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Article

“Wonderful”, “Hot”, “Good” Priests: Clergy on Contemporary British TV and the New Visibility of Religion Thesis

Andrew Crome

History, Politics and Philosophy, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester M15 6LL, UK;
a.crome@mmu.ac.uk

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Abstract: This article examines the “new visibility of religion” thesis through a case study of recent depictions of priests and ministers in British television drama and comedy. It focuses on four award-winning shows produced between 2009 and 2019 with clergy as central characters: *Broadchurch*, *Broken*, *Fleabag* and *Rev*. Clergy on these shows are depicted positively, in ways that contrast with portrayals in the 1990s and earlier 2000s. The shows demonstrate an active sympathy for, and engagement with, theological themes, and awareness of the important social role that clergy play in inner-city parishes. While some elements of these depictions support the idea of a “new visibility”, at the same time, they reiterate narratives of continuing religious decline in Britain. Rather than unproblematically celebrating faith, the shows use religion to critique neoliberal welfare policy and sacralise notions of community. This “new visibility” is also shown to contribute to the continued invisibility of some religious viewpoints in the media. This article concludes that despite these limitations, recent portrayals of clergy offer new opportunities for religious debate and conversation, particularly within media and fan commentary.

Keywords: priests; television; religion and media; secularisation; new visibility of religion; Church of England; British religion

As a direct opening to an interview, it is hard to beat *The Evening Standard*'s introduction to its October 2019 head-to-head with actor Andrew Scott. How, journalist Phoebe Luckhurst began, did Scott feel about “single-handedly causing a 162 per cent increase in searches for religious porn”? ([Luckhurst 2019](#)) Scott, already well known for his role as Moriarty in the BBC's *Sherlock* (2010–), attracted a new fan-base in Spring 2019, when he starred in the Emmy and Golden Globe award winning sitcom *Fleabag* (BBC, 2016–2019) as a priest, and the romantic interest for the eponymous protagonist. Scott's “hot priest” was just the latest in a series of more prominent portrayals of clergy on British TV over the period 2009–2019. These presentations represented a major change from the traditional image of the clergy in British popular media, which tended towards either demonisation or the stereotype of the bumbling cleric. The new presentation was complex, generally positive, and often placed clergy at the centre of communities. This changed emphasis makes it an ideal test case for examining some aspects of the “new visibility of religion” thesis. This suggests that since the early 1990s, religion has become increasingly visible and active in the public sphere, without seeing any necessary link to a “re-emergence” of religion or increasing adherence to religious institutions ([Hoelzl and Ward 2008](#); [Hjelm 2015](#)). How far do these new presentations suggest that the “new visibility” remains a useful paradigm for understanding religion in popular culture? And what do they tell us about the position of religion in wider British society?

This article will examine these questions in two sections. In the first, I will analyse the presentation of clergy in four shows produced between 2010 and 2019: *Fleabag*, *Broadchurch* (ITV 2012–2017a) *Broken* (BBC 2017), and *Rev*. (BBC 2010–2014). The second section will focus on how these presentations

challenge or support the new visibility thesis in different ways. Although the visibility of clergy has increased on British television, paradoxically, their depiction reaffirms a general sense of Christian decline in the country. Along with making a particular kind of clergy more visible, ironically these depictions also ignore areas of genuine religious growth. This suggests the importance of interrogating both the type of visibility, and the form of religion, when discussing the “new visibility of religion”.

1. Clergy on British Television

Much of the scholarship on religion and television concentrates on factual programming such as news and documentaries. This is understandable given that it deals with pressing concerns of both religious groups and wider society more generally, as well as providing (sometimes limited) opportunities for religious actors themselves to influence how they are represented by providing their own points of view. Studies of depictions of religion in dramatic programming have often concentrated on the way in which non-Christian religions have been portrayed on Western television, with a particular focus upon Islam (e.g., [Poole 2002](#); [Ahmed and Matthes 2017](#)) and new religious movements (e.g., [Laycock 2013](#); [Neal 2018](#)). Examinations of the portrayal of Christians, particularly clergy, in drama and comedy have been less common, and have mostly concentrated on the United States (e.g., [Skill and Robinson 1994](#); [Soren 2014](#); [Wolff 2010](#)) or on providing encyclopaedic overviews ([Paietta 2005](#)), although there are a number of studies of British comedy clerics (e.g., [Norris 2010](#); [Krämer 2016](#); [Hill 2016](#)).

Comedy has been a popular genre for presenting clerical characters on British television. Particularly notable was BBC sitcom *All Gas and Gaiters* (1966–1971), about a bishop, elderly dean, and the bishop’s bumbling chaplain, played by Derek Nimmo. While the series was a broad comedy, much of the humour depended upon the audience recognising the institutional structures and ecclesiastical politics of the Church of England. The sitcom led Nimmo to play a succession of similarly inept clerics, in *Oh Brother!* (BBC 1968–1970), its sequel *Oh Father!* (BBC 1973) and ITV’s *Hell’s Bells* (1986). A number of British Christian commentators have argued that the Nimmo characterisation helped to contribute to a stereotype of a bumbling, out-of-touch vicar that has been a popular image in British culture ([Taylor 2015](#); [Cary et al. 2015](#)).

Many of these stereotypes were challenged by Richard Curtis’s *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC 1994–2015), a half-hour sitcom focused on the new female vicar of a rural English parish. *Dibley* was the first major series depicting female clergy following the Church of England’s decision to ordain women in 1992. Some commentators within the Anglican Church have credited the show with both normalising female ministry and promoting ordination as an attractive option for women ([Butt 2007](#)). Hot on the heels of the show, Channel 4’s Irish-set sitcom *Father Ted* (1995–1998) provided an irreverent satire of Catholic belief and practice. Both shows still regularly feature on lists of Britain’s favourite sitcoms (e.g., [ITV News 2019](#)). These comic creations appeared alongside the more-or-less regular presence of clergy characters on soap operas, including the BBC’s *EastEnders* and ITV’s *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale*.

While these representations of clergy were popular (and often, in the soaps, sensationalistic), they rarely dealt with explicitly spiritual or even liturgical matters. Richard Wolff’s work suggests that American television producers shy away from such issues for fear of offending their audience ([Wolff 2010](#), pp. 207–10). The same has been true in Britain, where fear of offence may combine with declining religious literacy and church attendance to make liturgical plots and humour less appealing. Whereas the humour of *All Gas and Gaiters* relied on viewers knowing something of the Church of England’s services and organisation, the *Vicar of Dibley* concentrated largely on scenarios built around staple British sitcom plots and characters ([Knott and Mitchell 2012](#)). In the eyes of some interpreters, the “loss of a more detailed memory of religious tradition” ([Brown and Lynch 2012](#), p. 344) therefore led to representations of religion becoming part of the background narrative of entertainment rather than engaging with religious issues in and of themselves—a form of what Stig Hjarvard has termed “banal religion” ([Hjarvard 2008, 2012](#)).

Some recent depictions of clergy in British drama and comedy support this notion. For example, the wave of nostalgic programmes featuring clergy (such as *Call the Midwife* [BBC, 2012–], *Grantchester* [ITV, 2014–] and *Father Brown* [BBC, 2013–]) recall a “lost” Britain of close 1950s or 1960s communities where clergy played a central role. These depictions, of course, suggest some reflection on the diminished role of the clergy at present. Yet other recent dramas and comedies challenge the notion that the clergy are only of historical interest. These programmes put religious practice, and even theological reflection, back at the centre of their narratives. They range from the military comedy *Bluestone 42* (BBC 2013–2015) featuring a female military chaplain as a lead character, to 2018’s BBC/Netflix co-production *Collateral*, in which a major plot strand followed a vicar engaged in a lesbian relationship with an illegal immigrant, and the consequences of this for her ministry. This article focuses on four recent, award-winning, shows. First, the BAFTA winning *Rev.*, a sitcom focused on struggling liberal Anglican vicar Adam Smallbone (Tom Hollander), and his attempts to juggle the demands of married life with the management of a declining church congregation and internal Church of England politics. Another BBC dark comedy, *Fleabag* (2016–2019), dealt with the title character’s (Phoebe Waller-Bridge) personal and psychological issues and relationships with her dysfunctional family. The show’s second (and final) series introduced Andrew Scott as the notorious “hot Priest”. The characters fell in love, and needed to wrestle with issues involving celibacy, calling, temptation and service. As with many characters on the show, the Priest was only referred to by his title and relationship to Fleabag, rather than by his name (indeed, viewers never learn Fleabag’s real name). ITV’s drama *Broadchurch* (2013–2017), meanwhile, featured local vicar Paul Coates (Arthur Darvill) as a key character in bringing together the titular community shattered by grief after the murder of a local child. Finally, *Broken* (2017) examined the life of a dedicated Catholic parish priest in a deprived northern British city. Actor Sean Bean won the 2018 Best Actor BAFTA for his portrayal of Father Michael Kerrigan, a man scarred by past abuse and the emotional burden of supporting a struggling community. As the drama unfolds, Kerrigan struggles with his sense of calling, the impact of social deprivation, and personal guilt over what he perceives to be his own ministerial failings.

In some ways, these programmes provide evidence for the continued decline of institutional religion’s importance in the United Kingdom. Non-clerical characters often display little ecclesiastical literacy, whether in Fleabag’s confused attempts to remember liturgical responses, or when new members of Adam’s congregation in *Rev.* are equally baffled by the rigmarole of sitting and standing in Anglican services. The opening episode of *Broken* includes a children’s first communion class as a way of introducing the rite to viewers and talking them through its meaning. The first episodes of the show suggest that, for the majority of the congregation, first communion serves more as an opportunity for social expression through displaying new outfits, rather than an engagement with God. Michael therefore suggests that children receiving communion all wear school uniform in order to prevent their parents getting into debt for new clothing. As the teacher organising the children for the ritual tells the priest, “We tell them every year to keep it simple and they just get more and more ... [hesitating] Well, vulgar.”

Likewise, it is common for the shows to acknowledge the decline in attendance experienced by British churches, both Catholic and Protestant. *Broadchurch*’s vicar Paul complains about the general lack of interest in attending church: “On Sundays now, the church is emptier than before Danny was killed ... People look to God when they want something and ... now they’ve just deserted him.” In *Rev.*, after preaching to a combined congregation of four, Adam explains to his Archdeacon that, “the reality is ... sometimes ... people just don’t come.” In later episodes, the empty church contrasts with the flourishing local mosque. When a joint fund-raising effort for a local playground aims to raise £10,000, the church contributes only £350.68 (of which £350 is drug money). Adam compares the dedication of Christians unfavourably to their Muslim neighbours: “Look how comfortable they are with their religion. It’s because Islam’s woven into their everyday lives. Whereas for our lot it’s just something you do on Sundays if you can be bothered.” These complaints demonstrate awareness of

the reality of the drop in church attendance in the UK, which has only accelerated in the past decade ([Church of England Research and Statistics 2018](#), p. 3).

Yet, at the same time that they reflect a general decline in religious attendance, one of the major developments in these programmes has been to combine this narrative of decline with an affirmation of the central role of the churches in their local communities. As Andrew Scott noted when asked about the Catholic Church in *Fleabag*, “Are there faults of the Catholic church [sic] that are highlighted by it? Yes. But there are also amazing things about the Catholic church [sic] that are brought up later on in the series.” ([Pollard 2019](#)). The shows therefore depict the churches as providing social cohesion, focusing on the extent to which clergy and congregations serve to cohere communities and provide social resources. This highlights an increasing trend for faith groups to take on welfare provision once provided by the state ([Woodhead 2012](#)). In *Rev.*, Adam’s church is an important resource for the local community, providing homeless night shelters, venues for support groups, and aiding local addicts. Notably, when Adam criticizes local evangelicals, he argues that they lack “any sense of this parish”. Michael’s church in *Broken* provides food and clothing banks that are a vital resource for struggling locals, while the priest himself functions as a community counsellor, support worker, and social campaigner. It is important that these roles are in no ways divorced from his clerical identity, but instead are seen as an extension of his ecclesiastical role. In the *Radio Times*, *Broken* writer Jimmy McGovern made this point explicitly:

As an inner-city priest you will get nowhere if all you talk about is “bells and smells”. You’ve got to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned, help cure the sick. When I go into churches and see a food bank I think isn’t it shocking that there’s a need for this [sic]. And then I think, thank God the churches are doing this. They can’t ignore the poverty that’s in front of their eyes—they’d soon get short shrift if they did. ([McGovern 2018](#))

The final episodes of *Broadchurch*, *Broken* and *Rev.* affirm the centrality of their protagonists to the lives of their local communities. Throughout the series, all three clerical figures in these series experience a crisis of confidence (although not necessarily of faith). Paul in *Broadchurch*, despairing over the declining congregation he ministers to, decides to leave the parish. Adam in *Rev.* has his church closed by the diocese due to low attendance and the challenges of maintaining the traditional church building. In *Broken*, Michael is haunted by memories of his treatment of women prior to his conversion, and by his guilt over ignoring a desperate phone call from a mentally ill youth who was later shot by Police. He also determines to leave the priesthood.

However, the community rallies around each character to demonstrate their importance to them. Paul’s final sermon is attended by a burgeoning congregation, celebrating his central (and often unacknowledged) role in local life. Adam, having fallen into deep depression, is cajoled into conducting a final Easter morning mass and baptism in his now derelict church by his friends and former parishioners. Michael, agreeing to conduct a funeral mass for his own mother, has his role affirmed by the community during the Eucharist. Offering the bread to each parishioner as the body of Christ broken for them, each responds with “Amen, you wonderful priest”.

As this focus on the Eucharist suggests, the affirmation of each character’s centrality to their community is not merely an expression of their work as glorified social workers. While Wolff argued that depictions of clerics on American TV showed little engagement with the transcendent ([Wolff 2010](#), pp. 213–14), this is not the case with recent British television. Instead, there is clear recognition of the religious context in which they operate. Producers of the shows therefore consciously attempted to engage with faith. As James Wood, co-creator of *Rev.*, noted in an interview: “*Father Ted* is very funny and surreal, *Dibley* was great, successful, family comedy, but neither of them were that interested in faith, really, or the church as an institution, and that’s something that we’re really interested in” ([VanDerWerff 2012](#)). To this end, creators Wood and Tom Hollander consulted with a panel of twenty Anglican ministers when writing and employed four further priests to provide more detailed feedback on the rites and beliefs discussed in each episode ([Rees 2012](#); [VanDerWerff 2012](#)). This interest in using drama and comedy to engage seriously with theological issues echoes through all of the shows.

Paul in *Broadchurch* is therefore explicit in his scriptural exhortation for the physical community to build themselves into a spiritual community through the mediation of the church:

There's a line from Hebrews echoing through my head: "Let us all consider how we may spur one another on, toward love and good deeds. Not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another."

Now, I hope that even without me here, you will go on encouraging one another. All any of us really want are love and good deeds.

In *Rev.*, Adam's restoration to his ministerial status is framed theologically. The final episodes of the series focus upon the build-up to Easter, and find Adam reliving a form of the passion narrative. Beginning with a parochial church council meeting that recreates the last supper, Adam experiences a moral fall and scandal as a past misdeed is exposed. His friends and congregation reject him, while in a surreal, nightmarish sequence he attempts to deliver a large cross, intended for a local Catholic congregation, across London. As he carries the cross up a final hill, he meets a man who seems to be an eccentric drunk (played by Liam Neeson) who sings "Lord of the Dance" with him. While their conversation begins as light-hearted, it soon turns to deeper matters of Adam's doubts and disappointments. The mysterious man becomes serious, affirms that he "will always be here", and vanishes into thin air. Adam is convinced that he has "just met God".

Nonetheless, this encounter with the divine does not solve Adam's difficulties. He gradually succumbs to depression and withdraws from the world. This experience is characterized as a form of death—unable to leave bed, he cowers beneath the covers entirely separate from the world. Extreme close-ups of the inert minister suggest the claustrophobia of the tomb and his transformation into a corpse. As the camera hovers over him, friends and family are heard to pray and consider their own culpability in his fate, ultimately coming together to help restore him. His resurrection occurs on Easter morning, with the camera positioned inside the now boarded-up church as he enters it to conduct the service. Light floods the interior as the boards fall away from the door, suggesting the rolling away of the stone from the tomb. For Adam, priesthood is not a career, but a vocation and sacramental identity, as his wife reminds him as she encourages him to conduct a final Easter service. Recalling "the worst first date a woman's ever been on", when Adam met her and took her to a homeless night shelter, she remembers his passion for supporting people against disinterested local authorities:

Seeing that grace and anger in you that night I loved you for that, Adam Smallbone. And that's what makes you a priest. They believe in you. And looking after them—that crowd of lost, hopeless, annoying people - it's who you are. So, come on. It's Easter morning. Do this for them.

Finding himself, in his own words, "back in a cassock", he prays once again to God: "You won't let me go apparently. Is this what resurrection is?"

Broken is also explicit in its theological connections and links to liturgy. The series' writer, Jimmy McGovern, deliberately structured the show around the Eucharist. It is possible to interpret the *Broken* of the title in many ways, referring to the shattered lives that Michael must minister to, the state of the nation, or to his own damaged psyche as an abuse survivor. Particularly, however, it refers to the broken body of Christ. As the show's ecclesiastical advisor Fr. Dennis Blackledge, commented: "the whole essence of Jimmy [McGovern]'s thought was this brokenness of Jesus himself, who was on the Cross. And also the taking, the blessing, the breaking, and the giving, which are the four key elements of Eucharist". This was echoed in McGovern's own statement that the drama was "all about the Eucharist" (Gledhill 2018), and further by the diocesan decision to screen the series with a talk by the writer at the 2018 Adoremus Eucharistic Congress in Liverpool (Collins 2018).

Even *Fleabag* found room for suggesting divine presence. Writer Phoebe Waller-Bridge acknowledged that the show took the Priest's belief seriously. As Andrew Scott stated in the same interview, "We were both really, really concerned with the idea of somebody who is a good priest,

who is good at his job, and who gets a lot of peace and joy from it." (Robinson 2019). When Fleabag tells the Priest that she doesn't believe in God, a copy of Titian's *Noli me Tangere* immediately falls from the wall, an act the Priest attributes to the deity. The choice of painting, with the risen Christ pulling away from the touch of Mary Magdalene, foreshadows the arc of the characters' relationship, and the Priest's ultimate withdrawal from Fleabag. Whether the intervention of the divine in this moment is intended as a sign of blessing, or as a warning to the Priest, is ambiguous.

These depictions of clergy therefore differ markedly from the bumbling ecclesiastics of the 1960s and 70s, or the broad comedy of the 1990s. Whereas *The Vicar of Dibley* featured a flourishing local church and rural idyll, the struggling settings of more recent television clerics acknowledge Melvyn Bragg's criticism of the image of the idyllic village church as "fiction" (Bragg 2006, p. 62). These priests are vocationally driven, theologically engaged, and committed to their local communities. Although sometimes doubting and discouraged, they maintain a vital hope in Christ and a sacramental connection to him through the Eucharist. The crucial question remains, however. What does this tell us about the "new visibility of religion"? The concluding section of this article will discuss the specifics of the theory and make some suggestions as to how far it applies to the issues discussed so far.

2. The New Visibility Thesis and Clergy on British TV

The "new visibility" thesis is part of a wider debate around the concept of "postsecularity", a term popularised through (although not coined in) Jürgen Habermas's work (e.g., [Habermas 2008](#)). As James A. Beckford has noted, "postsecularity" is a slippery term that can often have diametrically opposed meanings when employed in different disciplines and contexts. For example, it might imply a refutation of the secularisation thesis, a revival of religious belief or practice, or simply refer to a society that has already passed through secularisation—all definitions employed by various theologians, philosophers and social scientists since the mid-1990s ([Beckford 2012](#)). The fuzzy nature of definitions of the postsecular suggest that it is important to better define the changes that have taken place in religion's role in society in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries. Graham Ward and Michael Hoelzl's 2008 collection *The New Visibility of Religion* is one attempt to do this. As such, it represents a sensible starting point for evaluating how far the "new visibility" thesis can be applied to developments in popular media over the past decade. For Hoelzl and Ward, religion has become increasingly visible as an issue of global public concern since the 1970s. Political events such as the Iranian Revolution, the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, and the reaction to Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* are representative of these changes. This is not simply a re-emergence of a subsumed religious culture into the public sphere, but instead offers genuinely new expressions and representations of religion. Neither is it necessarily linked to a rise in adherence to religious institutions; eclectic personal religious practice and the prevalence of "religious" myths in contemporary culture also provide evidence for the new visibility. Hoelzl and Ward note it is possible to track this visibility across four key categories. These include the necessity of revising secularisation theory, interest in the links between monotheism and violence, the re-enchantment of the arts, and the return of metaphysics in theology ([Hoelzl and Ward 2008](#), pp. 1–9).

In relation to media and culture, Alexander Ornella's chapter in the collection develops a nuanced account of the relationship between media and the new visibility. He argues that there is now a mutual interdependency between society, religion, media and culture. These fields are involved in an "exchange of discourse" in which media coverage of religious events and debates feed into developing responses for religious institutions and actors. This process is fluid, with a dynamic interchanging of roles apparent—for example, media can fulfil religious functions, at the same time that religious institutions can set themselves up as media producers. Finally, the outcome of these trends is a movement towards the commodification of religion, by both consumers (who attempt to purchase spiritual experiences) and producers (who attempt to attach a spiritual aura to their productions) ([Ornella 2008](#)).

The observations from Ward and Hoelzl's collection are valuable, and lead to further reflection on the complex links between religion, media, and popular culture. Logically, the idea of the "new visibility" applied to popular culture should examine ways in which particular manifestations of that culture act as conduits for making religion visible or open up potentially new religious experiences. These might be the so-called "invented" or "fiction-based" religions that have sprung up around popular culture franchises, such as Jedi-ism or Matrixism ([Cusack 2013](#); [Davidson 2013](#)). Alternatively, believers in established religious traditions might merge elements of popular culture with their historic faith and practice. For example, Greek Orthodox believers personalising *lambatha* candles with Real Madrid decorations, Muslim women incorporating hijabs into their Marvel cosplay, or *My Little Pony* fans producing Christian fan fiction to evangelize non-believers, are all examples of ways in which popular culture can become part of individuals' religious practice (see [Lofgren 2018](#); [Gittinger 2019](#); [Crome 2019](#)). These practices demonstrate the reciprocity between religion and media, highlighting the interdependencies that Ornella discusses ([Ornella 2008](#), p. 131). Whether this is a process of commodification is more doubtful, and for all Ornella's careful nuancing, the term itself is loaded with the negative implications of the Frankfurt School. Lighting the candles, wearing the hijab, or sharing evangelical faith do not lose meaning simply because they mingle with personal interests in Spanish football, superheroes, or magical unicorns. Instead, the emotional connections engendered by links with popular cultural franchises adds further personal meaning to the religious practices undertaken ([Crome 2014, 2019](#)). Such new manifestations of faith may not be especially visible outside of their subcultural communities, but would nonetheless fit broadly within the "new visibility" paradigm.¹ New uses of popular culture to express meaning-making and personal faith in these subcultures reflect changes in society as a whole.

The most relevant topic for the issues discussed here relates explicitly to the presentation of religion in the media. Ornella, again pointing at interdependencies, notes that while media channels represent and report religion, religious organisations themselves often become media producers and suppliers ([Ornella 2008](#), pp. 135–36). The Christian movie studio Pure Flix offers a recent example. In response to perceived biases against Christians in mainstream film, the studio experienced significant success with its theatrical releases depicting Christian persecution in the contemporary US. *God's Not Dead* (2014), for example, launched at number 3 in the US Box Office and grossed a total of \$60.7 million on a \$2 million budget ([Box Office Mojo 2014](#)). The success of ventures such as Pure Flix reveals ambiguities in the current cultural environment. Perceived lack of visibility drives religious groups into countercultural production, which then feeds back into the mainstream culture. For example, Pure Flix now has a deal with major studio Universal to distribute its home entertainment releases ([Universal Pictures Home Entertainment 2016](#)). This results in greater visibility for these cultural products that, ironically, rest on the continued assumption that the faith group remains neglected and "invisible".

When thinking about presentations of religion in a wider broadcasting environment, it is therefore important to recognize that this central concept of visibility makes no assumptions about either the nature of that visibility or the viewer's response to it. For example, in cases of communal religious violence, child abuse, or terrorism, religion may be increasingly visible in society, but also increasingly othered—as in Lövheim and Linderman's example of the increased use of religion in Swedish newspaper editorials ([Lövheim and Linderman 2015](#)). Due to this, it is important to consider what purpose religious iconography serves in the programmes discussed here. The emergence of "banal" religion is a key part of mediatization theory, which argues that as religious symbols are recycled in popular media, they lose their central meanings and connotations to work as a shorthand for media intent on invoking a sense of tradition or "the sacred" ([Hjarvard 2008, 2012](#)). In the same way that an everyday object from the ancient world becomes a piece worthy of museum exhibition in

¹ The "new visibility" does not assume that religion is visible to observers—Hoelzl and Ward point to religious text messaging services as an example ([Hoelzl and Ward 2008](#), p. 4).

the twenty-first century due to its obsolescence, so religion might be invoked only to add a dash of exoticism to popular cultural artefacts.

Yet it is possible to use another metaphor here. Some everyday objects have been discarded and rejected as obsolete, only to be rediscovered in later years. Like the vinyl record, once seen as outmoded but now reclaimed by audiophiles, or the cassette tape, enjoying a resurgence amongst connoisseurs of a lo-fi dynamic, so different forms of religion might appear to have declined to obscurity, only to reappear unexpectedly. This need not necessarily be a *re-emergence* of religion, however. The contemporary collector's costly vinyl record, or the lo-fi fan's use of the cassette in tandem with computer-based recording, is very different to the mass-productions of these formats in the 1970s or 1980s. In other words, any manifestation of religion in a particular cultural context is always in some way new, even when making use of tradition and existing religious resources. Given the extent to which modern audiences are familiar with the practice of self-selecting and remixing texts and popular artefacts, the increased visibility of religion in the media may well lead to personal adaption of elements of the religious ideas portrayed (cf. [Hoover 2006](#)).

How far, then, do the various portrayals of clergy represent a banalisation of religious symbols, as Brown and Lynch argued in their analysis of the *Vicar of Dibley*? (2012) On the one hand, there are examples of banalisation of some symbols, and the use of religion to add spice to drama or comedy. In *Fleabag*, the Priest's dog collar is not an expression of his sacramental status, but of his sexual unavailability (and thus part of his appeal). The confessional becomes the site for a sexual encounter, with the Priest's invitation to "kneel" merging the language of the liturgy with the term's usage in BDSM. However, it is important to remember that these connotations of the confessional as a site of sexual transgression are not new. During the scare surrounding the "papal aggression" in the early 1850s, British writers commonly viewed the confessional as a site of sexual misconduct. This view was articulated in newspaper editorials, anti-Catholic novels, and in satirical cartoons in publications such as *Punch* ([Paz 1992](#); [Wolffe 1991](#)). What at first might appear a banalisation of religion can alternatively be interpreted as evidence for the continuing cultural inheritance of a long tradition of anti-Catholicism in Britain.

Indeed, it would be a mistake to argue that any of the shows discussed here use religion merely to add background colour. As McGovern suggested when he discussed the inspiration behind *Broken*, he was motivated to display the way in which priests served in working class areas in ways impossible to other community workers. In addition to this, the drama centred around the Eucharist. The breaking apart and sacrifice of Michael's life was resolved as he was made whole in the body of Christ that was broken for him. Likewise, the creators of *Rev.* were explicit about focusing on the prospect of God's intervention in daily life, even as non-believers themselves: "[we] allow the possibility of the presence of God in it, without answering it. Most episodes contain a moment where there is a *certain* [sic] moment of grace, where something wonderful happens." ([VanDerWerff 2012](#))² So, Adam's healing in *Rev.* came in an explicitly sacramental context, as he conducted both the Easter morning service and baptized his daughter. The sacraments have power to restore and to make the shattered ministers whole again. This wholeness was only achievable within the body of the church—it is notable that the sacrament combined with the affirmation of the priestly role by a loyal congregation in both *Rev.* and *Broken*'s conclusions. This is not a banal use of religious rites and symbols—the dramatic narrative depended on an understanding of those rites and symbols as powerful in and of themselves. In terms of the "new visibility" thesis, they articulate the continued power of these rituals to evoke a sense of community and the sacred. As Thomas Axelson noted in his critique of Hjarvard's concept of banal religion, where the term implies "predictable, trivial or even dull" use of religion in popular

² For example, the shooting script for Adam's encounter with the tramp who may, in fact, be God, encourages ambiguity in its directions to the cast and crew. The tramp is described as "angelic ... Where did he appear from? Heaven?" Following the tramp's promise to Adam that "I'll always be here", the script notes: "Is that God talking about His Presence? Or the tramp referring to his bench?" ([Wood 2013](#)).

media, such instances can in fact become an important part both of an individual's understanding of a particular cultural artefact, and their meaning-making process as a whole (Axelson 2015, p. 153).

Of course, this raises the question of the extent to which viewers actually identify these sacred symbols. As Moberg and Sjö caution, citing a recent study of Danish teenagers who failed to recognize religious symbols in their popular entertainment, it is always important to consider whether such symbols retain any meaning for a particular audience (Moberg and Sjö 2015). While this is an important consideration, it is less of a concern for shows centring directly on ecclesiastical settings, in which religion is necessarily foregrounded. Religious symbolism on shows such as *Good Omens* (Amazon/BBC 2019) or *Mr. Robot* (USA Network 2014–2019) may be missed by viewers,³ it is harder to do this when the Priest in *Fleabag* preaches in full vestments, or Michael conducts a confession on *Broken*. For many viewers, while the precise details of the rites will be unfamiliar, they nonetheless retain a sense of their sacrality through their connection to recognized religious groups. As Ornella notes, the remediation of religious symbols in new contexts can never entirely divest the symbol of its original meaning, as its redeployment depends in part upon recognition of it (Ornella 2008, pp. 139–41).

Likewise, the programmes represent an engagement with the lived religion of their characters. Their faith is fully integrated into their wider lives beyond their churches. Adam regularly prays in *Rev.*, with the audience privy to his conversations with God. His prayers are not limited to a liturgical context, with Adam as likely to speak to God while washing up as he is in the church. In *Broken*, Michael will light a candle to remind both himself and others of the continued presence of Christ in all places, whether within or outside of the church. Prayer on the show, according to McGovern, "came at crucial times . . . As a dramatist you want people to say 'What now?' And the prayer comes at that crucial time." (Collins 2018). These characters' priesthood is more than a career; it is a sacramental identity. *Fleabag*'s Priest is incapable of abandoning his vocation despite his love for the title character. "It's God, isn't it?" Fleabag asks when she realizes that he will not leave the Church, responding "Damn!" to the Priest's affirmative answer.

These portrayals therefore support Grace Davie's point that a new visibility of religion reflects both respect for faith and willingness to take religious positions seriously. Thus "fewer people are now religious, but those who are take their religious lives more seriously" (Davie 2015, pp. 15–16). As a result, the shows offer spaces to question secular culture in which the potential of God's intervention is entertained. This is always ambiguous and open to interpretation. To repeat an earlier quotation from Hollander, *Rev.*'s writers were "conscious and careful to allow the possibility of the presence of God in it, without answering it." (VanDerWerff 2012). Was the mysterious man that Adam met in *Rev.* God? Did divine power displace the Titian in *Fleabag*? While this is unclear, these portrayals of clergy leave the question of God's presence open. While foregrounding the social role of priests, they show not only a respect for their faith, but a willingness to admit that it may have a solid basis.

This sympathetic theological turn, however, must be balanced with two caveats. First, it is important to consider that depicting clergy within struggling congregations reaffirms a general narrative of religious deterioration and secularisation. Although ministers appear as sincere and noble characters in these programmes, at the same time, their actual churches are in terminal decline. Paul leaves the parish at the end of *Broadchurch*. *Fleabag*'s Priest ministers to a generally old and declining congregation. Michael in *Broken* is always speaking in a church that is less than half-full. The narrative arc of *Rev.* is one of failure—Adam cannot raise money or attract a sustainable congregation, despite the good work he does, and his church ultimately closes.

³ Examples of religious references, particularly in fantasy and sci-fi television, are legion. However, viewers may not be familiar with the religious ideas the background symbols represent. For example, *Good Omens* viewers do not have to be familiar with the book of Revelation to enjoy the show's depiction of the four horsemen and Armageddon. Neither will *Mr. Robot* viewers necessarily notice references to the millennialism of the Anabaptist prophet Jan of Leiden (1509–36) overheard in snatches of radio documentaries.

This is why it would be a mistake to assume that increased visibility automatically contradicts the secularisation thesis. As previously noted, a secularising society may make religion more visible as a distinct category, as it loses its importance and moves from the realm of the everyday to the exotic. This is why it is problematic to read the recent depictions of clergy as straightforward expressions of the continued importance of religion in British life. Each of them explicitly reiterates the narrative of decline and encroaching secularisation. Fleabag's complete lack of biblical or liturgical literacy is both humorous and representative of the wider state of British religion. While these shows certainly do not celebrate the process of secularisation, they nonetheless reinforce perceptions of it. Following Gordon Lynch's work on the "sacred", it is possible to argue that images of "traditional" church ritual as representations of the sacred could be emptied of any explicitly transcendent content, serving instead as a "communicative structure . . . around which the meanings of social life are constituted and that exert normative claims on social life" (Lynch 2012, p. 133). Here, images of the church could become synonymous with a generalized idea of "real" British identity, what Knott, Poole and Taira term "British media religion" (Knott et al. 2013, p. 177). All of this suggests that the new visibility in this context *reaffirms* the existing narrative of secularisation rather than suggesting any return of religion to the public square.

Likewise, the celebration of clergy meeting social needs in deprived communities is more complicated than a straightforward endorsement of the churches. Abby Day's study of Northern England suggested that many people who identified themselves as Christians placed little emphasis on church attendance or formal doctrinal belief. Instead, they emphasized the importance of community and shared values, holding to something she described as "believing in belonging" (Day 2011). If applied to recent portrayals of clergy and their centrality to community cohesion, this might suggest that most viewers would be likely to value the depiction of community above any specifically "religious" content. The shows might also be less about celebrating the churches, and more about criticising austerity measures in British social service provision. The visibility of clergy on television as purveyors of social welfare provides some backing to discussions of the way in which the state's declining role in social welfare since the late 1970s has allowed religious providers to step into their shoes. While this is sometimes represented as a return to the proper role of religion in public life (Woodhead 2012), it also opens up the possibility that these popular depictions of clergy are more about contemporary politics than religion's role in society (Hjelm 2015). The representations, while certainly positive towards clergy, may be more interested in implicating the state's neoliberal welfare policies as a cause of poverty, rather than praising the churches for their involvement in solving them. McGovern, for example, has been vocal in his critiques of social inequality fostered by government policy (BFI 2014). If, as quoted above, his first thought when seeing a food bank in a church was "isn't it shocking that there's a need for this", so *Broken* might be more about raising awareness of social deprivation than providing positive portrayals of faith. Certainly, its storylines, focusing on the destructive nature of gambling and the extremes people are driven to by poverty, point in this direction.

These observations do not deny that recent depictions of clergy suggest an increased visibility of religion, but they do challenge the idea of its novelty. The new visibility here is, in fact, simply a slightly different lens through which to view a classic narrative of religious decline and secularisation. The shows therefore represent a nostalgic longing for a commitment to both a communally engaged local ministry, and to ideas of the welfare state lost to neoliberalism. Clergy on the programmes discussed here clearly do make a difference in individuals' and communities' lives and attempt to intervene in the public sphere. However, they make little impact on a wider social scale. Indeed, contemporary portrayals of clergy as social and community workers might appear to support James Beckford's theory that the contemporary visibility of religion is due to neoliberal governments operationalising faith groups to provide services, rather than any fundamental change in belief or slowing of religious decline (Beckford 2015).

Nonetheless, the use of fictional clerical characters to deliver (real world) political messages is rhetorically complex and should not be reduced to a simple binary of religious or political

communication. Considering this issue through Lövheim and Axner's typology of religious communication (Lövheim and Axner 2015) provides an appropriate illustration of the difficulties in play. In their study of religion and the public sphere, Lövheim and Axner suggest four types of communication by two broad groups of actors. Those associated with religious organisations might perform religious communication (such as a televised Christmas address), or non-religious communication (for example, when faith representatives are interviewed about food banks). Non-religious actors, or those associated with secular institutions, may also offer both non-religious communication (such as discussions of community issues) or religious communication (for example, politicians or celebrities speaking about the supernatural in an interview). Fictional clergy on television complicate this neat division, but also provide evidence for Lövheim and Axner's emphasis on the interconnectedness of different spheres of media and religious activities. The priests shown on the small screen are religious actors expressing both religious and secular communication. At the same time, the writers and creators of these characters are explicit about their own position as non-religious actors, communicating their viewpoints through these characters via a "secular" medium (primetime television). Should we consider this communication religious or secular? It seems likely that both fictionalisation and the medium used to communicate these ideas allow viewers to understand them ambiguously. Those with pre-existing religious views can interpret the programmes as explicitly supporting religion, while the fictional form allows a distancing from faith elements and connection with the social realities explored for those without a faith-based perspective. In other words, how far the viewer actually sees a newly visible religious message as opposed to an expression of social concern will depend upon their personal position and preconceptions.

A second caveat relates to the form of religion displayed in these programmes. Any study of the "new visibility" in media must also interrogate its flipside; the areas of religion that are *not* visible, or indeed become newly invisible, in the current media environment. It is clear that the shows discussed in this article make a particular kind of religion visible. This is theologically liberal, shown by Michael's condemnations of the Catholic Church's position on women priests, or Adam's willingness to conduct a gay wedding against his superiors' wishes, for example. It is liturgically engaged, as the Priest in *Fleabag* draws attention to his lavish vestments, and key sacramental events come centre stage in *Broken* and *Rev*. Yet by concentrating on representing clergy within these traditions, recent television has overlooked some of the more successful and fast-growing forms of Christianity in the UK. For example, Cathedrals, large conservative evangelical churches, and migrant churches have all experienced substantial growth in recent years (Davie 2015). A failure to depict these bodies of believers contributes to the narrative of unidirectional decline and the continued invisibility of such believers in the broader cultural landscape. The very limited depiction of these churches on the shows demonstrates this issue, continuing a trend in British media to ignore Pentecostal and immigrant congregations (Knott et al. 2013, pp. 57–61). While *Rev*. is consistently sensitive in its awareness of theological and religious differences, only when dealing with popular evangelicalism does it stray into stereotyping. When Adam hosts an evangelical Anglican congregation while their building is out of commission, he finds himself increasingly frustrated with Darren, their minister. Darren is arrogant and egotistical, speaking in clichés, bullying Adam, and finally refusing to accept a biblical command to forgive fellow believers. While some such ministers undoubtedly exist, the fact that this is the only representation of evangelicalism on the show provides a skewed picture. As Anna Strhan's study of a large London conservative Anglican evangelical church suggests, believers are often concerned about how their faith be perceived by outsiders, leading to humility, sensitivity, and a desire to clearly separate themselves from American evangelical politics, rather than direct confrontation with non-believers (Strhan 2015).

3. Conclusions

Where does this leave us when it comes to the "new visibility of religion"? Certainly, the shifting portrayals of clergy studied here provide support for some areas of Ward and Hoelzl's initial definition.

The engagement with liturgy and lived faith, and the implied presence of the divine, in all of these programmes suggests both a re-enchantment of the arts, and an increasing engagement with the theology. Yet as I have argued above, the picture is complex and neither supports and celebrates a new vibrancy in British religion, nor is a simplistic reiteration of the secularisation thesis. The new visibility of religion on these shows suggests what media producers see as an acceptable form of faith in Britain in the twenty-first century. This religion is socially engaged and community orientated, focusing on the way in which churches build up their local communities and bring them together. This is not “believing without belonging” (Davie 1994); rather, it is a recognition that belief can (and perhaps should) be central in ensuring community cohesion. These churches are also theologically liberal and religiously tolerant, open to truth within a wide range of faith-traditions, and progressive on issues surrounding gender and sexuality. While celebrating the social engagement and liturgical richness of some forms of Christianity, at the same time, these programmes help to reiterate a narrative of religious decline and contribute to the invisibility and othering of different forms of the faith. There is no celebration of this decline in these programmes, which communicate shrinking congregations as a tragic loss to both the social and liturgical life of Britain. This position on faith is consistent with research on British newspaper reporting on religion, which suggests a general sympathy towards liberal faith and opposition to both militant belief and militant Atheism (Taira 2015).

While I have suggested above that we could read this shift in the portrayal of clergy as promoting a form of “British media religion” focused on ideas of national identity rather than belief, I prefer to adopt a more optimistic view. In spite of the limitations and problems I have noted, the liturgical engagement of shows such as *Broken* and *Rev.* has the capacity to introduce new audiences to the richness of a range of theological concepts centred on the Eucharist, forgiveness, and links between faith and social engagement. What is particularly “new” about these portrayals is their willingness to engage with liturgy and faith, rather than emptying out the Christianity they show of all content. While at an early stage, my current research on fan fiction produced by those continuing *Fleabag*’s story found an engagement with questions of clerical calling, celibacy, and discerning God’s will in relation to the “hot Priest”. Although anecdotal, combined with media responses to *Broken* and *Rev.*, it suggests that these programmes have contributed not only to a new visibility of religion, but a new willingness to discuss explicitly religious and theological issues. To argue this is not to reclaim a triumphant narrative of desecularisation, or to argue for the re-emergence of religion. It is, however, to make the case that new media representations of religion can show us some of the complexities of contemporary faith in Britain and open up new avenues through which viewers can explore theological issues.

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