

Church & Media Conference transcript

Panellists:

James Cary (chairing the session)

Daisy Coulam

Bryony Taylor

Frank Williams

James Cary Thank you very much for coming to this session entitled "More Tea Vicar" produced by the Sandford St Martin Trust. And hopefully over the nextminutes we're going to be thinking particularly about the portrayal of the clergy on television. And I have a fantastic panel here with us. I have on my right Frank Williams who played the Reverent Timothy Farthing in the much loved series 'Dad's Army'. I have Bryony Taylor. Bryony has written a book called "More TV Vicar?" and has been given a lot of thought to this particular subject. I'm very excited to be hearing more about that. And we also have Daisy Coulam who has adapted James Runcie's books for ITV's series "Grantchester".

(Applause)

Which has prompted applause, quite rightly so. Brilliant. We're going to kick things off though with a clip, let's start this whole thing with a drunken fight!

Clip

'Dad's Army'

IN: "Come along now the Vicar's waiting for you..."

OUT: "...don't push the organist." + JOSTLING

James Cary Excellent an outdoor service turned into a drunken fight. What an excellent way to start this discussion. Frank do you remember that day particularly filming?

Frank Williams I remember it very well indeed, yes indeed.

James Cary Was it as much fun to film as it looks?

Frank Williams It was great fun.

James Cary Excellent, now, go on sorry.

- Frank Williams Well I was going to say the extraordinary thing is, I think the great appeal of 'Dad's Army' was a kind of nostalgia for an England that doesn't exist anymore. A sort of tranquil, rural, pastoral thing but that that doesn't actually typify it I don't think. But I think that was the appeal of 'Dad's Army' and that was a Vicar in those days.
- James Cary I suppose, we forget now perhaps that in 2015 that 'Dad's Army' was made and set at a time before it was made. So in that sense it was already nostalgic wasn't it? Now tell me about the Reverent Timothy Farthing, how would you describe this particular Vicar?
- Frank Williams Well, he wasn't a very nice person. I mean he was rather tetchy and rather bad tempered. Mannerling always says "Hitler and the Nazi hordes are across the channel and that was the enemy" but the second enemy he had was a sort of unholy trinity of the Vicar the Verger and the Warden. Because the Vicar was always out to thwart him at every, in every possible way.
- James Cary Yes and I mean in one...do you get the sense that when they were writing the show and creating the character did they particularly base it on anyone that they knew or why do you think they decided to go with a relatively unsympathetic Vicar which in some senses may be a surprise for the times?
- Frank Williams Well I should think they wanted somebody who would be an opponent of Mannerling.
- James Cary Right.
- Frank Williams And he's not that unsympathetic I suppose there are moments when he almost seems pastoral.
- (Laughter)*
- But he's not really very much help. There's a moment in the same episode I think, when Bill Pertwee narrowly escaped death and he comes to see the Vicar and he says "Why me Vicar? Why am I chosen, why?" and I just say "I haven't the faintest idea"
- (Laughter)*
- which is not pastoral really at all.
- James Cary No, no but honest at least. And when you were playing the part you were and are a church goer yourself - it's not something that felt alien to you, so how did you do much research for the part, or much thinking about it or...?

Frank Williams Well I think the thing about Jimmy Perry and David Croft was they wrote wonderful characters so it was all there for you really and you don't really need to do a great deal. People always say to me did I base it on any particular clergy man? Well would I dare? No of course I didn't.

(Laughter)

But there are probably bits from the clergy I've known in the character somewhere.

James Cary And did you, I think I've read somewhere that perhaps you were able to advise occasionally on "now this is how they do it, this is how they don't do it." Is that exaggerated?

Frank Williams Yeah, no it's not entirely because I think writers don't always know about things and although the vast majority of the television audience wouldn't know either there are always a few people in any situation who are expert about it. So if you get something wrong people are going to say "That's not right. That's wrong. It wouldn't be like that." And I'm afraid I do that myself when I watch. I was watching something the other day, it may be Downton Abbey but they were reciting the Lord's Prayer and they started "Our Father who art in heaven" and I thought no, not in those days it was "which art" then "that" not "those who" and its silly little things like that you sort of notice. Nobody else will notice but people who know will and it sort of takes away from the reality of it.

James Cary Well I hope you wrote them a very angry letter.

(Laughter)

But no it's interesting that you say there something that we'll come on to I'm sure, is that the Vicar character is someone who is part of a comedy show and that he fulfilled a function to be an adversary to Captain Mannering and actually if he had been a sympathetic Vicar perhaps he wouldn't have been you know..In one sense Mannering needed somebody to annoy and to be up against.

Frank Williams Yes

James Cary ...and so we are slightly hostages to what the writer is trying to achieve I suppose.

Frank Williams Yes of course, well, I mean you go way back and you get real caricature in some of these sort of sketch show Vicars, like Dick Emery and so on and then you get to something like 'Dad's Army' where at least the characters are sort of believable.

James Cary Yes

Frank Williams And that's the essence I think of good comedy. So although he wasn't very pleasant I hope he was reasonably real.

James Cary Well no I think he was very real and Dick Emery, one for the teenagers there! I am sure you'll remember Dick Emery.

(Laughter)

Fantastic well as you were, we're going to show another little clip in a moment because one of the people who would have been in people's minds with the clergy character is the next gentleman who is called Derek Nimmo who did at least three different comedies in which he played a clergyman of various types. Can we have that Derek Nimmo clip now please?

Clip 'ALL GAS AND GAITERS'

IN: Derek Nimmo at desk opening post. He rings the speaking clock to check the time.

OUT: ...I'm not very awake yet this morning ”

James Cary That is Derek Nimmo who almost embodies the sort of Church of England Vicar or member of the church establishment. And it's interesting isn't it that throwing away letters which he is clearly doing because he is extremely tired we now look back on it thinking "Oh he doesn't care" or "maybe he's looking for money" which is something Adam Smallbone would do in 'Rev' isn't it? Going through these letters or is it the Arch Decon in "Rev" you can imagine him shredding letters.

(Laughter)

So we are going to come onto...looking backwards to an extent Bryony you've written a book about the past, the present and the future really of the portrayal of clergy on television. Why? What was it about television that made you want to write this book?

Was there a particular moment that annoyed you where you said "right that's it I'm writing a book!"

Bryony Taylor It was actually other Christians that irritated me. *(Laughter)*

James Cary Fair enough.

Bryony Taylor It was people kind of complaining about Christian characters on the television saying "Oh it's really annoying that they are like that because I'm not like that." It frustrated me because I

thought well actually you know the reason these characters are on TV aren't necessarily to represent all Christian's everywhere. You know somebody like Dot Cotton in Eastenders she can't possibly represent all the Christian's in the country but a lot of Christian's kind of want the characters to do that and when they don't behave in the way that they want them to they complain about them and that's kind of what triggered my desire to look at it in a bit more detail. I just wanted to see what it said about society's portrayal of Christians and also what our reaction means. You know if we are frustrated by the portrayal of Christians on TV what does that reaction mean? Is it because it's true, that we find it uncomfortable, or is it something else?

So that's what I wanted to look at.

James Cary And what conclusions did you come to? I mean in particular we should be looking at how I think some people associate the church with the past in this country rather than the present or the future and actually you decided not to do too much about the past, why is that?

Bryony Taylor I wanted to look at kind of contemporary portrayals of Christians. What I did was I separated the book into the good, the bad and the ugly it was just an easy way of categorising and actually nearly all the characters that were kind of really wholesome and good were set either in the past or in the countryside. I mean that scene is kind of a rural idyll singing Come All Ye Faithful People Come. When you think of the countryside you always think of the church and you always think of Vicars it just kind of goes together and so these shows play on nostalgia. I mean a very interesting case in point is Father Brown written by G. K. Chesterton. Father Brown is a Roman Catholic priest living in the slums in Edwardian London and it was put on the BBC in 2013 with Mark Williams playing the lead character. They set it in 1950s Cotswolds' and you wouldn't get...

James Cary That great Bastion of Roman Catholicism.

Bryony Taylor *(Laughter)* You wouldn't get a Roman Catholic priest operating in a tiny village in the Cotswolds'. It just wouldn't happen. So it's kind of there's a connection particularly between the Church of England Vicar and the countryside and nostalgia so that was one of the things I explored in the book.

James Cary No, interesting, we'll come back to some of those things in a moment I just want to bring Daisy in on the discussion who has been adapting James Runcies books for ITV. Just to give us a flavour we've got a clip of Grantchester if we can have that now and then we can talk a bit about it.

Clip

Grantchester

IN: (Music) "Where's your parish?"

OUT: ...I'll only talk to him" (Music)

- James Cary Great. Daisy do you want to just give a bit of background as to how you ended up involved in adapting this for television?
- Daisy Coulam Yes Diederick Santer who is the Exec Producer kind of presented me with the manuscript and I read it very quickly and kind of knew as soon as I read it, it was like "This is going to be great! I can see it, I can see it all" the characters were there. James Runcies' world that he'd created was all kind of there. So we had a big chat with James about what he...I mean he was very much the kind of Nimmo version of..that was, he didn't want that. That was what the entire book really was, again a sort of rebellion against those kind of perceptions of Vicars and he described it as 'an Anglican Father Brown or Morse with morals' that was his...The idea that Sidney has to think the best of people but as a detective he has to think the worst. So it's kind of that paradox is what we tried to play on in the series.
- James Cary How important is it that it's set in the past?
- Daisy Coulam It's interesting. It is the classic 50s pastoral, beautiful but what we tried to do is tap into this kind of post war...all the men were carrying this heavy burden of the War which seemed far away but was still playing on their minds. So we tried to tap into the kind of seething undercurrent of what was really going on. You know, there is homosexuality, there is race, there is all these things that we consider contemporary that were happening then but perhaps weren't as pronounced, so we tried to explore that really.
- James Cary I mean in a way I also wonder if it's sort of easier for us to deal with some of those issues in a slightly safer way by setting it in the past because actually these things all have resonance today. If they didn't they wouldn't be terribly dramatic or interesting.
- Daisy Coulam Exactly. And I think there's something about that..a character, a Vicar to explore those things in the 1950s setting. Also for a Vicar he has got further to fall, he's got you know more to lose.
- James Cary Yes and he's hot as well! Which is also something that is not particularly explored. The Reverend Timothy Farthing is an unmarried man I believe he's a bachelor is that right?
- Frank Williams Yes he is yes.

- James Cary There's a lovely line I read somewhere about him imagining what Hitler would ...
- Frank Williams Yes well I joined the home guard and Mannering said "Why did you join?" and I say "Could I see my wife and my daughter being raped by a German and I said to myself No I couldn't." And he said "But you are not married" and I said "But I have a very vivid imagination."
- (Laughter)*
- Now the thing about Vicars is it's very easy just to look and say this is a Vicar but Vicar's are like everyone else they are very different from each other. So almost anything goes really when you are dealing with a Vicar.
- James Cary No then there is that variety which I think if you are involved in a world it is frustrating when you see one character. For a while Dot Cotton was pretty much the only Christian character on all television. Which is an odd sense of disconnection I think between what's portrayed on the media and what goes on on a Sunday morning up and down the country. Is that something you've thought about? I think you've written a bit about Dot Cotton as well haven't you?
- Bryony Taylor Yes absolutely, yes for a long time she was the only one. I struggled in the book because I ended up focusing on a lot of clerical characters because the majority of Christian characters on television are Vicars, and Anglican Vicars at that, and actually to find someone that was just an ordinary Christian living out their faith! The only person I could really think of was Dot Cotton. Although part of my thinking around it after doing the research was unfortunately an ordinary Christian living out their faith faithfully doesn't make that interesting television *(Laughter)* and so that's why there is only one - and it's in Eastenders which is a programme that is a kind of a touchstone for different moral issues generally in drama. And so that's why we don't see so many ordinary Christians on the telly because it's just not that exciting. *(Laughter)*
- James Cary Yes. And Daisy why do you think it was important to James Runcie that this character should be who he is? Because it sounds like he had quite determined views on who he should be and who he should not be.
- Daisy Coulam Yes he was, I think he felt quite strongly that portrayals, you know the Dot Cottons, were not representing a true picture, they weren't human really, in a sense they are kind of stereotypes and his father was Archbishop. He kind of grew up in that world

and I think it's kind of an homage to his father really and to say that this person has a past and that they are sexual...

James Cary

Also intelligent as well and I wonder if that fights the stereotype that especially today where we have a very pro-science agenda in the media and in the country possibly as a whole. Is it, there's an element of well either you have faith or you have science not really have both therefore if you are into faith you are probably not that bright. Or you are probably not that well educated and actually most Vicars I know have two degrees rather than one! They did their regular degree and then they did another degree as part of their ordination and so in one sense I guess his intelligence is probably a really important part.

Daisy Coulam

Intelligence and I would say you were saying earlier, it's about sense of humour as well. You know, you are not kind of this stuffy person.

I just think humanity, you have humanity, you have all the flaws that everyone else has.

Bryony Taylor

I think something interesting that's happened we were talking this morning about loss of religious literacy just culturally but alongside that people now don't actually have a clue really what Vicars do. (*Laughter*) People don't really know what I do and that's why we are seeing more of them on our TV screens I think because it's a sort of fascination to people because it's a whole world that people don't really know very much about. I mean a couple of years ago I was watching the TV show 'Silks', 'Silk' I think it's called 'Silk'.

And I really enjoyed that because that was a world that I didn't know anything about. I didn't know what barristers did and I didn't know what those people in the wigs did and I think people feel the same way about the clergy and that's why we are starting to get characters that are clergy on TV but also portrayed in such a way that shows they are ordinary people too, they have problems, they might have a past, they might have doubts and they are just like anybody else.

Frank Williams

I do think one of the things. Isn't it true that I'm afraid now that in society most of the people see the Church as totally irrelevant and Vicars with it? I'm interested that you are saying people are interested in Vicars, I would have thought by and large the public are not particularly interested in Vicars. They see the Church as irrelevant and quite often in many series all you get if you have a Vicar, you have an actor who has two lines and all he's got to do is either marry someone, bury them or baptise them.

And that's all they are there for. I mean they just come in, they are totally irrelevant to the rest of the story. So it's interesting that there are some series that do actually have a clergy person in the middle of it.

Bryony Taylor

Well there's certainly been some very recent examples like in 'Broadchurch' which was a really popular crime drama on ITV prime time. The central character was a curate character in that. And particularly at the end of the series, without trying to spoil it, the curate character kind of brings the community together to mourn the loss of the little boy that's murdered. And he's right in the centre of it and they even include a bit of his sermon (*Laughter*) in the episode. And to see a Vicar preach a sermon in an episode of a prime time television programme is quite surprising and then of course just this last couple of weeks has been a programme 'Midwinter of the Spirit'. I don't know if anybody has seen it? ITV about a woman exorcist, diocesan exorcist or deliverance minister.

James Cary

It's a thing!

Bryony Taylor

She's the main character so we are...and I think it is because it's an area, it's a world that people don't know anything about. And so it's kind of quite intriguing and if you couple that with murder or demons then you've got a classic winner haven't you? You've got a TV show.

James Cary

Or hot Vicar! Right well in one sense Frank I think you are right to say that there has been a decreasing irrelevance almost as a perception because at one point Dot Cotton was the only Christian character on television but I think now, because the church is still here and the church is still in every parish. It's almost now become a fascination again because people are thinking "Oh church!, is that still a thing? Do we still do that? Who are these interesting intelligent people who decide to jack in their normal job and go off and do this? These are people I want to know more about. So think that's an interesting...so going back to the kind of...the sexy Vicar.

(Laughter)

We have another sexy Vicar in a clip from a show which I was involved with and we've got a clip of that coming up now.

Clip

'Bluestone 42'

IN: (Music) Cough "Sorry"

OUT: "I know"

(Laughter)

James Cary Major Mary Greenstock there is the padre in 'Bluestone 42' a show which I wrote with my writing partner Richard and it's not really for me to talk about her really. I am going to ask you to talk about her briefly. What interested you about this character what enraged you? You know, what did you make of Mary?

Bryony Taylor One thing, I mean up until 'Bluestone 42' really the only TV woman Vicar was...

James Cary Geraldine

Bryony Taylor Vicar of Dibley! And she kind of dominates and so if you talk...wherever I go I get compared to the Vicar of Dibley and I am sure any other Vicars in the room have the same experiences and so actually to see another woman Vicar on the TV was very exciting. And actually, when the Vicar of Dibley came out it was a shocking idea to have a woman Vicar. It was just as women had started to be ordained in the church so it was a thing of fascination and interest and one of the only areas left in the church where it's quite 'oh that's interesting for them to be a woman' is probably the army. And so the fact that you chose to have a woman padre character was kind of interesting. I thought one of the things that was interesting about the character of Mary is that she is really attractive. And I think, I'm not sure everyone is ready for an attractive woman Vicar.

(Laughter)

They are fine with sexy male Vicars you know Sidney in 'Grantchester' that's fine but a sexy woman Vicar woo I don't know! Because Sally Hitchiner I don't know if she's here today, I think she is here today. She is in the other room. She did a feature with the Telegraph a few, no the Times a couple of years back called "The Vicar wears Prada" and they dressed her up in Prada and they did this feature and there was an outcry "how on earth could a woman want to wear nice shoes and be a Vicar?" You know? It was kind of anathema so I think that's quite interesting how you kind of went for a sexy woman character and I just thought that's another way of challenging people's perceptions about what is and isn't appropriate for a Vicar.

Because I think people are all right with women Vicars looking a bit dumpy and a bit kind of unattractive but a sexy one, ooh I don't know about that.

James Cary Well we did have...people did say that they would probably be more likely to join the army if the padres did look like that.

Bryony Taylor *(Laughter)*

James Cary But going back to what we were saying earlier as well Mary for us fulfilled a specific role within that show, which was to be someone unobtainable he thinks, to the hero of the show played by Ollie Chris and Captain Nick Medhurst. So in one sense...

Bryony Taylor There was a love interest.

James Cary There was a love interest which we were trying to not only just give her so I mean 'Bluestone 42' is basically 'Cheers' he is Sam Malone and you've got Diane and Nick is Sam. And we thought we need a good reason for someone to not want to give into a man who takes his life into his own hands, who is quite tall and handsome and knows it and so let's give her a theological reason to stop her from giving in. And spoilers she does give in!

Bryony Taylor Yes, and you told me I would scream at the telly and I did.
(Laughter) Don't do it! *(Laughter)*

James Cary And you did. Yes that's right, but that was kind of slightly unexpected thing perhaps but again felt made her more human didn't it? More real?

Bryony Taylor Absolutely. I mean interestingly in 'Broadchurch'...

James Cary We're not going to show that bit by the way.

Bryony Taylor No
(Laughter)
Don't think I could even watch it again.
The curate in 'Broadchurch' has a past history of alcoholism I think?

James Cary Yeah

Bryony Taylor ...in the programme and ..

James Cary Mary...

Bryony Taylor Mary has a problem with gambling and it come out in one of the episodes and that's quite interesting because I think we are seeing more and more now people are becoming ordained after doing other careers. I worked as a Social Media Consultant before I was ordained. The Archbishop of Canterbury worked in the oil industry. You know, it's very different from the days, of the time that 'Dad's Army' is set in where people would go to Oxford and then go straight to being a curate and so it's starting to come out in TV shows and I think that's good. That people have got a past and they change the way they live.

James Cary It's interesting isn't it? Because you are talking about people with brokenness in their lives and that's something that we're going to come onto in a moment because. But just before we do that it was interesting that you had a rule on your show as it were, that the hero is not going to have a crisis of faith.

Daisy Coulam Yes

James Cary Which is a standard trope in all sort of TV...

Daisy Coulam Did you have, you had the same one did you?

James Cary Well I said to my writing partner "the one thing that she's not going to do is to have a crisis of faith because it's been done before, it's dull and it's surprisingly uncommon."

Daisy Coulam Yes exactly. We made a strict rule that Sidney can have a crisis of self.

James Cary Yes

Daisy Coulam And kind of doubt himself and doubt his worth, whether he is worthy of God and ..

James Cary Yes

Daisy Coulam ...that kind of thing. Never, never unless we do worry that we'll get to series three and be like "ah what do we do next?" Run out of ideas.

James Cary Yes. But that's a nice problem to have isn't it?

Daisy Coulam Yes exactly.

James Cary But we now have a character who probably is wracked with considerable doubts, self-doubts in particular in 'Rev' which is a show which many people have enjoyed here is a clip.

Clip

'Rev'

In: "I was always irrelevant outside my church now I am irrelevant inside it..."

Out: I am off my tits Lord."

James Cary That's quite a moment. Frank I believe you quite enjoyed 'Rev'

Frank Williams I loved 'Rev'. I thought it was really a very intelligent and very well written thing. And it did actually...you see I am very worried about this whole thing of not allowing people to have a crisis of faith because I think it does happen and I mean it's sort of classic it goes back to Graham Green and all that I mean his priests are always having crisis of faith all over the place. But I

do think the importance of a Vicar who is vulnerable and Rev is. I just thought that last episode which follows the Good Friday thing where you see Rev as an icon of Christ in a way. I thought that was tremendously powerful.

James Cary (Bryony) What was your take on Rev, what do you think it really added?

Bryony Taylor I just thought it was one of those rare things it achieved the same thing as 'All Gas And Gaiters' did actually. Which was it was universally popular with people that didn't go to church and with people that did (*Laughter*). And actually even with the 'Vicar of Dibley' there are parties in theological collages of people gathering round to watch 'Vicar of Dibley' and when I was training when 'Rev' was on and we would have an evening when we would all gather to watch it. It achieved that rare accolade of winning BAFTAs for being a fantastic comedy but actually also being quite accurate about church. I think you know there seems to be two camps. There seems to be one camp of people that think it portrayed the church as in terminal decline and how depressing and it wasn't very encouraging really. There is one group that feel that way about it and there is another group of people that say "that's what it's really like" and found it really encouraging to see sort of a portrayal of how tough it is actually to be a priest in the inner city and the kind of challenges that they have to cope with.

James Cary I think that's the thing that really sticks out isn't it? The authenticity of it. It feels real.

Bryony Taylor Yes

James Cary Admittedly a little bit depressing at times, but in one sense that's what you've...the engine behind comedy is the truth actually.

Bryony Taylor Yes

James Cary But you mentioned there that...go on Frank.

Frank Williams I was going to say that the end of Rev is...I think it's in that Good Friday one. You go through the whole Good Friday thing and then at the end the church is closed down and you do have a kind of death but you don't have a resurrection and that's worrying in a sense.

Bryony Taylor Yes

James Cary That's true although many would I guess know churches that have..the doors have been closed and they have not been opened again.

Frank Williams No but I mean for the character himself.

James Cary Sure

Frank Williams You would rather leave him in that kind of..

James Cary I don't know if there is going to be any more. I mean maybe they are...

Bryony Taylor I think they've kind of..it looked like they left it a bit open but I think they have said they are not going to make any more.

James Cary Ah there will be a Christmas special in three years when they need the money.

Bryony Taylor Yeah *(Laughter)*

There probably will!, there probably will.

James Cary Come on they are not made of stone. It does pick up on the loneliness of the role actually as well, doesn't it? That's one that really comes across there. I mean Daisy I wondered if you had any thoughts on 'Rev' in terms of how it may have informed what you've been doing on 'Grantchester'?

Daisy Coulam We were really inspired by 'Rev' to be honest. Cos that's the first time I've really felt like this is a ...you see the human within the role you don't just see the kind of dog collar and so we kind of ripped off that. I mean obviously it's completely different he is inner city and ...but I think it's, even though it's representing an inner city it's about community still. Even though you know people are man to him and shout 'pedo' in the street and whatever. It's still about his role in the community and I think you know our lives are messier now and not everyone's married and it's, it's not an easy..

James Cary Yes

Daisy Coulam And I think he represents that. He represents modern, you know, society really.

James Cary I think in one sense I wonder if he, we will come onto this in a moment, whether he embodies..this is what happens if, this is what it can do to you if your main job is listening and listening to people, having to be nice to them. That certainly is what Mary finds in 'Bluestone'. And she, she, you know..oh in fact I think there is one line that I quite enjoyed writing where Mary says "It's okay I'm theologically compelled to forgive you".

Daisy Coulam Yes *(Laughter)*

James Cary Which is that kind of 'I have to be nice to you, you know that's what I do' but in terms of this is what happens if people take on the brokenness that they actually themselves become broken. Which is in a sense, that is Christianity that is at the heart very much of what we believe. But within that we are told these secrets. They are told they have to listen because they are trusted and i think that is something that I just want to come onto before we open it out for questions. And what better way to look at trust within the Clergy than with our next clip? If we can have that?

Clip Father Ted

In: Dougal look.....

Out: I hear you're a racist now Father.

(Laughter)

James Cary It's just very pleasing isn't it? Very pleasing indeed. So 'Father Ted' is obviously huge, it's still on and I think any one given night it's probably on more 4 TV isn't it 'Father Ted'. And Bryony do you want to just say a little bit about how...about what difference that show has made and whether actually that show could be made now?

Bryony Taylor I read an interesting interview with Graham Linehan who's one of the writers of 'Father Ted' and he's written lots of other very good comedies as well. And he said "it just couldn't be written now' and I think he is absolutely right you couldn't make a comedy about three priests living in a house it just wouldn't happen because of all the scandals that have happened with the Catholic church. I think one of the reasons why Father Ted actually worked was because it was a cartoon universe that they created and it was a world again that none of us know anything about. So they could almost paint whatever they wanted to onto the characters. He even said that actually 'a priest is a great character because you can put anything in front of the word priest, you can have a disco priest', you can have a...And that's what they did they created all these funny little characters because it's like a blank canvas you have got this sort of black outfit and stuff and you can turn that into whatever you want. And because they made it into a cartoon universe it almost implied that the world of the church was also a cartoon universe, it wasn't relevant at all. And he actually said in the same interview that someone had told him that 'Father Ted' had lanced a boil for the Irish people in terms of being able to critic the Church. Because the Catholic Church in Ireland probably had much more sway over people's opinions than say the Church of England in England has. And they were saying that it

really, it marked a shift in attitudes to the Church and the beginning of the end really in terms of the influence of the Roman Catholic church in Ireland and maybe also in this country as well. But I think because they created this cartoony world they kind of, they got away with it and it was just kind of silly. And that was what he said it wasn't hard satire it was just making fun and being silly. I still love it, I absolutely love it and I love Father Dougal. I've got a red jumper and whenever I put my red jumper on I always call it my Father Dougal jumper because I just look like Father Dougal when I wear my red jumper. (*Laughter*)

James Cary I think in one sense that's..one thing that.. it feels like there is a bit of a distinction with Catholic priests and with the sort of Church of England even though I am not entirely sure how much the non church going public differentiate between the two. It's almost as if they sense there is a difference, because the Canon Sidney in Grantchester is trusted isn't he?

Daisy Coulam Pretty much. We sat down at one point and we said every detective has a superpower what's Sydney's superpower? Well it's that people feel they can tell him things and when you pair him with a copper whom no one wants to tell anything that's his strength is people trust him and actually in the second series we kind of explored that idea that he's got to the point now where can he be trusted? People don't come to him now because you know he's often just passing that information onto the police so it's kind of...

James Cary Yes. There's that lovely, at the end of that trailer that we showed where she says..

Daisy Coulam "I'll speak to him" yeah.

James Cary "I'll talk to him" and the police man is like "uh"

Daisy Coulam Yes (*Laughter*) everybody, exactly.

James Cary So we've got a few minutes left, we've got about ten minutes left I think before we get hoofed out of here so have a think about a question, if you have a question to ask. Whilst you do that..or just a comment even to add to the discussion, whilst you do that we are just going to have one last question. Before that one thing to say whilst I remember is this book is available

Bryony Taylor It is

James Cary from Bryony afterwards.

Bryony Taylor It is yeah.

James Cary Where will you be?

Bryony Taylor Wherever the books are. (*Laughter*)

James Cary Wherever the books are.. downstairs.

Bryony Taylor Downstairs. Thanks Anna.

James Cary And it's excellent. I mean I have no financial interest in this book whatsoever but I have been reading it and it's really helped, really interesting. There are just not really many books out there like this. Which take popular culture seriously, which take faith seriously, the church seriously. So I think it's a really positive read I'm going to spare your blushes but I really enjoyed it.

Bryony Taylor Thanks I appreciate that.

James Cary But one other final question I wonder is to what extent writer may be or society likes to place onto Vicars their own prevailing attitudes of what they think the church is or what they think the church should be. Because it's very convenient in the 50s and 60s perhaps to show the church as being rather impotent and rather clumsy, rather foolish in that Derek Nimmo mould and it is very interesting to see how toothless the church became. I wonder if there is anything in that, am I talking nonsense?

Bryony Taylor I don't know I mean you're the writer so I kind of..

James Cary Well you are a writer too.

Bryony Taylor But a TV writer! Because that was one of the things I sort of explored in the book was okay at the end of the day you know you guys are trying to make a good TV show.

James Cary Yes

Bryony Taylor And some of the kind of opinions [audio muffled] might be incidental to that but at the end of the day you are just trying to write a really, really good drama and that's kind of what the characters are there for and I think one of the mistakes that Christians make when they watch a programme is that they expect "oh great, oh there's a programme about the Church that's going to make everyone think that we're cool" you know and it's like "no, it's not".

James Cary No it's not because we're not.

Bryony Taylor It's not because we're not. That's not what the TV producers are trying to do they are not trying to kind of promote the church and that was why I got frustrated with some of the critics of 'Rev' because actually the guys writing 'Rev' weren't trying to kind of make people interested in the church they were just writing a good comedy.

James Cary Exactly yes.

Bryony Taylor So that is what I would say.

Daisy Coulam Yes I think we tried to think of the characters first and then put the clothes on them kind of thing because that's what's interesting really is you know the sermons nice and everything is nice but you want a really interesting character with moral dilemmas and moral choices and you know that kind of stuff.

James Cary Yes. Was it frustration for you Frank that your, that the character you played was a slightly unsympathetic and wasn't possibly as dynamic as you might have liked?

Frank Williams No not particularly because you know the character was the character. I think that is the truth about characters.

James Cary Yes

Frank Williams And I think, I mean I am not a writer but if you are a writer presumably you create a character and if it's going to be a central character, it's going to be a Vicar then you put certain things into that character which fit with your idea of what you want that particular Vicar to be but it isn't a typical Vicar of the church. There is no such thing I don't think. I'll go back to the real thing that I think is the problem at the moment that the church is seen not as something bad but as totally irrelevant to a large proportion of people. They will turn to it only in times of crisis and that is when the church needs to respond and possibly where we need to show within as has happened within a series on television the church, people turning to the church and finding something there in a time of crisis.

James Cary Thank you Frank. Do we have any questions or comments?

Man (Audience) Hi I'm Richard this is a question for Frank really. Frank in your role portraying a Vicar filmed in the 1970s dating back to the 1940s and comparing that, contrasting that with the roles of the Vicars now how do you..do you have a comment about the role of the reverence, the esteem in which Vicars were held back then and now? Do you see it as the same thing? Obviously the role in 'Dad's Army' was sort of the peace maker the organiser is that something that you still feel holds true?

Frank Williams Well I think it does hold true to some extent but I don't think the majority of the people see it like that as I was saying I am afraid the majority of the people see it as irrelevant. Now if you have a church which is lively and a lot of people are going to it then you get a community of people who do trust the church and trust the Vicar and see that the Vicar is the leader of that community. But for society at large I think, sorry I think people find it

irrelevant. And of course Timothy Farthing was in a rural setting in 1940s very different from somebody who's in an urban setting in 2015. Very different.

Woman (audience) Hi I'm Eleanor from the Faraday institute Science and Religion at Cambridge University. You mentioned the popularisation of science in the media so Brian Cox obviously extremely popular. I wonder among the panel where is the responsibility for us to continue to communicate about fantastic scientists who are also Christians or religious is it for the media or is it for education? Do you think having people like Brian Cox so prominent might be confusing the relevance of religion for society?

James Cary Yes that's a good question do you have a particular thought on that?

Bryony Taylor I certainly look at in the book the sort of rise of new atheism and particularly stand up comedy and the influence of stand up comedy and I think it has had quite a negative influence over people's views of faith. I remember being in a taxi when I was at college and the guy said "oh what are you doing?" and I said "I'm training to be a Vicar actually" and he said "oh hasn't that all being debunked now what with evolution and everything?" (*Laughter*) and I just had to go through this really laborious untangling process of saying "well actually you know I believe that evolution is probably how God created the universe and...and I just realised that the influence of those stand up comics was probably massive probably even more so than people like Brian Cox actually. Because watching Ricky Gervais you know more people are going to watch Ricky Gervais or somebody like him and be influenced. But I think having spoken to Paul Kerensa who was in the session you just had he was saying "it's a bit passé now to actually have a pop at Christians on the stand-up circuit" so I think it will probably come, bubble back round again but I think in terms of promoting I think we probably do need more thinking Christians in the media that are intelligent. And particularly any science based. I know somebody that does it a lot is David Wilkinson who is the Principle of John's college where I trained and he's got a Phd in Astrophysics and he's got a Phd in theology. He's got a brain the size of the universe.

James Cary And he's a very nice man as well.

Bryony Taylor And he regularly speaks on 'Thought For The Day' and I think he's a really good example of a thinking Christian in the public space. So yeah I think we probably do need to try and find them more of a platform.

James Cary It's a hard one I wrote a play on the subject, hardly anyone seen it but I don't know. (*Laughter*) Say again?

Woman The coverage isn't always there....

James Cary It's true the coverage isn't necessarily there but in one sense the decision makers aren't necessarily on board with what we're trying to do. So in one sense what you are saying about Christians in the media generally I think is true and one thing that I'm interested in, especially with my tradition of Christianity which is more Evangelical, if a bloke is well educated and a good communicator you want him to become a Vicar. Now we've got thousands of Vicars we hardly have anyone in the media who is in that situation so I tend to try and encourage people to not be Vicars (*Laughter*) that doesn't always make me as popular as I could be.

Woman (audience) Thanks, I'm Cindy and I'm a Vicar and a broadcaster. Out of all the ones that we've seen on the screen the one that resonates most with most of us Vicars is 'Rev' because it's not an original line but most of us think it's more like a documentary than a comedy because it really does bring home what we're all doing. But can I just ask why all the ones we've seen today your woman and the others are all very attractive? You've mentioned it but would it have worked if they had looked like the back end of a bus?

James Cary Yeah well

Woman Some of us Vicars do.

James Cary That's a good question there in lies..., that's television for you really in one sense.

Bryony Taylor You look at CSI I mean...

James Cary Look at CSI

Bryony Taylor Forensic scientists don't look like that necessarily (*Laughter*)

James Cary And actors aren't like, us they are like better looking versions of us.

Bryony Taylor Yes

Frank Williams I'm not!
(*Laughter*)

James Cary I don't know how you can say that Frank.
(*Applause and laughter*)

No it is a factor and I think that's just one of those things that through the lens of television it just sort of filters everything and you have to make one of those conceits of television where television is like normal life but slightly better looking.

- Bryony Taylor Although actually in 'Rev' of course Adam is not the most attractive guy, well he is quite cute but he's not gorgeous and there is that episode where the Imam is much better looking than him, better at everything than him and so it's kind of...*(Laughter)*. Rev's quite realistic I think.
- James Cary He is sort of the underdog as well isn't he?
- Bryony Taylor Yes it's part of his character.
- Man (audience) Hi I'm Russ Bravo. I just wondered whether you think that part of the problem is the church quite often wants to appear likeable on television when actually we are called to be a little bit awkward and prophetic and on the edge and challenging society rather than fitting in with it.
- James Cary It's a good point we are called to tell the truth and the truth is frequently not comfortable and we...
- Daisy Coulam We have advisors on 'Grantchester' and often we have to slightly push against their advice because they say "well they wouldn't sleep with a jazz singer" and we say "but he would" so you know it's kind of - you have to..
- James Cary I think that's one of those things that I think I certainly know that when I ended up writing a character who ends up having sex on the table with the bomb disposal guy that people thought "oh that's a really bad image of Church" well that's just life unfortunately she has put herself in that really silly situation, she has not been particularly wise in handling that and that's just the way it is and I think sometimes as a church we place expectations on Christian role models within the media because we want them to look perfect and actually...And I think that's another reason why 'Rev' has really punched through because here is someone who is normal.
- Daisy Coulam The audience don't want perfection anymore I don't think.
- James Cary No
- Bryony Taylor No they don't.
- Frank Williams No the clergy have to come through as human beings and if you try to make them perfect it doesn't work. I mean they become a caricature.
- James Cary Yes

Daisy Coulam

Exactly

Bryony Taylor

Someone complained a couple of years ago at a conference similar to this that all the Christians or the people that were religious on television, so not just Christians but anyone of faith were either “freaks, geeks or antiques”. That was the phrase used and I thought to myself that describes most churches actually. *(Laughter)* They are full of freaks, geeks and antiques and maybe we should just be proud of the fact that we are misfits and that actually the church has always been full of misfits right from the beginning.

James Cary

Yes

Bryony Taylor

It's always been full of people that wouldn't fit in anywhere else and that's kind of what the church should look like actually. So if the portrayal of Christians on the telly is freaks, geeks and antiques I am not that bothered about that. *(Laughter)*

James Cary

Well that's a fantastic note on which to end our session. On behalf of you guys I hope I'd like to thank our guests for making time to come here to be with us. Please thank Frank Williams *(Applause)* Bryony Taylor *(Applause)* and Daisy Coulam *(Applause)* and thank you very much for coming and I think we're done.