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Combining thematic analysis and stimulating close readings, *The Collar* is a wide-ranging study of the many ways—heroic or comic, shrewd or dastardly—Christian ministers have been represented in literature and film. Since all Christians are expected to be involved in ministry of some type, the assumptions of secular culture about ministers affect more than just clergy. Ranging across several nations (particularly the U. S., Britain, and Canada), denominations, and centuries, *The Collar* aims to encourage creative and faithful responses to the challenges of Christian leadership and to provoke awareness of the times when leadership expectations become too extreme. Using the framework of novels, plays, TV, and movies to make inquiries about pastoral passion, frustration, and fallibility, Sue Sorensen's well-informed, sprightly, and perceptive book will be helpful to pastors, parishioners, those interested in practical theology, and anyone who enjoys evocative literature and film.

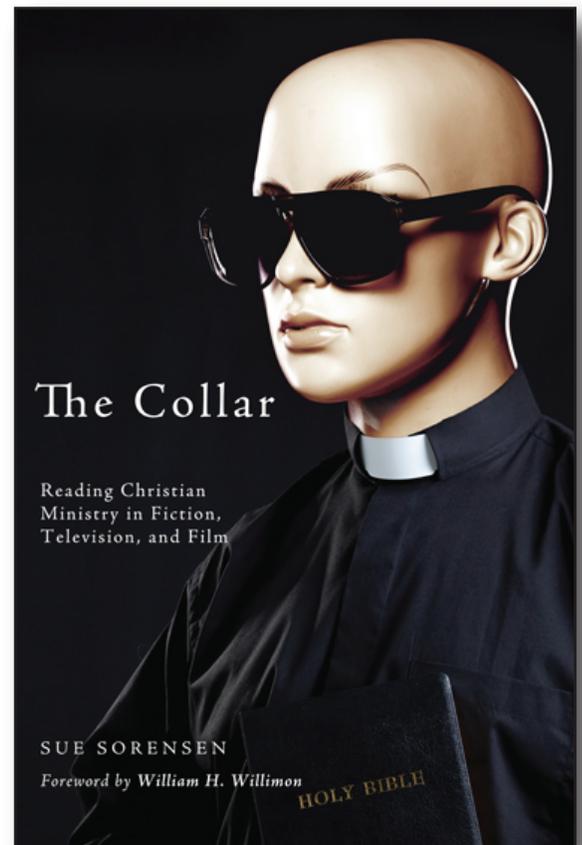
## The Collar

Reading Christian Ministry in  
Fiction, Television, and Film

SUE SORENSEN

Foreword by William H. Willimon

**Sue Sorensen** is Associate Professor of English at Canadian Mennonite University and an active member of First Lutheran Church in Winnipeg. She is the author of a novel, *A Large Harmonium*, and the editor of *West of Eden: Essays on Canadian Prairie Literature*. She has written about contemporary British literature, detective fiction, film, popular music, children's writing, the fiction of A. S. Byatt, and is also a published poet.



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“A marvelous mix of scintillating literary criticism and probing theological reflection, Sue Sorensen has provided insight into why funny stories are funnier and tragic stories more tragic when a clergyman is the principal character. But she also explores the deeper question, ‘Have these artists, as outsiders looking in, captured that mysterious soul of the one who has that special call from Christ?’”

—Dale Ahlquist, President, American Chesterton Society

“Like every professional, the minister inherits images he or she did not create and may or may not want to project. Some of these images persist well beyond the epochs that shaped them. A few are positive, even heroic; many are negative and demeaning. Not only for those directly involved in the vocation, but for all who try to understand what the church has been and is, it is good to sort out these sometimes ‘graven’ images. And what better way of doing that than by considering the great stories in which clergy have some degree of prominence.”

—Douglas John Hall, author of *What Christianity Is Not*

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# The Collar

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in Fiction, Television, and Film

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*With a Foreword by William H. Willimon*



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THE COLLAR

Reading Christian Ministry in Fiction, Television, and Film

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For all ministers, ordained or not,  
rashly following a Lord who  
“saved us and called us with a holy calling” (2 Tim 1:9).

And especially, with love, for Michael.

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## 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>

In 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.

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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:

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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.

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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*.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

## INTERLUDE

### “The Collar” by George Herbert

I struck the board, and cried, “No more!  
I will abroad.  
What! shall I ever sigh and pine?  
My lines and life are free; free as the road,  
Loose as the wind, as large as store.  
Shall I be still in suit?  
Have I no harvest but a thorn  
To let me blood, and not restore  
What I have lost with cordial fruit?  
Sure there was wine  
Before my sighs did dry it; there was corn  
Before my tears did drown it.  
Is the year only lost to me?  
Have I no bays to crown it?  
No flowers, no garlands gay? all blasted?  
All wasted?  
Not so, my heart; but there is fruit,  
And thou hast hands.  
Recover all thy sigh-blown age  
On double pleasures; leave thy cold dispute  
Of what is fit and not; forsake thy cage,  
Thy rope of sands,  
Which petty thoughts have made, and made to thee  
Good cable, to enforce and draw,  
And be thy law,  
While thou didst wink and wouldst not see.  
Away! take heed;  
I will abroad.

## THE COLLAR

Call in thy death's-head there; tie up thy fears;  
He that forbears  
To suit and serve his need  
Deserves his load."  
But as I raved, and grew more fierce and wild  
At every word,  
Methoughts I heard one calling, "Child";  
And I replied, "My Lord."<sup>1</sup>

Of the two greatest metaphysical poets, John Donne and George Herbert, Herbert in the past was understood as calm, dutiful, and single-minded, especially placed next to the passionate and complicated Donne. It is true we possess Donne's poems of sensuality as well as his religious verses, while Herbert left us only religious poems; we can judge Donne's skill as a preacher by his printed sermons, while Herbert, also a seventeenth-century parson, left us none. Until recently, critics assumed that Herbert was (compared to Donne, at any rate) acquiescent, quiet, secure, modest, as Stanley Fish pointed out with some exasperation in 1978, and he then went to some lengths to demonstrate that Herbert was as "restless and secure, precarious and stable"—just as full of metaphysical paradox—as his friend Donne.<sup>2</sup> One of the first to redress the imbalance in the ways Herbert and Donne are seen was T. S. Eliot, who did much to rehabilitate the reputation of all the metaphysical poets. In his short study of Herbert in 1962 Eliot said this: "To think of Herbert as the poet of a placid and comfortable easy piety is to misunderstand utterly the man and his poems."<sup>3</sup>

When I came across these remarks, which assumed that a case needed to be made for George Herbert's complexity, I was puzzled. The first poem by Herbert I ever read, and one that is still my favorite, is "The Collar," a poem fizzing and spitting with impatience, daring, and apparent irreverence.

Like Donne, Herbert was a devoted man of the church, but both were slow in taking holy orders. Initially each was ambitious, brilliant, and worldly, expert in an astonishing array of matters; to some minds their submission to the church must seem a tremendous waste of their

1. Herbert, "The Collar," *The Country Parson, The Temple*. All quotations of Herbert's poetry in this chapter are from this source.

2. Fish, *The Living Temple*, 46.

3. Eliot, *George Herbert*, 14.

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*Interlude—“The Collar”*

gifts. In their poems both dare to argue vociferously with God, to plead with him as if he is a lover or a close comrade. While Donne’s religious poems are less about his life as a priest but rather his life as a Christian, some of Herbert’s most notable poems are explicitly about the trials of the priestly life. Yes, many of the poems in Herbert’s only collection, *The Temple*, can be read as expressions of the problems and joys of the Christian life more generally, but several of them apprehensively and anxiously probe a priestly way of life that will never quite fit Herbert’s personality, even though he is completely convinced of the rightness of the cause. “The Priesthood,” “Aaron,” “The Windows,” and of course, “The Collar” are all profound ruminations on the difficulties of the minister’s vocation.

“The Collar,” unlike many seventeenth-century poems, is delivered conversationally, if a conversation can be imagined to rush and roar in near-monologue as this one does. The voice is a modern one to our ears, with its short, clipped demands and complaints, its repetitions (“I will abroad”), and its crankiness. The poem seems to belie its age by disdain-ing order and good form, with the poem’s narrative arc beginning in that very contemporary place, the end. (We too often forget that the twentieth and twenty-first centuries did not invent fragmentation or unconventional structure.) The reader enters into the space of the poem just as the speaker launches into his furious finale, shouting his defiance at God for ruining his life and denying him pleasure and opportunity. “I struck the board, and cried, No more” is the first line; we neither know the precise cause of the speaker’s anger nor does it matter. What we need to do is catch both the legitimacy of his complaint and his petulance. He is rightly frustrated by the leanness and harshness of his life: “No flowers, no garlands gay? all blasted? / All wasted?” But he is also enmeshed in petty, self-ish concerns, indicated by the frequency of the pronoun “I” and the way the poem’s short lines rush along heedlessly in one long stanza, refusing to stop and consider whether there might not be another, more sensible way. The poem also, cleverly, does not at first sight make much use of rhyme, and the ragged lines look disordered. For thirty-two lines, the speaker raves unchecked, and only in the last four lines is a turnaround indicated; he steps back from his fit of temper in line 33 and in lines 35 and 36 acquiesces with great suddenness: “Methoughts I heard one calling, *Child*: / And I replied, *My Lord*.”

That’s it. *Child. My Lord*. The reader wants to turn the page to follow up the story. And then what? Does the Lord tell the speaker what to do

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with all this anguish? Does God suggest what rules to follow that might work better, what work to undertake that could be less maddening? No. The storm inherent in the human personality is immediately obedient, recognizing in all humility its master's voice. The humility, I think, is shown to be most real in Herbert's decision to end the poem so immediately. To go on, to explain would be to exercise human ingenuity too much; the lesson is that the speaker must obey. When reading this poem aloud to my students, I often wish that there were helpful punctuation marks for the final exchange between God and the man. Is *Child* querulous? Is the naming an exclamation? Stage directions would be agreeable. Is the reply *My Lord* an appropriately gracious one? Is this tiny exchange of words loving or regretful? (While I am asking my fussy or naïve questions, my colleague Paul Dyck at Canadian Mennonite University bids me look at the meter of the last two lines. The rhythms have been uncertain, but when God speaks, common meter—the most common rhythm for old hymns—enters and establishes peace.)

"The Collar" is full of movement and fierce vitality, a little one-act play familiar to anyone who has ever shaken a fist at the heavens and muttered irreverent oaths through gritted teeth. The disappointments the speaker has suffered need not be confined to the work of the church; the festering irritations are widely applicable. But it is, after all, called "The Collar," and while we are invited to hear *choler* and *caller* in the word—and I think both the speaker and God call on each other, although only the fallible speaker gives into choler—Herbert has chosen the spelling of this homophone because his calling as a man of the cloth is most clearly at stake. While today we might think of a clerical collar as the obvious symbol that is choking Herbert's speaker (and, let us be frank, Herbert himself), it would be more appropriate to think of liturgical vestments as confining him, particularly the stole, which symbolizes the yoke of Christ that the priest has accepted. And while "the board" that is struck in the poem's first breath can be a homely and ordinary table, suitable for the domestic argument that is underway—"What? Shall I ever sigh and pine?" sounds like the griping and bellyaching that occurs in one's own kitchen—when combined with the collar of the title, the board becomes much more. This is the table of Holy Communion, and Herbert wants to hear our gasp of shock when we realize that the speaker is pounding on the communion table in a fit of rage. Even a postmodern, liberal Protestant such as myself pales at sacred furnishings handled in such a manner.

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*Interlude—“The Collar”*

The lovely thing about “The Collar” is that it is precisely and only the minister who presides at that table and is thoroughly at home with it who would use it in such a manner. It is, in a way, the table he is sharing with the Lord, an intimate part of the equipment of his pastoral work. Why should he not pound on it? Is it not his, at least a little? On further reflection, the reader should recognize that the table, as representative of Christ’s sacrificial love for the Church, can stand up to this battering and a whole lot more. The Lord can bear any amount of abuse from his priest. This does not mean that God is not hurt by the speaker’s rant, but certainly God is wholly in control of the situation, as the simplicity of God’s one word answer, “*Child,*” demonstrates.

The notion that a minister, and a godly one, as the last line proves, could be so angry at God and have the courage to publish that anger, was liberating when I first read this poem so many years ago. I had known ministers all my life, and although in my tradition they dressed casually, turned up in the post office, and watched many of the same television shows the rest of us did, like nearly everyone I suspected they were ridiculously patient people, touched with some special gift of goodness. Later, I would read other Herbert poems, such as “The Windows,” where the poet almost moans or snarls the first lines: “Lord, how can man preach thy eternal word? / He is a brittle crazy glass” (with “crazy” here having simply the meaning of flawed, unsound). “The Windows” deals with one particular aspect of ministry, the poet asking how good preaching can be achieved. But, unlike “The Collar,” Herbert’s “The Windows,” which compares the sermon to a stained glass window, is orderly, with a tidy conceit and something like a pat ending. “The Priesthood” also deals methodically with the motif of God as potter, making a useful vessel even out of the “foul and brittle” clay that the speaker feels himself to be. “The Collar” is more akin to Herbert’s poems of despair and longing like “Affliction” (of which there are five, more than any other of his repeated titles, with even “Prayer” and “Praise” being used three times only). “Kill me not ev’ry day” is the first line of “Affliction (II)” and the final phrase is “all my future moan.” In these poems there are no startling revelations or straight answers; God does not provide ease in a flash and sometimes does not provide ease at all.

These are the poems of a real man and a real priest: painful, exuberant, intense. It is helpful to place the priesthood poems of *The Temple* alongside Herbert’s other major work, the prose treatise *The Country*

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*Parson*, sometimes called *The Priest to the Temple*. According to some clergy within the Church of England, Herbert's *The Country Parson* sets up impossibly lofty standards for clerical behavior. In the recent book *If You Meet George Herbert on the Road, Kill Him*, Justin Lewis-Anthony rails against the tradition of "Herbertism":

Herbert has been, and continues to be, used as an exemplar, *the* exemplar for the English parson. Whether you are High Church, Low Church, Evangelical, Charismatic, whatever, Herbert is portrayed as the prototype of the pastor, teacher, preacher, almoner, negotiator, gentleman, scholar. He is *Ur-Vicar*, the *Echt-Rector*.<sup>4</sup>

These super-vicars that Herbert supposedly promotes are, says Lewis-Anthony, "not just representatives of the Church of England, they *are* 'the Church of England' in any given place" and are "omni-present, omni-competent and omni-affirming." If all you read of *The Country Parson* is this devastating passage from the first chapter, "Of a Pastor," one can see the rightness of Lewis-Anthony's complaint:

A Pastor is the Deputy of Christ for the reducing of Man to the Obedience of God. This definition is evident, and contains the direct steps of Pastoral Duty and Authority. For first, Man fell from God by disobedience. Secondly, Christ is the glorious instrument of God for the revoking of Man. Thirdly, Christ being not to continue on earth, but after he had fulfilled the work of Reconciliation, to be received up into heaven, he constituted Deputies in his place, and these are Priests. And therefore St. *Paul* in the beginning of his Epistles, professeth this: and in the first to the *Colossians* plainly avoucheth, that he *fills up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in his flesh, for his Body's sake, which is the Church*. Wherein is contained the complete definition of a Minister. Out of this Charter of the Priesthood may be plainly gathered both the Dignity thereof, and the Duty: The Dignity, in that a Priest may do that which Christ did, and by his authority, and as his Vicegerent. The Duty, in that a Priest is to do that which Christ did, and after his manner, both for Doctrine and Life.<sup>5</sup>

I am not a parson, country or otherwise, but I can imagine the sting a cleric might feel under the snap of some of Herbert's phrases.

4. Lewis-Anthony, *If You Meet George Herbert on the Road, Kill Him*, 6, 46–47.

5. Herbert, *The Country Parson*, 55 (emphasis in original).

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*Interlude—“The Collar”*

The emphasis on obedience and duty is sobering enough but it is terrifying to think of oneself either as Christ’s “deputy” or (worse) Christ’s “viceregent.” I would not know whether to laugh or cry at the unbearable simplicity of “the complete definition of a Minister”—the parson must merely and simply take Christ’s place.

There are severe-sounding words in this passage that seem to guarantee a pastor’s unpopularity: the pastor is to *reduce* us to obedience, and we are reminded that Christ came to *revoke* us. However, we misapprehend if we read too much negativity here. If the pastor must reduce his parishioners, in early seventeenth century usage that means he is to bring them back from error. If Christ revokes believers, he restores them to a good life. Some of the vocabulary that George Herbert uses in *The Country Parson* has descended in tone over the centuries. Words that now sound fierce were in some cases more positive in their original connotation; this is the case, for example, with the way Herbert uses *mortify*, *condescend*, and *censure* in his book.

If read carefully and patiently, the famous “complete definition of a Minister” emphasizes not only obedience and duty, but joy. Christ, after all, is the “glorious instrument of God,” and Herbert wants ministers to take their strength from Christ. Concentrate on Christ, on dignity and duty, he says, and the rest will follow. Even more helpful is to turn back to the previous page, “The Author to the Reader,” and note not only that this preface emphasizes Herbert’s desire to “please” God (the word is used twice) but that he wants to describe the character of a pastor’s “love.” The vocabulary is gentler. The key sentence of the opening of *The Country Parson*, however, is this one, and we should often recall it to mind: “I have resolved to set down the Form and Character of a true Pastor, that I may have a Mark to aim at: which also I will set as high as I can.” Herbert is writing a guidebook to inspire his own ministry, setting up a series of objectives for himself. Being the man he was, Herbert made his standards sufficiently demanding to be worthy of a calling he knew was a high calling indeed.

*The Country Parson* and the poems in *The Temple* are companion pieces, the former setting forth the ideals, while the latter reveals how the “various strategies of didacticism are actually acted out,” as John N. Wall Jr. has put it.<sup>6</sup> To see the daunting injunctions of *The Country Parson* as a series of commands is to see only a tiny portion of what Herbert

6. Wall, “Introduction,” *The Country Parson, The Temple*, 28.

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intended. The dialectical movement between the ideal and the actual in the two books should, hopefully, create a third way: a dynamic, embodied, workable portrayal of what ministry might be like. (Similarly, says Christine Wohlberg in her study of *The Country Parson* called *All Possible Art*, Herbert was the advocate of a middle way between high church elitism and Puritanical plainness. He was advocating balance in an era when conflict between Anglo-Catholics and Dissenters was real and sometimes agonizing.) There is also a sense that Herbert realizes that the profession of ministry is already in social jeopardy (in *The Country Parson* see chapter 28, “The Parson in Contempt”). Thus lofty goals must be established. The author knows his guidebook is idealistic, but ideals are needed to try to turn the situation around.

There are other elements which make the tone of *The Country Parson* hard for today’s reader to grasp. One point to remember is that Herbert’s era was one of the last great ages of rhetoric. He was well trained in the rigid conventions of classical rhetoric at Cambridge, where he was a leading scholar and even held the position of Public Orator, demonstrating that he was among the best rhetoricians in a time of masterly rhetoric. *The Country Parson* would have been recognizable to its first readers as, among other things, a type of courtesy or conduct book, a guide to correct behavior. The genre was well-known and readers would expect the author to delineate sharply the rules of comportment for a gentleman who happens (in this case) to be a minister. What we may not see today is how unusual Herbert’s relatively personal manner would be in such a conduct book. See for example, his advice about being a companionable storyteller while traveling; Herbert suggests the parson provide “sometimes some short, and honest refreshments, which may make his other discourses more welcome, and less tedious” (“The Parson in Journey”).<sup>7</sup>

What makes *The Country Parson* truly remarkable is that, unusual for its time, this is a book about relationships, about community. Herbert is not interested in the parson in isolation, because then he would be no minister at all. His aim is an enlightening portrayal of how the parson and the people interact. The parson should bless them frequently (chapter 26), give thanks and bear their sins to God (chapter 6), praise them (chapter 7), and most importantly teach them. Chapter 21, on catechizing, ought to be the dulllest of chapters, but Herbert’s instruction catches

7. Herbert, *The Country Parson, The Temple*, 78.

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*Interlude—“The Collar”*

fire in this chapter. He emphasizes the delight that will result for all parties during the process of truly good and meaningful catechism.

Those readers who still worry that George Herbert sets impossible standards for the clergy of any age, or who worry alternatively that *The Country Parson* places too much emphasis on appearance (“his apparel plain, but reverend, and clean, without spots, or dust, or smell; the purity of his mind breaking out, and dilating itself even to his body, clothes, and habitation”),<sup>8</sup> should take notice of the brief, beautiful expressions that appear to have crept into *The Country Parson* from its more ecstatic sister volume, *The Temple*:

The pulpit is his joy and his throne. (62)

His Parish being all his joy and thought. (78)

Do well, and right, and let the world sink. (97)

Now Love is his business, and aim. (109)

Yes, Herbert does say that “The Country Parson desires to be all to his Parish, and not only a Pastor, but a Lawyer also, and a Physician” (87) and that it is necessary that his wife should be, of course, a skilled healer (69). But alongside these exacting injunctions are plenty of homely remarks, like the one in which a pastor is required “to be on God’s side, and be true to his party” (80). I think the statement that demonstrates most clearly the intimate relation between *The Temple* and *The Country Parson* is this one, in the chapter on preaching: “He often tells them, that Sermons are dangerous things, that none goes out of Church as he came in, but either better, or worse” (62–63). The sharp edges of ministry, the fears and disappointments, are as evident in this simple but explosive sentence as in “The Collar” when the speaker shouts at himself to “leave thy cold dispute / Of what is fit and not; forsake thy cage, / Thy rope of sands.”

No one should go out of church as he or she came in. No one should enter *The Country Parson* or *The Temple* as she or he came in. Herbert desires with all his considerable being that ministry, and the experience of being a Christian generally, should change us every day. It involves risk and anguish, passion and love. Herbert’s two books, four hundred years old, reveal the ministry in a fully-embodied, terrifying manner that will, if read rightly, even now change lives.

8. *Ibid.*, 57. References to subsequent passages are given parenthetically.

## Heroism and Suffering

Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel. (2 Tim 1:8)

Therefore, when we feel pain, when we suffer, when we die, let us turn to this, firmly believing and certain that it is not we alone, but Christ and the church who are in pain and are suffering and dying with us. . . . We set out upon the road of suffering and death accompanied by the entire church.

(Martin Luther, *Fourteen Consolations*)<sup>1</sup>

A remarkable turn has occurred during the last half century in the Christian attitude toward religious heroes. For centuries veneration of martyrs was a fundamental part of the worship experience; while one might assume this is a predominantly Roman Catholic reality, the story of Thomas Becket has been important for both Anglicans and Catholics, and in the radical Reformation tradition of the Mennonites, the book *The Martyrs Mirror* is acknowledged traditionally as having a place second in importance only to the Bible. Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* is similarly a product of the Reformation. Yet in my lifetime the place of martyrdom in the worship experience has become questionable, if not objectionable. In Robertson Davies's 1970 novel *Fifth Business*, Dunstable Ramsay begins a career as historian and mythographer in part because of his early exposure to Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. The action is set in the early twentieth century; this late twentieth-century reader found the protagonist's

1. Luther, *Fourteen Consolations*, 163.

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tolerance, and even fondness, for martyrs' tales bizarre, although Davies's magnificent storytelling skills carried the day.

The subject of martyrdom makes me uncomfortable, I freely admit, and I suspect, based on a lifetime of observing other Christians at worship (admittedly mostly Protestants), my feelings are widely shared. Two men who could be considered the most important Christian martyrs of the past century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King Jr., are more usually termed political martyrs, killed for their determined stances against Nazism and racism, respectively. Only a few generations ago they would have more definitely been designated Christian heroes—people who suffered pain, disgrace, torture, and death, following the example of Christ. While there were certainly other ways of being entered in either Alban Butler's Catholic *Lives of the Fathers, Martyrs and Other Principal Saints* (1756–1759) or Sabine Baring-Gould's Anglican *Lives of the Saints* (1872–1877), for the majority of Christian history the customary way of distinguishing oneself as a hero in the church has been to die for love of God and God's church. As James Doyle says in the Preface to the 1895 edition of Butler's authoritative collection of tales, "here the doctrines of the Catholic Church are presented to us passing through the *ordeal* of time."<sup>2</sup>

I will say little here about the way in which the current avoidance of stories of suffering and death marks the cowardice and comfortableness of our era. There is truth in that. But in our century the transformation of notions of Christian heroism has been, in many ways, a necessary and valuable one. For one thing, the unrelenting violence of most martyrologies has done little enough to "guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:79). Additionally, as Gerard Manley Hopkins tells us in his poem "Pied Beauty," God is also in the "dappled things," in "skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow," and for many (if not most) Christians such lovely but homely particulars suggest the numinous more commendably than any tale of flaying or beheading. This chapter, then, details some of the fictional representations of martyrology in recent times, but takes note of a lessening emphasis on violent suffering, until we arrive at Marilynne Robinson's astonishing work *Gilead*, a novel which proposes a gentle new ideal of Christian hero, one who dies slowly, lovingly, peacefully.

2. Doyle, preface to *Lives of the Martyrs*, 8 (my emphasis).

## The Willing Sacrifice

I would like to make an appeal in a special way to the men of the army. . . . Brothers, you are part of our own people. You kill your own campesino brothers and sisters. And before an order to kill that a man may give, the law of God must prevail that says: Thou shalt not kill. No soldier is obliged to obey an order against the law of God. . . . In the name of God, and in the name of this suffering people whose laments rise to heaven each day more tumultuous, I beg you, I ask you, I order you in the name of God: Stop the repression!<sup>3</sup>

Oscar Romero, Roman Catholic Archbishop of San Salvador, delivered these words during a long Lenten homily one day before he was assassinated on March 24, 1980. Romero's words are used nearly verbatim in John Duigan's film *Romero*, released in 1989 and starring Raul Julia. The highlight of Romero's March 23 sermon is when he moves from request to order, attempting to use his authority to compel the soldiers to his point of view. Neither request nor order succeeds for the historical Archbishop, but in the years since 1980, in artistic and inspirational terms, his words and example have been notable.

Part of the appeal of Romero's dramatic life and death is the distance he traveled in the three years he was Archbishop. As a priest, Oscar Romero had been a conservative, with little patience for the liberation theology so prevalent in the Latin American church. However, during his term as Archbishop, six priests were murdered and Romero became increasingly outspoken about government corruption and his nation's neglect of the poor and vulnerable. Increasingly he allied himself with the poor; the collection of his writings called *The Violence of Love* is replete with statements like this one: "A church that does not join the poor, in order to speak out from the side of the poor against the injustices committed against them, is not the true church of Jesus Christ."<sup>4</sup>

In some respects John Duigan's film does not stray far from documentary, but it has little need to. Such a recent martyr in the church is well documented. What distinguishes this film is Raul Julia's fine and subtle performance as Romero, a man not known for his passionate nature and one who had little personal charisma. Julia, without histrionics,

3. Quoted in Brockman, *The Word Remains*, 217.

4. Romero, *The Violence of Love*, 202.

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demonstrates how remarkable was Romero's transformation from dull and careful conservative to someone who preached radical openness, as evidenced in these words from 1978:

Everyone who struggles for justice, everyone who makes just claims in unjust surroundings is working for God's reign, even though not a Christian. The church does not comprise all of God's reign; God's reign goes beyond the church's boundaries. The church values everything that is in tune with its struggle to set up God's reign. A church that tries only to keep itself pure and uncontaminated would not be a church of God's service to people.<sup>5</sup>

It must have been tempting in the film *Romero* to make this personality shift overly melodramatic, but Duigan and Julia resist the temptation. It is precisely the passionate martyrdoms of the past that they counter with their film. Their Romero is dogged, grim, almost plodding. He does little that is more remarkable than refusing stubbornly to be untrue to his principles, demonstrating to the audience the potential that anyone has to be heroic. It is Romero's environment that is unusual, rather than the man; given another era or another place Oscar Romero might have been ordinary. But his response to circumstances that were vicious and inhumane moves him out of the category of the ordinary. Still, the message is there: he did not have a particularly startling or eloquent message, nor did he have supernatural powers or strength. He was, however, obstinately committed to the ideal that the church must represent the downtrodden.

Romero's martyrdom in this film does resemble prevailing notions of religious martyrdom: he is calm in the face of death; he appears prophetically to see his end coming; he dies in the act of serving others. Like other martyrs over the centuries he is marked by loneliness and isolation. But the novelty in Romero's martyrdom is his insistence that God's reign is not only about or for Christians. Before his death Romero came to a wide and all-embracing view of God's love that appears to dissolve boundaries between the secular world and the church. Although responsibility for Romero's death has been variously attributed to military forces protected by the government of El Salvador, to U.S.-trained opposition death squads, and to the rebel forces who did not welcome his pacifist

5. Ibid., 115.

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## *Heroism and Suffering*

approach, Romero's statement that the "church does not comprise all of God's reign" must have also unsettled Romero's superiors in the church.

*Romero* at first seems different in its politics than the other great nineteen eighties film about religious leaders making the ultimate sacrifice, Roland Joffe's *The Mission*. While *Romero* ultimately promotes a radically open view of the church's responsibility and membership, *The Mission* looks very old-school in its allegiance. Father Gabriel, played by Jeremy Irons, is a devoted servant of the church, sent to convert the forest-dwelling Guarani nation in South America. Father Gabriel's remote mission is presented in idealized terms as a place of education and tranquility. (Although Robert Bolt's screenplay purports to be based on actual events in the eighteenth century, this is a European vision of the events, and somewhat patronizing to the aboriginal peoples in the story.)

The twist in *The Mission* occurs when Spanish missionaries, of which Father Gabriel is one, are ordered to abandon the missions they have painstakingly created because these colonized territories in Paraguay are being reassigned to Portugal. In refusing to leave the mission, Father Gabriel is, on the one hand, standing up for the institution of the church as he understands it. But on the other hand, Father Gabriel's stance can be interpreted as his transfer of allegiance to the Guarani people, who are presented in Joffe's film as the true people of God, sincere in their worship and unwavering in their principles (unlike the Europeans, who are seen to have no firm principles). It is arguable that Father Gabriel dies, with his parishioners, for a very ancient church. But it could also be said that Father Gabriel dies in the act of becoming a new kind of priest, or even the priest of a new vision of Christianity.

In key scenes in this film we watch Jeremy Irons in the act of translation, both literal and figurative. So much of ministry is about translation, taking biblical stories and unpacking them for a congregation, explaining the history and theology, making scripture appropriate for the times. What we see Father Gabriel ultimately performing, however, is translation that goes the other way. Looking out to the secular world, he reads the actions of the Europeans and recognizes that the orders he has received are not part of God's plan for a healthy creation—far from it. So he becomes a spokesman for the Guarani against the church, carrying in the final battle scene a cross that has become the cross of the Guarani, not the cross of the Holy Mother Church that Father Gabriel once served.