

## PRELUDE

# Why Literary Ministers?

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully. (2 Tim 4:1–5)<sup>1</sup>

He sits on the edge of a chair in the background. He has colourless eyes, fixed earnestly, and a face almost as pale as the clerical bands beneath his somewhat receding chin. His forehead is high and narrow, his hair mouse-coloured. His hands are clasped tight before him, the knuckles standing out sharply. This constriction does not mean that he is steeling himself to speak. He has no positive intention of speaking. (Max Beerbohm, "A Clergyman")<sup>2</sup>

**I**n Graham Greene's powerful and strange 1940 novel *The Power and the Glory* we follow a character called only the priest or the whisky priest. An alcoholic who has fathered a child, he has little respect for himself and is accorded none by the officials of his country, Mexico, which has

1. All biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

2. Beerbohm, *And Even Now*, 238.

purged the nation of all clergy. The whisky priest is on the run. He is the last priest, and he carries on a clumsy and clandestine ministry until at last he is captured and executed. Like all of Greene's religious characters, the priest is a complicated amalgam of bad and good: he is weak and full of uncertainties, but he is also stubbornly faithful and self-sacrificing. He would agree with anyone who said he could not possibly be the stuff of a martyr, and yet that is what he becomes. He has no name because his importance as a man is nothing. For Greene, it is his identity as a Roman Catholic priest that matters. He is a priest to the end.

In one of Eugene Peterson's many wonderful books about the Christian ministry, *The Contemplative Pastor*, he tells an anecdote about his congregation getting ready to go on retreat. Peterson, as their pastor, is late to arrive at the gathering place. Once, he tells us, they would have waited obediently for him. But he has recently been on sabbatical, and the congregation has become less reliant on their pastor. They are more vitalized and independent. After waiting for a while, they leave without him. When Peterson does arrive, he is delighted to find that he has lost his place of prominence.

Here are two distinct tales located at very different places along a continuum of stories about Christian ministry. These stories both, in their own ways, tell important truths about what ministry is for and what it looks like. Ministry is at the same time a high calling and a frustrating, changeable job that is encased in complex notions of servanthood. There are thousands of other stories that are quite different from Greene's and Peterson's. The Christian ministry provides such a rich heritage of stories because it is, in fact, one of the "oldest professions." For example, since Christians can claim an inheritance from the history of the Hebrew people, the Old Testament contains hundreds of injunctions for and glimpses of the lives of priests. We also encounter priests and ministers in Chaucer, Shakespeare, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Marilynne Robinson. Because religion has always been one of the most pressing themes that occupy writers, we constantly meet pastors and ministers in novels, plays, films, and poems because they are the readily grasped representatives of religion. Dostoyevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov* gives us Father Zossima not just as a character but as a symbol of certain ideas about holiness, humility, foolishness, miracles, irony, death. In chapter 6 of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* the village priest fails utterly to help Emma Bovary when she turns to him for moral guidance. Flaubert's description of him is devastating:

The full light of the setting sun upon his face made the cloth of his cassock, shiny at the elbows and frayed at the hem, seem paler. Grease and tobacco stains ran along his broad chest, following the line of the buttons, growing sparser in the vicinity of his neckcloth, in which rested the massive folds of his red chin; it was dotted with yellow spots that disappeared beneath the coarse hair of his greyish beard. He had just eaten his dinner, and was breathing noisily.<sup>3</sup>

Flaubert, the scathing social critic, in those three descriptive sentences tells us volumes about his opinions of the Roman Catholic Church in France in the nineteenth century. Whether such portrayals have been fair or not, any candidate for the ministry knows that she or he is entering one of those occupations (the law is another) that are rife with provocative stereotypes and about which everyone has an opinion.

That I can call this book *The Collar* and safely assume that most readers will successfully arrive at my topic indicates the ministry's strong cultural associations. (For the few who hoped for a book about the training of dogs, my apologies.) And that many (if not most) pastors do not even wear clerical collars in the twenty-first century is even more of an indication how powerful the old associations and symbols are. In 1994 and 2011 two films simply titled *Priest* could tap into a complex range of expectations—about duty, mystery, reverence, sexual frustration, confession, confidentiality—that allowed filmmakers to leap instantly into their particular stories. One has to think hard to come up with a roster of movies or plays starring plumbers, postal workers, or accountants—although all of these professions outweigh the ministry in numerical terms. Ask an average person to name a handful of movies or television shows about ministers, and there should be few hesitations: *The Bells of St. Mary's*, *The Keys of the Kingdom*, *A Man Called Peter* for an older generation; *The Preacher's Wife*, *The Vicar of Dibley*, *Rev.* for a younger generation. Gregory Peck, Bing Crosby, Robin Williams, Richard Burton, and Max von Sydow have played priests or pastors more than once and developed recognizable clerical screen personas. Indeed, possibly there are young people who have internalized Rowan Atkinson's line "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the holy goat" from *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and accept it as sound liturgical form. In a tiny and splendid Wallace and Gromit animated short film, "The Autochef," one of Wallace's inventions that goes hopelessly awry is a cooking and serving robot. One of the signs

3. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 80.

that the robot is about to go berserk is its sudden and maniacal utterance, “More tea, vicar?” For some reason the only line that is funnier than this is the robot’s last word before it blows up: “Knickers.”<sup>4</sup>

Why should ministry attract so much cultural attention? For Christians, one substantial reason, although largely unacknowledged, is that we are all ministers. Most of us do not think of ourselves in this manner from day to day, but unconsciously we must be studying pastoral actions and attitudes for models of what we should be doing or not be doing. John Patrick Shanley’s excellent *Doubt*, with a cast of two nuns and a priest, attracted attention both as a Broadway play and as a Hollywood film, and the questions Shanley raises about honesty, manipulation, and compassion are hardly restricted to the clergy. E. M. Forster’s Mr. Beebe, in the 1908 novel *A Room with a View*, is one of my favorite literary vicars because of his crucial but unassuming role as a social mediator. On the other hand, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and Reverend Samuel Parris in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* are disturbing reminders of just how fallen and flawed all Christian mortals are.

Ministry is also fascinating as a cultural artifact because it has been and continues to be the most personal of the professions. As we advance into the twenty-first century our respect for certain key members of society—lawyers, physicians, professors, soldiers, pastors—may become less and less obvious, but there is no doubt that our civilization will never completely lose its conviction that specific careers involve such dedication that a strong sense of vocation or calling is required, in addition to specialized training. Historically, the ministry was one of three professions accepted automatically as having high social status (the other two being the law and medicine). We can see this in Jane Austen’s novels. Mr. Elton in *Emma*, with no special personal recommendations, nevertheless has an immediate invitation to events for the social elite. Whether we consider Austen’s century or our own, the fact is that the only professional with whom ordinary people are likely to have contact—everyday, if they wish—is the parson, pastor, preacher, priest, or minister. (I will use a variety of these terms throughout my study.) Parson, after all, derives from a word that denotes “person,” and pastors are, etymologically speaking, shepherds. They are an intriguing mixture of the exalted and the humble. In centuries past, they were among the few men accorded the

4. “The Autochef,” *Wallace and Gromit’s Cracking Contraptions*.

status of gentleman, but they were also, in England at any rate, considered the representative, accessible gentlemen of a parish. Often the only literate person for miles around, the cleric would be the go-to person for a large variety of needs: not only to officiate at solemn occasions and preside over the sacraments, but to teach, keep a community's records, and distribute charitable aid. This combination of privileged status with familiarity and availability makes the character of the pastor endlessly interesting to us. And the ministry has probably changed less than almost any other profession.

Justin Lewis-Anthony notes that while medicine, law, and other professions have become conglomerated or more corporate, the parson today remains “in solitary splendor.”<sup>5</sup> And within that solitary splendor the most basic needs have been met for centuries: among the pastor's most crucial tasks is to listen, to sit with people and acknowledge their humanness.

Ministry has been studied profusely over the generations and so there is a mass of material regarding the pastoral life. Larry Witham claims that at least 485 surveys of the ministry were made between 1930 and 1970.<sup>6</sup> And because study for the ministry is, alone among the professions, lodged in or near the humanities wing of universities, it is closely tied to history, classics, philosophy, and English; these are fields traditionally given to contemplation. The thousands of handbooks, meditations, and polemics involving the ministry range across many disciplines—psychology, sociology, communications, ethics. The medical profession has comparatively few such works written in the vernacular and accessible to the layperson. The following books are all titles published since 1990 that I encountered randomly in the small library of my Christian university: *Walking Through the Valley: Understanding and Emerging from Clergy Depression*; *Fit to Be a Pastor: A Call to Physical, Mental, and Spiritual Fitness*; *The Pastor as Minor Poet: Texts and Subtexts in the Ministerial Life*; *The Country Preacher's Notebook*; *Clergy Killers: Guidance for Pastors and Congregations Under Attack*. Older titles can be winsome; titles I have seen over the years include *How to be a Minister and a Human Being*; *They Cry, Too! What You Always Wanted to Know about Your Minister but Didn't Know Whom to Ask*; and (a personal favorite) *Your Pastor's Problems*.

5. Lewis-Anthony, *If You Meet George Herbert on the Road, Kill Him*, 34.

6. Witham, *Who Shall Lead Them?*, vii.

But this lively publishing activity does not mean that there is anything close to a solid or definite agreement about what Christian ministry is, how it works itself out in daily life. The profession is an astonishingly diverse one. Nearly every ministry handbook offers a list of key attributes that a pastor should have, and I am always intrigued by how various these lists are. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* offers these: holding one's tongue, meekness, listening, helpfulness, bearing, proclaiming, authority. John Stott in *The Preacher's Portrait* claims five key roles: steward, herald, witness, father, servant. Eugene Peterson's *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* lists these focal points: directing prayer, telling stories, sharing pain, saying no to sin and the dominant culture, building community. And to cast the clerical eye over the more ancient texts can be a prelude to dejection. Who feels confident after reading George Herbert's admonishment about being "exceeding exact in his Life, being holy, just, prudent, temperate, bold, grave in all his ways"?<sup>7</sup> And then there are the mighty injunctions in 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, the pastoral epistles: "Proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching." This sounds reasonable, even if the word "utmost" gives one pause, but this manageable job description is followed by some unnerving imperatives and ultimates: "always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully" (2 Tim 2:5).

All of this is to say that while there may be thousands of studies of the ministry, the ministry is fascinating and important enough to bear one more. And the ministry deserves close attention because of the tremendous strains involved. Like physicians and lawyers, pastors lead unpredictable and stressful lives, much of it under an intense public gaze; unlike physicians and lawyers, pastors are only modestly recompensed for their hard work. It is not for me to say with any certainty that the ministry is more stressful than it ever was—I suspect that the challenges were always arduous, with a brief respite perhaps in the religious golden era of nineteen fifties America—but it is certainly now no less stressful than it ever was. Here, for example, is the complaint of the prominent American preacher and teacher Barbara Brown Taylor, in her 2006 memoir:

I gave myself to the work the best way I knew how, which sometimes exhausted my parishioners as much as it exhausted me. I thought that being faithful meant always trying harder to live

7. Herbert, *The Country Parson*, 56.

a holier life and calling them to do the same. I thought that it meant knowing everything I could about scripture and theology, showing up every time the church doors were open, and never saying no to anyone in need.<sup>8</sup>

The notion that people feel called to be so arduously holy and then do such exhausting work is worth our thoughtful attention. Eugene Peterson informs us “in the fifty years that I have lived the vocation of pastor . . . defections and dismissals have reached epidemic proportions in every branch and form of the church.”<sup>9</sup> Marva Dawn asks, “Why is it so hard to serve God these days? Everywhere I go, pastors and lay people tell me how discouraged they are.”<sup>10</sup> To be a pastor, says G. Lee Ramsey Jr. “is a recipe for heartache followed by failure.”<sup>11</sup>

Married as I am to a hard-working pastor, and with many friends in church leadership, I take this crisis language seriously. But I also remember Martin Luther’s words “O worthless religion of this age of ours, the most godless and thankless of all ages!” in 1520.<sup>12</sup> Consider Søren Kierkegaard’s bitter invectives in the eighteen fifties about the failings of the church. “We play at believing, play at being Christians,” he sneers; “we go and twaddle with one another, or let the priest twaddle to us.”<sup>13</sup> It was ever thus, and perhaps ever thus shall be. The nature of ministry prompts passionate views, and we should be grateful that such passion still abounds, even when that passion is transformed into anger and grief.

Before this subject becomes too distressing, recall this delightful passage from Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*:

It was pretty ornery preaching—all about brotherly love, and such-like tiresomeness; but everybody said it was a good sermon. . . . It did seem to me to be one of the roughest Sundays I had run across yet.<sup>14</sup>

In 1885, Twain’s famous book points to those of us who might be accused of absent-minded piety, and advises us to hold on just a minute. Similarly, in Shaw’s *Candida* (1898) a straight-talking Londoner says, “A

8. Taylor, *Leaving Church*, 226.

9. Peterson, *The Pastor*, 5.

10. Dawn, *The Sense of the Call*, 1.

11. Ramsey, *Preachers and Misfits, Prophets and Thieves*, 43.

12. Luther, *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 43.

13. Kierkegaard, *Attack upon “Christendom,”* 191.

14. Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 176.

clergyman is privileged to be a bit of a fool, you know: it's only becoming in 'is profession that he should.'<sup>15</sup> Yes, the ministry is a profession of vital importance, but it is also delightfully strange, even absurd. We need to look at it from a variety of angles and look at it honestly, making do with the least possible amount of mystification and false reverence.

My desire to contemplate ministry's many facets makes literary analysis a sound choice. One can study the ministry by way of denominational comparisons, or by way of biblical injunctions, or through the history of women in the church. But, with James Wood I hold that fiction "gives the best account of the complexity of our moral fabric."<sup>16</sup> Fiction is flexible and warm-blooded, suggestive rather than prescriptive. (I include film, for the purposes of this book, in my rather open definition of fiction.) Literature about the ministry allows us to explore ministry as lived by individuals, not as stipulated in denominational handbooks. Statistical reports need to be embodied, and perhaps that embodiment involves getting to know Geraldine Granger, the fictional vicar of Dibley, played by Dawn French on BBC television. The seminary study of ministry tends to be abstract; the precise details of an imagined pastor's life in John Updike's novel *A Month of Sundays* or Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* open the way to authentic, sympathetic comprehension. Clergy literature also allows the communication of pressures and pains that might not be able to find an appropriate place in official channels. The awfulness and stupidity of the clerical characters in the nineties British television series *Father Ted* can be cringe-inducing, but the laughter is beneficial, puncturing as it does so many pointlessly sanctimonious anxieties about the church. The flawed but far from wicked character of Arthur Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter* has been for 150 years a necessary reminder that clerics like everyone else have desires that can be powerful or hurtful.

What I hope is clear from the outset is my interest not in those books and movies that are comforting, anodyne, and "inspirational," but rather my trust in the sometimes difficult and prickly world of literary fiction and film. Although kindly, gentle novels and movies about the ministry have their place, and I do mention them from time to time, their usefulness is limited. The well-meaning but insipid clerics found in the television show *7th Heaven* or the old movies *The Bells of St. Mary's* and *Going My Way* are not rooted in anything resembling real church

15. Shaw, *Candida*, 140 (with Shaw's idiosyncratic spelling).

16. Wood, *How Fiction Works*, 178–79.

life, which is more messy and complicated. The upright and relatively untroubled pastor can never be as valuable to the reader or viewer as Shaw's struggling Major Barbara or Greene's whisky priest. An evening with a cup of cocoa and a slim Barbara Pym or Jan Karon novel may provide some relief to a cleric smarting from the day's parish cruelties, but for real understanding I propose a large measure of Tennessee Williams and Sinclair Ross—*The Night of the Iguana* and *As For Me and My House* demand to be considered and reconsidered; they stay in one's active memory longer than Karon's Father Tim novels. And because worthwhile literature demands full attention and considerable interpretative energy, I try not to summarize or categorize too quickly. Many of the works in this study resisted being sorted, although for the sake of the reader I have provided an organizational framework. For the integrity of the stories and the characters, however, I have let some of them stand alone in "Interlude" sections of close reading, where the literary works and the pastors they contain belong to themselves and not to a taxonomy.

There is something extreme about the ministry that makes this profession a truly fascinating subject, one that cannot be fully fixed or delineated. Justin Lewis-Anthony, in his provocative book *If You Meet George Herbert on the Road, Kill Him*, provides an anguished and nearly endless list of the demands we make of our ministers.

We want a priest who is always available, who is always on the end of the telephone, who is always out visiting, who is good with old people, good with young people, brings new families into church, looks after the old families of the church community, makes the church grow, keeps the church the same, preaches well, is the first to arrive and the last to leave, keeps a happy family, attends every meeting, and so on, until the last syllable of recorded time.<sup>17</sup>

So many heightened expectations assail us when we immerse ourselves in the many tangled aspects of the ministry that an artistic outlet is useful, even just to name and expel irritation. But literary art can do more. The tributes and affection that poured out for Marilynne Robinson's picture of the ministry in her 2004 novel *Gilead* demonstrate the considerable power of literary art. *Gilead* has been, I believe, genuinely inspirational, perhaps even life-saving for many people in the church. No writing of "A New Creed" (as in the United Church of Canada), no reworking of

17. Lewis-Anthony, *If You Meet George Herbert*, 163.

the Thirty-Nine Articles can even begin to suffice as full explanations of church leadership and membership. But a poem like George Herbert's impassioned "The Collar" or an explosive work like *Elmer Gantry* (which exists now as an opera, as well as a novel and film) helps to provide a more all-embracing view of the possibilities and, yes, perversions of the ministry. As Horton Davies said in 1959, in one of the first books to take seriously the literary treatment of pastors: "Since complacency is the chief enemy of the Christian church, the critical novelist, whether this is his intention or not, can play the Socratic role of a gadfly, stinging the comatose Church into awareness of its dangerous condition."<sup>18</sup> At the very least, the representation of the church in art can prompt stimulating questions. Who, I wondered as I embarked on this book, invented the color "clerical gray" and what does it mean for the profession to be encumbered with this middling, unexciting hue? And why is it inevitably funny (and it is) that a pack of rascals in P. G. Wodehouse's short story "The Great Sermon Handicap" expend much energy establishing odds and placing bets on the length of sermons in English country churches? Would it be as amusing to put the length of lawyers' summations at the center of a comic story?

My personal incentives for working through some of the masses of clerical references in literature and film were several. As I noted earlier, my husband is a member of the clergy, so I have an intimate investment in observing cultural representations of his profession. While closely surveying his work and the work of his clerical friends and colleagues over the years, I have been amazed by the manifold demands of this strange but wondrous career. He has strength of character and bears up exceedingly well. But recently he told me of a colleague who was floundering and said to me, shaking his head, "I would have thought he had more grit." Whether or not Michael always knew that being a pastor would require grit, he certainly knows it now. Ministry is a tough profession, and it is increasingly hard to attract good candidates. The seminaries of most denominations are overly quiet places in our century. There is now less prestige attached to this profession. The hours are long, the financial compensation underwhelming. Two of my motives for this study are to unpack some of the cultural factors that might make the ministry such a hard sell, and to determine whether literary and cinematic works have been misrepresentative, misleading, or even harmful. I do want this book

18. Davies, *A Mirror of the Ministry in Modern Novels*, 8.

to be of practical use to the church and helpful for my often beleaguered friends in the ministry.

This is not a definitive survey of literary and cinematic clerics through the ages. I have chosen themes that resonate with the needs of the church today, in the twenty-first century, and have paid close attention to clerical types that insist on recurring over the generations. Many of the portrayals I examine arise from contemporary fiction and film, but this is not entirely the case. The nineteenth century provides a rich and timeless store of ministers. Just recently I retrieved from our university library the little-known 1879 Canadian novel *Lights and Shadows of Clerical Life*, by William Cheetham, and was instantly captivated by how discerning and modern Cheetham's descriptions of church life seem to me. As for geographic range, this study is unusual, I think, in not being exclusively fixed on British or American models. My examples are taken in the main from three cultural landscapes: the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, and I partake happily of examples from Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions.

A great deal has been written and said about the divide—a longstanding one—between the established or mainstream aspect of the church and the evangelical stream. This is one of those issues that, it seems, will never go away. (This ecclesiastical division is at the heart of Margaret Oliphant's novel *Phoebe Junior*, as one example. It was published in 1876. Take away the candles and crinolines, and the story could almost be set at the current time, with its high church/low church tensions.) From time to time I will have to address this divide in my book, but I signal to the reader straight away my partial impatience with such categories. There has been so much energy squandered, in my opinion, defining one's own category of Christian over and against other categories of Christian that the church is in grave danger of losing its true purpose and identity. One matter that exercises me is the continued use of the term *evangelical* to connote a certain range of characteristics that have little to do with evangelism, a word (*euangelion* in Greek, Latinized as *evangelium*) that means, after all, "gospel" or "good news." My own denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) is not what most people think of as evangelical. Although a re-envisioning process for this terminology is not a main objective of this book, I thought it best to put my impatience with such factionalism frankly before the reader.

Another somewhat controversial matter concerns my decision about how to handle portrayals of women in ministry. In early outlines of this book I gave female ministers a “room of their own.” There was a chapter just for them. However, I have decided that surely 2013 (the date of my current writing) is as good a time as any to work more positively within Paul’s declaration that “there is no longer male or female” (Gal 3:28). While not all denominations have fully welcomed women into the leadership of the church, Christianity overall has at last achieved a respectable standing on this issue. My own work, feminist as it is, on the cultural representation of clergy feels most comfortable if I impose the least number of divisions on the clerics under scrutiny.

Finally, I hope that *The Collar* mediates between an accessible style and a scholarly one. I am an academic but also an enthusiastic church member, and I care about the audience of this book, just as I care about the real flesh-and-blood pastors I have known all my life. To all of them I dedicate this book, and I have a word of comfort for them. The enmity that our society, and its cultural artifacts, sometimes shows to the ministry indicates that the church, in this age, is still a contender. If the church were no longer significant there would be no need for moviemakers, as an example, to pursue pastors with such mocking or condescending vigor. Of course, mockery is not the only scenario to be encountered. Nevertheless, there would be no purpose in creating a clergy buffoon or charlatan if the church no longer mattered. We are still here, and still breathing.