

# Pulpit & Pew

Research on Pastoral Leadership

## THE MINISTRY AND THE MESSAGE

WHAT AMERICANS SEE AND READ  
ABOUT THEIR LEADERS

by Joyce Smith



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# FOREWORD

All too often, when clergy have been portrayed on television or in film, I have been struck by what the portrayal seems to imply about ordained ministry. Often the pastor, priest, imam, or rabbi seems to be considered to be a nice, rather innocuous, but somewhat bumbling figure, presiding at a wedding or funeral or other life cycle event. There are, to be sure, important exceptions ranging from Robert Duvall's powerful portrayal of a Pentecostal preacher to Dawn French's comic portrayal of an Anglican priest in a small rural parish. Both of the latter—especially Duval's preacher but also French's priest—serve to humanize the pastoral role. Garrison Keillor's *Pastor Inquist* does something of the same. But such portrayals are few and far between, in sharp contrast to portrayals of lawyers, physicians, school teachers, or police.

Why is this so, and does it matter? Does it matter in how clergy feel about themselves? How those considering a call to ministry think about the profession? How the larger public feels about clergy? Does what clergy do matter to folks in their daily lives? Or are clergy basically appendages to important life cycle events, nice to have around but somewhat marginal to the big issues of life? Is what clergy do just not as interesting as in other occupations? Or is it just too difficult to portray clergy honestly without incurring the ire of the groups they represent—as was the case with the television series, “Nothing Sacred?” These are some of the questions that this new report from *Pulpit & Pew* seeks to address.

Joyce Smith, a specialist in media studies at the Toronto University's School of Journalism, seeks answers to such questions in this report. What she discovers is that clergy are far more often included in the media than one might expect—certainly more than I suspected—though what kinds of clergy are included, how they are included, and in what roles varies considerably. She is also able to look at trends over time in clergy portrayals in the media, and, since she was engaged in her study in the post-September 11th world, she has been able to look at how clergy were portrayed during and after that tragic event in our nation's history.

Smith reflects on, but is unable to ask directly, about the impact of clergy portrayals on either clergy or the lay public. To do so would require that we have surveys over time with both groups. But she does provide important grist for reflection about what this impact might be, and her work is aided by thoughtful reflections from several astute commentators: Kenneth Briggs, a journalist and former religion writer for the *New York Times*; Stuart Hoover, professor of journalism and mass communications at the University of Colorado and a specialist in religion and the media; and James P. Wind, President of Alban Institute and a historian of American religion.

*Pulpit & Pew* is a major project on pastoral leadership underway at Duke University Divinity School with generous funding from Lilly Endowment, Inc. In a variety of ways, *Pulpit & Pew* aims at providing answers to three broad sets of questions:

- What is the state of pastoral leadership at the new century's beginning, and what do current trends portend for the next generation?
- What is excellent ministry? Can we describe it? How does it come into being?
- What can be done to enable excellent ministry to come into being more frequently, and how can it be nurtured and supported more effectively?

To learn more about *Pulpit & Pew*, we direct you to our Web site, [www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu](http://www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu). You may also want to register to receive regular project updates from our electronic newsletter.



Jackson W. Carroll, Director  
*Pulpit & Pew: Research on Pastoral Leadership*  
Williams Professor Emeritus of Religion and Society

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In “The Ministry and the Message,” Joyce Smith examines factual and fictional portrayals of Christian leaders in feature films, television programs, and newspaper reporting.

Drawing upon various film and television databases, the report inventories movies and television programs that contained any representations of ministers, priests, nuns, or other clergy in credited roles. While ministers, priests and nuns appear in a small but steady percentage of films, peaking at 6 percent in 1993, the roles they play are almost always generic and anonymous, with clergy primarily serving as stock characters in the background, presiding at weddings and funerals or performing other rituals or sacraments. Female religious leaders seldom appear and when they do, they are most likely to be nuns.

In the world of television, Smith examines made-for-TV movies, mini-series and regular series with clerics in central, recurring or cameo roles. As with film, most clergy appear as only peripheral characters, but clerics have been central characters in some television programming, such as “Amen,” “Soul Man,” and “7th Heaven.”

In her examination of news coverage, Smith notes that the events of Sept. 11, 2001, prompted at least a temporary increase in reporting on the Christian community, particularly in the weeks immediately following the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. Comparing daily coverage at 24 local papers for the month following Sept. 11 with the same period the previous year, Smith finds that newspapers were quick to recognize the role of Christian and Jewish leaders in the aftermath of the crisis.

In her conclusions, Smith notes an “interconnectedness” between Christian leaders and those who create media representations of them. Citing examples of shared stories and vocations, she says an “us vs. them” model is not accurate. Likewise, news and popular entertainment images of religious leaders are also inter-related, with each influencing and reinforcing the other.

She contends the relationship among journalists, entertainment creators, and Christian leaders has great potential for improvement. Some of the most powerful and popular portrayals of Christian leaders, she says, are those that are modeled on real people or created by or in cooperation with real clerics.

The report also includes responses from Kenneth A. Briggs, former religion writer for *Newsday* and the *New York Times* and now a freelance writer and adjunct professor of religion and English at Lafayette College; Stewart M. Hoover of the Center for Mass Media Research at the University of Colorado at Boulder, and the Rev. Dr. James P. Wind, president of the Alban Institute.

Briggs says the report is a very helpful barometer of the overall visibility of ministry in the media, offering sobering evidence that clergy in America have become largely nameless and faceless. Yet, he is puzzled about why and how such overall visibility matters. Focusing on numbers alone, he says, can tend to give all films equal value without taking into account a given film’s overall religious value.

Hoover addresses both the report’s methodology and the significance of its findings. He places Smith’s report in context of various approaches to media studies and says it makes good use of its sources, weaving them into a humanistic/historical evaluation of the subject and providing a rich background for other kinds of more focused studies. The report, he says, establishes that religion and ministry are pervasive in media content, more so than most would imagine, and such images change over time and against social and historical conditions.

Wind calls the report one of the most comprehensive attempts ever made to portray how Americans collectively see their ministers in the media. Yet, the report is also incomplete, but understandably so. Focused primarily on major media, the report does not take into account the growing impact of niche media outlets. The total picture of how ministers are portrayed in the media is in fact so large and complex that it is impossible to capture, says Wind. Fuller and richer portrayals of ministry, he contends, can still be found in literature.

# INTRODUCTION

Americans live in a world where we hear and are heard, see and are seen through the mass media. So the presence or absence of Christian leaders in both entertainment and news media is of intrinsic interest to any consideration of the state of pastoral ministry. The representations which do appear may color not only the general public's notion of what constitutes the work of such people, but may well influence members of congregations and even those who are themselves in leadership positions.

In turn, those who never see their likeness in newspaper pages or on big or small screens may well be deemed not to exist at all, given the idea that our news and popular media reflect back the world around us.

With religious leaders, it is difficult to argue that they are missing – any content analysis of news or popular culture will soon turn up the supporting figures.

However, it may not be what was hoped for; in many cases, clerics are ritual placeholders, there to rubber-stamp the official life rituals of weddings or funerals. As with many things, quantity alone is not enough.

This project attempts to consider fictional and factual representations of Christian leaders, as well as to set them in context and suggest ways in which such representations might influence and be influenced. To do this, I have paid special attention to feature films, popular television shows, and newspaper reporting.

The scale of this study doesn't allow an in-depth consideration of the topic, either on the entertainment or news end of things. Rather, what I have tried to do is suggest the relationship between factual and fictional portrayals. By considering the overlap in content, I've also suggested the bond which exists – welcome or otherwise, conscious or otherwise – between creators of mass media and the priests, ministers, and women religious who appear in the creations, and all those who swim in the messages.



*“North Andover, Mass. Nov. 3: Two Episcopal priests married the couple, top.” Ran with “Lydia Peelle and Ketch Secor,” by Abby Ellin (NYT 11 Nov. 2001 p. 11). In the story, details like the fact that guests were seated on bales of hay were given, but not so much as the names of the “two Episcopal priests.” Photo by Laurie Lambrecht for the New York Times. Copyright, 2001, Laurie Lambrecht.*

# FILMS AND TELEVISION

The potential audience for visual depictions of Christian leaders is enormous. In 2001, despite the slowdowns following September 11, approximately \$8.5 billion was spent on movie tickets, up from the previous year's record of \$7.7 billion.<sup>1</sup> But box office receipts are in fact only a small part of the entertainment media story: syndicated shows, constantly multiplying television channels, and DVD and video rentals and sales mean not only more new content, but the continued use of content originally for much smaller audiences, many years ago.

## METHODOLOGY

The presence of Christian leaders was searched using references in publications, television listings, film reviews, the Corel All-Movie guide, and in large part, the Internet Movie Database ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)), an online catalogue including over 300,000 titles.<sup>2</sup> Roles including the words priest, nun, minister, cardinal, and reverend were searched, and titles including Father, Padre, Pastor, Bishop, Sister and Brother picked up in most cases. Appearances were only included if the actor was credited; this unfortunately left out a large number of instances where clerics were present as minor characters, particularly in early films, where such roles seldom were given credit. For example, some estimates suggest that Father Neal Dodd appeared as a priest or minister in some 300 films between the 1920s and early 1950s,<sup>3</sup> but in this study, he is indexed as appearing with credit only seven times.

Every American production or co-production was included, regardless of how small, or how few people might have seen it, as a way of capturing the number of times leaders were incorporated by American filmmakers. Foreign productions were included in the count only if they enjoyed significant notice and/or box office success in the United States. This allowed noteworthy productions such as *Priest* (United Kingdom), *Black Robe* (Canada/Australia), or *The Mission* (United Kingdom) to be included in the study, important films both in terms

of what American audiences saw, as well as releases having potential influence on American filmmakers. (Indeed, the soundtrack for *The Mission* alone continues to be used in large public gatherings; how many watching the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics thought of the Christian missionaries of the movie when Ennio Morricone's music was used during the official ceremonies?)

Genres were assigned based on the first one given by the database since many films could otherwise have multiple genres listed. The use of genres provides one method of noting trends in plot lines involving Christian figures.

It is particularly telling that the vast majority of Christian leaders present in feature films (less so in television) are not given a name in addition to their title. If there are modifiers, one sees the following:

- Old Priest, Young Priest
- Minister #1, Minister #2
- Singing Nun, Choir Nun, Nun in Mortuary

or worse,

- Machine Gun Packing Nun Leader/Singing Nun<sup>4</sup>
- The Impressive Clergyman<sup>5</sup>

Often, where there are multiple roles, the characters are named according to the ritual they are seen presiding over. For example, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, a film which hinges on rituals, most of which take place in churches, lists its ministers as:

Ronald Herdman as Vicar (Wedding 1), Ken Drury as Vicar (Wedding 3), Neville Phillips as Vicar (Funeral), Richard Butler as Vicar (Wedding 4), Rowan Atkinson as Father Gerald

where only the most famous of the actors (Rowan Atkinson aka Mr. Bean) and the one involved in the marriage of one of the central characters, is given a name and a number of lines which he delivers in a bumbling fashion.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Hollywood's 2001 odyssey: record bucks, big franchises, fallout from attacks," Associated Press, 2 January, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> According to their statistics page ([http://us.imdb.com/database\\_statistics](http://us.imdb.com/database_statistics)), this includes 235,192 theatrically-released movies, 27,370 Made for TV movies, 19,239 TV series, 16,441 direct-to-video movies, 2,576 TV mini-series.

<sup>3</sup> From The Motion Picture & Television Fund Web site (<http://www.mptvfund.org/history.htm>), the organization which has the Motion Picture Relief Fund (MPRF) as an antecedent. Dodd was administrator for the MPRF.

<sup>4</sup> *Spy Hard*, 1996

<sup>5</sup> *The Princess Bride*, 1987

<sup>6</sup> *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, 1994

## FEATURE FILMS

Many feature films incorporate Christian rituals such as baptisms, weddings and funerals. With few exceptions, however, the people who enact and bless these rituals or sacraments are nameless and almost voiceless. Indeed, in a book discussing hundreds of instances of movie rituals – sacred and so-called secular – between 1945 and 1995, authors Parley Ann Boswell and Paul Loukides do not devote a *single paragraph* to any particular cleric [Boswell and Loukides 1999].

Their analysis proves only too well what another critic of the representation of clergy in film had to say. In the 1950s, Malcolm Boyd, a former advertising executive turned Episcopalian priest wrote: “Often a non-Roman clergyman is pulled in for a quickie marriage scene, of course” [Boyd 1958:48]. A consideration of Roman clergy suggests that this is increasingly true of Catholics as well.

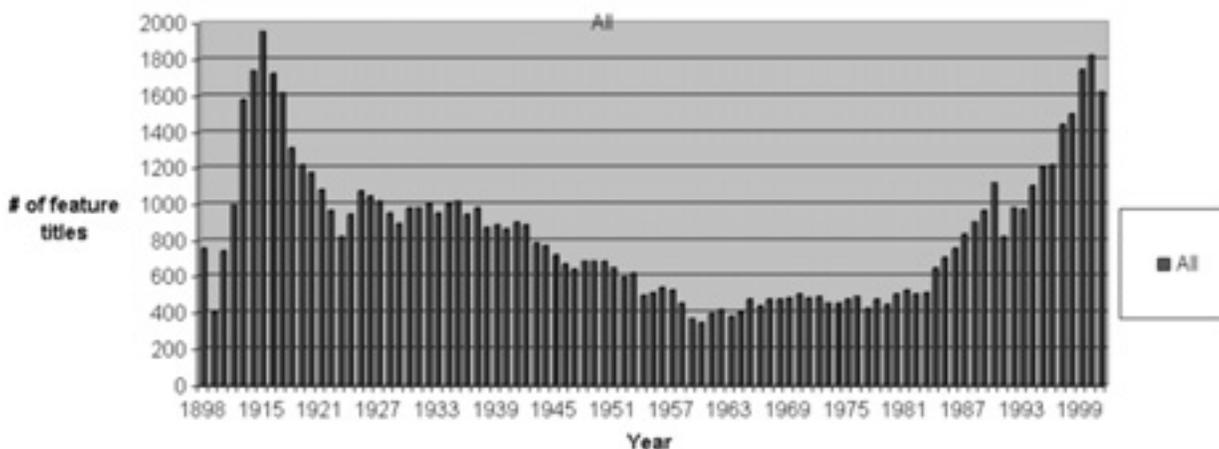
A total of 1232 feature films were indexed as part of this study. While one might think that the number of Christian clerics<sup>7</sup> and religious sisters appearing in films would have peaked during the years in which church attendance numbers and other measures of piety were highest, a look at the numbers suggests otherwise. Graph 1 indicates all films produced in the U.S., while the second shows the number of feature films with a credited actor playing the role of a Christian leader. From the 1980s through the 1990s,

the number of films in which actors are credited for portraying a leader actually grew.

The year with the largest percentage of films involving at least one leader is 1993 (6.66 percent of all films listed for that year), followed closely by 1994 (5.38 percent) and 1996 (5.35 percent). Again, quantity of releases does not always equate with the number of eyeballs viewing Christian leaders in lead roles. For example, in 1965, during which *The Sound of Music* appeared, only 1.98 percent of all films included Christian leaders, while 1973, the year of the first *Exorcist* film, fared a bit better at 2.76 percent. *Sister Act* was not alone in 1992, when 5.7 percent of films appeared with clerics in some role.

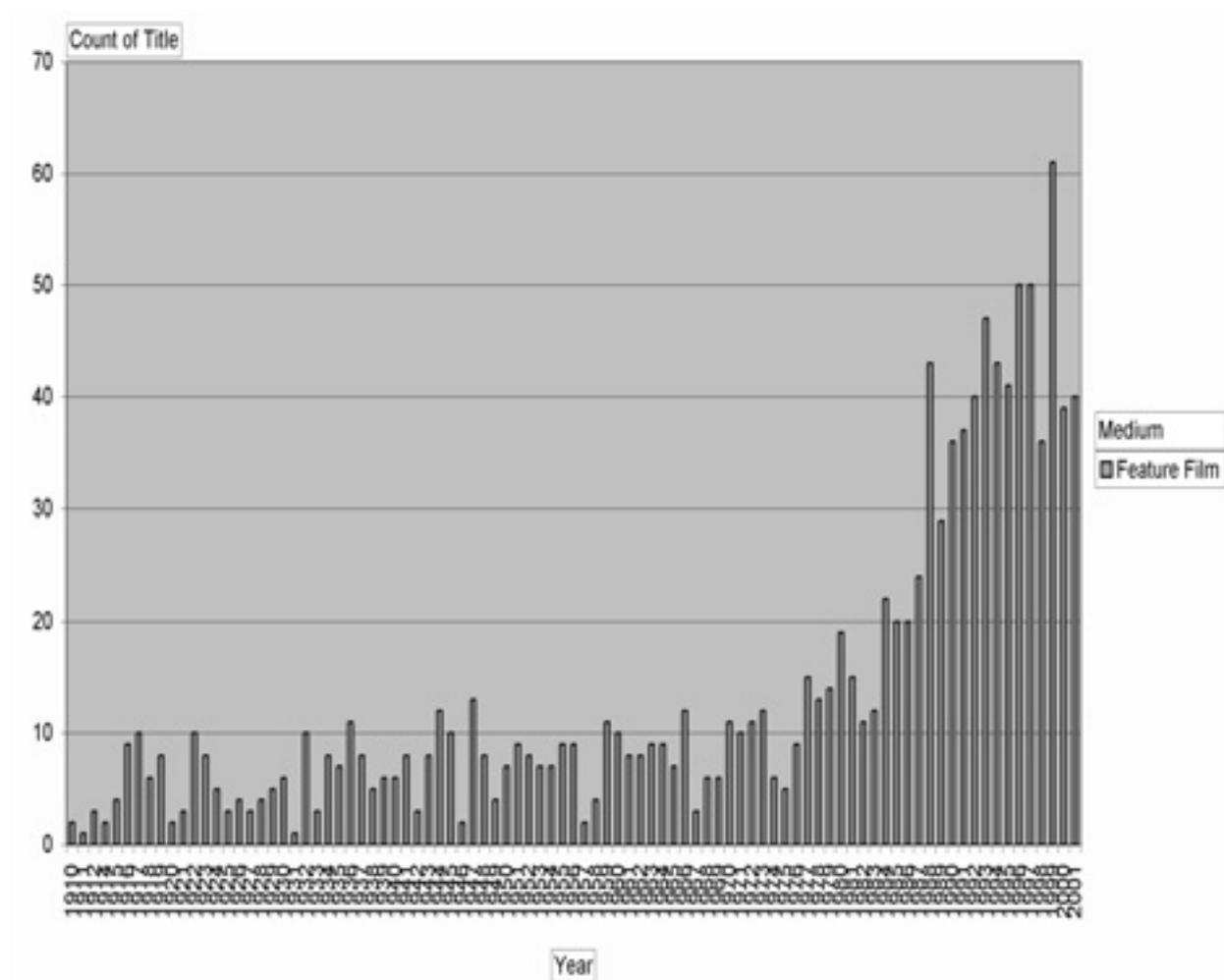
Part of the growth in numbers can be traced to the practice of crediting almost every actor in the cast, regardless of size of role, but it still points to growth during the time when traditional measures of mainline Christian practice, such as church attendance, have been dropping. Not all of the films are set, however, in times contemporary to their release, or in places that involve only the United States; so one gets a Friar Tuck in 1991 (*Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*) or 1930s Irish priests in 1999 (*Angela's Ashes*). While it is easier to imagine audiences making a distinction between the fairy-story nature of the jolly Friar and the local Franciscan monk, it may not be as easy for some viewers to consciously distinguish the Catholic priests of McCourt's childhood from those who now populate their hometown, particularly if they do not themselves know a priest.

GRAPH 1: ALL AMERICAN FEATURE FILM PRODUCTIONS



<sup>7</sup> Unless otherwise stated, the terms “cleric” and “Christian leader” will be used to include Catholic women religious as well as Catholic priests and brothers, and mainline Protestant ministers of either sex.

**GRAPH 2: ALL AMERICAN FILMS (ENGLISH LANGUAGE OR SILENT) INCLUDING CREDITED ACTORS AS CHRISTIAN LEADERS**



Very few of the leaders appearing in films are credited using a denominational adjective. For example, there were six listed as being “Baptist” ministers, three as Anglican, and two Mormon. Without viewing all of the films, as many as 85.9 percent of the films are unable to be given a particular denomination, because the honorific or title leaves the allegiance of the cleric uncertain. Often, there is simply the title “priest” or “minister,” making it difficult to decide whether the priest is Episcopalian or Catholic, for example. Even films with “monk” characters can be difficult to index, as many films feature Buddhist monks. Despite this, as many as 164 of the feature films indexed clearly included Catholic leaders (13.3 percent), and there are undoubtedly many more as a majority of those listed as “Priests” are almost certainly Roman Catholic.

The gender of the leaders is easier to ascertain, although one of the earliest westerns made by Cecil B. DeMille had actress Francisca de la Vinna in the role of “Priest at wedding ceremony,” although James Neill appeared as Padre Antonio.<sup>8</sup> Looking at all the feature films,

- 964 (78.2 percent) of the films featured only males
- 121 (9.8 percent) featured only female leaders — with few exceptions, — Catholic nuns
- 127 (10.3 percent) featured both male and female, again the majority representing films where Catholic nuns and priests appear together

On Hollywood’s screens, there are precious few female ministers. The exceptions include: *The Cruel Tower*

<sup>8</sup> *Rose of the Rancho*, 1914

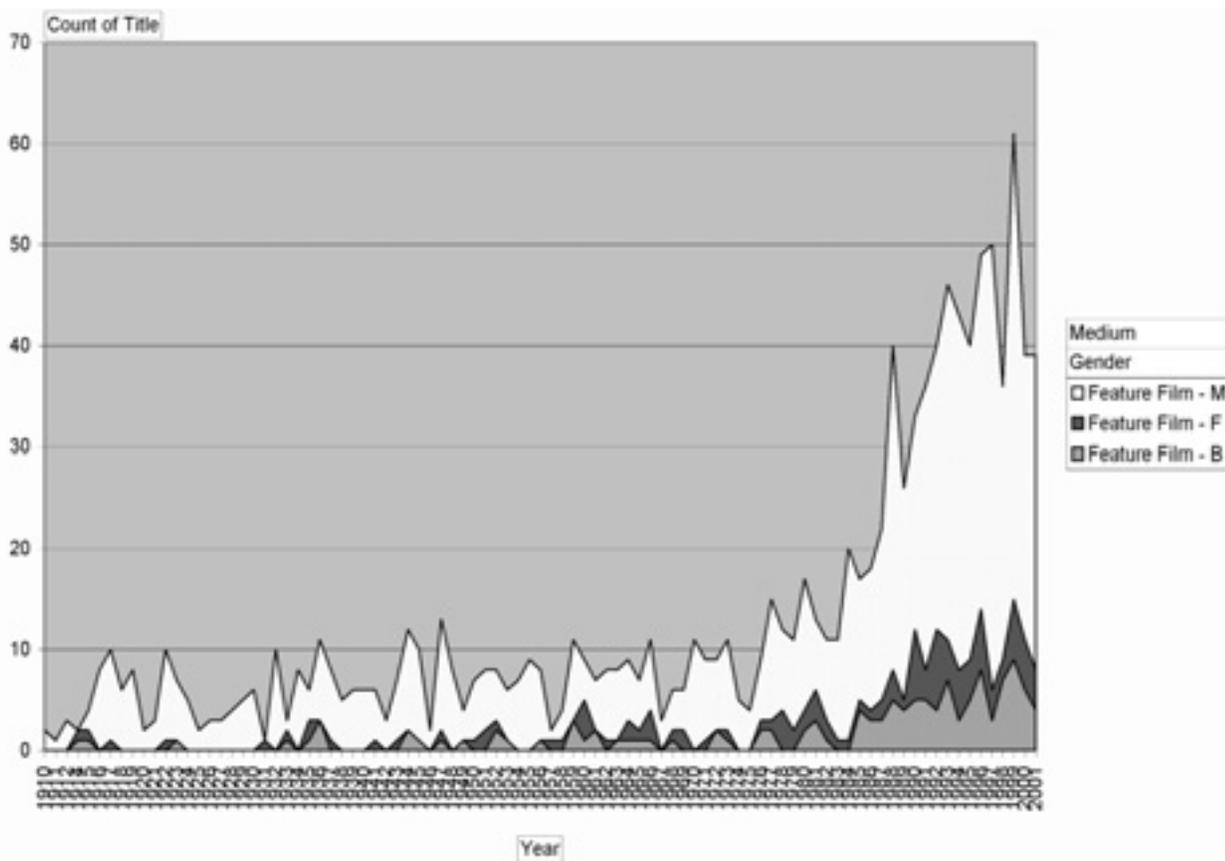
(1956) with Barbara Bell Wright as Rev. Claver, Minnie Pearl as Rev. Rose Conley in *That Tennessee Beat* (1966), *Together Brothers* (1974) with Bessie Griffin as Rev. Brown, *Dear God* (1996) with Hope Alexander-Willis as “Female Minister” (who is nonetheless joined by a religious sister and male ministers) and Pamela Roberts as Rev. Brenda Mason in *South Bureau Homicide* (1996). (Whether or not these characters are meant to be traditionally schooled and ordained ministers in the manner of the male peers is another story.) One might argue that the advent of women as clerics has been late enough (the 1970s for church communities like the Episcopalians and Lutherans) not to have registered with screenwriters, which may indeed be true. But the reflection argument does not entirely hold when one considers the continuing presence of Catholic female religious while their real numbers continue to decline.

Some of the continued presence can be understood by recalling that many films are set in historical times. As film scholar Sklar writes: “Movies and other forms of

popular entertainment have clearly become principal social institutions for storing and interpreting the past (while their own past has become increasingly accessible through videocassette and cable television) [Sklar 1997:358].” They can serve either to tell historical events from a less-well known viewpoint, or may completely re-interpret them or offer a revisionist reading. The furor over Oliver Stone’s *JFK* is but one example of a historical film which challenged the viewer to balance facts and conspiracy theories. The concern, for Sklar and others, is the power film may have when the audience either does not know, or has forgotten, traditionally shared explanations.

There certainly seems to be no end to the roles involving Catholic figures of the past. At the Sundance Film Festival in January 2002, a film called *The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys* was screened (and opened to general distribution in June 2002), with Jodie Foster as Sr. Assumpta and Vincent D’Onofrio as Fr. Vincent,<sup>9</sup> dealing with boys in a Catholic school

GRAPH 3: GENDER OF CHRISTIAN LEADERS IN AMERICAN FILMS



<sup>9</sup> This film and others released in 2002 are not included as part of the data set for this study, as most have yet to be screened.

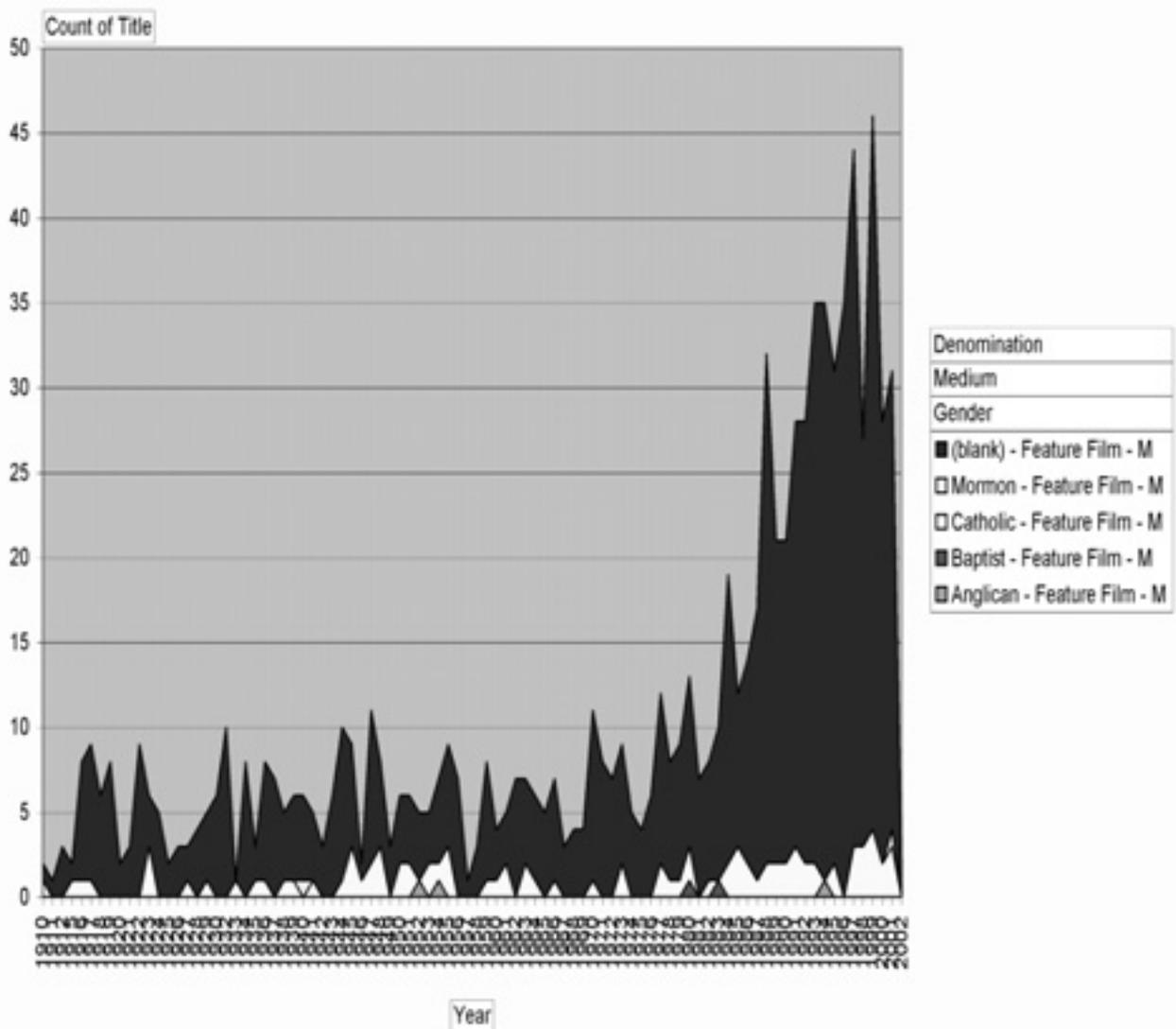
during the 1970s. Richard Harris appears as Abbé Faria in *The Count of Monte Cristo* (the 2002 version). In production at the time of writing, Liam Neeson and Ryan Phillippe are billed as Father Lankester Merrin and Father William Francis in the “prequel” to *The Exorcist*, *Exorcist 4:1*, slated to be released in 2003.

When one looks at the prevalence of either all male, all female or films with a mix of genders, there has been a small increase of female and blended representations, but the number of male clerics still prevails:

The representation of women alone in films peaks in the 1990s: 1992 is the biggest year with eight films, seven in 1996 and 1990, and six in 1999. Films with both male and female characters peak in 1999 with nine (1996 saw eight, 1993 and 1998 with seven each). If almost all depictions of female Christian leaders are Catholic nuns, then is the appearance of non-Catholic male ministers to account for some of the enormous growth in films with only male clerics in the last third of the study period, peaking in 1999?

By filtering out films with only female leaders, or with a

**GRAPH 4: DENOMINATION OF MALE CLERICS**



mix of genders, the surge is clearly due not to ministers who are identified as being something specific, but those who are simply not identified at all. This “un-denominational” group have always made up the largest portion of representations throughout the study period, but in recent years outstrip by far those which are identified.

Why is this the case? It may be not so much a conscious decision by the filmmakers to choose a non-denominational character in order to appeal to all audience members, but rather the fact that in large part, the Christian minister is meant to perform a ritual, or be part of the human background, and his or her actual denomination does not matter. More cynically, it may be that the director or writer isn’t familiar enough with differences in denomination, and so strange disconnects in costume or ritual are only perceived by those “in the know.”

The preponderance of Roman Catholic clerics is due to three basic facts: the Catholic church remains the largest Christian denomination in both the U.S. and the world, the rules regarding celibacy, the sanctity of the confessional, and obedience to the hierarchy are both firm and well-known, and finally, many priests continue to wear black garb with a clerical collar. The combination of these facts makes them easy “short-hands” for plot purposes. This is in many cases true too for Catholic sisters – celibacy, obedience, poverty, and despite post-Vatican II real-life changes, a habit – make them easy touchstones.

This may explain the use of Catholic priests, particularly in the recent past, to appeal to both a diverse audience as well as for lapsed and practicing Catholics. But are there certain directors or writers who have particular relationships or ties to specific Christian leaders?

Leading the list of directors who have overseen the largest number of films with Christian leaders are a number of men (they are all male) who had long careers and made many films. Female directors are more plentiful in the realm of documentary filmmaking [Sklar 1997:334]. This may be because of opposition or obstacles at the studio level, as well as in some cases reflecting a preference for factual storytelling. Whatever the reason, the unequal number of female writers, directors and producers of feature films almost certainly colors the number and types of female Christian leaders who make their way to the big screen.

John Ford (1894 – 1973) directed some 145 feature films, eight of which (one with Edwin Carewe) involved credited clerics or nuns. In some cases the leader is the central character, as with Henry Fonda as the exiled priest in *The Fugitive* (1947) based on Graham Greene’s *The Power and the Glory*. In others, Ford uses a religious character as partial framing devices (Robert Hazelton as the Minister in the prologue section of *Silver Wings* (1922)).

John Huston (1906 – 1987) is the other American director known for a number of films including Christian figures. From *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison* (1957), with Deborah Kerr as Sr. Angela, to Richard Burton as the Rev. T. Lawrence Shannon in *The Night of the Iguana* (1964) to one of his final films, the disturbing *Wise Blood* (1979) based on a Flannery O’Connor short story, over 13 percent of Huston’s directing credits include films with religious characters.

More recently, director Garry Marshall (born 1934 in New York) has produced a number of films with religious characters, including *Dear God* (1996), one of the few films listed in this project with a female minister (a minor role in a film about a man who answers letters posted to God). In most cases, however, the characters are necessary to the rituals: for example, the ministers who oversee the weddings in *Runaway Bride* (1999), or those who do the same for the two marrying daughters in *The Other Sister* (1999).

Abel Ferrara (born 1952, also in New York) has made films at the other end of the spectrum from Marshall, including *The Bad Lieutenant* (1992) starring Harvey Keitel as a deeply troubled detective investigating the rape of a Catholic nun. He has directed five films appearing in this index, ranging from crime, drama, horror and a thriller.

Far from Oklahoma, Woody Allen (b. 1935 again in New York) has peppered his films with religious characters of all sorts, including priests, ministers and religious sisters. *Love and Death* (1975) includes three priests, the Oscar-winning *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986) has a Catholic priest, while *Celebrity* (1998) includes priests as well as nuns, one credited as yet another “singing nun.”

Nun-movies occupied much of Henry King’s (1886 – 1982) time. He directed *The White Sister* (1923) with Lillian Gish as Angela Chiaromonte, as well as *The*

*Song of Bernadette* (1943). Another Henry, Henry Koster (1905 – 1988), oversaw *Come to the Stable* (1949) as well as *The Singing Nun* (1965) with Debbie Reynolds in the title role and Greer Garson as Mother Prioress.

A non-American director whose films – all five of them to date – have nevertheless garnered large U.S. audiences, has included Catholic priests in four of the five. Jim Sheridan (b. 1949, Dublin) has presented pictures of the not-too-distant-past Ireland through *My Left Foot* (1989), *The Field* (1990), *In the Name of the Father* (1993) and *The Boxer* (1997), each including a Catholic priest. A real priest plays the part in *The Boxer*, although only in *The Field* is the character given a name (Sean McGinley appears as Fr. Doran). In these films, the priest is presented as part of the warp and weft of Irish society, be it in the north or south of Ireland.

Sheridan also shares writing credits for these films, which makes the presence of priests all the more tied to his part in the movies' creation. Among the writers most often associated with films indexed here are Ben Hecht (1894 – 1964) whose credits include *The Miracle of the Bells* (1948) and *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938). Dudley Nichols (1895 – 1960) has writing credits on many of the John Ford projects, including *The Plough and the Stars* (1936) (adapting the Sean O'Casey play), *The Fugitive* (adapting Graham Greene's book), and co-writing *Judge Priest* (1934) with another person whose name appears often here, Lamar Trotti (1900 – 1952). Nicols also co-wrote *The Bells of St. Mary* (1945), the Leo McCarey film which would reinforce the idea of the young priest as a crooning Bing Crosby on Americans. The majority of these writers grow up in places (Dublin, New York) and time periods during which Christian leaders were active and visible members of the community.

Remembering the chestnut that successful writers most often write of what they know, it is no coincidence that these writers and directors created works with clerics – particularly Catholic ones – front and center.

It also should be noted that between the mid 1930s and 1950s, the Legion of Decency, the Catholic organization grading movies according to moral suitability, was at the height of its powers. Studios producing positive depictions of the church could count not only on dodging criticism, but picking up support and sizeable audiences.

Rebecca Sullivan also points to the sociological and interconnected influences of church and film producers as affecting the on-screen life of Catholic sisters. She has argued that nuns provided an early means of safely exploring issues of women's independence and nascent feminism in a non-threatening manner [Sullivan 1999:132]. Later, as the 1960s progressed and women's struggles were more and more in the public eye, "the nun became less a figure of strategic independence than one of compromise" [Sullivan 1999:133]. Considering magazine reports, television and feature films, she comes to the conclusion that "while the parameters of the cinematic nun's relationship to lay society expanded over time, there was ultimately little change to her persona" and indeed, by the time of the blockbuster *Sister Act*, the persona had in some ways rolled back to pre-Vatican II stereotypes [Sullivan 1999:140, 176].

The balance of creative power has also influenced the presence of Christian leaders in feature films. Directors such as Ford and Huston were joined by if not entirely replaced in the early 1970s with the new brand of "auteurs," including Martin Scorsese (included in this study for *Casino* (1995)), Peter Bogdanovich (*Paper Moon* (1973)), and Francis Ford Coppola (*Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *Dracula* (1992)). But the studios soon turned to less individually-driven movies in order to make the most of what had become a small audience. Movies which could be marketed as blockbusters, beginning, many say, with Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975), were the new breed of films. This meant moving away from appealing to a mass, mainstream audience in favor of focusing on specific groups which could be counted on to flock to opening weekend releases.

Parts of the industry sought to carve out a lucrative niche by pushing the level of violence and graphic sexual content. Eventually, these titles would find a particularly lucrative trade with the advent of the VCR. But from the 1960s on, a large number of films – not indexed here – depicted women masquerading as Catholic nuns, or actually portraying religious sisters acting out sexual fantasies. In *AntiCristo: The Bible of Nasty Nun Sinema & Culture*, author Steve Fentone catalogues hundreds of B-movie pornographic films from around the world. By using sado-masochism and religious taboos to subvert the image of purity and chastity, a fetish pornographic sub-

genre has clearly flourished, building on what Fentone recognizes as medieval texts through to parodies of mainstream movie nuns [Fentone 2000].

Moving into the 1980s, the studios began to recognize the financial benefits of appealing simultaneously to baby boomer parents and their “echo-boom” children by creating family films. Unlike their Disney predecessors, the new family genre became almost any kind of film which did not feature over-the-top violence and sex, and which, better still, could be parlayed into merchandising rights from fast food packaging to running shoes. By the early 1990s, video rentals outnumbered theater ticket sales by four to one [Sklar 1997:343]. Among other things, this made the usual methods of rating movies and restricting entrance to films by age almost meaningless. If the baby boom generation grew up as the first television generation, their children were growing up along with the VCR [Allen 1999:113].

Very few films indexed here fell into the “family” genre. But the surge in Christian leaders during the early 1990s almost certainly coincides with this growth in the home video market. In 1993, the year with the largest number of films involving Christian figures, only a few titles are recognizable as box office or critical successes: *In the Name of the Father*, *Schindler’s List*, *Sister Act II* all had widespread releases. But there are far more comedies (*Ed and His Dead Mother*, *Freaked*, *Hexed*, *My Boyfriend’s Back*, *Stepmonster*, *Undercover Blues*) and horror films (*Uninvited*, *Children of the Corn II*, *Doppelganger*, *Ghost in the Machine*) which were sent almost immediately to the video market, and which feature clerics in bit parts. More is not necessarily better, certainly in an aesthetic sense. But it definitely affects the way in which the generation growing up watching films at home rather than paying to see them as a large group event may come to view Christian leaders.

During each decade, there are certain faces and portrayals which become the standard for audiences. As one begins to look at the numbers, there are two types of actors who seem to become these “faces:” those whose careers include a number of clerical roles, but always as supporting or character actors, and those whose one or two turns in robes and collars achieve high profile.

Considering movies from the first era studied here, the silent pictures from 1898 – 1929 (*The Jazz Singer*,

the first “talkie”, was released in 1927), there are a number of bit-part actors, including the aforementioned Francisca de la Vinna who serves as the priest at the wedding ceremony in DeMille’s silent *Rose of the Rancho*. Edward Hoyt appears as three clerics (two named) in films released during 1916 and 1917 which judging by the titles (Minister, Rev. Wilson and Rev. Smudge) may be the Protestant cleric of the time, while James Neill (1860 – 1931) appears in four films listed here, quite possibly as the Catholic peer: Priest in two, Padre in two, and Cardinal in one.

The 1930s saw the appearance of the Reverend Neal Dodd (1879 – 1966), an Anglo-Catholic priest in real-life who worked both behind the camera as “Hollywood’s Pastor” to the actors and crew, as well as becoming the priest or minister when needed, particularly for on-screen rituals. He was also the founding rector of St. Mary of the Angels Church in Los Angeles. Dodd would be among the first but certainly not the last cleric in real life to also act the part.

Charles Waldron (1874 – 1946) also appeared in multiple pictures during this time, while Eily Malyon was the most credited woman, playing nuns in *The Melody Lingers On* (1935) and *The White Angel* (1936) as well as Mothers Superior in *Anthony Adverse* (1936) and *Les Miserables* (1935). As with the directors of this era, actors racked up enormous numbers of credits: Malyon, an English actress, had a total of 80 acting credits listed. Spencer Tracy, the man whose face may be the most immediately recognized as a priest from this era, had some 90 credits by the time of his death in 1967.

But Tracy had but two credited roles as clerics during the 1930s: as Fr. Tim Mullin in *San Francisco* (1936) and Fr. Flanagan in *Boys’ Town* (1938). It was as the real-life Flanagan that Tracy, although not acting in as many films as actors with smaller roles, would become the embodiment of the Catholic priest for this time. Film critic Leonard Maltin notes that having come through the Jesuit school system, Tracy had once thought of going into the priesthood himself, and his understanding of the type of man he was portraying was rewarded with a Best Actor Oscar (which he then donated to the real Boys Town).



In the 1940s, a similar pattern emerges: Fritz Leiber (1822 – 1949), Pedro de Cordoba (1881 – 1950), Neal Dodd and Francis Pierlot (1875 – 1955) portray a variety of abbes, priests, padres, bishops and ministers in Cisco Kid Westerns, romances and action-adventure plots. But again, it is a two-film turn as Fr. Chuck O'Malley which makes Bing Crosby (1904 – 1977) the screen version of every-priest with *Going My Way* (1944) and *The Bells of St. Mary* (1945). As with Tracy, Crosby picked up an Oscar for his role in the 1944 film, which also was recognized as picture of the year.

*The Bells of St. Mary* was one of 10 films including Christian leaders released in 1945, the year that theatre-going hit its peak to date in America, with almost 75 percent of all those who could physically get to the cinema actually buying tickets [Sklar 1997: 269]. During this postwar year, movie-makers were concerned with reaching a truly mass audience rather than the niche marketing used to identify theatre-goers today. With fewer releases (about 710 movies were out in 1945) concentrated at fewer theatres across the country, there was a much better chance that most people would see the same movies. This kind of communal experience is in sync with observations by sociologists that those born after 1945 tend to be less civically or socially active in the ways exhibited by their parents and grandparents [Chaves 2000].

Although the 1930s and 1940s weren't periods during which the most films involving Christian leaders appeared, the use of leading men and women to portray religious leaders, the group experience of watching these films, and the recognition of the films with Academy Awards made it seem as though these were the years when priests, ministers and sisters were front and centre. But with the inroads made by television in the early 1950s, this period of group movie-going was not to last.

The next Oscar period would fall in the late 1960s with *The Sound of Music* (1965) and the following year *A Man for all Seasons* (1966) picking up best picture awards. But these films featured religious characters from earlier times. *The Sound of Music* fell near the end of Hollywood's attempt to rejuvenate its golden era of movie musicals, with films such as *Singing in the Rain* (1952) and *The Band Wagon* (1956) also using plots involving earlier periods of time [Sklar 1997:283]. Of the 1950s, Sklar writes in *Movie-Made America*:

For the first time in their history, American commercial movies became principally what they had once been only partially – an escape from reality into the familiar structures of genre formula. Their role in propagating alternative modes of social behavior seemed to have been completely abandoned, a casualty of the Cold War and a vanishing audience. [Sklar 1997:283]

This makes a consideration of the presence of Christian figures in specific genres important to note. What dramatic or narrative purpose is most often served by these leaders?

The majority of films (just over 30 percent) indexed for this project is classified as dramas. But they make up only about 2.4 percent of all American dramas produced. Just less than a quarter of the films considered here can be called comedies, but they make up only 1.5 percent of all American comedies. Compare this with the horror genre, which only made up 7 percent of the films indexed, but account for at least 3 percent of all American horror films. The other most common genres studied include action films (9.3 percent of the 1,232), crime (4.1 percent), thrillers (with *The Exorcist* among the 3.0 percent), westerns (2.7 percent) adventures (2.5 percent), mysteries (1.6 percent), with musicals and romances (each 1.4 percent) making up most of the rest.

The number of dramas with Christian characters peaked in 1993, with 14 (6 percent of all U.S. dramas released that year). But dramas with religious characters have been a staple throughout the study.

In 1980, comedies with religious leaders took off, peaking somewhere around 1996, when there were a number of spoof films released, including *Spy Hard* and *The Craft*. That year, comedies including Christian leaders made up 7.3 percent of all comedies released, a sizeable number.

When one looks at the list of films broken down by genre, it is horror films where the largest percent of all such films include Christian leaders at 3.4 percent. The early nineties were particularly full: 5.9 percent of all 1990 releases, 10.2 percent in 1992 and 10 percent again in 1993. It should be noted that the horror genre as used here tends to include the more recent, B-movie films, and it does not include, for example, *The Exorcist*, often cited as one of the first of the new form of horror films, but categorized here as a drama.

Because horror films tend to concentrate either on a plot line where the most immoral of a group of characters succumb one by one to a murderous fiend (cleverly sent-up in the horror spoof *Scream* (1996)), or feature a showdown between super-natural powers of evil, Christian figures are often featured as heroic, or at least well-meaning.

While these films are rarely the recipients of awards or even significant box office ratings as compared to their action/drama peers, they do represent a significant way of considering Christian leadership. Scott Derrickson, who wrote both *Urban Legends: Final Cut* and *Hellraiser: Inferno* (which he also directed), two horror films released in 2000, has sought to defend his genre. Although neither of these films feature clerics, in an article defending his ability to make such films and do so as a self-professed Christian, he mentions others which have inspired him: “More mainstream horror films like *Angel Heart*, *The Exorcist* and *Rosemary’s Baby* explore the satanic and demonic realm with feverish moral passion” [Derrickson 2002].

The appeal of a showdown between exorcist and demon is clearly not one relegated to the early 1970s, when *The Exorcist* first appeared. In 2000, the film was re-released and received significant box office business. Despite being followed up by sequels in 1977 (*Exorcist II: The Heretic*) and 1990 (*The Exorcist III*), *Exorcist 4:1*, a “pre-quel” to the original is in production. Other recently released films, including *Stigmata* (1999) with Gabriel Byrne in the leading role as Father Andrew Kiernan, and *The Prophecy* (1995) with Elias Koteas as a seminarian turned detective, feature struggles with demons. Whether the viewer takes these tugs-of-war seriously, the films themselves clearly do.

Horror films are usually opportunities for male clerics (read Roman Catholic priests) to do battle with demons which recognize them by their clerical collars, whereas many comedies use ministerial garb as an opportunity to poke fun at a character, or to offer a chance to dress up and pretend to be something one is not. The horror genre is traditionally thought to appeal most to young men and teenage boys, which would tend to support the idea of the heroic priest battling the forces of darkness. But feminist readings have suggested that there are a good number of

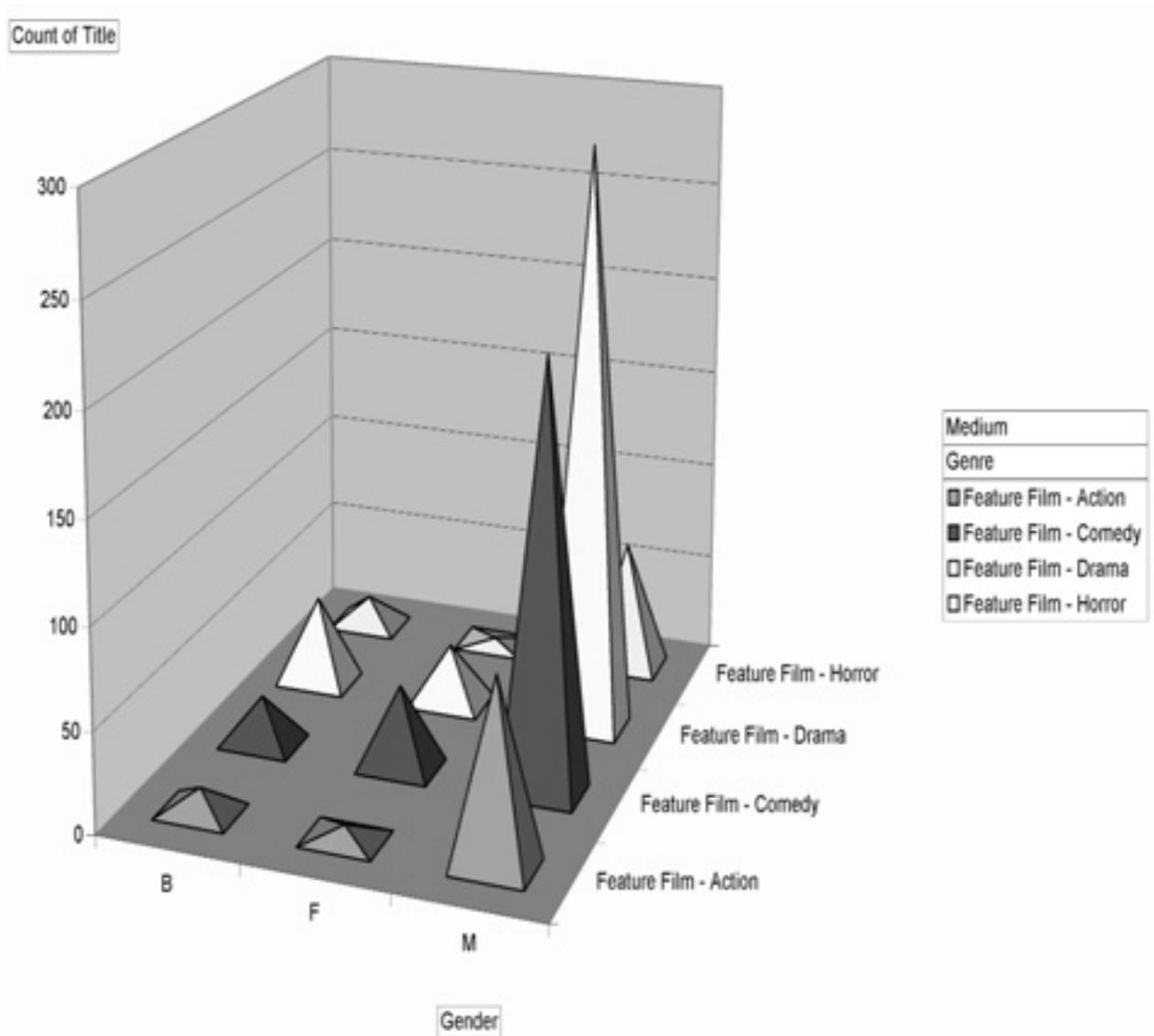
female fans of the genre, particularly those involving vampires [Cherry 1999]. Brigid Cherry found in polling female horror fans that they often identified with the monster, rather than with the conquering human. It is interesting to consider what a gendered split in the audience’s sympathies may mean. Is it possible that by using a male cleric the director has set up a sympathetic adversary, at least for the female viewer? Or might the female viewer (particularly the Catholic one) automatically cheer for the side which doesn’t by definition exclude her?

Action films, by comparison, generally use clerical characters in minor roles. In 1997, for example, the peak year for such films involving Christian leaders, only three of the films had roles with actual names (*The Eighteenth Angel*, *The Fifth Element* and *Fire Down Below*). The ultra-masculine action figure had his heyday in movies of the 1980s (think Rambo and Schwarzenegger); it would seem that in most action films, religious figures are used as foils to highlight the much stronger secular lead.

Continuing along gender lines, female religious leaders (for feature films, nearly always Catholic nuns) are more often found in comedies than in dramas, which are almost always the domain of male clerics. About half of all the films indexed here involving only women religious are comedies, compared with 32.2 percent for men. There have been some very well known comedic turns by male clerics, however. Dick Van Dyke plays a minister who tries to take up and then quit smoking in order to fit in with his community in the Norman Lear film *Cold Turkey* (1971) in what many thought was an overlooked performance. The pope has, particularly since the late 1980s, become a familiar source of fun. Eugene Greytak has parlayed his physical likeness to the pontiff into an acting career, appearing as John Paul II in six films since 1990, as well as at least four television programs. But it is fair to say that dramatic films are the purvey of the male clerics, with 44.2 percent as compared with 37 percent for those involving only women.

The effect of this emphasis on comedy when dealing with religious sisters is made even more powerful when one takes a look at the movies with religious figures which make the list of 201 top grossing movies in the United States (see Table 1 in the appendices). Among them are *The Sound of Music* (1965) and

GRAPH 5: COMPARISON OF GENRE BY GENDER



*Sister Act* (1992), both with strong comedic and musical elements, particularly when one considers the re-release and “re-purposing” of the Julie Andrews musical for sing-along performances, where audiences are encouraged to dress up and perform. Not only are there more comedies with nuns than other genres, but some of the most popular comedic movies involve nuns as central characters.

Apart from showcasing women as funny and musical, most often sisters appear in “packs,” seldom on their own, despite the real-life move of sisters out of con-

vents, and into smaller communities, or even individual living arrangements.

Priests and ministers are much more likely to be portrayed as loners, without many community members in evidence, unless a cloister or manse itself is an important part of the plot. *The Name of the Rose* (1986), a murder mystery set in a damp, poisonous monastery comes to mind here [cf Lindvall 1993].

More often other male clerics are seen as obstacles, particularly those who occupy supervisory roles. One thinks of the less than charitable visit from the bishop

who visits the hospitalized Father Greg (Linus Roache), the gay priest of *Priest* (1994), while he recovers from a suicide attempt. The bishop advises him to get well and leave his diocese as soon as possible.

In *The Third Miracle* (1999), the Catholic authorities seem intent on quashing the findings of Father Frank Shore (Ed Harris), regardless of how persuasive the investigator has been in making inquiries of a possible cause for sainthood. In *Stigmata* (1999), Gabriel Byrne's character fights no less than the Vatican where some seem intent on keeping a gospel hidden from sight, while in *The Verdict* (1982), the lawyer played by Paul Newman does battle with a more local version of Catholic hierarchy while investigating a case of malpractice. These are a few examples of a recurring plot in which those who ascend through the ranks of Catholic hierarchy become not only out of touch with the laity, but are more likely to be out-and-out corrupt. Kevin Smith makes the corrupt cleric laughable with George Carlin as Cardinal Glick in *Dogma* (1999).

Occasionally, there is an intermediate mentoring character who acts as a buffer between the downtrodden and the hierarchy. In *True Confessions* (1981), police officer Robert Duvall tries to convince his brother Father Des Spellacy (Robert DeNiro) to stop his sycophantic support of a cardinal (Cyril Cusack) and his corrupt supporters (including Charles Durning). In *Mass Appeal* (1984), Jack Lemmon's Father Farley struggles to further the dreams of the young deacon Mark Dolson (Zeljko Ivanek) despite the domineering Monsignor Burke in charge of the seminary (again played by Charles Durning as the hierarchical heavy).

The triangle formed by a young Catholic cleric whose homosexuality (or in Dolson's case, bisexuality) threatens his vocation, his mentor who has his own problems (alcoholism, sexual affairs), and a domineering bishop or monsignor is common both to *Mass Appeal* and *Priest*, released 10 years later in the UK. And in both films, the mentor makes a pulpit appeal for support from the people to overturn the hierarchical decision against the young man, turning the triangle into a one-on-one relationship, bringing back into focus the reason for the path these men have chosen. There is a definite appeal to the idea of the church as "house of God and People of God" versus "center of hypocrisy," to use Lindvall's typology [Lindvall 1993:139].

Leaders don't always have to be front and center to demand attention: Oscar-winning films *On the Waterfront* (1954) and *Chariots of Fire* (1981) would be less successful without the supporting performances by Karl Malden as Father Barry in the former and Eric Liddle's strong missionary family in the latter.

The opportunity to consider the struggle to live in the present and the mundane while working as a Christian leader has been particularly well explored by a number of films with Protestant protagonists. By giving the minister the opportunity to have a family and romantic life, the intersection of the secular and the sacred, rather than the choice whether to keep or break a vow, can take center stage. Sometimes the plot deals with the nitty-gritty of surviving in a poorly-paid occupation; *One Foot in Heaven* (1941) took a look at the trials and tribulations of a minister and his family as they move from parish to parish. *The Preacher's Wife* (1996) (a remake of *The Bishop's Wife*) gave the audience a chance to consider what ministry can do to a man's romantic and family life – if in a somewhat artificial manner, seeing as his competition for his wife's affections is an angelic Denzel Washington.

*Footloose* (1984) became one of the most popular films of the 1980s, tapping into the dance craze also exhibited by *Flashdance* (1983) and *Dirty Dancing* (1987). Herbert Ross (1927 – 2001) directed the story of a small town torn by teenagers' need to dance (led by Kevin Bacon), versus the town elders' no-dancing rule. The main obstacle is the Reverend Shaw Moore, played by John Lithgow in one of his best-known performances. According to screenwriter Dean Pitchford, the film was inspired by a conflict between a group of teenagers and church elders in Elmore City, Oklahoma, over a no-dancing rule in place since the founding of the city in 1861. (The story has also been made into a stage musical.) While Rev. Moore's denomination is never made obvious, he is clearly a conservative Protestant, with a wife (played by Dianne Wiest) and a rebellious daughter, Ariel, who becomes the bridging character between the two groups. Anyone who was a teenager during the mid-1980s would have seen this film, and may well have considered whether or not the local preacher's kids fit the Ariel stereotype.

*The Apostle* (1997) begins with a flashback echoing an early scene in *Elmer Gantry* (1960), as a young boy is introduced to Pentecostal preaching. But Robert

Duvall's labor of love soon leaves Gantry's tale in the dust. Few films are as fearless in their exploration of a Christian leader as a human being, warts and glory both. Duvall – who wrote, produced, financed, directed and starred in the film – reportedly was taken with a Holiness church in Hughes, Arkansas, over 30 years before the release of his film [Blizek and Burke 1998]. He admits to using actual preachers to supply Sonny/E.F. with some of his best lines – some lifted from “. . . a 96 year-old black man from a little church in Hamilton, Virginia. He seemed to me more spiritual than the Dalai Lama or Mahatma Gandhi. This guy was great. He had a great cadence of preaching, a great honesty” [Blizek and Burke 1998]. Duvall also used a number of actual Pentecostal preachers on screen, mixing them in with actors. In creating the fallen Sonny, the actor avoided a portrait of either a pure saint or an evil sinner. The viewer is charmed by his genuine faith and silver tongue, and horrified by his surges of violence and troubled relationships with women. His friendships and love of his mainly African American congregation and fellow preachers are natural, and while early on he looks the part of the slick evangelist in the white suit, he never slides into Elmer Gantry hucksterism. *The Apostle* manages to illustrate the interconnectedness of spirit and body, good and evil, and the individual minister and his vocation as we watch Sonny's personal redemption take place alongside the rebirth of an abandoned church. Although not successful in winning the Oscar for his performance, Duvall certainly succeeded on every other level.

Duvall has not, however, been the only director or writer who has chosen to make an appearance as a Christian leader, although more often than not it is as a cameo role as either a priest or nun, sometimes uncredited.<sup>10</sup> In a film of a very different type, actor/director Ed Norton cast himself as Fr. Brian Kilkenny Finn, a young Catholic priest. Father Finn and his best friend, an equally young rabbi (Ben Stiller as Rabbi Jacob “Jake” Schram), find themselves sharing both a spiritual vocation as well as a love for their childhood friend, Anna Riley (Jenna Elfman). While unusual to see a young, attractive leading straight man

as a priest, the plot disappoints. The romantic tension of the love triangle is undercut, knowing that Father Finn does not really face the same sort of choice as he would if he were allowed to marry. The chance of him actually dropping his vows in favor of Anna never asserts itself. In a sort of homage, Norton has director Milos Forman play the part of his supervising priest Fr. Havel in *Keeping the Faith* (2000).

With the “afterlife” of feature films through video and DVD rentals and sales, the importance of these supporting roles grows. It may be that the power and influence of smaller roles in oft-seen films becomes more important than movies with a cleric in a leading role, but which do not garner a large theatre audience.

While cataloguing the actors who most often portray Christian leaders, I was struck by the number of real-life clerics who appear on-screen. Many appeared without credit, including Baptist ministers in *Hallelujah!* (1929), a King Vidor version of an Irving Berlin musical, with an African American cotton picker trying to resist temptation and become a preacher. Rev. Neal Dodd was one of the first of many to actually receive credit, and one could imagine the attraction for directors and producers. Rather than hire a cleric to ensure that an actor carries out a ritual in the correct way, why not have the cleric himself do the acting? Within the 1184 films studied, 25 had actors who were credited and listed with clerical titles (Rev., Father, Sister), just over two percent, which is probably low, since there may be more who appeared without such honorifics.

As well as appearing in front of the camera, clerics have been influential at the production end of things. The Reverend Ellwood Kieser (1929 – 2000), a Paulist father, was a well-known producer involved in the creation of *Romero* (1989) starring Raul Julia, as well as *The Dorothy Day Story* (1996).<sup>11</sup> At more of a remove, but still crucial, are writers like the late William X. Kienzle, a former priest whose series of mystery novels featuring the sleuthing Fr. Robert Koesler, became celluloid with *The Rosary Murders* (1987). Following his death, Kienzle's wife and editor said Koesler was more or less Kienzle's own alter ego.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Those where the creators are credited include: *The Low Life* (1994), *Alma's Rainbow* (1994), *Coming Soon* (1999).

<sup>11</sup> His credits include even more television programs: *We are the Children* (1987), *The Fourth Wise Man* (1985), *Buchanan High* (1984), *The Pilot* (1984), *Safe Harbour* (1984), *Weekend* (1984), *The Trouble with Mother* (1979) and *Insight* (1960).

<sup>12</sup> Associated Press, “William X. Kienzle: Former priest created clergyman-sleuth,” *The Globe and Mail*, 18 Jan. 2002, p R15.

Many of the most successful and powerful films are based on real-life Christian leaders, and are often created with the cooperation of the leaders themselves. Most recently, one may remember *Dead Man Walking* (1995), the Tim Robbins film based on the work of Sr. Helen Prejean, which she had an active role in bringing to the screen. (Susan Sarandon won the Best Actress Oscar for her portrayal of Prejean.)

An earlier film, again featuring a traumatic death penalty scene, is the 1961 *Hoodlum Priest*, based on and produced with the co-operation of Father Charles Dismas Clark and his Jesuit community ministering to ex-convicts.



*Susan Sarandon as Sr. Helen Prejean (above) and the real Prejean (right).*

## TELEVISION

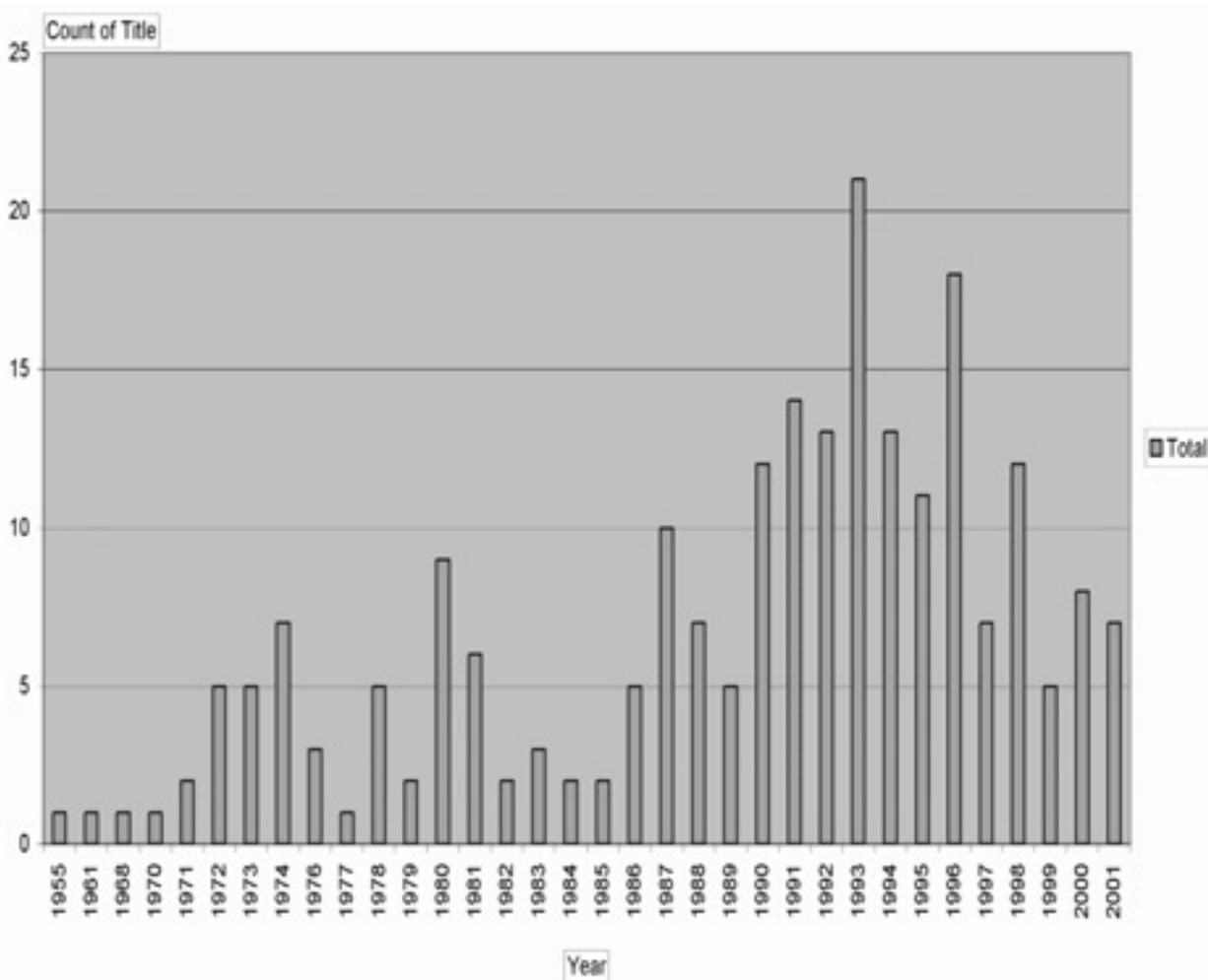
It didn't take long for television to lure the American audience away from movies as the top source for visual entertainment and storytelling. More people would watch a single episode of "All in the Family" (1971 – 1979) than all those who attended a movie in one week during the same time period; by the 1970s, the percentage of the total potential audience actually going to the cinema was less than 10 percent, as compared to nearly 75 percent in 1946 [Sklar 1997:321].

There are three types of television forms considered in this study: Made-for-TV movies, television mini-series, and series meant to run long-term, which have central, recurring or only cameo roles which include clerics.

Of the TV movies, 6.6 percent had identifiable Catholic characters, a significant decrease from their film peers. Many more were simply identified as clerics without any other immediately identifying information, suggesting more room for Protestant figures on the small screen by comparison to theatrical releases, where the percentage of Catholics is noted here as 13.5 percent. Titles with only female characters (Catholic sisters) make up 8.0 percent of all, while those featuring both male and female characters account for 8.8 percent of the content. It seems even more difficult to find anything but male clerics in small screen compared to large screen content.

In most, the figures carry out weddings and funerals, but there have been some with central characters as clerics, including "Color of Justice" (1997) with

GRAPH 6: NUMBER OF TV MOVIES WITH CHRISTIAN LEADERS



Gregory Hines as Rev. Walton, the drama “Catholics” (1973) based on the Brian Moore book of the same name, and “The Scarlet and the Black” (1983), with a high-powered cast including John Gielgud as Pope Pius XII and Gregory Peck as Monsignor Hugh O’Flaherty. As the multi-channel universe continues to expand, movies created for television will become an increasingly important place for the portrayal of Christian leaders to be tracked. Here, there were 226 made-for-TV movies indexed, with 1993 being the peak year (23 titles noted for that year).

The television mini-series format includes one of the best-known examples of clerics in leading roles, with “The Thorn Birds,” first shown in 1983. Richard Chamberlain became the 1980s epitome of “Father-what-a-waste”<sup>13</sup> as a man torn between love of a woman and his Catholic vocation. The series, which cleaned up at the 1984 Golden Globes (best mini-series or motion picture made for TV, best performance by an actor, by an actor in a supporting role and by an actress in a supporting role in a mini-series), spawned a made for TV movie in 1996: “The Thorn Birds: The Missing Years.”

Much has been made of the rise and fall of “Nothing Sacred,” a short-lived television series (1997-1998) built around a Catholic priest and his urban parish. But “Nothing Sacred” wasn’t the first series to focus on a religious leader and a community. There had been “The Flying Nun” (1967 - 1970), “Amen” (1986 - 1991), “Soul Man” (1997 - 1998) and the ongoing “7th Heaven” (1996-).

“The Flying Nun” was in keeping with the comedic depictions of religious sisters on the big screen, making light of burgeoning changes in the governance of women’s orders, as well as their dress-codes.



*Clifton Davis as Rev. Reuben Gregory and Sherman Hemsley as Deacon Ernest Frye in “Amen”*

“Amen” used an African-American family rooted in the church to explore the sitcom side of daily church life and politics. There was the potential for romantic tension between the deacon’s daughter and the young, handsome minister (played by Clifton Davis), eventually ending with a marriage.



*Dan Aykroyd with Kevin Seridan, Courtney Chase, Brendon Ryan Barrett and Spence Breslin in “Soul Man”*

“Soul Man” also chose a Protestant minister as its focus, in this case an Episcopalian widowed father who loves his four children and his Harley Davidson. This again allowed for the introduction of the traditional elements of sitcoms, including cute kids and a romantic life for Dan Aykroyd as Rev. Mike Weber. Unlike “Amen,” “Soul Man” only lasted on screen for a single season.

“7th Heaven” has chosen to further downplay the clerical aspect of its central character, giving Eric Camden and his wife seven children to provide plenty of grist for the dramatic and comedic mill. Portrayed by Stephen Collins, Camden is a non-denominational Christian pastor who is described on the show’s official Web site as a father who “just happens to be a minister at the local church” in southern California. Camden’s wife Annie has until recently stayed at home, which is clearly a very comfortable house with enough room for their children.



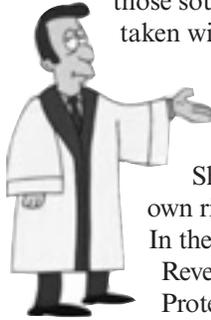
*The most visible Christian minister in America, with his on-screen family: the cast of “7th Heaven”*

The creator of the series, Brenda Hampton, has said that at first, she didn’t have an occupation in mind for the father of her fictional family. Hampton has also said she loosely based Eric on a friend who is a minister-turned-writer. Despite initially low ratings, the series has prospered as part of the Warner Bros. stable which advertises it as the broadcasters’ highest rated show for four straight seasons of its six, quite an achievement considering that WB also carries “Dawson’s Creek,” “Felicity” and “Sabrina,” all appealing to a young audience.

One of the trends of the 1980s was a move back to fantasy and animation. While in many forms this

<sup>13</sup> Patrick McCormick, “Something Sacred: Hollywood’s new men in black,” U.S. Catholic, January 1998, vol. 63, issue 1, p 46.

meant a means by which audiences could enjoy escapist entertainment, on television, some creators used this renewed taste to come up with some of the most trenchant satire. While young audiences like those sought by WB were entranced, adults were taken with the clever and often fearless humor.



“The Simpsons” was created by cartoonist Matt Groening as a series of shorts which aired on “The Tracy Ullmann Show” (1987-1990). It became a show in its own right in 1989, and continues to air regularly. In the fictitious town of Springfield, the Reverend Timothy Lovejoy is the resident Protestant minister, shepherding the First Church of Springfield (voiced by Harry Shearer). Rev. Lovejoy was introduced in the first season of the series, and he and his church have often been used in the traditional guise of a hypocritical community. The pastor takes delight in denouncing people and things from the pulpit, using a voice not unlike that of certain televangelists. As the series has progressed, Rev. Lovejoy has taken both supporting and lead roles, appearing as part of the institutional life of the town, or acting as the key driving source of the plot, by leading crusades against the influence of Krusty the Clown, a children’s television entertainer, or by hosting a marriage retreat with his busybody wife, Helen. The pastor also has to work with the other religious groups in his community, including the Catholics and “miscellaneous” – which really means the Hindu corner store owner. But some of Reverend Lovejoy’s biggest challenges come from his own congregants, including the most devout Christian family in Springfield, the Flanders, neighbors to Homer Simpson and his brood. His delight in Ned Flanders’ difficulties cements the pastor’s role as grand hypocrite.



Other animated series, including “Pinky and the Brain,” have offered less than flattering images of Christian ministers, which makes the Reverend Karen Stroup of “King of the Hill” noteworthy. Another animated comedy, “King of the Hill” (1997 -) is a less “cartoony” look at family life in America, centered on the Hill family of fictitious Arlen, Texas, and created by Mike Judge of “Beavis and Butthead” fame. Hank Hill works for a propane company, his wife is a

teacher, and their son Bobby a somewhat confused boy. Hank’s friends include Vietnam vets, rednecks and “good ol’ boys” that turn out to embody all the complexities of big city, cosmopolitan types. The Hills go to a church which used to be led by the male Rev. Thomason. So it comes as a bit of a shock when he is replaced by the Reverend Karen Stroup (voiced by Mary Tyler Moore, the original TV career woman).

On her first day, Rev. Stroup serves up a special fish casserole, the Norwegian lutefisk, for her congregation. Bobby consumes the entire dish and suffers severe gastrointestinal distress... lighting a match to cover his embarrassment in the basement bathroom, he manages to burn the entire church to the ground. Many believe the culprit to be Bobby’s grandfather, Cotton, who took umbrage at the installation of a female minister. In the end, all comes right, but the episode (first aired in 1999) manages to tackle a number of arguments around women’s ordination. As with the other characters in Arlen, the local minister and her community are never quite as straightforward as they seem.

What made “Nothing Sacred” different was its attempt to create a dramatic rather than a situation comedy approach to religious life. As the program garnered both critical raves and anger from the Catholic League, Paul Leland, the creator of the series stepped out from behind his pseudonym. Paul Leland was actually Bill Cain, a Jesuit priest who has a number of writing and producing credits for TV movies. He in turn has said that he was drawn to the priesthood after reading Andrew Greeley’s book *Young Men Shall See Visions* while a high school student.<sup>14</sup>



*The cast of the beseiged "Nothing Sacred." Third from right: Fr. Ray, Sr. Mo and Fr. Eric.*

<sup>14</sup> John L. Allen, “Andrew M. Greeley: Pop culture evangelist still telling stories of sin, sex and redemption,” National Catholic Reporter, vol. 35, no. 20, 19 March 1999.

“Nothing Sacred” featured Father Francis Xavier “Ray” Reyneaux, a priest with liberal leanings (played by Kevin Anderson), the older Fr. Leo (Brad Sullivan), and Father Eric (Scott Michael Campbell), a young cleric with a more conservative outlook, as well as a Sister Maureen “Mo” Brody (Ann Dowd).

While many of the same issues affecting films show up in television, the power of the boycott is much more effective on the small screen. While certain films (including *Priest* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*) have been targeted by Catholic and Christian groups, by the time protests and calls for boycotts are made, the product is usually completed, and controversy can often generate extra audience numbers. Protests against a television program, however, can quickly kill a show; broadcasters need advertising dollars, and advertisers can and have bowed to pressure from lobby groups. The ABC network certainly was targeted by groups like the Catholic League, and soon the program was bouncing around different time slots, before finally being cancelled, with five episodes never aired.

It is somewhat surprising, then, to read reports that Sylvester Stallone is working with CBS to develop a new TV series tentatively titled “The Priest,” with a plot outline which sounds very much like that for “Nothing Sacred.”<sup>15</sup>

There has been only one non-animated American television series featuring a female minister.<sup>16</sup> “Amazing Grace” (1995) starred Patty Duke as Hannah Miller, a nurse-turned-minister who tries to rebuild her life after a divorce, an addiction to pills and a suicide attempt. She also has a son and daughter to care for. The series, co-produced by Duke, lasted only five episodes on NBC.

One of the longest-running Christian characters on television was the well-meaning but bumbling Lieutenant/Captain Fr. Francis John Patrick “Dago Red” Mulcahy, on “M\*A\*S\*H” (1972 – 1983). Rene Auberjonois played Mulcahy in the original 1972 film by Robert Altman, but William Christopher picked up the role for the television version, becoming the most visible Catholic priest on TV. For the most part, Fr. Mulcahy

served as straight man to the antics of Alan Alda’s Hawkeye and the other medics and nurses, as well as being on hand to minister to the sick and wounded. Christopher said he spoke with Catholic priests as part of his preparation for the role.<sup>17</sup> Following the final episode, Fr. Mulcahy appeared again in “After MASH,” a short-lived spin-off set at General John J. Pershing General V.A. Hospital in



*William Christopher as Fr. Mulcahy of “M\*A\*S\*H”*

Missouri, where William Christopher reprised the role as the Catholic chaplain. Unlike the current TV minister, Eric Camden, Mulcahy’s life did not include a large family; his one sister was written in as a nun.

There have, and continue to be, series which feature religious figures in cameo or recurring roles. Indeed, there are few long-running series which haven’t at some point involved a cleric, if only to carry out a wedding or funeral. Like films, some are set up to provide comic relief, as in “Will and Grace,” where a highly-publicized episode featured Ellen DeGeneres – long after coming out as a lesbian – as a habited nun who tries to charge an exorbitant sum for a third-hand car.<sup>18</sup>

Series as varied as “Northern Exposure,” “Dr. Quinn: Medicine Woman,” “ER” and “Family Law” have all featured priests, monks or religious ministers. Within the emerging universe of special content developed for cable television, series like “Sex and the City,” “The Sopranos” and “Oz” have all had Christian ministers appear, often in central roles. The characterizations tend to be more daring and complex, as the productions depend less on advertising than on direct subscription dollars. The HBO drama “Sex and the City” included an episode with Samantha Jones (portrayed by Kim Cattrall) unsuccessfully attempting to seduce a handsome Franciscan friar (Costas

<sup>15</sup> Nellie Andreeva, “Stallone, Glenn catch CBS’ eye with ‘02 dramas,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 2 Oct. 2001.

<sup>16</sup> Britain’s BBC had great success with “The Vicar of Dibley” (1994 - ), a sitcom starring Dawn French as a single, female Anglican minister in a small village. The show has also been broadcast in the U.S. on specialty channels.

<sup>17</sup> From interview section, The MASH 4077 Homepage [http://www.mash4077.co.uk/actor/christopher2.html]

<sup>18</sup> “Will & Grace,” “My Uncle the Car,” first broadcast 15 Feb. 2001.

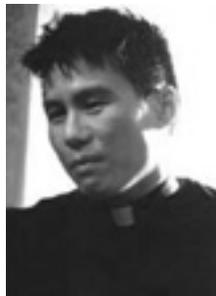
Mandylor).<sup>19</sup> “The Sopranos” (1999 -) has had a recurring character, Father Phil Intintola (Paul Schulze), whose interests in his female parishioners have been less than platonic.



*Rita Moreno as Sr. Peter Marie Reimondo*

But perhaps the most involved depiction of clerics on television appears on “Oz,” a brutal and often difficult to watch drama set in Emerald City, a fictitious high-security prison, where the worst of the worst offenders come to serve their time. From the beginning of the series (1997 -) Sr. Peter Marie Reimondo (Rita Moreno), a Catholic sister who serves as the psychologist and counselor, has been a key member of the ensemble cast. As

the series has developed, viewers have learned of Sr. Pete’s previous life as a woman widowed after her husband was murdered, watched her struggle with her vows as she rethinks her celibacy and obedience to her order, and her difficulties counseling inmates on death row between participating in anti-death penalty protests outside the prison walls.



She is joined on staff by chaplain Fr. Ray Mukada (B.D. Wong), who appears as a young Catholic priest with his own challenges. He was sent to Oz by a bishop who thought him too egotistical, is challenged by prisoners who question his sexuality, and must deal with issues of his own personal belief as he watches bad and even horrific things happen to good people.

*B. D. Wong as Fr. Ray Mukada*



*Luke Perry as Rev. Jeremiah Cloutier*

In the fourth season, he faced new challenges in the form of competition for the souls of the Christian inmates. (There is another, sizeable group of black Muslim prisoners.) Luke Perry took on the recurring role of Jeremiah Cloutier, an evangelical preacher sent

to Oz for bilking his community. Rev. Cloutier proves to be a popular figure, and soon has a substantial following, which Fr. Mukada sees as a threat to his own position as chaplain.



*Ona Faida Lampley as Rev. Truman*

The position of minister is no guarantee against the violence which permeates Oz; Fr. Mukada gets entangled in hostage-takings, and Rev. Cloutier only barely survives an explosion after being walled up by some murderous inmates. Apart from these key figures, the show has also had appearances by a Catholic bishop, an African-American female minister (who happens to be the sister of the imprisoned imam), and a former priest incarcerated for pedophilia.

In many of these series, the strained relationship between the news media and the church are used as part of the plot. The very first episode of “Soul Man” had Fr. Weber attempting to undo the damage after telling a reporter of his personal intimate “urges.”<sup>20</sup> One of the most controversial episodes of “Nothing Sacred,” titled “HIV Priest: News at 11!” was held back from being broadcast, and never aired.<sup>21</sup> The television is constantly on for prisoners in Oz, and the religious ministers are often in the public eye over death penalty decisions, or violence.

The creator of “Oz,” Tom Fontana, has said he based the character of Sr. Peter Marie on his sister, who is herself a Catholic sister. As with films, there is considerable involvement by real clerics in television productions. As well as Bill Cain, the creator behind “Nothing Sacred,” the young minister of “Amen,” Clifton Davis, is himself an ordained minister in the Seventh Day Adventist church. Even when actors are not ordained, press reports seek connections. In an interview, Stephen Collins of “7th Heaven” revealed that he is happy to serve as a lay eucharistic minister for his Episcopalian parish.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps even more so than on the big screen, there is the desire to connect real with fictional life.

“Law & Order,” a long-running television drama (begun in 1990), has made its name by lifting head-

<sup>19</sup> Costas Mandylor as Franciscan Brother in “The agony and the ex-tacy” episode 4.1 (2001)

<sup>20</sup> “Urges and Lies,” episode 1.1 (1997)

<sup>21</sup> Anne Stockwell, “TV’s Holy Mess,” *Advocate*, issue 753, 17 February 1998, p 23

<sup>22</sup> Larry Sutton and Paula Yoo, “Rev’d Up,” *People*, vol. 51, issue 15, 25 April 1999, p 69

lines and translating them into semi-fictional hour-long episodes. While the original series continues, the idea has branched off into other series, including “Law & Order: Special Victims Unit” (dealing with sexual crimes), and “Law & Order: Criminal Intent” (focusing on a crime through the eyes of the perpetrator). In the ultimate turnaround, “Law & Order” creator Dick Wolf has helped launch “Crime & Punishment,” in which actual court cases are broadcast using the graphics and structure set out in the “Law & Order” series.



*Fr. Torres (Paul Calderon) protests the arrest of one of his parishioners by detectives Max Greevey (George Dzundza) and Mike Logan (Chris Noth).*

Set in New York City, all the dramas owe at least some of their success to modeling episodes on serious situations involving real-life characters, including both Protestant and Catholic leaders (including women religious). This has resulted in storylines involving:

- a former Catholic priest eventually brought to justice for sexually abusing altar boys<sup>23</sup>
- a Catholic nun up on similar charges by a young street-involved woman before being cleared<sup>24</sup>

- a Hispanic priest who is pushed to testify against a parishioner wanted for murder<sup>25</sup>
- another black pastor is shown ministering to a family and community injured when a promising young man dies as part of a drug ring<sup>26</sup>
- a priest who attempts to raise publicity for a young couple whose baby goes missing<sup>27</sup>
- a suspect minister of an apocalyptic sect
- a minister supporting a couple who refused traditional medical help for their child<sup>28</sup>
- a monsignor who runs a Catholic school and tries to protect a murderous student<sup>29</sup>
- a marginalized priest involved in extreme anti-abortion protests<sup>30</sup>
- a pastor who gets involved in racial strife after an African-American boy is killed by a Jewish driver in Harlem<sup>31</sup>
- a priest who defends a young man accused of murdering his upper-class girlfriend<sup>32</sup>

In some cases the writers for “Law & Order” have pressed on the time-worn plot device involving the sanctity of the confessional – Hitchcock’s *I Confess* (1953) being the most famous example – but in most others, the clerics are created as relatively full characters that “belong” within the New York slices of life.

The way in which the real Fr. Mikes and Fr. Rays interact with the media is the subject of the next portion of the report.

<sup>23</sup> Bill Raymond as Father Joe Krolinsky in “Bad Faith,” episode 5.108 (1995)

<sup>24</sup> Kate Burton as Sister Bettina and Aileen O’Kelly as Sister Kate in “Sisters of Mercy,” episode 2.39 (1992)

<sup>25</sup> Paul Calderon as Father Torres in “The Secret Sharers,” episode 1.18 (1991)

<sup>26</sup> Al Freeman Jr. appears as Reverend Thayer in “Poison Ivy,” episode 1.8 (1990)

<sup>27</sup> Michael Willis as Father Carner in “Angel,” episode 6.119 (1995)

<sup>28</sup> William Biff McGuire as Reverend Morley in “God Bless the Child,” episode 2.27 (1991)

<sup>29</sup> John Griesemer as Monsignor Whalen in “Kids,” episode 4.81 (1994)

<sup>30</sup> Edward Herrmann as Father Drew Seeley in “Progeny,” episode 5.125 (1995)

<sup>31</sup> Tony Todd as Reverend Ott in “Sanctuary,” episode 4.85 (1994)

<sup>32</sup> Luke Reilly as Father Gregory S. Jay in “Forgiveness,” episode 3.47 (1992)

# NEWS COVERAGE

On page 2 of the September 11, 2001, edition of the *St. Petersburg Times*, a column by Greg Hamilton started by asking “How would you like to be called reverend?”

Hamilton had received an e-mail offer from a “Minister Charles Simpson” inviting him to become a legally ordained minister within 48 hours for the low price of \$29.95. The offer included:

1. 8-inch by 10-inch certificate IN COLOR, WITH GOLD SEAL. (CERTIFICATE IS PROFESSIONALLY PRINTED BY AN INK PRESS).
2. Proof of Minister Certification in YOUR NAME!
3. SHIPPING IS FREE!

Hamilton considered what being a minister would offer: the ability to marry family and friends, baptize infants, forgive sins and visit correctional facilities. And \$29.95 seemed to be a good deal considering “most denominations require years of theological and divinity training and close examination by the hierarchy of elders before allowing a leader to fly solo. Simpson wraps all that up in two days. Why, it’s a miracle!”<sup>33</sup>

In the following day’s edition of the *St. Petersburg Times* and most other newspapers across the country, the cost of being an ordained minister would be valued as much, much higher. Stories involving clerics in the Florida paper were headlined: “Churches ease pain with prayer services,” “Nation’s shock, concern hit home,” “Sense of violation shrouds residents” and “Show of faith rises amid fear.”

There already has been and will continue to be much written about the coverage of the events beginning with the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on the morning of September 11, 2001, (too late for the *St. Petersburg Times’* editors to pull the Hamilton piece). The way in which journalists spoke of Islam and in many occasions attempted to inform and educate the general public about Muslim beliefs has been the focus of some attention. But there was also a sort of education which took place regarding the supposedly more familiar Christian community of pastors, priests, women religious and ministers. By looking at the daily coverage including these people between September 11 and October 11, 2001, certain types and traits of representation unique to this time period as well as those which were not tied to the events serve to illustrate core themes in the representation of Christian leaders in the news media.

<sup>33</sup> Greg Hamilton, “For \$29.95, you can marry, baptize, and forgive scams,” *St. Petersburg Times*, Sept. 11, 2001, p 2.

## METHODOLOGY

Key newspapers from around the country were chosen in order to get a sense of the representation of Christian leaders both in Washington and New York as well as locally. (*The New York Times*, *USA Today* and *Christian Science Monitor* were noted, but not included in most calculations, so as to concentrate on publications with a particularly high ratio of local news.)

The following 24 newspapers were tracked daily between September 11 and October 11, 2001 for stories including the words priest, pastor, minister, reverend, nun, bishop, monk, cardinal and pope:

<i>Arizona Daily Star</i>	<i>Milwaukee Journal Sentinel</i>
<i>Atlanta Journal-Constitution</i>	<i>Pittsburgh Post-Gazette</i>
<i>Baltimore Sun</i>	<i>Portland Oregonian</i>
<i>Boston Globe</i>	<i>Providence Journal</i>
<i>Buffalo News</i>	<i>Richmond Times-Dispatch</i>
<i>Cincinnati Post</i>	<i>Salt Lake Tribune</i>
<i>Dallas Morning News</i>	<i>Seattle Post-Intelligencer</i>
<i>Denver Post</i>	<i>St. Petersburg Times</i>
<i>Hartford Courant</i>	<i>Star-Ledger (Newark)</i>
<i>Houston Chronicle</i>	<i>Star-Tribune (Minnesota)</i>
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	<i>Times-Picayune (New Orleans)</i>
<i>Las Vegas Review-Journal</i>	<i>Washington Post</i>

Religion briefs or those with community bulletins were left out of the count.

Some of these papers are larger in size (circulation and pages) than others, and some clearly have larger numbers of reporters on hand, including those who specialize in reporting about religion. Instead of simply counting the number of articles which appear in each, it is better to consider the ratio of different types and elements of reporting in each.

Where possible, each story was coded for the denomination and gender of the Christian leaders involved. A similar exercise performed on coverage for the same 30-day period in 2000 allowed for comparison between reporting during a “normal” September and October.

## FINDINGS

Newspapers were extremely quick to recognize the role of Christian leaders within the crisis. Those papers which issued an extra edition on September 11 included ministers within stories headlined: “Religious leaders open churches for prayer services,” (*Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*) and “Churches schedule services; City’s clergy urge prayers for victims,” (*Houston Chronicle*).

The amount of reporting stayed unusually high for the next 30 days. For example, the *Los Angeles Times* during the same period in 2000 had an average of 1.6 stories each day, while in 2001, the number jumped to 2.8 stories each day. *The Washington Post* went from 1.9 per day in 2000 to 3.76 stories on average in 2001. These are sizeable increases. Before considering the content of the stories, a look at the gender and denominational make-up of the coverage is instructive.

The coverage was coded by including whether or not the content referred to the September 11 events and issues directly related (for example, the hostage taking of U.S. missionaries by the Taliban). These stories were noted as “WTC” (dealing with attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon), or “non-WTC.” Just over 60 percent of all stories indexed over the 30-day period involved the attacks, while the other 39.63 percent was in keeping with coverage usually involving Christian leaders.

Just under half (48.01 percent) of all the stories tracked involved Catholic leaders, followed by 20.59 percent with Baptists, and 11.31 percent Episcopalians. Further behind were Methodists (9.44 percent), Presbyterians (6.75 percent), Lutherans (5.61 percent), AME (2.52 percent), Congregational (2.44 percent), United Church (1.79 percent) and Assembly of God (1.30 percent). (Latter Day Saints appeared in 1.22 percent of the stories, mostly in the Utah newspaper.)

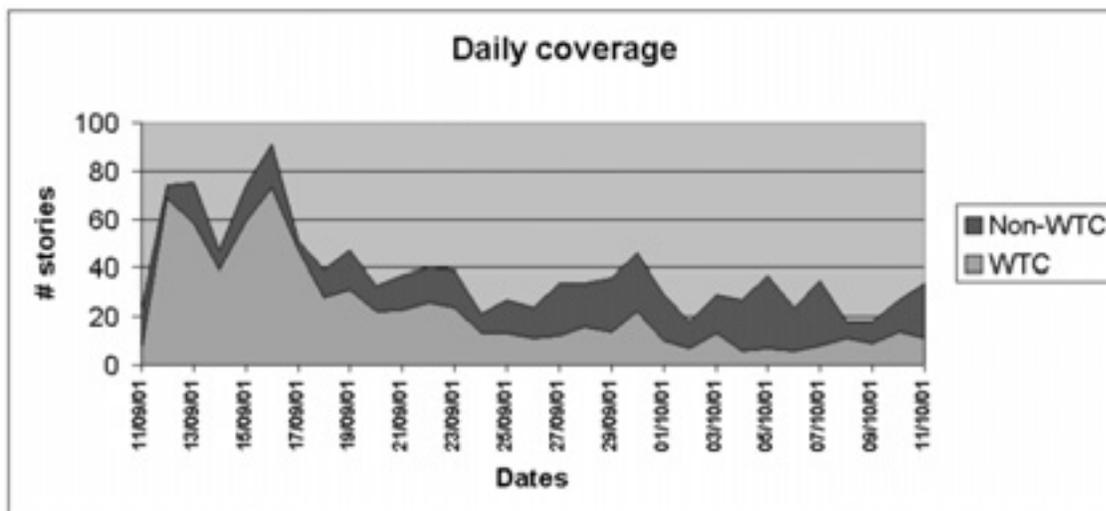
Of all the articles, stories involving solely male ministers log in at 77.79 percent, only female at 6.02 percent and those incorporating both men and women make up 11.72 percent of the stories noted. Although the numbers alone don’t indicate this, the big change in comparison to the same time period for the previous year were the number of female Christian ministers who appeared. Previously, the majority of stories involved either Catholic sisters, or an occasional AME bishop [Smith 2000].

While noting the balance between denominations, some of the content itself cautioned against denominational titles:

The Rev. Samuel Johnson Howard, vicar of the Episcopal Trinity Church Wall Street, about 300 yards from the twin towers, was with his wife and congregants when the trade center crumbled.

In a strange pilgrimage through the clouds of ash outside, Howard ministered to police and firefighters, many of whom were Roman Catholic.

GRAPH 7: RESULTS OF ONE MONTH, SEP 11 – OCT 11:



“To the first half dozen, I said, ‘You understand I’m an Episcopal priest,’ and they would say, ‘Father, I don’t care,’” Howard recalled. “I stopped saying it. I knew in the midst of that tragedy and the terror all around us, all the folks in the street wanted was someone to reassure them that God was with them.”<sup>34</sup>

When separating the stories about the attacks from those few which did not involve them, one finds that most of the reporting involving only female figures does not occur in direct relation to the attacks and their aftermath. Rather, when women are quoted or covered with regard to September 11, it is most often alongside male clerics. There were two particularly frequent types of reports which influence this result: first, the coverage of the September 14, 2001, ceremony from the Washington National Cathedral, where Jane Holmes Dixon, Episcopalian Bishop of Washington, joined Billy Graham, Nathan D. Baxter, Dean of the National Cathedral, Muzammil H. Siddiqi, Imam (Islamic Society of North America), Joshua O. Haberman (Rabbi Emeritus of Washington Hebrew Congregation), Kirbyjon Caldwell, (Pastor of Windsor Village United Methodist Church in

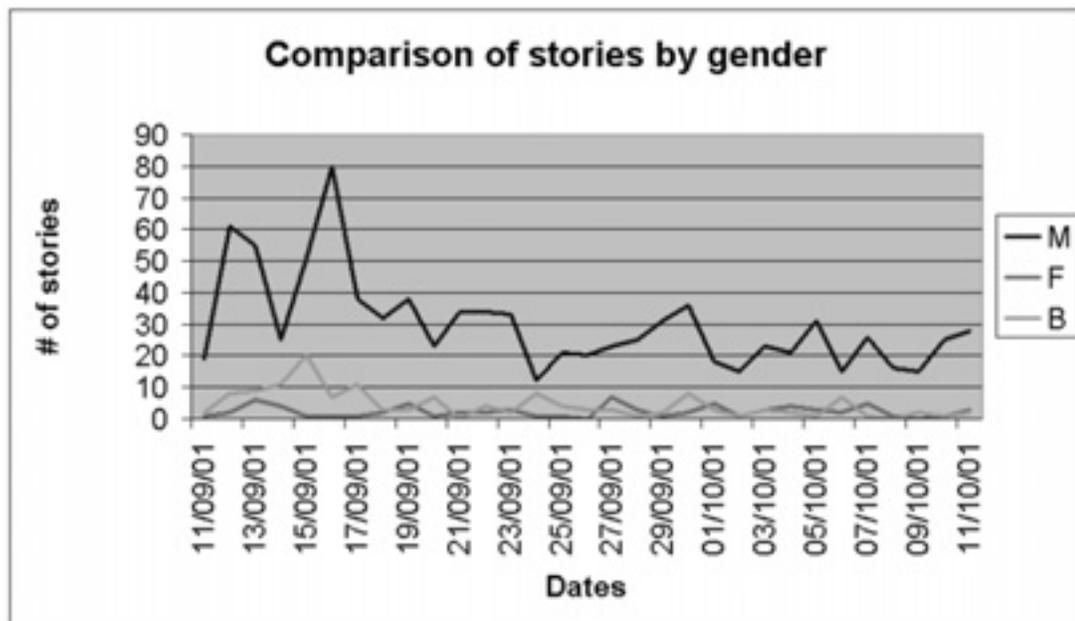
Houston) and Theodore Cardinal McCarrick, Catholic Archbishop of Washington.

The second type was the local story, where reporters were clearly sent out to poll local ministers as to their communities’ reactions and responses. Again, in comparing the number of female Presbyterian, Methodist, United Church of Christ, Episcopalian and Lutheran ministers who suddenly appear in print, one wonders if the reporters sent out on these stories “discovered” that there were female clerics in their midst.

There were still, however, far more stories which involved only male clerics. This may be explained in many ways: the familiarity of reporters with more established pastors and the traditional use of Catholic clerics as spokespeople, the numerical inequities at the church level as well as the numbers of men who occupy roles as bishops and cardinals.

In reviewing the content of the reporting during these 30 days, it is important to recognize that the traditional stories involving clerics did not disappear (in many cases in keeping with the topoi of “good works,” “hypocrisy” and “false prophecy” identified by Mark Silk in *Unsecular Media*), although as with all other

GRAPH 8: COMPARISON OF STORIES BY GENDER



<sup>34</sup> “Churches are tested by grief,” *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, 29 September 2001.

types of reporting, there was less room and appetite for pieces which did not involve September 11.

There were, however, theatre reviews which seemed to involve a number of Christian roles, including productions of *Nunsense*, a musical comedy of yet more singing nuns (*Times-Picayune*), *Party*, with a gay Catholic priest (*Times-Picayune*), *Joyful Noise* with Anglican leaders (*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*), *Nice People* with a Catholic novice (*Oregonian*), *God's Man in Texas* (*Cincinnati Post*) involving a younger and older Baptist pastor, *Jeffrey* (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*) with another Catholic priest, *Misgivings*, a one-man-as-a-Catholic-priest show (*Providence Journal*) and yet another Catholic priest in *Subway Farce* (*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*).

In theatres, critics were reacting to the American release of *Liam*, a Stephen Frears film written by Jimmy McGovern, who also penned *Priest*, which always was mentioned in the reviews. There was even a question in a syndicated Q&A column from a reader trying to remember the name of the series featuring the young Fr. Ray Reynaux!

Reports of criminal or inappropriate behaviour among Christian leaders also did not disappear:

- a South Boston Catholic priest was removed after charges of sexual abuse came to light (*Boston Globe*)
- a pastor and former youth basketball referee was charged after he allegedly slashed a coach (*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*)
- there was a shady tale of a lawyer who is also an ordained minister writing off expenses which might otherwise not be allowed for a lay person (*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*)
- a priest admitting to driving drunk (*Star-Ledger Newark*)
- a very public incident in which a Catholic priest who confessed to infidelity in print as “Father X” (*Los Angeles Times* September 14) went on to be removed from his parish, and identified by name (*Los Angeles Times* October 3)

Weekend features including profiles of church communities were printed, pastors continued to accompany and speak for the accused at court proceedings, priests were interviewed at the groundbreaking of new

schools, and ministers continued to organize meetings and activities to work on racial and policing issues, particularly in Cincinnati.

And ministers and sisters continued to die; 65 obituaries appeared during this time period, unconnected to the September 11 tragedies. In the previous year, this had been the source of much content. However, there also appeared a number of items applauding the presence of new clergy, including an Episcopalian parish in Florida which imported a new priest from England (*St. Petersburg Times*), while the ordination of Catholic priests made news in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* and *Dallas Morning News*.

But without doubt, it was the coverage of September 11 which shifted the usual representation of Christian leaders. In addition to the vast number of stories focusing on the pastoral efforts of religious figures, some stories portrayed pastors as vacationers:

Phil Popineau, a pastor from Antioch, Calif., said he was in line at the White House for a tour with his wife and four children when they were ordered out. “A few people started running,” he said, and then a security officer said, “Get out and get away as fast as you can.”

His 10-year-old daughter, Chelsea, said her father turned to her and said, “You’re in the middle of history.” Asked how she felt she responded, “Freaky, just freaky.”

Popineau’s wife, Barbara, cut off their daughter and said, “You should be just praying, not talking.”

The Popineaus said they were walking down the Washington Mall when a police officer on a bike shouted, “Another plane is five minutes out” as he directed people away from the Mall.

“Just get out of here,” the pastor said the officer yelled.

*Fears at home*

The California family members walked a block west and pulled out their tourist map to collect their bearings. Popineau realized they were parked a block from the White House. “We’re never going to get anywhere near there.”

The couple visited Israel in June. “We made sure we had a living trust set up before that trip,” the pastor said. “We never thought we had anything to worry about here in the states.” [“In the middle of history,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 12 September 2001]

Some reports placed ministers among the commuters stuck in airports, while others noted them as grieving family members. Among the passengers aboard American Airlines Flight 11 was David Angell and his wife. Angell was often noted as a producer of the comedy “Frasier,” as well as being the brother of Kenneth A. Angell, the Catholic bishop of Burlington, Vermont, who said his brother’s funeral mass.

Less well known or visible ministers were written about as the ones families waited with, and the ones sometimes sent to ground zero to aid in the search, as among those who waited in blood banks to donate, and those who wrote letters to newspapers (there were 12 letters noted here as having been signed by ministers, one of which was jointly signed by eight clerics).

Seldom have ministers of all stripes been as broadly presented as human beings with families, who also face the day-to-day exigencies of travel, or the sometimes conflicting requirements posed by duty to God, to family and to the job:

The Rev. Rob Taylor is torn between God and country.

Taylor, who was installed last year as pastor of St. Thomas Lutheran Church in Streetsboro, is a munitions systems specialist with the 910th airlift wing, an air force reserve unit of C-130 transport planes based outside Youngstown.

Taylor and members of his wing have been told to prepare for deployment as part of U.S. retaliation to the terror attacks.

“A year ago, I could have done this and gone into uniform and gone anywhere my country asked me,” Taylor said. “But how can I with any credibility preach Sunday after Sunday about Jesus, who tells me to love my enemies, and yet be part of a combat support unit?” [“Pastor-guardsman facing dilemma,” *Houston Chronicle*, 25 September 2001]

Taylor was one of the many pastors who were also noted as performing military service, although only one of a few who did not do so as a chaplain. A large number of stories included Navy, Army and Air Force chaplains.

Early reports from ground zero almost all incorporated stories of churches being opened to accommodate the suffering, whether victims were physically or emotionally hurt. A number of stories used the scene as encountered by a minister as the main lens through which to express the devastation. Many, including the one excerpted at length here, were particularly powerful:

At a service at St. Teresa of Avila in Summit, N.J., where he participated as a eucharistic minister, Father Ryan heard a Port Authority official call himself a bystander in the events of Sept. 11, a way to humbly separate himself from the working-class heroes among the cops and firefighters and ironworkers and search-and-rescue teams.

That was a perfect description, “bystander,” the priest thought, one that he would like to apply to himself. Still, he was doing what he was supposed to do. When he first returned to the site on Sunday the 16th and blessed a torso and teased the bucket-brigade firemen about smoking and passed out his little silver medals of St. Michael the archangel and St. Florian and let the cops vent about their fears and frustrations, he never felt more alive as a priest. Food exists to be eaten, he said; and priests exist to serve. The irony was not lost on him that his sense of worth was heightened by the proportion of loss around him.

Sunday the 16th was supposed to be a day of celebration for Father Ryan, marking his 25th anniversary as a Catholic priest. A festive program had been planned at St. Cecilia, with a visit from the archbishop of St. Paul-Minneapolis and music provided by the Cuchulainn, a local Irish bagpipe band in which Liam Callahan played snare drums. All scrapped and forgotten now.

It was his priesthood anniversary that had taken him down to Lower Manhattan in the first place on the morning of the 11th. He was a great admirer of Rudy Giuliani and a friend of First Deputy Police Commissioner Joseph P. Dunne, and he had arranged to go into town to get his picture taken

with the mayor at City Hall at 9:15 and then walk across to One Police Plaza to see the top cops.

Instead, from the time Lt. John Lyke picked him up at the Port Authority bus terminal at 8:35 that morning, he was caught up in the whirlwind. First, they sped down Ninth Avenue with siren blaring and parked near the site. Then, Lyke politely dumped him, saying he had rescue work to do. Seconds later, the priest looked up and saw the second plane hit the building. Like a hand gliding into a pile of whipped cream. He saw a man with a piece of metal in his back, moaning.

He was taken by another officer to police headquarters, then fled the building when they feared it, too, was a target. From there to Midtown, he walked, visiting three morgues and a convent over the next few hours. Finally, he made it across the George Washington Bridge and began hitchhiking home. No luck, even with his collar, until he took out a sheet of paper and scrawled “80 WEST” on it and a carpenter stopped and drove him all the way back to the rectory.

His black priest’s suit was a mess. When he took it to the dry cleaner the next day, he was overcome by guilt that his experience could so easily be washed away.

For the rest of that week, he wondered what happened to Lt. Lyke. He called police headquarters and combed the papers but could get no answer. Finally, he mustered the courage to return to the city on Sunday morning, and he talked his way back up to the 14th floor and Commissioner Dunne’s office. He was standing there in the conference room, chatting with a group of weary aides, when in walked Lt. Lyke. And when the good father caught sight of him, he blurted out in angry joy, “You [expletive]! I thought you were dead!” Everyone was silenced by the unexpected outburst, and then the laughter rippled and rolled and came gushing out in a great flood of release. It was just what everyone needed at the end of an unlaughable week: a priest swearing like that, and smiling as he swore. [“The days after, ‘Maybe Daddy fainted,’ a 4-year-old wished,” *Washington Post*, 30 September 2001]

Even from the other side of the country there were stories of Christian leaders serving as missionaries and care-givers on home ground, sending teams to give relief to the “God Squads” patrolling New York.<sup>35</sup>

While the vast majority of reporting had Christian figures portrayed in positive terms, the September 13 statements of evangelists Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson created much coverage. Appearing on the 700 Club, Falwell said:

the pagans, and the abortionists, feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way – all of them who have tried to secularize America – I point the finger in their face and say “you helped this happen.”

To which Pat Robertson replied:

Well, I totally concur, and the problem is we have adopted that agenda at the highest levels of our government. And so we’re responsible as a free society for what the top people do. And, the top people, of course, is the court system.

Both men later distanced themselves from the comments, and *USA Today* ran a letter of apology from Jerry Falwell on September 21. But the public response to the attribution of blame by Falwell, Robertson and by Rev. Ed Young, pastor of Second Baptist Church, (the largest church in Houston), who also suggested that a lack of faith had brought the tragedy on America, were widely criticized. Within articles as well as through letters to the editor, Christian leaders made it clear that they did not agree with the statements. Editorials gave voice to public anger:

Moreover, the Baptist Church at the very least should move to censure Falwell, whose latest example of political and religious insensitivity should now be embarrassing to even the more rigidly fundamentalist arms of the church. Liberty University should disassociate itself from this millstone of intolerance. The use of the title “Reverend” for such a person is not only a mockery to Christianity, but is blasphemous.” [“America’s religious fanatics,” *Cincinnati Post*, 20 September 2001]

This sentiment came at the same time that Rudy Giuliani, George W. Bush and Laura Bush were all

<sup>35</sup> “As reality sets in, ‘God Squad’ there to counsel the grieving / Members provide religious support,” *Houston Chronicle*, 17 September 2001 and “Oregon sends mental health help,” *Oregonian*, 18 September 2001, and “Oregonians in N.Y. give emotional first aid,” *Oregonian*, 20 September 2001.

being described not only as leaders or politicians, but as “pastors.”<sup>36</sup>

Others just had enough of the media attention given to Christian leaders:

To the editor:

It should surprise no one that the attack on the World Trade Center was done in the name of God. Religion is and always has been the root cause of most war, terrorism and death on this planet. Religion is the evil which brings out isolationist, selfish traits in all people.

I almost puked every time the media dragged another priest or fundamentalist preacher before the cameras this week. I realize most people would like to fool themselves into believing God is a benevolent being, but God, regardless of religious persuasion, has more blood on its hands than any other symbol mankind has ever invented. Terrorism and war will never end as long as man rejects reason and rationality in favor of religion.

Frank Boehnlein  
Goodsprings

[*The Las Vegas Review-Journal*, 14 September 2001]

There were several Christian leaders who died in the September 11 attacks: the Rev. Francis E. Grogan, 76, was aboard United Flight 175, en route to visit his sister in California. A passenger aboard American Airlines flight 11, Jeff Mladenik, 43, was usually listed as a businessman, but he was also an associate pastor at Christ Church in Oak Brook, Illinois.<sup>37</sup> Isaias Rivera, 51, survived the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center and had been honored as a hero for his actions on that day. But he would not be so fortunate in 2001; listed most often as a transmission engineer for WCBS, he was also a co-pastor at Jesus Cristo es la Respuesta, an evangelical community in Rahway.<sup>38</sup>

But of all of these, it was Father Mychal Judge who emerged as the key figure, not only among clerics, but

among the ranks of the fallen public servants, including the military, port authority, police officers and fire fighters who perished that day.

The Rev. Mychal Judge died giving a man last rites. The priest, a chaplain with the New York City Fire Department, had rushed to the World Trade Center. While tending the soul of a victim, he was crushed by falling debris.

Judge, 68, will be remembered Saturday in one of the first funerals since Tuesday’s tragedy. The church holds 800; it’ll be packed. “Father Mike” was the priest from central casting: white-haired, rosy-cheeked, “a map of Ireland on his face.”

That’s a description from his old friend Harry Ryttenberg, who sat Wednesday in Father Mike’s room at the St. Francis of Assisi Friary – a cell only 10 feet by 8 feet, with a desk, a chair, a couch that turned into a bed. Ryttenberg said the priest gave away almost all his possessions. He took seriously his vow of poverty.

“If he was alive today,” said Ryttenberg, “no doubt he’d say just put me in a cardboard box and plant me in the ground.”<sup>39</sup>

The death of Mychal Judge caught the spotlight for many reasons. His was one of the few bodies to be recovered on September 11, and there were reports that his death certificate was the first to be issued.<sup>40</sup> The photograph of his body being carried away ran around the world, a striking image long before his name or story were known. The extra edition of *Newsweek* used it on the back cover as well as on page 23, where its caption read: “Firemen carry an injured man who was overcome after the World Trade Center collapse.” As the story of his death emerged, his heroic actions – suffering injury apparently after removing his helmet while giving the last rites to another victim – heightened his presence in the evolving story. Finally, the outpouring of grief from the people he served cemented his part of the September 11 narrative.

<sup>36</sup> “Bush’s two tasks: lead, heal nation,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 14 September 2001, “Laura Bush, comforter in chief,” *Washington Post*, 19 September 2001

<sup>37</sup> “More stories of lives cut horribly short,” *USA Today*, 14 September 2001.

<sup>38</sup> “Family rooted in faith clings to hope - Perth Amboy man survived bombing in ‘93,” *Star-Ledger*, 27 September 2001

<sup>39</sup> “In Victims’ Deaths, a Wide Slice of Life; Only a Few Could Reflect on the End; Now Survivors Have Only Reflections,” *Washington Post*, 13 September 2001.

<sup>40</sup> “Goodbye and thank you,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 16 September 2001



*The photographic pieta that appeared in numerous publications: Fr. Mychal Judge being carried away from Ground Zero. Photo by: Shannon Stapleton, Reuters.*

As the background emerged, readers learned that Father “Mike” was a joyful man, ministering to firefighters, but also to parishes. He had become a minister-in-need to many following another disaster, the explosion of TWA Flight 800 in 1996, while a news photographer remembered receiving solace from him at the scene of daily tragedies. Many politicians and bureaucrats called him friend, and much notice was given to the fact that Hillary and Chelsea Clinton attended his funeral. His name appears throughout the 1,229 stories collected here, and often in surprising places. In a story about the Anabaptist response to the attacks and the military strikes which followed, Bruderhof pastor Johann Christoph Arnold called Judge one of his closest friends.

Judge and Arnold had traveled three times to Northern Ireland to rally Protestants and Catholics in terror-wracked neighborhoods to pray together for peace. They were scheduled to make a similar trip to Israel in October to work for reconciliation among Israelis and Arabs.

Anabaptists have a deep historical distrust of Catholicism because Catholics once burned them as heretics. But the Bruderhof was so moved by Judge’s faith that they asked him to celebrate a Mass at the Rifton Bruderhof for local Catholics.

“So the loss of Father Mychal was a very, very personal loss for our whole community,” Arnold said.<sup>41</sup>

Reports made it clear that this man had lived a heroic life – one out of central casting – and so his death was

not at all out of keeping with this real-life plot structure. An oft-repeated quote noted that it almost made sense that Judge should die along with so many fire fighters, as these men would need their chaplain to be with them in the afterlife.

Long after the memorial services, a column headed “Apparently gays can serve during war, but not peacetime” appeared in the October 10 edition of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. Susan Paynter decried the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” rule of the U.S. military, noting:

For a little hypocrisy on the home front try the fact that public officials, including the president, are busy appealing eloquently for fairness. They say that no Arab or Muslim should suffer from assumptions made about them because of racial, ethnic or religious identity. Americans should not be targeted because of who they are or how they look.

Meanwhile, they make assumptions about the courage, fitness and morality of gays.

Apparently, though, being gay didn’t keep rugby player and public relations exec Mark Bingham from being one of the heroes who attempted to overpower the hijackers aboard the United Airlines plane that crashed in Pennsylvania - sparing a city.

Apparently it didn’t impair David Charlebois, the co-pilot of the American Airlines plane that crashed into the Pentagon.

And, seemingly, the courage of Mychal Judge, the Franciscan priest who died administering to New York firefighters amid the ruins of the World Trade Center, was undiluted by the fact that he was gay.<sup>42</sup>

In all the reports indexed by this study, this was the first and only mention of this aspect of Fr. Judge’s life. His homosexuality has been reported in a few other publications, including *New York* magazine (“The Fireman’s Friar,” *New York*, November 12, 2001) and various gay publications and programs, but only much later (*The Village Voice* was among the first, including Judge’s recovery from alcoholism and his homosexuality in the September 19 – 25, 2001 edition).

Why, when readers were given so much personal information about Judge’s life, and that of other vic-

<sup>41</sup> “Pacifists, others talk of confusion, anger, forgiveness, defense,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 30 September 2001

<sup>42</sup> “Apparently gays can serve during war, but not peacetime,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 10 October 2001

tims, was this element of his being left out, particularly when he apparently had spent much of his time ministering to the gay community, including Dignity and AIDS groups?

In an article reviewing the coverage of religion following the attacks, Andrew Walsh rules out the possibility that mainstream journalists didn't know of his homosexuality, citing the pointed questions reporters from the gay press asked of celebrant Cardinal Egan following Judge's funeral.<sup>43</sup> It must be noted that nowhere was it suggested that Father Judge was not true to his vows of celibacy.

It may be that the excerpt given here from the *Washington Post* article of September 13 supplies the answer – Father Mychal Judge was the “casting central” priest – the one occupying the same series of subconscious headshots as Bing Crosby and Spencer Tracy. He was the real-life version of the good-to-the-core Irish-American priest from New York. Writers like Susan Paynter have argued that his heroic and somehow familiar role couldn't be made to jibe with his homosexuality.

The usual place for a gay priest would seem to be as a source of comic relief (Bruce McCulloch as Father Sean “Paddy” P. Starr in the mini-series “Further Tales of the City”) or more darkly, regardless of attempts to separate the notion that homosexuals are necessarily pedophiles, as a potential pederast, both in news reports as well as on-screen [Ohi 2000].

In November, after the period of time covered by this scan, Fr. Mychal Judge's fire helmet was given to Pope John Paul II, an act which angered many, while others saw it as a special honor to have the pope accept the gift.

Just as there is talk of rebuilding the World Trade Center, and as reconstruction of the Pentagon takes place, there will almost certainly be feature films and TV movies made chronicling the events of September 11. Already North American television audiences have seen *9/11* (2001), a documentary film by brothers Gedeon and Jules Naudet. In it, the French filmmakers capture the events in and around the World Trade Center in real time. And Father Judge is there, in the lobby of the building, dressed in hard hat and fireman's overcoat. One of the fire fighters, in a voice

over, describes how the chaplain was not his gregarious self that day, obviously pensive and standing quietly, presumably in prayer, as those assembled try not to concentrate on the sound of bodies hitting the pavement outside.

The documentary was first aired on March 10, 2002. Seeing Father Judge and the other firefighters in living, breathing color moments before their deaths is an eerie experience. With the knowledge of what had been written about these men, watching their final minutes is painful. While shooting the video, the cameraman notes that the chaplain is found prone, and describes how men struggling in the chaos take his body outside as they leave the building.

How Father Judge and the other ministers who served as ministers, died as victims, were denounced as divisive, triumphed as heroes, or simply admitted their faith was sorely tested will be portrayed in the future will be very telling. The cycle and exchange of such representations of this time by reporters and by scriptwriters and directors will be key in the continuing creation of the image of the American Christian leader.

It didn't take long for the pendulum of representation of Catholic clergy in the news to swing from a predominance of heroic tales, to those of criminal and immoral behavior. There would be just three months between tales of self-sacrifice and horrific abuse.

Although there were some stories of sexual abuse by clerics even during the month immediately following the attacks of September 11, the real heat was on when in January of 2002, the *Boston Globe* ran a series highlighting the history in the diocese. Soon, newspapers across the country were searching for stories in their own parishes, and as the reporting continued, it became clear that there was a pattern of moving problem priests not only around a diocese, but indeed, around the country.<sup>44</sup> Mark Silk notes that some of the discoveries were made in part because of journalists competing with each other to unearth stories and avoid being scooped [Silk 2002:1-2].

In many respects, the stories weren't new: individual cases had been reported previously. And the United States Church is experiencing what Catholic communities in Canada and Ireland have gone through in previous years. But the American situation generated

<sup>43</sup> Andrew Walsh, “Religion After 9-11: Good for What Ails Us,” *Religion in the News*, vol. 4, no. 3, Fall 2001

<sup>44</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the coverage of the sex abuse stories, see *Religion in the News*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Spring 2002.

a quick response from the Vatican, and a meeting to specifically discuss the situation, something not done in the Canadian or Irish cases.

In part, this may be the result of the fierce journalistic competition, as well as the use of the news media by victims and survivors who felt the secular press was the only way to cut through what they perceived to be years of secrecy and obfuscation by the Church. A number of newspapers ran letters to the editor from self-identified Catholics and non-Catholics as the stories continued to pile up. Such letters often make up significant religious content in newspapers, and while the influence of the editor selecting the correspondence must be taken into account, the feedback from readers can offer insight into the reception of reporting of religion [Smith 1997, 1999].

It is particularly telling, then, of the disputed relationship between the Catholic hierarchy and the secular press when Catholics who wrote critical letters published in the *World-Herald* in turn received letters from Omaha Archbishop Elden Curtiss scolding them for using the mainstream media to criticize his leadership. In one case, he assigned a penance to be performed by the letter-writer [Silk 2002:2].

In a June 13, 2002, presidential address delivered in front of the members of the news media, Bishop Wilton D. Gregory devoted considerable time speaking directly to reporters. After reassuring the assembled bishops that the media glare would soon be off as the synod went into camera, Bishop Gregory made a variety of apologies to Catholics, both lay and clerical, before addressing American journalists:

During the past five months the sexual abuse of children and young people, especially by priests, has been a focus of the national and local media. In my own many encounters with the media, I have been treated usually, if not invariably, with consideration. I have a great respect for the power of the media to do good. If, as seems to be the case, the current attention of the media has helped victims of abuse to come forward, this has been a great service. I am particularly pleased that the media have also given greater attention recently to the issue of the sexual abuse of children and young people as a societal problem.

But I ask the media to allow me a moment of complete candor. During these last months, the image of Catholic hierarchy in this country has been distorted to an extent which I would not have thought possible six months ago. Sad and disturbing facts, often long in the past, have been readily presented in ways that create an erroneous image of the Church in 2002 as neglectful and uncaring in a matter about which we Bishops have cared a great deal for many years now.

The advances we have made in trying to overcome the problem of the sexual abuse of children and young people have not been so quickly reported: more stringent screening of seminary candidates, seminary formation that makes healthy human development a major goal, and procedures to remove from ministry those who have proved a threat to children and young people.

I am not only proud to defend this body from the distortions; I do it as a matter of justice to set the record straight so that the work we Bishops will be doing today and tomorrow will be seen in its proper perspective – as an important piece of work that we have been doing together for twenty years. There has indeed been some very thoughtful media coverage and editorial analysis alongside the hysterical and distorted coverage, analysis which has provided real insight into the issues. We Bishops accept the challenge of this insightful coverage to do better in the fulfillment of our responsibilities. As we accept that challenge, I count on you, the media, to report fully and fairly on what we do these days and in the days and years to come.

When all is said and done, the Catholic Church in the United States remains the single largest private provider of services, care, formation, and education for children throughout this nation. And we do that service well, effectively, and from the hearts of very faithful people. You who serve in the media have challenged us Bishops well by calling us to better action in the fulfillment of our responsibilities. I extend the same courtesy to you and challenge you to do the same in the fulfillment of your own responsibilities. [Gregory 2002]

There are a number of particularly notable things about Bishop Gregory's statements. He actually acknowledges, if grudgingly, the secular media's role in giving victims the ability to seek redress, and even a prophetic function in calling Church leaders to do their duty. But he also suggests that too much time and space has been given to events in the past. It's difficult to know how journalists might have avoided this emphasis as so much of the scandal is based on tracing back decades of the Church's handling of abuse cases. But it may also be that the public and reporters drew on their experience of movie and television appearances of Catholic leaders, which in many cases refer back to even earlier incarnations. As I've discussed in the section dealing with films, religious representations often fall into the cinema's tradition of offering up nostalgic or revisionist portrayals.

It's also more than possible that Bishop Gregory and his brothers consider the coverage they've received as part and parcel of past and present representations in entertainment and news media. Is it always possible for the clerics to remember that specific journalists are responsible for specific reporting, or do they become part of the amorphous creature most often referred to as "the media"? Immersed in multiple mediums, it is often difficult to untangle the impressions gained through films which bleed through into our reading of the daily newspaper. And is it possible that news directors and journalists are influenced by their viewing of evil or at least secretive Catholic hierarchies in films like *The Verdict*, *Stigmata*, and *True Confessions*?

The desire not to cause or at least contribute to public scandal has often been cited by commentators during this waterfall of revelations. And it is here that the figure of Father Mychal Judge reappears.

After months during which his sexual orientation had been left to the gay press to discuss, the mainstream media's avoidance of the chaplain's homosexuality had become an issue for many. On October 22, 2001, the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association issued an Open Letter to U.S. News Organizations which began:

Dear Fellow Journalist:

Since the September 11 attacks, many of us have been touched by countless accounts of heroism. Americans learned about how ordinary people became extraordinary in a moment. We know about these people because journalists in print, online and broadcast have told their stories. We know much about their lives, families and friends and what made them special because those details were revealed in newspapers, magazines and on the air.

At least we know much more about the heterosexual heroes and victims.

But many Americans may be deprived knowing about the gay heroes. That is because some news organizations have selectively chosen to obscure or ignore the sexual orientation of some of those who also lost their lives.

Consider the story of Franciscan priest Father Mychal Judge, the chaplain of the New York Fire Department who was killed while administering the last rites to injured rescue workers at the World Trade Center. Although Father Judge was openly gay and often worked in the gay community, this fact went unreported in many stories generated by the mainstream press.

Some readers were angry that Judge's orientation had appeared in any coverage, regardless of how long after the events of September 11, feeling that the revelation detracted from his heroic actions and life of service. They would have preferred that the mainstream media abide by the church's insistence on not spreading scandal; was this kind of self-censorship the reason for the avoidance in the month following Father Judge's death? If so, it would be in keeping with Silk's thesis that the secular media in fact follow many of the implicit rules of institutional Christianity.

Once the sexual abuse scandal began making the front pages of papers across the country, any chance at leaving the fire chaplain's sexuality out was gone. In response to arguments that the Catholic rule of priestly celibacy was a contributing factor, some columnists, church leaders and analysts suggested that in fact it

was the presence of homosexual priests which was at the root of the pedophilia and sex abuse cases.

The Vatican's spokesman, Joaquin Navarro-Vallis was quoted as saying, "People with these inclinations just cannot be ordained... That does not imply a final judgment on people with homosexuality. But you cannot be in this field." (The comments sound lifted from the lips of *Mass Appeal's* Monsignor Burke.) In response, on the front page of the 2002 St. Patrick's Day edition of the *Bergen Record*, a New Jersey paper, Mike Kelly discussed "The Secret of Father Judge."

If Judge, 68 and a priest for some 40 years, had been defrocked merely because he was gay, New York's firefighters would have been deprived of their comforting chaplain. So would the families of those who died when TWA Flight 800 plunged into the Atlantic in July 1996. Judge offered free counseling for weeks at a Long Island motel.

Here in northern New Jersey, where Judge worked for almost 20 years, Catholic parishes in East Rutherford, Rochelle Park, and West Milford would have felt none of Judge's humanity, not to mention his spiritual guidance. In Manhattan, where he moved in 1986, all manner of ministries – the homeless, alcoholics, AIDS, to name a few – would have lost Judge's touch. (...)

Some of Judge's friends believe he should be declared a saint by the Catholic Church. A Hudson River ferry now bears his name, and the pope accepted his helmet as a memento from visiting New York firefighters.

But if Judge had somehow survived the collapse of the twin towers on Sept. 11, would the Vatican now be asking him to hang up his Franciscan robes and find a new job?

Not only has Father Judge's memory been invoked in response to statements linking priests and homosexuality with pedophilia, but also in relation to victims of September 11 who were unmarried. A bill named for the chaplain which would extend benefits to those named by an unmarried person stalled in June 2002. Rather than being apart from lay people who would be unmarried for other reasons, the priest was used as the standard-bearer for all those in similar situations.

But while the bill may have been named for Judge due to his heroism, his introduction to the newspaper reader almost 10 months later has changed:

As chaplain to the New York Fire Department, the Rev. Mychal Judge rushed on Sept. 11 to the World Trade Center. He died there, buried in debris while giving last rites to a firefighter.

Over the years, the gay Franciscan priest affectionately called "Father Mike" had garnered plenty of fans. But like nine public-safety officers killed in the line of duty on Sept. 11, there was one thing he didn't have: a child, parent or spouse.

Under current guidelines, Judge's two sisters – as well as others named by victims in their life insurance policies, including domestic partners - are not eligible for \$250,000 in federal death benefits.

As a result, legislators drafted a bill named for the beloved chaplain to extend the survivors' benefits to anyone who didn't leave behind a child, parent, or spouse. [Shelly Emling, "Sept. 11 benefits bill hits snag in house," *Palm Beach Post* (and others), June 6, 2002]

The heroic fire chaplain of September 11 now is also well-known as a "gay Franciscan." It remains to be seen if these two aspects of his being will meld in media memories, or whether they will always be presented as somehow oxymoronic.

"Silence" was the name of the third season finale of "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit," aired first by NBC on May 17, 2002. The show begins with a Catholic priest, Father Michael (Eric Stoltz), coming across the body of a murdered transsexual laid out in a ritual manner on the floor of a church, next to a burned out confessional. Smack dab in the middle of the real-life revelations, the writers of the show came



*Father Michael (Eric Stoltz) discovers a body in his church in "Silence."*

up with a plot involving elements from news stories mixed in with plot devices common to dramatic depictions of Catholicism: a suspect who dresses up as a priest (*We're No Angels, Sister Act*), a pastor who refuses to tell detectives what he knows, citing vows of silence (*I Confess*), and a sniff of the demonic in the use of Latin and arson, common to horror films.

The actors themselves contribute to this feeling of cross-pollination: the detectives consult psychologist Dr. George Huang, who not only sheds light on clerical abuse but accurately translates the Latin phrase scrawled next to the burned confessional. Huang is played by B.D. Wong, who many viewers will recognize as Fr. Ray Mukada of *Oz*. The suspect in the murder of the transsexual, Bobby Douglas (Sean Dugan), is found to be accepting payoffs to keep him silent about the sexual abuse he has suffered at the hands of a cleric. Dugan also appeared on *Oz* as a young convict who turns his back on Catholicism and Fr. Ray to join the evangelical community established behind bars. (One of the detectives, played by Christopher Meloni, has also done *Oz* time as a prisoner.) So it becomes very difficult in the viewer's mind to watch these actors without remembering their turns in earlier "crime and Catholicism" plots.

The "Law & Order" franchise is famous for both turning on a dime in order to use (exploit?) news stories to construct dramatic plots. But the writers are also well-known for introducing plot twists which turn the expected outcome on its head. In "Silence," Father Michael, a priest who has been moved from an earlier assignment after admitting that he watched pornography with young men, seems to fit exactly the type of priest reported on in current newspapers. But the writers turn expectations upside down when in the final scene of the show, it is revealed that Father Michael has been covering for the real perpetrator of the sexual abuse, the man who is now his Bishop (Patrick Collins as Bishop Mallinson). In so doing, the episode directly lays the blame at the feet of those which letter writers and analysts of the actual sexual abuse scandal identified as guilty.

The interconnectedness of news and entertainment media in forming views of Christian ministry may never have been so powerful as during the stories of September 11 and sexual abuse which has preoccupied so much media time in 2001 and 2002, and there is no sign of a real-life season finale yet.

# CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

As with so many other aspects of American life, the events of September 11, 2001, have affected the way in which Christian leaders have been portrayed in the news media. It remains to be seen how long these effects may last; will reporters turn more often to female clerics for quotes and comments now that they know they exist? Will journalists appreciate the human dimension of all ministers, namely that they too have families, even if only in the extended and not nuclear sense? That they can be heroic as well as criminal? Or that they too can be stymied when asked where God is in the face of evil, but continue to serve in faith? In this, there was no less a public figure than Billy Graham, “the aged pastor of American official life,” admitting in the Washington National Cathedral that sometimes there are no easy answers.<sup>45</sup> These are fair questions to pose of journalists, but there are accompanying questions of religious leaders.

Are ministers willing to let a reporter learn more about them than their educational background and when the next service will be held? Will struggles to care for people be open for discussion, both in terms of personal cost to family life as well as to the basic toll on one’s physical, emotional and financial self?

One of the key findings of this study was the interconnectedness of Christian leaders and those who create representations of them for mass consumption. An “us-them” model is simply inaccurate. There are too many examples of shared stories and even shared vocations between religious and “secular” communicators. As Clifton Davis of “Amen” has said, “Regardless of the industry, we must own up to our own responsibilities; I don’t see anything wrong in my going back into show business and being a Christian.”<sup>46</sup>

African-American ministers seem to have much less difficulty melding such dual identities. In many, many instances, well-known figures in one field are also Christian leaders, although not always acknowledged as such. And this “mufti” is sometimes appreciated, as George Foreman, pastor of the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ in Houston noted in an *Ebony Man* interview:

***Ebony Man:*** Why don’t your television colleagues ever refer to you as the Rev. George Foreman? Why doesn’t any news medium, for that matter, use the word reverend in referring to you?

***George Foreman:*** Because I prefer that. The one thing I was born with was the name George. I can never lose that. And the other thing is where titles sort of came along like champ George, heavy-weight champion of the world George, and all those things, they’re pretty much titles that people give you. You can easily lose them. But my name is what my mother gave me, and I can never lose it. So people would say ‘What should I call you, George or Reverend George?’ I’d say ‘Just don’t call me too late for dinner.’<sup>47</sup>

Imagine if Christian leaders regularly made the top year-end lists of publications like those found in *People* magazine? And yet, consider “The 56 most intriguing Blacks of 2001,” published by *Ebony*. Among them are these four:

- William Gray III, ordained Baptist minister, former politician and president of the United Negro College Fund
- Bishop T.D. Jakes, presiding over Dallas’ Potter’s House church (with a note that he and his wife live in a \$1.7-million mansion)
- Donnie McClurkin, gospel artist and newly ordained pastor
- Rev. Al Sharpton, activist whose weight loss and change in garb from “gaudy gold” to “power suits” is noted<sup>48</sup>

The importance of recognizing the inter-related nature of news and popular visual entertainment is also important. For example, consider again the gender findings of the feature film and 30-day news scan. When considering the percentage of releases/stories which involved either male clerics or female clerics alone, or appearing together:

<sup>45</sup> “Congress approves use of military force,” *Washington Post*, 16 September 2001.

<sup>46</sup> M.G. Stoddart, “Amen’s Clifton Davis a reverend for real,” *Saturday Evening Post*, Jul/Aug 1990, vol. 262, issue 3

<sup>47</sup> “George Foreman,” *Ebony Man*, November 1993, vol. 9, issue 1, p 18

<sup>48</sup> “The 56 most intriguing Blacks of 2001,” *Ebony*, November 2001, pp 53-100.

**Feature Films:**

Male: 78.6 percent

Female: 9.8 percent

Both: 10.7 percent

**News Scan:**

Male: 77.8 percent

Female: 6.0 percent

Both: 11.7 percent

Despite important differences, including the fact that most women on celluloid are Catholic nuns, and most in the news scan were ordained ministers, the ratios are exceptionally similar.

Over and over again, commentators noted the strangely cinematic way in which the September 11 attacks took place, comparing the collisions and destruction to something out of a film. This comparison was certainly carried over to the descriptions of some of the Christian leaders, noted most clearly in the case of Father Mychal Judge. But there were other mentions in analysis and commentary. For example, in an opinion piece appearing in the September 22 edition of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the writer takes Falwell and Robertson to task, including a reference to the John Huston film, *The Night of the Iguana*.<sup>49</sup> Reporters swim in the same media mix as directors and screenwriters.

It would be interesting to get a sense of the type of media those who enter seminaries and formation programs consume. One can get a sense from ratings systems and circulation numbers what the general populace watches, hears and reads; is there a difference among the would-be ministers and religious sisters? Is there a difference not only in what they consume, but in how they relate the content to the other parts of their lives? In the movies, there is evidence of self-conscious comparisons; in *Mass Appeal*, Father Farley introduces his young, hot-blooded deacon to the congregation as a new “James Dean,” and later suggests that the collection plate is the Nielsen ratings system by which the priest can judge the success of his sermon. In reporting about September 11 and the Falwell/Robertson comments, it was clear that reporters and analysts knew their movie analogies. Studies being conducted on audience reception – and more importantly – interaction with media narratives might point the way for those wishing to see if there are ways to understand if not influence the cycle.<sup>50</sup>

The emergence of new interactive and converging technologies must also be considered. Video games are being created using characters and stories from other media, and now vice versa. The movie *Super Mario Bros.* (1993), created on the basis of the popular video game, is part of this study by virtue of having nuns listed in the credits.

Already, scholars have pointed to the intersection of “cocooning” technologies like the VCR and the drop in civic engagement. How do these same technologies affect communal religious belief and worship/ritual? Rather than simply a turning away from organized or institutional religion, is it possible that what goes on in America’s home theaters and media rooms is akin to the home church phenomenon? Before dismissing this idea, it should be remembered that on many of those television screens appears a dad who just happens to be a pastor and whose ministry is more often than not directed internally to the needs of his family (“7th Heaven”).

But movies will continue to be important for the same reason that major traditional news outlets continue to count amidst a proliferation of specialty television channels and independent online sites: as an agenda-setter. With the amount of money still involved in producing a feature film, such productions will continue to have cachet. As Sklar writes of feature films in the age of spinoff merchandising: “Movies were more important than ever as detonating points, bursts of creative energy out of which flowed stories, characters and images that could survive the trip and end up at new destinations transformed into video games, theme park attractions, clothing logos, toys and dolls” [Sklar 1997:341]. Will movies operate as a starting point for those planning to enter the ministry? For those ‘marketing’ or communicating the message of ministry?

Finally, the potential for improved relations among journalists, entertainment creators and Christian leaders must be recognized. Some of the best reporting of the tragedy took place by listening to and recording sermons (including investigations into how a minister finds the right words to say<sup>51</sup>), viewing politicians as people of faith looking for guidance to pastors, and by following the “God Squad” at ground zero, as well as at the local town hall.

<sup>49</sup> “Attacks weren’t God’s vengeance,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 22 September 2001.

<sup>50</sup> For example, see the Symbolism, Media and the Lifecourse project being conducted by Stewart Hoover and his team at the University of Colorado [http://www.colorado.edu/Journalism/MEDIAALYF/].

<sup>51</sup> “Our prayers: Pastors seek answers for Sunday,” *Cincinnati Post*, 15 September 2001.

Some of the most powerful and even popular portrayals of Christian leaders take place when stories are modelled on real people, and/or when created by or in co-operation with real clerics. Robert Duvall's magnificent *The Apostle* would not have been as alive without the presence of Prophet Carl D. Cook as a Preacher, Reverend Chili Graham, Reverend Bobby Green, Reverend Steve White, Sister Fay Winn and Reverend Charles Johnson as "Tag Team Preachers," Reverend Daniel Hickman as "Flashback Preacher," and Sister

Jewell Jernigan as Sr. Jewell. *Romero* and *Boys Town* would hardly be believed except for the fact that they are based on real people. *Dead Man Walking* and *The Hoodlum Priest* would be much different films without the co-operation of their real-life heroes.

The potential for realizing the media creators' desire for a great story with the Christian leaders' desire to touch and care for God's people should be anything but mutually exclusive.

# APPENDICES

## CONTENT TABLES

TABLE 1: OF 201 U.S. TOP-GROSSING MOVIES, 6.5 PERCENT OF TOP GROSS APPEAR IN STUDY

TITLE	YEAR	GENRE	CHARACTERS NOTED FOR STUDY:	OTHER TOP GROSSING FILMS RELEASED SAME YEAR, AND THE BEST PICTURE OSCAR
<i>The Sound of Music</i> Won Best Director, Best Film Editing, Best Music, Best Picture, Best Sound	1965	Musical	Julie Andrews as Maria (novice), Peggy Wood as Mother Abbess, Anna Lee as Sr. Margaretha, Portia Nelson as Sr. Berthe, Marni Nixon as Sr. Sophia, Evadne Baker as Sr. Bernice	<i>Doctor Zhivago</i> Oscar to: <i>The Sound of Music</i>
<i>The Exorcist</i> Won Best Sound, Best Writing (Screenplay based on another medium)	1973	Drama	Max von Sydow as Fr. Lankester Merrin, Jason Miller as Fr. Damien Karras, Wallace Rooney as Bishop Michael, Roy Cooper as Jesuit Dean, Reverend Thomas Bermingham as President of University (and technical advisor)	<i>American Graffiti</i> <i>The Sting</i> Oscar to: <i>The Sting</i>
<i>Superman II</i>	1980	Adventure	Melissa Wiltsie as Nun	<i>Nine to Five</i> <i>The Empire Strikes Back</i> <i>Stir Crazy</i> Oscar to <i>Ordinary People</i>
<i>Tootsie</i> Won Best Supporting Actress (Lange)	1982	Comedy	Richard Whiting as Priest	<i>E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial</i> <i>An Officer and a Gentleman</i> <i>Rocky III</i> Oscar to <i>Gandhi</i>
<i>Ghost</i> Won Best Supporting Actress (Goldberg), Best screenplay (Rubin)	1990	Comedy	Sam Tsoutsouvas as Minister, Sondra Rubin and Faye Brenner as Nuns at St. Joseph's Shelter for the Homeless	<i>Dances with Wolves</i> <i>Dick Tracy</i> <i>Die Hard 2</i> <i>Home Alone</i> <i>The Hunt for Red October</i> <i>Pretty Woman</i> <i>Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles</i> <i>Total Recall</i> Oscar to: <i>Dances with Wolves</i>
<i>Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves</i>	1991	Action	Michael McShane as Friar Tuck, Harold Innocent as Bishop	<i>The Addams Family</i> <i>Beauty and the Beast</i> <i>City Slickers</i> <i>Hook</i> <i>The Silence of the Lambs</i> <i>Sleeping with the Enemy</i> <i>Terminator 2: Judgment Day</i> Oscar to <i>The Silence of the Lambs</i>
<i>Sleeping with the Enemy</i>	1991	Drama	Graham Harrington as Minister	
<i>Sister Act</i>	1992	Comedy	Whoopi Goldberg as Deloris Van Cartier/ Sr. Mary Clarence, Maggie Smith as Mother Superior, Kathy Najimy as Sr. Mary Patrick, Wendy Makkena as Sr. Mary Robert, Mary Wickes as Sr. Mary Lazarus, Ellen Albertini Dow and Carmen Zapata and Pat Crawford Brown and Prudence Wright Holmes and Georgia Creighton and Susan Johnson and Ruth Kobart and Susan Browning and Darlene Koldenhoven and Sheri Izzard and Edith Diaz and Beth Fowler as Choir Nuns, Rose Parenti as Sr. Alma, Joseph Maher as Bishop O'Hara, Eugene Greytak as Pope	<i>Aladdin</i> <i>Basic Instinct</i> <i>Batman Returns</i> <i>The Bodyguard</i> <i>A Few Good Men</i> <i>Home Alone 2: Lost in New York</i> <i>A League of their Own</i> <i>Lethal Weapon 3</i> <i>Unforgiven</i> <i>Wayne's World</i> Oscar to <i>Unforgiven</i>

TITLE	YEAR	GENRE	CHARACTERS NOTED FOR STUDY:	OTHER TOP GROSSING FILMS RELEASED SAME YEAR, AND THE BEST PICTURE OSCAR
<i>Forrest Gump</i> Won Best Actor (Hanks), Best Director, Best Effects (Visual), Best Film Editing, Best Picture, Best Writing (based on another medium)	1994	Drama	Lonnie Hamilton as Minister	<i>Clear and Present Danger</i> <i>Dumb &amp; Dumber</i> <i>The Flintstones</i> <i>Interview with the Vampire</i> <i>The Lion King</i> <i>The Mask</i> <i>Maverick</i> <i>Pulp Fiction</i> <i>The Santa Clause</i> <i>Speed</i> <i>True Lies</i> Oscar to <i>Forrest Gump</i>
<i>Face Off</i>	1997	Action	Father Michael Rocha as Priest	<i>Air Force One</i> <i>As Good as it Gets</i> <i>Batman &amp; Robin</i> <i>Con Air</i> <i>Contact</i> <i>George of the Jungle</i> <i>Good Will Hunting</i> <i>Liar, Liar</i> <i>The Lost World: Jurassic Park</i> <i>Men in Black</i> <i>My Best Friend's Wedding</i> <i>Scream 2</i> <i>Titanic</i> <i>Tomorrow Never Dies</i> Oscar to <i>Titanic</i>
<i>Deep Impact</i>	1998	Drama	Frank Whiteman as Priest	<i>Armageddon</i> <i>A Bug's Life</i> <i>Doctor Dolittle</i> <i>Enemy of the State</i> <i>Godzilla</i> <i>Lethal Weapon 4</i> <i>Mulan</i> <i>Patch Adams</i> <i>The Prince of Egypt</i> <i>The Rugrats Movie</i> <i>Rush Hour</i> <i>Saving Private Ryan</i> <i>Shakespeare in Love</i> <i>There's Something About Mary</i> <i>The Truman Show</i> <i>The Waterboy</i> <i>You've Got Mail</i> Oscar to <i>Shakespeare in Love</i>
<i>Analyze This</i>	1999	Comedy	Drew Eliot as Priest	<i>American Pie</i> <i>Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me</i> <i>Big Daddy</i> <i>The Blair Witch Project</i> <i>Double Jeopardy</i> <i>The General's Daughter</i> <i>The Green Mile</i> <i>The Matrix</i> <i>The Mummy</i> <i>Notting Hill</i> <i>The Sixth Sense</i> <i>Star Wars: The Phantom Menace</i> <i>Stuart Little</i> <i>Tarzan</i> <i>Toy Story 2</i> <i>Wild Wild West</i> <i>The World is Not Enough</i> Oscar to: <i>American Beauty</i>
<i>Runaway Bride</i>	1999	Comedy	Donal Logue as Priest Brian, Tom Mason as Final Wedding Pastor	

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# A STUDY IN AMBIVALENCE

A Response by Kenneth A. Briggs, former religion writer for *Newsday* and the *New York Times*, now a freelance writer and adjunct professor of religion and English at Lafayette College.

Never before has visibility yielded greater status, money and power than it has since the advent of movies, television and better-than-life photography. In a culture that hungers for a competitive edge, achieving recognition often spells the difference between success and failure. The race for favorable product placement in the public mind covers broad territory. Corporations most obviously spend billions on marketing. Less overtly, colleges and universities play a similar game as they maneuver to climb a few notches in the annual *U.S. News* “best college” rankings in hopes of being “seen” as more desirable. Lawyers, as well, look to attract clients by going public with television and print ads that show them bestowing assurance and big jury awards.

Visibility, therefore, has increasingly influenced our perceptions not only of show business figures and politicians but causes and personalities in nearly every aspect of American life. America is a perpetual marketing sweepstakes.

Religious leaders – with some notable exceptions – are bystanders to this publicity stampede. Yet they cannot avoid being caught in its undertow, willingly or not. Their presence or absence in the print and visual media provides a rough index of where they get positioned by those who produce the news and entertainment. As Professor Joyce Smith shows in this helpful report, the history of these depictions is a study in ambivalence at best. While ministers, priests and nuns appear in the casts of a small but relatively steady percentage of films (the peak was 6 percent in 1993 according to the study), most of these portrayals are stick figures, clergy without names or denominational identity who do weddings and funerals. Ordained women are practically non-existent on the big or little screen; on the television side, when religious women do make an entrance, most of the time they are in the company of a male cleric, suggesting the need of a chaperone.

Prof. Smith’s study asserts that the overall treatment of “religious leaders” – a designation that allows her to increase the number of women by including non-ordained nuns – are treated shoddily by movies and much of television. Such leaders don’t show up much and when they do, she concludes, they are likely to be rendered as anonymous, irrelevant or stupid. There were the alleged glory days, when Spencer Tracy and Bing Crosby charmed audiences in impeccable clerical garb, and occasional entries explore the real religious world. Among recent surprises have been Robert

Duvall’s *The Apostle*, an in-depth, moving portrayal of a Pentecostal preacher, *Mass Appeal* about the difficulties between younger and older priests, and *Romero* which portrays the courage and martyrdom of the late archbishop of San Salvador. But generally the big stars have disappeared from such roles, and the roles themselves shrink into bit parts.

Prof. Smith confirms some common hunches. For instance, film clergy are more likely than not to sport clerical collars. By default, therefore, Roman Catholicism has a greater market share. The visual media like uniforms and recognizable symbols. The weight and pervasiveness of Catholic tradition may also make a difference. Rightly or wrongly, Catholicism has an aura of pedigree and authenticity that impresses producers and directors who think in terms of greatest impact. The “one true church” concept lives on, even though Vatican II put it to rest. Likewise, she offers proof that male clerics get cast in dramas while women (*Sister Act*, *A Mule for Sister Sarah*) become pigeonholed in comedies.

Other findings are more surprising. Religious leaders are most likely to show up in horror films, Prof. Smith found, exorcising the demons. Television and some films, on the other hand, are fairly adept at mirroring the real life complexities of Protestant ministers.

The number of films that had credited actors playing religious leadership (the study’s standard for inclusion) shot up in the 1990s according to Prof. Smith and she naturally wonders why without coming up with an answer. She suggests an anomaly. Why would such an increase (from roughly 2 percent to 6 percent) occur during a decade of decline in church attendance? The answer appears implicit in the question. Precisely because religion had begun to fade from public interest it became more exotic, therefore even more interesting subject matter. It would be interesting to know whether any correlation had been found between “religious” movies and church attendance in the past.

By and large, the study seems to indicate that religion gets a better shake on television than in the movies. While television may be a more ephemeral medium, its ability to reach some depth in household drama may better serve religion’s interests. Several excellent programs are cited. Among them: “Nothing Sacred” and “Oz,” both based on Roman Catholics, “Amen,” about a Seventh Day Adventist minister, and “Soul Man,” about a mainline Protestant priest and his

family. Many of the most popular television series – “Law and Order,” “Northern Exposure,” etc. — have also featured religious people from time to time.

The analysis of newspaper coverage of religious leaders is an awkward fit. It compares how much religion reporting was done during September, 2001, when the country was in the throes of 9/11, compared to amount which appeared the previous September. Clearly, the aftermath of the tragedy produced many more stories about clergy helping in a variety of ministries. Nothing much to conclude here. There was more coverage in 2001 but there is no grist for speculation of analysis.

It is the visual world, of course, that matters in this study. How it matters is something of a puzzle. If counting the appearances of Christian leaders is meant to demonstrate something, it is far from obvious what that might be. Perhaps the object is to find a “visibility” yardstick to show how religion is doing in public perception but such conclusions are not drawn. In religion’s own terms, how does visibility relate to impact? Is this yet another instance of churches being co-opted by the culture? If drug company X receives a payoff for placing its sinus remedy high on the visibility charts, what does religion gain, if anything? In other words, why is it important whether religious figures turn up in 50 movies this year or none? Is it somehow important to the profession, or the church, or both?

Let’s assume that churches see films and television as a conduit for their evangelistic message. Then it would certainly seem to matter. In that case, why would the study be confined to the rather awkward bunching of ordained clergy and non-ordained women? Why not count film characters who impart a genuinely “Christian” or “religious” message? One example is “The Simpsons.” The study focuses on Rev. Lovejoy as a buffoonish religious leader but, in keeping with the methodology, leaves out, in my view, the show’s true Christian exemplar, Marg Simpson. Her impact as a saintly soul immersed in real life far outweighs either Lovejoy’s or Flanders’s.

Such examples of what Karl Barth called “anonymous Christians” – and other lay people not so anonymous — are plentiful. Characters in movies who bear no clerical garb and have no official standing act out lives of Christian heroism in day-to-day struggles. The total effect of a film would appear to count much more than its clerical presence (in a related context, what would become of Moses?). By looking only at designated leadership, the dichotomy between clergy and lay is reinvented. No research can do everything, and a narrow view can serve its own purposes. But, absent an interpretive framework with

which to evaluate the data, a larger context that looks at the total Christian (or other) effect of a work seems worth proposing.

Straight numbers regarding religious faces on the screen can also, without further refinement, place too much emphasis on the statistics and tend to give all films equal value. The religious value of a particular film is, naturally, open to debate. But no one would disagree that some films pack a much greater religious punch than others. Favorites would include films featuring religious leaders, those largely without them, and still others where they play peripheral roles. How would it be possible to consider the religious impact of a movie or television series apart from the clerical-lay distinctions? Prof. Smith already crosses that line by including nuns who, by definition, aren’t ordained. What about the others? What if it turns out that the major figures in films over the years were not clergy?

A film such as *Jesus of Montreal* where a cleric is left aside while a group of struggling actors discover Jesus, or a television series such as “Nothing Sacred” illustrate the religious power of a total production, whether it centers on secular seekers (*Jesus*) or priests and nuns (“Nothing Sacred”). The works of Ingmar Bergman occasionally included a member of the clergy – his father had been one – but in most cases they were almost beside the point. At the heart of Bergman’s creations lay theological questions whether posed by a pastor or a pedestrian. One of his greatest picture *The Seventh Seal* puts those eternal issues in the hands of a knight returning from the Crusades.

As a rough barometer, Prof. Smith’s study delivers some appearance data, the value of which is, in one respect, disheartening. It is sobering evidence that the clergy in America has become largely nameless and faceless. From the days when the parson was “The Person” in the British parish, it would appear that the leadership in Catholic and Protestant churches is experiencing a serious loss of public identity. Too much could be made of this, of course. From the tinsel studios of Hollywood, the realities of church ministry can seem distant and easily dismissed. It may make no difference to religious groups themselves whether they become more or less visible. They may reject the driving force of recognition and power and status. Their relative absence from what the public watches on television and movie screens does, however, raise an apparent paradox. What does it say about the consciousness of a nation calling itself religious to see that consciousness reflected back to itself with so little religion?

# METHOD, APPROACH AND SIGNIFICANCE

A Response by Stewart M. Hoover, Ph.D.

Professor of Journalism and Mass Communications, University of Colorado at Boulder

As part of a larger research project on the vocation of ministry, Joyce Smith was commissioned to carry out a study of the image of ministry as portrayed in mass media. As the media play an increasingly important role in public discourse and public perceptions across a range of social and cultural spheres, such a study makes sense. Any analysis of the conditions surrounding readiness and the choice of professional ministry as a career must take into account the general public perception of that profession, its social attributes, and its role.

I would like to address two separate but related issues in this commentary: first, the approach and methodology Dr. Smith employed; and second, the significance of her findings.

First, on **method and approach**: Within the fields that engage in the scholarly study of the media, there are two major research paradigms: the social-scientific, and the humanistic. Each is generally considered valid scholarship, and a range of significant scholarly discourse has been devoted to these directions and the kinds of questions best approached by each. The nature of this discourse would be familiar to other fields of study as well. Within the social-scientific paradigm, there is, further, the familiar division between quantitative-objectivist, and qualitative-interpretivist approaches. In general, the scholarly consensus within media studies is that the method to be employed depends on the phenomena and questions under study. The relevance here is that Dr. Smith has taken an approach that is quite legitimate and conventional—that of choosing a combination of methods appropriate to the somewhat complex question under discussion.

The complexity arises from a number of directions, some implicit and some explicit in this work. Among the implicit issues are the subtle and nuanced nature of the phenomenon of religion as a symbol system within media content, the also-subtle-and-nuanced differences and similarities between representation and cultural articulation in different media, and the as-yet-unresolved-questions of the “effects” of various media on various populations. On the explicit side is the very real scholarly condition that each of the media she must analyze—television, journalism, and film—has historically been subject to its own traditions of scholarship, with television more com-

monly subjected to quantitative social analysis, film more commonly looked at humanistically, and journalism somewhere in between these two. An even more important explicit issue is the fact of the events of September 11, 2001, and their effects on religion and media and relations *between* religion and media.

All of this is to say that Dr. Smith might well have chosen a single methodological approach (with enough resources, for example, a quantitative content analysis might have been undertaken) but chose instead—wisely—a more synthetic interpretation bringing together both social and humanistic analysis. It goes without saying that there are sacrifices in any methodological choice. What one approach lacks in depth it makes up for in breadth, etc. What Dr. Smith has presented is an analysis that makes a great deal of its sources, both scholarly background and data, and weaves them into a humanistic/historical evaluation of the situation with media representations of ministry that is provocative, informative, and even—to an extent—comprehensive. What she is able to say is that the situation is more complex than we might think. First, while anecdotal evidence might have predicted that ministry is relatively under-represented in media content, and that when present, is seen in an ineffectual or even negative light, Smith’s analysis shows that that is too simplistic a picture. Second, that whatever picture of ministry emerges is contingent on social, historical, and demographic forces. Third, that a good deal of the motive force in the construction of the texts and narratives of the media is rooted in *aesthetic* and (to an extent) *cultural* rather than *social* logics. Fourth, that the emergent “representation” exists in a variety of locations in the culture and in its discourses, and that a unitary theory of “media effect” in this area ignores that for different populations at different times, the picture takes on different characteristics.

All of this might go without saying, but the history of media research has shown, time and again, a tendency for scholarship devoted to media to be drawn toward analyses that are over-generalized and overly deterministic. Dr. Smith rightly avoids this trap by lodging her analysis in this more humanistic framework, and to good effect. At the very least, it provides a rich exploratory background from which other kinds of more focused studies (including such things as systematic content analyses) might be developed.

This speaks as well to the **significance** of her findings. Her findings provide a comprehensive and intriguing view of the way religious leaders have been, are being, and are likely to be portrayed in media content. As I said earlier, the three contexts she chooses to review: films, television, and journalism, are, in fact the places where most of these ideas are formed and articulated. Each context is different, however, and these differences, which she identifies, are fascinating. She makes a plausible and intriguing case for the idea that the regnant images and symbols of ministry emerge from the most fictive of these media—film—rather than from the most rational and putatively objective one—journalism. And it is within film that some of the most powerful and persuasive ideas have been constructed. This is not unproblematic, of course, but provides a somewhat more optimistic view than we might have acquired were we only to have looked at content analyses of either television programs or journalistic treatments alone. To be reminded, for example, that commercial, Hollywood cinema can and does regularly produce things like *Dead Man Walking* is a testament to the powerful centrality of film in American cultural dialog, and its ability to present compelling, sophisticated, and existentially-profound treatments.

This inter-relationship between the various media and their various ideas about religion and ministry would not have emerged from an analysis of any one medium, of course. It would also have been less likely to emerge from a study that was less interpretive and humanistic in orientation. To understand the significance of “public scripts” about ministry—that is, to understand what we all have “learned” from our absorption in mediated public culture—we must really ask not only “what is said?” (in the media) but also “who is saying it?” “in what context?” and (most importantly) “who is paying attention?” This latter question is the one that in some ways concerns the future of ministry the most. Are young people, the “next generation” of parish, congregational, and intellectual leadership, subject to a cultural view of ministry that is systematically contributing to their readiness, willingness, and motivation? As the study’s directors claim by having commissioned Dr. Smith’s study in the first place, the representations present in the media are at least an important litmus, if not actual influence. Dr. Smith’s study provides helpful

insight into this question. Rather than assuming the purpose of her study was to address any specific image, medium, or interpretive community, she has provided a kind of matrix through which the reader can pursue a given generational or taste “demographic,” and arrive at a more refined and focused sense of what capacities the media might be having to contribute to what kinds of discourses for that group.

I might have wished for a more comprehensive review and summary, at the same time, a good deal of the important information emerges through the survey she provides, and is not easily integrated into a set of “findings” in the classic sense. What she does establish, though, is that the image of religion and its ministries is a more pervasive element of media content than I would have imagined. Further, she demonstrates that this image is culturally significant enough that it changes over time and against social and historical conditions. What she has shown thereby is that to understand the relationship between the culture and ideas about religious vocation, we have to understand that these ideas emerge from a discourse that is an interaction between the culture, individuals, the social and historical forces to which each is subject, and certain characteristics of the media that define the context for that discourse. The contributions of the media (the “value added” component of their role) are, in some ways odd and idiosyncratic (the tendency, for instance, for television—in particular—to fall back on the Roman Catholic priesthood as the generic clerical profession simply because it is easy to represent visually) and in other ways systematic and authentically rooted in the senses and “structures of feeling” of the times.

The comprehensive review would not have so clearly established this situation. It would have necessarily been rooted in a certain objectivist view (as it would have had to have chosen such a standpoint from which to begin). Further, it would have necessarily limited itself in terms of its historical and contextual scope. And, given what Dr. Smith has found, it would have been a false expectation that such a review would have revealed systematic, summative statements about “the media image of ministry.” We know now that, had such a study made such claims, it would have necessarily been limiting its purchase on the real complexity and meaning of the situation.

# AN INCOMPLETE PICTURE

A Response by the Rev. Dr. James P. Wind  
President of the Alban Institute, Bethesda, Md.

How does America view its ministers? In an age saturated with images and shaped by a variety of powerful media, the answer to such a question must always be a complex and incomplete one. Since none of us can view all the images and monitor all the media, there can be no “final answer” of the sort that the game show hosts ask for. Each of us constructs a composite of some of the available images as we encounter them through the particular media we choose to attend to and through those uninvited ones that nonetheless impinge upon us.

In her *The Ministry and The Message*, Joyce Smith provides us with one of the most ambitious efforts to date to comprehend the kaleidoscope of signals about ministry that tumble thorough our imaginations. Her careful inventories of the portrayals of clergy and nuns in film and on television yield several interesting conclusions. First, ministers are a part of the ocean of images in which we swim. Some may find themselves surprised at just how many times clergy and nuns actually do appear on screen. They may also be surprised to see that the number of such portrayals has grown in the 80s and 90s, a period when “organized religion” seems to many to be fading into the background.

Second, and alas, most of these ministers are quite forgettable. In Smith’s words, the vast majority of them serve as “ritual place holders,” nameless individuals who play generic roles. In their robes and collars, they serve as visual short-hands for the sacred dimensions of key life transitions. Like Father Neal Dodd who appeared in 300 films between the 1920s and 50s, these clergy provide fleeting images of a vague religious reality. Most of them make little memorable difference. They routinely are interchangeable parts in stories that focus attention and find meaning elsewhere.

Third, Smith does remind us that there have been and continue to be notable exceptions. Some directors like Ford, Huston, Marshall, and Allen regularly have called attention to clergy. Oscar Award Winning actors and actresses like Spencer Tracey in the 30s, Bing Crosby in the 40s, or Susan Sarandon in the 90s, reached the zenith of their careers playing powerful ministerial roles. But “great” performances like Robert Duvall’s in *The Apostle* or Raoul Julia’s in *Romero* are rare portraits amidst a sea of stick figures and caricatures.

Fourth, according to Smith, the picture does not get much better when we move from the world of film to that of television. Smith’s inventory of “made for TV movies” and weekly series (including animated ones) offer very little to ground or sharpen the fleeting images of the silver screen. Once again ministers are there, that is, they do appear in a wide variety of stories. But most of the time they do not make much difference. In fact, in many cases – like that of Father Mulcahy in the long-running hit series “M\*A\*S\*H” – the ministers portrayed are benign presences at best. Often, the clergy portrayed are ineffective or bumbling. Sometimes, the portraits are much more negative, such as the hypocritical Rev. Timothy Lovejoy in the popular animated series “The Simpsons.”

The most surprising turn in Smith’s study is to analysis of the news coverage of ministers in the period immediately following the tragedy of 9/11. She notes that the press was quick to pick up on the religious significance of this huge story. In her analysis of newspaper coverage during the month following 9/11, she found that the amount of coverage given to ministers came – when compared with the same month a year previously – close to doubling in major papers like *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times*. As one might expect, the majority of those stories focused on the terrorist attacks and their aftermath. In the 24 newspapers she studied, close to 60 percent of the religion stories focused on ministerial responses to the World Trade Center catastrophe.

While newspapers continued to run stories from their usual menu of ministerial topics – good works, hypocrisy, false prophecy, and criminal behavior – Smith found that a major shift in the tone and focus of newspaper coverage had occurred. A large number of stories appeared which featured clergy as human beings. Their heroic work at Ground Zero, their personal suffering as they came to terms with losses in their own families and communities, their struggles to find meaning for themselves and for others, became newsworthy subjects. Tragedy had opened space clergy to become more complete characters in the stories being told to Americans.

Nowhere was this turn made clearer than in the coverage given to Fr. Mychal Judge, the Catholic priest who died at Ground Zero while administering the Last

Rites to a victim. Immortalized in photographs of his body being carried from the scene, Judge appeared at first to be a real life version of the Tracey/Crosby-like characters from central casting. Smith counted 1,229 stories about his heroism and his life. In them, he became, in fact, a new religious martyr.

As Smith reports, a great irony occurred in the months that followed. As the media sought to discover more about the lives of ministers affected by the tragedy, especially in this celebrity case, the fact that Judge was gay slowly began to be written about. The real life “good-to-the-core Irish American priest from New York” (Smith, p. 62) became a much more complex hero. A ministerial stereotype had been fundamentally challenged. As the press continues to cover stories about clergy sexual misconduct (*The Boston Globe* broke its series of articles on sexual abuse by Roman Catholic clergy in January, 2002) and as it continues to deal with America’s changing sexual mores, it remains to be seen how Judge’s image will evolve.

Smith concludes her paper by wondering how long the humanizing effects of 9-11 on ministerial images will last. She asks if religious leaders will allow the media to learn more about them than just the short-hands of their role? And she ponders the complex symbolic interactivity of the converging technologies that shape how we view the world. Those are excellent questions that cannot be fully addressed here.

But I would like to pursue the last two a bit further than she has. (The first question is one that historians of media will have to answer years from now.) I will do this by returning to the “incompleteness” theme that I sounded at the beginning of this response.

Clearly, Smith’s paper is one of the most comprehensive attempts ever made to sketch a picture of how Americans collectively see their ministers in the media. Comprehensive as it is, however, it is still incomplete. There are many movies that she has not viewed, and every day more arrive in the theatres. Relentlessly, television continues to churn out its new creations. Moreover, Smith did not cover the vast world of the smaller television networks, a world that includes many specifically religious channels and a great deal of religious programming that floods our

TV sets, especially on Sunday mornings. Her analysis of print coverage focused on a month-long slice of life from only 24 newspapers – to be sure, major dailies – out of a universe of thousands, including a host of denominational and religious publications. She did not cover at all another major print genre, magazines, an additional major media universe.

In essence she has given us primarily a view from vantage point of the major media powers – the Hollywood film studios, the larger television networks, and the major metropolitan newspapers. These historic media giants (we once called them the mass media), along with an occasional upstart like HBO or Fox, are engaged in an enormous struggle for market share with a growing universe of niche media that seek smaller, more particular audiences. This observation does not mean that Smith did something wrong in her project. Instead, my point is that the picture of what Americans see about ministers in the media is much bigger and much more complex – so much so that no mortal can see it – than even her exhaustive efforts portray. And it is constantly moving.

Further, there are other media that shape how Americans see ministers than those of film, TV, and newspapers. These “other media” can contribute to a more complete picture. I will mention three types here.

The first type, American fiction, has a long tradition of ministerial portraiture. In fact, one could argue that there is a growing sub-genre of books that could be called “clergy fiction.” For years I have made it a practice to read novels and short stories from this tradition – and occasionally have written about some of them.<sup>52</sup> This sub-genre contains many wonderfully complex and nuanced portraits of ministers such as Graham Greene’s whiskey priest, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Reverend Dimmesdale, Willa Cather’s Archbishop Latour, Sinclair Lewis’s Elmer Gantry, and John Updike’s Reverend Marshfield.

For our purposes here, it is important to note that it is in this literature that many of the missing dimensions of ministerial lives that concern Smith can be found. On more than one occasion, I have heard religious leaders and writers say that it is only in written works of fiction that the deep ambiguities of the

<sup>52</sup> “Clergy Lives: Portraits from Modern Fiction,” *The Christian Century*, 108:25 (September 4-11, 1991) 805-10; “Preacher and Preaching in Literature,” *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer, editors (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), pp.378-82; and “A Special Kind of Knowing,” *Congregations* (September/October, 2002), 5.

ministerial life can be dealt with. Congregation members, the media, and the clergy themselves often unwittingly conspire to keep full, complex, and deeply human stories of clergy from being told. Believers do not want their clergy too flawed or too fallen, and so tell stories that often demonstrate the “pedestal effect.” Ministers and nuns have their own deep desires to keep from tainting their message, so they hide their flaws and failures. The media veer back and forth between stereotypical stories about clergy and explosive scandals, neither of which make room for the real human complexity of a life of faith. Occasionally, a brave novelist breaks through this taboo and tells a different kind of story, one that reveals much more of the struggle – and the genuine nobility – of ministerial life than others want to – or can afford to – tell.

Recently, a new kind of writing about ministerial life has appeared, the book length journalistic account. This is still a small collection of books and it remains to be seen if it will grow into a distinct sub-genre. For example, Samuel Freedman’s *Upon This Rock*, Gary Dorsey’s *Congregation*, and Stephen Fried’s *The New Rabbi* tell complex tales of ministerial life.<sup>53</sup> In each case, these books are products of lengthy immersions in the life of congregations. Interestingly, in each case the authors get so deeply engaged in the life of a particular community of faith that they find themselves reflecting in new ways about their own spiritual lives. As their narratives unfold, more of the complexity of ministerial life comes into view. These stories, however, are important not simply because they fill in more information about ministerial life. Their greater significance is that these complex stories have the power to inspire people – beginning with their authors – using the rich material found in real, complicated, and honest lives of ministers.

There is still one more type of literature, one written by and for the ministers themselves. Within this large body of work there are several sub-categories. First is the practical literature written by and for ministers to assist with issues of the practice of ministry.

Second is a more scholarly literature about congregational and religious life. Both of these categories of literature are large, but both remain primarily the preserve of clergy themselves – or the scholars who study them. Since these literatures seldom “cross over” into more popular audiences – the larger arena that Smith is concerned with – I will simply note them in passing.

However, before turning from this group I want to call attention to another new phenomenon. Recently Richard Lischer’s *Open Secrets* and Diana Butler Bass’s *Strength For the Journey* have been published as trade books.<sup>54</sup> Lischer’s book is an example of the first category I mentioned, professional writing about ministry (he is both an ordained minister and a teacher of ministers). But *Open Secrets* is written for a much larger audience than the guild of clergy. *Strength for the Journey* is a book by a scholar of religion (her questions and approaches employ many of the techniques of those who have pursued the academic field of congregational studies). But again, her book aspires to break out of the scholarly niche to address a larger public. Both books give us non-fiction glimpses of larger, more complete ministerial lives. It remains to be seen whether these books will be rare exceptions to the professional literature of religious leaders and scholars or whether they will become harbingers of a new sub-genre.

My point in turning to these other sources for media images is first to remind us that there are other media and fuller images than those Smith pointed to. They provide evidence – together with some of the rare exceptions she notes in her research – that there are a number of story tellers in America who want to tell the kinds of stories she cares about. They also thicken the symbolic interaction between types of media beyond the ways she attends to. As the hegemony of the networks, major dailies, and Hollywood studios weakens there may be room for more crossovers into the mass media by those with compelling stories to tell about ministers than has previously existed.

<sup>53</sup> Samuel G. Freedman, *Upon This Rock: The Miracles of a Black Church* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993); Gary Dorsey, *Congregation: The Journey Back to Church* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1995); Stephen Fried, *The New Rabbi: A Congregation Searches for Its Leader* (New York: Bantam, 2002). Gene I. Maeroff edited a collection of article length journalistic stories about ministers that can also be considered examples of this kind of writing, *Sources of Inspiration: 15 Modern Religious Leaders* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1992).

<sup>54</sup> Richard Lischer: *Open Secrets: A Spiritual Journey Through a Country Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2001); Diana Butler Bass, *Strength for the Journey: A Pilgrimage of Faith in Community* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002).

It may also be the case, that what Smith observed about the impact of 9/11 on reporting about ministers may be part of a larger cultural shift. Ours is an era of unprecedented emphasis on personal experience and self-revelation. Talk shows and book stores abound in stories that disclose every aspect of human behavior. It may be that this insatiable hunger for experience may create an occasion for ministers to become fully incarnate in American life. The challenge will be to find ways to leave the safety of the stereotypical role behind without pandering to the prurient and voyeuristic tastes of our times. What our time most needs are encounters with real ministers who are fully human, showing at the same time and in the flesh the glory of God and the finitude and fallenness of human life. Well written, well told, well filmed stories that capture the essence of the paradoxical life of the minister are possible. We have examples to point to and an age that needs life-giving stories. Smith's study reveals that there are moments when breakthrough can happen. With

intentionality, excellence, and the eye of a good storyteller, we can provide Americans with fuller, richer, and more moving images of ministers – and in so doing, of themselves.

But will we? The deeper question raised by this study has to do with the conspiracy I mentioned before. It is very tempting to blame those in the media for the kind of images that dominate our television and film screens. And they can be criticized for a lack of imagination about the story potential in ministerial lives. But the root of the problem lies elsewhere, I believe. We must ask why it is that the churches and the ministers themselves do not tell stories so powerful that the media cannot fail to notice. At bottom it may be a problem of bad faith. Maybe ministers and their parishioners fail to see the drama in their own lives. Maybe they settle for simplistic interpretations of their own life and times. Maybe the first place to do some new story telling about ministry is within the churches themselves.

## ABOUT PULPIT & PEW

**P**ulpit & Pew is a research initiative of the Duke Divinity School funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc., and aimed at strengthening the quality of pastoral leadership (clergy and lay) in churches across America. The goal of the research is to strengthen the quality of pastoral leaders, especially those in ordained ministry, through (1) understanding how changes in the social, cultural, economic, and religious context in recent years have affected ministry, (2) forming pastoral leaders with the capacity for continual learning and growth in response to these changes, and (3) identifying policies and practices that will support creative pastoral leadership and vital congregations as they respond to a changing environment.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**J**oyce Smith is an assistant professor of journalism at Ryerson University in Toronto. She worked previously as features editor for the web edition of the *Toronto Globe and Mail* and copy editor for the *Toronto Star*. She has conducted large-scale studies of the representation of religion in Canadian, South African and American news sources, and in 1998-99 was a Rockefeller Research Fellow at the University of Toronto's Centre for the Study of Religion. She is a board member for the Centre for Faith and the Media.

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