Incongruity Theory too seems unreasonably broad and does not account for non-humorous incongruities.

This leads into the final Incongruity Theory, which was devised in response to other Incongruity Theories being either too broad (as not all incongruities are funny) or too rigid (as not all humorous situations involve a resolution).[101] Oring's theory proposes the "appropriate incongruity theory" – "the perception of an appropriate between

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[97] Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p. 39.
[98] Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour*, p. 3.
[99] Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously,* p. 10.
[100] Ibid*.,* p. 15.
[101] Oring, *Engaging Humor*, p. 2.

categories that would ordinarily be regarded as incongruous".[102] The difference in Oring's theory is that there is no need for resolution, and recognition can occur at any point in the process. As such, jokes where laughter occurs after resolution, or with no resolution at all, can be included. Despite this, Oring acknowledges that even this theory is not holistic. Oring shows that definition and metaphor, for example, contain appropriate incongruities; yet these are not automatically considered comic.[103]

All of these theories assume "there is [a] single factor that underlies humour", because something as universal as laughter cannot be simply attributed to a single culture or physiognomy.[104] However, as these three humour theories stand, no single one can fully encapsulate every humorous scenario. Superiority cannot account for humour that does not laugh 'at' someone; Relief does not address content; and even the broadest Incongruity Theory includes instances of incongruity that are not comic. Since none of the theories on their own cover all examples of humour, a better approach than using only one of these theories is to utilise all three to cover as many examples of humour as possible. Using all three covers the vast majority of humorous scenarios that may occur in the sitcoms and allows for the opportunity to determine which (if any) is used most frequently and effectively. More importantly, since none of the currently used theories fully cover all humorous scenarios, it is possible that there may not be a universal humour theory at all. The need for (and possibility of) a universal humour theory is unconvincing; even within one culture, there are so many different humorous situations that it seems unlikely that a unifying factor includes all instances of humour and rules out everything non-humorous. Therefore, developing a separate, universal theory is unproductive, and instead a framework utilising all three covers more ground.

The three humour theories previously outlined may demonstrate how or why something may generate humour, but they do not (and do not intend to) explain how humour and religion may intersect. With Superiority Theory, which suggests that humour is generated by a power imbalance, the primary objection would be if religion were on the receiving end of cruel laughter. For example, if religion or belief

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[102] Ibid., p. 2.
[103] Ibid., p. 2.
[104] Ibid., p. 12.

itself was laughed at, then it would be a subject of derision. Similarly, if God were to be laughed at, then the laugher might see themselves as above God, a scenario which in Christianity is unfeasible. Still, both religion and Plato's Superiority Theory in particular are highly negative about humour, suggesting that those who laugh are 'buffoons'[105] who imitate "inferior people".[106] Similarly, when discussing humour and Christianity, Morreall cited the fact that Jesus never laughed in the Bible, and that laughter has "negative connotations", as a reason for Christians not to engage with humour.[107] If viewed through this, the intersection of Superiority and religion emerges from a mutual dislike of laughing at those perceived as 'inferior'.

Like Superiority Theory, Relief Theory could include an object of derision, as Freud's Relief Theory uses 'tendentious' jokes that could be dismissive or aggressive when directed towards religion (especially when religion is viewed as influential of the construction of social acceptability).[108] In addition, the loss of self-control, or the release of this pent-up psychical energy, is another reason why Relief Theory is incompatible with religion. Critchley relates bouts of extreme laughter to the "moments of radical corporeal exposure" such as sobbing, and this loss of bodily control was the reason for Christian condemnation and recodification in the Middle Ages.[109] To explore this concept, it is useful to apply the notion of the 'carnival' described by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*.[110] Carnival relies on the "temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order", and Relief Theory similarly emphasises a break from social norms.[111] To achieve this, Bakhtin suggests, the laugher is "[freed] completely from all religious and ecclesiastic dogmatism", and some carnival forms even "parody the Church's cult".[112] Indeed, Bakhtin writes that religion itself is emblematic of "seriousness".[113] Therefore, the values of Relief Theory are at odds with religion, as one prioritises the freedom of laughter and the other priorities social control. As such, the two concepts seem too oppositional to intersect.

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[105] Plato, *The Republic,* p. 550.
[106] Aristotle, *Poetics,* p. 9.
[107] Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p. 86.
[108] Carey, quoted in Freud, *The Joke*, p. viii.
[109] Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 9.
[110] Bakhtin, *Rabelais.*
[111] Ibid., p. 10.
[112] Ibid*.,* p. 7.
[113] Ibid*.,* p. 73.

Incongruity, Kierkegaard and Götz argue, works well with religion because of the inherent incongruities in Christianity. Kierkegaard heavily emphasises the inherent humour in Christianity, which he argues is "expressed in a fundamental principle which declares that the truth is hidden in the mystery".[114] Regardless of the increase of "Christian knowledge", Kierkegaard observes, there will always remain central incongruities in Christianity that can presumably be determined as humorous (though he gives no examples).[115] As in Kierkegaard's general Incongruity Theory, though, Kierkegaard does not elaborate on why these incongruities will be found funny, and simply assumes the incongruity itself will generate laughter. Similarly, Ignacio L. Götz specifically cites incongruities as central to both humour and religion. In *Faith, Humor and Paradox,* Götz begins by dismissing several of the historical arguments against the relation of humour and religion. As previously observed, Morreall claims that laughter has "negative connotations" because Jesus never laughs, and therefore Christians do not engage with humour to emulate Jesus.[116] Götz counters that, while Jesus never explicitly laughs in the Bible, this does not mean that he never laughed at all or that the stories in the Bible were not humorous at the time of original compilation.[117] His main argument concerns the similarity of religion and humour through the creation and maintenance of paradoxes, loosely applied to inexplicable problems and circular (or repetitive) incongruities. Religion's natural paradoxes emerge because so much of religion relies on belief that cannot be evidenced. Humour, by using Incongruity Theory, can be described as existing when the rational or expected is subverted. Religion can be enhanced by humour because humour does not have to obliterate or "detract from the veracity" of religious belief.[118] Still, beyond a suggestion of how the two could work together, Götz does not suggest why a reliance on incongruity automatically forges a connection; Götz only shows that religion and humour (especially as defined in Incongruity Theory) *can* intersect.

However, Terry Ray Clark demonstrates in *Understanding Religion and Culture* how satire can be used to do exactly what Götz suggests humour should not do –

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[114] Hong and Hong, *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals*, p. 252.
[115] Ibid., p. 252.
[116] Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p. 86.
[117] Ignacio L. Götz, *Faith, Humor, and Paradox* (London: Praeger, 2002), p. 3.
[118] Götz, *Faith, Humor, and Paradox*, pp. 104-105.

question the veracity of religious belief.[119] Clark first discusses how some of his religious students reacted negatively to the "highly exaggerated and mean-spirited depictions of religious belief".[120] While as Feltmate highlights, satirical truth can be "inherently contentious" because the humour is reliant on social assumptions of "religion, religious institutions, and the value of religious life",[121] he does show how provocation in satire leads to the assumption that all humour exists to "make fun of" beliefs considered false.[122] Since humour can critique "what some consider potentially dangerous, excessive, or just plain silly", humour does not have the single purpose that Götz imagines to expose paradoxes to religion's favour.[123]

In addition, Götz is narrow on what he considers humorous and what is merely frivolous. 'Humour' involves thought, work, and cultural importance (which remains undefined and unspecified) while frivolity is "just a vapid, tepid sort of pabulum that is very difficult to describe", though Götz is certainly able to describe the sort of people whom enjoy it – "the common person" who has become "the norm".[124] This recalls Morreall's dismissal of sitcoms in *Taking Laughter Seriously,* which also reinforces the notion of high culture versus base low culture,[125] or the "buffoon" of Plato.[126] Clark summarises the issue with establishing high and low culture succinctly:

> This… reflects a biased judgement on the part of those individuals who have the power to impose their own value system upon others, and may serve to maintain a distinction in society between people of different economic and political standing.[127]

The fact that Götz refers to those who engage in frivolity as 'common people' seems to confirm that his scorn is rooted in class and economic standing. Statements about cultural value call into question whether these theories can be applied to texts that

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[119] Terry Ray Clark, "1. Saved by satire? Learning to value popular culture's critique of sacred traditions" in Terry Ray Clark and Dan W. Clanton, Jr., *Understanding Religion and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
[120] Terry Ray Clark, "1. Saved by satire?", p. 13.
[121] David Feltmate, "It's Funny Because It's True? The Simpsons, Satire, and the Significance of Religious Humour in Popular Culture", *Journals of the American Academy of Religion,* 81 (2013), pp. 231-232.
[122] Clark, "1. Saved by satire?", p. 16.
[123] Clark, "1. Saved by satire?", p. 16.
[124] Götz, *Faith, Humor, and Paradox,* p. 94.
[125] Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p. 125.
[126] Plato, *Republic*, p. 550.
[127] Clark, "Introduction: What is religion? What is popular culture? How are they related?" in Clark and Canton Jr., *Understanding Religion and Popular Culture*, p. 6.

these scholars would have considered too low to be worthy of attention – such as the sitcom – and these theories were not intended for application to popular culture.

Some of these readings have questioned whether humour can intersect with religion, but they do not question whether religion *allows* for this intersection. In *Taking Laughter Seriously,* Morreall suggests that there is no allowance for humour in religion (Morreall specifically uses Christianity as his example) because "everything we do has theological and therefore practical consequences", and as a result a wholehearted commit to Christianity involves living seriously to fulfil "the will of God".[128] This conclusion, rather than presenting humour and religion as incompatible, indicates that religion has no interest in such a flawed concept as humour. Further, Donald Capps suggests that, though Christianity is not explicitly opposed to religion, there are "a number of traits" that are "so significant that religion would almost certainly be negatively associated with, and even negatively affect, sense of humour".[129] On the other hand, Douglas Adams in *The Prostitute in the Family Tree* proposes that humour is an integral part of acknowledging the flawed humanity of believers, and to provide "hope" for improvement.[130] Rather than trying to emulate the perfection of Jesus, Adams argues that the parables Jesus tells illustrate that humans are not perfect, thus inspiring people to continue striving after setbacks. Just as Bergson argues that humour can be used to mock those who stray from societal norms, thus reinforcing a certain type of behaviour in the observers, Adams argues the humour in Jesus' parables exposes the negative actions of others to bolster the hope for change in ourselves.[131] Still, all three theorists agree that humour is humanizing – according to Wylie Sypher, "Bergson says that comedy can make us human and natural".[132] Consequently, the differences in opinion stem from the extent to which being merely 'human' is seen as positive or negative in terms of religious belief.

Peter L. Berger takes another perspective, arguing that humour is a method of accessing the inherent elements of the "supernatural" in religion.[133] To believe in and experience the supernatural, Berger argues, is to engage in childish play,

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[128] Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p. 125.
[129] Capps, "Religion and Humour: Estranged Bedfellows", p. 419.
[130] Douglas Adams, *The Prostitute in the Family Tree: Discovering Humor and Irony in the Bible* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), p. 3.
[131] Ibid., p. 12.
[132] Wylie Sypher, "Introduction", in Bergson, *Laughter*, p. xvi.
[133] Peter L. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1973), p. 13.

signifying transcendence from tangible reality.[134] This 'childish play' takes the form of humour, acting as a conduit to move beyond the "tragedy of man" to a state that can experience joy and look to a positive future.[135] In other words, comedy and religion allow people to forget the inevitability of death by providing a joyful outlet. This is the complete opposite of Morreall's conclusions in *Taking Laughter Seriously* that a "wholehearted commitment to Christianity" involves utter seriousness at all times because they live for the sole purpose of "fulfilling the will of God".[136] A more cohesive interpretation would be a combination of both theories – neither Berger nor Morreall seem to allow for the existence of humour and seriousness together, as only one or the other can achieve transcendence.

For other theorists, humour and religion's compatibility is to do with whether it is good or bad to be 'human' *and* 'Christian'. For example, Morreall suggests that the 'committed' Christian could not allow humour into their lives because "there is no 'time-out' in which we live outside the Creator-creature relationship" – since every action on Earth affects the life in the next, the Christian must "obsessively" pursue the fulfilment of God, which leaves no room for humorous error.[137] If such a Christian were not living so single-mindedly, Morreall argues, then they are simply failing their purpose.[138] Further, since "God cannot be amused" (nothing can surprise Him), it is presumed He would not approve of amusement in general. [139] Such an argument leaves little room for rebuttal, as Morreall interprets Christianity as fundamentally serious and its aim to imitate God. Conversely, Conrad Hyers views this interpretation as that of the "zealot", who accepts and expounds religious views without question. This is of limited utility, however, as this could support or disprove Morreall's claims.[140] If Christians attempt to be above humanity and closer to divinity, then humour is to be avoided, as humour is a reminder of human error. Still, if human error is unavoidable, then embracing it through the humanity of humour is to fully perceive the world and avoid the blind obedience of a zealot.

There are a few common assumptions to be drawn from these arguments. First, as mentioned earlier, most studies are extremely Western-centric; few consider religion

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[134] Ibid*.*, p. 79.
[135] Ibid., p. 90.
[136] Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p. 125.
[137] Ibid., p. 125.
[138] Ibid., p. 125.
[139] John Morreall, *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 78.
[140] Conrad Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy: Comic Heroism in a Tragic World* (New Jersey: Rutgers, 1995), p. 73.

to mean anything but 'Christianity', and those that do rarely move beyond Abrahamic religions. For example, the fact that Jesus never explicitly laughs in the Bible is of no consequence to Judaism or Hinduism. A notable exception is John Morreall's *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion*, which examines both Western and Eastern religions.[141] On the other hand, even this text speaks primarily of 'Abrahamic' and 'Eastern' religions, rarely specifying further, and much is only applicable to Christianity. Still, one of the benefits of focusing solely on texts that explore Christianity (as is the case for the British religious sitcom) is that there is a plethora of literature on this relationship. Second, many of these arguments assume the relationship must be mutually beneficial; in other words, humour that mocks religion would not be considered compatible. In fact, intersection does *not* demand compatibility, and as such religious and humorous intersection in the case studies does not have to be mutually beneficial. The third assumption is that seriousness – and especially the seriousness of religion – leaves no room for humour, and vice versa. Consequently, seriousness and humour are presented as inherently binary, which cannot overlap. Yet, if this was the case, it would not be possible to find humour in serious subjects, or to have serious moments in comedic television shows. If humour and seriousness are not inherently binary, then they *can* intersect. The question, therefore, is *how* they intersect, and whether humour and/or religion benefit from the intersection, rather than questioning *if* they can intersect to mutual benefit.

The discussions of humour and religious intersection have considered largely abstract, theoretical arguments, without examples from literature, theatre, or (pertinent to this study) television. In fact, there has been little analysis of the intersection of religion and humour in television, and what has been considered has often focused on specific instances of satire, such as in Terry Clark's "Saved by Satire"[142] or Feltmate's "It's Funny Because It's True?".[143] Clark's discussion of satire relates implicitly to the conclusions of Superiority Theory, arguing that "if some belief or practice is considered to be false, it can and should be made fun of".[144] This suggests that the opposite is also true; by making fun of a belief or practice, it is

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[141] Morreall, *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion.*
[142] Clark, "1. Saved by satire?", pp. 13-19.
[143] Feltmate, "It's Funny Because It's True?", pp. 222-248.
[144] Clark, "1. Saved by satire?", p. 16.

implicitly considered false. However, Clark also highlights that humour can be educational, and thus can be used as a tool to teach about religion.[145] Clark then uses these conclusions to inform an analysis of religious representation of the adult animated sitcom *South Park* (1997-present),[146] and looks at specific jokes and scenes as evidence for his findings rather than episode or series overviews. In addition, Clark only looks at moments of religion and humour rather than including general representation of religion, which does not account for moments of religion that are not humorous, and thereby the study does not investigate representations of religion in sitcom outside of a humorous context.

Feltmate's study specifically analyses the representation of fundamentalist or evangelical Christianity in the character Ned Flanders in family animated sitcom *The Simpsons* (1989-present)[147] and is one of the few examples of religious representation study in television. The fact that Feltmate's investigation is a textual analysis of one specific character's religion and beliefs, and that Flanders is a humorous character in a sitcom, is a good example of how religious sitcoms could also be researched. Feltmate justifies the focus on *The Simpsons* and Flanders by stating that:

> *The Simpsons'* depictions of religion matter because they are treated not as frivolous cartoon humor, but as satires which criticise competing moral and civic perspectives of religion's relevance in the United States.[148]

Like Clark, Feltmate underlines the frequency of studying satire when considering religion in sitcoms. Feltmate acknowledges the assumption that cartoons are viewed as "frivolous", but dismisses this assertion by using satire to underscore the social importance that humour can perform – as a tool for critiquing moral and civic perspectives, in this case in the US.[149] Feltmate later specifies that *The Simpsons* uses a blend of "wit, parody, and satire", and its religious jokes draw on well-known cultural phrases, moral concepts, popular culture references, and puns.[150] Thus, Feltmate firstly focuses on a categorisation and identification of religious humour,

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[145] Ibid, p. 16.
[146] *South Park*, cr. Trey Parker and Matt Stone (Comedy Central, 1997-present).
[147] *The Simpsons*, cr. Matt Groening (Fox, 1989-present).
[148] Feltmate, "It's Funny Because It's True?", p. 223.
[149] Ibid., p. 223.
[150] Ibid., p. 229.

and then uses an analysis of religious character Flanders to point to general representations of religion as well as how this religious humour is implemented. This model directly answers both how religion is represented in *The Simpsons* and how humour and religion intersect, including the specification of certain types of humour and scenarios which are not overtly humorous.

There are, of course, a few key differences in Feltmate's analysis from British religious sitcoms; the case study is an American animated sitcom, had been running (at the time) for 24 years, and Flanders is not a clergy member nor the main character. In addition, the inclusion of a religious character, and infrequently discussing religion, means *The Simpsons* is not as directly and intricately involved in religious representation as a sitcom that has an active church minister as the central role. There may be a tangible difference between the findings of Feltmate and Clark in relation to American animated sitcoms and 'religious' sitcoms, which may use intersections between humour and religion differently to other sitcoms. Therefore, to establish the differences between sitcom and the religious sitcom, it is necessary to go back to the roots of genre to look at the meaning of genre and how television programmes are generically classified.

'Genre' as a term, according to Glen Creeber, simply describes a method that "allows us to organise a good deal of material into smaller categories", important both as a method of classification and also to create expectations for producer and audience for what the product will involve.[151] Still, these categories are not fixed. Mittell observes that "genres are cultural products, constituted by media practices and subject to ongoing change and redefinition".[152] In other words, genre is defined not only by what has come before but by current and future products as well, which will shape and reshape the genre through new interpretation. In the case of religious sitcoms, the historical examples of religious sitcoms have more relevance because it will have been classified after the shows have aired – "forged through the cultural processes of categorisation itself" rather than creating the sub-genre (or genre within a genre) before seeing an example of it.[153] Creeber adds that this process is not only done by academics but also by productions and audiences.[154] Therefore, it would

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[151] Glen Creeber, *The Television Genre Book 2nd edition (*London: BFI, 2008), p. 1.
[152] Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.
[153] Creeber, *The Television Genre Book,* p. 12.
[154] Ibid.*,* p. 3.

be remiss to assume that the generic connection between the religious sitcoms was not observed by television makers, the media, and audiences members too. Indeed, the plethora of terms such as 'clergy comedies', 'ecclesiastical sitcoms' and 'religious sitcoms' across the media suggests the connection was certainly evident.[155]

Rick Altman splits genre into four descriptive terms: "blueprint", which uses historical examples of the genre to create a new product; "structure", which is the "formal framework" which the genre follows; "label", the name of the genre category; and "contract", the "viewing position required by genre film of its audience".[156] In essence, Altman draws a distinction between historical genre, genre definition or framework, genre name, and generic expectations. Consequently, a holistic view of genre will do more than simply name it and discuss historical examples such as the case studies, and will also provide a generic framework and use this to indicate generic expectations of future genre entries. However, Altman's terms here were intended for application to film genre, and Mittell questions whether the importing of genre analysis from other disciplines is enough as they "cannot address key specificities of the television medium".[157] One of these key specificities, observed by Richard Kilborn, is the production of 'hybrid' genres (such as sub-genres like religious sitcoms), which is far more common in television out of a need to "hold the viewer's attention".[158] Kilborn writes that "television programme-making has, in short, always involved the constant transgressing and blurring of generic boundaries".[159]

The sitcom genre and its texts have not been the subject of extensive academic attention, though there are a few significant exceptions. Mills,[160] Joanne Morreale,[161] and Stephen Wagg,[162] for example, have studied the sitcom in general, while Ben Thompson[163] and Leon Hunt[164] have considered the sitcoms of the 1990s and early 2000s. Instead, sitcom-specific studies are more common, such as the plethora of

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[155] See the Introduction for discussion of media terms for religious sitcoms.
[156] Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 1999), p. 14.
[157] Mittell, *Genre and Television,* p. 5.
[158] Richard Kilborn, "'Mixing and Matching': the Hybridising Impulse in Today's Factual Television Programming" in Garin Dowd et al., *Genre Matters: Essays in Theory and Criticism* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2006), p. 109.
[159] Kilborn, "'Mixing and Matching'", p. 109.
[160] Mills, *Television Sitcom.*
[161] Joanne Morreale, *Critiquing the Sitcom: A Reader* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003).
[162] Wagg, *Because I Tell a Joke or Two.*
[163] Ben Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty* (London: HarperCollins, 2004).
[164] Leon Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

texts on *The Office*. The word 'sitcom' is a contraction of 'situation' and 'comedy',[165] firstly recognising the importance of the familiar, unchanging situation in which the characters find themselves, and secondly drawing explicit attention to the sitcom's intention as "one of funniness".[166] Yet, much like definitions of humour, this definition fails to capture the specifics of sitcom, as this does not distinguish between sitcom and other television comedies.

Wagg chooses eleven characteristics that identify the sitcom, including a length of 30 minutes; "a core of regular characters, with familiar scenery and sets"; a recorded laugh track from a live studio audience; a self-contained plot that is resolved within the episode; and a happy ending.[167] Wagg also highlights that sitcoms are usually made for the home market, meaning that British sitcoms are often set in Britain (past or present) and made for a British audience.[168] Further, Bignell and Orlebar have described the sitcom situation as a "house or a workplace" where "characters seem trapped together".[169] For this reason, Hunt identifies that many British sitcoms essentially tragi-comic; sitcoms present a 'family', whether blood relation or formed through friendship or circumstance, but a family that cannot escape its small, unchanging space.[170] In addition, sitcoms are often recorded under "very bright lights" reminiscent of live theatre,[171] and, especially in the US, can be created purely to unleash one popular comedian's talents.[172]

However, a sitcom does not have to always include all of these factors.[173] The majority of sitcom study has been reserved for so-called 'quality' sitcoms,[174] often foregoing or subverting definitive sitcom elements and including "social realism" or "drama" as well as comedy.[175] For example, the aforementioned *The Office* does not have a live audience and trades the three-camera set-up for a single-camera mocumentary format.[176] The advantage of using techniques connected with more 'serious' genres, such as documentary or drama, is that sitcoms can exploit the

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[165] Wagg, *Because I Tell a Joke or Two*, p. 3.
[166] Ibid., p. 17.
[167] Ibid., p. 3.
[168] Ibid., p. 3.
[169] Jonathan Bignell and Jeremy Orlebar, *The Television Handbook Third Edition* (Oxon: Routledge, 2005), p. 63.
[170] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy*, p. 73.
[171] Mills, *Television Sitcom*, p. 32.
[172] Brett Mills, "Comedy Verité: Contemporary Sitcom Form", *Screen,* 45:1 (March 2004), p. 66.
[173] Ibid., p. 66.
[174] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy*, p. 18.
[175] Ibid*.,* p. 71.
[176] Bignell and Orlebar, *The Television Handbook Third Edition,* p. 64.

expectations and "constraints" of the sitcom genre and attract audiences who are dismissive of the more traditional sitcom.[177] Alongside the 'quality' distinction is the 'classic', a show revered by audiences and/or critics that has outlasted competition and withstood the test of time.[178] This is despite, as Bignell and Orlebar write, the suggestion some classic sitcoms may be "outmoded", with outdated views of "race or gender, for instance".[179] While not explicitly referenced, the representation of religion can also be added to the list, and the enduring popularity of classics demonstrates the importance of studying sitcoms that, removed for their original temporal period, are still consumed by a modern audience.

A final factor not mentioned thus far is that sitcoms are expected to be comic, which Jonathan Bignell identifies in his four core elements to a sitcom: "fictional narrative, self-conscious performance, joke and physical comedy, and the presence of a studio audience denoted by laughter on the soundtrack".[180] Mills summaries this expectation to be comic as the "comic impetus", the sitcom's ultimate and over-riding aim to be funny.[181] This is one of the key generic tropes that separates the sitcom from other television genres. Connected to the comic impetus is Mills' 'cue theory', described by Mills as the method through which sitcoms signal what is intended to be funny.[182] Rather than simply identifying various generic tropes that typically occur in the sitcom, cue theory argues that it is this intention and signalling of comedy that defines the sitcom genre, which has the advantage of allowing for "comic failure" or offense as well as comic success, because "a viewer can still generically place a sitcom even if they find the jokes within it unfunny".[183] Mills identifies two categories of cue signalling, building on findings by Handelman and Kapferer,[184] which are used tangentially within the sitcom.[185] The first is 'category-routinising jokes', which rely on a pre-established comic relationship between the joke-teller and the audience, such as comic personas from previous performances or catch-phrases.[186] The second is 'setting-specific joking', which uses the recognisable sitcom format

[177] Ibid., p. 64.
[178] Wagg, *Because I Tell A Joke or Two*, p. 2.
[179] Bignell and Orlebar, *The Television Handbook Third Edition,* p. 63.
[180] Jonathan Bignell, *An Introduction to Television Studies*, *Third Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 133.
[181] Mills, *The Sitcom*, p. 5.
[182] Ibid., p. 93.
[183] Ibid., p. 94.
[184] Don Handelman and Bruce Kapferer, "Forms of Joking Activity: A Comparative Approach", *American Anthropologist,* 74:3 (1972), p. 484.
[185] Mills, *The Sitcom*, p. 95.
[186] Ibid., p. 95.

itself to signal humour through "obvious, unambiguous, deliberately noticeable" metacues.[187] Some of these latter setting-specific cues are elements already identified as key generic markers of the sitcom, such as the laugh track, the shooting style, and even the opening titles.[188] Cue theory therefore boils down the identification of the sitcom genre to the unique way in which the sitcom broadcasts its humorous intentions, prioritising the comic impetus above aspects such as episodic length, the presence of a live audience, or a self-contained narrative (all of which can also be present in other televisual genres).

John Mundy and Glyn White identify two large, commonly cited subgenres of sitcom – the domestic and the workplace sitcom.[189] The domestic subgenre, including "about half" of sitcoms, Mundy and White define as "set in a living space or home environment" and can centre on family, friends, or both.[190] Mundy and White use the family domestic sitcom as the "default setting", the most frequent and recognisable form which sitcom can take. Aptly, some of the most popular sitcoms in the UK have been in a domestic setting, ranging from *Only Fools and Horses* (BBC1, 1981-2003) to *Mrs. Brown's Boys* (BBC1, 2011-present). Another category is the workplace subgenres – describing "about a third" of sitcoms – which are set in a workplace setting such as a canteen in *dinnerladies* (BBC1, 1998-2000) or an office in *The Office.* Not all sitcoms fall into these subgenres. Many sitcoms use both workplace and domestic settings, with Mundy and White citing *Fawlty Towers* (BBC2, 1975-1979)[191] as an example. Even ostensibly domestic sitcoms such as *The Good Life* (BBC1, 1975-1978)[192] create workspaces in the home, complicating the distinction. Similarly, workplace sitcoms could also create the 'surrogate family' atmosphere found in domestic sitcoms through workplace friendships and relationships, further muddying the waters. Consequently, these two subgenres, even if valuable for quickly identifying the most common sitcom settings, frequently overlap. There could be a third category termed 'workplace-domestic' that combines both, but the utility of this term is dubious due to its breadth and lack of specificity. Still, this grey area between the domestic and workplace settings is theoretically

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[187] Ibid., pp. 95-6.
[188] Ibid., p. 95.
[189] John Mundy and Glyn White, *Laughing Matters: Understanding film, television and radio comedy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp. 108-109.
[190] Ibid., p. 108.
[191] *Fawlty Towers,* cr. John Cleese and Connie Booth (BBC2, 1975-1979).
[192] *The Good Life,* cr. John Esmonde and Bob Larbey (BBC1, 1975-1978).

applicable to the religious sitcom. Common religious sitcom locations include both the vicarage and the church which on its own fulfils both subgenre requirements. More importantly, the vicarage alone represents the domestic and workplace together due to the frequency of visitations by parishioners and colleagues as well as friends and family. Also, as with workplace sitcoms that develop a surrogate family, the religious sitcom may similarly develop a familial-like connection between the vicar and parishioners.[193]

Partly because of the significant number of sitcoms that defy classification through the standard 'domestic' and 'workplace' monikers, Mundy and White break down the sitcom into smaller subgenres focused on narrative and character instead of setting. One of these subgenres is "a clear strand of comedies centred on clergy",[194] in particular highlighting the enduring popularity of *Vicar of Dibley* and *Father Ted.* Mundy and White do not give this subgenre of sitcoms a name, nor do they elaborate further on the specificities of the group, but they do highlight the important point that the subgenre is a unique grouping to the UK (though it should be noted that Mundy and White in this chapter only compare UK and US).[195] Indeed, it is far more common in US sitcoms to have religious characters of topics integrated into other subgenres of sitcom, either for single episodes or occasional reference.[196] In addition, these episodes are usually about established characters and their religious beliefs rather focusing on a vicar or priest. As discussed earlier, such series also exist in the UK, but these are alongside numerous 'clergy comedies' (or indeed religious sitcoms) like *Dibley* and *Ted.* Mundy and White attribute the presence of these comedies in the UK but not in the US to "a clear cultural difference in sensibilities about religion", but they do not expand on from what this difference is caused, which admittedly could be a lengthy discussion.[197] Regardless, though Mundy and White do not describe these comedies as 'religious sitcoms', they are undoubtedly of the same group and their mention alongside other UK sitcom subgenres such as "historical" (*Blackadder*) "fantasy-based" (*Red Dwarf* [BBC2,

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[193] See *Dibley* in Chapter 3.
[194] Mundy and White, *Laughing Matters,* p. 122.
[195] Ibid., p. 122.
[196] There are numerous examples of individual episodes addressing religion in most US sitcoms, but some examples include: *Happy Days*' "Fonzie's Baptism" (Gary Marshall, ABC, 29 March 1977) when Fonzie decides to be baptised; *Frasier*'s "Star Mitzvah" (David Angel, Peter Casey, and David Lee, NBC, 4 November 2002) which addresses Lilith and Freddy's Jewish heritage; and *Community's* "Comparative Religion" (Dan Harmon, NBC, 10 December 2009), when Christian Shirley struggles to accept the rest of the group's religious beliefs.
[197] Mundy and White, *Laughing Matters,* p. 122.

1988-1999; Dave, 2009-present),[198] and "older person-centred" (*One Foot in the Grave* [BBC1, 1990-1995])[199] demonstrates they are at least frequent enough to be of note.

The occurrence of particular sub-genres or historic trends of sitcom from the 1980s onwards is conveniently split into nearly decade-long iterations motivated by political upheaval, changes to format, and the success of individual sitcoms. According to Hunt, the 1980s represented a noticeable turn towards comedy that was "biting", "dangerous", "controversial" and most importantly, "politically correct", a period posthumously termed 'alternative comedy' by the media.[200] Chrissie MacDonald highlighted the "doom, misery, and, eventually, urban riots" of the Thatcher era that fuelled the pent-up emotion and opposition to the mainstream, while simultaneously providing endless material to use in comedy routines.[201] Hunt suggests that Channel 4 was the largest influence on the introduction of alternative comedy to television, citing the channel's broadcast of *The Comic Strip Presents…* (C4/BBC2/Gold, 1982-2016)[202] as a turning point.[203] Although 1980s alternative comedy was prevalent in stand-up and TV comedy in general, Hunt categorises the 1980s sitcom as typically "bland and conservative".[204] MacDonald, too, draws a comparison between the 'blandness' of sitcoms pre-alternative and the sitcoms generated during the 1980s, that remained untouched by the alternative comedy scene.[205]

The television comedy of the 1990s was termed by Ben Thompson as the "Golden Age" of British comedy, and even suggests the best television comedies of the 1990s actually "*overshadow* the small-screen landmarks of any previous era", accrediting case study *Father Ted* as one of these 1990s accomplishments.[206] Much of Thompson's sentiment here seems subjective, but it does highlight how comedy in the 1990s attempted to distance itself from the comedy that preceded it. Hunt describes the 1990s as the 'post-alternative era', reacting against the "self-righteous, 'politically correct'" comedy that came "at the expense of being funny".[207]

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[198] *Red Dwarf,* cr. Rob Grant and Doug Naylor (BBC2, 1988-1999; Dave, 2009-present).
[199] *One Foot in the Grave,* cr. David Renwick (BBC1, 1990-1995).
[200] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy,* p. 1.
[201] MacDonald, *That's Anarchy!,* p. 17.
[202] *The Comic Strip Presents…* cr. Peter Richardson (C4/BBC2/Gold, 1982-2016)
[203] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy*, p 4.
[204] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy,* p. 69.
[205] MacDonald, *That's Anarchy!,* p. 17.
[206] Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty,* p. xii.
[207] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy,* p. ix.

Rather than grouping by a single overarching factor, Hunt suggests that the 1990s had a number of different nexus points, including cringe comedy, mockumentary, northern comedy and dark surrealism.[208] Thompson cites the rise in independent production companies and the overarching influence of the alternative era during the 1980s as the primary influences, though Thompson acknowledges that this led to an overlapping transition period. Thompson therefore describes the change as "less of a clean break and more of a jagged edge".[209] The post-alternative was characterised by two different categories of programme; the "cult" sitcoms that were the "province of the previous generation of alternative comedians" – such as French and Saunders, or Mayall and Edmundson – and the new "traditional sitcom with fantasy touches written by the "new generation of writers" like *Ted* co-creators Linehan and Mathews.[210]

Near the end of the 1990s, Hunt argues that sitcom began to experience "upheavals" in form and look, which took hold post-2000 with the success of mockumentary sitcom *The Office*.[211] *The Office* dropped the live audience and laugh track, changed to a single-camera shooting style, and for the most part did not offer a 'happy ending'. Yet there were still identifiable sitcom tropes, such as the 30-minute episodes, the small, unchanging setting, and the pseudo-family, inescapably trapped in a dead-end office job.[212] Significantly, though, *The Office* still aims to entertain, and uses the generic changes "for comedic ends".[213] Hunt observes that the 'quality' sitcom, a sitcom that uses "single camera, no recorded laughter, [and] touches of non-comic drama and pathos" are symptomatic of the changes to the "look" of TV comedy during the early noughties.[214] The development of the quality sitcom is perhaps more monumental considering that, as Mills observes, the sitcom form remained largely stable before this point, in-keeping with the "constancy of sitcom content", such as the use of simplistic stereotypes and representations.[215] Mills termed this the "comedy verité", an amalgamation of the "visual nature of docusoaps" and the purposeful artificiality of the standard sitcom.[216] In addition, this

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[208] Hunt, *Cult TV Comedy*, p. 10.
[209] Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty*, p. xii.
[210] Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty*, p. 17-18.
[211] See Mills, "Comedy Verité", pp. 68-78.
[212] Mills, "Comedy Verité", p. 69.
[213] Ibid., p. 71.
[214] Hunt, *Cult TV Comedy*, p. 18.
[215] Mills, "Comedy Verité", p. 63.
[216] Ibid., p. 70.

new form appeared to restate the sitcom's dedication to social engagement and representation.[217] The 'quality' sitcom in this context is a label applied to this particular format of sitcom production, and therefore the use of the term 'quality' refers only to this label rather than a judgement of artistry or legitimacy. As Mills describes, this documentary aesthetic is not in pursuit of "legitimacy" or "veracity" as much as exploring a new avenue for generating humour.[218] Indeed, the look of comedy verité does not confine itself purely to documentary or docusoap aesthetics; the use of single camera or voiceover, for example, can equally be found in TV drama.

As discussed earlier, sitcom has not been the frequent subject of academic attention, and this is attributed to the assumption that sitcom is "mere entertainment" with no social or political function.[219] Mills highlights that Media Studies has attempted to consider "more 'socially relevant' forms, particularly news and documentaries",[220] while Wagg suggests there is simply "widespread derision for the banality, suburbanism and heavy-handedness perceived in the average British sitcom".[221] The dismissal of sitcom is linked to an institutional sense of "unworthiness" in the study of television (prioritising study of the more socially relevant formats) and, further, the fact that sitcom is comedy. In other words, since the subject matter is light-hearted and entertaining, it must have nothing valuable to say on serious subjects.[222] Morreale argues that dismissing sitcom in this manner is to ignore the fact that "when we watch sitcoms, we are watching ourselves; and when we deconstruct them, we become more aware of how we are constructed.[223] Indeed, Mills adds that "sitcom becomes not only representative of a culture's identity and ideology", but "one of the ways in which culture defines and understands itself".[224] Sitcoms provide a vital avenue for the analysis of character representation, often exploring contradictions in social discourse which do not always have to be resolved by the 'happy' ending.[225]

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[217] Ibid., p. 78.
[218] Ibid., p. 74.
[219] Ibid., p. 78.
[220] Mills, *Television Sitcom,* p. 2.
[221] Wagg, *A Joke or Two*, p. 2.
[222] Paul Attallah, "Chapter 6: The Unworthy Discourse: *Situation Comedy in Television*", in Morreale, *Critiquing the Sitcom*, p. 93.
[223] Morreale, *Critiquing the Sitcom*, p. xix.
[224] Mills, *Television Sitcom*, p. 9.
[225] Morreale, *Critiquing the Sitcom*, p. xii.

However, the low-culture status of the sitcom, as both a television and comic format, is also attributable to its mass appeal. Mills argues that sitcom is "one of the most maligned cultural forms" partially because it is "popular", and this viewpoint has informed expectations for and production of the genre.[226] Similarly, Jeremy Butler suggests that viewers, critics and actors have a "love-hate" relationship with sitcom, born from its combination of popularity as a genre and the "inauthentic", "[disdainful]" humour it produces (though Butler does not reference any academic sources to evidence these assertions).[227] In addition, Mundy and White argue that television's availability and appeal to the mainstream", again referencing television and sitcom's mass popularity, have earned the low culture reputation, while "general conservatism" has further damaged its "critical credibility".[228] On the other hand, this argument is rarely pushed further to question whether being seen as 'low culture' should be automatically negative. Butler, for example, states that sitcoms "often contributed to national discourses about identity politics", but fails to connect this to low culture, and Mundy and White observe television and comedy's "low critical status" but do not consider the potential benefits to this label.[229]

One clear benefit to the trappings of being 'popular' low culture is that sitcoms *are popular*, meaning sitcoms may reach millions of viewers during and after broadcast. Mills highlights that even if popularity does not always result in progression, it does "create a forum in which anything that is progressive is able to have a far-reaching effect".[230] Because the sitcom is able to reach a much larger audience than other art forms, it follows that it will be able to impart any ideological messages to this larger audience. In academia in particular the potential progressive nature of sitcom has been emphasised through social representations of gender, sexuality, race and class, whose study has been partly justified by the argument Mills raises. Still, Mills does not suggest here that only progressive sitcom is worth studying. Even if the sitcom is not seen as 'progressive', a subjective judgement dependent on the viewers' historical and social context, the sitcom does provide a historical insight into views of the time. These are certainly not fool-proof – simply because a sitcom suggests this is normal does not mean the viewers agreed – but it does show

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[226] Mills, *Television Sitcom,* p. 153.
[227] Jeremy G. Butler, *The Sitcom* (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 1-2.
[228] Mundy and White, *Laughing Matters,* p. 102.
[229] Ibid., p. 107.
[230] Mills, *Television Sitcom*, p. 154.

enough viewers were watching shows that imparted these messages. Therefore, though being a low culture form does create a potential environment for progression, even without this the sitcom can be valuable in its own right.

One of the societal ideological structures sitcoms both produce and re-produce is representation. Stuart Hall emphasises the importance of "cultural meanings" to representation, arguing that shared cultural codes, formed through "systems of representation", inform understandings of societal meaning and identity.[231] Hall describes two particular systems of representation; a "shared conceptual map" through which the world is understood and influenced by common factors like experience and culture, and "language" which translates this conceptual map into a series of "signs" that can be understood by others".[232] While this discussion of representation is more general, the use of language 'signs' here can refer to the visual images or aural codes broadcast on television as much as dialogue. Indeed, for television in particular, Victoria O'Donnell argues that representation is "central" to its study, because its constant mediation and selection of images "limits the meaning of what is seen".[233] As such, television is constantly not only reproducing cultural representations but also *creating* them, a source of the representations themselves. However, the purpose of studying representation here is not to decide what are 'positive', 'negative', or 'realistic' representations; this is not only a reductive and subjective judgement, but does not serve the purpose of examining the range of representations in religious sitcoms, nor relate these to the sub-genre's definition.[234]

Another interpretation of representation by Sarita Malik similarly describes representation as twofold: one part referring to the representation *of* something, such as substituting or 'standing for' an entire community; the other being the process through which someone or something is "reproduced" through a construction of reality.[235] This echoes the summary by Bernadette Casey, who distinguishes between representation as an image that "can be seen to represent or 'stand in for us'" and a "re-presentation" of the world – a *constructed* representation

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[231] Hall, *Representation*, pp. 4-6.
[232] Hall, *Representation,* pp. 17-19.
[233] Victoria O'Donnell, *Television Criticism*, (London: SAGE Publications, 2007), p. 163.
[234] Sarita Malik, *Representing Black Britain: A History of Black and Asian Images on British Television* (London: SAGE Productions, 2002), p. 23.
[235] Malik, *Representing Black Britain,* p. 23.

of reality.[236] All three of these interpretations by Hall, Malik, and Casey involve a first factor that focuses more on the purpose or end product and a second identifies the process through which representation is attempted; thus, representation can employ interpretations simultaneously, both process and product.

The importance of representation on television is one of the key motivators for the UK's historical dedication to public service broadcasting, the system utilised from television's inception to bring television to the masses.[237] The definition for public service broadcasting is difficult to determine due to complications of intention, execution, and nationality, but in the British context public service broadcasting demonstrates a commitment to "inform, educate, and entertain" through television shows that, to some extent, appeal to everyone.[238] This does not mean *every* programme will appeal to everyone as many programmes have specific, smaller audiences in mind, but instead aims to provide *something* for everyone. Nevertheless, television is not just about entertainment and appeal; Bignell identifies that "the role of television has been, and still is, to offer a public service by informing and educating its audience, as well as entertaining its viewers".[239] In the early days of television in the 1930s to the mid-1950s, this translated to a BBC monopoly; because the BBC had no competition and was publicly funded it had no commercial obligations to produce mass-appeal entertainment programmes at the expense of less popular but educative programmes.[240] The other side of this argument is the BBC and public service broadcasting is "paternalistic"[241] to assume the public requires education and if so what it requires to be educated, especially in light of the fact that it was supposed to be making television for everyone rather than only to a "small cultural elite".[242] Still, it would be remiss to assume the BBC was *only* making educational programmes, or that it sidelined education during this period; the BBC produced a range of different programmes and genres, including cultural, political, entertainment, and religious.[243] This monopoly was disrupted in 1955 with the beginning of ITV, then later the introduction of BBC2 (1964) and Channel 4 (1982).

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[236] Bernadette Casey et al., *Television Studies: The Key Concepts Second Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 235.
[237] Ibid., p. 223.
[238] Ibid., p. 224.
[239] Bignell, *Introduction to Television Studies*, p. 23.
[240] Paddy Scannell, "Public Service Broadcasting: The History of a Concept", in Andrew Goodwin and Garry Whannel, *Understanding Television* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 14-15.
[241] Peter Dahlgren, *Television and the Public Sphere* (London: SAGE Publications, 1995), p. 14.
[242] Bignell, *Introduction to Television Studies*, p. 25.
[243] Scannell, "Public Service Broadcasting: The History of a Concept", p. 16.

It should be noted though all three of these new channels also had (and continue to have) public service broadcasting responsibilities, despite the fact ITV and Channel 4 are commercially funded.[244] Indeed, the famous "inform, educate, and entertain" quote is referenced in the brief for the Independent Television Authority (the supervising body for the creation of ITV).[245]

After the introduction of Channel 4 in 1982 television continued to grow with diversification of new terrestrial channels, satellite channels, and streaming services that would follow after the 1980s. This new plethora of viewing options has prompted questions about the purpose and validity of public service broadcasting. Some like Bignell maintain that it still valuable to have a television public service because it serves the function of producing a range of programmes for everyone rather than appealing to a narrow market,[246] while others such as Peter Dahlgren argue public service broadcasting "[ignores] the growing pluralistic and multicultural character of their own societies".[247] Rather than arguing for or against public service broadcasting, however, the purpose of this brief history of public service broadcasting is to show two key points: first the importance of televisual appeal to 'everyone' to British television history and second its triple purpose of being informative, educative, and entertaining, both points linked to the topic of representation.

These two key points have their roots in the public sphere, a democratic concept coined by Jürgen Habermas[248] and applied to television by Dahlgren.[249] Habermas describes the public sphere as "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed", where everyone can participate and discuss important social issues.[250] This indicates a location that is easily accessible by large numbers of people, and that the purpose is to find a universally applicable conclusion to adopt as public opinion. Television's easy and wide-ranging access (certainly after the 1950s when television ownership became more common) performs this function, not only as a forum from which the television makers can present opinions but also as a discussion topic among viewers and even between

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[244] Ibid., p. 17.
[245] Casey et al., *Television Studies: The Key Concepts*, p. 224.
[246] Bignell, *Introduction to Television Studies*, p. 23.
[247] Dahlgren, *Television and the Public Sphere*, p. 14.
[248] See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1989).
[249] Dahlgren, *Television and the Public Sphere*, pp. 13-21.
[250] Jürgen Habermas et al., "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopaedia Article", *New German Critique*, No. 3 (1974), p. 49.

viewers and makers. Thus, both the public sphere and public service broadcasting advocate for a space in which everyone can participate and be informed.

Though public service broadcasting and public sphere seem to advocate for the same function, there are significant issues with simply applying the public sphere theory by Habermas in television, including the fact that Habermas' primary interest was the "bourgeois public sphere" of the 18th Century (two centuries before television began broadcasting) and Habermas' blatant disinterest in the modern media.[251] According to Crossley and Roberts, Habermas had little time for the "regressive 'dumbing down'" of commercial television, and disliked its overreliance on generating revenue.[252] Further, Dahlgren highlights the difficulty of applying Habermasian public sphere theory to television due to the fact that the public sphere is "very wedded to the notion of face-to-face interaction".[253] This is very similar to the difficulty in applying humour theories to sitcom. As Mills highlights, sitcoms have two audiences; "the one in the studio laughing 'live' and contributing to the laugh track, and the audience at home".[254] The audiences exist in different spaces and experience the show at different times, complicating the applicability of humour theories to television without concessions. Returning to public sphere theory, distance is created firstly because of the 'two audiences' (one live, one watching the television) and secondly because television does not create face-to-face, two-way interaction. Habermas' "distrust" of televisual representation, Dahlgren notes, stems from the fact that it is "mediated", which is an obstacle to "communicative authenticity".[255]

Because of this, the Bakhtinian model of public sphere might be more applicable, as described by Crossley and Roberts. The Bakhtinian Circle version of public sphere prioritises protecting "multiplicity", a synonym for pluralism, and rejecting "homogeneity".[256] This is in clear opposition to the Habermas model, which values the pooling of knowledge through debate to find a single overall answer. Peter Berger et al. suggest that declining church attendance and an increase in secularization in Europe is partially attributed to pluralism presented in the public

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[251] Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, pp. 27-29.
[252] Nick Crossley and John Michael Roberts, *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2004), p. 9.
[253] Dahlgren, *Television and the Public Sphere*, p. 16.
[254] Mills, *Television Sitcom*, p. 15.
[255] Dahlgren, *Television and the Public Sphere*, p. 16.
[256] Crossley and Roberts, *After Habermas*, p. 45.

sphere, in which denominations of Christianity are not the only, homogenous option for religious or non-religious belief.[257] Like the theory of market competition, Berger argues, religions would be most efficient in a monopoly, and the function of pluralism would be to introduce competing options for the religious consumer (an argument not dissimilar to the debates happening when ITV broke up the BBC's monopoly).[258] In fact, Berger identifies that the most significant vehicle for pluralism is "the modern media of mass communication".[259] Because of the decline in church attendance since the 1980s, the media gains a new significance as one of the few places in the public sphere where religious discussion can occur.[260] Therefore, mass media gains a greater importance in providing a space to discuss a plurality of religious ideas that can inform and challenge the dominance of a single idea.

Returning to the public sphere, the Bakhtinian model suggests that social discourse was to be found in the "low genres" of public life, which at the time indicated theatre but now is clearly attributable to television sitcom.[261] This defies the overwhelming assumption that only realist and non-fictional forms can contribute to the public sphere, and allows for forms that do not involve face-to-face interaction. Texts such as Dahlgren's *Television and the Public Sphere*[262] and John Corner's *Television Form and Public Address*,[263] for example, cite news and journalism as the primary suppliers of public sphere debate, and especially values realism as its key component. Despite this, Dahlgren writes "all media representation potentially can become an object of critical analysis", and by presenting social (and religious) representations, sitcoms are not only a viable but a desirable candidate for participation in the public sphere.[264] The Bakhtinian model demonstrates there are benefits to studying sitcom representation as part of public sphere engagement that other models do not.

What impact does this have on religion and public service broadcasting? As already outlined, Berger cites pluralism in the public sphere as one of the reasons for a

[257] Peter Berger et al., *Religious America, Secular Europe? A Theme and Variations* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), p. 16.
[258] Berger et al., *Religious America, Secular Europe?,* p. 16.
[259] Ibid., p. 13.
[260] Ibid., p. 13.
[261] Crossley and Roberts, *After Habermas*, p. 53.
[262] Dahlgren, *Television and the Public Sphere.*
[263] John Corner, *Television Form and Public Address* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995).
[264] Dahlgren, *Television and the Public Sphere,* p. 15.

decline in Christian church participation and self-identification.[265] However, by looking to other sources of representation and engagement within the public sphere – in this case, sitcoms – pluralism offers the opportunity for different spaces, voices, and forms for engagement. This is not only at the heart of public service broadcasting, which aims to present a plethora of programmes with something for 'everyone', but also evokes the public service broadcasting aim to offer different forms of representation. In the context of religion, this means providing some religious programming every year, ranging from religious documentaries to televised religious services. This does not include comedy programmes, instead (much like the focus of many texts on the public sphere) focusing on factual genres like news, current affairs, and documentaries.

In the past, public service broadcasters had more specific quotas to reach as to the amount of religious broadcasting it produced every year, but this has recently changed. In October 2021, Channel 4 claimed they were more concerned with appealing to "the tastes and interests of a culturally diverse society" than a religious programme quota, and now aim to "[weave] religious issues into a broad range of programming" instead of having a separate category for religion.[266] While this latter statement appears to match well with the religious sitcom – a programme involving religion instead of being specifically and solely 'religious programming' – the examples given in their report were news and current affairs.[267] Consequently, even if Channel 4 does not currently, there is room here for viewing sitcoms as religious engagement. Viewing religious representation in sitcom as a contribution to public service broadcasting is also of current interest to the BBC. In 2017, the BBC Religion and Ethics department conducted an in-depth review of the BBC religious programming output and stated that, alongside the traditional non-fiction programming already broadcast, the BBC needed to consider "the wider impact the BBC can have, e.g. with mainstream drama, soaps and comedy".[268] The term 'impact' is vague – it could mean representation, debate, increased awareness, or simply a high viewership, for example – but the fact that the BBC acknowledges

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[265] Berger et al., *Religious America, Secular Europe?,* p. 16.
[266] "Channel 4 – Supplementary written evidence (FCF0045), House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee inquiry into the future of Channel 4", *Committees.parliment.uk* (October 2021) <https://committees.parliment.uk/writtenevidence/39811/pdf/#:~:text=Channel%204's%20remit%20calls%20for,a%20single%20category%20of%20programmes> [accessed 29/03/2022], p. 3.
[267] Ibid, p. 3.
[268] "BBC Religion and Ethics Review December 2017", p. 8.

comedy as a form for having 'impact' shows that comedy is now viewed as more than "mere entertainment".[269] Therefore, as the Bakhtinian public sphere model suggests, these religious sitcoms could be a lucrative source of religious representation fulfilling the intention and remit of public service broadcasting to provide diverse programming.

To review, then, this chapter has identified a plethora of key areas that will influence the study of the religious sitcom case studies, including the three key humour theories, Superiority, Relief, and Incongruity, in various iterations; the humour vs. religion debate; the definition and history of the sitcom genre on British television; and the intersection of representation, the public sphere, and British public service broadcasting. The intersection of humour and religion and the definition and history of the sitcom genre will be of particular use in Chapters 2 to 5, which will textually analyse the four chosen case studies – *All in Good Faith, Father Ted*, *The Vicar of Dibley,* and *Rev.* While these research areas will also crop up in Chapter 6, the importance of representation and public service broadcasting will inform the discussion of televisual and religious socio-historical contexts in this chapter, combining the academic texts studied in this chapter and the textual analysis findings of Chapters 2 to 5 to advance a definition for the religious sitcom sub-genre.

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[269] Mills, "Comedy Verité", p. 78.

Chapter 2

All in Good Faith: Stardom, Sitcom, and the Comic Impetus

I don't know if it's an urge, the voice of God, or indigestion,

but I can't ignore it.

Philip Lambe, *All in Good Faith*[270]

In 1985, fresh off the success of the first series of *Ever Decreasing Circles* (BBC1, 1984-1989),[271] Richard Briers returned to ITV – the home of his very successful sitcom *The Good Life* – for his new sitcom *All in Good Faith.* Airing eighteen episodes between 1985 and 1988, *Good Faith* is about restless country Church of England vicar Philip Lambe (Briers) who decides to leave his comfortable Oxfordshire parish and take wife Emma (Barbara Ferris) and two teenage children Miranda (Lydia Smith) and Peter (James Campbell) to a challenging, new post in the Midlands called Edendale. Of the primary cast, it was Briers that was the draw; according to James Hogg, *Good Faith* was created as a "comedy vehicle" for Briers, drawing on the popularity of Brier's character Tom Good in *The Good Life.*[272] However, while Michael Coveney claims that *All in Good Faith* was one of Briers' "two hit series" in the 1980s – the other being *Ever Decreasing Circles* – the *Telegraph*'s obituary for Briers suggests that the series was a "disappointment" which received significantly lower audience numbers that his other sitcoms,[273] especially compared to the 17 million-strong audience *The Good Life* regularly received.[274] This may have led to the dramatic change in cast in 1988, when Emma was recast (Susan Jones) and the children dropped altogether, and the eventual cancellation after Series 3. The sitcom also has a noticeable lack of cultural afterlife – the sitcom is never repeated on television, only the first and second series are

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[270] 1.02 "No Stone Unturned", *All in Good Faith* (ITV, 6 January 1986).
[271] *Ever Decreasing Circles,* cr. John Esmonde and Bob Larbey (BBC1, 1984-1989).
[272] James Hogg, "Too smug, selfish and middle class: why Richard Briers hated himself in The Good Life." in *Mail on Sunday*, (23 September 2018).
[273] *Telegraph* Staff, "Richard Briers" in *The Telegraph* (18 Feb 2013) <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news-/obituaries/9877607/Richard-Briers.html> [accessed 07/05/2019].
[274] Hogg, "Too smug, selfish and middle class".

available on DVD, and the only clip of *All in Good Faith* currently uploaded to YouTube is from the guest actor who appeared in the clip, Tony Hawes.[275]

The combination of lack of popularity, cultural insignificance, and difficulty of access has meant *Good Faith* is virtually absent from academic study. Indeed, although none of the four case study religious sitcoms in this work have been extensively discussed, it is *Good Faith* that has received the least attention. Another likely reason the sitcom has not warranted academic discussion is because it is a traditional sitcom resembling many other, more popular sitcoms like Briers' other sitcom hits *The Good Life* and *Ever Decreasing Circles.* As Mills observes, the analysis of sitcoms has been largely restricted to series that have done something "'new' and 'different'", usually through technical or production changes (see Chapter 1).[276] 'New' and 'different' does not typically include those with high audience ratings or enduring popularity anyway, even if *Good Faith* had achieved these factors. Still, as a traditional sitcom with nothing unusual in terms of production, cast, or topic, *Good Faith* had all the academic odds stacked against it.

Despite this, there are many different areas of interest in *Good Faith* that make it an apt choice for the study of religious sitcoms. The most obvious reason is that *Good Faith* is a religious sitcom, with vicar Philip Lambe as the main character. In fact, *Good Faith* is the only religious sitcom of the 1980s (after the beginning of alternative comedy on television) and the only case study on ITV, a channel popular for its sitcoms during the 'Golden Age' of the 1970s.[277] *Good Faith* also bears a striking resemblance to other, later religious sitcoms like *The Vicar of Dibley* (see Chapter 3) and *Rev.* (see Chapter 5), through setting and narrative, so will be valuable in establishing religious sitcom historical development as well as a subgeneric definition. In addition, because of its origins as a comedy vehicle for Richard Briers – an actor renowned for his work in sitcoms – *Good Faith* is of academic interest as part of Briers' star persona, especially in comparison to shows such as *The Good Life*. This feeds into a wider narrative about the style of sitcom in the 1980s – a clash

[275] "Tony Howes in All in Good Faith", *Youtube.com* (published 22 Aug 2010) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7opYNKdj2EQ&t=2s> [accessed 14/05/2019].
[276] Mills, *The Sitcom*, p. 12.
[277] Philip Hancock, "Fear and (Self) Loathing in Coleridge Close: Management in Crisis in the 1970s Sitcom", *Organisation,* 15:5 (September 2008), p. 690.

between the traditional and more anarchic alternative offered by shows like *The Young Ones* (1982-1984).[278]

As mentioned previously, Hogg describes *Good Faith* as a "comedy vehicle" for Briers, drawing on the popularity of Brier's character Tom Good in *The Good Life*.[279] In fact, according to Bonner and Jacobs, *The Good Life* was *also* a comedy vehicle designed for Briers, who already had an established dramatic and comedic theatre career during the 1970s.[280] There are a few rather blatant connections between *Good Faith* beyond a similarity in title and point of origin. One of these connections is that *The Good Life* and *All in Good Faith* have very similar premises. In *The Good Life* Tom Good, a middle-aged, middle-class suburban husband, becomes bored and frustrated with his office job and decides to uproot his life by quitting his job and 'living off the land'.[281] In *All in Good Faith*, Philip Lambe, a middle-aged, middle-class husband and father living in a country village, becomes bored and frustrated with his unchallenging work as a country vicar and decides to uproot his life by moving to a new parish. Both are rooted in a form of 'mid-life crisis'[282] and seek to make significant changes to improve their lives.[283] Further, Hogg states that Briers served as "the model" for his character Tom Good in *The Good Life,* suggesting Briers' similarity to Good (and Good's subsequent similarity to Lambe) mean Briers had already established a common character star persona before the start of *Good Faith*.[284] Thus, *Good Faith* could draw upon the popularity of *Good Life* to draw in audiences familiar with Briers, who can expect him to embody a certain type of character in a different situation.

The term 'comedy vehicle', referring to the concept that a comedy programme is based on a particular actor or star persona, is comparable to the term 'comedian comedy' coined by Steve Seidman.[285] 'Comedian comedy' is distinct from other star-led media because it is designed to exploit "the skills and abilities of the comedian" resulting in the creation of notably similar characters for the comic star across

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[278] *The Young Ones,* cr. Ben Elton, Rik Mayall, and Lise Mayer (BBC2, 1982-1984).
[279] Hogg, "Too smug, selfish and middle class".
[280] Frances Bonner and Jason Jacobs, "The persistence of television: The case of *The Good Life*", *Critical Studies in Television,* 12:1 (2017), p. 9.
[281] 1.01 "Plough Your Own Furrow", *The Good Life* (BBC1, 4 April 1975).
[282] See later in the chapter.
[283] 1.01 "In the Beginning", *All in Good Faith* (ITV, 30 December 1985).
[284] Hogg, "Too smug, selfish and middle class".
[285] Steve Seidman, *Comedian Comedy: A Tradition in Hollywood Film* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UM Research Press, 1981).

multiple comedy performances.[286] Seidman argues that audiences can be expected to "carry over" support for a comedian from one product to another, potentially guaranteeing a large audience, and comedians "reward" this support by "[maintaining] aspects of performance which had made them popular".[287] Mills has identified that although the term 'comedian comedy' originally applied to Hollywood comedy films constructed for a well-known comedic star, it can equally be applied to television comedies and sitcoms designed for a specific sitcom star.[288] *Good Faith* certainly fits this description of a comedian comedy, since *Good Faith* was not only described as a bespoke comedy vehicle for Briers but also because his *Good Faith* character was almost identical to his character in the *Good Life*. The comedian comedy also connects to Mills' cue theory (see Chapter 1), which argues that the sitcom is defined not only be its intention to be funny but also how it *signals* this intention, through either pre-existing relationships (comic personas, catchphrases) or easily identifiable, genre-specific cues (laugh track, shooting style).[289] The former, 'category-routinising jokes' in particular are relevant to the importance of Briers' comic performance. Mills writes that stars can bring their 'comic heritage' to a sitcom, therefore utilising a pre-established comic relationship between the star/joke-teller and the audience.[290] The clear advantage for *Good Faith* here is that, since audiences have seen and enjoyed Briers in one sitcom, they can expect to be just as entertained in another. Determining why *Good Life* was successful while *Good Faith* struggled is not the aim of this discussion, especially as it could be due to a myriad of factors including script, casting, the decade in which it was broadcast, or its difference in situation and subject matter. However, what this *does* demonstrate is the extent to which *Good Faith* was inherently tied to its main star, both as a platform for Briers' talents and as a draw for the audience.

Good Faith's similarity to *Good Life* and other 1970s sitcoms – in format, style of comedy, and theme as well as choice of star – make *Good Faith* simultaneously typical and atypical of television comedy during the 1980s. 1980s comedy is frequently associated with 'alternative comedy', a much-contested term for the so-

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[286] Ibid., p. 134.
[287] Seidman, *Comedian Comedy,* p. 3.
[288] Brett Mills, "Chapter 7: Contemporary Comedy Performance in British sitcom" in Christine Cornea, *Genre and Performance: Film and Television* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 134.
[289] Mills, *The Sitcom,* pp. 95-6.
[290] Mills, *The Sitcom*, p. 95.

called 'alternative' to the 1980s comedy norm that fought against the "bawdy, sexist, racist or, in some cases, quite bland" comedy found both on television and in the stand-up circuit.[291] The focus in this case is more on the 'bland' than the 'sexist/racist' because of the way in which these 1970s sitcoms looked very similar, starred the same actors, and told the same types of jokes/comic situations. Of these, it has already been shown that *Good Faith* and *Good Life* have the same star and a very similar premise. The 'alternative' to these purposefully fought against these stereotypes by drawing on fantasy, surrealism, exaggerated violence, political correctness, and variety-style musical interludes in a way previously unseen in the sitcom genre. Many of the famous alternative comedians of the 1980s such as Alexei Sayle, Rik Mayall, Dawn French (star of *The Vicar of Dibley*), and Jennifer Saunders later found fame on TV sitcoms, both in the 1980s and in the decades after.[292] However, while these alternative comedy sitcoms and sitcom stars are often better remembered (academically and culturally), MacDonald and Hunt observe that the vast majority of the sitcoms produced during the 1980s still fitted that "bland" comedy image from pre-alternative.[293] This is a logical move commercially because of the success of sitcom in the 1970s, and the 1970s has since been considered the "high water mark" of British sitcom[294] (though such statements have equally been applied to the 'Golden Age' of the 1990s by Ben Thompson and the new 'quality' sitcoms of the 2000s).[295] Therefore, although *Good Faith* did not fit into this alternative scene, it is more representative of the typical sitcom of this era.

One of these few alternative sitcoms that differed from *Good Faith* is *The Young Ones*, especially notable in this context for mocking *The Good Life.* In the opening of "Sick" the title sequence of *The Good Life* begins to play, but is quickly interrupted by Vyvyan (Ade Edmondson) smashing violently through the digital title. In a highly articulate outburst, he yells:

> I hate it! It's so bloody NICE![296] […] They're nothing but a
> couple of reactionary stereotypes confirming the myth that

[291] MacDonald, *That's Anarchy!* p. 11.
[292] For example, see *The Young Ones* and *Girls on Top,* cr. Dawn French, Jennifer Saunders, and Ruby Wax (ITV, 1985-1988).
[293] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy.*
[294] Hancock, "Fear and (Self) Loathing in Coleridge Close", p. 690.
[295] Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty.*
[296] Capitalisation here reflects moments where Vyvyan raises his voice louder than in other parts of the quote.

> everybody in Britain is a loveable, middle-class eccentric! And
> I HATE THEM.
>
> 2.05 "Sick"[297]

While it is not possible to conclude Vyvyan's opinion was shared by the larger public just from this quote, and *The Good Life* was certainly very popular at the time of its broadcast (with viewership peaking at 14 million),[298] this scene demonstrates the contempt and conscious aim by alternative comedy sitcoms to be different from the type of comedy *The Good Life* (and *Good Faith*) represented – the suburban, middle-class, eccentric, and above all 'nice' image of British life that differed greatly from the image of Britain *The Young Ones* portrayed of a struggling, Thatcherite country leaving young people behind.

These points demonstrate a particular style and intention for the 1980s non-alternative sitcom like *Good Faith*, but what particulars does *Good Faith* meet that make it a sitcom in the first place?[299] At a basic production level, *Good Faith* has 24-minute episodes allowing for up to 6 minutes for adverts (as it originally aired on ITV) and have 6 episodes in each series.[300] *Good Faith* has a live audience (and laugh track) positioned as the 'fourth wall' and is filmed with a theatrical, multi-camera setup.[301] Third, the episodes have a self-enclosed narrative arc, or 'problem of the week' with narrative resolution at the end of each episode, which is even more prominent during series 2 and 3 after the longer series arc of moving to another city is resolved.[302] Fourth, the series is primarily shot in one setting (the Oxfordshire or Edendale vicarage, with brief sojourns out of the house) with the same few recurring characters.[303] Finally and most significantly, the show has a clear comic impetus – an association with the comical and a desire to be humorous (see Chapter 1) **and signalled through cue theory**.[304] This is not only through an emphasis on jokes, witticisms, slapstick and visual humour, but also reinforced by the show's laugh track.[305]

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[297] 2.05 "Sick", *The Young Ones* (BBC2, 12 June 1984).

[298] Bonner and Jacobs, "The persistence of television: The case of *The Good Life*", p. 9.

[299] See Chapter 1 for a discussion of sitcom definition, characteristics, and history.

[300] Wagg, *Because I Tell a Joke or Two*, p. 3.

[301] Mills, *Television Sitcom*, p. 31.

[302] O'Donnell, *Television Criticism*, p. 100.

[303] Ibid., p. 100.

[304] Mills, *The Sitcom*, pp. 5, 95.

[305] Ibid., p. 76.

As a sitcom with a clear comic impetus,[306] comedy and the types of humour *Good Faith* uses are especially important to understand its meaning and intentions. In the context of understanding intentions though, it is less useful to judge whether or not the joke *is* funny, and more beneficial to investigate whether or not the joke is *intended* to be funny, indicated through cues like the laugh track, performance, and camera shots.[307] As Mills' cue theory states, the intention to be funny does not have to result in generated humour (termed "comic failure") as long as it can still be "read as comedic" through the sitcom genre's comedic cues.[308] Much of the humour in *Good Faith* emerges from dialogue involving Briers' character Philip, who not only makes humorous comments but also is often on the receiving end of disparaging jokes from friends and family. As might be expected of a comedy vehicle for Briers, most of the jokes revolve Briers as Philip. This is taken to a more extreme level in *Good Faith* than other comparable sitcoms because Philip is in every scene. Many of these take the form of incongruous quips, while many others are light-hearted (or heavy-handed) insults. In other words, many of the jokes are at the *expense* of either Philip or his family and friends.

Some typical examples of this type of humour are in the first episode, "In the Beginning".[309] In the episode, Philip struggles to choose between staying in his humdrum, unchallenging parish (where his family are settled) and a new, more stimulating urban parish. Many of the jokes directed *at* Philip in this episode, such as those from his family, are disparaging. For example, daughter Miranda and wife Emma joke that Philip wants to move to Edendale because he is going through "male menopause", receiving appreciative laughter from the studio audience (an example of cue theory's 'setting-specific' metacues),[310] and later Emma teases Philip about his inability at golf and says bad golf players "have the good sense not to play". Philip, unable to think of a good retort, simply replies "... Shut up."[311] In this instance in particular, coming as it does immediately after the discussion of male menopause, this inadequate response further serves to emasculate Philip as unintelligent and childish. As such, humour in this example is used to mock Philip

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[306] The comic impetus is so clear that *Good Faith* does not include dramatic scenes like those found in *The Vicar of Dibley* and *Rev.* – see Chapters 3 and 5.
[307] Mills, *Television Sitcom,* p. 14.
[308] Ibid., p. 94.
[309] 1.01 "In the Beginning".
[310] Mills, *The Sitcom,* p. 95.
[311] 1.01 "In the Beginning".

for his perceived inadequacies. This is not to say that Philip does not engage in this behaviour too – later in the episode, after Philip regains his 'fire' and enthusiasm for his job as a vicar, he tells overbearing parishioner the Major to 'shove off' and adds "If I knew what was good for me, I would have told you to shove off ages ago", again accompanied by laughter from the audience.[312] Until this point the Major has had a modicum of power over Philip because of his military bearing and superior knowledge of church affairs, and this joke serves to deflate Major's superiority and empower Philip after his earlier emasculating feelings of inadequacy and stagnation. Indeed, earlier in the episode Major had warned Philip "don't mention God" if Philip wants people to like him, demonstrating a contempt for Philip's manner and professional ability. This is also the first example so far of religious and humour intersection, with the suggestion here being discussing God is boring and will result in dislike from others. As a result, the later insult from Philip was a method of retaliation and power-balancing after the earlier slight.

This type of humour – where one person mocks another – could be viewed as an example of humour from Superiority Theory as the joker (usually Emma or Philip) is laughing *at* a person, the butt of the joke.[313] Both of the earlier examples demonstrate power imbalances or changes, caused by the joke teller and at the expense of the joke's target. However, to claim that these power imbalances put the joke's target at a disadvantage is dependent on the target. Philip, as the self-appointed patriarch and breadwinner for the family, does not fall into this category, nor does this small challenge shift this position as a result. This is further complicated by the presence of the live audience and the audience watching at home. At least one of these groups is laughing at Emma and Philip's jokes as they are heard via the laugh track. Does the power lie in this case with the audience in the studio, the audience at home, the characters, or elsewhere?[314] Superiority Theory struggles to account for multiple positions of power, especially when the audience could be laughing *with* the joke teller (reinforcing their power) at the butt of the joke or laughing *at* the joke teller (diminishing their power). Therefore, while

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[312] 1.01 "In the Beginning".
[313] See Chapter 1 and Plato, *The Republic*, p. 550.
[314] Mills, *The Sitcom,* pp. 79-81.

the simple exchange between Emma and Philip might appear a clear case of Superiority Theory, the question of power complicates a straight application.

Instead, these disparaging jokes could be an example of Incongruity Theory, if the 'incongruity' in question is social conventions.[315] This is especially apparent in the second example, where Philip snaps at the Major. Rather than viewing the power imbalance as emerging from the desire to be superior over another, in this example Philip's behaviour is incongruous with socially-expected politeness (especially a vicar) as well as his behaviour in earlier scenes. As such, the humour emerges from a comparison between his expected polite behaviour and his unexpected rudeness diegetically justified by the Major's interference. In this situation, the theory is not complicated by the presence of the audience, who are mere observers of the incongruity rather than complicit in power dynamic fluctuations. In contrast to the power of the laugher to be 'superior' in Superiority Theory, in Incongruity the laugher is afforded no particular dominance. Still, this advantage is also its disadvantage. This interpretation does not account for the differences in power, especially as Philip's joke seems to place him above the Major, who has been insulted. Consequently, the most complete reading is a combination of the two, acknowledging the source of the joke as a mix of power shifts and incongruous behaviour that places Philip above the Major and alongside the laughing studio audience.

The visual gags in *Good Faith* are more infrequent than the disparaging dialogic humour, but most episodes include at least one or two, and they are a more clear-cut example of Incongruity Theory. Returning to "In the Beginning",[316] there are two pertinent instances of visual comedy. The first is on the golf course, when Philip tries to 'botch' a shot to allow the potential financial investor Sir Monty to win, only for it to bounce off a few trees and fall straight into the hole. The second is in church when Philip 'loses' his sermon notes (they are taken by Emma to encourage improvisation) and tries to look for them without revealing to the congregation they are missing. The incongruity from these visual gags emerges from either an unlikely event – the golf ball falling in the hole – or unusual behaviour – Philip searching for his notes. In the latter case, incongruity comes from the scenario where a vicar, who

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[315] See Chapter 1 for a discussion of Incongruity Theory and (among others) Oring, *Engaging Humor*, p. 12.
[316] 1.01 "In the Beginning".

should be behaving professionally while performing a service, is scrambling to find his notes. This is also another example of religious and humour intersection because the visual gag is taking place in a religious setting from a religious person. In other words, the joke is not based on religious content, but *is* based in a religious context. Other visual gags, such as slapstick comedy during a funeral ("The Prodigal Son")[317] or a baptism ("Where my Caravan has Rested")[318] similarly utilise a religious setting for incongruous visual comedy. In terms of humour theories, these types of comic situations have no laugher in a position of power as in Superiority Theory – with the possible exception of the audience – and while Relief Theory might explain why it is physically beneficial to laugh at Philip it does little to explain why it is comical.[319] Thus, these infrequent visual gags are good examples of incongruous humour, and examples of potential humour and religious intersection.

On the topic of religious intersection, it has been long debated whether religion and humour can co-exist, and if so whether it can be beneficial to both (see Chapter 1). To summarise, John Morreall writes that "the anti-comic feature widespread in religions is their essential seriousness", arguing that religious is too serious a subject to exist with – and benefit from – a relationship with comedy.[320] Likewise, Donald Capp has suggested that, although there is not "an explicit anti-humour bias" in Christianity, the "traits of religion" such as seriousness and piousness "would almost certainly be negatively associated with, and even negatively affect, sense of humour".[321] This statement not only implies that religion would not want to be associated with humour, but that religious belief might be *detrimental* to their sense of humour. Conversely, writers in favour of humour and religious interplay argue that humour exposes the truth and contradiction in religion; Conrad Hyers suggests that without the 'comic', the 'sacred' is "easily twisted into a perverse self-caricature",[322] and Ignacio Götz adds that "the paradox of faith is preserved in the paradox of humour, the contradiction of faith in the contradiction of the joke".[323] From this perspective, humour is compatible with religion because of their mutual engagement with 'the paradox', or the inherent contradictions in humour and religion, and religion

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[317] 3.03 "The Prodigal Son", *All in Good Faith* (ITV, 25 April 1988).
[318] 3.01 "Where My Caravan has Rested", *All in Good Faith* (ITV, 11 April 1988).
[319] Freud, *The Joke.*
[320] Morreall, *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion*, p. 46.
[321] Capps, "Religion and Humour: Estranged Bedfellows", p. 419.
[322] Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy*, p. 72.
[323] Götz, *Faith, Humor, and Paradox*, pp. 105-106.

is actually aided by humour since it helps the 'sacred' remain grounded. Regardless of the religion and humour debate, the presence of religious sitcoms on television implies some intersection.

So far, *Good Faith* has demonstrated one particular method of intersection in multiple scenarios, which is jokes in a religious *context.* This includes, for example, jokes told by a religious person, such as vicar Philip, in a religious setting, like a church, or during a religious act, such as a prayer or church service. However, there is another example of religious intersection; the Major's aforementioned insult to Philip that he shouldn't "mention God"[324] has both religious *context* (about a vicar) and religious *content* as well (about God and discussing Christianity). This joke could even be an example of a third type of intersection – a joke at the *expense* of religion – but the extent to which this joke is at the expense of religion is unclear, especially as the primary purpose of the joke is to mock Philip. Theoretically, there could be a fourth type of religious intersection into which this joke does not fall, namely whether the joke was at the expense of *humour.* This type of joke would be told for religious rather than comedic purposes and might happen if, as Capps suggests, religion "negatively [affects] sense of humour".[325] Therefore, while the religious joke might intend to be funny, it misses the mark. Still, this is such a highly subjective judgement that it would be difficult to conclusively decide if a religious joke fell into this category, and additionally would defy both the sitcom's comic impetus and the intention for a joke to have "a comic effect".[326] Consequently, the type of intersections already seen have fallen into the first and second categories, though the possibility for the third and fourth categories remains.

Moving on to religion and religious representation, Philip's relationship with religion can be split into the two different categories: 1. beliefs, meaning Philip's religious and moral stances; and 2. practices, referring to the physical actions Philip takes to do with religion, such as prayers, sermons, and church services. Since Philip is a Church of England vicar, it might be expected that through his professional and personal life Philip engages with religion on a regular basis. To some extent this is the case. Philip occasionally prays to God, alone or with others. He occasionally

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[324] 1.01 "In the Beginning".
[325] Capps, "Religion and Humour: Estranged Bedfellows", p. 419.
[326] Mills, *Television Sitcom,* pp. 14-15.

visits different churches to deliver sermons and religious services such as weddings, funerals, and christenings. Throughout *Good Faith* Philip provides plenty of community support to his parishioners and friends, which forms the majority of the narrative. However, while the inclusion of these elements demonstrates its connection to religious content and contexts, there is a lack of frequency and variety within these activities. In other words, even if these elements are present, they are not often, different, or multi-purpose. One religious activity that illustrates this point is the discussion of religion, in the 'religious beliefs' category. In *Good Faith*, such discussion is not commonplace. The need to advocate for Christianity in Philip's community is quite low, since the vast majority of people he encounters are his Christian parishioners or Christian family members, especially in his original Christian-dominated Oxfordshire country village. Even when Philip is asked as the local vicar to weigh in on important issues they are rarely to do with religious matters, and are normally local disputes between couples, family members, or neighbours.[327] Therefore, despite his personal and professional interest in religion, Philip does not often discuss the nuances of his religious beliefs with friends, family, or strangers.

Philip may not discuss his religious beliefs frequently in *Good Faith* because of this assumed universality of Christianity in Philip's world. Philip does not even seem to socialise outside of his specific denomination of Christianity, and Philip is not tasked with converting anyone in *Good Faith* or debating the details of Christian faith. Also, throughout *Good Faith* Philip only interacts with a couple of other vicars or vergers (one of which is his father) meaning *Good Faith* does not have a support system of colleagues with whom to discuss religion.[328] Finally, *Good Faith* may not be interested in 'religion' as more than a situation to set the more important domestic sitcom hijinks. In this scenario, the discussion of religion is unnecessary because it is simply a backdrop for Philip's different humorous situations. This is also linked to *Good Faith*'s comedy vehicle status; the 'religious sitcom' sub-genre here functions as a convenient form to import many of the characteristics that made Briers' other sitcoms such as *Good Life* popular, just changing the context from 'living off the land' to 'life as a vicar'.[329] A good example of this is the episode titles, which all

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[327] A good example of this is in 2.04 "Babes and Sucklings", *All in Good Faith* (ITV, 19 March 1987) when Philip is asked to mediate between a father and his estranged daughter.
[328] A support system of vicars and priests is found most notably in *Father Ted*, but also to a much lesser extent in *Rev.*
[329] Hogg, "Too smug, selfish and middle class".

contain quotes from the Bible. These quotes are drawn from a religious source, but only seem to reference the content of the episode rather than the meaning of the religious passage from which it is drawn. "In the Beginning", for example, is titled as such because it is the first episode and holds no meanings about the creation of the world.[330] While this does not mean that using religion in this manner is not significant in itself, it does suggest that, to the show, religion is not a huge theme that they constantly address.

Treating religion and priesthood as a contextual theme rather than interrogating religious doctrine is also tied to the sitcom genre aesthetic, especially when considered alongside *Good Faith*'s historical context as a non-alternative 1980s sitcom. First, there is the notion of the sitcom being "unworthy as a serious intellectual pursuit" as suggested by Morreale, therefore implying that the sitcom is not worth serious thought and does not *contain* serious thought.[331] Instead, sitcom is viewed as "escapist fare" focused entirely on "[provoking] laughter" instead of interrogation.[332] Indeed, Mills adds that seriousness in sitcom is only ever a "matter of degree" anyway; some sitcoms may be more serious and address serious topics, but this does not mean a sitcom is ever 'serious'.[333] In the case of *Good Faith*, this certainly seems applicable, as it never addresses serious religion discussion. Second, sitcoms are conceived as a comfortable, familial space that always ends with domestic harmony.[334] Arguments may happen (and often do) in the sitcom domestic setting, but by the end everything must be resolved, which is more difficult if the characters are trying to solve anything religious. As a result, to create the suburban, middle-class, 'nice' atmosphere found in the non-alternative 1970s and 1980s sitcoms such as *The Good Life, Good Faith* benefits from not confronting divisive and complicated issues of religious doctrine. A sudden shift into a deep religious discussion after a slapstick funeral would be a stark change in tone from the otherwise cosy domestic sitcom atmosphere.[335] This is not to say that sitcom cannot be a site for serious religious interrogation, as Chapters 3 and 5 with *Vicar of Dibley* and *Rev.* demonstrate – instead, this suggests that the desire to create a

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[330] 1.01 "In the Beginning".
[331] Morreale, *Critiquing the Sitcom*, p. 63.
[332] O'Donnell, *Television Criticism*, p. 100.
[333] Mills, *Television Sitcom*, p. 19.
[334] O'Donnell, *Television Criticism,* p. 100.
[335] See 2.02 "Manna from Heaven", *All in Good Faith* (ITV, 5 March 1987).

comfortable, cosy environment was a conscious decision that steered *Good Faith* away from possible subjects of contention found in religion to maintain the façade of amicability.

Religious practices in *Good Faith* are similarly absent as religious discussion for the same reasons of 'religion as context', sitcom domesticity, and prioritisation of comic impetus. Practices including prayer, sermons, and church services are all present in *Good Faith,* but very infrequently, in opposition to claims within the show of their importance. Prayer is represented as one of the defining actions of a vicar, not only for professional or personal practice but as a means of identifying a vicar *as* a vicar. In "A Flying Visit" Philip is asked by police officers to recite the Lord's Prayer to prove he is a vicar,[336] while in "Exodus" Philip is asked by the movers to pray with them, not because they want it – one of the movers describes himself as "not really a Christian" – but because they expected Philip to want it.[337] Despite these assertions, Philip's prayers in *Good Faith* are sporadic. The few prayers Philip makes are usually relatively short statements of one or two sentences, and normally do not follow an ascribed religious pattern. They do vary in location, ranging from the vicarage to the local golf course, and they differ in terms of audience, as Philip prays while alone but also in group settings, such as in religious services. However, the most important aspect of Philip's prayers is their singular purpose; an opportunity for jokes and humorous responses. In this sense, prayers become a (and *only* a) site for religious and humorous intersection, an opportunity to combine the religious act of prayer with the chance for comedy. This does not automatically result in comedy *about* prayer, belief, or any aspect of religion because speaking to God is solely another method of conveying Philip's thoughts and feelings to the audience, making humorous remarks about the situation at hand.

One illustrative prayer is in the early episode "An Eye for an Eye", where the short aside to God is used as a comedic punchline or reaction.[338] Philip's son Peter tells Philip that he has written the script for the school play and called it "Joseph and his Amazing Technicolour Brassiere". Philip, exasperated, looks skyward when Peter has left the room and says aloud "He doesn't get it from me, Lord". This interaction

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[336] 1.03 "A Flying Visit", *All in Good Faith* (ITV, 13 January 1986).
[337] 1.06 "Exodus", *All in Good Faith* (ITV, 3 February 1986).
[338] 1.05 "An Eye for an Eye", *All in Good Faith* (ITV, 27 January 1986).

is demonstrative of Incongruity Theory, as it is unexpected; rather than punishing his son, for example, Philip simply claims no responsibility for his actions.[339] The purpose of the joke is clearly not to make other characters laugh, as Philip is alone. Therefore, the prayer joke acts as an indication of Philip's informality and familiarity with God, with whom he can share inside jokes. As such, there is a second layer of Incongruity here between the expected formality between a vicar and God and the reality of Philip's reaction. However, the presence studio audience means Philip's prayer is not conducted entirely 'alone'. While diegetically Philip does not *know* the audience is watching, the practical broadcasting purpose of voicing these prayers aloud rather than silently thinking the prayer is to bring the audience in on Philip's thoughts and jokes.[340] Even though Philip is alone, the intention of this prayer is not just for the 'Lord' but also for the studio audience, who laugh at Philip's words. As well as showing a modicum of Philip's personality and relationship with God, this prayer is an opportunity for audiences to hear Philip's dry humour. The majority of prayers in *Good Faith* follow this format, though there are a few prayers in *Good Faith* that break from this pattern. When Philip prays to God after playing golf with Major and the potential church investor in "In the Beginning",[341] exasperated with the duties he is expected to perform (specifically losing a round of golf) just to pay for a new church roof, Philip looks skywards and says "God, is this the best I can do for You?".[342] Despite the fact that the line is accompanied by a small laugh from the audience, the purpose of the prayer is to underline the overarching narrative theme of the series – Philip's desire for professional challenges, whether this is to serve God or his own needs. Still, even this prayer is short and an opportunity to hear Philip's thoughts on a narrative subject, much like the first prayer; neither of these prayers asks for anything to *change.* One of the most significant purposes prayer might serve for Philip – asking for help – never happens in *Good Faith*,[343] and because Philip never asks for help in his prayers they remain 'unanswered' by God, who does not appear in voice or in person.[344] As such, although prayer is presented

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[339] See Chapter 1 and (among others) Oring, *Engaging Humor*, p. 12.
[340] As will be shown in Chapter 5 and *Rev.,* there are some technological methods that would enable silent prayer to still be heard by the audience.
[341] 1.01 "In the Beginning".
[342] 1.01 "In the Beginning".
[343] Prayers in all three of the other case studies occasionally ask for divine help with a problem. See Chapters 3, 4, and 5.
[344] As will be discussed in *Rev,* God could appear in the show in some form if that was what the show intended.

as an integral part of a vicar's work, Philip rarely prays in *Good Faith* and when he does it is often simply another vehicle for delivering jokes to the audience.

Finally, the purpose of the prayer as an opportunity for humour does not mean these prayers mock religion, the act of prayer, or belief, the third category of potential humour/religion intersection previously outlined. Instead, the humour comes from much the same places as other forms of humour in the show, namely superiority over other characters and incongruity through wordplay and behaviour. The closest *Good Faith* comes to mocking the act of prayer is in "A Flying Visit" when Philip complains about his recent back injury and Emma remarks irately "Do you think a prayer might help?".[345] Nevertheless, even this example finds humour in the purpose and effectiveness of prayer to heal sudden physical injuries rather than prayer itself.[346] As such, the fear that the combination of humour and religion will come at the cost of religion in this sitcom is unfounded.

Other religious practices Philip performs – sermons and church services – are also presented in *Good Faith* as an integral part of the vicar's role. In "In the Beginning" Philip's worries about his lack of professional enthusiasm partly stem from his inability to write and perform engaging sermons anymore,[347] and in "A Flying Visit" Philip is asked to give a sermon to test whether he would be a good fit for Edendale.[348] On the whole, Philip's sermons are usually well-received by parishioners, such as his first sermon in Edendale that received universal praise from the three parishioners who greet him afterwards. However, like prayer, Philip's sermons and services are not frequently shown. "In the Beginning" features the only two sermons of the whole series, one in a primary school (and therefore could more accurately be called a 'speech', if not for the episodic comparison between it and the later sermon) and one in church.[349] These two sermons again serve to underline the narrative arc of the series, Philip's feelings of stagnancy and boredom in his work as a country vicar, contrasted with the exciting possibilities of a change of location. Philip's first sermon, a dry and lifeless recitation of the importance of school to a group of bored schoolchildren, is badly received. Philip claims this is because

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[345] 1.03 "A Flying Visit".
[346] A similar joke is performed in the *Father Ted* episode 3.03 "Speed 3" (C4, 27 March 1998) though the difference in situation and execution illustrate the shows' disparate approaches to religious representation; see Chapter 4.
[347] 1.01 "In the Beginning".
[348] 1.03 "A Flying Visit".
[349] 1.01 "In the Beginning".

the school is "catering for a handful of isolated, middle class children being made even more isolated and middle class", a microcosm for the entire community and his disdain for it.

Philip's second sermon during a later church service is improvised because his sermon was taken secretly by Emma, who tells him to say "what's in [his] heart and mind". This sermon addresses his lack of purpose and enthusiasm, comparing his passion to a flame that "[doesn't] burn much anymore". The sermon itself resembles a monologue or even direct address, giving Philip the space to express his thoughts uninterrupted from the 'stage' of the pulpit.[350] While the sermon is largely humourless (emphasised by silence from the studio audience) the religious act of giving a sermon provides an opportunity to explore the narrative arc and character development of Philip. It is difficult, however, to establish this as a pattern throughout the series because "In the Beginning" is the only *Good Faith* episode to feature sermons on-screen.[351] The fact that there are so few examples of sermons in the sitcom, let along sermons that actually discuss religion, further demonstrates the purpose of the sermons, again like prayer, is for humour and the narrative rather than to frequently intersect with religion.

With a lack of sermons already established, it is unsurprising to find that Philip does not often perform any kind of religious or church service on-screen either. Philip only enters a church four times during the series, and instead the vast majority of the show is inside the vicarage or at a parishioner's home. The two services Philip performs on-screen are a funeral in "Manna From Heaven" [352]– where, due to a faulty foot press, Philip accidentally makes the coffin comically rise and fall multiple times before it finally disappears from view – and a christening in "Where my Caravan has Rested" – where Philip has to baptise 13 children at once and mixes up their names.[353] As these descriptions attest, both of these religious services rely on slapstick humour to make the situation comical. Other than these few examples, though, Philip does not perform any other services. The purpose of including services in *Good Faith* provides another opportunity for, often slapstick, humour. In

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[350] For a discussion of monologue and direct address see Chapter 5, and also David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Penguin Books, 1992).
[351] There are other examples where Philip gives sermons, but they are entirely off-screen.
[352] 2.02 "Manna from Heaven".
[353] 3.01 "Where My Caravan has Rested".

these examples, the dialogue in the service does not deviate from a traditional service and (especially when considering the lack of laughter from the laugh track) is not humorous. Instead, the humour emerges from the actions taking place during the service, such as the rising and falling coffin and the number of children waiting to be baptised.

The intersection of religion and humour in these services is complicated by a consideration of how the comic scenes can be interpreted with different humour theories. On the one hand, the humour in the funeral example in "Manna from Heaven"[354] emerges from an object not behaving as expected – in other words, incongruity. This incongruous humour can be considered humorous without any prior knowledge of religion or funerals. On the other hand, the knowledge that a funeral is a religious service and a sombre affair means Philip's behaviour is also incongruous during such a serious occasion. This second reading aligns with Freud's Relief Theory as well, as the 'taboo' subject of death and grief is relieved by the humour from the misbehaving coffin.[355] As discussed in Chapter 1, both the relief and incongruity readings could be detrimental to the seriousness of the religious event (though this assumes that the event *should* be serious) because the focus is entirely on the humorous lift malfunction, even if the scenes themselves are not critical of religion or the religious services.[356] This argument loses weight when the scene is viewed in situ, as the funeral itself is not sombre for Philip or the audience; can the audience be released from difficult feelings of grief if these have not been encouraged before the funeral?[357] Instead, this scene again demonstrates *Good Faith*'s devotion to the comic impetus within a religious context, as even in a potentially 'serious' or dramatic scene *Good Faith* still prioritises humour.

After concluding from this discussion of Philip's religious practices that the importance of prayers and services, like other parts of the show, is to provide another opportunity for the comic, it is important to emphasise that this is not a 'negative' reading of humour nor an attempt to reduce the importance of humour in sitcom. If the purpose of sitcom is its comic impetus, then *Good Faith* is certainly trying to fulfil this purpose by providing so many opportunities for humour. However,

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[354] 3.03 "The Prodigal Son".
[355] Freud, *The Joke,* p. 116.
[356] See Chapter 1 for a discussion of the intersection of humour and religion.
[357] An important contextual point for this scene is that the funeral is for a character who has not appeared on screen and is not well-known by Philip, and therefore the emphasis is on the act of the funeral rather than the death of a character.

this does demonstrate that these situations need to be viewed in light of its purely humorous purpose rather than as a serious depiction of religion. While it is clear there are intersections between humour and religion happening, the vast majority fall under the banner of intersection through *religious context.*

Since Philip does not often perform services, pray, or give sermons, perhaps the most common and significant example of Philip's work as a vicar is when Philip provides guidance and counselling to parishioners, usually in one-on-one sessions in his study or another domestic setting. Philip interacts with his parishioners and the community in almost every episode, ranging from marriage advice to a groom-to-be ("The Prodigal Son")[358] to counselling a gambling addict in a betting shop ("Behold a Pale Rider").[359] In these sessions, his advice is usually a combination of religious teachings (as he interprets them) and personal experience, but these scenes still aim to be funny; the advice Philip gives is often misunderstood or twisted by the advisee, whose ignorance is laughed at by the studio audience. Occasionally it is Philip who is the butt of the joke, either because his advice is entirely impractical – often the case when there is a class difference between Philip and the parishioner – or Philip is embarrassed by the sensitive nature of the topic in question, such as discussing the wedding night with a groom-to-be in "The Prodigal Son".[360] While other characters may be expected to perform similar duties, since meetings between friends or family discussions are hardly unusual in sitcom, Philip as a vicar has unique pressures upon his actions; the necessity to represent not only himself and his family, but also the church and his community. As such, any public (and, because of Philip's morality, private) actions must be considered in relation to his profession. This is such an important role for a vicar that it forms the crux of the narrative arc in series 1; a generic desire to help a different community was ostensibly one of Philip's reasons for seeking a move to Edendale in the first place. For this purpose, it is valuable to distinguish not only between public and private, but also between different types of public interaction. One type of public interaction is literally 'in public' with parishioners or strangers. The other is in a more relaxed and domestic setting with friends or family members, but still not alone, termed 'relational'. Since Philip is expected to uphold high standards at all times this distinction between being around

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[358] 3.03 "The Prodigal Son".
[359] 3.05 "Behold a Pale Rider", *All in Good Faith* (ITV, 16 May 1988).
[360] 3.03 "The Prodigal Son".

strangers and family members may make a difference to his interactions, but even during these scenes he is still a vicar. As such, 'relational' time has the potential to reinforce the all-encompassing nature of Philip's profession, while private time is important as a period away from these expectations.

Philip's counselling, as mentioned earlier, is often concerning local disputes between parishioners, which involve sex, marriage, and family, and reveal Philip's moral and theological beliefs. One example of this is in "The Prodigal Son", where Philip discusses pre-marital sex with a groom-to-be, Marvin.[361] Marvin tells Philip he is worried about the honeymoon night because his brother said if Marvin and his fiancée really loved each other, they would not have waited until after marriage to sleep together. Philip argues that "it's because you truly love each other that you have waited", demonstrating that he does not support pre-marital sex. In another example from "Home from Home", Philip tries to counsel a separated couple to stay together, even though both have been cheating with other people and eventually choose to divorce.[362] Philip gives an impassioned speech on the importance of marriage both in religious and societal terms, demonstrating his strong belief in marriage, even if it proves to be unconvincing for the couple. Similarly, Philip shows his strong belief in the family unit when he tries to reunite an estranged father and daughter, because the father has not been able to meet his infant granddaughter (due to the prejudices of the father), in "Babes and Sucklings".[363] What this does not indicate is the extent to which Philip is espousing the views of the Church of England; in both *Father Ted* and *Rev.,* for example, the protagonists clash with church authorities on subjects like abortion and gay marriage (see Chapters 4 and 5). This may be because Philip does not clash at all with the church's views, and therefore does not warrant major scrutiny. Alternatively, this could be because the church authorities are entirely absent from *Good Faith,* and Philip is largely left to his own devices. Instead, Philip is shown as the only source of authority and help, despite the fact that this authority is rightly questioned by members of his family and his friends when they disagree.

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[361] 3.03 "The Prodigal Son".
[362] 2.01 "Home from Home", *All in Good Faith* (ITV, 26 February 1987).
[363] 2.04 "Babes and Sucklings".

The existence of Philip's family members is noteworthy because *Good Faith* is the only religious sitcom to feature a married vicar with children, teenagers Miranda and Peter. The presence of his family offers the opportunity to obverse the aforementioned 'relational' situations, where Philip is not in a work setting but must still uphold standards set as a vicar. This initially seems significant, as the presence of the children further justifies the application of 'family' to the sitcom classification.[364] As the only religious sitcom with teenagers in particular, *Good Faith* might have explored the difficulties of raising teenagers with such a demanding job, or the particulars of raising children Christian. However, apart from a slight involvement in a few storylines in series 1 and 2, an exploration of the family is infrequent. The children are entirely absent from series 3, victims to the cast reshuffle that also recast Emma (Susan Jameson in series 3). Also, beyond having an interest in punk hairstyles (Miranda) and computers (Peter), the children do not have an abundance of personality, hobbies, or development and play a very small role in the narrative, often used either to set up jokes, provide antagonistic quips, or create a minor difficulty to overcome. It is consequently barely noticeable when the children do not return in series 3, as they were scarcely around in series 2. The children never discuss religion and very rarely talk about Philip's job; indeed, the children's main contribution in the first series – to object to the move from their Oxfordshire village home to Edendale – demonstrates their essential roles as trouble-making antagonists to either humorously mock Philip or prevent him from achieving what he wants. In addition, although it is entirely possible his relationships with his children would be affected by his work, this does not appear to be the case after their initial objections to the move. In essence, the children perform a role much like that of prayer or services; their sole purpose is to generate humour.

The far more frequent family presence is Emma, who appears in most episodes and is directly involved in many storylines. Philip's job poses difficulties with his relationship with Emma due to his constant work hours, which means he struggles to find a work-life balance. While Philip and Emma often exhibit physical affection and have an active sex life, they struggle to find time for intimacy due to Philip's constant work hours. For example, after the Lambes move to Edendale in "Home from Home", Philip often arrives home close to midnight, exhausted, but has to

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[364] See Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy,* p. 73.

answer a call from a parishioner struggling to cope with loneliness at night rather than spend his limited time with Emma.[365] Philip comments that it is at this time of night that the television stops broadcasting so she "switches on the vicar", both underlining the frequency of her calls and the viewpoint that Philip is another resource to be drawn upon regardless of his personal needs. Emma tries to convince Philip to ignore it, but Philip responds that he must answer because "it could be someone at the end of their tether".[366] This demonstrates that this is not only a pre-established expectation but also that Philip feels an obligation to be constantly available. This moment is played for laughs (Emma says that she should talk to the caller and they can "compare tethers", indicating that she too is frustrated and lonely without Philip's attention), but it eventually leads to a rift in their relationship where Philip has to 'hang up his dog collar' for the night and become "only a man" to repair it. This scene is an example of pressures within a relational setting, where Philip should be able to relax but work continues to encroach. This problem may not be unique to the religious professional because other jobs can equally unfairly impact a work-life balance. However, with Philip, his distractions are not easily dismissed because Philip may have to deal with issues affecting life, death, mental health, or other crises that cannot wait. It is quite literally his job to be constantly available to his parishioners, even if this negatively impacts his life and his family.

In addition to demonstrating the difficulty in establishing a work-life balance, this interaction shows that Philip's identities of 'vicar' and 'man' are considered to some extent oppositional, a suggestion that is supported by the findings on 'clerical masculinity' by Ornella (see Chapter 5). Ornella writes that clerical masculinity combines "'being' a man and performing masculinity" with living as a vicar, suggesting that there is a division between the two identities (masculinity and being a vicar) that may or may not be cohesive.[367] This theory, originally applied to Rev. Adam Smallbone (Tom Hollander) in *Rev.*,[368] applies to Philip because of its emphasis on the division between gender and profession, as outlined in the example

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[365] 2.01 "Home from Home".
[366] 2.01 "Home from Home".
[367] Alexander Ornella, "Losers, Food, and Sex: Clerical Masculinity in the BBC Sitcom Rev", *Journal for Religion, Film and Media,* 2:2 (2016), p. 100.
[368] See Chapter 5 for more information on *Rev.* and clerical masculinity.

from "Home from Home".[369] Indeed, Philip's choice of 'man' versus 'vicar' suggests that there is a rift in his identity between his more human or male desires – which in this scenario are hinted to be personal time, romantic relationships, and even sleep – and the role of the vicar, who will sacrifice these base needs to care for his community. Philip is unable to pursue his own interests while in the guise of 'vicar', and thus must become a 'man' to do so. In addition, by symbolising his role as a vicar with the dog collar, Philip implies that this is not only an identity that he can chose, but also an identity that can be discarded. In fact, the dog collar has previously been shown in *Good Faith* to be the defining factor for a vicar for other people too, such the Police Superintendent in "A Flying Visit" who refuses to believe Philip is a vicar because he doesn't "really look like a vicar" without his dog collar.[370] Regardless of any obligation he feels to always be available, Philip is able to take off the dog collar for the night to be 'a man' – and a husband to Emma – and reassume the identity of vicar when he wants. This is made more complicated by the long hours he works and the pressure to be always available to his constituents, to the extent that he has to literally take the phone 'off the hook' to ignore any potential work distractions.

The symbolism of the dog collar suggests that, for Philip, he has one identity as a 'vicar', when he wears the dog collar, and another as a 'man' when he does not. As such, these identities are not simultaneous. Still, this does not mean that Philip is not able to satisfy both his 'vicar' and 'man' identities. As discussed in "In the Beginning", Philip's original reasons for moving away from Edendale and the crux of the series 1 narrative are that Philips wants to move to find a new, more challenging and exciting parish, which Emma and Miranda claim is a response to 'male menopause'.[371] In this context his reasons meet both of these identities; a need for professional challenge as a vicar, and a need for change as a response to feeling emasculated and stagnant. Therefore, the move to Edendale will satisfy both the 'man' and the 'vicar'. However, one final point on clerical masculinity and gender is that, apart from the few examples mentioned here, the show rarely addresses the difficulties of being a husband, father, or male, and a vicar. Most of the time Philip is treated as 'the vicar' by parishioners and 'husband' by Emma, with little overlap.

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[369] 1.02 "Home from Home".
[370] 1.03 "A Flying Visit".
[371] 1.01 "In the Beginning".

There are examples of clerical masculinity negotiation, difficulties with having to be 'always available', and questions of identity as shown here, but these are neither frequent nor consistent. As with other elements in *Good Faith,* the show always returns to its comic impetus and the need to solve its 'problem of the week' to reach narrative resolution.[372]

Good Faith is, above all, a comedy vehicle for star Briers, and as such the whole show revolves around his character and his humour. The show's comic impetus took priority in every scene, using religion as a convenient context in much the same way as the earlier *Good Life* used suburban self-sufficiency as an opportunity to create new comic situations in which Briers could flourish. Because the show, in keeping with its sitcom genre, prioritises the comic impetus, the religious and humour intersection is largely in terms of religious *context*, such as a Philip making a joke during a prayer, or more infrequently *content,* where the joke involves religion but without mockery. Lastly, despite representing a village (and later city) that is entirely Christian and starring a religious professional, there is very little religious discussion, though the show is clear that religious acts like prayer, church services, sermons, and community support are an important part of a vicar's work. While the show is a religious sitcom, the emphasis here is on a sitcom *with* religion rather than a sitcom *and* religion. The next few chapters will continue looking at the religious sitcom case studies in chronological broadcast order, with Chapter 3 looking at *The Vicar of Dibley.*

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[372] O'Donnell, *Television Criticism*, p. 100.

Chapter 3

***The Vicar of Dibley*: Clerical Femininity, the Unruly Woman, and Community Expectations**

You were expecting a bloke – beard, bible, bad breath? […]
And instead, you got a babe with a bob cut and a magnificent
bosom.

Geraldine Granger, *The Vicar of Dibley*[373]

Six years after the end of ITV's *All in Good Faith* the BBC began airing a religious sitcom of its own about a country vicar, which would prove to be far more popular and long-running than ITV's previous offering. *The Vicar of Dibley* starred Dawn French as Reverend Geraldine Granger, a modern and enthusiastic vicar sent to the more traditional Oxfordshire village of Dibley. Initially resistant to accepting a woman vicar, Geraldine's Dibley parish quickly grew to love her ability, passion, and care. *Dibley* originally ran for three series from 1994 to 2000 (peaking at over 14 million viewers during its third series)[374] and aired specials in 2004/5 and 2006/7. However, its enduring popularity has resulted in nearly constant, shorter specials since finishing, including short comedy skits for Comic Relief and four 'lockdown' specials during December 2020.[375] Lucia Kramer writers that *Dibley'*s many holiday specials and frequent repeats during holidays – on Christmas Eve in 2019, for example, BBC1 repeated the 1999 special "Winter"[376] – "have turned each new episode into something of an event", which Kramer suggests reflects and reinforces the show's ongoing popularity even years after it stopped producing regular episodes.[377] The constant presence throughout the main series and its many

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[373] 1.01 "Arrival", *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC1, 10 November 1994).
[374] "Top 10 TV since 1981".
[375] The three official series of *Dibley* ran from 1994 to 2000 and aired another 4 hour-long specials between 2004 and 2007, meaning the broadcast date is 1994-2007. If including all of the seven Comic Relief specials and the four lockdown specials, the broadcast date would be 1994-2020. However, these specials were shorter, did not connect to the narrative of the full-length episodes and did not feature the whole cast, so have not been included.
[376] 3.02 "Winter", *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC1, 25 December 1999, repeated BBC1 24 December 2019).
[377] Lucia Kramer, "14: Comic Strategies of Inclusion and 'Normalisation' in *The Vicar of Dibley*" in Jurgen Kamm and Birgit Neumann, *British TV Comedies: Cultural Concepts, Contents and Controversies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 212.

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specials has been French's Geraldine; funny, charming, and dedicated, Geraldine is the glue that holds together the quirky band of parishioners that inhabit Dibley.

Dibley is unique amongst the religious sitcom case studies not only for its longevity, but also because it is the only sitcom to feature a woman vicar as its central character. It is no coincidence that *Dibley* was first broadcast in 1994, as this was the first year in which women vicars were ordained to the Church of England.[378] Two years prior to Dibley's release the General Synod of the Church of England passed a vote to allow women to be ordained, but the act was so controversial that women were not ordained until 1994.[379] The act also came with the caveat that parishes could refuse to accept a woman vicar based purely on her gender.[380] In response to this development, *Dibley* co-creator and co-writer Richard Curtis originally pitched a show about a woman vicar; according to Dawn French in *The Story of Dibley* (BBC1, 2007), Curtis wanted "to win the vote for female priests".[381] This paved the way for *Dibley's* first series in which members of the village, especially the pompous and traditional David Horton, resist Geraldine's appointment and threaten to have her removed from the parish. Curtis discusses in *The Story of Dibley* how attending a wedding with a female officiant brought his attention to the issue because the service was "so much more personal and intimate and meaningful" with a woman officiant than other services he had attended.[382] By this point in the early 1990s, Curtis had already gained international fame for his work on comedic film and television, including comedy shows like *Blackadder* and *Mr. Bean* (1990-1995)[383] and rom-com films like *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994),[384] which would continue into the early 2000s with *Bridget Jones' Diary* (2001)[385] and *Love Actually* (2003).[386] With many successful comedies already under his belt and a "bee in [his] bonnet about women vicars", Curtis turned his attention to *Dibley*.[387] Despite the fact that the ordination of women has now been possible for nearly 30 years (and even before this a fictional sitcom could have imagined a world where women could

[378] Bruce Robinson, "Ordaining female priests in the *Church of England*", *Religious Tolerance* (21 November 2012) <Ordination of women by the Church of England (religioustolerance.org)> [accessed 10 July 2021].

[379] BBC Staff, "Church of England", *BBC.co.uk* <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/cofe/cofe_1.shtml#h3> [accessed 23/02/2021].

[380] Ibid.

[381] Dawn French, *The Story of Dibley,* pr. Lucy Kenwright and Caroline Wright (BBC1, 10 January 2007).

[382] Richard Curtis, *The Story of Dibley.*

[383] *Mr. Bean,* cr. Richard Curtis and Rowan Atkinson (ITV1, 1990-1995).

[384] *Four Weddings and a Funeral,* wr. Richard Curtis (Working Title Films, 1994).

[385] *Bridget Jones' Diary*, wr. Richard Curtis, Andrew Davis, and Helen Fielding (Working Title Films, 2001).

[386] *Love Actually,* wr. and dr. Richard Curtis (Working Title Films, 2003).

[387] Curtis, *The Story of Dibley.*

be vicars before legal ordination anyway), Geraldine is still the only woman vicar main character in any of the religious sitcom case studies.

As well as the draw of Curtis's creation and writing, *Dibley* had the early appeal of casting Dawn French as Geraldine Granger. Like *Good Faith, Dibley* can be considered a 'comedian comedy'[388] or comedy vehicle for French, building on her previous TV successes *The Comic Strip Presents…*, *Girls on Top*, *Murder Most Horrid* (BBC2, 1991-1999),[389] and her most notable work with comedy partner Jennifer Saunders in *French and Saunders* (BBC2/1, 1987-2017).[390] French was one of only a handful of female comedians performing as part of the alternative comedy scene in the 1980s,[391] many of whom went on to star in their own sitcoms in the 1990s.[392] Further, Hunt includes French and Saunders in his list of noteworthy alternative comedy performers, identifying that "… alt-com put not only female comedians but explicitly *feminist* comedians on the stage…".[393] However, in contrast to Richard Briers and *The Good Life,* there is no single clear example of French's comic performance to illustrate how French's performance transferred to *Dibley*. Part of the reason for this is that French's role in *Dibley* is very different to characters she played in shows like *French and Saunders* and *Girls on Top.* In the documentary *The Story of Dibley* French discusses how she originally felt unsure how to play "somebody decent and kind and Christian" because Geraldine was originally intended to be "at the centre of it", but "the least funny character".[394] Still, French's influence on the character is certainly evident after French accepted the role; co-creator and co-writer Richard Curtis later added that French's insistence on more humorous material for Geraldine led to "many jokes for her" that would not have otherwise occurred.[395] While Curtis does not elaborate on the nature of these jokes, he implies that one of her additions was physical comedy, such as a well-known scene in which Geraldine jumps in a deep puddle, covered up to her neck in mud

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[388] See Chapter 2 and Seidman, *Comedian Comedy.*
[389] *Murder Most Horrid,* cr. Paul Smith (BBC2, 1991-1999).
[390] *French and Saunders,* cr. Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders (BBC2/1, 1987-2017).
[391] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy,* p. ix.
[392] This includes French's partner Jennifer Saunders, who created and starred in the sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous* (BBC2/1, 1992-2012).
[393] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy,* p. 7.
[394] French, *The Story of Dibley.*
[395] Curtis, *The Story of Dibley.*

(which was so popular she did it again in a later episode),[396] and references to her physical appearance, especially (in French's words) "her stupendous tits".[397]

With the exception of French's Geraldine though, there are very few examples of women vicars across the other religious sitcoms, and *Dibley* is still the only one with a woman vicar as the main character. There are a couple of reasons this could be the case. First, the lack of female representation could reflect Church of England statistics because the Ministry Statistics of 2018 from the Church of England Research Statistics department suggest that, although there are more female clergy members than ever, the number of women 24 years after their first ordination is significantly lower than men.[398] The assumption here would be that, because there have always been more male clergy members in the Church of England, there have been fewer women vicar characters on television. This does not mean, however, that television *had* to reflect this disparity – it has simply broadcast programmes that do. Another reason for the lack of representation could be that there are very few representations of female vicars that *can* be produced on television. Consequently, once *Dibley* had created Geraldine Granger, there were no new representations to produce. Indeed, because of the popularity of Dibley, any future women vicar sitcoms would likely be compared – favourably or otherwise – to Geraldine's. Yet, this would imply firstly that there are multiple different versions of the male vicar but not female (Philip, Ted, and Adam from the other religious sitcoms are certainly very different characters, for example), and secondly that there can be only one type of female vicar on television – proved erroneous by the presence of different women vicars on *Rev.* (see Chapters 5 and 6). Regardless of the reason, Geraldine is the only example of a main character woman vicar which can be studied in any detail from the religious sitcom case studies.

Gender identity in religious characters on television has not been widely studied, but one example of academic consideration is Alexander Ornella's "Losers, Food and Sex", which discusses the term 'clerical masculinity" in relation to the sitcom *Rev.*[399] As discussed in Chapter 2, Ornella argues that clerical masculinity is the negotiation of the dual identity of "'being' a man and performing masculinity" whilst performing

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[396] 3.01 "Autumn", *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC1, 24 December 1999) and 5.01 "The Handsome Stranger", *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC1, 25 December 2006).
[397] French, *The Story of Dibley*.
[398] "Ministry Statistics 2018", *The Church of England Research Statistics* (2019).
[399] Ornella, "Losers, Food, and Sex".

a religious (Christian) job, exacerbated by the need to live in a "so-called secular society" which may reject the faith that he holds.[400] In addition, their interaction with society is especially relevant as clerical masculinities are not simple or singular – they "live and breathe the dynamics of both their socio-religious context and their secular "others".[401] Ornella suggests that clerical masculinities are always related to more secular masculinities or femininities and are not stable, influenced by a host of different factors including their socio-religious contexts, power dynamics, and relationships with others.[402] Finally, the development of clerical masculinity often combines contradicting factors (such as asexuality and hyper-sexuality) from 'clerical' 'masculinity' stereotypes to create a fluctuating identity dependent on scenario. In *Rev.*, for example, Ornella emphasizes the intersection of clerical identity with sexuality, addressing the fact that *Rev.* shows clergymen as having "sexual bodies with sexual desires" that are simultaneously emasculated and fetishized by their clerical clothing.[403] The "clerical collar" in particular is highlighted by Ornella as an object of potential sexual desire which evokes either "an eroticized, fetishized, hyper-masculine masculinity" or is entirely emasculating.[404] This is reminiscent of the dog collar in *Good Faith*, with draws a symbolic line between Philip's 'husband/man' and 'vicar' identities.

Despite an involved explanation of clerical masculinity and the "rich, fluid, and at times highly contested diversity of clerical masculinities" which can all operate within the male vicar, Ornella does not discuss the notion of a 'clerical femininity'.[405] Ornella writes that discourse about gender in Christianity often draws upon "the notion of natural order", such as the "innate mother role of women or the fatherly role of the priest", but does not expand on how this 'mother' role (among other stereotypes) could be applied to a female vicar.[406] In addition, Ornella argues that the female clergy members in *Rev.* "seem to 'act masculine'" as "'mannish women'" rather than acting as "vibrantly celebratory female vicars", though Ornella does not

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[400] Ibid., p. 100.
[401] Ibid., p. 100.
[402] Ibid., p. 100.
[403] Ibid., p. 101.
[404] See Chapter 2 and Ornella, "Losers, Food, and Sex", p. 109.
[405] Ornella, "Losers, Food, and Sex", p. 104.
[406] Ibid., p. 100.

expand on how this could manifest.[407] In this context, Ornella has simply applied the same model of clerical masculinity to women working within the Church.

It could be argued that just because clerical masculinity has been exclusively applied to 'men' by Ornella does not mean it could not apply to Geraldine. The dynamic between asexuality and hypersexuality, for example, could equally apply to Geraldine as it does to *Rev.*'s Adam. Still, if clerical masculinity is, as Ornella writes, "'being' a man and performing masculinity', women are automatically excluded by definition.[408] Ornella's explanation specifically avoids discussing traditionally 'feminine' traits like emotional understanding or nurture that are part of a vicar's everyday role – traits Curtis specifically cites as benefits from having a woman officiant.[409] For example, Robbins et al. discovered that ministry may "attract men who value and display certain traditionally feminine personality characteristics or nurture femininity" whereas female clergy members "may value and display certain traditionally masculine personality characteristics".[410] From this, it is clear that clerical gender is an amalgam of traditionally masculine and feminine traits, which are notably missing from Ornella's interpretation of clerical masculinity. Therefore, while acknowledging that Geraldine can embody elements from clerical masculinity despite the fact that she identifies as female, it is also beneficial to develop a separate category of clerical femininity, investigating how 'being a woman and performing femininity' align with her work as a vicar. This clerical gender can be found with close textual analysis of both *Dibley* in general and gendered representation of Geraldine as a woman vicar in *Dibley*, as well as the specific challenges she faces as a woman in her male-dominated profession.

Dibley closely resembles the look and construction of a traditional pre-2000s sitcom that, as Kramer notes, "sticks firmly to older forms of production and revels in their theatricality".[411] This refers to its use of the multi-cam setup and the live audience, which while certainly an 'older' form of production was still the dominant form of sitcom production during this period. *Dibley*'s episodes were mostly half-hour in length, with TV specials ranging from 45 to 60 minutes (and Comic Relief specials

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[407] Ibid., pp. 113-114.
[408] Ibid., p. 103.
[409] Curtis, *The Story of Dibley.*
[410] Mandy Robbins et al., "The Personality Characteristics of Methodist Ministers: Feminine Men and Masculine Women?", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion,* 40:1 (March 2001), p. 124.
[411] Kramer, "14: Comic Strategies of Inclusion and 'Normalisation' in *The Vicar of Dibley*", p. 214.

usually under 15 minutes). Like *Good Faith*, Dibley was mainly set in the same two locations – the parish hall and the vicarage – with some other frequent locations including the church, outdoor spaces in the village, and the Horton residence, Dibley Manor. Although Geraldine is undoubtedly the star, the series also has a large recurring ensemble cast of village locals, including parish council chair David Horton (Gary Waldhorn), son Hugo (James Fleet), verger Alice Tinker (Emma Chambers), and other parish council members Owen Newitt (Roger Lloyd-Pack), Jim Trott (Trevor Peacock), Frank Pickle (John Bluthal) and Letitia Cropley (Liz Smith). One final format point which differs from the other religious sitcom case studies is the inclusion of a short scene after the end credits in which Geraldine tells Alice a joke that Alice does not understand (though the audience certainly does, as evidenced by the laugh track).[412] This scene is usually entirely separate from the episode's narrative. Every episode featured a joke scene along these lines except for one, where the episode uses it at the beginning to underline the seriousness of its ending.[413]

Though this description suggests *Dibley* is a traditional sitcom in format, this does make *Dibley* an outlier from other 1990s sitcoms that have already received significant academic attention. Leon Hunt describes the 1990s as the "post-alternative" era of television comedy, noting that because of the "bland and conservative" nature of sitcom in the 1980s (see Chapters 1 and 2), the genre "underwent more significant changes" in the following two decades.[414] Both Hunt and Ben Thompson have referred to the 1990s as a comedy 'Golden Age' for its diverse range of well-received comedies, and for religious sitcoms the 1990s seem particularly relevant because two of the four case studies were produced during this period.[415] The other case study mentioned is *Father Ted,* which is name-checked by Thompson in his list of "best ten British TV comedy shows of this era", though this 'best of' list does seem entirely subjective.[416] Hunt characterises 1990s comedy – including sketch comedy and light entertainment shows as well as sitcoms – as

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[412] Ibid., p. 215.
[413] In "Happy New Year", the episode ends with a short documentary video showing poverty in Africa (made in conjunction with Comic Relief), and therefore to avoid ending with a joke after this series subject the episode placed the joke at the beginning of the episode instead. 4.02, "Happy New Year", *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC1, 1 January 2005).
[414] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy,* pp. ix, 69.
[415] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy,* p. ix, and Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty.*
[416] Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty,* p. xii.

manifesting a number of conflicting trends during this period, including cringe comedy, dark humour, new light entertainment formats, and surrealism.[417]

From this summary, *Dibley* does not resemble the 1990s sitcoms described by Hunt and Thompson. It does not employ cringe comedy or dark humour on a regular basis, nor does it use the surrealism of sitcoms like *Father Ted* or *Spaced* (C4, 1999-2001).[418] However, much like the divide between sitcoms like *Good Faith* and alternative comedy discussed in Chapter 2, this instead points to a disparity between the sitcoms discussed in academia and the range of sitcoms that existed in this period. Many of the most popular sitcoms in the 1990s – including *Absolutely Fabulous, One Foot in the Grave, The Vicar of Dibley,* and *dinnerladies* (BBC1, 1998-2000),[419] as well as some longer-running sitcoms that began in the 1980s but continued in the 1990s such as *Only Fools and Horses* (BBC1, 1981-2003)[420] – do not employ cringe comedy, dark humour, or surrealism either.[421] In fact, these sitcoms use many of the traditional sitcom markers, like a live audience with a laugh track and multi-cam setup, but also engage with societal issues like gender, class, and age. As such, the description of 1990s sitcoms from Hunt and Thompson may be describing either a certain *type* of sitcom from the 1990s (such as those from Thompson's 'top 10' list) or the sitcoms that were significantly different from those that came before.[422] Rather than being an unusual or cult sitcom, then, *Dibley* and other 1990s sitcoms in the same vein may not have attracted the same level of academic attention because it is considered too traditional, too safe, and too middle-class.

Since *Dibley* does not employ cringe comedy, dark humour, or surrealism, what types of comedy and humour does it use? Co-creator Richard Curtis addresses this in comments on his initial ideas for the sitcom in *The Story of Dibley*.[423] Curtis stated that he "came up with an idea of a village, all of whom [were] sort of mad", and as a

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[417] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy*, pp. 10-15.

[418] *Spaced,* cr. Simon Pegg and Jessica Stevenson (C4, 1999-2001).

[419] *dinnerladies,* cr. Victoria Wood (BBC1, 1998-2000).

[420] *Only Fools and Horses,* cr. John Sullivan (BBC1, 1981-2003).

[421] All of these sitcoms were in the top 30 of BBC's 'Britain's Best Sitcom' poll in 2004, while *The Vicar of Dibley, One Foot in the Grave,* and *Only Fools and Horses* were all in the top 10. It should be noted though that the date when this poll was conducted may have benefitted sitcoms that were still airing or had recently aired, such as the aforementioned 1990s sitcoms. See: BBC Staff, "Britain's Best Sitcom Top 10" <https://web.archive.org/web/20141013160237/http://www.bbcattic.org/sitcom-/winner.shtml> [accessed 08/03/2021]; *BBC Staff,* "Britain's Best Sitcom 11-100" <https://web.archive.org/web/-20141013153757/http://www.bbcattic.org/sitcom/top11to100.shtml> [accessed 08/03/2021].

[422] Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty*, p. xii.

[423] *The Story of Dibley.*

result he was "tempted… to give the mad characters all the jokes".[424] Though ultimately Geraldine was also given plenty of jokes as well, the humorous 'madness' of the other characters manifests in catchphrase-like, humorous quirks amongst the villagers, including Jim who prefaces almost all statements with 'no, no, no, no' and Alice whose innocent ignorance means she is often confused by simple items and concepts. For the villagers, their jokes typically revolve around these quirks. In "Love and Marriage", for example, Jim delivers a dry run of his best man's speech for Alice and Hugo's wedding and chooses the topic of 'Knowing Me and Knowing You', repeating 'no, no, no, no' multiple times before each 'knowing'.[425] This catchphrase is, using the language of cue theory (see Chapter 1), a category-routinising joke, where the pleasure of the joke emerges from "an understanding of the characters and the kinds of humour which we can expect from them".[426] In another example, from "Animals", Alice spends over a minute discussing a new butter substitute, culminating with:

> Well, I can't believe the stuff that is not 'I Can't Believe It's Not Butter' is not 'I Can't Believe It's Not Butter', and I can't believe that both 'I Can't Believe It's Not Butter' and the stuff that I can't believe is not 'I Can't Believe It's Not Butter' are both, in fact, not butter. And I believe they both might be butter... in a cunning disguise. And, in fact, there's a lot more butter around than we all thought there was.

1.06 "Animals"[427]

Curtis' statement suggests two possible interpretations; one, that the 'mad characters' would be humorous intentionally, or two, that the characters would be funny *because* of their 'mad' quirks, though the characters themselves are unaware of the humour in their dialogue. In Alice's quote above, Alice's constant repetition of 'I Can't Believe It's Not Butter' and her convoluted explanation supports the latter interpretation because the humour seems unintentional; she has a blank expression, earnest tone, and a track record of naive behaviour. The question of intention leads to Superiority Theory (see Chapter 1), which argues that humour

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[424] Curtis, *The Story of Dibley.*
[425] 2.04 "Love and Marriage", *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC1, 22 January 1998).
[426] Mills, *The Sitcom,* p. 96.
[427] 1.06 "Animals", *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC1, 15 December 1994).

emerges from laughing *at* someone, thereby creating a power imbalance between the mocking laugher (dominant) and the mocked subject (subservient).[428] However, as in *Good Faith*, this is further complicated because of the different types of audience observing the character – the characters perform to other characters in the scene (often Geraldine), the live audience watching the sitcom recording, and the audience watching the show through a screen. Is there a power imbalance here between two characters, between character and live audience, and/or character and audience watching through a screen? This makes it difficult to establish who is ultimately 'dominant', but not who is 'subservient', as in every scenario it will be the original 'mad' character.

This very scenario could also work with Incongruity Theory (see Chapter 1), which fundamentally suggests humour emerges from an incongruous situation.[429] Rather than laughing at the 'mad' character because of feelings of superiority, the humour comes from the incongruity between normal social behaviour and those exhibited by the villagers. In many respects the theory here is far more universal, as it can encompass scenarios where the subject is laughed *at* and laughed *with,* thus humour can be found regardless of power dynamic. Still, this theory suggests that the humour in this scenario emerges from the disparity between the possible understanding Alice could show about 'I Can't Believe It's Not Butter' and her evident confusion and obscurity of delivery, thereby suggesting that this theory could be just as applicable as Superiority. However, while this example could work with Superiority and Incongruity theories, it is difficult to justify this type of humour as part of Relief Theory, which argues laughter comes from a release of pent-up energy suppressed by societal norms and expectations.[430] The theory could be stretched to suggest the laughter is caused because the laugher is relieved not to possess the mad quirk or behaviour, or because the laugher finds relief from watching people who do not conform to social norms of speech. On the other hand, these interpretations do not account for why these specific social deviances are 'humorous', simply explaining why the laugher 'might' find this laughable. Therefore, the stronger argument supports primary engagement with Superiority and Incongruity Theory from *Dibley*'s premise alone, suggesting a focus on these

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[428] See Chapter 1 and (among others) Aristotle, *Poetics,* p. 9.
[429] See Chapter 1 and (among others) Oring, *Engaging Humor.*
[430] See Chapter 1 and Freud, *The Joke,* p. 144.

theories and their intersection with religion (as discussed in Chapter 1) will be most productive. This echoes the findings of Chapter 2 in reference to *Good Faith*; Superiority and Incongruity both have their place in the show, but Relief is a much more difficult theory to apply in the *explanation* of humour, especially as it is primarily concerned with the reason to laugh in the first place.

In terms of religious engagement, *Good Faith* and *Dibley* have very different approaches. Chapter 2 described how *Good Faith* used religion as a situation in which to repackage Briers' established comedy persona. Conversely, in *Dibley,* though the premise of fighting the cause of women vicars is partly gender-motivated, it is also intrinsically religious. In other words, while *Good Faith*'s Philip might have been a social worker or councillor to perform the same role within his community, changing Geraldine's profession would have had a much starker effect on the narrative and her character. Beyond the show's premise, the most apparent sites for intersection are jokes or comic scenes that are about religion. In *Good Faith*, this manifested as jokes with either religious content or a religious context, such as jokes told by a religious character or in a religious setting. Also, while there were no examples of these in *Good Faith*, Chapter 2 theorised that further joke categories could be jokes that *mock* religion or jokes that are religious at the *expense* of humour. Of course, these four categories are not mutually exclusive. A joke with religious content or context may mock religion and lack humour all at once. Since *Dibley* has a higher number of religious acts such as prayer, services, and religious discussion in comparison to *Good Faith*, there are more opportunities for these religious jokes to occur. For example, although Philip sporadically prayed and always for comic effect, Geraldine's prayers are more frequent and have multiple purposes. Similarly, Philip gives only one service, but Geraldine officiates many, especially in the first series. There are even more visual religious cues, like Geraldine's pictures of Jesus on her wall, shots of Dibley's St. Barnabas church, and the wide variety of different religious vestments Geraldine wears throughout the series. From these examples of religious narrative and representation, *Dibley* already demonstrates a different and varied connection to religion in comparison to the situation-motivated style of *Good Faith.*

As well as acts like prayers, services, and religious discussions that are in *Good Faith*, *Dibley* also has the unique feature of the post-credits joke. As mentioned

earlier, at the end of almost every *Dibley* episode is a short scene in the church vestry where Geraldine tells Alice a joke that Alice does not understand.[431] Many of these jokes, especially during the early series, have religious content or context. A good example of one of these religious jokes is in "Community Spirit".[432] In the after-credits scene, Geraldine tells Alice a joke about three nuns who die in a car crash and have to answer a question from St. Peter to get into heaven. The first two nuns are asked simple questions about the Garden of Eden and the final nun, the Mother Superior, is asked the more difficult question of "What did Eve say when she first saw Adam?". The Mother Superior answers "Oh, that's a hard one" and St. Peter lets her into heaven. As usual Alice misunderstands the joke, thinking the Mother Superior was let into heaven without answering the question, and the humour (understood by the studio audience, who laughs along with Geraldine) instead comes from the double meaning of 'hard one' – a difficult question, or an erect penis. The joke is literally about religious knowledge, because the nuns must demonstrate their knowledge of the book of Genesis to be allowed into heaven. However, the punchline is explicit sexual innuendo that has little to do with religion. Either the Mother Superior stumbled onto the correct answer innocently – saying 'one' in place of 'question', as is suggested by Geraldine's tone – or through her in-depth knowledge of Adam and Eve knew that Eve was impressed by Adam's nudity. Therefore, this joke relies on the religious *context* of being told in the vestry by a vicar (since Geraldine tells almost all of these jokes) but also significant religious *content,* including knowledge of the afterlife and of nuns. While many of the jokes in the post-credits scene are religious in nature, this decreases as the series continues. At the beginning the jokes are almost all religious, but later examples are more general, such as a joke about an accountant with constipation (working it 'out with a pencil').[433] Nevertheless, the separation of specifically religious jokes initially – serving the dual purpose of reinforcing character quirks (Geraldine's wit, Alice's naivety) and utilising religion-based humour – demonstrates an early commitment to humour and religious intersection, as well as religious content in general.

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[431] Only one episode does not feature this scene in any form which is "Happy New Year". This episode includes the joke before the opening credits instead due to the sensitive nature of the episode's ending. Also, a couple of episodes swap out either Alice or Geraldine for another *Dibley* villager because the character in the narrative is not in *Dibley,* such as "Love and Marriage".
[432] 1.03 "Community Spirit", *The Vicar of Dibley* (24 November 1994).
[433] 5.01 "The Handsome Stranger".

In addition to religious jokes, Geraldine's prayers, services, and religious discussions in *Dibley* are another site for humour and religious intersection. Before analysing these however, it is valuable to re-emphasise the distinction between Geraldine's public and private actions (see Chapter 2). For *Dibley,* this distinction is so important to the show that *Dibley* producer John Plowman draws attention to it in *The Story of Dibley*, stating "[Geraldine] in all situations has to be nice except when she's by herself".[434] In other words, Geraldine has to maintain an upbeat, kind persona when with her parishioners ('public' or 'relational') and can only 'be herself' when she is alone ('private').[435] As such, like in *Good Faith*, the religious practices outlined above are not exclusively 'public' or 'private' as defined by location (a usually 'private' space like the home is still a place of work for Geraldine) but instead by the presence of others. Further, since Geraldine is not in a relationship and lives alone for the majority of *Dibley*, she does not have as clear distinctions between spending time with parishioners and family members as in *Good Faith*. All of her friends are also her parishioners, and she does not have family members in *Dibley* with whom to interact until her marriage to Harry in the final episode. Therefore, Geraldine already has different, public pressures to *Good Faith* that are not alleviated by more private time with family members. Of course, even her private moments are witnessed by the studio audience, who often laugh at the jokes she makes out loud to herself, though Geraldine is unaware of their presence.

First, while prayer is certainly not a regular occurrence in *Dibley* (for example, Geraldine does not pray in every episode), Geraldine does pray more often than Philip and the prayers serve a larger range of purposes. In *Good Faith*, Philip's prayers were often simply used for comic effect or to reinforce the narrative, such as "In the Beginning" when Philip's brief prayer on the golf course acts as a reminder that Philip is feeling stagnant and underutilised.[436] In *Dibley,* this is sometimes the case; for example, in "The Handsome Stranger", Geraldine briefly prays to God on her knees asking Him to make Harry have "a crush" on her.[437] Other times, her prayers take the form of a conversation, such as in "The Wind and the Weather"

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[434] Jon Plowman, *The Story of Dibley.*
[435] As discussed in Chapter 2, the distinction between public and relational is that public is outside of the domestic in a work setting surrounded by parishioners and others, while relational refers to a domestic, non-work setting where the vicar is still expected to uphold certain standards as a vicar. The relational setting is complicated by the fact that the vicarage is also work setting.
[436] 1.01 "In the Beginning", *All in Good Faith.*
[437] 5.01 "The Handsome Stranger".

when Geraldine talks about cremation and burial on the way to church.[438] Since Geraldine is alone and these are ostensibly 'private' prayers, their purpose appears to be to appeal to the live audience as well as God, who because she is vocalising the prayer out loud is privy to her inner thoughts. In fact, the scene is ambiguous – is Geraldine praying, as indicated by her statement 'Thank you God' at the end, or is she only talking to herself and by extension the audience? Regardless of intention, both of these prayers take an informal and humorous tone that combines the religious act of prayer with comedy to create a comic effect or reinforce the narrative.

However, there are also times when Geraldine prays for help and guidance, striking a notably solemn tone in otherwise comedic scenes. In the series 1 episode "Animals", Geraldine prays for God to "lend [her] a hand" in performing a special animal-centred church service because otherwise she will be forced to leave Dibley.[439] Similarly, in the first Christmas special, "The Christmas Lunch Incident", Geraldine very gravely asks God to "please, help me" write a good Christmas sermon after struggling all night.[440] In both of these examples, in scenes where Geraldine is alone, Geraldine breaks from her positive, entertaining façade and turns to God for help. The solemnity is emphasised in these moments by contrasting the prayer with a usually humorous preceding line. In "Animals" Geraldine prays after joking that her sermon might be "the ecclesiastical equivalent of LaToya Jackson's new nose"[441] and in "The Christmas Lunch Incident" Geraldine points at her picture of Jesus on the wall and demands that the "birthday boy" will have to help or she will tell everyone that he is actually Noel Edmonds.[442] The absence of laughter from the studio audience after this joke when Geraldine solemnly asks for aid creates a sudden shift in tone. Therefore, while some prayers are for comic effect in *Dibley,* there are others that ask for assistance in a non-humorous way. This does not demonstrate a different form of humour and religious intersection, but it does show that prayers in religious sitcoms like *Dibley* can be multi-functional.

God does not ostensibly answer Geraldine's prayers with any visible actions such as a lightning bolt from the sky (as in *Father Ted* episode "Entertaining Father Stone"

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[438] 1.04 "The Wind and the Weather", *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC1, 1 December 1994).
[439] 1.06 "Animals".
[440] 1X.02 "The Christmas Lunch Incident".
[441] 1.06 "Animals".
[442] 1X.02 "The Christmas Lunch Incident".

– see Chapter 4),[443] or appearing in person (as in *Rev.* episode "Episode 5" – see Chapter 5).[444] Regardless, Geraldine always triumphs in the situations in which she prays, sometimes immediately. In "The Handsome Stranger", Geraldine kneels before a picture of Jesus after going on a date with future husband Harry and says ": "Lord, I don't do this very often, but just in case any of this on the knees stuff actually *works*, please can you let him get a *little* crush on me…".[445] Moments later, Harry knocks on her door and asks if he can kiss her. This moment is not entirely miraculous – Harry did after all ask Geraldine on the date and showed plenty of romantic interest in her – but by placing the events so close together *Dibley* certainly implies some divine intervention, and afterwards Geraldine happily points at her picture of Jesus and gleefully shouts "You are good! You are really good!"[446] Therefore, while God does not *explicitly* answer Geraldine's prayers, situations normally turn out in her favour when she does pray.

As well as prayer, Geraldine occasionally performs services in Dibley's church St. Barnabas, which in the first series happens in nearly every episode and then dwindles as the series progresses – a trend across all religious scenes in the series. Some services are ceremonies such as weddings or funerals, but most are normal Sunday services with an unusual twist. One unusual service is in "Songs of Praise"[447] in which a Sunday service is filmed for the (real) BBC television show *Songs of Praise*. Another is the service in "Animals"[448] which was attended by parishioners with their pets and farm animals. For Geraldine, these services are often more than just a weekly task; her services are used to judge her capability as a vicar, and on multiple occasions she is threatened with removal if she fails. This is a direct result of council leader (and Conservative MP) David Horton's prejudices against female vicars, an extra pressure that was never placed on Philip in *Good Faith* even when he changes to a new parish. In the first episode, "Arrival", after David Horton claims that appointing a woman vicar must be an "insane joke", David threatens Geraldine by writing a draft letter to her superior that will request her removal.[449] He and the council do not ultimately send this letter because her first

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[443] 1.02 "Entertaining Father Stone", *Father Ted* (C4, 28 April 1995).
[444] 3.05 "Episode 5", *Rev.* (BBC2, 21 April 2014).
[445] 5.01 "The Handsome Stranger".
[446] 5.01 "The Handsome Stranger".
[447] 1.02 "Songs of Praise", *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC1, 17 November 1994).
[448] 1.06 "Animals".
[449] 1.01 "Arrival".

service is such a wild success, increasing the congregation from 4 to a full house in the space of a week. David then repeats this stunt in the aforementioned "Animals", using the preceding press coverage of Geraldine's planned service for animals and their owners as a reason for her dismissal. Again he is thwarted when the service is hugely popular. Consequently, services are a clear example of how Geraldine, as a female vicar, is loaded with extra expectations and standards because of her gender, and Geraldine has to *exceed* expectations to gain acceptance.

Apart from the overhanging threat of dismissal, the *Dibley* services are usually a site for verbal humour, such as the service in "Songs of Praise".[450] Geraldine gives a sermon in which she jokes that some people believe allowing a woman to become a vicar will lead to "pantyhose drying on the vestry radiators and that hymns will have to be called 'hers'". Later, Alice confuses the old-fashioned text script 'S' for an 'F', unintentionally leading to a nearly disastrous pronunciation of 'succour'.[451] There is plenty of physical or visual humour too. In "Animals" the church is packed with pets and livestock as well as their humans, and the camera lingers on shots of congregational rabbits, birds, and the odd goat.[452] Also, in "Merry Christmas", Geraldine accidentally gets drunk before giving a Midnight Mass, resulting in a very garbled sermon before she comedically falls over.[453] Both of these examples demonstrate incongruity, whether it is the incongruity of Alice continually misunderstanding the 'S' is an 'F' or Geraldine's drunkenness in the serious situation of Midnight Mass. These humorous scenes intersect with religion through the context of a religious service rather than religious content, or a combination of the two as in the post-credits religious jokes. In addition, as in *Good Faith* before it, neither the prayers nor the services in *Dibley* are critical of religion or religious services. They do not criticise the process or purpose of the service, nor the message that the services may deliver. Indeed, the services often go in the opposite direction, celebrating Geraldine's faith or devotion to her job (as in "Songs of Praise").[454]

For the final type of intersection, religious discussions, *Dibley* limits its ability to hold a multitude of different conversations with other clergy members by isolating

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[450] 1.02 "Songs of Praise".
[451] 1.02 "Songs of Praise".
[452] 1.06 "Animals".
[453] 4.01 "Merry Christmas", *The Vicar of Dibley* (25 December 2004).
[454] 1.02 "Songs of Praise".

Geraldine from other vicars. With the exception of Geraldine, there are very few vicars or religious professionals who appear in *Dibley,* and none outside the Christian faith. In fact, the only clergy member who is not Church of England that appears in any of the *Dibley* texts is in the Comic Relief special "Ballykissdibley"[455] when Catholic priest Father Peter Clifford from the Irish drama *Ballykissangel* (BBC1, 1996-2001)[456] visits as part of an inter-faith exchange programme. Father Peter Clifford had earlier cameoed in another religious sitcom and case study, *Father Ted*, as the same character (though this time in a dream).[457] Otherwise, the vicars are overwhelmingly Christian, Protestant, and Church of England. The guest stars who appear as vicars are almost all white and male, such as Richard Griffiths (the Bishop of Mulberry in "Spring")[458] and Hugh Bonneville (Rev. Jeremy Ogilvy in "The Vicar in White").[459] Overall in the vast majority of episodes Geraldine is the only vicar, and she rarely interacts with other clergy members during the series. Given this, it would be impossible for Geraldine to draw on the clerical community for advice or support. While this means she is given plenty of freedom to perform her job as she sees fit, she does not have the support of her peers or the church in general. Instead, Geraldine's community is just the other Dibley parishioners and council members, complicating the divide between public and private but providing more opportunities for casual religious discussion with her parishioners.

There are two particularly illustrative but contrasting examples of this casual religious discussion in "The Window and the Weather"[460] and "Winter".[461] In the former, Geraldine and the other councillors must decide what image should be on their new stained glass church window, and the discussion quickly unravels because nobody can remember what was on it in the first place. Their conversation meanders from Moses to St. Barnabas (the namesake of Dibley's church), until eventually they conclude it might have been Jesus surrounded by 5,000 people in a boat-shaped cigar. The sequence is played for laughs, each ridiculous suggestion followed by roars of laughter from the audience and derision from Geraldine or David. The particular quirks of the council are on full display, from Jim repeating his catchphrase

[455] "Ballykissdibley", *Comic Relief Special 1997: The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC1, 14 March 1997).
[456] *Ballykissangel,* cr. Kieran Prendiville (BBC1, 1996-2001).
[457] 2X.01 "Christmassy Ted", *Father Ted* (C4, 25 December 1996).
[458] 3.03 "Spring", *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC1, 27 December 1999).
[459] 5.02 "The Vicar in White", *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC1, 1 January 2007).
[460] 1.04 "The Wind and the Weather".
[461] 3.02 "Winter".

'no, no, no' to Hugo's innocent suggestion that a boat might be a large cigar. In this case the actual 'religious' discussion may seem fairly minor – the group is not, after all, debating serious theology or religious doctrines – but that does not diminish the fact this discussion relies on religious knowledge to fully understand the references. This could even be seen as an intertextual relationship; referencing Bible stories and characters to generate incongruity from their inclusion together in the stained glass window.[462] This sequence acts as a reminder that Geraldine is a vicar of a church, and that these council members are her parishioners as well as colleagues, and that their relationship hinges on this distinction. In this case, then, the religious discussion is used as a site for humour, combining the quirks of the characters and their knowledge of religious figures to produce a humorous and religious intersection.

In other episodes, though, religious discussion is used as an opportunity to emphasise Geraldine's faith in brief moments of seriousness (similar to the use of solemnity in prayer), all the more significant because of their infrequency. One example of this is in *Dibley*'s many holiday specials. In "Winter" the councillors argue about what is the 'greatest story ever told'.[463] Geraldine claims it is the Nativity and everyone else has gradually more ridiculous suggestions, such as stories about unlucky burglars, novels by Jackie Collins or Beatrix Potter, or even local stories on the news. Exasperated, Geraldine reminds the cast of the story:

> I believe that this tiny little baby boy actually was the Son of God, and when he was younger than I am today, he was brutally crucified for simply telling people to love each other. And the men who killed him thought 'that's it, that's the end of it, he's dead, he's gone'. And yet here we are. 2,000 years later. In a village in the middle of England, doing a play about his birth. Now I think that's a pretty great story.
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> 3.02 "Winter"[464]

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462 See Chapter 4 for a discussion of the meaning of 'intertextual', and Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 1-2.
463 3.02 "Winter".
464 3.02 "Winter".

This speech is not only notable for Geraldine's passionate endorsement of the Nativity, a rare direct address of Christianity specifically in *Dibley*; it is also notable for the way it is framed. The speech is bookended by comedic moments, but the speech itself is not humorous – there is no laugh track, the other cast members are quiet, and afterwards the council withdraws their other suggestions. Such serious moments are not completely absent from *Dibley,* but usually only occur on rare occasions such as Mrs. Cropley's death in "The Easter Bunny"[465] or the video on poverty from the Comic Relief appeal in "Happy New Year".[466] In essence then, "Winter" uses the Christmas special to specifically address the religious aspects of Christmas and to reinforce Geraldine's beliefs in a non-humorous way that is disparate from most of its episodes and denotes a symbolic weight.[467]

Still, it is important to note that religious discussion (serious or humorous) in *Dibley* is not that frequent. In the other Christmas, New Year, and Easter Specials there is a dearth of religious conversation even when the presence of a religious holiday could warrant it, and during the other, non-special episodes it is a rarity. Instead, it is more common for Geraldine to comment on a religious matter and a joke to follow, either from Geraldine herself or from another villager. For example, in "The Easter Bunny", Geraldine tells the council that "we must remember the true Easter message. Jesus gives us hope of eternal life in heaven. No one on Earth lives forever."[468] Jim then says that Bruce Forsyth is the exception, to which Geraldine replies that it just 'seems' like he had been alive forever. While this is only a small amount of religious discussion (missing from *Good Faith*), it acts as a reminder that *Dibley*'s primary goal is to produce a comic effect, cutting through most serious discussion with a joke.

The inclusion of holiday specials in a religious sitcom also provides the opportunity for religious discussion during a religious holiday. The holiday special is a tradition in British sitcom regardless of religious affiliation, but in the case of *Dibley* which is so firmly Christian it gives *Dibley* a chance to engage with religious holidays within the generic tradition.[469] When discussing holiday specials, there is a distinction to be made between the 'holiday specials' (special episodes broadcast during a

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[465] 1X.01 "The Easter Bunny", *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC1, 8 April 1996).
[466] 4.02 "Happy New Year".
[467] 3.02 "Winter".
[468] 1X.01 "The Easter Bunny".
[469] Mills, *The Sitcom*, p. 33.

holiday period, such as Christmas or Easter that are *separate* from a usual series run) and 'holiday-themed episodes' (episodes that are concurrent with a usual series run that are about a particular holiday, whether or not the episode is broadcast during this period). The former category is most relevant to *Dibley,* which has multiple Christmas specials, a couple at New Year, and even one Easter special, "The Easter Bunny".[470] The sheer number of holiday specials, which is what *Dibley* almost exclusively produced from 1999 onwards, could offer multiple spaces for the show to engage with religious holidays, as in the example of "Winter".[471]

The previous extract from "Winter" demonstrates that there is space for some religious discussion in the episode relevant to the holiday to which it is attached. Other examples, while not so overtly religious as discussing the Nativity, provide more opportunities for holiday-themed services (Midnight Mass in "Merry Christmas")[472] or engaging in religious acts like Lent ("The Easter Bunny").[473] The specials also explore extra pressures on the vicar around the holiday season, including visiting parishioners and special services, such as in "The Christmas Lunch Incident".[474] However, as the series progresses, the religious connection to the holiday significantly decreases. For example, the series 4 Christmas special "Merry Christmas" does feature Midnight Mass, but the episode is more concerned with the drunken actions of Geraldine than the service itself.[475] The final two Christmas specials, "The Handsome Stranger"[476] and "The Vicar in White",[477] have no connection to Christmas at all. In later series, the lack of religious engagement with holiday specials may signal that, as previously highlighted by Lucia Kramer, the use of holiday specials was instead to capitalise on 'event television' – making each episode feel more special because they air around a holiday, infrequently, and in longer episodes.[478] Therefore, there are some links between the religious festival and the holiday special in some cases, but engagement is neither constant nor expected, especially in the latter half of the series.

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[470] 1X.01 "The Easter Bunny".
[471] 3.02 "Winter".
[472] 4.01 "Merry Christmas".
[473] 1X.01 "The Easter Bunny".
[474] 1X.02 "The Christmas Lunch Incident".
[475] 4.01 "Merry Christmas".
[476] 5.01 "The Handsome Stranger".
[477] 5.02 "The Vicar in White".
[478] Kramer, "14: Comic Strategies of Inclusion and 'Normalisation' in *The Vicar of Dibley*", p. 212.

Returning to the topic of religious representation, as well as Geraldine's prayers and officiating services, the most vital and regular job that Geraldine performs is that of community support. From the moment of her arrival, Geraldine is expected to be constantly available to her parishioners. While this was seen in *Good Faith* (such as the episode "Home from Home", when Philip struggles to make time to spend with his wife, Emma),[479] this is to a much greater extent in *Dibley.* In every episode her parishioners visit her vicarage, often unannounced; Geraldine is expected to attend every parish council meeting; and Geraldine is rarely shown interacting with other friends or family, meaning almost all of her social interactions are with her parishioners. In fact, the role of community supporter is so integral to Geraldine's character in *Dibley* that the series ends when her ability to perform this role is diminished. In the last episode, "The Vicar in White",[480] Geraldine gets married, which according to Curtis "[ended] the dynamic of the sitcom" because she could no longer be there unconditionally as their vicar and friend.[481] This is explicitly acknowledged in the episode too. At Geraldine's makeshift hen party, the villagers reminisce about the good times they have had together and collectively conclude that those days will be over soon. Geraldine protests, saying she will "always have time" for them. David responds that it "will never be quite the same", because they will no longer be at "the top of [her] list".[482] Of course, this might not be the case at all – as seen in *Good Faith* and *Rev.* (see Chapter 5), many vicars in religious sitcoms attempt to balance professional and personal lives as a vicar after marriage, even if this is occasionally unsuccessful. However, for Geraldine, she has simply never needed to make the choice between her personal and professional lives. They have overlapped so completely in *Dibley* that she could give all of her time – whether it is a parishioner popping over with a question or eating four Christmas lunches in one day – to her work.[483] This represents a problem experienced by the first women vicars too; in 2001, the Provost of Leicester Cathedral Vivienne Faull described how "no allowances are made for family life" for women in the church, because "the jobs are shaped around the lives of men with wives" to look after their needs.[484] Therefore, the job of community support is not only vital to Geraldine's profession,

[479] 2.01 "Home from Home", *All in Good Faith*.
[480] 5.02 "The Vicar in White".
[481] Richard Curtis, *The Vicar of Dibley: Inside Out*, dr. Matt Pothecary (Gold, 6 March 2021).
[482] 5.02 "The Vicar in White", *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC1, 1 January 2007).
[483] 1X.02 The Christmas Lunch Incident".
[484] Vivienne Faull, quoted in Robinson, "Ordaining female priests in the *Church of England*".

it is the job that the entire series revolves around, echoing the experiences of women vicars in this period.

At first, the only 'expectations' the parishioners have of Geraldine (in this context referring to what they expect her *to be like* rather than professional or behavioural expectations) are superficial, visual, and gendered. In the first episode "Arrival", when Geraldine arrives in the village for the first time, David Horton (expecting a man) is shocked by her appearance. In response to his confusion, Geraldine says:

> You were expecting a bloke, beard, Bible, bad breath? ...
> And instead, you've got a babe with a bob cut and a magnificent bosom.

<div align="right">1.01 "Arrival"[485]</div>

This joke, met by laughter from the audience, demonstrates the type of vicar they were expecting (male, older, visually identifiable as Christian, and possibly unkempt, much like their previous vicar who died at the beginning of "Arrival") and the extent to which Geraldine defies this expectation. Geraldine immediately draws attention not only to the multitude of ways she differs from their expectations, but also specifically and proudly to her feminine appearance. This was a choice by star French, who claims that "the first thing I insisted on was that the vicar should have stupendous tits".[486] This joke additionally highlights the humour and religious intersection through incongruity already seen in religious discussions – in this case, identifying a stereotype of a vicar and presenting Geraldine as the incongruity. The slew of negative expectations that follow after Geraldine arrives, stemming from sexist prejudice and largely from David Horton, are gendered and based on stereotypes. First David regards Geraldine's appointment as an "insane joke", then as a dangerous problem, suggesting wild theories about how Geraldine will corrupt them by bathing "topless" on the rectory lawn.[487] David's attitude is emblematic of some of the prejudice women vicars first faced during the 1990s, with backlash ranging from calling women vicars "witches and priestesses" to sending letters "with violent content" that forced police involvement.[488]

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[485] 1.01 "Arrival".
[486] French, *The Story of Dibley.*
[487] 1.01 "Arrival".
[488] Robinson, "Ordaining female priests in the *Church of England*".

Despite David's objections Geraldine is soon accepted in the village, even by David, who eventually and unsuccessfully proposes to her in "Spring".[489] After Geraldine is widely accepted, the expectations of her *role* take more importance – in other words, what the parishioners expect her to do as their local vicar, which is essentially to be always available for help and to find solutions to their many problems. The best example to illustrate the importance of this role, and the expectations of the parishioners that she will fulfil it, is in an episode where Geraldine is taken away from her work *by* her personal life. In "Autumn"[490] Geraldine starts dating David's younger brother Simon, a suave and charming man who instantly expresses an interest in Geraldine when they meet in the earlier episode "Love and Marriage".[491] At the beginning of "Autumn", before Geraldine starts dating Simon, she admonishes the parish council for their underlying hostility towards one another, stating:

> You seem to be forgetting that we're partners here. If you've ever needed me, I'm there for you, are I? My house is your house, and I like to believe that if I ever needed you, you'd be there for me.

<div align="center">3.01 "Autumn"[492]</div>

In this dialogue, Geraldine summarises the position she has always held in *Dibley* of openness, support, and care. She reminds the parishioners that she (and her house) is always available to them, and also underlines the need for camaraderie and companionship between the council members. Shortly after this council meeting Geraldine invites Simon for a date at the vicarage, but when he arrives, they struggle to find time for each other between visits from almost every member of the village. Despite their villagers' trivial reasons for visiting (Alice and Hugo have come round to drop off an anorak) Geraldine feels she cannot send them away because her vicarage must be always open. After waiting for hours, Simon finally interrupts for her, saying to the parishioners while Geraldine stands in mortified silence:

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[489] 3.03 "Spring".
[490] 3.01 "Autumn".
[491] 2.04 "Love and Marriage".
[492] 3.01 "Autumn".

I've been waiting for this gorgeous creature for hours. She won't tell you herself, of course, she's your vicar. She always puts your happiness above her own, but I can't help thinking that on this one occasion, she might quite like you to go.

3.01 "Autumn"[493]

From this moment onward Simon becomes a block between Geraldine and her duties as a vicar. Echoing the efforts of his brother, David, Simon attempts to take Geraldine away from her work, though his reasons are sexual attraction rather than a lack of belief in her abilities. At first this only impacts smaller duties such as her open house policy and council meetings. However, when they break up later in the episode, Geraldine becomes so upset by the event that she refuses to give the usual Sunday service, yells at the parish council members during a meeting, and eventually decides to resign. Geraldine tells Alice that "I just can't imagine myself standing up in that pulpit, preaching about right and wrong, after what's happened."[494] In "Autumn", Geraldine for the first time finds that her personal life has entirely prevented her from fulfilling her roles as the vicar, and her immediate response is that she cannot recover. Luckily for Geraldine, the support of her parishioners (in a rare role-reversal) encourages her to stay and in the next episode, "Winter", she is back to her usual self.[495] The next time Geraldine enters a relationship (with Harry Kennedy in "The Handsome Stranger"),[496] the balance between personal and professional seems entirely manageable and productive, suggesting the issue was not with *relationships* as much as Geraldine and Simon's particular responses to their relationship in "Autumn".[497] In this situation, therefore, their response is gendered and dependent on her status as their vicar. She is expected to behave differently in her relationship because she is a woman vicar, suggesting this pressure to act in a certain way (chaste, prioritising work) is part of the conflict within the clerical femininity identity.

As well as illustrating the importance of community support to Geraldine's work and the difficulty of balancing personal and professional lives (when her personal life

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[493] 3.01 "Autumn".
[494] 3.01 "Autumn".
[495] 3.02 "Winter".
[496] 5.01 "The Handsome Stranger".
[497] 3.01 "Autumn".

differs from her professional life), this example touches on another factor of clerical gender – sexuality. In "Autumn", as has been shown, there is clear conflict between Geraldine's public work as a vicar and her private life as a sexual woman, with one competing with the other. Simon exacerbates this, explicitly drawing attention to the fact that her involved job does not leave enough time to spend with him. Some of the parishioners – especially David, but also Alice – consider the two to be entirely incompatible outside of marriage, and cite God and the Bible as proof for their Christian convictions. Ultimately, neither her work or her private life particularly succeeds because of the conflict between them, as Simon unceremoniously dumps Geraldine after a few weeks and Geraldine has a crisis of ability that results in her almost-resignation. Therefore, for Geraldine there is the same internal conflict between sexuality and professional responsibility as in clerical masculinity. While Ornella discusses conflict within sexuality in clerical masculinity, the manifestation here of *moral* conflicts around pre-marital sex and distraction from work is very different to clerical masculinity's asexual/hypersexual/perverse paradoxical dynamic.[498] In this context, the conflict comes from societal *judgement* rather than societal (or personal) desire.

Part of David and Geraldine's reactions are due to issues around pre-marital sex in Christianity, an issue which the Dibley parishioners discuss after Geraldine begins her sexual relationship with Simon. David in typical fashion takes a fairly conservative view, drawing on biblical teachings, saying "Unfortunately my memory is that Jesus was against it, which I think is a problem when we're talking about our vicar".[499] Owen, in Geraldine's defence, says that 'things were very different' in Jesus' day. Rather than discussing it in private, Alice speaks to Geraldine about pre-marital sex in person, unaware that Geraldine is about to sleep with Simon. Alice claims that it is well known that the punishment for pre-marital sex is eternal damnation and "pneumatic drills in your brain tissue" for simply looking at a man with lust.[500] The punishment is even worse for a vicar, Alice says, suggesting God would strangle Geraldine with her bare hands.[501] It is no coincidence that when Geraldine *does* get engaged and married to Harry Kennedy (Richard Armitage),

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[498] Ornella, "Losers, Food, and Sex", p. 110.
[499] 3.01 "Autumn".
[500] 3.01 "Autumn".
[501] 3.01 "Autumn".

there is no suggestion that she and Harry ever slept together before they were engaged.[502]

Yet, Geraldine does not seem to espouse these views herself. Geraldine, after some time considering Alice's sentiment, responds that she does not think it is a 'mortal sin' for an unmarried vicar to have sex as long as "she doesn't rub her parishioner's noses in it", referring to keeping her actions private.[503] While this is before her breakup with Simon (after which her views might have changed), Geraldine still seems to believe pre-marital sex is permissible, even desirable, as long as she can remain private. If so, Geraldine would not have considered such as relationship or experience 'wrong'. What, then, is her issue with continuing to preach? The answer instead may be because of her other actions during the relationship and abandoning her professional duties, such as leaving her house open at all times for visitors, attending parish council meetings, and giving services. Geraldine believes that she has let the Dibley parishioners down because of her lack of professionality, presence, and care. In *The Story of Dibley,* Simon's actor Clive Mantle supported this reading, commenting that "I think it's actually very healthy to see a vicar, albeit in a comedy, talking about sex or feelings or lusts or passions".[504] Rather than condemning sexual desire for a vicar, then, this interpretation suggests the real fault is with allowing Geraldine's personal life to impact her work as a vicar, which is why the series ends when Geraldine marries and disruption is inevitable.

There is, however, a further factor of Geraldine's gender and appearance at play here; Geraldine is not *just* a vicar with sexual desires, she is also a fuller-figured female vicar presented as sexually active, desirable, and desiring. As French summarised in *The Story of Dibley,* Geraldine is "not just a vicar, she's a woman… 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".[505] Indeed, due to her size, sexual appetite, and exuberant personality, Geraldine is reminiscent of the 'unruly woman', described by Kathleen Rowe as a woman who is "too fat, too funny, too noisy [and] too rebellious".[506] Rowe identified a number of qualities to the unruly woman, including that she "creates disorder by dominating... men", "her body is

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[502] 5.01 "The Handsome Stranger".
[503] 3.01 "Autumn".
[504] Clive Mantle, *The Story of Dibley.*
[505] French, *The Story of Dibley.*
[506] Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), p. 19.

excessive or fat", "she makes jokes, or laughs herself", and "her behaviour is associated with looseness and occasionally whorishness".[507] Despite the fact that the language here is purposefully derogatory – demonstrating the extent to which being 'unruly' is misogynistically coded as undesirable[508] – many of these qualities emerge from an analysis of Geraldine, who initially takes a traditionally male role, is fuller-figured, comedic, and both sexually desiring and desirable. Rowe discusses how the unruly woman figure "creates a disruptive spectacle of herself", both drawing (potentially unwanted) attention and turning that attention into a "source of potential power".[509] From the moment Geraldine arrives in Dibley, that attention is firmly on her, whether it is David Horton, the local parishioners, or even the national media.[510] She is unapologetically hungry for food, sex, and attention, which she receives in spades. In this sense, she is the opposite of clerical masculinity's "loser" character, who in *Rev.* is forced to hide or suppress elements of their sexuality in order to appear to possess an "appropriate" clerical masculinity (whether that is straight, asexual, or just discreet).[511] The 'appropriate' in Geraldine's interpretation of clerical femininity is purposefully 'inappropriate' and unruly.

Rowe relates the unruly woman trope to the carnivalesque "grotesque body" described by Mikhail Bakhtin.[512] Bakhtin identifies the grotesque body as "a body in the act of becoming", a body that is constantly changing, building and creating, but also a body that is 'excessive' and 'exaggerated'.[513] It is a body ruled by bodily changes, whether those are sexual, food consumption and its aftereffects, or excessive vocalisations and behaviour.[514] Though Bakhtin often uses examples of male speech and behaviour to illustrate the meaning of the 'grotesque' imagery,[515] Rowe asserts that the grotesque body is ultimately a "female body", driven by female biological functions and desires.[516] The use of the words 'grotesque' and 'excessive' demonstrate the extent to which the 'grotesque' is viewed as base, a spectacle, over the top, and visceral, and ultimately undesirable. Yet, without this excess, Geraldine

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[507] Ibid., p. 31.
[508] Ibid., p. 31.
[509] Ibid., p. 31.
[510] In "Celebrity Vicar", Geraldine becomes a brief national sensation by appearing on radio shows and posing for newspaper photoshoots. 2.03 "Celebrity Vicar", *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC1, 15 January 1998).
[511] Ornella, "Losers, Food, and Sex", p. 105.
[512] Rowe, *The Unruly Woman,* p. 33.
[513] Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, pp. 303, 316.
[514] Ibid., p. 318.
[515] Ibid., pp. 318-319.
[516] Rowe, *The Unruly Woman,* p. 33.

would not have been able to push herself forward through the stigma which she receives initially as a woman vicar, nor through the rigours of the job itself once she is in the position. For Geraldine, then, the unruly woman offers her the power of confidence and attention without which she would have been exiled from Dibley soon after her arrival.

From this analysis of Geraldine's role and performance within Dibley, there are four factors that have emerged in Geraldine's behaviour and treatment that contribute to her clerical femininity identity, or 'being a woman and a vicar'. First, Geraldine faces prejudice and higher standards within her profession because of her gender, constantly forced to fight adversaries like David Horton to receive the same respect and attention afforded to her male colleagues. Second, in comparison to other religious sitcom vicars like Philip, she is expected to be constantly available to her parishioners, opening her home at all hours even when she is busy, to the point where any personal relationships inevitably interrupt this dynamic. Third, Geraldine is both sexually desiring and desirable, who navigates a difficult line due to the views of her parishioners and the demands of her work, but is also unashamedly connected with her desires. Finally, Geraldine fulfils the role of the unruly woman, utilising the excess of her appetites and her attention-grabbing spectacle as a source of power to counteract the prejudice against her and fulfil the demands of her profession. The running theme throughout these points is the extent to which, as a woman vicar, Geraldine faces extra work or scrutiny to perform the same role, which she must do above and beyond the parameters of previous men vicars to be permitted to stay. Even when Geraldine is accepted into the village, she is still subject to extra scrutiny during personal relationships and held to a higher standard. Simon, for example, does not receive the same criticism she does during "Autumn", because he is male and not a vicar.[517] Without other examples of clerical femininities in main character religious sitcom vicars, the only potential forms of comparison to compare Geraldine to other clerical femininities is through a comparison to the few women who work for the church in *Rev.,* even if these are not direct comparisons (see Chapter 6). It is difficult to conclude to what extent this version of clerical

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[517] 3.01 "Autumn".

femininity is universal or even replicable, but like Ornella's analysis of *Rev.* this does illustrate *a* version of clerical femininity.[518]

In addition to this analysis of clerical femininity, this chapter has focused on two key areas – examples of humour and religious intersection, and the manifestation of the religious sitcom sub-genre in *Dibley.* For the former, like *Good Faith* before it, *Dibley* used a range of religious acts that function as a conduit for the comic effect, especially through prayer, services, and religious discussion. While this demonstrates the use of religious jokes through *context* and *content*, there were no examples of jokes to the *detriment of religion*, such as through mockery. However, unlike *Good Faith*, there were more examples of serious religious moments in *Dibley* with no comic impetus, to demonstrate both Geraldine's devotion to Christianity and to provide the complete antithesis to the potential 'mockery' of religion humour might have entailed. This leads on to the religious sitcom sub-genre, for which the occasional serious moment might be a generic convention. Alongside this, *Dibley* has numerous holiday specials, some of which were religion-based in narrative; it continues the 'overworked vicar' trend started in *Good Faith,* but to a greater extent; and it has many of the hallmarks of religious work such as prayers and services. Like *Good Faith*, *Dibley* is a 'traditional' sitcom (featuring a laugh track and multi-cam setup in a studio), and a comedy vehicle for its star. These points, alongside the discussion of clerical gender, will inform the definition of the religious sitcom in Chapter 6. Before this, the next two chapters on *Father Ted* and *Rev.* will investigate whether these elements are a staple of the religious sitcom sub-genre and what other conventions might define it.

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[518] Ornella, "Losers, Food, and Sex".

Chapter 4

Father Ted: Priests, Parody, and 'Light Touch' Religion

> Heaven, hell, and everlasting life and all that type of thing.
> You're not meant to take it seriously, Ted.
>
> Dougal McGuire, *Father Ted*[519]

While *Vicar of Dibley* was dominating viewing figures on BBC1, Channel 4 began airing *Father Ted* in 1995. In many respects, the sitcoms were very different. The only Catholic religious sitcom of the case studies, *Ted* follows the antics of three priests and their housekeeper living on the remote, fantastical Craggy Island (a fictional location off the west coast of Ireland) who spend most of their time avoiding work as much as possible. Titular character Father Ted Crilly (Dermot Morgan), a middle-aged priest stuck on Craggy Island after a financial scandal in his last parish, is obsessed with gaining fame and fortune whether as a priest, a pop star, or television presenter. Ted is tasked with taking care of the repulsive, vulgar senior priest Father Jack Hackett (Frank Kelly) and the young and simple Father Dougal McGuire (Ardal O'Hanlon). Mrs. Doyle (Pauline McLynn), the only regular female cast member, is always on hand to offer tea and cake, whether they ask for it or not. Beyond the fact that Craggy Island is rural and sparsely populated, it is very difficult to describe the location because it transforms to suit the needs of the narrative. In one episode, Craggy Island has a thriving Chinese population of which somehow Ted is entirely unaware,[520] while in another the island has 'no west side' because it fell in the sea.[521] Since it finished broadcasting in 1998, *Ted* has proved to be an enduring hit; as well as a dedicated "*Father Ted* Night" in 2011[522] and winning second place in a 2019 Radio Times poll to find the "Best Sitcom of All Time",[523] it has an annual celebration of *Ted* called Tedfest that takes place in Ireland.[524]

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[519] 1.01 "Good Luck, Father Ted", *Father Ted* (21 April 1995).
[520] 3.01 "Are You Right There Father Ted?", *Father Ted* (C4, 13 March 1998).
[521] 1.03 "The Passion of St. Tibulus", *Father Ted* (C4, 5 May 1995).
[522] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy,* p. 77.
[523] Paris Donnatella Callan, "Father Ted Named Second Best Sitcom of All Time", *IB4UD* (12 April 2019) <https://www.irelandbeforeyoudie.com/father-ted-named-second-best-sitcom-of-all-time/> [accessed 17/05/2022].
[524] "Tedfest", *Tedfest.org* <http://tedfest.org/ted.php?Action=Home> [accessed 14/04/21].

Consequently, Hunt describes *Ted* as "Channel 4's first unqualified 'classic' sitcom", a compliment that demonstrates the impact *Ted* had during and since it was first broadcast in the 1990s.[525]

Relative to the other religious sitcoms, *Ted* has had a remarkable amount of academic attention, largely focused on three areas: the writers and creators Graham Linehan and Arthur Mathews (Thompson, McGonigle);[526] the relationship between the programme and Ireland (Free);[527] and *Ted*'s frequent use of parody (Archer).[528] Parody is of particular interest when discussing humour and religion as another potential site for intersection. The reasons given by academics for the attention on *Ted* and Linehan and Mathews range from the "migrant identity" of Linehan[529] to simply being one of "the best ten British TV comedy shows" of the 1990s,[530] but in the context of sitcom history, *Ted* has been especially lauded as an example of "post-alternative" 1990s television comedy output in opposition to both the "bland and conservative" sitcom fare of the 1970s and 1980s and the more traditional (in look and comedic style) sitcoms like *Dibley* (see Chapter 3).[531] In fact, Hunt highlights the work of *Ted* co-creators Linehan and Mathews as one of two important "nexus points" for the 1990s (the other being the work of Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer) that fed into the trend for "dark comedy" and surrealism later in the decade.[532]

In terms of formatting and production, *Ted* is a fairly typical example of the sitcom format (see Chapter 1).[533] The episodes are usually around 25 minutes with time for advertisement breaks. *Ted* uses a multi-camera setup and is almost entirely filmed on the same set – the living room of their abode, the parochial house. There is also a live studio audience providing a laugh track. While all of these points demonstrate an adherence to the traditional sitcom look, Hunt argues that this was a stylistic

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[525] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy,* p. 76.
[526] Lisa McGonigle, "Doesn't Mary have a Lovely Bottom?": Gender, Sexuality and Catholic Identity in *Father Ted*', *Etudes Irlandaises,* 37:1 (2012), pp. 89-102.
[527] Marcus Free, "'Don't Tell Me I'm Still on That Feckin' Island': Migration, Masculinity, British Television and Irish Identity in the Work of Graham Linehan", *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies,* 10:2 (1 June 2015).
[528] Neil Archer, *Beyond a Joke: Parody in English Film and Television Comedy* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017).
[529] Free, "'Don't Tell Me…'", p. 5.
[530] Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty,* p. xii.
[531] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy,* pp. ix, 69.
[532] Ibid*.,* p. 9.
[533] For information on the sitcom format see Chapter 1, and Mills, *The Sitcom;* Brian G. Rose, *TV Genres: A Handbook and Reference Guide* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985); and Morreale, *Critiquing the Sitcom,* among others.

choice by Linehan and Mathews to 'resist' the changes coming in the sitcom,[534] evidenced by a continued use of the traditional in Linehan's later sitcoms *Black Books* (C4, 2000-2004)[535] and *The IT Crowd* (C4, 2006-2013).[536] The changes in sitcom look Hunt highlights include the "heightened naturalism" of some 1990s sitcoms such as *The Royle Family* (BBC2/1, 1998-2012)[537] which dropped the studio audience and fourth wall, and later the "quirks" of shows such as *The Office* or *Peep Show* (C4, 2003-2015)[538] that used hybrid generic conventions or technological developments to change the sitcom look.[539]

Rather than changes in the sitcom look, *Ted* breaks from the sitcom tradition through character and narrative. Hunt describes *Ted* as a "traditional sitcom with fantastical touches", claiming the sitcom does not 'subvert' the genre as much as embellish it.[540] First, while there is arguably a 'family' setup amongst the main characters, as is common in sitcoms[541] – Ted as father, Mrs. Doyle mother, Dougal child, and Jack as grandfather – these roles often change from episode to episode. For example, while in some Ted acts as a paternal figure to Dougal, in others they are more like brothers banding together against a common enemy such as Bishop Brennan or the priests from Rugged Island. Ted is not a role model to Dougal, nor does he provide fatherly advice or punishment. In this sense, *Ted* replaces the stability in the family setup with a mutable, shifting relationship that can morph to fit the narrative. Second, *Ted* uses many fantastical, surrealist elements such as ridiculous, unlikely situations and a constantly changing, almost magical environment to suit the narrative (allowing Craggy Island to 'take the roads in' or add a Chinese community as needed, much like the changing family dynamics). While it is certainly not a 'surreal' comedy in the style of later sitcoms like *Spaced* or *The Mighty Boosh* (BBC3, 2004-2007),[542] these "fantastical touches" separate *Ted* from both the earlier religious sitcoms *Good Faith* and *Dibley* and the later *Rev.* In fact, Hunt attributes this 'ruptured naturalism' to its roots in the "sitcom aesthetics that emerged in the 'alternative' 1980s", the very sitcoms that shows like *Good Faith* were pitted against

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[534] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy*, p. 69.
[535] *Black Books,* cr. Dylan Moran and Graham Linehan (C4, 2000-2004).
[536] *The IT Crowd,* cr. Graham Linehan (C4, 2006-2013).
[537] *The Royle Family,* cr. Caroline Aherne and Craig Cash (BBC2/1, 1998-2012).
[538] *Peep Show,* cr. Andrew O'Connor, Jesse Armstrong, and Sam Bain (C4, 2003-2015).
[539] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy,* p. 69.
[540] Ibid.*,* p. 17.
[541] Mills, *The Sitcom,* p. 20.
[542] *The Mighty Boosh*, cr. Julian Barratt and Noel Fielding (BBC3, 2004-2007).

and deemed "bland".[543] Third, *Ted* has been "celebrated" for its combination of different comedic styles, ranging from "verbal interplay", farcical slapstick and violence, and particularly the "pull-back/reveal gags", defined by quick cuts that emphasise incongruity between an earlier and later scene.[544] For example, in "Are you Right There, Father Ted?" when Ted finally escapes Craggy Island for a new, luxury parish, the scene cuts from a priest asking Ted about some of his 'expenses', to another where Dougal opens the door of the Craggy Island parochial house (where Ted has been sent as punishment for fiddling his expenses) with a long shout of 'TED!'.[545] These cartoon-like quick cuts are more reminiscent of animations such as *The Simpsons* than traditional sitcom, which are cited as influences on *Ted*.[546]

One further point of difference is *Ted's* choice of star. Both *Good Faith* and *Dibley* act as comedy vehicles for their comedy actor leads, Briers having starred in popular sitcoms before and French in a variety of different comic roles in sketch, stand-up, and sitcom.[547] Dermot Morgan also had a comedy background, especially on stand-up circuits in Ireland, but was consequently more well-known in Ireland than the UK (where *Ted's* broadcaster Channel 4 is based).[548] More important to the subject of the religious sitcom, however, is that Morgan "had long been antipathetic towards the Catholic Church in his stand-up routines" and had otherwise "gained a reputation" for religious satire.[549] Because of this, Morgan's casting, McGonigle argues, was an early indicator of antagonism towards the Catholic Church within the show.[550] As such, rather than positioning *Ted* as a comedy vehicle, the choice of star here actually suggests potential religion engagement from the outset.

Despite this potential, academic criticism about religion in *Ted* seems reluctant to argue that *Ted* is anything more than light entertainment with only some "(relatively mild) digs at Catholicism".[551] Marcus Free comments that *Ted* "directly satirises the Catholic Church" but conflates this satirising with representations of Irish culture rather than as a commentary on religion, arguing that it creates a "paradoxical vision of a nation" caught between repressed desire and the beliefs that hinder this

[543] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy*, pp. 81, 7.
[544] Ibid., pp. 77-78, 86.
[545] 3.01 "Are You Right There, Father Ted?".
[546] Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty,* pp. 198, 202.
[547] See Chapters 2 and 3, and Seidman, *Comedian Comedy.*
[548] McGonigle, "Doesn't Mary have a Lovely Bottom?", p. 101.
[549] Ibid., p. 101.
[550] Ibid., p. 101.
[551] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy*, p. 70.

desire.[552] Hunt similarly states that *Ted* has "nothing to say" on the topic of religion, reminiscent of his comments on how Hunt describes sitcoms as 'apolitical' in the 1990s.[553] This is echoed in interviews with co-creators Linehan and Mathews, who claim that they were "just being a bit silly"[554] about the church, and that the humour is very "innocent"[555] rather than the "hard-hitting, anti-clerical satire" it could have been.[556] Chapter 3 has already discussed the gender and church politics present in the early series of *Dibley*, demonstrating that despite being one of these apolitical sitcoms from the 1990s *Dibley* at least was not entirely apolitical.[557] Also, since neither Hunt nor other academics discussing *Ted* go into significant detail about religious representation in the sitcom, it remains to be seen whether the show's 'digs' at Catholicism or its religious representation in general are light, mild, or innocent.

As well as commenting that *Ted* has "nothing to say", Hunt suggests *Ted* takes a "light satirical touch to religion", and "religious faith is rendered a kind of fannish enthusiasm", comparing Jesus to a "particularly celebrated and accomplished performer".[558] Because of this, Hunt claims that *Ted* essentially "secularizes the Catholic priesthood" by only connecting Catholicism with work and, therefore, as a "an unwelcome burden to be avoided", influenced by the fact that *Ted* "is the work of a younger atheist with no axe to grind".[559] From this description, then, there is a parallel between religion in *Ted* and religion in *Good Faith;* religion is seen as little more than a situation for the show's narrative or a reason for the characters to interact rather than an integral part of the characters' lives, beliefs, and motivations. However, *Ted* takes this even further by entirely avoiding the work of Catholic priesthood wherever possible, eschewing even the one or two appearances in church that occur in *Good Faith* by never showing Ted and his fellow priests giving sermons, officiating a wedding or funeral, or supporting the local community. It also exposes a potential paradox – on the one hand, religion is work, and work is to be avoided; on the other, religion can be a 'fannish enthusiasm' akin to popular culture. In other words, when religion is mandatory work it is unappealing, but as a hobby it

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[552] Free, "'Don't Tell Me…'", p. 9.
[553] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy*, pp. 70, 5.
[554] Graham Linehan in Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty*, p. 202.
[555] Arthur Mathews in Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty*, p. 202.
[556] Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty*, p. 202.
[557] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy*, p. 5.
[558] Ibid*.,* pp. 79-80.
[559] Ibid., p. 84.

could be more exciting. The effect of this is to present the priests as professionally apathetic – in fact, they actively avoid work unless forced. Still, despite claiming that *Ted* takes a "light satirical touch", Hunt does not elaborate on the meaning of 'light' or provide examples from *Ted* that demonstrate the point.[560] Therefore, textual analysis interrogating the representation of religion in *Ted* can either validate or disprove the claim.

In Chapters 2 and 3 there have been three key areas of religious representation: prayers, services, and religious discussion. As seen in *Good Faith* and *Dibley,* prayers in religious sitcoms can have multiple purposes or functions. For example, in *Dibley,* prayers could be conversational; asking for help; or a comic nod to the presence of the audience. In *Ted,* prayers again have the potential to offer different functions or purposes to the narrative. However, *Ted* includes only four individual examples of prayer, and therefore their functions are already limited by a lack of opportunity for variation.

Two of the four prayers in *Ted* are in the second episode of the first series, "Entertaining Father Stone", when Ted's boring acquaintance Father Paul Stone (Michael Redmond) visits for a holiday.[561] Stone, a very quiet and awkward priest, has been visiting the parochial house every year to the chagrin of Ted and Dougal. During Stone's 'holiday', Stone usually sits on the sofa, not talking or moving, until Ted and Dougal find an excuse to leave. After Stone has been staying for over three weeks, Ted frantically kneels before an altar in the bedroom and prays to God to "please, get rid of him" in whatever way possible. God appears to oblige; in the following scene, after Ted and Dougal have encouraged him to play crazy golf with them in a thunderstorm, Stone is electrocuted and comatose. Mortified, Ted later prays in hospital for Stone to be revived, promising to let Stone stay with them as long as he wants. In the middle of the prayer Stone miraculously rises from the bed, still clutching the golf club through which he was electrocuted. Ted is ecstatic, but quickly realises that Stone is still as unresponsive and awkward as ever. The final scene shows Ted, Dougal, Jack, and Stone sitting in silence in the living room for the entirety of the end credits, as if nothing has changed.

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[560] Ibid., p. 79.
[561] 1.02 "Entertaining Father Stone".

These two prayers serve the singular purpose of asking for help to make Father Stone leave. Unlike examples from *Good Faith* and *Dibley,* the prayers do not offer any special insight into the character's thoughts or narrative progression through monologue. Ted's prayers were either completely ineffective (Ted remains trapped with Stone) or dangerously detrimental (Ted's prayers nearly kill Stone). This pattern is reflected in the other examples of *Ted* too, such as in the first episode "Good Luck, Father Ted?"[562] when Dougal prays using the Lord's Prayer but forgets the words and demonstrates his inability to perform even basic tasks as a priest. Similarly, in "And God Created Woman",[563] Ted starts reciting a 'Hail Mary' prayer in the car to try and speed up the traffic which results in Ted rear-ending the car in front and then getting punched by the driver. Consequently, prayers in *Ted* seem to perform a single function – asking for help – and are either ineffectual or damaging to the person praying.

This might be an example of the 'light' touch to religion that Hunt has identified, both in its singularity of purpose and lack of examples, but this may underestimate the extent to which these prayers can be viewed as satirical or mocking.[564] In Chapters 2 and 3 religious jokes were split into four categories: 1. jokes with a religious *context* (such as told by a religious character in or a religious setting)*,* 2. jokes with religious *content* (jokes with religious topics), 3. jokes at the *expense* of religion (jokes that mock religion), and 4. jokes at the *expense* of humour (jokes that are religious but not funny).[565] The majority of jokes in Chapters 2 and 3 fell into the first two categories with a couple of examples from the third. The lack of jokes that fall into the fourth category may be due to the sitcoms' perceived comic impetus, which would be sacrificed to have a non-comedic religious joke, or because jokes are always supposed to intend to be funny. All of the prayers in *Ted* fall into categories 1 and 2 – joke told while a priest prays – but also demonstrates evidence of category 3, jokes that mock religion. The content of the prayers is not mocking in isolation, but the consequences of the prayers (either something undesirable or nothing at all) suggest the process of praying is pointless or dangerous. In this sense, prayer, and the belief that a positive change will result from it, is rendered deluded or ridiculous.

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[562] 1.01 "Good Luck, Father Ted".
[563] 1.05 "And God Created Woman", *Father Ted* (C4, 19 May 1995).
[564] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy,* p. 79.
[565] See Chapters 2 and 3.

Instead of prayer, then, *Ted* advocates for more concrete, practical action. In "Flight Into Terror",[566] through an accident caused by Dougal, a plane full of priests returning from a conference drops all its fuel and they have only a few minutes before the plane crashes. Ted organises a competition to see which priests should receive one of the two parachutes left on the plane. Before the competition begins, Father Gallagher (a cameo by Graham Linehan) stands up and says: "Should we not just have a bit of an old pray? Maybe God will help us and…".[567] Gallagher trails off after the other priests fail to respond and sits down awkwardly. In this example, the other priests' objection is clear; prayer will be ineffective and will simply waste the limited time they have left, so they need a practical solution to save them. While this could be an example of Incongruity Theory (see Chapter 1),[568] the fact that this belief is encapsulated in the figure of Gallagher lends itself more to Superiority Theory, where a power imbalance is created between the laugher (dominant) and the object of laughter (subservient).[569] In other words, *Ted* actively invites mockery and laughter at the character of Gallagher, reinforced by the mocking reactions of the other priests and the roars of laughter on the laugh track. As such, even by choosing not to pray, *Ted* reinforces that prayer is either ineffective or detrimental. Another example is in "Speed 3", when Dougal is trapped on a milk float with a bomb and Ted calls in other priests to help save him.[570] After trying to think of solutions for hours, the priests eventually settle on holding a Mass in full regalia alongside the milk float on the back of a trailer. As the trailer unsteadily trundles past Dougal's milk float, the priests intone a prayer to ask God to bring Dougal "to safety". This Mass proves ineffective, again showing the priests' reliance on religious rituals as impractical and illogical. Therefore, while prayer in *Ted* only serves one function, when it *is* used it demonstrates an antipathy towards prayer in general and actively mocks the advocation for prayer instead of practical action.

The aforementioned Mass "Speed 3" is also the only 'service' shown on-screen, a rare break for the show which otherwise purposefully avoids showing the priests at work. *Good Faith* and *Dibley* showed a direct correlation between the number of prayers and the number of services in the series (few and moderate respectively),

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[566] 2.10 "Flight Into Terror", *Father Ted* (10 May 1996).
[567] 2.10 "Flight into Terror".
[568] See Chapter 1, and (among others) Oring, *Engaging Humor*.
[569] See Chapter 1, and (among others) Aristotle, *Poetics*.
[570] 3.03 "Speed 3".

and in this sense *Ted* is no different; like prayer, there are barely any services in the series, and the vast majority are off-screen. In one episode Ted whips through a service off-screen at a breakneck pace to get it over with as fast as possible,[571] while in another the scene only begins when Ted has finished the service as he walks away from the altar.[572] "Speed 3"'s Mass is the exception because the service is divorced enough from the usual church service to pass, since it happens on a moving trailer. On one occasion a group of nuns express their adulation for Ted's work, acting more like fans or groupies that peers[573] (another example of "fannish enthusiasm")[574] but in a later episode Ted's parishioners complain that Ted's services "bored the arse off" them.[575] Regardless of reception, Ted does not seem to care about priestly work, commenting after a parishioner's cutting remark that he "couldn't give a toss" about what his parishioners think, instead valuing the allure of fame, whether as a pop star, lauded priest, or TV personality.[576] Ted's attitude towards work is evidence that priestly work is indeed "an unwelcome burden to be avoided" for Ted as Hunt suggests.[577]

Ted's wish to avoid work and chase fame is emblematic of the British sitcom "loser" archetype described by Mills[578] and applied to Ted by Free.[579] The loser is both self-obsessed and hindered by an innate lack of self-awareness, causing a division between "how they wish to be seen by others, and how they actually appear".[580] In the case of Ted, this results in being seen as dull and out of touch in contrast to the desire for attention and adulation. The services Ted is required to perform as part of his professional duties hold none of the attention and adulation Ted seeks, and therefore they are a task to be avoided. The other priests avoid services even more, Jack because he refuses to engage and Dougal because of his incompetence – during the one funeral Dougal officiates, a quick cut reveals that the hearse crashed into the coffin and exploded.[581] The 'purpose' of a religious service can be multi-faceted, ranging from personal exploration (*Good Faith*) to celebration or comfort

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[571] 1.05 "And God Created Woman".
[572] 3.08 "Going to America", *Father Ted* (C4, 1 May 1998).
[573] 1.05 "And God Created Woman".
[574] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy,* p. 79.
[575] 3.08 "Going to America".
[576] 3.08 "Going to America".
[577] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy*, p. 84.
[578] Mills, *Television Sitcom,* p. 42.
[579] Free, "'Don't Tell Me…'", p. 8.
[580] Mills, *Television Sitcom,* pp. 41-42.
[581] 2X.01, "A Christmassy Ted".

(*Dibley*), but "Speed 3" and the disastrous off-screen services have little purpose than to demonstrate their lack of appeal or effect. Ted does not want to officiate, the parishioners are reluctant to attend, and even if they do, they might catch fire.

Since both prayers and services end in disaster, it might be more effective to investigate evidence of Ted's internal belief system, which in *Dibley* was explored through religious discussion. Ted seems to hold very few beliefs, but this might be because Ted avoids discussing anything controversial as much as possible. As Free writes, Ted avoids "such contentious matters as transubstantiation and the Virgin birth" and instead often adopts the (presumed) belief system of whomever he is talking to, to avoid conflict or having to think for himself.[582] In the episode "A Song for Europe",[583] 'Eurosong' manager Charles reveals that he and 'Eurosong' MC Fred have been in a relationship for ten years. Thrown, Ted eventually stutters that there is not "anything wrong with that type of thing", claiming "the whole gay thing… is a bit of a puzzle to us all" and that "the Pope says things he doesn't really mean". Charles then mentions "Papal infallibility", the belief that the Pope is preserved from the possibility of error while in his role. Ted, unable to counter, ask Charles if it applies to everything and then laughs hysterically when Charles says is unsure. Because of Ted's hesitancy and nervousness, it is clear that Ted is simply reluctant to say anything controversial and responds with something to appease Charles and avoid conflict. On the one hand, the desire to avoid discussing anything too controversial matches the sentiment from Mathews that priests "prefer to talk about almost anything other than religion".[584] On the other, it purposefully fails to counter arguments against the church on potentially controversial topics (for Ted and fellow Catholics during the show's broadcast in the 1990s) such as gay acceptance or contraception.[585] By avoiding talking about the issues or offering any counterpoints, Ted and *Ted* make certain positions seem untenable.

Ted does, however, occasionally discuss his religious beliefs with Dougal and other priests, freed from the burden of interacting with the general public. Ted is apathetic towards his religious work and often ignorant to the possible complexities of religious argument, such as in "Tentacles of Doom" when Ted claims that "the great thing

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[582] Free, "'Don't Tell Me…'", p. 9.
[583] 2.05 "A Song for Europe", *Father Ted* (C4, 5 April 1996).
[584] Mathews in Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty,* p. 195.
[585] Contraception is another topic Ted almost manages to avoid talking about in 3.03 "Speed 3" when challenged by a particularly philandering milkman.

about Catholicism [is] it's so vague and nobody really knows what it's all about".[586] However, Ted is also the priest who is most enthusiastic about Catholicism and most likely to support their belief system, even if he is unclear on why. In the first episode "Good Luck, Father Ted", Ted tells Dougal off for not 'taking seriously' "heaven, hell, everlasting life and all that type of thing".[587] Returning to Hunt's argument that Ted's religious devotion is actually just "fannish enthusiasm" for religion and God, Ted's particular blend of lack of thought and muted passion certainly seems to apply.[588] In "Hell", he and Dougal muse on how Jesus was "great" and "brilliant" without any specifics about what this really means,[589] while in another Ted buys a souvenir of a money box from which the Virgin Mary pops up when they insert a coin.[590] Even in the earlier quote from "Good Luck", Ted is non-specific about what in particular Dougal should take seriously beyond conceptions of the afterlife, instead advocating a blind belief in "that type of thing".[591] 'Fannish enthusiasm', then, manifests in abstract statements of 'brilliance' and novelty purchases rather than serious devotion or analysis.

The other two priests, Dougal and Jack, take a different tack. In another sitcom, the inclusion of multiple priests as main characters might organically generate religious conversation. This does not play out in *Ted* since Ted does not give religion serious thought and Dougal and Jack are implicitly atheist or agnostic. Dougal frequently voices a lack of belief in Catholicism, despite expressing enjoyment about being a priest. Also in "Good Luck",[592] Dougal explains in a TV interview that he does not "believe in organised religion" and "who knows" if God exists, while Jack (according to Dougal) "doesn't even believe in God" either. In "Tentacles of Doom"[593] Dougal's statements on atheism and lack of belief are so convincing that a bishop decides to quit the priesthood entirely. This precision of thought and verbosity from Dougal on the topic of religion are especially incongruous given his usual obliviousness and childish demeanour. Dougal's discussions demonstrate that – while Dougal is undoubtedly the most ignorant and naïve of the priests – he has given thought to his beliefs and generated logical arguments to support his conclusions in a way that

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[586] 2.03 "Tentacles of Doom", *Father Ted* (C4, 22 March 1996).
[587] 1.01 "Good Luck, Father Ted".
[588] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy*, p. 80.
[589] 2.01 "Hell", *Father Ted* (C4, 8 March 1996).
[590] 2.10 "Flight into Terror".
[591] 1.01 "Good Luck, Father Ted".
[592] 1.01 "Good Luck, Father Ted".
[593] 2.03 "Tentacles of Doom".

Ted has purposefully avoided. Dougal's interaction with religion, then, is certainly not reminiscent of 'fannish enthusiasm' as much as occasional bursts of deeper thought, often to the detriment of religion. Jack does not discuss religious matters at all because he spends most episodes sitting angrily in his living room chair and shouting single word answers such as 'drink', 'arse', and 'girls'. However, there are rare flashbacks that reveal his violent, 'fire-and-brimstone' methods of ministry in the past. Such revelations include that Jack was a 'great believer' in discipline (such as whacking a child with a hockey stick), he once drove a priest to mass murder, and he did not agree with 'a lot of the modern thinking' of the church, such as *not* yelling at children that they were going to 'burn in hell'.[594] Therefore, the three Craggy Island priests have very different methods and levels of engagement with religion and religious thought; while Ted's engagement with religious is avoidance, a lack of attention and general enthusiasm, Dougal is unusually astute and thoughtful to an extent unseen in his other behaviour, and Jack was once emblematic of hard-line punishment and fear, using his religious position to assert power over children and parishioners.

The relationship between the three Craggy Island priests is entirely dependent on the narrative of the episode. Free describes the relationship as a "quasi-familial structure, with Ted as father, Dougal as son, Jack as grandfather and Mrs Doyle as a maternal figure".[595] In some situations this appears to be the case. For example, in "Old Grey Whistle Theft"[596] Dougal is corrupted by a new priest whose teenage interests (video games, cigarettes, music, and acting out) influence Dougal to experience puberty-like changes in temperament. Here, Ted acts as a parental disciplinarian against whom Dougal can react. However, in other episodes, Ted and Dougal are united against a common enemy, like their church superior Bishop Brennan[597] or other rival priests.[598] While Jack's age indicates he could be a grandfather figure, his monosyllabic interactions and rewards-based treatment make him more comparable to a disgruntled child or pet. Finally, their housekeeper Mrs. Doyle could be seen as a maternal figure, as she is in charge of caring for the

[594] 1.06 "Grant Unto Him Eternal Rest", *Father Ted* (C4, 26 May 1995).
[595] Free, "'Don't Tell Me…", p. 9.
[596] 2.04 "Old Grey Whistle Theft", *Father Ted* (C4, 29 March 1996).
[597] This dynamic is especially apparent in 1.03 "The Passion of St. Tibulus" and 3.06 "Kicking Bishop Brennan Up the Arse" (C4, 17 April 1998).
[598] 3.05 "Escape from Victory", *Father Ted* (10 April 1998).

priests, especially in terms of food and cleaning. Yet she also appears as a child for Ted to look after, literally dressing as such in "Going to America".[599] Regardless of the instability of the character's familial roles, they are also instantly recognisable during their narratives – there is little doubt that Dougal's sullen behaviour in "Old Grey Whistle Theft" is that of a teenager, for example, especially when paired with the line "I should be able to do what I want, Ted. I am nearly 26 you know. You still treat me like I was 24."[600] Therefore, while their positions in the family remain unstable, the stereotypical language and behaviour that signifies the role are easy to determine within each narrative, and gives *Ted* the opportunity to explore different narratives and allocate character roles to suit the narrative.

Because their familial roles are identifiable even if constantly in flux, the actual *existence* of the family unit (the group consisting of Ted, Dougal, Jack, and Mrs. Doyle) remains fixed throughout the series. Mills describes this as a "surrogate" family to distinguish from the 'related' family, which symbolises "the fragmentary nature of the family in contemporary society".[601] Another example of the surrogate family would be in *Dibley,* where the 'family' is comprised of Geraldine and her parishioners, while *Good Faith* has a related family with parents and children who are biologically or lawfully related. The establishment of a family unit is a common factor in sitcom even within 'workplace' sitcoms,[602] but the difference in *Ted* from other sitcom family units is that this family is neither related, 'chosen' or wanted. The three priests have been banished to Craggy Island for criminal behaviour in place of prosecution (hinted to be financial impropriety, life endangerment, and alcohol and sexual abuse)[603] and Ted in particular is desperate to leave. In an interview with Thompson, co-creator Linehan said that "Ted's situation is *terrible*" because he is "quite an intelligent man… stuck in the arse-end of nowhere with these two awful people".[604] Ted's reasons for wanting to leave are multitudinous, but the key reason is he believes he *deserves* more than Craggy Island, especially adulation, fame, and money.[605] Mills describes British sitcom as repeatedly focusing on characters who are "incapable of communicating" and whose "family are problematic and stifling",

[599] 3.08 "Going to America".
[600] 2.04 "Old Grey Whistle Theft".
[601] Mills, *The Sitcom,* p. 44.
[602] Mills, *The Sitcom,* p. 20.
[603] 1.03 "The Passion of St. Tibulus".
[604] Linehan in Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty,* p. 202.
[605] When Ted receives attention and admiration in 2X.01 "A Christmassy Ted", for example, he treats this attention as merely his right and abuses his position to take revenge on other priests whom he feels have wronged him.

and in this situation Ted views Craggy Island and his housemates as stifling his potential. Ted seeks escape both literally by attempting to leave the island or find another posting[606] and figuratively by attaining fame and fortune.[607] Unfortunately for Ted, even when he manages to leave Craggy Island, he can never escape for long. In "Are You Right There, Father Ted?", for example, Ted manages to find a new, more comfortable position in Dublin but is forced to return to Craggy Island after committing even more financial impropriety.[608] Similarly, in the final episode "Going to America", Ted has a real opportunity to escape and move to America, but turns back when he discovers the difficulties and potential danger of his new parish.[609] Craggy Island proves time and again the only place that Ted can be – either the other opportunities are worse, or Ted ruins his chances by fiddling his expenses. Therefore, Ted's surrogate family is not a source of comfort but of confinement, even if there is little evidence that there is anywhere else for Ted to go.

Instead of seeking comfort from his unwanted, surrogate family, Ted instead finds support from the many other priests that visit Craggy Island, establishing a thriving and interactive community of priests with whom Ted and Dougal could interact. The community provides friendship, support, and activities in an environment that otherwise is very isolating. Other priests act as acquaintances, friends, and rivals throughout the series, and their inclusion develops a wide and diverse priest community (diverse in terms of personality rather than intersection, since all the priests are male, white, and Irish). For the most part, the priest guest roles on *Ted* were given to Irish stars and comedians, whose personalities are encapsulated by on one comic quirk, such as the boring priest, the dramatic priest, the nervous priest etc.[610] McGonigle describes this "clerical world" as a "closed community in which priests appears to all know one another", creating a sense of exclusion to those outside the community but a connection and understanding for those within like Ted.[611] To create the sense of an exclusive priest community *Ted* also features priest-only products (the store 'Habit Hat' that produces clothing especially for

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[606] Including 3.01 "Are You Right There, Father Ted?" and 3.08 "Going to America".
[607] Such as in 2.05 "A Song for Europe" and 2X.01 "A Christmassy Ted".
[608] 3.01 "Are You Right There, Father Ted?".
[609] 3.08 "Going to America".
[610] 2X.01 "A Christmassy Ted".
[611] McGonigle, "'Doesn't Mary have…'", p. 90.

priests),[612] priest-only services (a helpline for priests to talk to other priests)[613] and priest-only awards (the Golden Cleric that Ted wins in "A Christmassy Ted").[614] For the most part, the priest community is largely devoid of specific religious discussion or activity, more likely to organise a holiday or sports day than a religious retreat. Like Ted, Dougal and Jack, the other priests actively avoid any engagement with religion. For example, in "A Christmassy Ted", the priests make a hasty exit rather than staying to watch a Christmas Mass. Similarly, in "Flight Into Terror", the priests meet a suggestion of praying for help to save them from a plane crash with stony silence and field non-religious suggestions for survival instead.[615] The lack of engagement with religion when together is consistent with comments made by co-creator Mathews, who argues that the "great thing about priests… is that they prefer to talk about almost anything other than religion".[616] Therefore, when they do gather, the priests want to have a talent show, throw a birthday party, or even play a board game rather than discuss religion. Their community is not only "closed" and exclusive, but also a means of escape from their professional responsibilities that Ted's otherwise isolated situation does not offer.[617]

The priest community might offer support and friendship to Ted (and no awkward religious conversations), but the church superiors – the direct authorities above Ted and Dougal such as bishops – are a different story. Like *Good Faith* and *Dibley,* the church institution itself is largely absent from *Ted*, because the priests are marooned on Craggy Island and rarely interact with anyone on 'the mainland' of Ireland. However, there are two key exceptions. One is in "Tentacles of Doom", when three bishops visit to upgrade the Holy Stone of Clonrichert to a 'grade two relic'.[618] In stark contrast to the religious avoidance by the priest community, the bishops all want to discuss ecumenical and religious issues with Ted, Dougal, and Jack, which prompts them to hurriedly prepare some generic responses in case they have to answer. The superiors here are not only more likely to engage with religious discussion, but are also people to fool and avoid, lest they 'find out' Ted and the other priests are not competent. Still, the church superiors are very similar to the

[612] 3.01 "Are You Right There Father Ted?".
[613] 2X.01 "A Christmassy Ted".
[614] 2X.01 "A Christmassy Ted".
[615] 2.10 "Flight Into Terror".
[616] Mathews in Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty,* pp. 195-196.
[617] McGonigle, "'Doesn't Mary have…'", p. 90.
[618] 2.03 "Tentacles of Doom".

priests; they have their own, separate community set up (in "A Christmassy Ted", the Vatican bishops have their own secret musical club) and with the exception of "Tentacles of Doom", are never shown to discuss religion within their own community.[619] While there is potential animosity between the priests and their superiors, then, there is little material difference between them, highlighting the "closed" nature of the church itself.[620]

The most significant appearance of a church superior in *Ted* is Bishop Len Brennan (referred to in the series as 'Brennan'), the priests' angry, hardline, and violent boss who visits once a series. Brennan usually appears to force the priests to complete a difficult, task, such as protesting an erotic film,[621] or to punish the priests for bad behaviour.[622] Brennan is the only senior member of the Church to appear consistently in the series and consequently one of the only connections the priests have to the world outside Craggy Island. He also embodies the potential 'threat' posed by superiors to disrupt the priests' relative peace. As Mills observes, religious figures in sitcom often embody the fear of being judged or "looked down on" for their decisions, representing social hierarchies that threaten the characters' autonomy.[623] In *Ted* this fear is not unfounded, since Brennan banished them to Craggy Island and looks for any excuse to send them somewhere even worse if they step too far out of line. Brennan exploits and relishes his power over the priests, taking every opportunity to remind them of their inadequacy and inferiority through physical threats and yelling. For example, in "The Plague", when Ted tries to cover up the fact that he says 'feck' to Brennan over the phone, Brennan calmly finishes the conversation by saying "If you ever try to bullshit me like that again, I will rip off your arms".[624] On other occasions, he is physically violent; in "Kicking Bishop Brennan up the Arse",[625] Brennan (incensed at being kicked and then told he imagined it), runs full speed at Ted, yelling "Crilly!" with his cape billowing behind him, doubling his size, and when he finds Ted he kicks Ted so hard he flies into the air. This is an

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[619] 2X.01 "A Christmassy Ted".
[620] McGonigle, "'Doesn't Mary have…'", p. 90.
[621] 1.03 "The Passion of St. Tibulus".
[622] 2.06 "The Plague", *Father Ted* (12 April 1996).
[623] Mills, "Paranoia, Paranoia, Everybody's Coming to Get Me", p. 60.
[624] 2.06 "The Plague".
[625] 3.06 "Kicking Bishop Brennan Up the Arse".

example of the "cartoon violence" Hunt identifies as a staple of *Ted*, echoing an exaggerated comedic style influenced by *The Simpsons*.[626]

Apart from Brennan's exaggerated violence towards the priests, there is little Brennan says or does that indicate his character or history. Brennan is hypocritical, because he is a 'celibate' bishop with a secret wife and child in America;[627] Brennan is hardline, making Ted and Dougal represent the church and the church's position even when the priests themselves disagree; and Brennan is frightening and violent, because Ted and Dougal are terrified of incurring his wrath. In this context, Brennan is singular in purpose – his presence in the series is to provide a violent threat to the priests' lives and little else. The exaggerated violence, singular purpose and lack of character history or development contributes to the impression that Brennan is little more than a cartoon, more reminiscent of the threat posed to *Looney Tunes'* (Warner Bros, 1930-1969) Road Runner by the single-minded Wile E. Coyote than *Dibley*'s David Horton (originally serving a similar purpose to Brennan by threatening Geraldine's livelihood in Dibley).[628]

Returning to the topic of religious beliefs, Brennan's primary interaction with the Craggy Island priests is to reinforce church doctrine for the priests to implement regardless of their personal viewpoints. It is clear that occasionally Ted does not endorse the church's line on issues such as homosexuality and abortion (though this may be due to a desire for to avoid conflict) and Dougal disagrees even on the existence of heaven, hell, and God. However, Ted and Dougal are still expected by the church to uphold their stance even when they do not personally support it. In "The Passion of St. Tibulus",[629] Brennan demands that Ted, Dougal, and Jack protest an erotic film that is accidentally playing on Craggy Island despite having been banned by the church from the rest of Europe. Brennan explicitly states that they must represent the church, telling the priests that "it's up to you to make the Church's position clear". Jack outright refuses to protest and instead goes to see the film. Ted and Dougal, after protesting 'in' the theatre by watching the film and yelling 'boo' once or twice, are forced to protest with signs outside of the theatre. Their non-specific signs read "Down with this sort of thing" and "Careful now", whose

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[626] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy,* p. 86.
[627] 1.03 "The Passion of St. Tibulus".
[628] *Looney Tunes* (Warner Bros, 1930-1969).
[629] 1.03 "The Passion of St. Tibulus".

vague wording demonstrates their evident apathy. In the end, their protest has the opposite effect of that intended; the protest draws the attention of the newspapers and people flock from all over Europe to see the film. Even though Ted and Dougal do not discuss their feelings towards the film, it is evident that Ted and Dougal's reticence stems from having to *perform* the task rather than from a desire to support the film. Ted and Dougal see the film and discuss it afterwards, but never suggest it should be allowed to play. Instead, Ted and Dougal chafe at being forced to work, which is exactly the threat that Brennan brings. In this context, the fact that it is religion-related work or that the priests must enforce the church's position is less important than the fact that it is *work.* Consequently, Brennan and the presence of other church superiors provokes anxiety for Ted and the others for both the potential to do extra work *and* the fear they may be moved from the parish or, in the case of Brennan, physically assaulted.

From this analysis, there are a few particular points to summarise. First, while *Ted* uses a sitcom family hierarchy, this hierarchy constantly shifts and changes to suit the narrative of the episode. Ted can be a father or a brother; Dougal a brother or son; Jack a grandfather, child, or pet; Mrs. Doyle a mother or daughter. Second, the priests avoid discussing religion or performing religious work as much as possible, and when the priests do engage with religion (such as praying or performing a funeral) this is usually detrimental. Third, there is a thriving, 'closed' priest community with whom the priests can interact (who also avoid religion) and supplant the family community in other religious sitcoms like *Dibley.* Finally, the church as represented by the infrequent appearances of Brennan is both fear-inducing and doctrine-enforcing, removing the priests' autonomy by compelling them to work and to advocate the church's position regardless of their personal opinions.

With the exception of shifting family hierarchies, all of these points demonstrate a clear intersection with religion, even if this intersection is the *avoidance* of religion. Further, including shifting hierarchies, these points link directly to two different historical theories of comedy: the 'carnivalesque', and parody. The first of these, carnivalesque, is a "form of comedy particular to the Middle Ages in Europe"[630]

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[630] Ellen Bishop, "Bakhtin, Carnival, and Comedy: The New Grotesque in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, 15:1 (Fall 1990), p. 49.

which is the focus of Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*.[631] Bakhtin writes that the carnival "celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order", marking the "suspension of all hierarchical rank [and] norms".[632] The carnival featured a myriad of comic figures, ranging from the "clowns and fools" which represented the "carnival spirit" of universality, revival, and renewal, to the "grotesque" characters embodying "degradation", the physical, and the material.[633] One pertinent point for the study of humour and religion is that the carnival was a "comic ritual" linked to "the feasts of the Church", entrenching the carnival as an intersection between humour and religion through its very construction.[634] While this is not enough to establish a framework for examining humour and religious intersection on its own, the addition of other carnivalesque elements such as the grotesque, the 'carnival spirit' and the suspension of hierarchy may show a connection between the religious sitcom (or specifically *Ted*) and the carnivalesque.

However, there is an inherent difficulty with applying Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque outside of its original medieval, in-person context. Bakhtin claims that carnivalesque was 'lost' after the advent of rationalism[635] and there is a clear lack of applicability between a carnival with live, inter-personal jokes and a television programme with a television screen between the joker and their audience. As Bakhtin describes, the "carnival does not know footlights, in that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators", while television has a very clear divide separating the performer and the audience (separated even further in sitcom by the presence of the live studio audience, providing another buffer between actor and television spectator).[636] However, Bakhtin's fears that the carnivalesque is lost aside, this does not mean that carnivalesque is entirely absent from the screen or television studies. The carnivalesque has been discussed in television programmes as disparate as American horror shows in the 1950s[637] and *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (BBC1, 1969-1974),[638] looking at elements such as the grotesque, carnival laughter, and the transparency of televisual construction.[639]

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[631] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*.
[632] Ibid., p. 10.
[633] Ibid., pp. 9-19.
[634] Ibid., p. 8.
[635] Bishop, "Bakhtin, Carnival, and Comedy", p. 50.
[636] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 7.
[637] Phillip J. Hutchison, "Frankenstein Meets Mikhail Bakhtin: Celebrating the Carnival of Hosted Horror Television", *Journal of Popular Culture* 53:3 (June 2020), pp. 579-599.
[638] *Monty Python's Flying Circus,* cr. The Pythons (BBC1, 1969-1974).
[639] Bishop, "Bakhtin, Carnival, and Comedy", pp. 49-64.

Building on the earlier textual analysis, *Father Ted* has a few textual elements such as these that point to the carnivalesque; the suspension or reversal of hierarchy, the grotesque, and its discomfort with religion.

First, the "suspension of all hierarchical rank [and] norms"[640] in the carnivalesque is reminiscent of the hierarchical shifts within the family unit in *Ted.* The hierarchy within the *Ted* family and between the priests and their church superiors is constantly in flux, rarely following pre-established patterns. Similarly, while church superiors like Bishop Brennan are sometimes viewed as hierarchical and strict, other times this hierarchy is reversed when Ted is able to fool or *make* a fool of Brennan.[641] Still, while there is evidence of hierarchical reversal in *Ted*, there is certainly no evidence of complete suspension, nor is there any desire to remove hierarchy entirely. Unlike carnival, there is no equality caused by reversal between those in power and those who are not, and instead there is only a brief establishment of a different hierarchy that is quickly changed again. It is neither a lack nor a denial of hierarchy; it is that the hierarchies are constantly shifting.

Second, *Ted* incorporates comic characters originating in the carnivalesque, usually characters that are comical instead of religious. Ted and Dougal could be examples of clowning 'fools' based on the use of slapstick comedy and their foolish behaviour, but neither particularly represents the 'carnival spirit' of reversal or renewal. More blatantly, the disgusting spectacle of Father Jack is indicative of the grotesque, described by Roland Boer as "eating, pissing, shitting, sex and death… pulsating, heaving and living entities".[642] As addressed in Chapter 3, the grotesque is concerned with the base and vulgar, but also with change and degradation, of "copulation, pregnancy, birth, growth, old age, disintegration, dismemberment".[643] Father Jack embodies many of these grotesque aspects, especially that of copulation (his obsession with sex and women), old age, and disintegration. Jack is largely monosyllabic, leaving only his actions and physical attributes – such as alcoholism and visible drooling – left to observe. This characterisation is intended to entertain and revile, as evidenced by the studio audience's mixture of laughs and

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[640] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 10.
[641] Both of these positions are clear in 1.03 "The Passion of St. Tibulus".
[642] Roland Boer (eds), *Bakhtin and genre theory in biblical studies* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).
[643] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 25.

groans at the sight of Jack's dribbling mouth.[644] While there are none of the 'regenerative' or reproductive elements to Jack's characterisation,[645] nor the inherently 'female' body changes described by Kathleen Rowe,[646] it is still evident that Jack is the grotesque's "funny monster".[647]

Third, carnival usually coincided with religious festivals and was officially (if begrudgingly) sanctioned by the church, but the carnival was firmly in a separate space to the church. Bakhtin claims that carnival arose because the "intolerant seriousness of the official church ideology" necessitated the legalization of "gaiety, laughter and jests" in other places, since it was not present in rituals and etiquette.[648] This is echoed in *Ted* because, while the show is a religious sitcom and the vast majority of the characters are explicitly identified as Catholic, both the show and the characters take every opportunity to avoid religion as much possible. *Ted* quite literally avoids the religious rituals where carnival was not welcome, and all of the priests are very reluctant to discuss anything religious.[649] In this sense, both *Ted* and the carnival involve humour and religion, but both also establish different spaces for religion and humour, even if the *combination* of the two is inherent in its creation.

Finally, Bakhtin discusses the notion of 'official culture' versus 'popular culture', the latter employed in carnivalesque.[650] Richard M. Berrong, discussing Bakhtin's work on Rabelais, writes that popular culture was "everything that official culture was not… a means of getting outside official dogmatism, of escaping from 'official lies'".[651] While popular culture in the Renaissance would have referred to carnival celebrations and play rather than the media of today, popular culture still is (as discussed in Chapter 1 in relation to the public sphere) a key method of communicating information and escape.[652] Also, as the examples of Bishop and Hutchison attest, the carnivalesque is still to be found on television, meaning popular culture can be a site for the carnival spirit. Popular culture in *Ted* is particularly relevant as there are numerous references to pop culture throughout the series,

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[644] 1.01 "Good Luck, Father Ted".
[645] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 75.
[646] Rowe, *The Unruly Woman*, p. 33.
[647] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 49.
[648] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World,* p. 74.
[649] See 1.02 "Good Luck, Father Ted", 2.03 "Tentacles of Doom", or 2.05 "A Song for Europe".
[650] Richard M. Berrong, *Rabelais and Bakhtin: Popular Culture in* Gargantua *and* Pantagruel (University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln and London, 1986), pp. 10-11.
[651] Berrong, *Rabelais and Bakhtin,* pp. 10-11.
[652] Dahlgren, *Television and the Public Sphere.*

including mentions of famous footballers and popstars".[653] In addition, many of *Ted*'s episodes reference pop culture like Hollywood films, with parodies of specific films like "Speed 3" (*Speed* [1994][654] and its sequel),[655] "Escape from Victory"[656] (*Escape to Victory* [1981]),[657] and Night of the Nearly Dead"[658] (*Night of the Living Dead* [1968]).[659] In *Ted* these escapes into popular culture are another method the priests use to either avoid religion entirely, as in the case of "A Song for Europe" when Ted and Dougal enter the international 'Eurosong' contest,[660] or to resituate religious practices in a ridiculous environment rending the practices useless, as in "Speed 3" when Ted holds a Mass to save Dougal from a bomb.[661]

The application of the carnivalesque to *Ted* here illustrates the importance of a few factors; one, the changing hierarchy as a method of creating equality between Ted, the priests, and church authority (which is not consistently achieved), two, the presence of comic characters from the carnivalesque, which contributes to the show's surrealism; three, both the inherent integration and the intended separation of humour and religion, fuelled by a desire to escape from work and seriousness; and four, the importance of popular culture as a method of communication and escape. The separation of humour from religion and the 'escape' from official culture (represented by church doctrine) are particularly relevant for the study of religious representation and humour and religious intersection. The carnivalesque framework further demonstrates how far removed the priests seek to be from religion, and consequently how undesirable religion appears as a result. Returning to Hunt's idea that religion in *Ted* is "light satirical touch", this framework shows how a *lack* of interaction is itself a commentary of religion.[662] By separating religion from their lives, 'escaping' or avoiding work, and destabilising official and familial hierarchies, *Ted* shows a consistent lack of value for religion, even conflating religion with popular culture in an attempt to remove its seriousness and 'official'-ness.

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[653] 3.03 "Speed 3".
[654] *Speed,* dr. Jan de Bont (20th Century Fox, 1994).
[655] *Speed 2: Cruise Control,* dr. Jan de Bont (20th Century Fox, 1997).
[656] 3.05 "Escape from Victory".
[657] *Escape to Victory,* dr. John Huston (Paramount Pictures, 1981).
[658] 3.07 "Night of the Nearly Dead", *Father Ted* (24 April 1998).
[659] *Night of the Living Dead*, dr. George A. Romero (Continental Distributing, 1968).
[660] 2.05 "A Song for Europe".
[661] 3.03 "Speed 3".
[662] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy,* p. 79.

As well as the carnivalesque, it is possible to use points of similarity – the grotesque, the almost paradoxical relationship with religion and authority, and the limited reversal of hierarchy – to apply another humour framework, one of the many 'reduced' forms of comedy that Bakhtin claims emerged after the end of carnival comedy; parody.[663] In scholarship on *Ted*, parody is one of the few areas which has already been discussed in relation to the show. Neil Archer's *Beyond a Joke* in particular discusses the presence of parody in *Ted* in great detail, situating *Ted* as one of many British parodic texts produced in the last 30 or 40 years lampooning Hollywood.[664] This use of parody connects strongly to Bakhtin's assertion that popular culture allows the characters to escape from the 'official culture' of the church and of life on Craggy Island, which is purposefully very disparate from life in the Hollywood films *Ted* parodies. The use of parody in *Ted* indicates another method through which humour can intersect with religion, either through parody *involving* religion or parody *about* religion.

'Parody' as a term is difficult to holistically define, but the two key elements that frequently crop up in definitions of parody are the need to 'imitate' a previous work and doing so for the purpose of 'comic' effect. For example, John Gross regards parody as "an imitation which exaggerates the characteristics of a work or a style for comic effect",[665] while Dan Harries in *Film Parody* describes parody as the "process of… transformation" of a source text's textual elements, "thus creating a *new* text" with "ironic incongruity".[666] In the context of humour and religious intersection, this could involve imitating a religious work or situation for comic effect, such as a church service or prayer. For sitcom, parody's comic effect purpose seems particularly pertinent because of its "comic impetus" (see Chapter 1).[667] Margaret A. Rose suggests that "the comic incongruity created in the parody may contrast the original text with its new form", meaning incongruity is central to the comparison produced between the source and parodic text.[668] Similarly, the aforementioned definition from John Gross argued that parody explicitly aims to

[663] Bishop, "Bakhtin, Carnival, and Comedy", p. 50.
[664] Archer, *Beyond a Joke,* p. 3.
[665] John Gross, *The Oxford Book of Parodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. xi.
[666] Dan Harries, *Film Parody* (London: BFI, 2000), p. 6.
[667] Mills, *The Sitcom*, p. 5.
[668] Margaret A. Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-modern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 33.

produce a "comic effect".[669] Neil Archer also highlights that the "central aesthetic practice" amongst the parodic texts he analyses is the purpose of comic effect".[670]

One of the difficulties of including comic effect as an integral part of parody is it may be excluding parodies with other purposes, or those whose comic effect is difficult to determine. Paradoxically, though, this also means that definitions *without* comic effect may be too broad. For example, Linda Hutcheon considers the inclusion of comic effect as part of parody's definition to be too restrictive and instead offers a definition of parody as "repetition with ironic critical difference".[671] The benefit of a definition such as this is it allows for parodies with multiple potential intentions, targets, and media. Yet Hutcheon's definition, while aiming to be broad, is too broad to differ parody from other, similar terms like intertextuality or pastiche. From definition alone it is unclear, for example, what would constitute an ironic 'critical' difference rather than simply a difference, or how this definition of parody differs significantly from Hutcheon's definition for adaptation more broadly, "repetition with variation".[672] In addition the use of 'ironic', despite claiming it to be unnecessary, suggests that comic incongruity is important; Noel Carroll suggests irony "traffics in contradiction, saying one thing while meaning its opposite" – in other words, a form of incongruity.[673] Therefore, while Hutcheon's definition may allow for other forms of parody beyond the comic, it also appears too broad and nonspecific for wider, practical application while still acknowledging that comedy is part of parody. For both sitcom and parody, then, the comic effect and comic impetus are central to its creation and purpose, and without which they lose the specificity of their identity.

The notion that comic effect in parody is not integral may harken back to the notion that comedy is fundamentally 'unworthy', in much the same way that 'television' and 'sitcom' connotes low culture (see Chapter 1). Rose argues that trying to distance parody from comedy is "in order both to save parody from such denigration" – sparing parody from the "trivial" nature of comedy.[674] Also, Rose indicates that ignoring comic effect makes parody's definition "cover other fashionable meta-

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[669] Gross, *The Oxford Book of Parodies*, p. xi.
[670] Archer, *Beyond a Joke*, p. 3.
[671] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. xii.
[672] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 4.
[673] Noël Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 22.
[674] Rose, *Parody*, p. 28.

fictional and 'intertextual' forms…", as seen in Hutcheon's definition.[675] Removing the comedy from parody, Rose suggests, means parody is little more than mockery. Regardless of whether 'comic effect' is included in parody's definition, it is certain that many parodic works whose purpose is, as Gross observed, "for comic effect".

The other key element of most parody definitions is the notion of 'imitation', such as Gross' aforementioned definition of parody as "an imitation which exaggerates the characteristics of a work or a style for comic effect".[676] This aspect of 'imitation' stems partly from its relationship with intertextuality. The term 'intertextuality', coined by Julia Kristeva, broadly refers to the relationship between texts, but the specifics of what is considered 'intertextual' are again contested.[677] Simon Dentith describes intertextuality as "the myriad *conscious* ways in which texts are alluded to or cited in other texts", drawing a distinction between 'conscious' and 'unconscious' textual allusions and determining only the former as intertextuality proper.[678] Dentith also notes that parody forms part of a range of cultural practices that deliberately reference precursor texts.[679] However, the relationship between intertextuality and parody, like defining either intertextuality or parody on its own, is difficult to determine. If parody is imitation for comic effect, then it is inherently intertextual through 'imitation'. If, on the other hand, parody is "repetition with critical difference", what separates parody from intertextuality?[680] Hutcheon's definition here is so broad that parody and intertextuality could be considered interchangeable. On the one hand, every text might be intertextual, if intertextuality refers to the way in which text engage with those that have come before through language, imagery, or direct reference. On the other, if intertextuality refers only to texts that *explicitly* engage in referencing other texts, then intertextuality becomes a smaller group of easily identifiable texts. For the purposes of *Ted* the latter is more useful, as *Ted* frequently parodies specific, identifiable Hollywood films that demonstrate clear intertextuality (like "Speed 3").

One further concept tangential to parody and intertextuality is satire, which similarly uses comedy to lampoon an existing concept or text. Satire and parody have often

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[675] Ibid., p. 28.
[676] Gross, *The Oxford Book of Parodies*, p. xi.
[677] Julia Kristeva, "The Bounded Text", *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).
[678] Simon Dentith, *Parody* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 5.
[679] Ibid*.,* p. 6.
[680] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, p. 6.

been thought of as overlapping or even interchangeable,[681] but Rose writes that satire is distinguished from parody because satire has a "target" of its humour, while parody is "ambivalently dependent upon the object of its criticism" for interpretation.[682] Satire aims to "[critique] social mores" and "change (or correct)" the configurations of said target.[683] In other words, while parody is imitation for comic effect and intertextuality is imitating a specific text, satire is imitating a *specific* target with the intention of critiquing or changing said target, though all three could overlap. Both academics and co-creators alike have been quick to deny any satirical potential in *Ted.* Free asserts that *Ted* is "not satire" because it "lacks direct targets", but does reach "subtle levels of social and cultural comedy".[684] Hunt refers to *Ted* as having a "light satirical touch" to religion,[685] and Thompson suggests that "hard-hitting clerical satire is not really on *Father Ted*'s agenda".[686] Similarly, Linehan argues that they were "probably doing more of a service by not attacking the church but just being a little bit silly about it".[687] In this context, the satirical is certainly interpreted as both religious and political; Linehan and Mathews are keen to dispel the concept that *Ted* was intended as an attack on the Catholic Church or Irish life – indeed, they argue they *could* have been satirical but purposefully chose not to be.[688] Free adds that the "'progressive' satirical potential should not be overstated" either, citing the use of Irish stereotypes like Mrs. Doyle as the 'Irish Mammy' and Dougal as the "'comic Irishman'", an "overgrown" man with "childlike characteristics" as examples where *Ted* is not as 'progressive' as it might have been.[689] These assertions assume that *Ted* does not take shots at specific parts of religion or scandals within the Catholic Church, though this analysis so far as demonstrated it certainly does not present religion as a positive force. McGonigle takes a different view, arguing that *Ted* "[satirises] Catholic ideology" as its specific target.[690] Therefore, depending on whether or not the Catholic Church can be considered a satirical 'target' there is

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[681] Harries, *Film Parody,* p. 31.
[682] Rose, *Parody*, p. 51.
[683] Harries, *Film Parody*, p. 31.
[684] Marcus Free, "From the Other Island to the One with "No West Side": The Irish in British Soap and Sitcom", *Irish Studies Review,* 9:2 (2001), p. 223.
[685] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy,* p. 79.
[686] Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty,* p. 202.
[687] Linehan in Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty,* p. 202.
[688] Free, "Don't Tell Me…", p. 8.
[689] Ibid., pp. 11, 9.
[690] McGonigle, "Doesn't Mary Have…", p. 92.

potential for satire here, especially within the context of its many pop culture parodies and intertextual references.

Returning to *Ted,* Neil Archer discusses "Speed 3"[691] as one of the show's clearest examples of parody and religion.[692] As mentioned earlier, in "Speed 3" (a lampoon of the film *Speed*) Dougal's new job as a milkman is threatened when the vengeful former milkman straps a bomb to Dougal's milk float, which will detonate if he drives at under 4 miles per hour. Both the imitation/transformation aspect – the references to *Speed*, among others – and comic effect – such as the incongruity of Ted's panicked reaction to a relatively innocuous situation – can be found in the episode. Rather than *Speed*'s high-octane ride through the streets of LA, Dougal has to slowly steer his small milk float around the empty Craggy Island roads, dodging inexplicable pyramids of cardboard boxes and circling tiny roundabouts. For Archer, this particular example illustrates how American, cinematic texts have been relocated and reworked for comic effect on British television, converting high stakes and globally-recognisable locations (a high-speed bus chase in the US) to comparatively low stakes in local settings (a slow-moving milk float on Craggy Island).[693] Archer also highlights the double existence of "Speed 3", operating both "in their own coherent and contained comic world" and "drawing attention to, and reflecting upon, the other texts influencing them".[694] Archer claims that the target of "Speed 3"'s parody is left "uncertain" because it does not present a "negative attitude" towards the parodic subject.[695] However, this appears to assume that there can only be one 'subject', when in fact there are multiple, including Hollywood action films, priests, religion, and even Irish life.[696] Also, this assumes that it must have a 'negative attitude' towards the subject, which from the previous descriptions of parody and satire appears to more closely align with the latter.

The analysis by Archer here demonstrates how *Ted* parodies Hollywood films, but there is also the potential to apply this same parodic framework to "Speed 3"'s parody of religion. In this case, the scene imitates the performance of a Mass, but the 'imitation/transformation' aspect transports the serious, sombre church ritual to

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[691] 3.03 "Speed 3".
[692] Archer, *Beyond a Joke,* pp. 1-4.
[693] Ibid., p. 4.
[694] Ibid., p. 3.
[695] Ibid., p. 116.
[696] McGonigle, "Doesn't Mary Have…", p. 92.

a rickety trailer, and delegitimizes the Mass by demonstrating its impracticality. Therefore, while for Archer the transformation was about changing the situation from high to low stakes, this religious transformation is concerned with removing its seriousness and, theoretically, its use. It is also clearly for comic effect, as the farcical situation is not only greeted with laughs from the studio audience but it is also incongruous, contrasting a traditional Mass with this trailer version. In this sense, religion is parodied in a similar fashion to the Hollywood films. However, the transformation is more than just Incongruity Theory, where the mere juxtaposition of the usual form of Mass alongside the travelling Mass could produce humour.[697] This example has a specific, satirical target (the belief that a church service could solve a practical issue, and that this is the only solution that priests can imagine) that again demonstrates how religion in *Ted* is seen as ultimately of no help to the priests.

This example from "Speed 3" already fell into the category of humour in a religious *context,* but because of this delegitimization it could even be viewed as an example of humour *mocking* religion (the aforementioned type three of religious jokes). Other examples follow a similar pattern, such Ted's prayers in "Entertaining Father Stone" which are transformed from a cry for help to a summons of dangerous lightning.[698] Even Bishop Brennan can be viewed as a parody of fear-mongering and authoritarianism, streamlined by his singular purpose and lack of character history to represent only this purpose. Therefore, an analysis of *Ted* through the lens of parody and satire shows how *Ted* treats religion in a similar fashion to other parodies of popular culture, but rather than transforming aspects to create a new, low stakes version of a text, it instead renders the practice futile or treacherous.

While this parodying of religion is evident within *Ted,* it should be placed in the context of two points: one, these scenes are infrequent (only a few per series rather than, for example, once and episode) and two, these parodies are not directed at a 'specific' incident or belief within the church. The priests are also successful in avoiding religion and religious work altogether in most episodes. Therefore, not only are they not typical examples of *Ted*'s content, they also do not 'attack' a particular person, practice, or event. In fact, there are a few examples where *Ted* tries to

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[697] See Chapter 1, and (among others) Oring, *Engaging Humour.*
[698] 1.02 "Entertaining Father Stone".

actively support religion, such as claiming that Jesus was "fantastic" and "brilliant",[699] or that it's "great being a priest".[700] However, this does not mean that *Ted* is entirely 'light touch', as the examples that *do* exist in *Ted* do not reflect this sentiment. This is in stark contrast to the previous two religious sitcoms, which have shown a general assumption that everyone is Christian and that this is largely positive. As such, *Ted*'s desire to avoid the subject and difficulties when this is not possible demonstrates a new mode of engagement with the religious sitcom – one that involves religion, but does not wholly approve of it, and would prefer not to discuss at all.

The fact that *Ted* is neutral or negative about religion is not its only distinction from previous case studies. In the style of the cult 1990s sitcom, *Ted* utilises the surreal and some elements of darker humour, which has led to an increased level of academic attention in contrast to the other sitcoms. The only Catholic sitcom, *Ted* does not have a traditional 'family' setup, and instead has a 'found' family in flux, desirous of escape but stuck on Craggy Island. It is also the only religious sitcom of the four case studies to have three priests as main characters, which results in very different representations – but all equally desirous of avoiding their priestly work. *Ted* has a large, supportive network of priests, but also has the threat of the Church hanging over them to force them to work. This work, which is very infrequent, includes the usual range of religious work (services, prayers etc.) but most happen off-screen, and often lead to more bad results for the three priests. Finally, *Ted* has elements of the carnivalesque, parody, and satire, which serve to underline its avoidance of religion (as well as its potential disruption if used). Still, there are plenty of elements that continue to carry over throughout the religious sitcom case studies, such as the inclusion of religious jokes about context and content, and a few that mock religion as well. Prayers and services are still present, even if there are rare. In addition, as a traditional sitcom with a multi-cam setup and a live audience, the sitcom still visually resembles the previous two. The fifth chapter on *Rev.* will be the last to explore the textual analysis of the case studies, and will investigate whether these possible generic traits continue to appear.

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[699] 2.01 "Hell".
[700] 1.01 "Good Luck, Father Ted".

Chapter 5

Rev.: Quality Sitcom, Interior Voiceover, and Jesus

Adam, Adam… We all have our crosses to bear.

Stranger, *Rev.*[701]

After *The Vicar of Dibley* ended its run in 2007, the BBC waited a mere 13 years before plunging back into religious sitcoms on BBC2. *Rev.,* airing from 2010 to 2014, had relatively small audience figures in comparison to a popular sitcom like *Dibley,* peaking during its first run at around 2 million.[702] However, this is not to say, like *All in Good Faith,* that *Rev.* was unsuccessful; it is still one of BBC2's highest rated sitcoms,[703] has been sold to over 140 countries,[704] and was nominated for numerous prestigious television awards, most notably winning the BAFTA for Best Scripted Comedy in 2011.[705] Even 10 years later *Rev.* is still used in promotion material for BBC projects, such as the joint BBC/ITV streaming venture *Britbox* that used *Rev.* – among other, more high-budget acclaimed dramas like BBC's *Wolf Hall* (BBC2, 2015)[706] and ITV's *Broadchurch* (ITV, 2013-2017)[707] – to advertise the new service.[708]

Created by James Wood and Tom Hollander, *Rev.* follows Rev. Adam Smallbone (Hollander) as he attempts to run the challenging, inner-city parish of St Saviours' in Hackney, London. Typical episodes follow Adam's struggles to support his parishioners; run services and increase his congregation numbers; raise enough money to keep the church running; and spend time with his wife, Alex (Olivia Colman), and in series 3 their daughter Katie. Amongst the ensemble group is verger Nigel McCall (Miles Jupp), who aspires to be a vicar but lacks the necessary

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[701] 3.05 "Episode 5", *Rev.* (BBC2, 21 April 2014).

[702] Butt, "Rev 'rather good'".

[703] Ibid.

[704] Andrew Preston, "Tom Hollander's Rev confessions: The actor reveals the six commandments of making a hit sitcom", *Daily Mail* (22 March 2014) <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/event/article-2585264/Rev-confessions-Tom-Hollander-reveals-six-commandments-making-hit-sitcom.html> [accessed 13/06/2022].

[705] John Plunkett and Josh Halliday, "BBC's Sherlock wins best drama award at the Baftas", *The Guardian* (22 May 2011) https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2011/may/22/sherlock-wins-best-drama-award-baftas> [accessed 13/06/2022].

[706] *Wolf Hall,* wr. Peter Straughan (BBC2, 2015).

[707] *Broadchurch*, cr. Chris Chibnall (ITV, 2013-2017).

[708] *Britbox* <https://watch.britbox.co.uk/> [accessed 06/06/2022].

social skills, Colin Lambert (Steve Evets), a lewd but devoted parishioner whom Adam helps with food and accommodation, Ellie Pattman (Lucy Liemann), the local school principal at the church's affiliated primary school, Adoha Onyeka (Ellen Thomas) the first black main character in the four religious sitcoms, and Archdeacon Robert, Adam's superior who often visits to observe Adam's progress and remind him to tackle St. Saviours' financial difficulties. During series 1 and 2, the episodes are mostly self-contained. However, series 3 is involves a longer arc emulating Easter Week that results in Adam leaving the priesthood and St. Saviours' closing for good.

The premise of *Rev.* at first glance has multiple similarities to *All in Good Faith*, since both follow married, country vicars seeking new professional challenges by moving to an inner-city parish. Still, the execution of this premise is very different. In terms of production, though both sitcoms have half-hour episodes, *Rev.* is a single-cam sitcom filmed without a studio audience or subsequent laugh track in a mixture of studio and location settings, most notably the St. Leonard's Church in Shoreditch, London, which serves as Adam's parish church St. Saviours'. In addition, in *Good Faith* participation in religious acts like prayers or church services is infrequent*., but* every episode of *Rev.* features a church service in St. Saviours' and a prayer from Adam heard through a voiceover. Finally, while *Good Faith*'s storylines often revolve around a humorous mishap in the local community, such as a disagreement between neighbours or family members, *Rev.*'s typically focus on homelessness, depression, job loss, crises of faith, and financial issues. *Rev.*'s choice of storylines partly stemmed from a desire expressed by creators Hollander and Wood to "depict England as it is *now*", to define itself in opposition to previous depictions of idyllic country vicar life and show "the complications of the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic inner-city, where everything is much harder".[709] To achieve this, Hollander and Wood conducted interviews with real working vicars, "finding out about their lives, what sort of things happen to them", and from this emerged the series' storylines.[710] In fact, reviewer Riazat Butt explicitly compared *Rev.* to *Dibley* and *Father Ted*, stating that *Rev.* was the only one to actually address "belief", "ritual", and modern day

[709] Tom Hollander, *South Bank Sky Arts Winners* (Sky Arts 1, 16 February 2011).
[710] Tom Hollander, "Rev: interview with Tom Hollander and Olivia Colman, *BBC.co.uk* <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/-mediapacks/rev3/interview> [accessed 24//08/2021].

topics like "openly homosexual clergy".[711] In other words, Hollander and Butt emphasise that *Rev.* is attempting to be 'realistic', drawing plots from real-life interviews and experiences that represent modern-day London and using this attempted realism and modernity to distinguish *Rev.* from other religious sitcoms.

On the topic of Hollander, one of the largest departures from previous religious sitcoms like *Good Faith* was in *Rev.*'s choice of leads, Hollander and Colman. Before *Rev.* aired Hollander and Colman had already appeared in high-profile comedic films and television shows, such as Hollander's *The Thick of It* (BBC4/2, 2005-2012)[712] and spin-off film *In the Loop* (2009)[713] and Colman's *Peep Show.* However, in stark contrast with previous stars like Richard Briers in *Good Faith* and Dawn French in *Dibley*, their roles in *Rev.* are strikingly different from other comedy characters they have played. In *The Thick of It,* for example, Hollander plays a foul-mouthed, ruthless political advisor, while in *Peep Show* Colman is a progressively unstable co-worker and occasional love interest. In addition, neither actor is known exclusively for their comedy work. For example, Hollander has appeared in such wide-ranging films and TV shows such as the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise (2003-present)[714], *Pride and Prejudice* (2005),[715] and *The Night Manager* (BBC1, 2016).[716] Similarly, since 2010, Colman has (among dozens of projects) starred in hit royal drama *The Crown* (Netflix, 2016-present),[717] won a BAFTA for her performance in *Broadchurch,* and was nominated for an Academy Award – her second nomination after winning for black comedy period drama *The Favourite* (2018)[718] – for *The Father* (2020).[719] Therefore, rather than drawing on the established star persona of the lead actors, *Rev.* purposefully chose actors associated with a variety of (often award-winning) comedies, dramas, and Hollywood films.

From this initial analysis, then, there are a few points to draw from *Rev.*'s production and content that distance it from its predecessors. First, the format itself, which is single-cam and does not have a laugh track. Second, *Rev.* tackles ostensibly more

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[711] Butt, "Rev 'rather good'".
[712] *The Thick of It,* cr. Armando Iannucci (BBC4/2, 2005-2012).
[713] *In the Loop*, dr. Armando Iannucci (BBC Films, 2009).
[714] *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise, pr. Jerry Bruckheimer (Walt Disney Pictures, 2003-present).
[715] *Pride and Prejudice,* dr. Joe Wright (Universal Pictures, 2005).
[716] *The Night Manager,* wr. David Farr (BBC1, 2016).
[717] *The Crown,* cr. Peter Morgan (Netflix, 2016-present).
[718] *The Favourite,* dr. Yorgos Lathimos (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2018).
[719] *The Father,* dr. Florian Zeller (Lionsgate, 2020).

'serious' subjects and is not always humorous. Third, *Rev.*'s stars are not comic actors with recognisable star personas, and instead have a history in a variety of acclaimed projects. Fourth, *Rev.*'s creators are drawing on the language of realism, citing one of the appeals of the project as its modern, realistic approach to storylines. These, among other tropes, are markers of the 'quality' sitcom, a largely unexplored category of sitcom noted by Hunt to be distinguished by use of "single camera, no recorded laughter, [and] touches of non-comic drama and pathos".[720] Mills adds that this new type of sitcom also "complicates conventional genre divisions", such as mixing sitcom with mockumentary, soap opera, or drama.[721] Other 'quality' sitcoms such as *The Office* and *Gavin and Stacey*, like *Rev.,* eschew the traditional sitcom tropes of laugh tracks, studio audiences, multi-camera setups, and constant comedy for these new markers of 'quality'. Even the choice to cast established, award winning 'quality' actors Hollander and Colman further distances *Rev.* from other traditional sitcoms starring comics or comedians like *Good Faith* or *Ted.*

In this context, 'quality' refers to its association with 'quality' television, TV shows that in the UK distinguish themselves in look and appearance from other, similar shows and often have critical acclaim with (usually, but not always) a small cult following.[722] Mills when discussing 'quality television' states that it is concerned with lending TV a "cultural legitimacy" afforded to more high culture products.[723] Therefore, for sitcom, the creation of some sitcoms with a new television aesthetic can be viewed as a desire to create distance from traditional sitcoms and its associations with low culture. While it is difficult to measure a show's cultural legitimacy from quantitative factors like viewership or popularity, there is certainly a higher academic interest in quality sitcoms such as *Peep Show*[724] and *The Office*[725] while other, traditional sitcoms like *Dibley* have previously barely attracted attention (see Chapter 3). As well as gaining cultural capital and academic interest, being considered 'quality' has other benefits such as longevity on television; for example,

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[720] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy,* p. 18.
[721] Mills, "Comedy verité", p. 65.
[722] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy,* p. 19.
[723] Mills, *The Sitcom,* p. 135.
[724] Examples of academic research on *Peep Show* include Mills' "Paranoia, Paranoia"; David Bolt's "Pretending to be a normal human being: *Peep Show,* sitcom, and the momentary invocation of disability", *Disability & Society*, 31:6 (July 2016), pp. 745-757; and an analysis of *Peep Show* in "Chapter 7: Are you sitting uncomfortably? From 'cringe' to 'dark' comedy" in Hunt's *Cult British TV Comedy*.
[725] Examples of academic research on *The Office* include Ben Walters' *The Office* (London: BFI, 2005); Henri de Jongste's "Culture and Incongruity in *The Office* (UK)", *Language and Communication,* Vol. 55 (July 2018) pp. 88-99; and "Chapter 9: Mockusoaps: people and places" in Craig Hight's *Television Mockumentary: Reflexivity, Satire and a Call to Play* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2010).

Hunt highlights that *Peep Show* was consistently supported through low-rating series because of "its loyal cult audience and critical acclaim".[726]

Of greater importance to *Rev.*, though, is the combination of sitcom, drama, and realism. Mills argues that one of the pleasures of traditional sitcom is its artificiality, stemming from tropes like the theatrical setup, laugh track, and over-the-top performance.[727] However, in the 'quality' sitcom, many of these tropes are abandoned and replaced with the markers of other genres that suggest veracity – or a form of televisual realism – over artificiality. For example, in *The Office* characters talk directly to the camera and filming equipment can be seen in the manner of a docusoap.[728] For other quality sitcoms like *Rev.,* the adopted tropes have more in common with drama such as on-location filming, longer-running camera shots, and moments (or entire episodes) of pathos without humour. Yet the purpose of these tropes is not simply to gain legitimacy for sitcom but also to give the impression of realism. This is partially by removing the aforementioned reminders of artificiality, but also by creating different layers of 'truth' – such as the way Adam talks and behaves in public, and his thoughts in private heard through the voiceover.

This voiceover is one of the key tropes taken from drama (and documentary) used in *Rev.*, essential in the sitcom to give voice to Adam's thoughts when he prays to God. The use of voiceover as internal/interior monologue is commonplace in television drama, with one contemporary example being the US drama *The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu, 2017-present).[729] There are also many uses of voiceover in contemporary US sitcom to a variety of audiences, including family members (*How I Met Your Mother,* CBS 2005-2014),[730] in the style of a mockumentary (*Arrested Development,* Fox/Netflix 2003-2019),[731] and speaking to themselves (*Scrubs,* NBC/ABC 2001-2010).[732] While the voiceover is less common in UK it is used is *Peep Show*, where the characters' often selfish or vulgar thoughts are heard through

[726] Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy,* p. 20.
[727] Mills, "Comedy verité", p. 68.
[728] Ibid., p. 69.
[729] *The Handmaid's Tale,* cr. Bruce Miller (Hulu, 2017-present).
[730] *How I Met Your Mother,* cr. Carter Bays and Craig Thomas (CBS, 2005-2014).
[731] *Arrested Development*, cr. Mitchell Hurwitz (Fox/Netflix, 2003-2019).
[732] *Scrubs,* cr. Bill Lawrence (NBC/ABC, 2001-2010).

voiceover. However, amongst these few examples of voiceover in comedy and amongst the religious sitcoms, the use of voiceover to indicate prayer is unique.

In previous chapters, all prayer examples have fallen into one of two categories: 1) silent prayers, when characters pray and the audience cannot hear; or 2) the more common spoken prayers, when characters pray out loud. The obvious advantage to the latter category is that the audience can hear their spoken words and understand more clearly the meaning behind the prayer, whether that is asking for help or just making conversation. However, while *Rev.* has examples of both categories, it also introduces a third – voiceover prayers. In every episode of *Rev.* Adam prays and his words are heard through a voiceover, meaning only the audience (and God) can hear his prayer. These prayers can cover anything at all, ranging from financial difficulties to his sex life. The location of the prayers varies – one particularly memorable example has Adam praying while on the toilet – but the visual elements are usually the same; a medium or close-up shot of Adam's face, eyes open, gazing off-screen and lost in thought, with Adam's voice overlaid.

There are three aspects of the voiceover prayer that are particularly important. First, the voiceover comes from Adam's mind – diegetic but not spoken aloud – and though it can be *heard* by the audience it is addressed *to* God, and Adam is not breaking the fourth wall or aware of the existence of an audience. Second, the voiceover prayer is a place for Adam to discuss in detail any issues, internal conflicts, and other narrative-based problems he is experiencing. Third, while the dialogue can cover any topic, the dialogue is rational, clear, and has a logical connection to the events occurring in the rest of the episode or series. From this description, there are a few different literary, theatrical, cinematic, and televisual devices that this voiceover resembles, and to arrive at a specific definition of this voiceover it is valuable to consider its similarity to these other devices. Due to the format of the voiceover, there are clear connections with direct address and the television voiceover, both of which can be addressed to different extents to the audience. Also, because of the purpose of the voiceover as a device to reveal Adam's thoughts, the voiceover draws comparison with two literary techniques, the 'stream of consciousness' and the 'interior monologue'.

The first of these, stream of consciousness, is a style of writing originating from a few select authors in late 1800s/early 1900s such as Virginia Woolf[733] and James Joyce.[734] The actual definition of stream of consciousness is hotly contested and "fraught with contradictions",[735] but it largely concerns a character's "motivation, emotion and innermost confidences"[736] to give "insight into [a character's] thoughts" in a form of writing "that mirrors more 'realistically' the human mind" than other forms.[737] This is achieved through changing topic frequently or lacking a logical follow-through. This can be so effective that Steinberg suggests "many readers think that the author has presented them with an actual stream of consciousness, the flow of thought and awareness as it occurs from moment to moment in the mind."[738] While stream of consciousness cannot "reproduce reality" only through language, the impression of realism is central to the purpose of stream of consciousness.[739] However, there are two clear differences between of consciousness and *Rev.*'s voiceover. First, Adam's prayers are generally far more rational and logical than the literary stream of consciousness. While Adam may drift off topic, it is clear why Adam has changed the subject and the change is usually generated by his experiences and thoughts during the episode. Second, and perhaps most importantly, one key aspect of the stream of consciousness is the fact it is *written* in a novel and not spoken.[740] Simply because the voiceover is an aural device accompanied by a visual moving image – and spoken by Hollander as Adam – it cannot be considered stream of consciousness in its purest sense.

A similar theory to the stream of consciousness is the 'interior monologue', which Steinberg describes as when a character speaks silently to himself, in his own mind: "the character can hear himself in his mind's ear, but no one else can hear him or need even be aware that he is thinking."[741] The difference between stream of consciousness and the interior monologue some critics believe to be so slight

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[733] For an analysis of Virginia Woolf, see David Dowling, *Mrs. Dalloway: Mapping Streams of Consciousness* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991).

[734] For an analysis of James Joyce, see Erwin R. Steinberg, *The Stream of Consciousness and Beyond in* Ulysses (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1950 – this edition 1973).

[735] Rebecca Bowler and Claire Drewery, "One hundred years of the stream of consciousness: Editors' introduction", *Literature Compass* 17:6 (2020), p. 2.

[736] Daphne M. Grace, *Beyond bodies: Gender, Literature and the Enigma of Consciousness* (New York: Rodopi, 2014), p. 118.

[737] Grace, *Beyond bodies*, pp. 133,128.

[738] Steinberg, *The Stream of Consciousness*, p. 13.

[739] Ibid., p. 23.

[740] Steinberg, *The Stream of Consciousness*, pp. 248-250.

[741] Ibid., p. 254.

that they have not distinguished much between them, such as Grace who considers the former to be in the style the latter.[742] Similarly, Steinberg states that stream of consciousness has historically been described as 'interior monologue', 'stream of thought', and even 'soliloquy' by other critics.[743] In some respects, it is easy to see why the terms overlap; both interior monologue and stream of consciousness involve introspection, remembering memories, and reflecting on difficulties, usually within a character's head. Yet, one significant difference (as written by its earliest literary proponents like Woolf and Joyce) is the extent to which the text was rational, rooted in narrative and dialogue rather than sensory input and memory.[744] Interior monologue does not employ the same frequency of tangents and erraticism of thought that are a staple of stream of consciousness. Because of this, interior monologue seems like the better fit for the voiceover prayer than stream of consciousness; the audience can hear Adam's thoughts but the other characters cannot, and equally Adam is not aware the audience can hear his thoughts either. Still, interior monologue is also a term intrinsically tied with the written word and does not account for voiceover or visual accompaniment. Therefore, interior monologue may be closer, but not a perfect match.

To further improve this definition, then, interior monologue can be adapted for use in television. What techniques on television use a form of interior monologue? One is direct address, where a character or television personality talks directly to the camera, sometimes referred to as 'breaking the fourth wall' by acknowledging the presence of a camera and an audience.[745] In factual television direct address is commonplace, ranging from journalists during the news to presenters addressing the audience during a reality competition show. This technique has also been used in drama, such as in *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-2018),[746] but are also a mainstay of comedy programmes like traditional sitcom *Miranda* – where Miranda looks into the camera and specifically addresses the live studio and home audience – and fellow quality sitcom *Fleabag* (BBC3/1, 2016-2019),[747] a TV adaptation that uses direct address to replace the original, one-woman monologue theatrical

[742] Grace, *Beyond bodies,* p. 118.
[743] Steinberg, *The Stream of Consciousness.*
[744] Dowling, *Mrs. Dalloway,* p. 47.
[745] Alison Gibbons, "Do worlds have (fourth) walls? A Text World Theory approach to direct address in *Fleabag*", *Language & Literature*, 30:2 (May 2021), p. 107.
[746] *House of Cards,* cr. Beau Willimon (Netflix, 2013-2018).
[747] *Fleabag,* cr. Phoebe Waller-Bridge (BBC3/1, 2016-2019).

performance. In all three of these examples it is assumed the other characters in the show cannot see or address the audience, and the characters use this interaction to react to events, explain their feelings, or otherwise provide an insight into their thought processes. In this manner it performs the same purpose as an interior monologue, especially because this device allows the character to step out of the situation physically and temporally to give a voice to their thoughts. However, direct address in this form is akin to a soliloquy – a spoken monologue directed to the audience that is structured and logically emerges from the action on stage/screen. Therefore, it does not entirely resemble the internal musings of interior monologue. The difference between direct address and *Rev.*'s voiceover is in the name; Adam does not 'directly address' the audience, neither by looking at the camera nor by acknowledging the audience's presence. For this reason it cannot be classified as a 'soliloquy' either.

If direct address is not applicable here, the best comparison for *Rev.*'s prayers is therefore other voiceovers in sitcom, which while an unusual device in UK sitcom is not unknown. Mills argues that the use of voiceover in other sitcoms, such as in *Butterflies* (BBC2, 1978-1983)[748] or *How I Met Your Mother*, hinges on the assumption that the audience is privy to "the thoughts and responses" of a particular character, and that those characters "know there is a listener to whom their inner voice is being addressed", therefore positioning this character as a narrator of their own life.[749] Yet, in *Rev.,* Adam is unaware that there is a watching and listening audience; his prayers are directed to God, and no other character can hear them. *Rev.* is therefore closer to the voiceover in *Peep Show*, a sitcom where the thoughts of the central characters Mark (David Mitchell) and Jeremy (Robert Webb) can be heard through voiceover. The voiceover in this situation serves the purpose of "eavesdropping on resolutely private thoughts", Mills states, and that *Peep Show* "clearly suggests that the interior monologue is a more 'truthful' representation of the characters".[750] This concept circles back to the central conceit of the interior monologue – to gain access to a character's innermost, unfiltered thoughts – but adapts this conceit to work in a televisual format. Indeed, Mills in this quote even uses the phrase 'interior monologue', as does Bolt when he describes the voiceover

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[748] *Butterflies,* cr. Carla Lane (BBC2, 1978-1983).
[749] Mills, "Paranoia, Paranoia, Everybody's Coming to Get Me", p. 52.
[750] Ibid., p. 58.

as "internal monologues [where] their thoughts are made explicit to the audience".[751] This analysis also re-emphasises the importance of realism and 'truthfulness' to the quality sitcom, where the voiceover creates an artificial reaction to a situation – what the character does – and a more truthful one – what the character thinks – even if both are ultimately fabricated (especially as in *Peep Show* the characters can lie to themselves).[752]

Where does this leave *Rev.'s* voiceover? It certainly has the most similarity with interior monologue (as an offshoot of stream of consciousness), but framed within a televisual format like *Peep Show.* It also requires a definition different to both direct address and other examples of voiceover like *Butterflies* because it lacks the narrative element and an assumed connection to an audience. Therefore, the term that combines both aspects – acknowledging its purpose as a device to hear a characters' thoughts without their knowledge and its televisual/screen specificity – is 'interior voiceover', of which two examples are *Peep Show* and *Rev.* The interior voiceover is different from usual voiceovers because the character does not intend for their voice or thoughts to be heard by an audience, whether this audience is specific (the children in *How I Met Your Mother*) or abstract (whomever JD is speaking to in *Scrubs*). Also, whether this is accurate or not, the interior voiceover suggests it is a realistic and truthful depiction of the character's thoughts, in a logical and tangible order but largely unfiltered. In addition, the interior voiceover establishes a clear divide between the words a character speaks out loud in public and the words a character thinks in private, a distinction that has ample potential for contradiction and incongruity.[753]

This distinction between the public and private links back to the idea that the vicar must always be 'on' whether in public or in private. In the other religious sitcoms the distinction between public and private was simply whether a character was with other people or on their own (public, relational, or private – see Chapters 2 and 3), but in *Rev.* the 'private' also includes Adam's interior voiceover. Returning to the concept of the quality sitcom, then, the interior voiceover creates a specific engagement with realism by suggesting the audience is privy to information that is

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[751] Bolt, "Pretending to be a normal human being", p. 746.
[752] Bolt, "Pretending to be a normal human being", p. 746.
[753] Mills, "*Peep Show,* Sitcom", p. 58.

unknown to other characters and is therefore more personal and truthful, similar to Mills' suggestion that *Peep Show*'s voiceover wants to be viewed as more 'truthful' than the dialogue spoken out loud.[754] For Adam, this voiceover is an opportunity to escape from the expectations of being a vicar and a chance to view his thoughts unfettered by public appearances.

One final difference between *Peep Show* and *Rev.*'s use of voiceover is that Adam's voiceover *does* assume there is an audience to his thoughts beyond himself; God. The voiceover gives the impression of being relatively unfiltered by talking about any subject on Adam's mind, but his thoughts are always heard in the context of a religious act, talking to a being intricately tied with expectations of how to think and behave in a manner that Mark and Jeremy are not subjected. This can be interpreted in two ways. First, there could be absolutely no difference between the thoughts Adam has and his prayers; they might be entirely unfiltered. Second, the fact that Adam is talking to God colours the version of his life that he is choosing to share, not consciously 'lying' but influenced in his discussions by the knowledge that Christianity has certain expectations of how to live which he may not be achieving. As Morreall claims, for Christians "there is no 'time out' in which we live outside the Creator-creature relationship", and as such everything Adam thinks in his prayers could be filtered through this knowledge.[755] However, the significant indication from the text that Adam's thoughts are unfiltered is the fact that Adam discusses topics that are sensitive or embarrassing, such as sexual performance issues, that he does not discuss with anyone else. Similarly, Adam expresses confusion and doubt about some Christian and church issues, such as the issue of gay marriage within the Church of England. His thoughts do appear unprocessed, personal, and relevant to his situation in a way that would not be applicable if Adam was presenting himself falsely to God.

Much like previous case studies, the interior voiceover prayer is a potential site for humour and religious intersection, and the sheer frequency of such prayers in *Rev.* increases the quantity of potential intersection sites. Part of the humour in *Rev.*'s prayers emerges from location, such as praying in surprising places like the toilet or while cycling, and part from the topics of Adam's prayers. Even when Adam prays

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[754] Ibid., p. 58.
[755] Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously,* p. 125.

in church or at home, he often does so with his eyes open and hands unclasped, sometimes busying his hands by holding a paper or scratching an itch. Adam will pray about anything on his mind including issues at work, problems with friends and family, or even something he is experiencing in the moment (such as complaining about the squeakiness of his shoes). Adam also occasionally discusses points of Christian doctrine or faith, such as conflicts between Adam's theology and the church or the extent to which he should help others, using the prayer as a space to explore religious themes in a manner surprisingly missing from other religious sitcoms. Both location and content here are inherently incongruous with the image of prayer as formal or conservative, especially in comparison to other prayers within *Rev.* during church services or at the altar.[756] This style of prayer also creates a very open, friendly, and conversational relationship between Adam and God, reminiscent of the familiarity in Geraldine's prayers in *Dibley* but much more frequent.

One of the many instances of prayer in *Rev.* (there are prayers in every single episode) is from the second episode of the first series, "Jesus is Awesome",[757] where Adam prays in church after a particularly small congregation fails to bring in enough money. During the prayer the camera uses just one mid-shot lasting nearly a minute of Adam sat alone in church staring around the room until he is interrupted by a fellow vicar. The use of the one-shot here further emphasises the show's attempt at realism, removing the assumed artificiality of noticeable editing and cuts. This prayer is not particularly unusual in comparison to other prayers (similar themes in Adam's prayers can be seen in the previous episode and throughout the third series) but illustrates many of the typical facets of Adam's prayers:

> Dear Lord, if you don't mind me bringing this up, could you give
> me more energy in bed? I'm so exhausted all the time and it's
> not fair on Alex, she deserves to be happy. Please help me find
> more time and energy for her, and it, and please help me get
> my numbers up. Why do You make finance such a constant
> daily issue for us? Shouldn't I be spreading Your word and
> building the kingdom rather than worrying about money? I
> gather wine's a good investment at the moment and property

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[756] See Chapter 1. and (among others) Oring's *Engaging Humour.*
[757] 1.02 "Jesus is Awesome", *Rev.* (BBC2, 18 March 2010).

in Bulgaria. And I hope You don't find the size of my flock insultingly small. If You've got any ideas on how to fill this place, I'd love to hear them.

1.02 "Jesus is Awesome"[758]

While this is a particularly long example, this prayer is an example of "arrow prayers", brief and frequent prayers to "continually connect with God" throughout the day.[759] In this prayer Adam strikes a conversational tone, using questions, contractions, and informal language to suggest an intimacy and openness in the relationship between Adam and God. Both of the major topics discussed – Adam's sex life and his financial issues – are personal topics that he has not talked about at length with other characters, suggesting God is Adam's confidante and that prayers are a space for Adam to work through his problems. This interpretation of the interior voiceover is very different from its use in *Peep Show*, where the interior voiceover often exposed the selfish and depraved thoughts of the characters rather than providing a space for deep contemplation. The situations in which the voiceovers are heard exacerbate this; while Adam almost exclusively prays alone, Mark and Jeremy in *Peep Show* are often heard through the voiceover while talking to other people, explicitly highlighting the difference between their thoughts and spoken words. However, the intimacy created during Adam's prayer in "Jesus is Awesome" does also try to capture the 'truthfulness' found in *Peep Show*'s voiceover, because Adam's thoughts suggest an authenticity due to their personal and private nature. Indeed, Adam's behaviour during the shot echoes this engagement; at the beginning Adam's hands are clasped together, but he quickly starts to inspect his nails instead and then uses a finger to clean his ear, behaviour that Adam never indulges in when around other people.

The implication of Adam's behaviour is very different from the prayers seen in other case studies. While in *Father Ted* prayer was a functional process to ask for God's help, Adam's purpose is multifaceted, an everyday activity that even in this short example serves multiple functions. First, Adam asks for help, in this instance with Adam's lack of sexual energy. This is a common purpose seen in *Dibley* and *Ted,*

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[758] 1.02 "Jesus is Awesome".
[759] Karen Barber, "Using Powerful, Quick Arrow Prayers", *Prayer Ideas* (30 July 2015) <https://www.prayerideas.org/using-powerful-quick-arrow-prayers/> [accessed 06/06/22].

where the vicar/priest uses prayer to ask for assistance. Second, the prayer discusses Adam's thoughts in a friendly, conversational manner, asking rhetorical questions about Adam's responsibilities and commenting on the possible benefits of investment in Bulgarian properties. A conversational tone has been used in *Dibley,* often a chance for Geraldine's witticisms, but such occurrences are more infrequent in *Dibley* than in *Rev.* Finally, Adam opens a dialogue with God, a purpose thus far unseen in the case studies. Rather than asking specifically for help, the third section suggests Adam wants to have a discussion or advice. While Adam does not seem to expect a verbal or physical response (and when he does meet God in a later series, he seems suitably surprised), this maintains the established conversational tone and offers the opportunity to respond in another form, through another person or action.

In addition to these purposes, the prayers are also intended to generate humour, which in this prayer plays on the incongruity of the act of prayer with the informal tone and behaviour. As discussed in Chapter 1, Hutcheson was amongst the first to hint at the theory that would eventually develop into Incongruity Theory, claiming that the cause of laughter was the "bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas" such as "grandeur, dignity, sanctity, perfections, and ideas of meanness, baseness, profanity".[760] This quote has a particular application to *Rev.* because it specifically singles out 'sanctity' and 'baseness', which – while not strictly opposites – are contrasted during Adam's prayers. On the one hand Adam is performing a religious act (sanctity) but on the other he is discussing topics like sex life while cleaning out his ear (baseness). One reading of this performance would suggest this is to the detriment of either humour or religion; by taking a cavalier attitude to the 'sanctity' of prayer, for example, the religious element of the act is somehow diminished or mocked.[761] This interpretation more closely resembles Superiority Theory, where an aspect of religion is mocked or denigrated through humour.[762] Yet, in this situation, it is difficult to ascertain what exactly about religion or prayer is being 'mocked' beyond a deviation in tone or formality. Adam instead demonstrates devotion by praying every day, honesty through sharing everything

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[760] Hutcheson, *An Inquiry Concerning Beauty*, p. 109.
[761] This was a conclusion of another BBC show – the part documentary part opinion piece *Are You Having a Laugh? Comedy and Christianity* (BBC1, 27 March 2013) presented by Anne Widdecombe that criticises a variety of comedy programmes and comedians for not taking certain Christian traditions and events seriously enough, including prayer.
[762] Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter,* p. 14.

he is thinking, and familiarity through his conversational approach. Rather than 'mocking', therefore, Adam's prayers demonstrate a different type of relationship with God than seen in other case studies, and the incongruous humour comes without cost to religion.

Another source of incongruous humour, as in the other religious sitcoms, are the St. Saviours' church services, which like prayer in *Rev.* feature in every episode. Their frequency in terms of quantity alone offers the chance for more religious engagement than other series. Indeed, by having services in every episode, *Rev.* has the opportunity to present multiple different *types* of services, ranging from christenings to funerals, and even services from other Christian denominations. Adam himself is an adept writer and public speaker, often complimented by other characters for his oratory abilities when officiating a service. However, despite Adam's abilities and efforts to raise interest or financial aid for the church, St. Saviours' services are constantly underscored by its looming financial issues and dwindling congregation. In the case of the church architecture, its financial issues are literally looming – its ornate organ, with enormous golden pipes that dominate the back wall, is broken, and the services' music is instead provided by a small, tinny CD player at the front of the church. Despite the CD player's weak sound system, there are no fears that the congregation will not be able to hear it; during the average service there are fewer than 20 people in the pews, sometimes dipping to as low as 5.[763] Some of the slapstick and physical humour in *Rev.* is reminiscent of previous religious sitcoms – *Rev.* even has a drunken, dancing Midnight Mass incident[764] like Geraldine's drunken 'skit' in *Dibley*[765] – but often the humour in the services comes from the disparity (or incongruity) between St. Saviours' services and what they should or could be, such as the 17 members of the congregation in a church built for 200. Alongside this humour however is an edge of pathos; the CD player and the small congregation are a grim reminder of both the dwindling interest in St. Saviours' and Christianity itself. While in *Dibley* Geraldine's exciting new style draws in a huge congregation from day 1, Adam's problems cannot be so easily solved, and their

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[763] 1.02 "Jesus is Awesome".
[764] 2X.01 "Christmas Special, *Rev.* (BBC2, 20 December 2011).
[765] 4.01 "Merry Christmas", *The Vicar of Dibley.*

inability to combat the problem eventually leads to the closure of St. Saviours' in series 3.

This narrative is reinforced when Adam interacts with other Christian denominations or religions, a unique element in *Rev.* amongst the religious sitcoms. One solution for St. Saviours' financial difficulties is proposed in the second episode of the first series, "Jesus is Awesome",[766] when St. Saviours' hosts a "chilled, friendly" Evangelical service which fills the church with new parishioners. The service, organised by the Evangelical youth church who need to borrow the church while theirs is doing renovations, is the absolute opposite of Adam's usual services, countering many of the obvious financial difficulties St. Saviours' has suffered. The church is filled with new, colourful furniture including sofas, chairs, and a smoothie bar. The CD player is replaced by a state-of-the-art sound system with huge speakers, microphones on headsets, and screens displaying live footage of the service and the lyrics to the Christian hip-hop tracks. They even have an in-house Christian rapper called Ikon (played by real-life rapper and comedian Doc Brown). The service is a huge success, raising over £10,000 in one morning. The new church group resembles the highly successful Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) church whose network reaches across dozens of churches within the Church of England and Wales and features a "rock-band style of worship".[767] With congregations in the several thousands and the popular Alpha course which attracts participants all over the country, the HTB church is a far cry from Adam's St. Saviours'. Yet, the service in "Jesus is Awesome" is also completely alienating for the few regulars.[768] Some of Adam's regular congregation leave halfway through, while others struggle to follow the songs or are jostled by the new worshippers. Despite the potential financial positives Adam decides that he must place the needs of his old congregation before finance and prevents them from returning. The final straw is when Adam confronts Darren on their different belief systems and Darren expresses his hatred of the "pathetic, liberal acceptance" of gay people and women priests. Adam's choice (though tinged with jealousy for the popularity and success of the Evangelical

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[766] 1.02 "Jesus is Awesome".
[767] Peter Stanford, "Holy Trinity Brompton, the evangelical HQ that claims the new primate as one of its own", *The Observer* (10 Nov 2012) https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/nov/10/justin-welby-archbishop-canterbury-holy-trinity-brompton [accessed 06/06/2022].
[768] 1.02 "Jesus is Awesome".

services) is motivated by a desire to cater to his congregation, but in this instance Adam's loyalty to his parishioners comes at the cost of financial gain.

In addition to battling against other forms of Christianity, Adam is the only vicar in any of the religious sitcoms to encounter and work alongside another religion – Islam. In "Forests of Prejudice",[769] Adam invites his friend Faiza (Tania Rodrigues) to teach her Qur'an class in St. Saviours. Much of the interaction between Adam, his congregation, and Faiza on the topic of inter-faith interaction seems to be explicitly or implicitly about discomfort, such as Adoha and Nigel's discomfort with the presence of the Muslim class and Adam's attempts not to accidentally offend Faiza or her class. For example, Adam suggests that (while he is fine with the church being used for non-Christian practices) he worries that other members of the congregation like Colin will have "prejudices" against the church welcoming a Qur'an class. In fact, the congregation's response is mixed. Colin is quite taken with many of the elements of Islam they discuss, including the fact that a minority of Muslim men have multiple wives and wearing a burka, which Colin finds "sexy".[10] On the other hand, Adoha tells Adam her military nephew thinks all Muslims are terrorists. Similarly, Nigel claims 'some people' might think the prayer group is a "hot bed for radicals" and views the Muslim community as 'threatening' the Church's continued existence. Adam vehemently denies all of these claims and says that if people are not coming to church it is because "we're not engaging with the community", a sentiment echoed in the series 3 episode "Episode 1"[770] when Adam visits a bustling mosque that stands in strong contrast to his emptying church. There is no real change amongst these opinions by the end of "Forests of Prejudice"[771] – in fact, most of the episode focuses on a different narrative entirely. The inclusion of this discussion is not to teach Adoha the error of her ways or to change Nigel's mind. Instead, it illustrates a variety of viewpoints held by the Christian characters on the topic.

Other representations in *Rev.* illustrate the difference in popularity and approach between Islam and Christianity in London, especially those connected with money, community, and power. In "Episode 1",[772] Adam starts fundraising with a local Imam,

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[769] 1.03 "Forests of Prejudice", *Rev.* (BBC2, 12 July 2010).
[770] 3.01 "Episode 1", *Rev.* (BBC2, 24 March 2014).
[771] 1.03 "Forests of Prejudice".
[772] 3.01 "Episode 1".

Yusef (Kayvan Novak), to restore a playground. At first Yusef seems, in Adam's words, "smug"; he jokes about Christianity, its "three gods" and "spacious" (code for empty) churches, and takes the ability to raise funds almost for granted. Conversely, Adam (who struggles to find a balance between humour and respectfulness) is often cut down by Yusef when Adam tries to joke along. It is hardly surprising though that Yusef is so much more confident; not only is he physically taller and fitter, but he has a large support network of other Imams at the mosque and a huge congregation with regular, large monetary donations as standard (as Yusef points out, "giving is an obligation"). In the street Yusef is greeted by many friends and congregants, while Adam's only familiar passer-by blanks him when Adam says hello. In truth, however, Yusef is generous and kind, offering to cover the entire cost of the playground when Adam cannot raise any funding and treats "brother" Adam as an equal by listening to and agreeing to his suggestions. Even when Yusef is accidentally electrocuted by St. Saviours' dodgy wiring, Yusef tells Adam that they can still be friends and should work together for the good of Christian and Muslim children. For Adam, Yusef is aspirational. Adam would love to be in a position where he can raise funds so quickly, where his congregation would love and respect him, and Christianity was on the rise in the neighbourhood instead of steadily decreasing in popularity. When the Evangelists took over the church Adam had to choose between funds and supporting his congregation; Yusef has never had to make this choice.

The issues exposed through comparison to other religions and denominations are also reinforced by the significant Church of England expectations Adam feels he has to fulfil. Indeed, considering the intense financial pressure from the church that Adam experiences in almost every episode, it is unsurprising that the church organisation itself has a much larger role in *Rev.* than the other case studies, which if they were present at all usually consisted of one superior figure to represent its views, like Bishop Brennan in *Ted*. The most frequent church representative is cast regular Archdeacon Robert, Adam's immediate superior and responsible for a number of churches in the area. Other significant figures – ranging from fellow vicar Abi Johnston (Amanda Hale) to the Bishop of London (Ralph Fiennes) – appear throughout the series as well, giving the impression of an interconnected and wide-reaching, even if often unhelpful, network of associates. However, Robert is a

constant, ever-present reminder of Adam and St. Saviours' obligations to the wider church, usually financial in nature but also in terms of church representation. Robert, a refined and snobbish archdeacon who struggles to interact with Adam's local congregation, is often the person exerting pressure upon Adam to raise funds and increase the congregation numbers. At first Robert is seen as an imposing but disconnected figure, reminiscent of Brennan without the slapstick humour. In later episodes Robert warms to Adam's care and enthusiasm (an antithesis to the other vicars Robert encounters) and eventually it becomes clear that Robert's constant reminders stem from a desire to keep Adam in his job; without the financing that Robert constantly pushes Adam to receive, the church is forced to close.

In some scenarios, the fact that Robert must enforce the church's decisions causes significant moral dilemmas for both Robert and Adam, such as in "Episode 3"[773] when Robert forbids Adam from conducting a gay wedding in the church. In "Episode 3" Adam's friends Jeremy and Rob ask him to marry them in St. Saviours', and while Adam wishes to do so, he is prevented from conducting a gay wedding in church by the rules of Church of England, which is still of contention within the Church eight years later.[774] Adam feels he has let his friends down, especially because he is a supporter of gay marriage. When Rob asks "God won't bless our union?", Adam replies that "God will, of course He will. But the church won't.". In effect, then, Adam explicitly states that he believes God accepts and blesses their union, and that the church is instead at fault for not allowing it. Yet, despite his beliefs, Adam is required to toe the line and obey church doctrine, or he may be suspended and defrocked – and, according to Archdeacon Robert, 'killed by one of the Bishop's teams of assassins'. In the end Adam marries the couple in secret, unable to reconcile his beliefs with the church's requirements, and has thankfully not yet suffered the wrath of the Bishop's assassins.

In fact, Adam seems to take from his experiences with the Muslims, Evangelists, and the wider Church of England in general the lesson that their version of religion is not meeting modern requirements; namely, that people are looking for more 'concrete' rules, a religion more interwoven into their daily lives, or values that match

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[773] 3.03 "Episode 3", *Rev.* (BBC2, 7 April 2014).
[774] "House of Bishops Pastoral Guidance on Same Sex Marriage", *Church of England.org* (14 February 2014) <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/House%20of%20Bishops%20Pastoral%20Guidance%20on%20Same%20Sex%20Marriage.pdf> [accessed 06/06/2022].

with theirs. For example, while watching the children's prayer group in the church Adam muses that they seem very "comfortable" with their religion, "because Islam's so woven into their everyday lives, whereas for our lot it's just something you do on Sundays if you can be bothered".[775] Similarly, in "Episode 1", Adam prays while watching the mosque emptying after a service and concludes that his church might be full too if "Christianity had rules like Islam".[776] This even arises when Adam defies the Church of England laws on gay marriage, as the current structure is not serving the needs of his friends and family.[777] Therefore, Adam's interactions with other religions or beliefs are always coloured by his own experiences and prejudices, viewing them almost entirely through the lens of Adam's version of Christianity.

Beyond Robert and the Church there are also significant expectations from Adam's parishioners because, like Geraldine in *Dibley,* Adam is expected to be "all things to all people", a phrase Adam himself uses when praying to God about his loneliness.[778] Parishioner Colin will burst into the vicarage at all hours, regardless of whether he is invited or not. Adoha will approach Adam for a chat even if he is busy with someone else. Some parishioners even expect special favours as church visitors, such as help enrolling their child in the local primary school. The long hours and frequent unscheduled interruptions cause friction with Adam's wife Alex because he rarely has time for their relationship, which becomes particularly strained when they decide to start a family. However, it also has a significant effect on Adam's mental health, which on multiple occasions leads to a breakdown or crisis of faith. This is particularly apparent in "A Fine Bromance",[779] the episode which precedes Adam's first breakdown (of a potential three) in "Ever Been to Nando's".[780] Adam complains to Alex that he has no friends and that his parishioners cannot be his friends because as the vicar he is expected to be "on at all times". In other words, Adam's job prevents him from connecting with those around him. To some extent, this is reminiscent of Morreall's words on what is 'expected' of Christians, who argues that "there is no 'time out'" when all thoughts and actions are seen by God, and therefore Christians must live "single-mindedly… with the purpose of fulfilling

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[775] 1.03 "Forests of Prejudice".
[776] 3.01 "Episode 1".
[777] 3.02 "Episode 2".
[778] 1.05 "A Fine Bromance", *Rev.* (BBC2, 26 July 2010).
[779] 1.05 "A Fine Bromance".
[780] 1.06 "Ever Been to Nando's?", *Rev.* (BBC2, 2 August 2010).

the will of God".[781] For Adam, this manifests as a constant and overwhelming pressure to perform the 'will of God' in every waking moment – and to be seen by others to represent this. The only person who Adam claims can see past 'the dog collar' is Alex, but in truth Alex is the only person who can reconcile the two sides to Adam (Adam the man and Adam the vicar) and acknowledges the importance of both to his well-being. After all, without his vicar duties, Adam is just as lost as he is when he is overworked.[782]

The duality of Adam's identity, symbolised by the addition or removal of the dog collar, is discussed by Ornella in relation to clerical masculinity in "Losers, Food and Sex".[783] Ornella writes that clerical masculinity combines "'being' a man and performing masculinity" with living as a vicar in a "so-called secular society" – in other words, being male, a religious professional, and surrounded by those who do not believe in what the vicar preaches.[784] In this context, society not only dictates the meaning of being 'male' and masculine, but also being religious in a primarily secular environment, further emphasising the influence of wider society on Adam's sense of self. The latter part of Ornella's definition deals directly with the ostracization Adam feels as a "religious other",[785] the separation between Adam and the rest of the characters because of his beliefs and profession. The representation of clerical masculinity within *Rev.,* Ornella argues, is founded on a series of dualities and paradoxes; being a vicar and a man, being viewed as asexual and sexually desirable; and being Christian in an increasingly secular society.[786] This also points to another key element, which is the lack of cohesion between these identities or the discovery of a solution that could unite them. Adam's struggles to balance his work and home life represent the two pulls of his 'vicar' identity and his 'male' (husband/father/man) identity that are frequently in conflict, such as when Adam fails to conceive a child with Alex. In this case, his sexual abilities as a husband and potential father are threatened by his work as a priest. Because Adam has to be 'always on', he is constantly exhausted and has only a limited amount of time and energy to put towards the task. Sometimes his work quite literally disrupts his sex

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[781] Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p. 125.
[782] 1.06 "Ever Been to Nando's?".
[783] Ornella, "Losers, Food, and Sex".
[784] Ibid., p. 100.
[785] Ibid., p. 101.
[786] Ibid., p. 100.

life, such as in "Jesus is Awesome"[787] when Adam and Alex are interrupted while in bed by the Evangelical priest Darren. This is clearly a point of historical embarrassment and emasculation for Adam, who voices this fear in "A Fine Bromance"[788] when Adam claims another man could get her pregnant while he could not.

As well as demonstrating the duality described by Ornella, the importance of sex and sexuality in *Rev.* is emphasised by Ornella as a separate element of clerical masculine identity. Ornella states "clergymen are sexual bodies with sexual desires, rejected or fetishized bodies, or queered bodies".[789] In some respects, this is not how clergy members have been historically viewed, as explored by Jennifer D. Thibodeux in *The Manly Priest*.[790] The connection between the priesthood and celibacy is associated with devotion and self-denial; Thibodeaux argues that monastic writers historically characterised the male body as "one that required constant discipline and vigilance in order to transcend desires", manifesting as a sexual chastity and "control of bodily appetites".[791] This view was so wide-spread that some institutions enforced it as ecclesiastical law.[792] However, Ornella claims there is another, paradoxical dynamic at work; they may be simultaneously viewed as chaste *and* an object of sexual desire, stimulated by the recognisable 'priestly' clothing, their care and attention, and their status as unattainable.[793] In fact, this latter point has been heavily utilised in recent comedies such as *Fleabag* with the nameless 'Hot Priest' (Andrew Scott). *Fleabag* encourages the notion that the 'Hot Priest' is sexually desirable not only through his moniker but also through 'Fleabag's direct addresses, which cite his physical appearance and unavailability as appealing. Returning to *Rev.,* rather than encouraging the audience to find Adam sexually attractive, Adam instead receives unwanted flirtations from "cassock chaser"[794] Adoha. Adoha often corners Adam after services, brings him food, and showers him with compliments, to the point where Adam's wife Alex becomes angered at Adoha's constant attention. Alex, however, does not share Adoha's

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[787] 1.02 "Jesus is Awesome".
[788] 1.05 "A Fine Bromance".
[789] Ornella, "Losers, Food, and Sex", p. 101.
[790] Jennifer D. Thibodeaux, *The Manly Priest: Clerical Celibacy, Masculinity, and Reform in England and Normandy, 1066-1300* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).
[791] Thibodeaux, *The Manly Priest*, p. 2.
[792] Ibid., p. 2.
[793] Ornella, "Losers, Food, and Sex", p. 109.
[794] 1.01 "On Your Knees Forget the Fees", *Rev.* (BBC2, 28 June 2010).

fascination with the cassock – like Emma in *Good Faith*, she requests that Adam remove his dog collar before they sleep together. Therefore, Adam is simultaneously othered, emasculated and sexualised in his profession, complicating the way Adam is viewed by others.

One further dynamic in clerical masculinity appears to be how the conflict between 'vicar' and 'male' leads to mental strain and breakdown, often as a direct result of the two identities in conflict. In series 1, Adam experiences a breakdown when his worst sermon is severely criticised online by a reviewer, leading to a brief crisis of faith, a few days of slouching on the couch 'wanking', and a drunken pass at school principal Ellie.[795] In the Christmas special, the sheer amount of work Adam has to complete along with constant undermining comments from Alex's father, the death of a friend, and mockery from drunk parishioners during Midnight Mass leads to a more public breakdown in church, when Adam vents his anger during the service and dances wildly.[796] In the first crisis Adam's vicar identity is threatened so his male identity comes to the forefront; in the second Adam's male identity is insulted, erupting in outbursts while ministering.

The final breakdown in series 3 is a combination of the two – Adam is ostracised by his friends, family, and parishioners (therefore, society) and loses any sense of his identity at all. In series 3, in a moment of weakness, Adam cheats on Alex by kissing Ellie,[797] and erratically attempts to hide his actions as long as possible.[798] When Alex finds out, Adam is ostracised or abandoned by his friends and family for his actions and suspended from work for unprofessional conduct – one of the only examples in *Rev.* where Adam's work life is affected by his personal life. He also suffers at the hands of the community. The story is reported in the papers, Adam receives abusive anonymous text messages, and his house is graffitied with insults. Adam begins to suffer from depression, sleep deprivation, and anxiety, culminating in a breakdown when Adam drags a life-size crucifix through the centre of London at night. This sequence, echoing Jesus' journey carrying the cross to Golgotha, is purposefully harrowing and dizzying, using the stark contrast of light and dark from the city lights and Dutch camera angles to represent Adam's fraught emotional

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[795] 1.06 "Ever Been to Nando's?".
[796] 2X.01 "Christmas Special".
[797] 3.03 "Episode 3", *Rev.*
[798] 3.04 "Episode 4", *Rev.* (BBC2, 14 April 2014).

state.[799] Adam is physically injured in the journey as the burden inflicts scrapes on his hands and a bloody head wound, and he hallucinates the faces of his friends and family mocking him as he struggles along.

Returning to the concept of duality, there are two interpretations of this scene through which duality manifests. One, Adam attempts to regain some control over his sense of self by performing a job that unites 'vicar' and 'man' – helping out another church by performing the physical task of dragging the cross through town. However, the second interpretation is that, having been undermined as a man (a husband who breaks his vows) and a vicar (who has been suspended for an immoral act), Adam is looking for a double punishment. The entire purpose of the journey – to carry this cross across town for an Easter parade – is implied to be arbitrary; the purpose is for Adam to experience self-inflicted punishment for his actions, to suffer even more physically and mentally than those around him. In addition, this scene is one of many where parallels are drawn between Adam and God or Jesus. For example, in the "Christmas Special", Adam holds a Christmas meal for the local homeless community and the table set-up evokes the Last Supper.[800] Also, in series 3 episode 3, Adam throws a group of investors out of the church, reminiscent of Jesus throwing the moneylenders out of the temple.[801] This concept is touched upon by some religious theorists such as Götz, who argues that "sincere believers" (Götz does not elaborate on what defines a 'sincere believer' here) become "a projection of God's image" by linking their lives and work to God.[802] *Rev.* addresses these parallels earlier in the series, when homeless man Mick compares himself to Jesus.[803] Adam tells Mick:

> Identifying with Jesus is just such a problematic business,
> because I suppose you have those big moments, don't you?
> But there's miracles, and… then there's everything else. It's
> just… I'm not sure that life becomes this perfect, clean thing…
> ever.

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[799] Series 3 consciously echoes the structure of the Christian Holy Week, starting from Palm Sunday in Episode 1 and culminating in Easter Sunday in episode 6.
[800] 2X.01 "Christmas Special".
[801] 3.03 "Episode 3".
[802] Götz, *Faith, Humor, and Paradox*, p. 57.
[803] 2.05 "Accounting", *Rev.* (BBC2, 8 December 2011).

In this quote, Adam tries to draw a distinction between the actions of Jesus – perfect, clean, miraculous – and those of ordinary people, which are more muddled, complicated, and imperfect. Indeed, Adam's life is neither perfect nor clean, both through his own making and the challenges he has to face. This is apparent from one very notable difference between Adam's journey and Holy Week; Adam's suffering is self-inflicted, having consciously made the choice to kiss Ellie and then attempt to hide it from Alex. Instead of the comparison between Adam and Jesus working in Adam's favour, then, the similarities serve to further underline two aspects of Adam's narrative; his unerring attempts to be a good Christian and vicar to his community, and his almost constant failures to live up to expectations, however unreachable they may be.

As well as this, there are also unmistakeable parallels between the audience and God. One parallel is the use of Adam's voiceover that only God and the audience can hear, but another is a shot in each episode's opening credits where the camera, shooting from above the entrance to St. Saviours', sees Adam look up at the camera, towards God above and the audience. There is a clear relationship between the perspective of the audience, who see Adam's entire life without being able to interact with the (fictional) character, and God, who in all the case studies so far has been an absent but ever-acknowledged presence. Both the audience and God are also physically absent. God does not appear in any of the case studies, but by eschewing the live audience, *Rev.* actually removes the possibility for audience members to view the scenes in person, paradoxically creating both further distance (all viewers watching through a screen) and reducing the distance as well (removing the barrier of the studio audience between the performer and viewer). On one hand, the idea that the audience and God are placed on a similar plane could suggest that both God and the audience are impassionate, impotent observers, who voyeuristically watch Adam without interfering. On the other, if the audience is encouraged to connect with Adam and care about him, then it is not a stretch to suggest that Adam wishes God to view him in the same way. God and the audience become Adam's confidantes and, while they still cannot help, they can offer Adam

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[804] 2.05 "Accounting".

the place to vent that he does not have elsewhere. This second reading is further evidenced by the actual appearance of Jesus in *Rev.* at the end of the series when Jesus (played by Liam Neeson) offers Adam some supportive words.

Jesus appears in the series when Adam is at his lowest, after dragging the cross across town all night to the top of a hill overlooking London.[805] As day breaks, Adam carries the cross up a hill, physically exhausted and bleeding. This is a clear reference to Jesus' struggles on Good Friday, especially as the episode is set during Holy Week and the episode, "Episode 5", aired the day after Easter Sunday.[806] Time and purpose become difficult to judge; Adam may have been dragging the cross for just an hour or throughout the night, and the reason he has dragged it up a hill instead of its intended destination is unclear. At the top, Adam puts down the cross. stares out at the rising sun, and then starts singing 'Lord of the Dance'. His singing gains momentum and he starts dancing along, reminiscent of his earlier breakdown in the Christmas special.[807] This dance, however, is more erratic, desperate, and impulsive than his others – Adam seems compelled to do so. After a few moments Adam is joined as if from nowhere by another man (Liam Neeson). The man is unkempt and informal, with matted hair and stubble, dressed in a tracksuit, and holding a beer can. The man is delighted in Adam's dancing and singing and joins in enthusiastically. After a while they stop and sit together. The man says he liked Adam's dancing, for which Adam thanks him. The man erroneously suggests Adam is in a bad mood, but Adam says no. Adam explains that he's "trying to keep something alive" – St. Saviours' – but finally acknowledges that his efforts may be fruitless. The man replies that he has "learned a few things over the years" and then launches into a series of well-known platitudinous proverbs, including "you can't make an omelette without cracking some eggs" and "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger", though one ("never parachute into an area you've just bombed") is more comedic than familiar. Then, the man turns to Adam and addresses him by name. Adam is surprised – he had not mentioned his name. "Adam, Adam. We all have our crosses to bear." Adam suddenly sees the man in a new light, delight and recognition on his face. "Yes. Yes, we do," Adam replies. The man puts hand on

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[805] 3.05 "Episode 5".
[806] Easter Sunday in 2014 was the 20th of April, and 3.05 "Episode 5" aired on the 21st of April 2014.
[807] 2X.01 "Christmas Special".

Adam's shoulder and says "I understand, Adam. I'll always be here."[808] Overcome with emotion, Adam begins to tear up. The man smiles warmly and gets up from the bench, leaving Adam alone. In the next shot he has disappeared.

The implication in this scene is that the man is Jesus. Adam certainly believes this, later telling Alex that he "just met God".[809] The camerawork supports this, since the man appears and disappears into thin air (or, at least, out of shot) in a reference to Jesus' disappearance in Luke 24:51 when He is taken to heaven.[810] There is no obvious reason for the man to know Adam's name, nor for him to take such an interest in Adam. More significantly, the man's dialogue only makes sense if it is Jesus; why would a stranger comment to Adam that 'we all have our crosses to bear' and that he will 'always be here' if he had never met Adam before? Despite this, Jesus is wearing a blue tracksuit and warm, blue hat, with straw-like hair poking out the sides, and stubble that looks unkempt rather than deliberate. In other words, Jesus is dressed very informally and inconspicuously, like many of the people Adam works with in London. As well as an unusual appearance, *Rev.*'s Jesus is in stark contrast to the Jesus described by humour and religion theorists like John Morreall, who argue that "the Christian God could have no sense of humour" – *Rev.*'s Jesus laughs, dances, and delights in Adam's idiosyncrasies.[811] Finally, Jesus' speech is casual and clear, not offering advice beyond the aforementioned platitudes.

This interpretation of Jesus is entirely in-keeping with the relationship Adam has developed through his use of prayer during the series. As discussed earlier, Adam's prayers have served multiple functions – asking for help, discussing his problems, thinking through dilemmas – but throughout it all Adam has struck a conversational tone, as if talking with a friend. Indeed, God is the one with whom Adam has consistently been the most honest and open, turning to Him everywhere in town. In this scene, Jesus appears as an equal and a friend, someone who understands what Adam is experiencing and offers his presence and support rather than answers. While "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger" might apply to Adam's current predicament, it is not advice that will help him solve it. The words that elicit an emotional reaction from Adam are 'I understand' and 'I'll always be here', that

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[808] 3.05 "Episode 5".
[809] 3.05 "Episode 5".
[810] *The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments,* Authorised King James Version (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), Luke 24:51.
[811] Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p. 126.

emphasise the eternal support and comfort Adam takes from his relationship with God. In a sense, since They are such an integral part of the series, the appearance of Jesus acts as the culmination of all the prayers Adam has thought during *Rev.,* both representing physically that relationship but also legitimating Adam's devotion to them.

There is one further point of significance for *Rev.*'s prayers that occurs after this scene, when other characters' prayers are heard through voiceover for the first time.[812] As a result of his discussion with God, Adam resolves to quit the priesthood, leaving Adam in the final episode of the series out of work and out of touch with God. For the first time, Adam does not pray. Initially Adam seems enthusiastic about the change; he claims he will find a new job easily, likely as a management consultant at a large firm. However, Adam only manages to find work in the local shop and Adam again becomes deeply depressed and disillusioned. In this case, though, Adam does not have his work to pull him out. Adam stays in bed all day, curled up under the covers, ignoring his parishioners when they come to the door and even leaving his daughter Katie crying in her crib. When Alex returns Adam tearfully says "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry", unable to get up and help. Realising how serious this has become, Alex prays to God herself, saying:

> 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… He's not ill. He's not mad. He's broken his own heart, when he shut Your church. But it's me who's got to do something now, isn't it, Lord?
>
> 3.06 "Episode 6"[813]

Echoing the form of Adam's prayers, Alex's prayer in this scene is informal and conversational. She even asks questions to establish a pseudo-dialogue, though since they are rhetorical, like Adam she is not expecting a reply. The fact that she only prays about Adam and says that she does not 'speak very often' with God

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[812] 3.06 "Episode 6", *Rev.* (BBC2, 28 April 2014).
[813] 3.06 "Episode 6".

suggests that prayer for her is not the daily activity it is for Adam. Instead, Alex only prays when she has a particularly difficult or troublesome issue to solve. As such, the inclusion of Alex's prayer demonstrates another form of religious engagement, with a similarity of tone and content but a difference in approach and purpose.

Alex is not the only character whose prayers are heard for the first time in the final episode.[814] In a scene reminiscent of the opening of the film *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946),[815] when the other characters' prayers are heard through voiceover asking for George Bailey to be safe, the other characters in *Rev.* reflect on the events of the series and on Adam's life. The comparison is especially prominent because both characters in this moment are on the brink of depression and, in the case of Bailey, suicide. Unlike *Wonderful Life,* however, their thoughts are not so charitable. Nigel prays that it was Adam's fault, not his, that the church closed, saying "What he did with Ellie was a sin. I was right to report it." Robert's prayer discusses why, despite leading "a life full of the heavenly virtues", people still find him "cold and aloof", and ends by musing on whether he could have done more to help Adam even though "he failed to help himself". Colin, angry at Adam, prays that God bless him "even though he's a twat". Alex, whose prayers bookend the scene, acknowledges that she prays rarely and asks God to help heal Adam's "broken… heart". Alex concludes that she will have to be the one to act, which prompts her to gather Adam's friends and hold one final service to christen their child. Waiting until the last episode to introduce different perspectives means the emphasis, that was previously always on Adam, is split; the events are analysed from multiple viewpoints, each with their own biases that have developed during the series.

The events described here from the final series of *Rev.,* from Adam's persecution to the closure of St. Saviours', are a far cry from the storylines in the previous case studies and even from *Rev.*'s earlier episodes. So far, in fact, that it is questionable whether the third series of *Rev.* is still identifiably a sitcom. The cast, locations, or number of episodes do not change, but during the end of the third series the humorous moments are noticeably less frequent than previously. "Episode 5"[816] especially, when Adam painfully and deliriously carries the cross through London,

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[814] 3.06 "Episode 6".
[815] *It's a Wonderful Life,* dr. Frank Capra (Liberty Films, 1946).
[816] 3.05 "Episode 5".

has little of the humour of early episodes like "Jesus is Awesome".[817] Even choosing to name the episodes "Episode…" rather than giving them a pithy title like "Ever Been to Nando's?"[818] suggests a more dramatic tone. As discussed earlier, *Rev.* conforms to many of the tropes of the quality sitcom, including its use of single-cam, no live audience, and a tendency towards televisual realism. The choice of casting Hollander and Colman, too, pointed towards a desire to include more drama and seriousness than, for example, the casting of French in *Dibley.* However, these quality sitcoms still maintain the sitcom's aim of the comic impetus, meaning the primary goal should still be to create humour.[819] Conversely, while *Rev.*'s last series has humour in scenes such as the one with Neeson's Jesus,[820] and earlier episodes certainly employed more serious scenes (like Adam's crisis of faith in "Ever Been to Nando's?"),[821] the final series ramps up the latter in place of the former. Consequently, the overriding comic impetus of the usual sitcom appears absent during the final few episodes of *Rev.,* despite its presence in the first two series. This is not to say that *Rev.*'s last few episodes are completely lacking humour – simply that it is no longer the show's main focus. This is amplified by, returning to Mills' cue theory (see Chapter 1), the lack of sitcom-identifying 'setting-specific' jokes and cues that have been seen in previous case studies, such as laugh tracks or the multi-camera shooting style.[822] On its own, the quality sitcom tropes do not preclude *Rev.* from being humorous or a sitcom. However, without the clear comic impetus or historically recognisable sitcom cues, *Rev.*'s final series moves further and further away from the sitcom genre.

If *Rev.* is not entirely motivated by a comic impetus during the third series and is no longer identifiably a 'sitcom', then there are two readings that may explain this transformation. First, *Rev.* may have changed genres during its run. Rather than being singularly 'comedy', the 'comedy-drama' moniker might fit instead. As Kilborn observes, television has a tendency to "produce hybridized formats" to a greater extent than film to meet the "compelling need to hold the viewers' attention with a mixed diet of offerings".[823] The combination of sitcom with more drama might

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[817] 1.02 "Jesus is Awesome".
[818] 1.06 "Ever Been to Nando's?".
[819] Mills, *Television Sitcom,* p. 5.
[820] 3.05 "Episode 5".
[821] 1.06 "Ever Been to Nando's?".
[822] Mills, *The Sitcom,* p. 95.
[823] Kilborn, "'Mixing and Matching", p. 109.

suggest this is the appropriate term for *Rev.*, which following Kilborn's logic would imply a motivation of 'holding viewers' attention.[824] Unfortunately, the term 'comedy-drama' seems particularly vague, since it encompasses almost all fictional (and some factual) television genres. Therefore, it does little to reflect the specificity of *Rev.*'s hybridization of sitcom and 'other', nor does it explain why *Rev.* would not simply employ hybridization from the outset. The second reading of *Rev.*'s alteration, however, connects to a genre's ability to change. Mittell describes genre as always "subject to ongoing changing and redefinition", reflecting media changes as much as feeding into future definitions of media products.[825] Within the religious sitcom case studies so far there has certainly been evidence of that change, not only in terms of format between the other sitcoms and *Rev.* but also in the quantity and quality of religious engagement, key themes, and uses of humour, among others. The same is true of the sitcom genre. As the quality sitcom shows, sitcom does not have to be defined by the use of multi-cam, a studio audience, or catchphrases (though these elements are still present in some sitcoms). Similarly, this embrace of more dramatic moments may point to further stretching of the sitcom genre, especially as *Rev.* was more straightforwardly a 'sitcom' until now. It is significant that *Rev.* is only able to forgo the comic impetus when it is already established, introducing further genre flexibility after finding an audience and critical acclaim when in a position to experiment. Since *Rev.* is the most recent example of the religious sitcom, it is difficult to definitively state if this is part of the sitcom, the religious sitcom, or a one-off, but it does demonstrate the possibility for further genre changes to the sitcom, continuing the quality sitcom trend and widening the definition for the sitcom beyond just the comic impetus.

As the last of the case studies, *Rev.* did not only experiment with generic identification. This chapter has shown how its use of voiceover, an increased and varied amount of religious engagement, a higher presence from church authorities, the threat of financial ruin, and the appearance of Jesus set *Rev.* apart from its predecessors. However, there is plenty that connects *Rev.* with the other case studies as well. *Rev.* continues to include prayers and services, shows a vicar who is overworked, engages with representations of clerical gender, features a holiday

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[824] Ibid., p. 109.
[825] Mittell, *Genre and Television,* p. 1.

special, and follows the same initial narrative as *Good Faith*. It also as a higher amount of religious discussion, even involving other religions and other Christian denominations. These recurring traits show how *Rev.* continues the religious sitcom tradition even if the format and tone may have changed. Chapter 6 will bring all of these findings together to offer a definition of the religious sitcom genre, encompassing the changes *Rev.* brought and the generic tropes that have been there since the beginning.

Chapter 6: Defining the Religious Sitcom

Up to this point, this research on religious sitcoms has largely taken two approaches; looking at academic research into the surrounding topics, and an in-depth textual analysis of four case study sitcoms. Chapter 1 addressed the plethora of relevant literature on humour, comedy, television, and religion (among others), and each of Chapters 2 through 5 has taken one of the four case studies, *All in Good Faith, The Vicar of Dibley, Father Ted,* and *Rev.* While the focus of Chapters 2 to 5 has ranged from gender to voiceover, parody to stardom, there have been a number of factors that have united all of the sitcoms. Apart from the obvious similarities that they are all sitcoms, British, and have a vicar main character (which were the reasons for their original selection), all four vicars were Christian, white, and age 40 to 50, while three out of four were male and/or based in the south of England. All four sitcoms had three series, and three were traditional multi-camera sitcoms with live audiences. Each of the sitcoms had examples of prayer, services, parishioners, overwork, crises of faith, gender negotiation, and religious jokes, while some had wider church communities or authorities, media engagement, and contemporary religious engagement. Some of these elements are vital to the definition of religious sitcoms, and others are instead products of their context, including their broadcast channel or sitcom time period. Taking all of these factors into account, this final chapter will bring together the analyses from Chapters 1 to 5 to offer a definition of the religious sitcom genre, as well as address the other key questions, representation of religion and the intersection of humour and religion.

Before offering a definition, however, this chapter will explore in more detail some of the socio-historical contextual areas that have emerged over the course of the thesis, namely the range of contemporary religious issues that have developed in the UK from the 1980s onwards, and the televisual context of broadcast channel and sitcom period of history in which these sitcoms were broadcast. While textual analysis in this situation has been an illuminating methodology to pinpoint the textual specifics of religious sitcom, the analysis would be incomplete without looking at the contexts in which these programmes were made and viewed. As well as providing a deeper understanding of the sitcoms' context, this will give the opportunity to rule

out certain elements as products of their era rather than key elements of the religious sitcom sub-genre. After the wider context of the case studies has been explored, this chapter will bring together all of the previous findings to address the three thematic areas of the thesis: namely, the representation of religion, the intersection of humour and religion, and the definition of the religious sitcom sub-genre.

The first socio-historical context is the contemporary religious period of the 1980s onwards, which saw wide-reaching changes in church attendance, religious self-identification, and the acceptance of different minority groups into the Church of England. While television cannot 'reflect' society or the issues it faces, it is entirely possible for television to *represent* modern phenomena in their narratives or characters. For example, in *Dibley,* the inclusion of Geraldine as a woman vicar was a topical choice as women vicars had only been ordained earlier that year.[826] Similarly, in *Rev.,* there are references to declining numbers of Christians, decreasing church attendance, the increase of other religions, and identity politics within the church (such as the appointment of openly gay bishops).[827] From this there are two key questions. What contemporary UK religious issues are addressed in the case studies? And does this impact the definition of the sub-genre?

One of the aforementioned issues addressed in *Rev.* is the rapid decline of people self-identifying as Christian and the subsequent drop in church attendance, affecting Adam's congregation in *Rev.* to such an extent that the church is closed due to lack of support and funding.[828] As discussed in the Introduction, from 2001 (the first UK Census to feature a question on religion) to 2019 the number of people self-identifying as Christian in the UK Census dropped from 72%[829] to an estimated 51%,[830] though this could prove to be even lower in the results from the 2021 UK Census.[831] Church attendance has seen a similar drop, from 6.5 million in 1980 to 3 million in 2015, though again the actual weekly figure could be even lower.[832] As such, other avenues for religious discussion and representation (such as television

[826] "Celebrations mark 25 years of women's ordination to the priesthood", *The Church of England* (11 March 2019) <https://www.churchofengland.org/news-and-media/news-and-statements/celebrations-mark-25-years-womens-ordination-priesthood> [accessed 16/06/2022].
[827] 2.06 "Day of Decisions", *Rev.* (BBC2, 15 December 2011).
[828] 3.06 "Episode 6", *Rev.*
[829] "Religion in England and Wales 2011".
[830] "How religion has changed in England and Wales".
[831] Harriet Sherwood, "Less than half of Britons expected to tick 'Christian' in UK census".
[832] See "Where is the Church Going?", *Brierly Consultancy* <https://www.brierleyconsultancy.com/where-is-the-church-going> [accessed 22/02/2022], and "Church Attendance in Britain".

and comedy) during this period have increased in importance, especially in terms of regularly engaging with larger audiences.[833] The reason for this drop in Christian self-identification is attributed partly to the rise of other religions, such as Islam (in 2011, 4.8% of respondents identified as Muslim), and a rise in 'no religion' (again in 2011, 27.9% of respondents identified as having no religion).[834] Consequently, while Christianity and church attendance has been falling, identification with other religions or no religion has been rising. Despite these evident changes in religious identification in the UK, there is very little reference to them in most of the case studies. In fact, one of the most defining aspects of religious representation in *Good Faith, Dibley*, and *Ted* is that everybody around the vicars is either explicitly or assumed Christian. This is logical in *Ted* since most characters are priests anyway (see 'the priest community' in Chapter 4), but most Craggy Islanders are Catholic too, to the point where when Ted meets a Protestant on the Irish mainland he is unsure how to react.[835] Equally, everyone in *Good Faith* seems to be Christian and attend Philip's church, either in Oxfordshire or Edendale. Even two of the very few non-Christian characters, his self-proclaimed atheist house movers, ask him to say a prayer before they set off on the road.[836] In *Dibley* the situation is similar – as soon as Geraldine arrives in town, everyone in the village starts attending her church. The is in stark contrast to *Rev.,* where many people Adam meets are either atheists (some pretending to be Christian to gain favour from the local Church of England primary school)[837] or Muslim.[838] With the exception of *Rev.*, however, the issue of changes in religious identification does not heavily factor into the sitcoms' negotiation of religion.

Other contemporary religious topics are given very little acknowledgement in the religious sitcoms too. For example, since 1982, there have been a number of identity-related changes within the Church of England. Some of these are clearly evident in the case studies, such as the admittance of women vicars into the Church of England in 1994 (a key aspect of *Dibley*),[839] and the later ordination of women

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[833] While each of the four sitcoms received differing levels of audience figures, *Dibley* at its height in the 1999 was receiving audiences of nearly 15 million. "Top 10 TV since 1981".
[834] "Religion in England and Wales 2011".
[835] 3.04 "The Mainland", *Father Ted* (C4 3 April 1998).
[836] 1.06 "Exodus", *All in Good Faith*.
[837] 1.01 "On Your Knees Forget the Fees", *Rev.*
[838] The most relevant (but not only) example of Muslim characters is 3.01 "Episode 1", *Rev.*
[839] "Celebrations mark 25 years of women's ordination to the priesthood".

bishops in 2014.[840] As of 2017, 30% of clergy are women.[841] Others changes, such as the allowance of LGBT-identifying priests and bishops during this period (as long as they are sexually abstinent), are only referred to in passing.[842] Even *Dibley,* whose initial premise is centred on the introduction of women vicars to the Church of England, quickly drops this tension after the first series and barely acknowledged later relevant changes such as gay clergy members or gay marriage. Another example is *Ted,* which does not address the wave of criticism and criminal charges levied at the Catholic Church in the 1990s around sexual, physical, and emotional abuse.[843] This, amongst other scandals, is one of the reasons co-creators Linehan and Mathews claimed that they were "probably doing more of a service by not attacking the church", because *Ted* did not engage with these stories.[844] When considering the religious contexts present in the UK at the time of their broadcast, it is clear that (with the exception of *Rev.*) religious context is largely ignored. The one significant outlier is *Rev.,* for which many of the aforementioned changes and issues in British Christian discussion are central to its narrative, including a decline in churchgoers, the challenges of a multicultural and multi-religious society, the appointment of female and/or gay bishops, and gay marriage. Still, the fact that it is central to *Rev.* further demonstrates how absent these elements are from the other sitcoms, whose storylines usually involve quirky parish members, threats from church authorities, or even a surreal invasion of zombie-fied old women.[845]

The religious sitcoms are under no obligation to represent the changes occurring in modern religious society, but the fact that most of the sitcoms do not evokes the question of what they *do* represent. One method of representation is through the locations in which these sitcoms are set. *Dibley,* in a small, picturesque country village in Oxfordshire, embodies the look and spirit of an old-fashioned and traditional 'Little England'.[846] Although the show has period-relevant references to *Doctor Who* (BBC1, 1963-present)*,[847]* Kylie Minogue, and Sean Bean, Kramer

[840]   "Bishops   and   Priests   (Consecration   and   Ordination   of   Women)   Measure   2014", *Gov.uk* <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukcm/2014/2/enacted> [accessed 22/02/2022].
[841] "Celebrations mark 25 years of women's ordination to the priesthood".
[842] Peter Walker, "Church of England rules gay men in civil partnerships can become bishops", *The Guardian* <*https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/04/church-of-england-gay-bishops*> [accessed 22/02/2022].
[843]   Conor   Humphries,   "Irish   Catholic   Church   concealed   child   abuse   in   1990s", *Reuters*   (13   July   2011) <https://www.reuters.com/article/ireland-church-idUSL6E7ID2J820110713> [accessed 14/06/2022].
[844] Linehan in Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty,* p. 202.
[845] 3.07 "Night of the Nearly Dead", *Father Ted.*
[846] *Dibley* was filmed in the real-life village of Turville, Buckinghamshire, with very little alteration in the outdoor scenes.
[847] *Doctor Who*, cr. Sydney Newman (BBC1, 1963-present).

points out that "most villagers seem to be caught in a pre-modern past without television", with some still thinking that "Margaret Thatcher is the Prime Minister" in 2004.[848] In other words, Dibley is aware of the modern world but it also seems like the world has moved on without Dibley. To a certain extent, this is echoed in the narrative. At first the sitcom engages with modern issues within the Church of England (the appointment of women vicars) but soon settles into more traditional storylines around its quirky villagers, pithily summarized by star French as "a sitcom about a vicar who landed in a village of mutants, which was by far the funnier and more traditional premise".[849] Alongside the outdated knowledge of British politics and lack of electronic advancement is an unchallenged assumption that everyone in the village is Christian. Geraldine's Dibley is unconcerned with the religious diversity and diminishing congregation that causes difficulties for Adam in *Rev.* Also, as highlighted by Harmes et al., Geraldine's ministry has little in common with the "four or five point parishes" that defined rural ministry in the 1990s and beyond, where Geraldine's responsibilities would have covered multiple villages and churches rather than just Dibley's St. Barnabas.[850]

Good Faith at first seems like it should be similar to *Dibley* because of its country location – in fact, both *Dibley* and *Good Faith* are originally set in Oxfordshire. In some ways this is true; whilst he in Oxfordshire Philip only interacts with his parishioners, family members, and the odd out-of-town investor, all of whom are Christian. Unlike *Dibley* there are no throwaway lines to indicate that anyone is aware of anything contemporary issues, or life outside of their small hamlet. This lack of engagement with wider societal issues in this country parish is partly why Philip wants to leave in the first place and seek out challenge elsewhere. As such, it would be logical that when he moves to Edendale then the situation might be different. This is not the case. In Edendale the type of people Philip interacts with have the same kind of problems and personalities (with the exception of some address to class differences), and as in Oxfordshire their universal Christianity remains constant.

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[848] Kramer, "14: Comic Strategies of Inclusion and 'Normalisation' in *The Vicar of Dibley*", p. 216.

[849] Dawn French, *Dear Fatty* (London: Arrow Books, 2009) p. 321, quoted in Lucia Kramer, "14: Comic Strategies of Inclusion and 'Normalisation' in *The Vicar of Dibley*" in Jurgen Kamm and Birgit Neumann, *British TV Comedies: Cultural Concepts, Contents and Controversies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 212.

[850] Marcus Harmes, et al., *The Church on British Television: From the Coronation to* Coronation Street (Springer International Publishing AG, 2020), p. 226.

Like *Dibley* and *Good Faith, Ted's* Craggy Island's very old-fashioned and isolated community seems aware of the existence of the modern world but is entirely untouched by it. However, unlike *Dibley,* this separateness manifests as isolation rather than traditionalism, a sense that Craggy Island could never be a part of the modern world because it is too far removed. Contributing to this is the fact that Ted and the other priests have been exiled to the island by the Catholic Church as punishment for bad conduct, suggesting Craggy Island is undesirable and confining. *Ted's* occasional brushes with the outside world, like the screenings of the otherwise-banned film *The Passion of St. Tibulus*, are usually detrimental to the Craggy priests and quickly disappear again.[851] In addition, the sitcom is relatively unconcerned with the contemporary scandals in which the Catholic Church was embroiled.[852] Part of *Ted's* isolation is because of *Ted's* surrealist fantasy humour, such as the notion that the roads are 'taken in' on stormy evenings[853] and the complete absence of any maps charting a course to the island.[854] This gives the impression of an island isolated from time and progression. The only communities outside of Craggy Island the priests meet are other priests, often from very similar and equally untouched locations, such as the Rugged Island priests who are almost identical to the Craggy Islanders.[855] However, as in *Dibley,* this separateness also comes from the religious monopoly of Catholicism, both barely engaged with and barely questioned on Craggy Island – everyone is assumed to be Catholic, but this is also rarely discussed.

Though *Rev.* is entirely immersed in modern London, the effect of this immersion is the same as *Ted* – a sense of isolation. For Adam this is because of the society and diversity surrounding him, which singles Adam out as a "religious other".[856] The more people with whom Adam engages, the more starkly small is his own congregation, whether compared to the local mosque,[857] the Evangelists,[858] or even Church of England authorities.[859] Equally, Adam is isolated by his status as a vicar, struggling frequently with both the expectations placed on him as a vicar[860] and

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[851] 1.03 "The Passion of St. Tibulus", *Father Ted.*
[852] Free, "'Don't Tell Me…'", p. 12.
[853] 3.06 "Kicking Bishop Brennan Up the Arse", *Father Ted.*
[854] 1.01 "Good Luck, Father Ted", *Father Ted.*
[855] The first appearance of the Rugged Island priests is in 1.04 "Competition Time", *Father Ted* (C4, 12 May 1995).
[856] Ornella, "Losers, Food, and Sex", p. 101.
[857] 3.01 "Episode 1", *Rev.*
[858] 1.02 "Jesus is Awesome", *Rev.*
[859] 3.01 "Episode 1", *Rev.*
[860] This is present throughout *Rev.* but especially during the whole of series 3.

alternatively being seen as anything *but* a vicar.[861] Despite this, *Rev.* engages most frequently with modern religious issues, using some developments (or lack thereof) within the Church of England to further this isolation not only from friends and family but also the church itself. For example, in "Episode 2",[862] when he cannot perform a gay wedding within the church because of ongoing church law, Adam faces the difficult decision of either letting down his friends or disobeying the church, a decision that nobody else in the sitcom is required to make.[863] The slow decrease of his tiny congregation serves a similar, more literal purpose of isolation, as Adam interacts with fewer and fewer people until his church is shut down at the end of series 3.[864] Connected with this is the shrinking number of Christians with whom Adam interacts in general, which the series acknowledges in "Episode 1"[865] of series 3 when Adam visits the far more popular local mosque. While Imam Yusef is greeted by many happy worshippers as he leaves the packed building, Adam sees only one person he recognises from church, who quickly runs away when Adam calls out a greeting. As such, addressing contemporary religious issues in *Rev.* reinforces the themes of the sitcom as a whole; Adam's overwork, crises of faith, and isolation as a vicar. Finally, referencing contemporary issues is another example of *Rev.* evoking realism, reinforcing its status as a 'quality' single-cam sitcom.

In summary, then, the decision to ignore or address contemporary issues is often more important than the issues themselves, eliciting the feeling of 'Little England' or of isolation. It is certainly not the case that contemporary issues were *never* referenced – *Rev.* addresses a few different issues across the series, while *Dibley'*s premise rests entirely on the ordination of women vicars – but the fact that they are completely ignored in both *Good Faith* and *Father Ted* demonstrates contemporary religious issues are not central to the religious sitcom sub-genre. One of the reasons religious issues may not be at the heart of all religious sitcoms is to avoid alienating part of the audience. By not addressing controversial positions, the sitcoms may have been aiming to cast as wide a net as possible and avoid offense. Also, these issues are time-sensitive; by *not* addressing them, the sitcoms may have attempted

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[861] 1.05 "A Fine Bromance", *Rev.*
[862] 3.02 "Episode 2", *Rev.*
[863] "Information for same sex couples", *The Church of England* <*https://www.churchofengland.org/life-events/your-church-wedding/just-engaged/information-same-sex-couples*> [accessed 23/02/2022].
[864] 3.06 "Episode 6", *Rev.*
[865] 3.01 "Episode 1", *Rev.*

to create a timeless quality that would give the sitcoms more longevity. That certainly seems to be the case for *Dibley* and *Ted,* both of whom have remained popular since the 1990s. Time will tell for *Rev.,* which only began a decade ago, but this will likely not be the case for *Good Faith* since it was unpopular at the time and is currently almost inaccessible.[866] Therefore, while the series all engage with religion in multiple forms (jokes, discussions, events etc.), the avoidance of potential controversial, contemporary issues by *Good Faith, Dibley,* and *Ted* could be to appeal to a wider audience for a longer period of time.

Rather than religious context, then, the previous chapters have established that television and sitcom context has had a far larger, tangible influence on the religious sitcoms' narratives, choice of star, and format. Earlier chapters highlighted some of the stereotypical iterations of sitcom during each time period separated by decade (1980s, 1990s etc.). Alongside this, the chapters demonstrated the flaws with this generalisation, especially when considering which sitcoms have been hand-picked as worth studying or remembering, as this has historically been influenced by factors such as personal taste, gender, and format. However, in addition to sitcom history, the influence of the broadcast channel is also important; both the channel's general aims and the other programmes they have produced during this period, for example, could explain the reasons behind some of the choices made in the sitcoms. This connects to the concept of British public service broadcasting, which influences the intended purpose and nature of productions by setting requirements and regulations via the Ofcom Broadcasting Code.[867] Therefore, considering the religious sitcoms alongside both sitcom history and their broadcast channels will provide a wider context for their production.

The sitcoms of the 1980s (explored in Chapter 2) fall in two distinct camps. The first is sitcoms that continued the trend started by the traditional 'Golden Age' sitcoms of the 1970s, termed 'bland' by MacDonald for its adherence to stereotypes, non-politically correct humour, non-experimental format and repetitive situations.[868] The second is the off-shoots from alternative comedy, fewer in number but with an enduring popularity 40 years later, like *The Young Ones* and *Blackadder,*

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[866] *Good Faith* is only available on DVD (series 1 and 2) and iTunes (series 3).
[867] *Ofcom, https://www.ofcom.org.uk/,* accessed 25/02/2022.
[868] MacDonald, *That's Anarchy!*, p. 11.

characterised by anarchic comedy, a non-traditional 'family', and 'politically correct' humour.[869] It is worth noting that the latter camp has had a lot more critical interest than the former, and MacDonald's assertion that the first are 'bland' seems based on the fact they were *not* doing what alternative comedy sitcoms did.[870] *Good Faith* firmly falls in the former camp as it was heavily influenced by 1970s BBC1 sitcom *The Good Life*, from choice of star to narrative premise rather than the anarchic offerings of Ben Elton and company. Unlike *The Good Life,* though, *Good Faith* was on ITV – a significant outlier in Briers' comedy work which was largely associated with the BBC, including his 1980s sitcom *Ever Decreasing Circles* and the comedy series *Goodbye, Mr. Kent* (BBC1, 1982).[871] As such, the attempt to draw on the popularity of *The Good Life* and Briers might have been to entice audiences from BBC to ITV, especially as the BBC had many more successful sitcoms during the 1970s and 1980s than ITV.[872] However, even if this was the intention, the show was not popular; it was cancelled after three series and has very little cultural afterlife (especially as it is not available to stream or on DVD in its entirety).

Dibley's apparent influences fall into two categories: the previous works of star Dawn French, and earlier comedy and sitcoms written by Richard Curtis. For both, their television and comic work has been split across multiple channels, but has been largely associated with the BBC. Curtis' television offerings during the 1980s and early 1990s ranged from sitcoms like BBC2's *Blackadder* and ITV's *Mr Bean*, to the ongoing Comic Relief charity "Red Nose Day" telethon events which air on the BBC.[873] Also, prior to *Dibley,* French had co-starred in her sketch series *French and Saunders* with comedy partner Jennifer Saunders on the BBC, but had also starred in the ITV sitcom *Girls on Top,* the Channel 4 *The Comic Strip Presents...* comedy series (though the series moved to the BBC in 1990 and then back to Channel 4 again eight years later), and comedy-drama anthology *Murder Most Horrid.* Consequently, while neither was exclusively associated with the BBC, they both had a tangible history in the context of sitcom and comedy on the channel. As previously stated, the BBC already had a reputation for producing popular British

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[869] Ibid., pp. 11-12.
[870] Ibid.*,* p. 11.
[871] *Goodbye, Mr. Kent,* wr. Peter Robinson and Peter Vincent (BBC1, 1982).
[872] Examples of successful 1970s BBC sitcoms include *Dad's Army,* cr. Jimmy Perry (BBC1, 1968-1977), *Fawlty Towers, Are You Being Served?* cr. Jeremy Lloyd and David Croft (BBC1, 1972-1985). Many of these 1970s sitcoms have been revived since their original run because of their enduring popularity, including the recent *Are You Being Served?* 2016 one-off episode (BBC1, 28 August 2016).
[873] *Comic Relief: Red Nose Day,* cr. Richard Curtis and Lenny Henry (BBC1, 1988-present).

comedies during the 1970s and 1980s (some written by Curtis or starring French). However, it is also worth noting that *Dibley* is an overtly 'English' sitcom too, concerned with a change in Church of England policy, set in a very visually English village in Oxfordshire, and starring established English actors like Gary Waldhorn and Roger Lloyd-Pack. Part of the remit for the BBC in relation to public service broadcasting is, according to the BBC, "to reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all the United Kingdom's nations and regions".[874] The representation of such an overtly English situation demonstrates an adherence to this remit of public service broadcasting as well as its requirement to provide religious programming. The very English-ness of the sitcom might be the reason that other countries' attempts at remaking the programme, such as the American adaptation *The Minister of Divine* (2007),[875] have not succeeded. Consequently, the BBC's reputation not only for sitcom but also identifiably 'English' and 'British' programming, as stated in their remit, connects strongly with the genre and construction of *Dibley.*

Rev., as the only sitcom with a non-traditional look and format (in other words, the only sitcom of the four employing a single-cam shooting style without a live audience or laugh track), follows in the footsteps of early BBC mockumentary adopters like *People Like Us* (1999-2001)[876] and *The Office,* but also of non-mockumentary follow-ups like *Gavin and Stacey, Outnumbered* (2007-2014),[877] and Channel 4's *Peep Show*. It should be noted that during the 2000s and 2010s there were plenty of very popular traditional sitcoms on British television, including the BBC's *Miranda*[878] and *Mrs. Brown's Boys* (2011-present).[879] Like alternative comedy sitcoms in the 1980s, single-cam was certainly not the only format during this period. Despite this (as discussed in Chapter 5), these 'quality' sitcoms have received far more academic attention than the traditional sitcoms of the 2000s and 2010s, especially *The Office*[880] and *Peep Show*.[881] Since, like *Dibley, Rev.* is broadcast on BBC, it is also associated with the BBC's historically strong output of sitcoms, and

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[874] "Mission, value and public purposes", *BBC.com* <https://www.bbc.com/aboutthebbc/governance/mission#:~:text=Our%20mission%20is%20%22to%20act,inform%2C%20educate%20and%20entertain%22> [accessed 25/02/2022].

[875] *The Minister of Divine,* wr. Suzanne Martin (FOX, 2007).

[876] *People Like Us* wr. John Morton (BBC2, 1999-2001).

[877] *Outnumbered,* cr. Andy Hamilton and Guy Jenkin (BBC1, 2007-2016).

[878] *Miranda,* cr. Miranda Hart (BBC2/1, 2009-2015).

[879] *Mrs. Brown's Boys,* cr. Brendan O'Carroll (RTÉ/BBC1, 2011-present).

[880] See Walters, *The Office.*

[881] See Mills, "Paranoia, Paranoia, Everybody's Coming to Get Me".

many of the aforementioned single-cam sitcoms were similarly broadcast on the BBC. However, as *Rev.'s* home was BBC2 rather than *Dibley's* BBC1, there are different expectations of content that aims to cater to a different audience than the more mainstream BBC1. According to the BBC2 Service License (published two years after *Rev's* final episode was broadcast), BBC2 aims to provide a "range of knowledge-building programming... complemented by distinctive comedy, drama, and arts programming".[882] This quote suggests that, while comedy and drama are important to the channel, 'knowledge-based programming' takes a more key role. The Service License adds that BBC2's comedy output "should offer established talent" (like *Rev.* Stars Tom Hollander and Olivia Colman, for example), "the opportunity to experiment", denoting that its priority is non-mainstream or experimental comedy.[883] Therefore, *Rev's* sitcom-to-comedy-drama genre blending fits nicely with BBC2's remit, as does the choice of Hollander and Colman as star.

Finally, the best sitcom comparisons for *Ted* are the sitcoms that emerged on Channel 4 from co-creator Graham Linehan after *Ted* finished, especially *Black Books* and *The IT Crowd,* which like *Ted* were both filmed before a live audience, multi-cam, slightly surreal, and followed a group of characters trapped in a work situation over which they have little control. In this sense, then, *Ted* is both part of a larger trend towards surrealist, cult sitcoms and comedy during the 1990s, and the first of a popular run of Channel 4 sitcoms by Linehan lasting until the mid-2010s. As discussed in Chapter 1, though, it is also significant that *Ted* aired on Channel 4. When Channel 4 began in 1982 it was tasked with appealing to the diverse, minority audiences that were left behind by BBC1, 2, or ITV, especially exploring "a range of contemporary issues".[884] This is still the case 40 years later according to Channel 4's remit, which claims that the channel intends to "champion unheard voices", "innovate and take bold creative risks", and to "stand up for diversity across the UK, among others.[885] In terms of application to *Ted,* though, the connection is a little less obvious than with the other case studies. Some academic studies of *Ted* have focused on its Irish origins and content, which could potentially fall under

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[882] *BBC Staff,* "BBC Two Service License", *BBC Trust* (April 2016) http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/regulatory_framework/service_licences/tv/2016/bbctwo_apr16.pdf> [accessed 28/02/2022], p. 1.
[883] *BBC Staff,* 'BBC Two Service License", p. 2.
[884] Harvey, "4. Channel Four Television: From Annan to Grade", p. 105.
[885] "Channel 4's remit", *Channel4.com* <https://www.channel4.com/corporate/about-4/what-we-do/channel-4s-remit> [accessed 01/03/2022].

'championing unheard voices' or 'diversity'.[886] However, it seems more applicable that *Ted's* surrealism and low-key but inherent criticism of religion, if not its traditional sitcom format, could be seen as a 'bold creative risk'. In comparison to the other religious sitcom on in the 1990s, *Dibley, Ted* presents a much less positive and cosy interpretation of the village, parishioners, and the wider Church. In addition, many other examples of surrealist and parodic comedies in the 1990s were also on Channel 4, such as *Brass Eye* (C4, 1997-2001)[887] and *Spaced.* Therefore, the strongest link between the broadcast channel and the case study is *Ted's* creative risks and comparison to similar Linehan sitcoms rather than its attempts to champion diverse voices.

From this analysis it is clear that the broadcast channel and period of sitcom history had a significant impact on the creation and continuation of all the religious sitcoms, and to a greater extent than the religious issues prevalent during their broadcast. This ranges from comparisons to other sitcoms to the connection between the case studies and their channel's public service broadcasting remit. One final element of public service broadcasting relevant to all the case studies, however, is the remit to provide religious programming. The Ofcom Broadcasting Code defines religious programming as "a programme which deals with matters of religion as the central subject, or as a significant part, of the programme".[888] While this analysis has established that *contemporary* religious issues are not a central subject in most of the case studies, this does not mean that religion itself is not central. For this reason, the previous four chapters have discussed religious representation through the vicar or priest main character, their parishioners, and other religious characters in the sitcoms. This is not only applicable to its status as a potential fulfilment of the 'religious programming' remit, but also the definition of the religious sitcom sub-genre.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the study of religious representation intersects with many of the issues already addressed in this chapter, especially in relation to the public service broadcasting mandate to provide religious programming, and to provide a variety of programming of different genres for different audiences.[889] Also, in the

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[886] For example see Free, "From the "Other" Island".
[887] *Brass Eye,* cr. Chris Morris (Channel 4, 1997-2001).
[888] "Section 4 Religion".
[889] See Chapter 1, and also "Section 4: Religion".

case of the religious sitcoms, the representation of vicars in this manner is particularly unusual because, without being a vicar of family member, the access given by sitcoms to the (fictional) vicar's home life is otherwise inaccessible. This opens up the opportunity to compare public and private behaviour for someone who is expected to always represent moral and religious piety. In addition, there is quantitative evidence that larger numbers of people engage with religious sitcoms than other sources of religious discussion, such as church attendance, and therefore the representation of vicars and Christians in general becomes important for visibility.

The purpose of analysing representation in this project was also to inform the definition of the religious sitcom sub-genre, especially in terms of identifying tropes, themes, and recurring characters. For example, across the four sitcoms, the most common example of religious representation was the inclusion of the vicar or priest as main character, which was not a surprising conclusion since this was one of the reasons for its inclusion in this research. Consequently, the definition of the religious sitcom must reference the importance of a religious professional as a main character. In addition, the most frequent site for religious representation and discussion were religious acts such as prayers and services, which (as explored in Chapters 2 to 5) appeared in all four sitcoms to differing degrees. As such, some mention of religious acts or engagement is vital to the definition as well. However, in addition to these elements, there were other representation-related topics that frequently occurred, such as: gender, manifested through identity crises, sexuality, and discrimination; and overwork/crises of faith, usually resulting in feelings of frustration or sadness about their career, performance, or the desire to significantly change their life. While all of these elements are present in the sitcoms, it is not as clear-cut whether they are a key part of the religious sitcom definition or not. Therefore, the next section will divide these points of continuity into four sub-headings: 1. Prayers and Services, 2. Gender, 3. Overwork/Crises of Faith, and 4. Media Engagement.

1. Prayers and Services

While all four sitcoms engage with prayer in some form, the frequency and format of engagement varies wildly. On one end of the spectrum is *Ted*, where prayer is a desperate last resort that begs for divine intervention which (if answered at all) goes

disastrously wrong. At the other end is *Rev.,* for whom prayer is an everyday activity serving multiple purposes but primarily that of conversation and friendship. In the middle are *Good Faith* and *Dibley,* whose infrequent prayers are a site for humorous punchlines, though in the latter prayer is occasionally used to underline the seriousness of a narrative situation. Religious services follow a similar pattern. The most frequent services are in *Rev.,* then in descending order *Dibley, Good Faith,* and *Ted,* which arguably includes no 'official' services. The purpose of inclusion (or, in *Ted'*s case, exclusion) is partly to demonstrate the priests' day-to-day activities – the events through which the public may interact with priests – but it is also a reminder of how important and permeating religious devotion is in their lives. As such, prayer and services are barely present in *Ted* because religion is largely unimportant to Ted and his priests, but in *Rev.* religion is central in Adam's life and this is reflected by the quantity of prayers and services.

The fact that prayers and church services are present to differing degrees and purposes in all four religious sitcoms is foreseeable, since they are both markers of religious devotion and part of a vicar's responsibilities, and their presences suggest both can be considered tropes for the sub-genre. However, the form that these prayers take (such as talking out loud or heard via a voiceover) and their purpose (asking for help, discussing problems, as a site for humour, or simply having a conversation) can vary wildly. Equally, services can range from a special 'Animal' themed Sunday service with packed pews[890] to a Mass on the back of a moving trailer[891] and can still be identified as a religious service through sermons, costume, setting, props, or physical movements such as the sign of the cross. Therefore, though prayers and services might be a common element, that does not dictate how (or how often) these elements will take shape.

2. Gender

In all four sitcoms gender played a large role in the narrative; certainly a larger role in the narrative than other intersectional identities such as race or age.[892] Three of the four priests (or five of the six priests, if Dougal and Jack are included) are male. The one exception to this is Geraldine, whose identity as a woman is key to *Dibley'*s

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[890] 1.06 "Animals", *The Vicar of Dibley.*
[891] 3.03 "Speed 3", *Father Ted.*
[892] Though all four vicars are white and between 40 and 50, none of the vicars or priests encounter storylines where their race or age is discussed or inhibiting in the same manner as masculinity and femininity.

initial premise. For the male vicars, Chapters 2 and 5 related the sitcoms' exploration of masculinity to the notion of 'clerical masculinity', which Ornella defines as the state of being a man and a vicar in a secular society.[893] This was especially applicable in terms of sexuality; Ornella emphasises that clergymen are still "sexual bodies with sexual desires", which Philip, Adam, and even Ted express on multiple occasions.[894] Adam and Philip both struggle to fulfil their and their partner's sexual desires because of the long, tiring hours of their job, while Ted, despite feeling attracted to a few different women during *Ted*,[895] is unable to act on his feelings because Catholic doctrine demands that he remain celibate (though multiple other priests, including Ted's superior Bishop Brennan, certainly do not stick to this rule).[896] This connects with other issues such as overwork – leading to a lack of sexual and emotional energy – and feelings of inadequacy, which in *Good Faith* and *Rev.* lead to crises of faith and dramatic life changes. As such, clerical masculinity in these contexts is associated with primarily negative experiences, both sexually and emotionally. The fact that all three of the male vicars and priests demonstrate behaviour conforming with clerical masculinity suggests that gender negotiation is a trope of the religious sitcom sub-genre.

In Chapter 3, clerical femininity was discussed as another facet of clerical gender alongside (but not in opposition to) clerical masculinity. Unlike clerical masculinity, where there are multiple examples of men in religious roles, there was only one – Geraldine – in *Dibley* through which to examine this negotiation of gender and position. However, even with this single example there were a few significant points of difference between Geraldine's personality and treatment and those related to 'clerical masculinity' discussed by Ornella. First, Geraldine was nurturing and enthusiastic, opening her house to her parishioners at all hours, brimming with new ideas for engagement and support. Second, unlike clerical masculinity, Geraldine was very sex and body positive, her only struggle being when she felt her personal life came in the way of her work as a priest. Third, she was held to much higher expectations than her male counterparts, receiving threats of being forced out

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[893] Ornella, "Losers, Food, and Sex", p. 101.
[894] Ibid., p. 101.
[895] Such as in 1.05 "And God Created Woman", *Father Ted*.
[896] Brennan's hidden family situation seen in 1.03 "The Passion of St. Tibulus" is reminiscent of the case of Bishop Casey, who had a secret child with his housekeeper in the 1970s. See Conor O'Clery, "How Bishop Eamonn Casey's fall from grace came to light", *The Irish Times* (13 March 2017) <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/religion-and-beliefs/how-bishop-eamonn-casey-s-fall-from-grace-came-to-light-1.3009016> [accessed 5 June 2022].

constantly from David and the council despite the fact she was not only excellent at her job but also much better than her predecessor. Fourth, Geraldine utilised the 'unruly woman' trope to exert power and attention to counteract the higher expectations placed upon her due to her gender.[897]

In the other three case studies there are still very few representations to compare with Geraldine. Apart from a handful of nuns who briefly appear in *Father Ted* (whose sole concern appears to be the length of Ted's Mass) there are only two women vicars in *Rev.;* young prodigy vicar Abigail Johnston (Amanda Hale)[898] and the church administrator looking to shut down St. Saviour's, Area Dean Jill Mallory (Joanna Scanlan).[899] Both Abigail and Jill differ greatly from Adam, the former because of her temperament and her numerous practical and social skills which Adam lacks, and the latter because of her authority, intentions, and matter-of-fact vocal tone. Abigail is the most comparable to *Dibley'*s Geraldine*.* Like Geraldine, Abigail is a gifted female vicar with excellent interpersonal skills and the ability to markedly increase the congregation in a short period of time. However, Abigail's personality is very different. Unlike Geraldine's quick wit and outgoing, exuberant personality, Abigail is often calm, quiet, deferring to Adam's judgement whenever they clash. It is significant that Robert accuses Adam of sexism when he unduly complains of Abigail's conduct during her visit.[900] While it is not discussed in Ornella's definition, then, it might be the case that clerical masculinity is inherently threatened not only by superior abilities in a woman, but by clerical femininity itself, which in both *Dibley* and *Rev.* is tied with professional success as well as higher expectations.

In stark contrast to Abigail and Geraldine, Jill is not lauded for their interpersonal skills, but as someone with the power to shut Adam's church, she has no need of them.[901] Abigail and Geraldine are tasked with drawing more people into the church and providing support, while Jill's visits are always connected with the church's closure and their plans for sale. She never sugar-coats her purpose or offers undue hope that Adam will turn the church around, and she rarely discusses anything

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[897] See Chapter 3 and Rowe, *The Unruly Woman.*
[898] 2.02 "The Talented Curate", *Rev.* (BBC2, 17 November 2011).
[899] Jill's first appearance is in 3.01 "Episode 1", *Rev.* It should be noted that Jill is accompanied by Diocesan Secretary Geri Mallory, but in this position Geri is likely not ordained and does not wear a dog collar like Jill.
[900] 2.02 "The Talented Curate", *Rev.*
[901] 3.01 "Episode 1", *Rev.*

outside of church matters. As both Abigail and Jill are side characters with very little screen time, it is difficult to draw any significant conclusions from Abigail and Jill's characterisation. However, their inclusion does offer further variety in terms of religious professionals and the roles they perform, especially considering the lack of options in the previous case studies. Consequently, while Abigail and Jill provide some comparison to Geraldine and a stark contrast to Adam, neither can contribute significantly to the study of clerical femininity due to their lack of airtime.

Even taking these other representations into account, however, there is little to compare to the quantity or quality of Geraldine's appearances on *Dibley,* meaning that Geraldine remains the only significant example of clerical femininity in the religious sitcoms. While this reinforces the importance of gender to the definition of religious sitcoms, it also places Geraldine in the unenviable position of representing all female vicars on screen. The brief examples of other female vicars suggest other representations are possible, but without a comparative role the conclusions on clerical femininity remain largely from the study of *Dibley.*

3. Overwork/Crises of Faith

Another element that emerges across all four religious sitcoms is the combination of dissatisfaction, overwork and/or crises of faith, expressed through a desire to either change parishes or entirely leave the priesthood. While job switching might occur in other sitcoms as well, in the case of religious sitcoms switching jobs would be a huge life change; it would involve not only the loss of their careers, but also the loss of their home (the vicarage) and could even mean turning away from their religion. In *Good Faith*, lack of job satisfaction is baked into the premise; Philip is unhappy with his work as a country vicar and needs more stimulation and challenge, resulting in his move to the urban parish of Edendale.[902] In *Dibley* Geraldine almost leaves the priesthood when she is dumped by Simon, because she feels she has let down the village by putting her personal needs ahead of her profession.[903] Adam in *Rev.* has at least 3 breakdowns due to overwork and actually quits the priesthood at the end of series 3.[904] In *Ted* this element is a little more complicated, because while Ted often wants to leave Craggy Island to work somewhere more glamorous

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[902] The best example is 1.01 "In the Beginning", *All in Good Faith.*
[903] 3.03 "Spring", *The Vicar of Dibley.*
[904] 1.06 "Ever Been to Nando's?", 2X.01 "Christmas Special", and 3.05 "Episode 5", *Rev.*

– and sometimes expresses more of an interest in being a celebrity than a priest –
he never explicitly states he wants to leave the priesthood for any reason.[905] Still, it
would be difficult for Ted to feel overworked since he rarely works, and equally he
seems perfectly at ease with his relatively loose connection with religion, so a crisis
of faith would also be somewhat out of character. Regardless, Ted certainly feels
job dissatisfaction and frequently tries to move to another, more comfortable parish.
Therefore, though the reasons differ, the impulse to leave the priesthood or to
change parish is common to all four sitcoms.

Rather than interpreting this commonality as emerging from a similar narrative,
though, this might instead come from the fact that being a vicar is a complicated,
time-consuming, and varied job, and ultimately a vocational choice. While most of
the priests are clearly devoted to their work, parishioners, and faith, being a vicar is
a choice they have made and can relinquish if the work becomes unmanageable. In
the sitcoms, their purposes for contemplating leaving include boredom (*Good Faith)*,
temptation (*Father Ted*), unrealistically high expectations (*Dibley*), and severe
overwork (*Rev.),* though only in *Rev.* does he actually choose to leave. Instead,
most of the priests choose to continue or adjust their work, including Adam during
multiple other crises. out of passion for the role, compassion for the parishioners, or
the inability to do anything else (*Ted*)*.* Still, the frequency of this narrative
demonstrates that overwork and crises of faith are recurring tropes within religious
sitcoms, especially as they are so intricately tied to the pressures of their profession.

4. Media Engagement

In addition to the discussions of gender and religious identity, there is another
common element that unites three of the four sitcoms: media engagement.
Occurring in *Dibley, Ted*, and *Rev.,* media engagement takes the form of radio or
television appearances or newspaper articles, and typically has dire consequences
for the religious professional and their community. In *Rev.* Adam becomes suddenly
famous for foiling a mugging, but his fame is brought to an unfortunate end when he
confesses it had been an accident rather than a heroic act.[906] Similarly, media
attention in *Dibley* when Geraldine becomes a minor celebrity leads to
embarrassment and mockery for the quirky village residents after they are

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[905] 1.05 "And God Created Woman", *Father Ted.*
[906] 2.01 "Accidental Hero", *Rev.* (BBC2, 10 November 2011).

negatively profiled in national papers.[907] Also, in *Ted,* Ted continually tries to become famous by trying to appear in a priest-focused documentary,[908] in the 'Eurosong'[909] and 'All Priests Stars in Their Eyes Lookalike' contests,[910] and even on a quiz show.[911] During his only successful 15 minutes of fame – when he rescues a group of priests from a labyrinthian lingerie department and receives a 'Golden Cleric' award – he uses the opportunity to mock all the priests who ever looked down on him, ensuring he would never be offered such a platform again.[912]

Since these sitcoms aired, there have been many other examples of the 'celebrity vicar' across the media, such Rev. Richard Coles or Rev. Kate Bottley, who have made appearances on multiple British comedy panel shows ranging from *Have I Got News for You*[913] to *The Wheel.*[914] Like religious sitcoms, these appearances of vicars on high-profile, popular programmes are one of the only ways audiences may view or interact with religious professionals. Unlike religious sitcoms, though, these vicars are real rather than actors portraying a role, and often in the single context of a comedy panel show rather than the multiple types of scenes in the religious sitcom (at home, in church etc.). However, these celebrity vicars all appeared *after Dibley* and *Father Ted* finished broadcasting, in 2008 and 2013 respectively. Therefore, while *Rev.* might take some inspiration from these real-life cases, this is impossible for *Dibley* and *Ted*.

Instead, the inclusion of the media in the religious sitcoms could simply be because sitcoms often self-referentially connect to the media industry, not only through numerous sitcoms about the media industry itself (such as *Extras* [BBC2/1, 2005-2007],[915] *Absolutely Fabulous,* and *I'm Alan Partridge* [BBC2, 1997-2002])[916] but also with one-off episodes where regular characters become briefly famous, as in *Dibley* or *Rev.* This again speaks to an avoidance of religious contexts in favour of other, more familiar pastures like general popular culture and the media. Because of these outside factors, it appears that media engagement might be a part of the

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[907] 2.03 "Celebrity Vicar", *The Vicar of Dibley.*
[908] 1.01 "Good Luck Father Ted", *Father Ted.*
[909] 2.05 "A Song for Europe", *Father Ted.*
[910] 1.04 "Competition Time", *Father Ted.*
[911] 3.07 "Night of the Nearly Dead", *Father Ted.*
[912] 2X.01 "A Christmassy Ted", *Father Ted.*
[913] *Have I Got News for You,* cr. Harry Thompson and Jimmy Mulville (BBC2/1, 1990-present).
[914] *The Wheel,* cr. Michael McIntyre (BBC1, 2020-present).
[915] *Extras*, cr. Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant (BBC2/1, 2005-2007).
[916] *I'm Alan Partridge*, cr. Peter Baynham, Steve Coogan, and Armando Iannucci (BBC2, 1997-2002).

religious sitcom specifically, or it might simply be part of the sitcom genre in general. Therefore, the inclusion of media engagement can be at least partially attributed to the tropes of sitcom rather than specifically to the religious sitcom.

As well as the elements outlined above relating to the vicars and priests, every sitcom has religious representation in the form of their numerous parishioners and other local Christians, though these are to differing extents. In *Ted*, for example, only a handful of parishioners ever appear and usually for only one or two episodes, while in *Dibley* the vast majority of the main cast are Geraldine's parishioners. *Good Faith, Dibley,* and *Ted* all have communities comprised of parishioners with the same beliefs – in *Good Faith* and *Dibley* that is Christian and Protestant (specifically Church of England), and in *Ted* that is Christian and Catholic. The exception is *Rev.,* for the established reason that his community has a variety of other religious beliefs including Islam and atheism. For the first three that makes matters simpler; everyone is assumed to be Christian, and therefore they are all representative of Christians. In *Rev.* this cannot be assumed, even of those who identify as Christian like Alex or Ellie, who at different points are implied to be Christian for appearances' sake. The presence of these parishioners offers a different form of engagement because the parishioners do not have to live and breathe religion in the same manner as the vicars or priests. For example, they do not experience the same overwork, as religion is not their profession, and there are fewer examples of crises of faith. They also certainly do not have to negotiate the dilemmas of clerical masculinity and femininity in the same manner, as they are not vicars or priests.

In *Ted* it is difficult to discuss the representation of parishioners because Ted interacts with very few of his neighbours and, of the ones with which he does, it is unclear who are parishioners or not because the show never shows the priests officiating a service in front of them. The few that do appear to look to Ted and the other priests for guidance on issues such as morality, but they also behave differently when around the priests (such as aggressive couple Mary and John, who always fight verbally and physically with each other until the moment the priests arrive).[917] *Good Faith* has a similar situation because of the lack of services, but unlike *Ted,* many of the later episodes of *Good Faith* are based on interactions with

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[917] For example, see 1.02 "Entertaining Father Stone", *Father Ted.*

local parishioners expecting Philip's aid. Rather than behaving differently around Philip, however, Philip appears to put pressure on *himself* to behave to a certain standard, such as when he answers parishioners' calls exhausted late at night rather than ignoring them.[918] It is difficult to generalize the representation of the parishioners in *Rev.* because of their number and diversity – there is little in common between Colin and Adoha, for example, despite the fact they are both regular churchgoers at St. Saviour's. The purpose of such a disparate group of parishioners (especially varied because some only attend for special occasions like Midnight Mass or to appeal to the local church-affiliated school) is to represent the range of people with whom Adam interacts and supports, and the much more diverse group found in London churches rather than the homogenous (older, whiter) group in country-based *Dibley.* Finally, *Dibley* is unique amongst the sitcoms because many parishioners are main characters and members of the village council. As explored in Chapter 3, they have many expectations of Geraldine both as a vicar and specifically a *female* vicar, exemplified by their expectation that Geraldine's house will always be open to them. It is no coincidence that the series ends when Geraldine gets married, and her house can no longer be open at any time.[919]

What none of these representations really expand on is the parishioners' thoughts or relationship with Christianity or religion in general, instead focusing on their relationship with their vicar or priest and, on some occasions, the church itself. It is simply assumed that, as churchgoers, their interpretation of Christianity aligns with the vicar or priest and does not expand further. The only exception to this would be *Rev.,* but in this case the emphasis still remains on whether the person attends church, whether they agree with church doctrine, and their relationship with Adam. As such, their importance is often simply to offer support or counterpoint the opinions of the vicar or priest rather than as separate entities.

The final significant example of representation across the four sitcoms is from the church and church authorities, ranging from other priests to bishops and even (briefly) the Pope.[920] The wider church and church authorities only appear regularly in two of the four sitcoms, *Father Ted* and *Rev.*, and are usually represented by one

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[918] 2.01 "Home from Home", *All in Good Faith.*
[919] See Chapter 3, and 5.02 "The Vicar in White", *The VIcar of Dibley.*
[920] 3.06 "Kicking Bishop Brennan Up the Arse", *Father Ted.*

figure, Bishop Len Brennan in the former and Archdeacon Robert in the latter. In both the church superiors are disciplinarians, present to ensure the priests are performing adequately. For Brennan this translates as loud, overdramatic monologues listing the priests' faults and the potential punishments he will inflict if the priests do not do as ordered, such as sending them to difficult or dangerous foreign parishes or breaking their arms.[921] Despite some extra backstory details – a family in America, an aversion to rabbits – Brennan's character is entirely defined by the threat he poses to destroy the Craggy Island priests. *Ted* also has the thriving wider priest community; all men (mostly white) but with different, stereotypical personalities, including the 'dramatic' one, the 'boring' one, and the one who is always hurt in accidents while on the phone.[922] However, this community is certainly unique amongst the case studies; a few other vicars appear in *Rev.* and one or two in *Dibley,* but the camaraderie and variety in the priest community in *Ted* is unrivalled.

Archdeacon Robert in *Rev.* starts off in a similar position, where his presence indicated that Adam had done something wrong, such as failing to raise enough funds to support the church.[923] His threats (delivered at a much lower volume than Brennan), were usually directed at St. Saviour's rather than Adam, reminding him that if the church underperforms it will be shut down. Unlike Brennan, though, Robert grew from a mere threat in the first series to a more important and supportive character in later episodes, someone who respects Adam's enthusiastic attempts to improve the parish, occasionally helps Adam with job-threatening issues,[924] and has a significant storyline of his own when he tries to become a bishop but is turned down because he refuses to hide his relationship with partner Richard.[925] As Robert's involvement in the series increases, too, his potential to threaten also decreases; in series 3 the threat of closure is personified by church authorities Jill Mallory and Geri Tennison (Vicki Pepperdine), who are even more senior than Robert, and Robert even tries to protect Adam from their potential wrath.[926] In this respect, Robert is far more allied with Adam than Brennan ever was with Ted. Also,

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[921] See 1.03 "The Passions of St. Tibulus" *Father Ted.*
[922] 2X.01 "A Christmassy Ted", *Father Ted.*
[923] From 1.01 "On Your Knees Forget the Fees", *Rev.* onwards.
[924] Robert covers for Adam when he is accused of officiating a gay wedding ceremony in St. Saviours' in 2.02 "Episode 2", *Rev.*
[925] 2.06 "Day of Decisions" *Rev.*
[926] 3.01 "Episode 1", *Rev.*

regardless of the anger Robert might feel towards Adam, he never threatens to break his arms. Therefore, though the roles are certainly similar, their execution and further development differ strongly.

Out of the three types of representation the role of the authority figure is the least utilized, but in both examples the role has the responsibility of representing the church at large, a factor that is vital not only to the sitcom but also because of their interactions with – and influence over – the vicar or priest main character. Like media engagement, however, there is evidence that the 'authority figure' is a well-used trope in the sitcom genre in general rather than a trope specific to the religious sitcom.[927] Consequently, while the authority figure offered another site for religious representation, it is not as vital as the vicar or priest main character to the definition of the religious sitcom. From this brief summary of the findings in Chapters 2 to 5, then, there are a few elements that stand out as especially significant: the inclusion of prayers and religious services; negotiation of gender; and, to a lesser extent, the appearance of other religious characters such as parishioners and church authorities.

Alongside the representation of religion, these chapters also investigated the intersection of religion and humour, especially focusing on the concept of the religious joke and humorous religious scenes. As explored in Chapter 1, there is a general assumption amongst humour and religion scholars that religion and humour cannot intersect, often conflating religion with just Christianity or other Western monotheist religions. Morreall argues that religions have an "essential seriousness" that is "against anything nonserious like humour", adding that "by definition, the sacred is something we should be serious about".[928] Some scholars have gone as far as to suggest that Christians are predisposed against humour. Capps writes there is an implicit "anti-humour bias" within Christianity because "religion would almost certainly be negatively associated with, or even negatively affect, sense of humour".[929] Götz also highlights the lack of laughter in the Bible or the anti-laughter, pro-silence sentiment of "the monastic movement".[930] While many scholars have concluded that humour and religion are too diametrically opposite to intersect let

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[927] Mills, "Paranoia, Paranoia, Everybody's Coming to Get Me", p. 60.
[928] Morreall, *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion*, p. 46.
[929] Capps, "Religion and Humor: Estranged Bedfellows", p. 419.
[930] Götz, *Faith, Humor, and Paradox*, pp. 3-4.

alone interact beneficially, a handful have supported their intersection. The abstract importance of play, enjoyment and mystery to both humanity and religion are commonly cited factors to argue for its inclusion. For example, Berger argues that "ludic, or playful, elements" are so embedded in "any sector of human culture" that it would be "impossible" to separate it from religion.[931] Similarly, Hyers suggests that without comedy religion would become a "perverse self-caricature" unable to critically evaluate or develop its teachings,[932] because (as Morreall adds) "a good sense of humour allows us to see ourselves… in the big picture" without distortion.[933]

Most of these suppositions have assumed two factors: that the religion in question is Christianity or monotheist (though in the case of this project this is largely true), and that intersections must be *mutually beneficial,* implying that there is scope for humour and religious intersection, but they must be anti-religion or anti-humour. Another striking aspect of many of these humour/religion analyses is the lack of examples to demonstrate intersection (or lack thereof), which are abundant in the case studies (see Chapters 2 to 5). Of course, many of these religion and humour scholars would not have considered religious sitcoms a potential site for intersection, either because their analyses predate television or, in the case of Morreall, sitcoms are "pitifully childish" with "almost no plot but… a group of family members or friends trading obvious or stupid insults" and therefore certainly not, in Morreall's opinion, a genre worthy of serious study.[934] From these discussions in Chapter 1, Chapters 2 to 5 aimed to identify and gather examples of humour and religion intersection from the religious sitcoms to develop a framework to a) distinguish between different types of religious jokes and b) analyse whether these examples are mutually beneficial, critical of one or the other, or neither.

Previous chapters have combined the intersection of humour and religion with both humour theories (namely superiority, relief, and incongruity) and examples from the case studies, such as humorous church services (*Good Faith*) or prayers (*Rev.*). For example, the suggestion that jokes about religion will mock religion fits well with Superiority Theory, which argues that humour is based on the mockery of someone,

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[931] Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, p. 76.
[932] Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy: Comic Heroism in a Tragic World* (New Jersey: Rutgers, 1995), p. 72.
[933] Morreall, *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion,* p. 152.
[934] Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p. 10.

creating an uneven power dynamic between the joker (dominant) and the subject of the joke (subservient).[935] On the other hand, if humour can be used as a method of critiquing parts of religion without criticising, as suggested by Hyers, then this same joke could instead be considered incongruous rather than mocking.[936] Indeed, some of the humorous scenarios in the case studies can be interpreted in either way (see Chapters 2 and 3), blurring the distinction between Superiority and Incongruity and placing a larger emphasis on subjective interpretation and contextual cues.

From these religion sitcom examples of religious jokes and religious humour, there are four types of religious joke that have emerged – in different quantities – across the texts. As discussed in Chapter 1, a 'joke' as defined by Brett Mills concerns a "single construction intended to have a comic effect", though in this analysis of religious jokes also refers to humorous scenarios or groups of religious jokes, using 'religious joke' as a shorthand.[937] There were four key methods of intersection resulting in a religious joke:

1. Jokes in a religious setting or told by/to a religious character (context);
2. Jokes *about* religion, where religion was a factor in understanding the joke but not the punchline (content);
3. Jokes *at the expense of* religion, where religion is mocked (purpose);
4. Jokes which *are* religious but *not* funny (purpose).

These four methods of intersection account for cases where religion is mocked, where humour is sacrificed, and where religion is only tangential to the joke (through situation or narrative). The latter, which involves methods 1 and 2, should theoretically be told without expense to either side. For example, despite being told by a religious person/in a religious setting or involving religion in some manner, these jokes are not told at the expense of either religion or humour. Unlike categories 1 and 2, categories 3 and 4 are at least partially subjective; how mocking or funny a joke could be is relative to comedic taste, religious beliefs, or personal opinion, though as Chapters 2 to 5 have demonstrated it is possible to observe how the joke *might* be viewed as mocking or funny. This is different to the concept of 'offense', as a joke can be mocking without being causing offense, but this is also a

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[935] See Chapter 1 for a discussion of Superiority Theory, and also Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour*, p. 5.
[936] Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy,* p. 72.
[937] Mills, *Television Sitcom*, p. 14.

subjective judgement. These categories are not always mutually exclusive; a joke could be told by a vicar in church about a figure from the Bible that is mocking *and* not funny, for example.

Connected to this, it is important to distinguish between a joke about *religion* and a joke about a *religious person,* as it may be simply about a personality quirk or action that has nothing to do with their religious beliefs. A joke about Geraldine's love of chocolate in *Dibley,* for instance, is not mocking Geraldine's religion as much as her chocolate addiction. However, other jokes are a little murkier – in *Ted,* when Dougal is mocked for his naivety and slow thought processes, is the joke about his personality or the acceptance of entirely unfit people to the priesthood? Therefore, the best method to distinguish between these four types of religious jokes is to use examples from the case studies to illustrate their meaning.

First, jokes that are religious through *context* – told by or to a religious character or in a religious setting – are inherently present in all of the religious sitcoms due to their subject matter. Since all of the sitcoms feature vicars or priests (and other characters who identify as religious) and a range of religious settings, it is apparently inevitable that a sitcom will have a joke told by one of these religious characters and/or in a religious setting. Examples appear across all four case studies, ranging from Philip's sex-related quips in the vicarage while explaining the ins and outs of the wedding night to a groom-to-be,[938] to Adam's pleas for quiet prayers in church one morning because he has a hangover.[939] In this situation, the religious context from these jokes does not come from the joke itself but from the context in which it is told. In other words, the joke is informed by the fact that the joke-teller or the setting is religious. On the one hand, this first category of jokes offers the chance for incongruity-based humour. In the two examples listed above, part of the humour emerges from the assumption that a vicar would not be well-versed in discussions of wedding nights (and further, that a groom-to-be would seek advice from a vicar on the subject), or hungover in church while leading morning prayers. On the other hand, this context may be irrelevant to the joke, and it may simply be a religious character telling a joke in a religious setting that has no bearing on the joke's content or how the joke is understood. As such, this type of religious joke is the most

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[938] 3.03 "The Prodigal Son", *All in Good Faith.*
[939] 1.01 "On Your Knees Forget the Fees", *Rev.*

common in religious sitcoms and demonstrates a contextual *intersection* between religion and humour but does not automatically mean these two elements *interact.*

Interaction is a much larger factor in the second type of religious joke, where religious *content* is a part of the joke (rather than as an outside contextual element as in type 1) but religion is not mocked or part of the punchline, such as in *Dibley* when Geraldine and David make up fake Bible quotes to support their political positions,[940] or in *Ted* when Ted is backed into a corner while discussing the use of contraception.[941] These jokes require a certain amount of knowledge about religion to understand, such as knowledge of parts of the Bible (the Sermon on the Mount, the Ten Commandments), Christian figures (Jesus, Noah), religious events (Lent, Easter Week), or religious laws or policy (contraception, gay marriage). However, as illustrated by these examples, the sitcoms do not use jokes that require a lot of religious knowledge, since the sitcoms are still aiming to appeal to a wide audience. References are usually either to well-known elements of religion (such as national holidays) or the jokes are explained through context. While some audience members may not know about Lent, for example, when the characters discuss giving up chocolate or alcohol 'for Lent', further knowledge is not needed. Much like the religious jokes told by a religious character or in a religious setting, these jokes may rely on incongruity, such as applying religious language to a non-religious subject like politics in *Dibley.* Equally, though, the example from *Ted* shows the potential for Superiority Theory, where Ted is mocked for his inability to explain or apply religious knowledge. Also, a joke involving religious can certainly be told by a religious character in a religious setting (as both of these examples show), so a joke can have religious context *and* content.

The third type of religious joke is one of two 'purpose' jokes, where either religion or humour are sacrificed for the other. Joke category 3, where religion is comedically mocked, is the default position many religion and humour scholars have adopted when studying this dynamic, assuming that either humour is entirely antithetical to religion or that, when combined, humour will always mock religion.[942] While these four types of religious joke prove this is certainly not the case, this does not mean

[940] 1.05 "Election", *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC1, 8 December 1994).
[941] 3.03 "Speed 3", *Father Ted.*
[942] Capps, "Religion and Humor: Estranged Bedfellows", p. 419.

that there are no examples of jokes mocking religion in these sitcoms, though because mockery and offence can be subjective and difficult to judge, this type of joke is not as easy to identify as the previous two. Also, as with joke type 2, it is entirely possible for the mockery to take place about a religious setting (such as mocking a church or its function), about a religious character for their religion or faith, or by a religious character of another person. Similarly, the joke could be about religion *and* mocking religion – in fact this seems highly likely, since the joke would usually need to involve religion in order to mock it – therefore meaning the jokes are more likely to overlap with other categories. The case study with the most common example of mocking humour is *Ted,* such as in this quote from "Are You Right There Father Ted":[943] "I'm not a fascist. I'm a priest. Fascists dress up in black and tell people what to do. Whereas… priests…". Unlike type 2, the punchline of this joke relies on an unfavourable comparison between fascists and priests, mocking both priests and Ted's accidental revelation simultaneously. The mockery of religion is not just confined to anti-Christian sentiment in these case studies either. In *Good Faith* Philip mocks Buddhist monks as not following "our God" and using this as the basis for denying a karate master (as a follower of the monks' teachings) from using the Anglican church hall.[944] On the whole, however, these types of religious joke in the sitcoms are significantly less frequent than types 1 or 2. This may be due to a desire not to alienate parts of the audience through offense, but also the format and intention of the sitcom – both *Good Faith* and *Dibley* in particular emulate a cosy and kind country village, and jokes at the expense of religion do not fit with this intention.

Finally, the fourth type of religious joke is when comedy is sacrificed in favour of religion (in other words, the exact opposite of type 3). This type is the antithesis of type 3 – if there are jokes that denigrate religion, then it is possible that there are jokes in favour of religion that are not funny or anti-comic. This appears to be the conclusion of Capps, who suggests that the negativity associated with humour by religion (or just Christianity here) is "so significant that religion would almost certainly be negatively associated with, and even negatively affect, sense of humour".[79] From this quote, Capps appears to argue that being religious would affect someone's

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[943] 3.01 "Are You Right There, Father Ted?", *Father Ted.*
[944] 2.03 "I Dreamt I Dwelt in the Parish Halls", *All in Good Faith* (ITV, 12 March 1987).

sense of humour to the point where jokes are no longer funny. Therefore, these category 4 jokes may have sacrificed humour to do be in favour of religion. One point to mention is that the purpose of a religious joke should still be to produce a comic effect, even if this is unsuccessful; if "comic effect" is not the purpose of a joke, then by definition the joke would no longer be a 'joke'.[945] It also becomes much more difficult to identify something as a 'joke' without this comic effect. Further, if sitcoms in which the jokes are told are supposed to be funny because of its "comic impetus", it can be inferred that any jokes in the shows *are* intended to be funny.[946]However, like the category 3 jokes the effectiveness of the comic effect in a joke is controlled by many subjective factors that are certainly not universally applicable to all audience members, and the purpose of this analysis is not to pass judgement on whether a joke is subjectively funny to a particular listener. As a result, the identification of whether a religious joke is funny or not is complicated by intention and subjectivity.

Given the complexity of identifying this fourth type of religious joke (and whether it should even count as a joke at all) it is no surprise that, out of the four types of religious joke, this type of joke is the least used in the case studies. In fact, it is possible this type of joke is entirely absent, as there are only a couple of possible jokes that could fit this brief. One potential example could be the *Good Faith* titles, all referencing Bible verses that are vaguely connected to the episodes' narratives, but do not have a comic effect. However, there is no evidence that these were *intended* as jokes. Similarly, in a later episode of *Good Faith,* after a man threatens to kill himself because of a series of life disaster, Philip says "I don't claim to understand God, but blowing your brains out is a pretty poor inversion of Christianity" which, while positively suggesting Christianity is not in favour of the man's actions, does not have a comic effect.[947] Again, though, it is hard to tell whether this is intended as a joke with a significant comic effect or an observation – the laugh track's lack of response suggests the latter, though the tone is sarcastic. The lack of examples for type 4 in particular demonstrates that religious jokes that sacrifice humour for religion are missing in practice from religious sitcoms. Therefore, while the category 4 religious joke *could* exist, it is more logical to

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[945] Mills, *Television Sitcom*, p. 14.
[946] Mills, *The Sitcom*, p. 5.
[947] 2.05 "The Patience of Job", *All in Good Faith* (ITV, 26 March 1987).

presume all of the sitcoms' jokes are trying to be funny since all of the sitcoms have a comic impetus (even if this changes later in the series like *Rev.*).[948]

This analysis demonstrates that types 1 and 2 – where religion is found through context and content – are the most plentiful in the religious sitcoms, followed by 3 (at the expense of religion) and in distant last place 4 (at the expense of humour). As has been discussed in relation to 3 and 4, the reason for the much larger inclusion of types 1 and 2 could be because 3 and 4 are predicated on some instance of mockery, sacrifice, or offense, however subjective that may be. The risk of including such jokes is alienating part of the audience, and this does not fit with either the image of the sitcom as popular and uncontroversial, nor the cosy village life some of the sitcoms have created. Also, the fact that the sitcoms (mostly) star vicars or priests who have chosen their religious profession means they may be less inclined to mock religion anyway. Considering only types 3 and 4 were theorised by religion and humour scholars, it is clearer why they thought religion and humour were incompatible; in practice, these types of jokes *are* not present.

However, despite this plethora of intersections in the religious sitcoms, it would be an exaggeration to say that the sitcoms were constantly making religious jokes of any type. Most of the jokes in the sitcoms are entirely unrelated to religion, and some of the religious situations have no humour at all, especially in *Dibley* and *Rev.* For example, the baptism of Katie after the closure of St. Saviours' in *Rev.* is not treated humorously.[949] In *Dibley,* too, the 'Nativity' speech in "Winter" is not humorous and is not accompanied with the usual laughter from the studio audience.[950] Other serious moments lack both humour and religion, such as the laugh track-less Comic Relief-related poverty scenes at the end of "Happy New Year"[951] – also notable as the only episode not to feature a joke at the end of the episode, to highlight the importance of the issue. This does not demonstrate a lack of intersection, as the previous examples show that there are many different types of intersections that occur in these sitcoms. What they do show is that intersection is present but not constant; in other words, not all jokes have to be about religion and not all religious parts are comic.

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[948] See Chapter 5.
[949] 3.06 "Episode 6", *Rev.*
[950] 3.02 "Winter", *The Vicar of Dibley.*
[951] 4.02 "Happy New Year", *The Vicar of Dibley.*

One reason for treating religion seriously is because, according to theorists like Morreall, religion is inherently a serious subject.[952] However, this argument is predicated on the assumption that religion must *always* be treated seriously, which the existence of religious jokes in the sitcoms proves is not the case.[953] Instead, the reason for including serious scenes about religion are twofold; to achieve realism as a 'quality' sitcom, and to draw attention to serious subjects through contrast with humorous scenes. First, as with many 'quality' sitcoms, one of the defining elements of *Rev.* is its incorporation of humorous and serious scenes, an indicator of its attempts at realism. This is especially present later in the series, as the show moved away from pure 'sitcom' towards the comedy-drama genre (see Chapter 5). Consequently, treating religion seriously and humorously is an attempt to represent religion in a realist manner, as well as to emphasise their own 'realism'. Another reason is to increase the contrast between humorous scenes and those with darker or more serious subjects such as poverty. In the case of religious scenes, it demonstrates engagement with religion in different forms; both serious and humorous.

This distinction between context, content, and purpose is not unique to religious jokes and could be used in a plethora of other representation-related comedy, such as gender, sexuality, or disability. The framework provides the opportunity to distinguish between jokes that *involve* a topic, are *told* by a particular individual or in a relevant location, and jokes whose *purpose* is to place one priority over another. While the intention of this framework was not to pass judgement on matters like offense or the morality of mockery, further research could investigate whether some categories are more likely to cause offense than others. In the case of this project, however, the advantage of establishing this framework is its demonstration of both the frequency and variety of religion/humour intersections in the religious sitcoms, also showing the sitcoms' value as a source of religious representation and discussion.

After reviewing the socio-historical and television contexts and the findings from the textual analysis (specifically in terms of representation and humour and religion), the final task is to determine the definition of the religious sitcom sub-genre. To re-

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[952] Morreall, *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion,* p. 47.
[953] Ibid.*,* p. 48.

cap, there are a few basic elements that have appeared across all four sitcoms, all of which have been discussed already. The first is that all four sitcoms have a religious professional, either a vicar or a priest, as the main character. Along with the vicar/priest comes a variety of associated settings, including the vicarage or clergy house and the church. The vicars also have common religious actions, including prayers, church services, and interacting with parishioners. The vicars and priests all dress identifiably as priests, using the same everyday wear of a dog collar and black clothing, with the more ostentatious alb, stole, chasuble etc. for services. The clothing and church in particular are quick, important visual cues for the identification of a religious sitcom because they are so distinct (and distinctly *British*) in design. The fact that these elements are present in all of them suggests that they are a staple of the sub-genre, but this does not dictate to what *extent* they need to be present in order to be significant. Indeed, what makes the sitcoms distinct is how and how often these elements are used. Though visual cues like priest clothing or vicarages appear frequently in all of the sitcoms, other elements (as explored in Chapters 2 to 5) like prayer, church services, and priest communities are present in very different amounts. For example, in *Ted* the church is barely present, but in *Rev.* St. Saviour's is featured in every episode. Similarly, *Ted* has a huge priest community, while in *Dibley* almost no other vicars appear at all.

As well as these setting-specific visual cues (see Chapter 1 for cue theory) and actions that are present across all four sitcoms, there are a few character types that often appear.[954] One is the strict and overbearing authority figure, represented by the Major (*Good Faith*), David Horton (*Dibley*), Bishop Brennan (*Ted*) and Archdeacon Robert (*Rev.*). Another is the quirky parishioners, who range from main characters, such as Alice and Hugo in *Dibley*, to unnamed side characters, like church attendees in *Ted.* A third who appears in *Good Faith, Rev.* and *Ted* is the long-suffering wife (or housekeeper), expected to pick up and support her vicar husband even at the cost of their home or work life. The 'wife's reactions vary from joyful revelry (Mrs. Doyle) to justified frustration (Alex). It is significant that Geraldine, the only female vicar, does not have an equivalent 'supportive husband' – Geraldine is expected to be entirely self-sufficient. Finally, there are a couple of common narrative elements which emerge across all four. Every vicar or priest feels a high

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[954] Mills, *The Sitcom,* p. 95.

level of overwork or experiences crises of faith, often at the same time (such as the third series of *Rev.*). With the exception of *Good Faith*, they all interact with the media. All four vicars engage with some form of gender negotiation, whether it is a crisis of masculinity (*Good Faith, Rev.*) or discrimination (*Vicar of Dibley*). Some of these, such as the presence of the media, are common across many television genres, since television features an inordinately high number of media industry-related programmes and narratives.[955] Others, like an overbearing authority figure, are common in many sitcoms, though they do not usually represent an entire religious organisation in the process.

Finally, the religious sitcoms have common production and contextual elements. All of the sitcoms are around half an hour (some shorter to allow for adverts) and each ran for three series. Three of the four series have holiday specials, with *Dibley* in particular producing exclusively holiday specials after 2000. Though *Rev.* and *Dibley* engage with some contemporary religious issues, these are largely ignored in favour of representing stereotypical elements of British culture (such as the 'little England' country village stereotype in *Dibley* and *Good Faith*) or the isolated, surreal island parish of *Ted.* The sitcoms are mostly multi-cam with a live audience, but *Rev.,* part of the 2000s 'quality sitcom' trend, is single cam, demonstrating that the religious sitcom sub-genre is versatile enough to allow for format changes.

A summary of all of these findings, and a step towards defining the religious sitcom sub-genre, is as follows: a religious sitcom is a sub-genre of the television sitcom that features a religious professional (such as a vicar or priest) as the main character, easily identifiable through clothing, location, and some or all of the following elements: prayer; a vicarage or clergy house; church services; support work and ministry; being overworked; crises of faith; gender-based identity crises and discrimination; religious discussion and engagement; a church or local authority figure; a range of other religious characters, including fellow religious professionals; and religious jokes, broadly defined as humour involving religion. The 'religion' of religious sitcoms in the UK has historically been Christianity, though this is theoretically not a pre-requisite. The religious sitcom typically lasts around 30

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[955] Television-related examples include *Drop the Dead Donkey* (cr. Andy Hamilton and Guy Jenkin, C4, 1990-1998)*, I'm Alan Partridge, Extras*, *Episodes* (cr. David Crane and Jeffrey Klarik, BBC2/Showtime, 2011-2017), and *Toast of London* (cr. Arthur Mathews and Matt Berry, C4, 2012-present)*.

minutes with six episodes per series and 30-60 minute holiday specials, and is usually but not exclusively filmed using a multi-camera setup in front of a live studio audience. Most use religious festivals as the basis for holiday specials, including Christmas, Easter, and Lent. Religious sitcoms air on all public service broadcasting channels, many of whom have a remit to provide religious programming. Often a comedy vehicle, the religious sitcom stars established comedy and sitcom actors and stand-ups that draws on previous comedy performances in characterisation and narrative. Religious sitcoms sometimes reflect contemporary religious issues (such as the ordination of women in the Church of England or the decline of Christianity in inner-city parishes) but more often represents an isolated community where everyone is the same religion.

The advantage of this summary is that it captures a lot of the specificities found during this research, such as the common themes, production details, and choice of star, that was not evident before the textual analysis. However, while this analysis serves as a good summary of the breadth of the sub-genre, a shorter definition narrows down the most important and specific elements of the religious sitcom. In the interest of brevity and precision, a shorter definition is: **a religious sitcom is a television situation comedy that engages with religious themes and practices in every episode through (1) a main character working as a religious professional, (2) a religious setting, and (3) some examples of religious discussion and religious jokes.**

As a reminder, Chapter 1 already discussed the definition of 'sitcom'. 'Sitcom' or 'situation comedy' refers to a (usually) half-hour television programme whose primary aim is to be funny,[956] achieved through humorous narrative situations[957] that centre on "relationships in the family, workplace and community".[958] 'Religion' generally refers to an organised system of faith and worship concerning beliefs in spiritual beings.[959] Connected to this is 'religious practices', which includes the plethora of different activities like prayer, church services, social work, sermons, and officiations that the vicars and priests perform during these case studies. The definition purposefully does not specify a particular religion because in Britain there

[956] Mills, *The Sitcom*, p. 5.
[957] Butler, *The Sitcom*, p. 2.
[958] Morreale, *Critiquing the Sitcom*, p. xi.
[959] "Penguin Dictionary of Religions".

are already representations of other religions, such as Islam in *Rev.* and *Citizen Khan*, and these could in the future develop as a focus in a religious sitcom. After all, the vast majority of the specificities of religious sitcoms are applicable to many religions, not just Christianity. Equally, 'British' is not specified in this definition because of its potential applicability to other countries' sitcoms (see Conclusion).

The inclusion of religious professional is a key factor, which was not only important when choosing the case studies but also a central part of the shows themselves. It is conceivable to have a religious sitcom without a religious professional; a sitcom could theoretically explore an informal group of religious characters who discuss religious without working in the industry. However, the fact that the main characters are religious professionals is so central to the case studies – especially when exploring the particulars and difficulties of the job in different locations and contexts, as outlined in Chapters 2 to 5 – that losing the religious professional as the main character would entirely change the sub-genre's focus. A 'religious setting' includes churches or equivalents (which appear in every case study), but also locations such as the vicarage or parochial house, where a vicar or priest's work often occurs out of usual hours. Finally, the use of 'some examples of religious discussion' reflects the fact that religious discussion in the case studies – though a factor in all of them – had different levels of quantity and significance.

Finally, the term 'religious discussion' could apply to many different types of communication in the case studies, ranging from Adam's frequent moral quandaries discussed in his interior voiceover prayers in *Rev.* to more sporadic but surprisingly lengthy debate on heaven, hell, and creation between Dougal and Bishop O'Neil in *Ted*'s "Tentacles of Doom".[960] However, religious discussion across the four case studies is certainly not consistent. *Good Faith,* for example, has a vicar main character and is set in a vicarage, but has only a few examples of religious discussion. On the other hand, religious discussion and morality in *Rev.* is of such high importance that it occurs in every episode. As such, religious engagement has clearly increased across the time period – in other words, the sitcoms have become 'more religious' more recently, despite the evident decrease in Christian self-identification. This also applies to religious jokes. As discussed in

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[960] 2.03 "Tentacles of Doom", *Father Ted.*

Chapters 2 to 5, there are many different examples of religious jokes, including jokes about religion, jokes in a religious setting, and jokes at the expense of religion. Like religious discussion, religious joke inclusion has been inconsistent in the case studies, with many more varieties existing in *Rev.* than *Good Faith*. However, religious jokes and religion and humour intersection are an important and unique part of religious sitcoms that, while not appearing constantly, are a recognisable part of the religious sitcom sub-genre. In addition, since the purpose of sitcoms is 'to be funny', it would be remiss not to acknowledge the importance of comedy with religion in its definition.[961] Therefore, the definition has used 'some' to indicate it should be present but does not have to be frequent or in large quantities.

This short definition encapsulates the general key findings from this research and serves as framework for analysing religious sitcoms past and future. However, the summary outlined before it is far more detailed, pinpointing the specific findings from the textual analysis and literary research explored in these chapters. Therefore, while the short definition is a useful device, it would be best used in conjunction with (and reference to) the longer summary. With the aim of defining the religious sitcom achieved, the conclusion will offer final thoughts on the research as a whole, as well as other, tangential avenues of research that could stem from the findings in this thesis.

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[961] Mills, *The Sitcom*, p. 5.

Conclusion

The Future of the Religious Sitcom

Over the last six chapters, this thesis has endeavoured to answer the key questions about the religious sitcom – how to define the sub-genre, how humour and religion intersect in the sitcoms, and how the sitcoms represent religion through priest main characters and their parishioners. Chapter 1 covered the plethora of literature connected to the project, including television sitcom history and genre, representation, and the humour vs. religion debate, as well as tangential subjects like public service broadcasting, gender, Bakhtinian research, and humour theories. Chapter 2 looked at *All in Good Faith,* examining elements like the crisis of faith/'male menopause' Philip experiences that begins the narrative, the humour found in religious settings, and the presence of the case studies' only family. The chapter found that religion was little more than a backdrop for a concept strikingly similar to another of Briers' sitcoms, *The Good Life,* and the series quantitatively lacked religious discussion, prayers, or services to address religion in any detail. Chapter 3 moved on to *The Vicar of Dibley,* a still-popular sitcom with a gender-focused premise that loses relevance as the series progressed. The chapter developed the theory of clerical femininity based on *Dibley's* interpretation of being a woman and a vicar, proposing that, unlike clerical masculinity, clerical femininity was defined by a constant need to prove yourself as a vicar, to be available at all hours, and to be simultaneously sex-positive and chaste until marriage – certainly a lot for Geraldine to navigate. Chapter 4 was about *Father Ted,* the only Catholic sitcom of the four case studies, that developed the priest community, parody, and whose priests were a little more ambivalent about religion than the others. On the latter point, the chapter argued that assessments of the sitcom as 'uninterested' or avoiding religion were only part of the story, and identified many scenes where religion, prayer, or belief were subtly denigrated. The last textual analysis in Chapter 5 focused on *Rev.,* its use of the 'interior voiceover', Adam's breakdowns due to overwork, and the first and only appearance of Jesus in any of the case studies. The only sitcom to utilize a single-cam format, *Rev.* moved away from sitcom and

towards a more serious tone by the end of its run, demonstrating a genre-wide move in favour of darker and more 'realist' comedy.

Finally, Chapter 6 brought this research together along with additional socio-historical contexts to answer the three research questions – representation, humour/religious intersection, and the religious sitcom sub-genre. After exploring the lack of discussion of contemporary religious issues in the case studies in general and the relatively larger importance of sitcom history and broadcast channel, Chapter 6 identified the elements that were (or were not) vital to the definition of the religious sitcom, especially those concerning religious representation and religious jokes. Based on all these findings, Chapter 6 proposed the following definition for religious sitcoms: a religious sitcom is a television situation comedy that engages with religious themes and practices in every episode through (1) a main character working as a religious professional, (2) a religious setting, and (3) some examples of religious discussion and religious jokes.

Returning to the question of public service broadcasting raised in the Introduction, as *Good Faith, Dibley, Ted,* and *Rev.* have shown, religious sitcoms certainly can be considered as fulfilling public service broadcasting's remit to provide religious programming. The very definition of religious programming by the Ofcom Broadcasting Code – "a programme which deals with matters of religion as the central subject, or as a significant part, of the programme" – aligns strongly with the definition of a religious sitcom as 'television situation comedy that engages with religious themes and practices in every episode'.[962] Related to this is the importance (and inclusion) of religion in the religious sitcom. Though all four religious sitcoms engage with religion through virtue of its setting, there are differing levels of variety and frequency of other religious engagement, such as prayers, services, and discussion. This ranges from merely providing a setting for the sitcom antics (*Good Faith)* to a vital and ever-present theme (*Rev.*). Religion is a "central subject" in both, but in *Rev.* in particular religious engagement is vital to its characterisation and narrative; in other words, *Rev.* would be unrecognisable without religion. These two examples show a remarkable rise in the importance of religion between *Good Faith* and *Rev.,* suggesting a significant upward trend from the beginning to the end of the

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[962] "Section Four: Religion".

time period. However, this development is more of a spectrum than linear progression. While the other two sitcoms were on simultaneously in the 1990s – and should therefore have similar levels and methods of religious engagement if the development was linear – *Ted* actively avoids religion wherever possible and is implicitly negative when religion is unavoidable, while *Dibley* has many examples of religious engagement in its earlier series, but these disappear as the series progresses. Despite this spectrum of religious engagement, it would be erroneous to suggest that the shows are not 'religious enough' to meet Ofcom's standard. The definition of religious programming by Ofcom is suitably vague to account for this spectrum of religious engagement; 'central subject' or 'significant part' can certainly apply to even *Good Faith's* negotiation of religion as setting. As such, though there is a spectrum of engagement and an apparent increase over the time period, all of the religious sitcoms still use religion as a significant part of its premise and narrative, and this engagement is vital to its sub-generic definition. It might not always be the genre's 'purpose' to engage with religion, but without it the sitcoms could not be called 'religious sitcoms'.

Inevitably, whatever the size or scope of the project, there are elements that cannot be included. In the case of this project, there were a number of elements of an intersectional identity that could not be discussed fully, especially race, class, and age. One of the reasons this was not touched on in more detail is the homogeny of the vicars/priests – all white, largely middle class, and most in their 40s or 50s. While this does not mean these elements were not present or worthy of study, the specific focus of this study on religious representation (and to a lesser extent gender) did not leave much room for other representative study. In addition, due to the textual analysis methodology, the project did not go down multiple other contextual angles that might have further informed the findings (and could be used in research in the future) such as a production study interviewing cast and crew, an audience reception study looking at public reactions to the sitcoms, or a critical reception study looking at critical reviews.

Future research concepts emerging from this project, beyond the topics not fully covered in this project already identified, could take four main routes: 1. a historical study of British religious sitcoms; 2. wider religious representation across British sitcoms; 3. international religious sitcoms; or 4. humour and religion in other forms

of comedy. The first of these concepts would be to create a historical study looking at British religious sitcoms before 1982, such as *All Gas and Gaiters, Oh, Brother!* (1968-1970)[963] And *Bless Me Father* (1978-1981).[964] A comparative study looking at earlier sitcoms could establish long-term trends or older elements to religious sitcoms that are no longer present in contemporary versions. While some surface discussions of these sitcoms already exist, there are no in-depth analyses of these shows comparable to the analysis in this project.[965] However, there might be a logistical reason that prevents further study of these texts. One significant difficulty with study is that some of the episodes of earlier religious sitcoms – especially *All Gas and Gaiters* – are not available because they have either been wiped or not released on VHS, DVD, or streaming services.[966] As such, it might be problematic to apply findings from the remaining few episodes because so many are missing. Similarly, rather than focusing entirely on 'religious sitcoms', further study could investigate more general religious representation across other British sitcoms. In the UK there are other sitcoms tangentially about religion, such as *Citizen Khan* and *We are Lady Parts* (2021-present),[967] that do not star a religious professional but still address religion. In addition, there are a number of vicar and priest characters who only appear in one or two episodes of a sitcom, ranging from the memorable 'Baby-eating Bishop of Bath and Wells' from *Blackadder* to the unnamed 'Hot Priest' (Andrew Scott) in *Fleabag.* Still, the scope of such a project might be very large since there are so many examples of religious professionals in sitcoms.

Another area of interest is religious sitcoms in other countries such as the US, which has historically produced (and arguably continues to produce) a high volume of sitcoms.[968] In recent years there has been more attention paid to contemporary US sitcoms like *Friends* (1994-2004),[969] [970] *The Office* (2005-2013),[971] [972]

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[963] *Oh, Brother!* wr. David Climie and Austin Steele (BBC1, 1968-1970).
[964] *Bless Me, Father,* wr. Peter de Rosa (ITV, 1978-1981).
[965] Wagg, *Because I Tell a Joke or Two,* p. 8.
[966] "All Gas and Gaiters", *BBC Comedy.*
[967] *We Are Lady Parts,* cr. Nida Manzoor (C4, 2021-present).
[968] Butler, *The Sitcom*, p. 2.
[969] *Friends,* cr. David Crane and Marta Kauffman (NBC, 1994-2004).
[970] Simone Knox and Kai Hanno Schwind, *Friends: A Reading of the Sitcom* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).
[971] *The Office: An American Workplace,* cr. Greg Daniels (NBC, 2005-2013).
[972] Among others, see Jeffrey Griffin, "The Americanization of *The Office:* A Comparison of the Offbeat NBC Sitcom and its British Predecessor" in *Journal of Popular Television*, 35:4 (Winter 2008), pp. 154-163 and Jessica Birthisel and Jason A. Martin, "That's What She Said": Gender, Satire, and the American Workplace on the Sitcom *The Office"*, *Journal of Communication Inquiry,* 37:1 (Jan 28 2013), pp. 64-80.

Community,[973] and *Black-ish* (2014-2022).[974] [975] However, despite the presence of religion in these texts, analyses have not touched on their religious discussion or representation. In *Black-ish,* for example, entire episodes are dedicated to exploring Christianity amongst the characters,[976] while *Community* explores religious diversity with an episode addressing the seven main characters' seven different religions (including atheism, agnosticism, Judaism, and Islam).[977] In many of these sitcom and comedy series examples, religion is not as constantly present as it is in the British religious sitcoms. While there are a very small number of religion-focused comedy series, such as the recent *The Righteous Gemstones* (2019-present),[978] a black comedy about a group of televangelists and megachurch pastors, the vast majority of religious representation appears embedded in single episode arcs of US sitcoms rather than as a long-running focus like religious sitcoms. As such, religion (like other topics, such as politics, gender, or sexuality) is addressed in one or two episodes in detail and barely mentioned outside of these. Also, unlike British sitcoms, there is a much higher presence of other religions, especially Jewish characters. Examples from US sitcoms include Ross and Monica Geller in *Friends, Frasier*'s frequently guest-starring ex-wife Lilith, and Annie Edison from *Community,* but this is by no means exhaustive; Jewish main characters also appear in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (2013-2021),[979] *The Goldbergs* (2013-present),[980] *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015-2019),[981] and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017-present),[982] to name a few. Therefore, further study could take the findings from the UK religious sitcoms and assess their applicability and differences to these more general representations of religious laypeople. As well as US sitcoms, there are other international sitcoms that might employ the religious sitcoms model. For example, there are two Canadian shows about religious professionals: *Lord Have Mercy* (2003)[983] about ambitious youth pastor Dwight Gooding (Arnold Pinnock) and *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (2007-2012)[984] about Canadian Imam Amaar Rasid (Zaib Shaikh) and his local

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[973] Ann-Gee Lee, *A Sense of Community: Essays on the Television Series and its Fandom* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2014).

[974] *Black-ish,* cr. Kenya Barris (ABC, 2014-2022).

[975] Butler, *The Sitcom.*

[976] See 3.02 "God", *Black-ish* (ABC, 28 September 2016).

[977] 1.12 "Comparative Religion", *Community* (NBC, 10 December 2009).

[978] *The Righteous Gemstones,* cr. Danny McBride (HBO, 2019-present).

[979] *Brooklyn Nine-Nine, cr.* Dan Goor and Michael Schur (Fox/NBC, 2013-2021).

[980] *The Goldbergs,* cr. Adam F. Goldberg (ABC, 2013-present).

[981] *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend,* cr. Rachel Bloom and Aline Brosh McKenna (The CW, 2015-2019).

[982] *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel,* cr. Amy Sherman-Palladino (Amazon Prime Video, 2017-present).

[983] *Lord Have Mercy!* cr. Vanz Chapman and Frances-Anne Solomon (Vision TV, 2003).

[984] *Little Mosque on the Prairie,* cr. Zarqa Nawaz (CBC, 2007-2012).

Muslim community. However, there are notably few outside of the UK; further evidence that religious sitcoms are currently an especially British phenomenon.

Finally, further study could investigate the presence of humour and religious intersection in other contemporary British comedy forms, especially stand-up. Religion is a theme touched upon in many stand-up comedy performances,[985] and there are even a few performances like Marcus Brigstocke's *Devil May Care* that base their entire routine on religious concepts.[986] Unlike the sitcom, stand-up is entirely focused on one character – the comedian and their routine – and treads a more complicated line between fiction and fact. The complexities of stand-up, as outlined by theorists such as Oliver Double, are very different from the world of sitcom, but could equally be a further source for information about the intersection of humour and religion.[987] For any of these future projects, the definition and analysis of humour, religion, and representation from this research on *Good Faith, Dibley, Ted,* and *Rev.* can serve as first step, a framework or comparative baseline to study other religious comedies.

Though religious sitcoms have been part of the British televisual landscape for decades, it appears increasingly unlikely that the religious sitcom trend will continue in the same fashion. Not only has religion in Britain changed dramatically due to factors such as the decrease in self-identifying Christians and changes to religious professional work (including the drop in traditional priests and the rise in non-traditional training pathways and roles),[988] but also the continual shifting landscape of television – the introduction of satellite channels and streaming services altering the influence or intentions of public service broadcasting, as well as the general decrease in the number of British sitcoms – has dramatically altered the development, output, and content of television comedy. Even at the end of this time period, *Rev.* demonstrates a very different take on the religious sitcom from its predecessors, ranging from its use of the single-cam format to its acknowledgement of contemporary religious issues. There has not been another religious sitcom since

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[985] Some televised examples include *Ricky Gervais Live: Animals*, cr. Ricky Gervais (NBC Universal, 2003), the 'Religion' (20 April 2009) and 'Islamophobia' (10 March 2016) episodes of *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle,* cr. Stewart Lee (BBC2, 2009-2016), and Ahir Shah's routine on "Christmas Special 2018", *Live At the Apollo,* pr. Anthony Caveney (BBC2, 22 December 2018).

[986] *Devil May Care,* cr. Marcus Brigstocke (Amazon Prime Video, 2021 – filmed 2020).

[987] Oliver Double, *Getting the Joke: The Inner Workings of Stand-up Comedy* (London: Methuen Publishing Ltd., 2005).

[988] Madeline Davies, "Number of ordinands in contextual training increases by 142 per cent", *Church Times* (6 December 2019) <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2019/6-december/news/uk/number-of-ordinands-in-contextual-training-increases-by-142-per-cent> [accessed 07/03/2022].

Rev. ended in 2014, and though *Dibley* has returned for specials during this period (the most recent being a set of 3 10-minute 'Lockdown Specials' in 2020), the British sitcom landscape has otherwise remained devoid.

It would be remiss, however, to conclude that the religious sitcom is gone. The death of sitcom has been predicted many times by writers and scholars, but though the genre has changed, it certainly has not disappeared. As Mills states, "the sitcom is likely to remain a potent force within television for as long as communities want to come together to enjoy laughter".[989] The same may be said of religious sitcoms; as long as religion remains a part of the community, it can be a subject in comedy. Instead, religious and comedy negotiation may take a different form. As suggested in Chapter 6, religion might be a theme of a sitcom without following a religious professional. Equally, instead of focusing on a Christian priest, future sitcoms might choose another religion, such as a Muslim imam-based sitcom. While there is a fear that only dominant or majority religions in the UK such as Christianity could form the basis of a comedy, this thesis has shown that the vast majority of religious jokes in religious sitcoms use a religious context or content, so worries that all jokes involving religions such as Islam are mocking are unfounded. It certainly has not stopped stand-ups like Ahir Shah from joking about other religions, nor other countries from producing sitcoms like *Little Mosque on the Prairie.*[990]

If British religious sitcoms were to return with another Christian lead, it could follow the trend towards the 'quality' sitcom and serious, more frequent religious engagement within the sub-genre started by *Rev.* A future, less comedic sitcom could use this format to further dispute Archbishop Welby's quote in the Introduction, which refers to TV vicars as "rogues or idiots" rather the "reality" of "hard-working, normal people, caring deeply about what they do".[991] This thesis has shown that this pithy summary of the TV sitcom vicar is not the whole story. There might be elements of the rogue in Adam or Geraldine and the idiot in Ted (Philip fits neither of these descriptors) but dismissing these characters as such takes away from the obvious hard work most put into their job, the care that Geraldine and Adam take supporting their communities, and even the subversive power Ted has to question

[989] Mills, *The Sitcom*, p. 146.
[990] Ahir Shah, "Christmas Special 2018".
[991] Sherwood, "'Rogues or idiots': Justin Welby condemns TV portrayal of clergy".

religious practices and Catholic priest expectations. Above all, this ignores the power these TV vicars have to entertain, to bring messages to huge numbers of viewers, and connect to those who have no other connection to religion. Even if religious sitcoms like *Rev.* appear to be moving towards the serious and complex, there should be room in the religious sitcom for another Geraldine or Ted too – sitcoms that do not have to treat religion as 'serious' to engage with it, or TV shows that can critique religion in a humorous or fantastical context. The religious sitcom thus far has proved to be a popular and resilient generic output that can adapt to new formats, and in the future will find new ways to challenge the idea that the TV vicar is nothing more than a 'holy buffoon'.

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Escape to Victory, dr. John Huston (Paramount Pictures, 1981)

Four Weddings and a Funeral, wr. Richard Curtis (Working Title Films, 1994)

In the Loop, dr. Armando Iannucci (BBC Films, 2009)

It's a Wonderful Life, dr. Frank Capra (Liberty Films, 1946)

Looney Tunes (Warner Bros, 1930-1969)

Love Actually, wr. and dr. Richard Curtis (Working Title Films, 2003)

Night of the Living Dead, dr. George A. Romero (Continental Distributing, 1968)

Pirates of the Caribbean franchise, pr. Jerry Bruckheimer (Walt Disney Pictures, 2003-present)

Pride and Prejudice, dr. Joe Wright (Universal Pictures, 2005)

Speed, dr. Jan de Bont (20th Century Fox, 1994)

Speed 2: Cruise Control, dr. Jan de Bont (20th Century Fox, 1997)

The Father, dr. Florian Zeller (Lionsgate, 2020)

The Favourite dr. Yorgos Lathimos (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2018)

Teleography

Absolutely Fabulous, cr. Jennifer Saunders (BBC2/1, 1992-2012)

All Gas and Gaiters, cr. Pauline Devaney and Edwin Apps (BBC1, 1966-1971)

*All in Good Faith, c*r. John Kane (ITV/Thames Television, 1985-1988)

Are You Being Served?, cr. Jeremy Lloyd and David Croft (BBC1, 1972-2016)

Are You Having a Laugh? Comedy and Christianity, pr. Anne Widdecombe (BBC1, 27 March 2013)

Arrested Development, cr. Mitchell Hurwitz (Fox/Netflix, 2003-2019)

Ballykissangel, cr. Kieran Prendiville (BBC1, 1996-2001)

Black Books, cr. Dylan Moran and Graham Linehan (Channel 4, 2000-2004)

Blackadder, cr. Richard Curtis and Rowan Atkinson (BBC2, 1983-1999)

Black-ish, cr. Kenya Barris (ABC, 2014-2022)

Bless Me, Father, wr. Peter de Rosa (ITV, 1978-1981)

Brass Eye, cr. Chris Morris (Channel 4, 1997-2001)

Broadchurch, cr. Chris Chibnall (ITV, 2013-2017)

Brooklyn Nine-Nine, cr. Dan Goor and Michael Schur (Fox/NBC, 2013-2021)

Butterflies, cr. Carla Lane (BBC2, 1978-1983)

Citizen Khan, cr. Adil Ray (BBC1, 2012-2016)

Comic Relief: Red Nose Day, cr. Richard Curtis and Lenny Henry (BBC1, 1988-present)

Comic Relief Special 1997: The Vicar of Dibley (BBC1, 14 March 1997)

Community, cr. Dan Harmon (NBC/Yahoo! Screen, 2009-2015)

Crazy Ex-Girlfriend, cr. Rachel Bloom and Aline Brosh McKenna (The CW, 2015-2019)

Dad's Army, cr. Jimmy Perry (BBC1, 1968-1977)

Devil May Care, cr. Marcus Brigstocke (Amazon Prime Video, 2021)

dinnerladies, cr. Victoria Wood (BBC1, 1998-2000)

Doctor Who, cr. Sydney Newman (BBC1, 1963-present)

Drop the Dead Donkey, cr. Andy Hamilton and Guy Jenkin (C4, 1990-1998)

Episodes, cr. David Crane and Jeffrey Klarik (BBC2/Showtime, 2011-2017)

Ever Decreasing Circles, cr. John Esmonde and Bob Larbey (BBC1, 1984-1989)

Extras, cr. Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant (BBC2/1, 2005-2007)

Father Ted, cr. Graham Linehan and Arthur Mathews (Channel 4/Hat Trick Productions, 1995-1998)

Fawlty Towers, cr. John Cleese and Connie Booth (BBC2, 1975-1979)

Fleabag, cr. Phoebe Waller-Bridge (BBC3/1, 2016-2019)

Frasier, cr. David Angel, Peter Casey, and David Lee (NBC, 1993-2004)

French and Saunders, cr. Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders (BBC2, 1987-1993)

Friends, cr. David Crane and Marta Kauffman (NBC, 1994-2004)

Gavin and Stacey, cr. James Corden and Ruth Jones (BBC3, 2007-2019)

Girls on Top, cr. Dawn French, Jennifer Saunders, and Ruby Wax (ITV, 1985-1986)

Goodbye, Mr. Kent, wr. Peter Robinson and Peter Vincent (BBC1, 1982)

Happy Days, cr. Gary Marshall (ABC, 1974-1984)

Have I Got News for You, cr. Harry Thompson and Jimmy Mulville (BBC2/1, 1990-present)

House of Cards, cr. Beau Willimon (Netflix, 2013-2018)

How I Met Your Mother, cr. Carter Bays and Craig Thomas (CBS, 2005-2014)

I'm Alan Partridge, cr. Peter Baynham, Steve Coogan, and Armando Iannucci (BBC2, 1997-2002)

Little Mosque on the Prairie, cr. Zarqa Nawaz (CBC, 2007-2012)

Live At the Apollo, pr. Anthony Caveney (BBC1/2, 2004-present)*.*

Lord Have Mercy! cr. Vanz Chapman and Frances-Anne Solomon (Vision TV, 2003)

Miranda, cr. Miranda Hart (BBC2/1, 2009-2015)

Monty Python's Flying Circus, cr. The Pythons (BBC1, 1969-1974)

Mr. Bean, cr. Richard Curtis and Rowan Atkinson (ITV1, 1990-1995)

Mrs. Brown's Boys, cr. Brendan O'Carroll (RTÉ/BBC1, 2011-present)

Murder Most Horrid, cr. Paul Smith (BBC2, 1991-1999)

Oh, Brother! wr. David Climie and Austin Steele (BBC1, 1968-1970)

One Foot in the Grave, cr. David Renwick (BBC1, 1990-2000)

Only Fools and Horses, cr. John Sullivan (BBC1, 1981-2003)

Outnumbered, cr. Andy Hamilton and Guy Jenkin (BBC1, 2007-2016)

Peep Show, cr. Andrew O'Connor, Jesse Armstrong, and Sam Bain (Channel 4, 2003-2015)

People Like Us, cr. John Morton (BBC2, 1999-2001)

Pointless, pr. Pam Cavannagh, Tom Blakeson and David Flynn (BBC1, 3 April 2018)

Ricky Gervais Live: Animals, cr. Ricky Gervais (NBC Universal, 2003)

Red Dwarf, cr. Rob Grant and Doug Naylor (BBC2, 1988-1999; Dave, 2009-present)

Rev., cr. Tom Hollander and James Wood (BBC2/Big Talk Productions, 2010-2014)

Scrubs, cr. Bill Lawrence (NBC/ABC, 2001-2010)

South Bank Sky Arts Winners (Sky Arts 1, 16 February 2011)

South Park, cr. Trey Parker and Matt Stone (Comedy Central, 1997-present)

Spaced, cr. Simon Pegg and Jessica Stevenson (Channel 4, 1999-2001)

Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle, cr. Stewart Lee (BBC2, 2009-2016)

The Comic Strip Presents, cr. Peter Richardson (C4/BBC/Gold, 1982-2016)

The Crown, cr. Peter Morgan (Netflix, 2016-present)

The Goldbergs, cr. Adam F. Goldberg (ABC, 2013-present)

The Good Life, cr. John Esmonde and Bob Larbey (BBC1, 1975-1978)

The Handmaid's Tale, cr. Bruce Miller (Hulu, 2017-present)

The IT Crowd, cr. Graham Linehan (Channel 4, 2006-2013)

The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel, cr. Amy Sherman-Palladino (Amazon Prime Video, 2017-present)

The Minister of Divine, cr. Suzanne Martin (FOX, 2007)

The Mighty Boosh, cr. Julian Barratt and Noel Fielding (BBC3, 2004-2007)

The Night Manager, wr. David Farr (BBC1, 2016)

The Office, cr. Stephen Merchant and Ricky Gervais (BBC2/1, 2001-2003)

The Office: An American Workplace, cr. Greg Daniels (NBC, 2005-2013)

The Righteous Gemstones, cr. Danny McBride (HBO, 2019-present)

The Royle Family, cr. Caroline Aherne and Craig Cash (BBC2/1, 1998-2012)

The Simpsons, cr. Matt Groening (Fox, 1989-present)

The Story of Dibley, pr. Lucy Kenwright and Caroline Wright (BBC1, 10 January 2007)

The Thick of It, cr. Armando Iannucci (BBC4/2, 2005-2012).

The Vicar of Dibley, cr. Richard Curtis and Paul Mayhew-Archer (BBC1, 1994-2007)

The Vicar of Dibley: Inside Out, dr. Matt Pothecary (Gold, 6 March 2021)

The Wheel, cr. Michael McIntyre (BBC1, 2020-present)

The Young Ones, cr. Ben Elton, Rik Mayall, and Lise Mayer (BBC2, 1982-1984)

Toast of London, cr. Arthur Mathews and Matt Berry (C4, 2012-present)

We Are Lady Parts, cr. Nida Manzoor (C4, 2021-present)

Wolf Hall, wr. Peter Straughan (BBC2, 2015)

Appendix

(1) List of case study episodes organised by television series.

Code	Title	Air Date
	All in Good Faith	
1.01	In the Beginning	30 December 1985
1.02	No Stone Unturned	6 January 1986
1.03	A Flying Visit	13 January 1986
1.04	The Crunch	20 January 1986
1.05	An Eye for an Eye	27 January 1986
1.06	Exodus	3 February 1986
2.01	Home from Home	26 February 1987
2.02	Manna from Heaven	5 March 1987
2.03	I Dreamt I Dwelt in the Parish Hall	12 March 1987
2.04	Babes and Sucklings	19 March 1987
2.05	The Patience of Job	26 March 1987
2.06	Like Father Like Son	2 April 1987
3.01	Where My Caravan Has Rested	11 April 1988
3.02	And He Fell Among Thieves	18 April 1988
3.03	The Prodigal Son	25 April 1988
3.04	The Spirit is Willing	9 May 1988
3.05	Behold a Pale Rider	16 May 1988
3.06	False Profits	23 May 1988
	The Vicar of Dibley	
1.01	The Arrival	10 November 1994
1.02	Songs of Praise	17 November 1994
1.03	Community Spirit	24 November 1994
1.04	The Wind and the Weather	1 December 1994
1.05	Election	8 December 1994
1.06	The Animals	15 December 1994
1X.01	The Easter Bunny	8 April 1996
1X.02	The Christmas Lunch Incident	25 December 1996
2.01	Engagement	26 December 1997
2.02	Dibley Live	8 January 1998
2.03	Celebrity Vicar	15 January 1998
2.04	Love and Marriage	22 January 1998
3.01	Autumn	24 December 1999
3.02	Winter	25 December 1999
3.03	Spring	27 December 1999
3.04	Summer	1 January 2000
4.01	Merry Christmas	25 December 2004
4.02	Happy New Year	1 January 2005
5.01	The Handsome Stranger	25 December 2006
5.02	The Vicar in White	1 January 2007
	Father Ted	
1.01	Good Luck, Father Ted	21 April 1995
1.02	Entertaining Father Stone	28 April 1995

1.03	The Passion of St. Tibulus	5 May 1995
1.04	Competition Time	12 May 1995
1.05	And God Created Woman	19 May 1995
1.06	Grant Unto Him Eternal Rest	26 May 1995
2.01	Hell	8 March 1996
2.02	Think Fast, Father Ted	15 March 1996
2.03	Tentacles of Doom	22 March 1996
2.04	The Old Grey Whistle Theft	29 March 1996
2.05	A Song for Europe	5 April 1996
2.06	The Plague	12 April 1996
2.07	Rock a Hula Ted	19 April 1996
2.08	Cigarettes and Alcohol and Rollerblading	26 April 1996
2.09	New Jack City	3 May 1996
2.10	Flight into Terror	10 May 1996
2X.01	A Christmassy Ted	24 December 1996
3.01	Are You Right There, Father Ted?	13 March 1998
3.02	Chirpy Burpy Cheap Sheep	20 March 1998
3.03	Speed 3	27 March 1998
3.04	The Mainland	3 April 1998
3.05	Escape from Victory	10 April 1998
3.06	Kicking Bishop Brennan Up the Arse	17 April 1998
3.07	Night of the Nearly Dead	24 April 1998
3.08	Going to America	1 May 1998
	Rev.	
1.01	On Yor Knees Forget the Fees	28 June 2010
1.02	Jesus is Awesome	5 July 2010
1.03	Forests of Prejudice	12 July 2010
1.04	The Rival	19 July 2010
1.05	A Fine Bromance	26 July 2010
1.06	Ever Been to Nando's?	2 August 2010
2.01	Accidental Hero	10 November 2011
2.02	The Talented Curate	17 November 2011
2.03	Sleepless Nights	24 November 2011
2.04	The Beautiful Game	1 December 2011
2.05	Accounting	8 December 2011
2.06	Day of Decisions	15 December 2011
2X.01	Christmas Special	20 December 2011
3.01	Episode 1	24 March 2014
3.02	Episode 2	31 March 2014
3.03	Episode 3	7 April 2014
3.04	Episode 4	14 April 2014
3.05	Episode 5	21 April 2014
3.06	Episode 6	28 April 2014

(2) Example Textual Analysis Table Template.

Episode #	*TV Show Title* "Episode Title"	**Air Date** Date(s) watched
Key Points	**Level of importance.**	
Narrative		
Creator Writer Director Guest Stars		
Key moments		
Humour/ Religion		
Relation to readings		
Themes		
Connections to case studies/ media		
Other		

1.04	***The Vicar of Dibley*** **"The Wind and the Weather"**	**1/12/1994** 21/01/2019
Key Points	**High importance.** The scene where they discuss what design the window should have – example of religious discussion and humour combined. Geraldine talks/prays to God while walking through the churchyard. Evidence for manifestation of clerical femininity.	
Narrative	The Great Storm hits and knocks a tree through the church window. Without the money to repair it, Geraldine turns to more unusual methods, such as guilting investors.	
Creator Writer Director Guest Stars	Richard Curtis and Paul Mayhew-Archer Richard Curtis Dewi Humphreys Nicholas Le Provost as Daniel Frobisher (also various children and villagers who are mostly background/unmentioned in notes)	
Key moments	**The parish council debates what the stained-glass window used to portray.** This is the epitome of *Dibley* – 5 minutes of debate which begins by suggesting the window was Jesus feeding the 5000 and ends with St. Barnabas and Moses in a library, potentially in a boat shaped like a cigar. The scene perfectly demonstrates the characters' quirks and shows the kind of care people in small villages put in to these seemingly unimportant details. Also, most of them got a piece of it right – the real thing was Noah's Ark. **Geraldine prays to God out loud as she walks through the churchyard.** She says she wants to be cremated instead and sit on a pot on her mother's mantlepiece. She then wants to fall off the mantlepiece, scare her mother to death, and then have the pair of them in pots on the mantlepiece. It is unclear if she is praying until she says 'Thank you, God' near the end. She says Dibley must be in favour, but then discovers the broken window and adds 'or not'. **Geraldine lies to get a meeting with an investor.** Geraldine is about to tell him the truth, but at the last second says she is the 'vi… llage postmistress' daughter". Investor Daniel says his friend 'hairless Horton' lives there and that they have a woman vicar. Geraldine: "Yeah, I heard that too. My mother says she is fantastic. And pretty cute too. An all-round bodacious babe, in fact." Daniel: "David says she's a bloody nightmare… probably fancies her. It's an interesting thought. She might be a virgin." Geraldine: *laughs* "I doubt it. I know a vicar and she's famously the best kisser in Cheltenham." Daniel: "Really?" Geraldine: "Oh yeah. Her tongue is in the home counties gymnastics team. She can scramble eggs with it at 20 paces." (17:35 – 18:06) **Geraldine meets the investor.** Geraldine attends the meeting wearing cross earrings, a dog collar, and a lovely silver heart brooch, a glamorous vicar. When Daniel realises she's a vicar his attitude immediately changes – he's suddenly less confident, more nervous and doesn't quite know where to look. He says that you don't often get members of the clergy heading up financial companies. Geraldine: "No, that's right. I fibbed about that. Bad. Particularly bad for a priest. I regret it." (19:47 – 19:52) Later, when Daniel swears, Geraldine use the opportunity to fine him for bad behaviour – a Catholic style penance system? **Geraldine chooses to get a clear window to give the rest of the money to the earthquake appeal.** She says she cannot bear to think of all the money going on the window when children are starving and dying. She even	

	manages to get more money out of Investor Daniel, which would also go towards it. David says it is "very beautiful. I've always thought it to be the finest view in the village. Good decision." Owen: "When it comes to it, you can't be God's own creation, can you?" (27:08 – 27:12) **Closing sermon.** Alice tells a joke this time, which is not religious – it's a knock knock joke where Ronnie Barker is at the door, which is funny (Alice says) because it would be funny if Ronnie Barker was at the door.
Humour/ Religion	**The parish council discusses how they can get funding for the window.** The council is not sure if they can get the funding. Geraldine says "'can't' isn't in the Christian vocabulary." Owen: "Yes it is. You can't commit adultery, you can't steal…" Jim: "And you even can't covet your neighbour's ass. Even if it is very alluring." (12:22 – 12:38) Geraldine: "What I mean is we can achieve anything if we want to. I mean, they said to Jesus, 'You can't walk on water, you'll get your dress wet.' But he did." Hugo: "And they said to Rolf Harris, 'You can't do *Stow Away to Heaven*, but he bloody well did." (12:40 – 12:58) Geraldine says they can't put a thermometer outside adding a line every time someone donates 2p. "I want our church to be a *church*. Not an enormous church-shaped begging bowl." (13:14 – 13:20)
Relation to readings	Relevance to the formation of clerical femininity (clerical gender), humour theories (incongruity, superiority etc.), religious sitcoms genre (inclusion of religious acts e.g. prayer), popular culture references (parody?).
Themes	**Charity.** The act of giving money to charity is a recurring action in *Vicar of Dibley,* who partly due to Richard Curtis maintained strong ties with Comic Relief and charities. Also feeds into the Christian notion of support and charity, though this is obviously something that is missed by many. Also, the vicar says she does not want the church itself to be a charity case – to have a thermometer outside the church forever, updating the total each time they are given 2p.
Connections to case studies/ media	In *All in Good Faith,* Philip talks about donating more money to charity and, when their gambling pays off, they donate their money (through a friend) to charity instead of keeping it. (S3E5 "Behold a Pale Rider"). *Rev* is always in constant need of money, and unlike *VoD* these issues are not resolved in one episode (the clearest example would be S1E1 and the whole of Series 3).
Other	One of the few examples where outside, natural forces mean the church is under threat – most examples across the series are from individuals (or lack thereof). Act of God?