

# Losers, Food, and Sex

## Clerical Masculinity in the BBC Sitcom REV.

### ABSTRACT

Clerical masculinities, much like their lay/secular counterparts, often appear unchanging because they are the products of naturalization processes. Clerical masculinities, however, are far from stable, for they live and breathe the dynamics of both their socio-religious context and their secular “others”. The BBC sitcom REV. (BBC2, UK 2010–2014) is a refreshing take on the everyday life and problems of a vicar in the Church of England trying to avoid stereotypes that often come with clerical roles. REV. (2010–2014) can be interpreted as an attempt to explore the negotiation processes of masculinity within an institution that is involved in the “production” of religion and gender roles. It shows that being a man in an institutional setting is as much a performance as it is a more or less successful negotiation of other people’s expectations and one’s own worldview. In particular, the main male clerical characters in REV. (2010–2014) inhabit a position of power but all have their flaws. They can best be understood as losers whose clash with masculine systems renders them more human.

### KEYWORDS

BBC, masculinities, clerical, television, gender, religion, Church of England

### BIOGRAPHY

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## INTRODUCTION

ALEX: Don't be the vicar for the day, for once.

ADAM: I can't, it's a calling, isn't it. It can't be un-called for the day.<sup>1</sup>

“Being” a male vicar entails more than just one’s calling: it means a very specific form of “being” a man and performing masculinity. It means to live one’s clerical masculinity in a so-called secular society (which more appropriately is described as shaped by a complex relationship between religious pluralization, a renewed interest in religion, and an ongoing secularization process)<sup>2</sup> that seems to clash with traditional religious values on many levels. The critically acclaimed BBC2 show *REV.* (BBC2, UK 2010–2014) portrays some of the struggles with and over clerical masculinities in a secular-religious setting, that is, in the context of a religious community, the Church of England, that is affected by and affects the secular community it lives in.

Clerical masculinities are not stable but live and breathe the dynamics of both their socio-religious context and their secular “others”. *REV.* (2010–2014) is not the first or only TV show to feature clerics, but its exploratory, searching approach points out that (higher ranking) members of the hierarchy, and masculinities in general, are never just beneficiaries or performers of power but are also subject to power and socio-religious momentums as well as to their own personal “baggage”. *REV.* (2010–2014) can be interpreted as an attempt to explore the negotiation processes of masculinity within an institution that is involved in the “production” of religion and gender roles. It shows that being a man in an institutional setting is as much a performance as it is a more or less successful negotiation of other people’s expectations and one’s own worldview. In particular, the main male clerical characters in *REV.* (2010–2014) inhabit positions of power but all have their flaws. They can best be understood as losers whose clash with masculine systems renders them more human. While all male characters are losers in their own way, the loser-masculinity is best embodied through Adam Smallbone, the protagonist of the show.

After a brief discussion of masculinity and television, this article offers three perspectives on the negotiation of masculinities in *REV.* (2010–2014): the loser, sexual bodies, and threatened masculinities. The conclusion draws these three perspectives together and shows that the male characters struggle with fitting into predefined notions of being a man but at the end of the show learn to appreciate and celebrate their own masculinities. While the show consists of three seasons, most of the examples in this paper are taken from the first two sea-

1 Dialogue between Alex Smallbone and her husband, the vicar Adam Smallbone, in BBC2’s show *REV.* (2010–2014), S01/E06.

2 Cf. Weisse 2016, 32–33, 39.

sons. In particular the ending of season two is important for the discussion of masculinities because in an iconographic Christmas meal staged as a Last Supper, the characters – and the audience – learn to see through their “corporeal eyes”.<sup>3</sup>

## SCREENING AND NARRATING MASCULINITIES ON TELEVISION

REV. (2010–2014) is a very well received<sup>4</sup> BBC2 sitcom that aired from 2010 to 2014 and was co-created by British actor Tom Hollander, who also plays the main character, Adam Smallbone, the vicar of the London parish of St Saviour’s. At the heart of the sitcom is the renegotiation of what it means to be a clergyman, husband, father, friend, or someone seen as “religious other” by secular society. It also addresses that clergymen are sexual bodies with sexual desires, rejected or fetishized bodies, or queered bodies.

In his response to REV. (2010–2014), Robert Stanier, chaplain of Archbishop Tenison’s School in Kennington, argues that the show is “just a series about a 30-something man”;<sup>5</sup> and in many ways it is, and in many other ways it is not, for it can be seen as a way to work through and discuss contemporary issues. In the context of TV news, John Ellis argues that television is a form of “working-through”<sup>6</sup> – it draws on “raw data” and transforms them into narratives.<sup>7</sup> Doing so, television aims to bring order and stability to messy images and information fragments of local or global events.<sup>8</sup> Yet, that does not mean that television offers easy solutions to complex problems; instead it remains an open process that ultimately remains inconclusive.<sup>9</sup> Thus television structures, responds to, and tries to anticipate cultural needs and transformation processes.<sup>10</sup> Television, its aesthetics, narratives, and processes of production, can reproduce and perpetuate existing social structures and lead to passivity. However, as a forum in which moral questions are discussed and shared, it can also foster critical engagement and become an agent of change.<sup>11</sup>

REV. (2010–2014) emerged out of Hollander’s curiosity about what it might be like to be a vicar and – according to Hollander – much research went into the crafting of the characters. Indeed, a number of clergy recognized a little

3 Cf. Fulton 2006.

4 Cf. Fraser 2010.

5 Arnold 2011.

6 Ellis 1999, 55.

7 Cf. Ellis 1999, 55.

8 Cf. Ellis 1999, 56.

9 Cf. Ellis 1999, 55, 58–59.

10 Cf. Hartley 2009, 21.

11 Cf. Zborowski 2016, 13; Dant 2012, 2–3; Cardwell 2006, 76–78; Cardwell 2013.

of themselves and their lives in the stories and the people on screen.<sup>12</sup> The socio-cultural context that gave birth to the show needs to be considered, too: church attendance in the Church of England is at an all-time low,<sup>13</sup> and in recent years the Church has been struggling over issues such as homosexuality, the role of women in the Church, and the ordination of women bishops. Thus, drawing on *Ellis, Rev.* (2010–2014) can be understood as working through narratives of clerical masculinities. It draws on a mix of traditional understandings of clerical and secular masculinities, on masculine roles and ideals such as the virtuous leader, the pious man, the father of the community, or the successful careerist. It works with and through them, pokes fun at them, and questions these very understandings in order to show that the male characters in the show themselves struggle with performing these masculine roles. In particular, *Rev.* (2010–2014) works through clerical masculinities in its aesthetic and narrative style as a sitcom, by lampooning them, not taking them quite seriously, and by portraying the men as losers who are very likable nonetheless.

The sitcom style is more than mere entertainment and important to consider when reading and interpreting *Rev.* (2010–2014). Brett Mills argues that “the pleasures of sitcoms are not simple, and certainly require an understanding of complex social conventions and generic rules in order for them to be enjoyed”.<sup>14</sup> They can, of course, re-inscribe rather than challenge existing social structures, stereotypes, or heteronormativity.<sup>15</sup> Yet they are an important site for both the negotiation and the study of masculinities.<sup>16</sup> In particular the comic aspect of sitcoms can be used to subvert hegemonic masculinities or, if not subvert or challenge, then at least show disrespect. What Hanke argues in his analysis of “mock-macho” sitcoms such as *Home Improvement* (ABC, US 1991–1999) holds true for *Rev.* (2010–2014) and its presentation of clerical masculinities, too: “By making a mockery of masculinity, these comic narratives simultaneously present men as objects of laughter and as subjects moving between ‘old’ and ‘new’ subject positions. While this process of resubjectification may not signify a change in social structures of hierarchy and inequality, such comic texts can imply a lack of reverence for conventional masculinity, especially as it is defined in terms of competence and infallibility.”<sup>17</sup> By poking fun, a sitcom can destabilize and call into question existing and seemingly rigid social structures. As a complex genre, the sitcom can invite the audience to respond to social conventions represented on screen and can thus be employed for a critical reading of

12 Cf. Hartley 2009, 21.

13 Cf. Archbishop’s Council 2016.

14 Mills 2009, 5.

15 Cf. Mills 2004.

16 Cf. Hatfield 2010.

17 Hanke 1998; cf. also Mills 2009, 5.

hegemonic masculinities, rendering visible what would otherwise remain hidden from social discourse.<sup>18</sup>

The way *REV.* (2010–2014) creates its story arc from the first to the last episode is important to consider, too. The way we tell stories is part of learning and teaching practices and thought processes. The art of storytelling teaches us how to use language, how to think and frame, make sense of, and mediate our experiences. Analyzing narratives, their content, aesthetics, forms, and the practices they emerge from and are embedded in, then, can allow for insights into how knowledge, power, myths, ideologies, and histories are (re-)created and communicated within and across societies and cultures.<sup>19</sup> Narratives, however, are also a means to draw boundaries, create and naturalize difference and inequality, or subvert existing hegemonic structures. Narratives and masculinities, therefore, are closely linked because our experiences, the way we make sense of and create gender, are situated in a socio-cultural narrative context. For the context of this paper, I therefore understand masculinity as “not what it means to be a man (if it were, it would, for instance, be unchanged through time as biological maleness has remained constant for centuries) but a set of assumptions about what men are like which are projected on to those with male bodies and which almost inevitably affect the experience of inhabiting a male body”.<sup>20</sup> In the production, adoption, and renegotiation of masculinities, media are active agents.<sup>21</sup> They provide a playground and resources for gender roles and gender practices, but as active agents they are never neutral but inherently ethical and political.<sup>22</sup>

Although discourses about gender and gender roles in Christianity often draw on the notion of natural order, for example, the innately motherly role of women or the fatherly role of the priest, the male cleric’s representing the male Jesus, or the male perspective’s being the default (or naturalized) perspective in the writing of history or narratives, Christian masculinities and femininities are not stable; they are as much a (naturalized) construct – and often deliberately so – as their secular counterparts. In particular the gender identity of (male) clerics has undergone change over time. Its production has been co-dependent on different factors, such as whether the cleric is a parish priest or a monk, whether he is/was married, the particularities of the specific Christian denomination, or the religious or secular context, to name just a few. Christian gender narratives often drew on existing models of religious and secular masculinities

18 Cf. Mellencamp 1992, 342–343; Mills 2009, 5; Hanke 1998, 89–91; Butt 2010.

19 Cf. Hartley 1999, 45; Hartley 2009, 12–13, 26.

20 Reynolds 2002, 98 (emphasis in the original).

21 Cf. Benschhoff/Griffin 2004, 250.

22 Cf. Byars 1991, 4, 6; Fiske 1987, 179.

and reconfigured them.<sup>23</sup> What we are faced with, then, both historically and today, is not one clerical masculinity (we are, however, often faced with a hegemonic clerical masculinity) but a rich, fluid, and at times highly contested diversity of clerical masculinities that are always also tied to their secular counterparts and the struggle over the relationship between masculinity, sexuality, and virility.<sup>24</sup> These rich and competing clerical masculinities are also expressed in *REV.* (2010–2014), for example when Adam encounters (and envies) colleagues who appear much more competent, cooler, and more hip, in other words, who are more masculine (from his perspective anyway) than he.

A challenge for research and members of the clergy themselves, however, is the question of how to make sense of and talk about clerical masculinity and what it means to use terms from secular contexts that might not necessarily make sense in an ecclesial context. As Derek Neal points out, “masculinity” typically refers to a position of power, while he links “clerical” to a more serving role, raising the question how masculinity can be negotiated with this (sub)servient understanding.<sup>25</sup> What complicates Neal’s distinction, however, is that in public discourse, the church as institution and its (clerical) representatives are often associated with a position of power, authority, and wealth. Therefore, clerical masculinities are always both “discursive trope and ... lived identity”<sup>26</sup> trying to negotiate a range of competing perceptions and ascriptions.

Clerical masculinities are always related to other (secular) masculinities or femininities, which shape their understanding, and they are continually renegotiated in relation to these (changing) others. Often, however, these renegotiation processes themselves contribute to a transformation (and naturalization) of ideas and boundaries.

## THE LOSER

Different understandings and perceptions of clerical masculinities clash already at the beginning of *REV.* (2010–2014) and thus set the tone for some of the struggles throughout the TV series. In episode one, the audience encounters different clerical masculinities in the character of Adam Smallbone: husband, host for the parish community, the guy who is available 24/7, manager, transvestite, or (closeted) gay. Viewers are also introduced to non-clerical masculinities, and all these different forms of being male compete with each other: Adam, the

23 Cf., for example, Lutterbach 2013; Bailey 2007; Thibodeaux 2010, 8, 12.

24 Thibodeaux 2010, 1–3.

25 Neal 2010, 18. The multifaceted nature of priesthood is also expressed in many documents of the Catholic Church that describe the priest as teacher, minister, and leader, though this requires further discussion with respect to theology and actual practice as well as to the relations between the different orders of deacon, priest, and bishop; cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith 1999.

26 Neal 2010, 33.

clumsy and often naïve vicar who seems to fail at everything he aims to achieve; Archdeacon Robert, the lordly clerical and gay careerist; homeless Colin, who just wants a job and a girlfriend and sees in Adam his best friend; and again Adam, who does see in Colin his best friend but seems already to be looking for the next best friend. As the narrative progresses, however, the show uncovers that all these different forms of being a man (and cleric) require the other for their own self-understanding. The audience is drawn into boundary processes to learn that while boundaries often exclude and alienate, they always require an inside and an outside and thus connect what they separate.<sup>27</sup> As such, *REV.* (2010–2014) shows that the previously othered is complementary rather than alien: Adam learns from Colin to appreciate true friendship, Robert becomes a better or more likeable character through his interactions with Adam, and Colin learns to see in Adam the person, not the vicar. And even though all these main characters seem to be losers, it is through their interactions that they grow in acceptance of each other.

The series uses the emphasis on the mutual dependence of masculinities as a means to subvert a hegemonic understanding of masculinity and to show how masculinities can transform each other. To do so, it relies not only on the plot but also on visual and acoustic means. Adam is affectionately portrayed as clumsy vicar who loves his wife, his job, and his congregation, but also lacks energy, is disillusioned by what is going on around him, and often tunes the world out by listening to sacred music on his iPod. This tuning out of this world and tuning into another, maybe more spiritual, world affects the viewer and their viewing experience as well. As soon as Adam plugs in his earplugs, the background noise fades, and the audience, too, tunes out of the filmic world, and maybe into another world, even a sacred one. In *REV.* (2010–2014), music is not limited to Adam's spiritual journey, but is also used as a technique to connect and set apart different masculinities. In episode *S02/E06*, for example, Johann Sebastian Bach's motet "Jesu, meine Freude" (BWV 227) is used as overlay music to connect two scenes and three different embodiments of masculinity. The episcopal see of Stevenage is vacant and the career- and power-minded Archdeacon Robert aspires to become the next bishop. He is not really a "people person" but has been playing it nice in light of his expected appointment. He is gay, in a relationship, and very much aware that this could negate his chances of climbing up the hierarchical ladder. Despite Robert's attempts to keep his relationship below the radar of the hierarchy, a member of the crown committee somehow finds out and asks during the interview, "One final question: Are you involved in an active gay relationship?" There is a cut from the committee to a close-up of Robert, whose face goes pale as he realizes that this question just

27 Cf. Ornella 2014.

put an end to his career aspirations, and Bach's motet starts playing. While the music still plays, the film cuts to Adam sitting on a park bench, with his earplugs in, listening to the very music we hear and smoking a cigarette. With Bach's motet still playing, yet another cut takes us to see Adam from behind while the homeless man Colin swears and kicks beer cans around, apparently angry at something. Prompted by Colin, Adam takes the earplugs out and the music fades.

Music here serves as a leveling factor between Robert, Adam, and Colin, bridging differences and connecting their masculinities. Despite their differences in social and ecclesial status, they all share the struggle of having to negotiate different masculinities (and the expectations thereof). The diegetic sound we tune into when Adam plugs in his earphones connects Adam with the audience and other characters in the show, and serves to connect different scenes. The music we hear is Adam's music, suggesting that while he might not be perfect, he still might be the one that holds the community together just as the music connects us with Adam and several scenes within the show (though every so often Adam needs his wife to motivate and support him in being the anchor for his parish community).

In contrast to Adam's acting as an anchor for the community, the careerist Archdeacon Robert seems to be only interested in exerting the power and authority invested in him and pursuing his own career. Yet, his male (clerical) identity is not as settled as it might seem either. He struggles with the institution's perceptions of gay relationships, which get in the way of his career ambitions. We only learn of Robert's sexual orientation late in the show, when Adam and Nigel, the closeted gay lay reader in St Saviour's, catch Robert and his partner shopping for a new bed. The situation is quite awkward, and we can assume that Robert has to negotiate his private/personal/sexual life with his institution's perception of an appropriate clerical and episcopal masculinity, that he struggles to fit in. Even if Robert is not the most likeable character, the filmic staging of the scene and the acting of all the characters on screen show him struggling with the very power he shares in and exerts over others. As such, he has to negotiate idealized and normalized notions of an episcopal masculinity as either heterosexual or celibate in an almost dichotomous fashion.

The element of food is a further vital ingredient in portraying and expressing the relationship between different masculinities in *REV.* (2010–2014), in particular Adam's and Robert's. In his study on food and sex in biblical texts, Kenneth Stone argues that "food and sex both play a central role in the social exchanges and symbolic associations by which male characters establish and manipulate their relations to one another".<sup>28</sup> In the beginning of the series, whenever the

28 Stone 2005, 83; cf. Nixon 2008.

archdeacon visits Adam, he dismissively pours the coffee Adam offers him into the sink. Adam and Robert both inhabit a position of power: Adam as the vicar of St Saviour's, and Robert in his role as archdeacon. And yet they are not equals; one is clearly subordinate to the other, not just in terms of church hierarchy but also in terms of performance. Coffee, what is done with coffee and what is said about it, becomes an expression of the power relations between those two very different embodiments of masculinity and shows that masculinity always has to be thought of in the plural, as masculinities.



Fig 1: Film still, Christmas Meal, Rev. (2010–2014), S02/E07.

Towards the end of the show, however, food is also used to symbolically express a transformation in power relationships. When Robert fails to be appointed bishop because of his gay relationship, he is outed by a member of the committee, but he also stands up for his sexual orientation and his love for his partner, as we later learn. Being able, finally, to be true to himself causes a change in the archdeacon and the way he performs power as well as his masculinities. In the last episode, S02/E07, Adam and his parish host a Christmas meal in the church. Robert stops by at the parish on his way back home; he had missed his flight into the holidays due to bad weather and was stuck in the departure lounge for 18 hours. As he wishes Adam a Merry Christmas, pays back a few pounds he owed, and is about to leave, Robert is invited by Adam to stay for the Christmas meal. Rather than making a dismissive comment as we might expect from his earlier pattern of behavior, Robert thankfully accepts:

ADAM: Stay with us, please! C'mon! We'd be honored.

ROBERT (*nods and seems to be quite moved by the invitation*): Thank you, Adam.

With the invitation, Adam reclaims his masculinity and dignity; one could even argue that in inviting Robert, Adam inhabits a position of power, albeit a form of power not rooted in having power over others but in the ability to establish relationships and create community. Rather than begging the archdeacon or

humbly requesting him to attend, Adam offers a friendly, encouraging gesture that is powerful and respectful at the same time. Through the Christian praxis of sharing food, the two men, representing very different masculinities, are transformed into “equals in Christ”.<sup>29</sup> This scene also renders visible the problem of applying labels when talking about masculinity: what does masculinity mean? And if we understand masculinity as performance, as power, we need then ask: who performs for/over whom?, who is in power and in which contexts?, and what kind of power are we actually talking about? Power, too, can have many different forms and effects: it can oppress, but it can also empower. This iconic Christmas meal also turns around power relations: the main “loser” character suddenly finds himself in the position of power and brings the community together.

The third and final season ends again with a gathering of “equals in Christ”, although there is no food in the final scene. The small community gathers in front of St Saviour’s parish church. It is the last Easter Vigil both for St Saviour’s, because the church is shut down for financial reasons, and for Adam, because he decided that being a vicar is not appropriate for him anymore. Even though there is no actual food, the theme is present in a theological sense. As the community gathers around the Easter fire and celebrates the resurrection, Jesus becomes their food: they consume Christ and are consumed by Christ. Both the Christmas scene and the Easter scene then seem to call for a celebration of life in all its shades and colors to overcome the power of one particular master narrative.<sup>30</sup>

Fig 2: Film still, Celebration of the Easter Vigil in front of St Saviour’s, Rev. (2010–2014), S03/E06.



29 Cf. Gal. 3:28; Méndez-Montoya 2012, 113–156; Counihan 1999, 6.

30 One can, of course, argue that today’s incarnation of Christianity is itself a master narrative that prevailed over other Christian narratives.

## SEXUAL BODIES

Martin Stringer argues that the priestly body, celibate or married, is also a sexual body. In fact, the worshipper's body, too, has to be understood as sexual. Real/lived bodies engage in worship, prayer, and liturgy, and these real bodies are always already sexual bodies.<sup>31</sup> This is made very explicit in *REV.* (2010–2014) when Adam's wife complains several times that there is not enough sex in their relationship. In episode *S02/E01*, for example, Alex throws her reproach “you don't shag me enough” into Adam's face.

Clothing becomes an important marker of the sexual, priestly body, setting the vicar-body apart. Clothing can be understood as practice that eroticizes but also emasculates the priestly body. In the very first episode, we see Adam cuddling up to his wife Alex:

ALEX: And if you think I'm gonna let you shag me in your dog collar, you're very wrong.

ADAM: I'm not trying to shag you, I'm trying to mobilize your trunk muscles.

ALEX: I hate it when you wear that thing in the bedroom, it's like you got no cock.

ADAM: All right, I'm taking it off, there it is, it's off.

ALEX: Nooo, leave it on, and don't bash the bishop.<sup>32</sup>

Right after this dialog the film cuts to a scene on the following day, so we do not know what happened next, but the way Alex and Adam interacted suggests that they did not have sex that night.

Paradoxically, the emasculating clerical collar can also produce a specific clerical masculinity that becomes the object of (sexual) desire, an eroticized, fetishized, hyper-masculine masculinity. Adoah, the cassock chaser of the parish, is very fond of Adam (to say the least). He is her hero, not only because she thinks he overwhelmed the thief who stole her purse (*S02/E01*), but also because collar-wearing vicar bodies seem to inhabit a very special place in her heart. Archdeacon Robert mentions that rumor has it that Adoah can become quite aroused during sermons, and the way she hangs on Adam's every word during liturgy suggests that there is something to this rumor and that she is indeed experiencing bodily pleasures. Priestly clothing, priestly bodies, and a desire that appears unfulfillable seem to be intimately intertwined.

In the context of Anglo-Catholics, Martin Stringer argues that there is something camp/drag about the colorful Anglo-Catholic worship, about men “garbing themselves in lace and grandly bejeweled robes in order to perform before admiring crowds”.<sup>33</sup> We do not find any of the traditional Catholic colorful richness in *REV.* (2010–2014). There is no incense; liturgical vestments are very sim-

31 Cf. Stringer 2000.

32 Dialogue between Adam and Alex, *Rev.* (2010–2014), *S01/E01*.

33 Stringer 2000, 42.

ple to say the least; and the music is not played by an orchestra or organist but comes out of a CD player. And yet some of what Stringer says about the Anglo-Catholic context resonates in the character of Adam:

The priest within Anglo-Catholicism was not like other men. In many cases he was celibate, but even if he was not, he did not drink and gamble and “fight like a man.” He was a “man of the cloth,” less brutish than the average man, or by implication, than the average husband. It is no coincidence that the most loyal followers in Anglo-Catholic churches were women, nor that these women actually enjoyed and revelled in the camp/drag humour of their clergy. Many entered into this world with enthusiasm and something of a sense of liberation. The man in the frock at the altar was part of the escapism. In part, he was attractive, totally unlike other men they knew, but he was also, and literally, “unavailable.”<sup>34</sup>

Clothing, however, cannot only render the priestly body an object of desire, but it can also turn it into the body of a pervert, or a “perverse body”. In one of the opening scenes of the very first episode, three construction workers next to the church yell at Adam, asking, “Mr. Vicar, where’s your dress? Are you gonna dress like a girl today?” The prejudice against priests as sexual perverts thrown at Adam shows that there is not one but many clerical masculinities: lived, experienced, stereotyped, othered, expected, imposed, chosen. Throughout the show, Adam tries to negotiate all these different aspects, and we take part in the journey of a pretty average, heterosexual, overall happily married guy who happens to be a vicar, who tells us that he will have a wank, who is fed up having to be – or play – the clergyman, who is looking for a true friend, and just enjoys and longs for the attention of women. All the different ways the sexual comes into play in *REV.* (2010–2014) show that the male priestly body is not just a body that is sexually abstinent (celibate) or practices sexuality within a (heterosexual) marriage, but that the priestly body as body always is and has to be thought of as sexual body. As sexual body, such “sexual markers of manliness”<sup>35</sup> are an important ingredient in the negotiation of masculinities both within a clerical context and in relation to non-clerical masculinities.

## THREATENED MASCULINITIES

After years of struggle and debate, the Church of England allowed the ordination of women as deacons, priests, and bishops in several steps. As Rob Clucas and Keith Sharpe show, however, the ordination of women priests represented only a formal equality. In the *Priests (Ordination of Women) Measure 1993*, a

34 Stringer 2000, 50.

35 McLaughlin 2010, 22.

set of masculine/patriarchal rules existed that allowed Parochial Church Councils, for example, to reject women priests solely based on the fact that they were women, while it was not possible to reject male priests solely because they were men.<sup>36</sup> Parochial Church Councils could also request alternative oversight if their (male) bishop supported the ordination of women. And Clucas and Sharpe argue, “we see the idea that something about women priests is so powerfully wrong that male bishops willing to ordain women are contaminated also.”<sup>37</sup> Different – and more rigorous – restrictions apply to the pastoral ministry of women compared to that of their male counterparts, contributing, as the authors argue, to the idea that masculinity is natural, normative, and unchangeable.<sup>38</sup> “Yet women priests have the additional restrictions of the 1993 Measure. In this way – being subject to additional regulation to men, and the specific content of that additional regulation – women priests are clearly understood and defined as deviations from the male norm.”<sup>39</sup> This deviation from the male norm is inscribed and reproduced on a structural, legal, and doctrinal level.<sup>40</sup> The naturalization of masculinity has often rendered masculinities – understood as a perspective of seeing and engaging with the world – invisible. Therefore, in her study on the construction of masculinities and femininities in the Church of England, Sarah-Jane Page points out that “masculinity as a concept has been little documented in terms of the church, but it can be observed that masculinity has been naturalized so that its existence is not self-evidently manifest. It is only when the presence of women’s bodies disrupts this ‘naturalized’ order that masculine identity comes to be noticed.”<sup>41</sup> And yet, what effect such disruptions through female clerical bodies (or pregnant female clerical bodies) might have is a complex issue.<sup>42</sup> The increasing number of women being ordained (in 2009: 266 women and 298 men),<sup>43</sup> however, might at some point contribute to a more balanced clergy and understanding of gender.

That the Church of England is still a predominantly masculine institution and that female vicars and office holders are seen as a threat to masculine roles and power is rendered visible in the TV show especially through material objects

36 Cf. Clucas/Sharpe 2013, 164–167. Alternative Episcopal Oversight and the “Five Guiding Principles” published after the 2014 decision finally to ordain women as bishops too make provisions for those who reject women ministry on theological grounds, cf. Church of England 2016.

37 Clucas/Sharpe 2013, 165.

38 Cf. Clucas/Sharpe 2013, 166. In their argument, they draw on Chrys Ingraham who analyzes how feminist theory sometimes contributes to heterosexual imaginaries. She argues, “For example, theories which foreground and bracket off its link with heteronormativity – the ideological production of heterosexuality as individual, natural, universal, and monolithic – contribute to the construction of (patriarchal) heterosexuality as natural and unchangeable” (Ingraham 1994, 207).

39 Clucas/Sharpe 2013, 166.

40 Cf. Clucas/Sharpe 2013, 167, 171–172.

41 Page 2008, 33.

42 Cf. Page 2011, 92–109.

43 Cf. Church of England 2013a.

and clothing. The so-called dog collar not only sets the (male) vicar body apart, but also represents the predominantly masculine and patriarchic institution, as I argued earlier. Yet the dog collar does not automatically put the person wearing it in a position of power; instead different people perform the “dog collar” in different ways. In S02/E02, Archdeacon Robert, Adam’s superior, visits the vicarage to let Adam know that a young female curate, Abigaile (Abi), will join St Saviour’s to support Adam. When Robert shows Adam a picture of Abigaile wearing a dog collar, what Robert says, how he says it, and his gestures express a feeling of superiority that is erotically charged. Robert is gay, and assuming he has no sexual interests in Abigaile, it seems that in this scene, it is a mixture of power, its symbols (the dog collar), and gender that excite and become a fetish.

ROBERT: Abi is one of our bright stars, very able, very, very able, highly intelligent, terrific communicator, and a popular touch, I think she is really going to be able to help Adam out. ... You can help her flourish, guide her (*Robert wiggles his hips*), enable her.

The dog collar we see Abigaile wearing on the picture Robert shows Adam, however, does not seem to bestow the same institutional authority onto Abigaile as onto Adam and Robert. As a representative of the Church hierarchy, with his voluptuous insinuations Robert embodies the Church as a patriarchal and masculine institution (even though the Church is usually thought of in feminine terms, as the bride of Christ), as an institution that is concerned with itself and its power fetish and attempts to contain a possibly dangerous and disruptive clerical femininity which is seen as a threat to masculine ideas and patriarchal structures.

Adam seems to be completely oblivious to the sexual, patronizing undertone of the conversation. His replies to Robert render visible how naturalized the male perspective has become. Rather than envisage a mutual relationship, Adam sees in Abigaile a tool to achieve his goals – or have someone achieve his goals for him: “This is great, I’ll be able to achieve a lot more than other priests, push through some more of my plans.” For Adam, Abi is an asset that will give him a competitive advantage over other (presumably male) priests rather than a younger colleague to be supported and to learn from. The *mise-en-scène* adds to the texture of the scene. The conversation could have happened anywhere in the parish but is set in the vicarage kitchen. Traditionally, the kitchen of a household has been regarded as a feminine space inscribed with expectations about which gender ought to occupy that space for what purpose.<sup>44</sup> The idea that the kitchen is a woman’s domain is also expressed when Archdeacon Robert, at the end of the conversation, almost naturally hands his coffee cup to Alex,

44 Cf. Swenson 2009.

who was witnessing the conversation, and not to Adam, his host, to clear away. Here, men not only condescend to women, but they do so in a feminine space. This must be interpreted not as men subverting traditional understandings of gendered spaces but as a masculine intrusion into feminine space, a safe space for women, in order to express their domination.

When Adam finally meets Abi, the audience perceives her as ambitious, energetic, motivated, and a natural leader. Abi embodies everything Adam is not and everything that is traditionally associated with a masculine character type, without acting like a man or being butch. Adam feels threatened by Abi to the point that he bullies her. This episode, S02/E02, provides a good example that masculinity does not depend on being male (that is, on having a male body), but that gender relations and who is considered to be or act masculine or feminine often emerge from and are rooted in positions of power.<sup>45</sup> As a curate, Abi is not in a formal position of power, but the way she connects with people, her leadership and her organizational skills invest her with power and authority. At the same time, this episode subverts the link between masculinity and power exactly because Abi does not “act” in a masculine fashion, pointing out that the link between masculinity and power is as much a naturalized social construct as the notions of masculinity and femininity themselves.

Abi is not the only female priest to challenge Adam’s clerical masculinity. In episode S02/E04, it is women-only night, with five spouses of vicars coming to the vicarage, hosted rather unwillingly by Alex. As the first guests arrive, it turns out that in addition to being married to vicars, three out of the five women are vicars themselves. The get-together starts with the women chatting over wine and snacks. Time progresses; it is almost 3 a.m. and we hear loud music playing. Adam is turning in his bed and we hear him thinking in voice over, “They are making so much noise, it’s really annoying. ... Why won’t Alex shut up? Right, I’m gonna go and tell her to shut up.” He crawls out of bed, the scene cuts to the party downstairs and we see all the women, including the female vicars, drinking, smoking, and dancing. Rather than tell Alex and her guests to quiet down, however, Adam mumbles something about the planned interfaith football match the next morning and reminds Alex of the curry she promised to make for the game. The facial expressions of Alex and the other women clearly show what they think of Adam’s idea of ending the party: nothing. And Alex replies to Adam, “We’re only making curry for some fat dads, it’s not a UN conference.” A little bit humiliated and stumbling over his words, Adam excuses himself and withdraws from the scene to go back to bed.

This scene can be interpreted in different ways. It can be seen as masculinity’s attempt to control and exert power over femininity by referring to a tradi-

45 Reynolds 2002, 100.

tional female duty (cooking) and the notion that a vicar's wife has the duty to support her ordained husband and contribute to parish life. At the same time, masculine power is rendered ineffective not just by Adam's insecurities and clumsiness but also by the female vicars' stealing the show from him. Even if he inhabits a position of power and authority as the head of the parish and the vicarage, Adam does not seem to hold either. Additionally, half of the women present at the party inhabit a traditionally masculine position of power, that of a vicar. But their behavior undermines stereotypical perceptions of both clerical identity and femininity: they smoke, drink, and party. The partying in *REV.* (2010–2014) has a subtly excessive and thus subversive undercurrent. Excessive drinking is still considered improper behavior for women, while it seems to be more acceptable for men. Most importantly, however, the women are, in effect, running the show. They *are* the show. Not caring about or sharing in Adam's concerns about the curry and the late hour, they render masculine power ineffective.

Season three introduces two new female members of the Church hierarchy, area dean Jill Mallory and diocesan secretary Geri Tennison. They plan to close down St Saviour's for financial reasons. Unlike the other female characters working for the Church, Mallory and Tennison do not come across as overly sympathetic characters. They seem to "act masculine", and appear closer to what is stereotypically labeled "mannish women" than to vibrantly celebratory female vicars who threaten existing power structures. Their presence in the show, then, seems to suggest that we are still stuck with relating masculinity with male bodies and femininity with female bodies and that something is at odds if female bodies "act" masculine.

## SUBVERSIONS AND RECONCILIATIONS

Raewyn Connell argues that we cannot stop at noting that there are different masculinities but that we need to analyze how they are related to each other, operate, and construct alliances, or how one version of masculinity can dominate or be subordinate to others.<sup>46</sup> Connell calls this play of domination and subordination "hegemonic masculinity" and argues that "at any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted".<sup>47</sup>

BBC's *REV.* (2010–2014) exalts a loser type of masculinity embodied predominantly through the dreamy, naïve, clumsy, and not very authoritative Adam. All Adam seems to need is a hug and the acknowledgement and approval of someone he considers an authority figure. The same holds true for the other

46 Cf. Connell 2005, 37, 76–77.

47 Connell 2005, 77. For a critique of the concept of hegemonic masculinity cf. Jefferson 2002; Connell/Messerschmidt 2005.

male characters such as Colin and Archdeacon Robert. While Robert seems to be in a position of power, he has his own struggles with the institution and his personal life. But it seems that exactly what many would perceive as weakness makes the male characters more human and sympathetic. These fractured loser-masculinities featured in the show turn out to be quite subversive. Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks argues,

Viewing the male experience as universal had not only hidden women's history, but also ... prevented analyzing men's experiences as those of men. The very words we used to describe individuals – “artist” and “woman artist,” for example, or “scientist” and “woman scientist” – kept us from thinking about how the experiences of Michelangelo or Picasso or Isaac Newton were shaped by the fact that they were male, while it forced us to think about how being female affected Georgia O'Keefe or Marie Curie.<sup>48</sup>

By focusing on the “loser qualities” of its male characters, *REV.* (2010–2014) portrays some of the struggles individuals face when trying to cater to expectations of clerical masculinities, of always being there and available for others. As Hollander stated in an interview,

They [vicars] are being good, they are being nice to people, their door is always open to people when there's nowhere else to go, you can still go to the church. So they don't have ... their private life is rather compromised the whole time. There is often somebody knocking on the door. And they are often exposed to rather irritating people, but they as vicars can't say please go away, you are irritating, because they are the vicar. The rest of us can choose who we hang out with.<sup>49</sup>

The series pokes fun at some of the everyday experiences a male cleric might encounter, without ridiculing personal struggles with faith. One thread present throughout the series is how the different male characters negotiate their being male with expectations of what it means to be male: their own, their partners', their friends', the parishioners', and the institution's. While the individual problems of the main characters are different, through its humor the series makes clear that they all share in the struggle over embodying male identity. The series draws on stereotypical and popular images but also gives space to subversion and transformation.

The portrayal of masculinities in the show, however, is not unproblematic. This becomes particularly obvious in the male characters' relationships with women. Adam seems to feel unsettled – even threatened – by women entering traditional male arenas. Robert and Adam perceive their female colleagues as

48 Wiesner-Hanks 2002, 601.

49 Hollander 2013.

(sexual) objects to be instrumentalized for their own gain rather than as equals. Nigel, the lay reader in the parish, too, objectifies women and invents a girlfriend to hide his homosexuality.

What, then, should we do with these different masculinities on screen? On the one hand, they are there, on screen, for us to enjoy. But on the other hand, they can be seen as speaking out of and to the sensibilities of contemporary culture. When writing the show, Tom Hollander interviewed vicars and observed services. While this does not qualify as academic research, it shows that television is entangled with real life on the level of content, production, and consumption. Through its pervasion of society, its both ephemeral and material nature, television is a contested site for the production and reproduction of society and culture. It is a discursive practice that links and organizes a range of social actors, viewing and fan practices, and online and offline social discourses.<sup>50</sup> It is a part of the ordinary, the normal, the everyday, but always also points beyond the ordinary. Stuart Hall argues that television needs to be understood as communicative process, and its production as an open circuit and a discursive practice that

is framed throughout by meanings and ideas: knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, historically defined technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience and so on frame the constitution of the programme through this production structure. Further, though the production structures of television originate the television discourse, they do not constitute a closed system. They draw topics, treatments, agendas, events, personnel, images of the audience, “definitions of the situation” from other sources and other discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political structure of which they are a differentiated part.<sup>51</sup>

The clerical masculinities we see in the BBC show *REV.* (2010–2014), then, are as much a construction as their real-life counterparts, shaped by those they are intended to cater to, whether or not they want to render visible, disrupt, or subvert naturalized viewing patterns.<sup>52</sup>

To better understand the production process of *REV.* (2010–2014), the way the show stages clerical masculinities on screen, and the issues it discusses, its cultural context and its cultural “prologue” need to be considered. In 2008 – and this seems to hold true to date – David Nixon argued that the questions the Church of England seems to concern itself with are: “Is it OK to be gay and a Christian? Is it OK to be gay and a priest? Is it OK to be gay and a bishop?” Nix-

50 Cf. Mittell 2001; Hartley 1999, 16, 29.

51 Hall 1999, 509.

52 For a discussion of the construction of TV masculinities cf., for example, Fiske 1987, 198.

on continued, “Seeking an answer to these questions, the church invokes two major themes, or rather, structures its answers to these questions in response to two historic arguments: purity and pollution; text and authority.”<sup>53</sup> And he went on to argue that “purity systems function by making the human body and its boundaries a symbol for the social body and its boundaries”.<sup>54</sup>

The struggle over “Is it OK?” seems to be at the heart of the various negotiation processes over masculinities in *REV.* (2010–2014): vicar, husband, sexual male body; being female in a predominantly masculine and patriarchic hierarchy that imagines itself as female, as Christ’s bride; archdeacon, careerist, and gay. All the different male characters on screen are trying to live up to a specific form of masculinity. Yet only when they learn to say “it is OK” and accept their own way of being male, appreciating the diversity in being male, do we see them starting to thrive and becoming subversive.

The end of season two, with the iconic Christmas meal resembling the Last Supper, provides a key for understanding the negotiations of masculinities in the show. In a pessimistic reading one could conclude that all is not well in ecclesial space and that while women have now been admitted to all levels of ordination, the institution is still a patriarchal heteronormative space governed by ideas of purity/pollution and authority/text.<sup>55</sup> Masculinity dominates femininity, but that is only one part of the picture. In ecclesial space, one master narrative of masculinity still seems to dominate over all others – including those of deviant masculinities – and the diversity of masculinities throughout the history of Christianity is often forgotten. As the current debates in the Anglican community over homosexuality show, such master narratives of specific (religious) masculinities, with their roles and expected behaviors, disrupt communities rather than unify them.

The iconography of the Last Supper, however, invites a more positive, a more Eucharistic interpretation. The Eucharistic meal invites, draws together, gives body to community and is itself body. Eating and drinking, we absorb someone or something else into our own bodies.<sup>56</sup> Psalm 34:9 says, “Taste and see that the Lord is good [or sweet, depending on the translation]”.<sup>57</sup> The Eucharist, then, allows one to see through the body with one’s “corporeal eyes”<sup>58</sup> and to understand differently and see differently, “suggesting a significant correlation between the apprehensions of the soul and the sensory experiences of

53 Nixon 2008, 598.

54 Nixon 2008, 599.

55 Cf. Church of England 2013b; Heneghan 2013; Nixon 2008, 599.

56 Cf. Fulton 2006, 170.

57 For a discussion of the sweetness of the Lord and the different versions of translation, cf. Fulton 2006, 181.

58 Cf. Fulton 2006, 175.

the body”.<sup>59</sup> The reference to the Eucharistic meal suggests that this Christmas meal does have Eucharistic qualities as it opens the characters’ eyes for each other, allowing them to share in this bodily experience, and experience peace and forgiveness. The idea that sharing food has Eucharistic qualities is something we come across long before *REV.* (2010–2014), in the film *BIG NIGHT* (Campbell Scott/St Stanley Tucci, US 1996), for example, where at the end of the film the two brothers share breakfast in silence after a fight that almost ended their relationship. In both narratives, the Eucharistic qualities of the food consumed express more than what could possibly be said. The overcoming of differences becomes possible and is expressed through the bodily and sensory/sensual experiences of sharing food.

Making us aware of our corporeal eyes, the plot, aesthetic form, and iconography of the BBC sitcom *REV.* (2010–2014) can teach us that despite existing master narratives, masculinities are not “natural” or “normal” but negotiation processes that are always open and thus vulnerable, even or especially in ecclesial space. Adam, with all his shortcomings and insecurities, can teach us that “appropriate roles” are just that: roles. *REV.* (2010–2014) is not overly provocative or critical of existing power structures. And yet, with the archdeacon who works hard to advance his career in the Church but eventually learns to say, “it is OK”, and the clumsy vicar Adam Smallbone, who sometimes enjoys a drink too many or is all too human in his male, priestly, sexual body, the audience, too, might learn that religion is very human. Maybe church representatives of all Christian denominations will come to a similar conclusion one day, learn to appreciate the richness and diversity of masculinities, and give space to all those different masculinities. And with church officials, the series, too, wants us as audience (believers and non-believers) to appreciate the struggles we often impose on clerics with our expectations and stereotypes.

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