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"To Sey or Thinke Otherwise": Ordinary Theology and Facing Death in Late Medieval Norfolk

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Received: 9 January 2018; Accepted: 19 February 2018; Published: 28 February 2018

Abstract: This article explores how Jeff Astley's work on ordinary theology can enrich historical study of late medieval lay religion. Ordinary theology provides scholars with a new set of vocabulary and methodological approaches for accessing the religious discourses of "everyday" Christians and allows medievalists in particular to reach beyond contested labels for lay belief. The article begins with a discussion of the promises and limitations of Astley's theories for historians of religion and concludes with a test case of how they might guide future research, through a quantitative and qualitative analysis of 152 wills from fifteenth-century Norfolk. The results highlight the diversity of beliefs about the afterlife and associated doctrines among medieval laypeople even as they demonstrated commitment to orthodox Christianity and their local parishes.

Keywords: theology; piety; popular religion; ordinary theology; medieval history; wills; England

1. Introduction

On the 4 July 1507, Simon Clere of Norwich, in the county of Norfolk, England, made his last will and testament.[1] He was likely already on his deathbed, as his will was probated only twenty-two days later; his wife Joan followed him to the grave by 28 August, leaving their four young children orphaned.[2] As Clere prepared for death, his thoughts turned to the state of his soul and to his relationship with the Church:

> In the name of God, Amen. The iiiith day of the moneth of Julii, in the yere of our lord God, m^{l} v^{c} and vii, I, Symonde Clere of Norwich, gentleman, beyng hole of mynde and in goode remembraunce, thanked be God, at Norwich aforsaid, make my testament and last will in this wise: knowleching myself a cristen man, I make this protestacion before almighty God that I entende and will, with his helpe and socour, to lyve and dye in the feith of holy church; and if it fortune me by seeknes, weykenes, alienacion of mynde, tribulacion, or eny vexacion of myn enimy to sey or thinke otherwise than the church hath ordeyned, which God forbidde, I now at this tyme for that tyme revoke and forsake it, and pray almighty God to repute it as never saide or thought. To whom I mekely commaunde my soule, to our blissed lady, to seynt Margaret myn avowe, and to all seyntes...[3]

This preamble is unusual; only one comparable example survives (Blomefield 1806, p. 270). Nearly all medieval wills begin with a set formula, with only a few minor variations. As in Clere's case, most begin, "In the name of God, Amen," followed by the date, the testator's name and place of residence or home parish, and sometimes their occupation or social status. The testator asserts their

1 Kew, The National Archives (hereafter TNA), PROB 11/15/539.
2 TNA, PROB 11/15/555.
3 TNA, PROB 11/15/539.

soundness of mind and then leaves their soul to God, the Virgin Mary, and All Saints, and sometimes to a particular patron saint known as their "avowe" (Middleton-Stewart 2001, p. 43). The will of Clere's wife Joan follows this formula exactly.[4] But Simon Clere's will includes a further element, proclaiming his submission to God, his commitment to the Christian faith, and disavowing any ideas he may have expressed contrary to what "the church hath ordeyned."

It is tempting on the basis of this preamble to assume that Clere was caught up in heretical practices and ideas, and historians of an earlier age might have identified him as a repentant adherent to late lollardy.[5] In that case, it would seem that the preamble represents a top–down enforcement of orthodoxy and that it bears little relation to Clere's own sentiments. And yet, his bequests, which are generally regarded as more reliable indicators of personal belief, demonstrate a profound commitment to orthodox practice (Spufford 1974, pp. 325–34; Lutton 2006, pp. 11–19; Dinn 1990, pp. 73–76). He made generous bequests to the four orders of friars in Norwich and to the priory of Bungay in Suffolk; asked that a chantry priest be found to pray for four years for his soul, his parents' souls, and all Christian souls; and left 3s 4d to the light of St. Margaret and 1s each to the lights dedicated to the Rood and the Virgin Mary in his local church.[6] Friars, chantries, and lights before the images of saints all attracted particular criticism from lollards (Aston 1984, pp. 17–18, 136–37; Lutton 2006, pp. 59–63, 83). But Clere's most telling bequest is a pair of chalices, which he left to the church of St. Margaret.[7] He asked that "myn name and my wiffes name be [engraved] theron," while his wife asked that her executors "make or doo to be made a hole newe crosse . . . and put therin my husbondes armes and myn name."[8] Both of the Cleres sought to establish themselves as patrons of their local church and to ensure that their names would live on in the prayers of their neighbors.

Further documentary evidence shows that Clere was regularly involved in the activities of the church, and that he came from a devout family.[9] He was a patron of the church of Bircham Tofts in Norfolk, and twice advanced candidates for appointment as rector there.[10] Two of his sisters were nuns, one of them at Bungay.[11] Finally, while scholars are often skeptical about whether testamentary provisions were actually fulfilled, it seems that Clere's executor Richard Freman took his duties seriously and filed a case in the court of chancery over property Clere had asked be sold to fund his religious bequests.[12]

Could Clere's anxiety about his orthodoxy be his own? For decades, scholars have shied away from attributing meaning to preambles. Most are highly formulaic and tell us more about scribes than testators (Spufford 1974, pp. 320–34). Indeed, the 1508 will of Avelyne Caster, widow of a Norwich

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4 TNA, PROB 11/15/555.

5 Simon Clere does not appear in the memoranda in Norwich bishops' registers, where heresy cases are recorded: Norwich, Norfolk Record Office (hereafter NRO), Registers 7/12, fols. 3r-11v, 206r-255v; 8/13, fols. 2r-17v, 1r-85v; and 8/14, fols. 60Cr-62v, calendared by E. D. Stone in NRO, MC 16/50. For trends in lollard studies, compare (Thompson 1965; Hornbeck 2010).

6 4d was the average daily wage for an agricultural laborer (Bowden 1967, p. 864).

7 There were two parishes of St. Margaret in Norwich, St. Margaret Westwick and St. Margaret in Combusto. Clere was likely a parishioner of St. Margaret Westwick; his home was in the parish of St. Swithin, which lay on the same street as St. Margaret Westwick (Dobson 2018).

8 TNA, PROB 11/15/539 and 11/15/555.

9 Simon Clere was a lesser member of a gentry family from Norfolk. He was descended from William Clere of Ormesby (d.1384) via Robert Clere of Stokesby (d.1420). Robert of Stokesby's elder brother John of Ormesby inherited the bulk of the family's estates, and his son, Robert of Ormesby (d.1446), married Elizabeth Uvedale (d.1492), confidant of the Paston ladies. Their son Sir Robert (d.1529) was knighted in 1494 and married Anne Boleyn's aunt, Alice (d.1538). Simon was less fortunate: his father Edmund of Stokesby (d.1488) was Robert of Stokeby's heir, but Edmund had three sons and three daughters, and his manors largely bypassed his children in favor of his grandson (NRO, NCC will register Woolman 15: Edmund Clere of Stokesby, 1488; (Blomefield and Parkin 1807, pp. 389–94; 1809, pp. 286–88; 1810, pp. 231–51; Woodger 1993; Virgoe 1982; Watt 2004, pp. 6–7).

10 Simon Clere presented priests to the avowdson of Bircham Tofts in 1478 and 1499: (Blomefield and Parkin 1809, vol. 10, pp. 286–88; Harper-Bill 1977, p. 615).

11 Dame Elizabeth appears in several documents (NRO, NCC will register Woolman 15; (Harper-Bill 1977, p. 702; Oliva 1988, p. 91)).

12 TNA, C 1/310/42: Freman v. Porter. Joan Porter contested Simon's ownership of the property.

alderman, begins with a declaration very similar to Clere's (Blomefield 1806, p. 270).[13] Their preambles differ only in wording and so may have been written by the same scribe at different times; in an age of limited literacy, it was common for parish priests to copy out the wills of the dying. But none of the witnesses to Clere's will can be identified as clerics, and it was prepared at such short notice that three of the four witnesses are women.[14] A third option remains; priests attending the sick were expected to ask whether the dying person intended to die in the faith of the Church and to verify their orthodoxy, and Eamon Duffy suggests that these questions may have inspired Avelyne Caster's preamble (Duffy 1992, pp. 315–27). Whoever wrote Clere's will may therefore have augmented the basic preamble with elements drawn from deathbed convention. Whether or not Clere held the pen himself, he was familiar with the tenents represented in the preamble, and it appears that he was particularly concerned about the implications of his thoughts and words.

We are left, then, not with Simon Clere the heretic or unwitting pawn but rather with the image of a devout parishioner who, in life, considered and discussed the theological underpinnings of his Christian faith and upon his deathbed felt anxiety about the extent to which he might have departed from the teachings of the Church. And well he might worry: although he likely enjoyed the basic education afforded to sons of the gentry, there are no indications that he was well versed in academic theology (Orme 2005, pp. 63–74). How, using current theoretical frameworks, might we discuss Clere's non-academic theology—the religious discourses of a pious but ultimately unexceptional Christian in medieval England—without resorting to deeply contested language?

Jeff Astley's writings about "ordinary theology," most fully developed in his 2002 *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology*, offer researchers a new approach to studying the spiritual world of regular churchgoers in the past as well as the present. In Astley's words, "Ordinary theology is my term for the theological beliefs and processes of believing that find expression in the God-talk of those believers who have received no scholarly theological education" (Astley 2002, p. 1). These "beliefs and process of believing" tend to be affective and concrete, rather than intellectual or abstract, but in order to qualify as theology must involve reflection on the meaning and content of faith and must find expression not only in words but also in action (Astley 2002, pp. 55–95, 114–16, 123–45).

Astley tends to focus on Christian churchgoers, but ordinary theologians can come from any faith tradition or no faith tradition at all (Astley 2002, p. 94). They cannot be trained in learned theological language, although the two discourses lie on a continuum and influence each other.[15] Unlike academic theology, ordinary theology is by nature idiosyncratic and specific to a particular believer's circumstances and interests (Astley 2002, pp. 34–36, 149–50). It develops over the course of their life, as they encounter new ideas and scenarios that challenge and engage their faith. In the face of such challenges, believers may turn to the tradition of the Church, to teachings gleaned from their early religious education, or to their own ideas about God and salvation (Astley 2002, pp. 1–4, 21–25). Their beliefs constantly evolve through these reflective acts, and so Astley encourages students of ordinary theology to investigate both the beliefs themselves and how they are learned (Astley 2002, pp. 17–44).

As a subject of study, ordinary theology can be difficult to access even today. For most people, even fundamental beliefs tend to remain unexamined unless provoked, and the process of questioning or reflecting on those beliefs can actually change them. Moreover, the perspective of the interviewer has major implications for the questions asked and the interpretations gleaned. Astley therefore recommends that researchers employ methods drawn from the social sciences, especially large-scale quantitative studies and extensive interviews (Astley 2002, pp. 97–103). In order to ensure that the

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13 Avelyne Caster, widow of Norwich, does not appear in the wills indexes of the National Archives or the Norfolk Record Office. Eamon Duffy lists her name as "Carter," but Avelyne Carter does not appear either (Duffy 1992, p. 321).

14 Of the 396 witnesses to the wills sampled, only 16 (or 4%) were women. Women could witness documents, but men were preferable (Sheehan 1963, pp. 179–80).

15 Astley prefers the three-dimensional metaphor of a ripples in a pond (Astley 2002, pp. viii, 57–58).

resulting studies are not merely descriptive, Astley instructs researchers to use their data to reflect on larger implications for their field of study and potentially for the Church. They can be critical of the beliefs they encounter but should ultimately seek either to reintegrate the believer into the institution, or draw the institution closer to the ideals of the believer (Astley 2002, pp. 103–22).

A number of essays and monographs based on Astley's ideas have emerged in the fifteen years since the publication of his book.[16] For the most part, these publications closely follow the guidelines that Astley established. Some explore theoretical aspects of his work, while more empirical studies draw on extensive interviews with churchgoers and/or quantitative analyses of texts. Only one scholar, Lewis Burton, has applied ordinary theology to historical sources (Burton 2011).

And yet, ordinary theology has a great deal to offer historical theologians and scholars of religious history. The beliefs and ideas of previous generations can be difficult to access; for much of human history, the voices of ordinary people were only rarely and indirectly reported. But ordinary theology encourages us to glean widely among surviving records and to take seriously the systems of belief that guided religious practice for the majority of believers. In this article, I first explore the promises and limitations of ordinary theology for historians of medieval religion and then offer a test case of Astley's ideas based on a large-scale analysis of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century wills from Norfolk. The "God-talk" of Simon Clere and nearly all his contemporaries is now inaudible, but echoes of their conversations survive.

2. The Promise and Limitations of Ordinary Theology for Medieval Religious History

Astley is far from the first theologian to take an interest in the beliefs of ordinary churchgoers, since there is an equally long tradition of attempting to access the elusive mental world of the average medieval Christian.[17] Scholars have coined various contested labels to describe the religious discourses of the laity. The disciplinary term that bears the closest resemblance to "ordinary theology" is "popular religion," though it has been the target of so much criticism over past decades that it is now rarely used (Van Engen 1986, pp. 519–52; 2002, pp. 497–98). Authors working on this topic emphasize diversity of practice and belief over uniformity and tend to make special reference to magic, folklore, mysticism, and heresy (Van Engen 1986, p. 530). "Popular piety" has largely supplanted "popular religion" in recent studies and tends to address a broader spectrum of belief, including perspectives from within the Church (Brown 1995, pp. 1–2; Lutton 2006, p. 6).

Despite the abandonment of "popular religion" as an appropriate concept, heresy and mysticism still loom large in discussions of popular piety in medieval England. In response, some scholars emphasize harmony over dissent. Eamon Duffy adopted the phrase "traditional religion" to describe a world characterized by "a remarkable degree of religious and imaginative homogeneity" (Duffy 1992, pp. 2–3). But Duffy's work tends to ignore power relations within medieval society, especially between clergy and laypeople.[18] The English Church in the fifteenth century was especially divided as a result of ecclesiastical responses to the threat of lollardy, for better or worse.[19] Even at the most peaceable times, churchmen and parishioners may have encountered and even endorsed a similar mélange of words, symbols, and rituals, but at a fundamental level, they were often not speaking the same language. Nicholas Watson used the term "vernacular theology" to refer to late medieval religious texts written in English (Watson 1995, pp. 823–24; 1997, pp. 145–46, 166–73; 1999b, pp. 334–45). His description of vernacular theology as a sophisticated intellectual tradition in its own right, outside the clerical domain of Latin, has been highly influential and has greatly enriched our

[16] These studies appear primarily in the journal *Rural Theology* and in a collection edited by Astley and L. J. Francis (Astley and Francis 2013). Astley's work has influenced at least three monographs and one dissertation (Village 2007; Cartledge 2010; Christie 2012; Abraham 2011).

[17] For related theological fields, see (Astley 2002, pp. 1–4, 57–86). For the medieval historiography, see (Van Engen 1986, pp. 519–52; 2002, pp. 497–98).

[18] Duffy responds to these critiques in the second edition (Duffy 1992, pp. xvii–xxxii).

[19] For better, see (Gillespie 2011, pp. 1–40). For worse, see (Watson 1995).

appreciation of fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century literature. But Watson's vocabulary has also encountered criticism because it has the potential to devalue fifteenth-century theological innovations and assert an overly strict division between users of Latin and English (Gillespie 2011, pp. 13–28; 2007, pp. 405–7). Moreover, most of the key texts for vernacular theology were written by formally educated clerics or scribes or by visionaries who devoted their lives to religious contemplation. They do not represent the experiences of ordinary churchgoers, though their authors sought to influence lay belief and regarded the uneducated with sympathy (Watson 1995, pp. 830–35; 1999a, pp. 550–60; 1999b, pp. 338–45; Gillespie 2007, pp. 402–7, 413, 419).

Taken together, these terms all express different conceptions of lay spirituality. For researchers who ascribe to the model of "popular religion," lay belief flourished in the spaces outside Church control and influence; for scholars of "traditional religion," the Church and the laity cooperated to create a mutually satisfying system of belief and practice; and for those interested in "vernacular theology," religious innovation thrived in a textual space separated by language and ethos from the Latinate elite. Ordinary theology offers a new view on an old debate by attending to what the laity themselves had to say. Rather than applying theoretical frameworks from the outset, Astley recommends uncovering patterns of meaning expressed within the sources themselves, using thick description and quantitative analysis to take stock of existing evidence (Astley 2002, pp. 97–103). So, rather than starting with what Aquinas or pagan Anglo-Saxons or Wyclif may have thought and then combing the sources for resonances, scholars should reconstruct the thought world of medieval Christians from within.[20] Ordinary theology should, for example, be able to encompass both the widespread popularity of indulgences and of the English Bible, despite Archbishop Arundel's fifteenth-century prohibition on new English translations of the holy text (Dove 2007; Swanson 2007).

One issue Astley's work helps to address is the divide between clergy and laity. The two poles on the axis Astley devises are "academic" and "ordinary" theology; one is learned in schools and prizes neutrality, consistency, and logic, while the other is found in lay communities and is individual, comforting, and flexible (Astley 2002, pp. 86–88). At a personal level, ordinary theology predates academic theology; it is learned conversationally and experientially and begins to take root in childhood (Astley 2002, pp. 2–15, 77–82). Academic theologians, then, come to their work already versed in ordinary theology and are often influenced by it even as they distance themselves from its propositions. But still, they often ignore or devalue the God-talk of regular parishioners. Their interest lies in ecclesiastical institutions or analytical problems rather than in the tentative questions of the everyday churchgoer (Astley 2002, pp. 21–25, 123–45).

A similar situation prevailed in the medieval Church, though the axes may have been closer than they are today. Clergymen were necessarily the sons of the laity and were usually brought up within the home through their early teens (Orme 2001, pp. 223–31). Within rural communities, the local priest might still have ploughed land alongside his parishioners and may well have been related to some of them (Bennett 1999, p. 50). How well versed the parish clergy were in academic theology varied; basic Latinity and knowledge of sacred rites were required for ordination, but complaints about the level of clerical education were common, as were attempts to reform the clergy to a higher standard (Tanner 1984, pp. 28–35; Swanson 1989, pp. 58–61, 312). Certainly, laypeople were to some degree controlled by the institutional church, but they could also lodge complaints against ill-behaved or neglectful clergymen (Swanson 1990). Lay ideas influenced even the most scholastic of theologians: even Aquinas did not take his metaphysics of the soul to their logical conclusion, unwilling to deny the power of saintly bodies that so enthralled lay observers (Bynum 1990, pp. 74–75).

Perhaps the most appealing aspect of ordinary theology is its recognition of the diversity of the ordinary, and its emphasis on methods of thinking and expression that may be devalued in academic discourse. According to Astley, both scholars and seminarians tend to limit their work to the

[20] Miri Rubin exemplifies this ethnographic approach (Rubin 1991).

specialized debates of academia, which bear little relation to the concerns of the people in the pews, who constitute the true body of the Church (Astley 2002, pp. 60–61, 148–57). Ordinary people are more highly valued in medieval scholarship because insight into their worldview is so fleeting and hard won. And yet, the backlash against the strict hierarchies posited by scholars of popular religion can hide how power moved within the body of the faithful and can efface the overall diversity of belief and practice (Lutton 2006, pp. 8–11). In Astley's attention to how individual people's beliefs develop and change, we can see a new model for approaching lay belief more generally.

Astley also draws attention to the gendered nature of the academic/ordinary dichotomy. His image of academic theology is particularly masculine; though not exclusively the realm of men, it values modes of discourse that are traditionally gendered male. Ordinary theology, on the other hand, tends to take on more feminine characteristics, as a material, bodily, tentative, nurturing expression of faith (Astley 2002, pp. 77–82). It would be easy to push the dichotomy too far, but in the medieval world of male clerics and mixed congregants, gendered hierarchies cannot be ignored. Women's voices are particularly difficult to locate within historical sources, but they exerted significant religious influence through their role in early childhood education, in the home, and as patrons and benefactors (Orme 2001, pp. 204–9; Sheingorn 2003, pp. 105–34; Erler 2002). Their theology was ordinary too, and its influence would have been far reaching.

But there are methodological challenges to using Astley's ideas historically, and, indeed, applying his theories to historical theology may betray their original purpose. Throughout this discussion, wills are used to illustrate the benefits and shortcomings of medieval records, as they are both the basis for the empirical section of this study and are one of the document types scholars most often look to for evidence regarding late medieval lay theology.

The primary challenge to the medieval historian in approaching ordinary theology is the overall lack of sources that record ordinary belief. Although a multitude of documents survive from the fifteenth century, they are only a tiny fraction of the texts produced. The issue becomes especially acute in the case of wills. In some dioceses and deaneries, entire registers of wills are missing; in other cases, originals were never registered and so are lost to time.[21] Moreover, medieval testators often devised property to the Church before their death via separate transactions or left it to their executors to choose the kind of memorials that would follow after death. In the few cases where accompanying documents survive, they reveal a host of donations beyond the testamentary record (Burgess 1987a).

Because historians cannot generate new primary sources, they must use documentary forms that addressed medieval, and not modern, concerns. Every document type comes with its own set of distortions, from the set questions and translation issues of heresy inquisitions to the haphazard selection and layered construction of commonplace books (Hornbeck 2010, pp. xii–xviii; Pearsall 2005, pp. 17–29). Wills are rife with methodological challenges. Some bequests may have been altered or imposed by clerical scribes, while others were omitted as expected and customary. Their execution was subject to the conscientiousness and resources of the executors, some of whom may have refused or neglected to act. Wills should thus be taken only as a representation of the testator's intentions, not the executor's actions, or even as a complete summation of all the pious giving undertaken before death (Burgess 1985, p. 46; Brown 1995, pp. 21–25). As a source for religious attitudes, they are incomplete; they show which practices and organizations testators found attractive as they considered the fate of their souls, but the beliefs that underlie those decisions can only be inferred from careful analysis of a large number of wills and from evidence provided by other sources.

The degree to which any person, then as now, is "ordinary" is highly subjective and context-dependent. Simon Clere was certainly not ordinary in the sense of the demographic median. He was wealthy, male, and married, with all the status and power accorded to a gentleman. Although Astley's formulation of ordinary theology allows any non-academic believer to qualify, we must be very

[21] Two registers from the Norwich Consistory Court are missing, covering the years 1408–1416 and 1472–1477 (Farrow 1943, p. xxiii).

clear about which groups can actually be represented because they are documented in the surviving records (Astley 2002, p. 1). Medieval will makers were only a small portion of the population, though scholars are divided about why particular people made wills and not others and how representative will-makers were of the general populace (Lutton 2006, p. 16; Dinn 1990, pp. 59–73; Brown 1995, p. 21; Middleton-Stewart 2001, pp. 45–55; Tanner 1984, pp. 114–15). Certainly, limited literacy meant that only some people could access written forms, and many had to do so through an intermediary. The proliferation of scribes and the increasing use of the vernacular in formal contexts meant that fifteenth-century England was more textual than ever before, but still the young, female, poor, disabled, and dispossessed appear only fleetingly in medieval sources, most dishearteningly in records of their deaths (Hanawalt 1986). The wealthy, literate, and male are disproportionately represented within wills, as in most medieval document types.

As a result of these source limitations, medieval historians are more methodologically constrained than their modern counterparts. Astley's preferred methods of study are large-scale surveys and in-depth interviews, as extensive and prolonged as possible, to allow subjects to reflect on various points of religious belief (Astley 2002, pp. 97–103). For obvious reasons, medievalists cannot conduct phone or internet surveys. Mute sources rarely respond even to the most tentative questions, and archivists generally disapprove of whispered interviews with parchment. Instead, thick description of medieval attitudes on particular topics, compiled from scrupulous reading of a wide range of sources, generally has to suffice for this kind of qualitative analysis. Quantitative surveys are still possible using medieval sources, but they are more prone to bias and misinterpretation than modern studies, especially since the source base, with all its deficiencies, is already set. The documentary limitations must be acknowledged and understood. In the quantitative survey of medieval wills that follows, numbers should only be taken as indications of intention and priority rather than concrete expressions of empirical truth. Some bequests may have been omitted or altered by clerical scribes, and executors may not have fulfilled all the conditions of the will as recorded (Burgess 1985, p. 46; 1987a, pp. 853–56). But layering many sources together via large-scale analysis reveals general trends and patterns within wills that sprang from common attitudes and beliefs.

Wills in particular fulfill one of Astley's requirements for ordinary theology. In order to qualify as theology, the God-talk of believers must be reflective; that is, it must spring from critical thought about faith and salvation rather than being an intuitive reaction to a question or problem (Astley 2002, pp. 138–45). Some wills certainly could have been made in a rote fashion, with only conventional bequests. But the moment of will-making in itself was likely to be a time of reflection. Many wills were made on the deathbed, when a person's mortality seemed most imminent. Others would be written in anticipation of death, before a voyage or when a testator reflected on the instability of life (Dinn 1990, p. 48; Tanner 1984, p. 116). In all cases, the person involved had to make choices about how to dispose of their goods, provide for their family's future, and render a worldly and spiritual account of their deeds. Some of these accounts are simple because the testator was content to trust in the discretion of their executors to dispose appropriately of their belongings. Others are complex, laying out detailed funeral arrangements and setting conditions on the descent of goods and property.[22] Both approaches say something about the attitude of the testator towards death, and towards the future (Marshall 2002, pp. 43–46; Burgess 1987a, pp. 855–56). Astley himself says that, "facing the death of others and facing our own death . . . fires the crucible of ordinary theologizing" (Astley 2002, p. 70). It can be difficult to identify whether other medieval texts involved similar levels of reflection, and so historians must pay close attention to the circumstances of document creation before mining a source for ordinary theology.

The last challenge for the historical application of ordinary theology is that using Astley's methods to investigate historical sources in some ways strips them of their initial impetus. Astley developed

22 For example: John Symonds of Hilgay made only one bequest, while Thomas Styward of Swaffham made 84: NRO, ANF Register liber 2a (Bulwer), fol. 17; NRO, NCC Register Johnson 29.

ordinary theology to drive the modern Church forward, as a pastoral and practical tool, useful for ministry and the further development of the living faith. Historical theology and the study of historical religions are, by nature, more academic. They can be, and have been, influenced by political and religious agendas; they may even offer lessons for modern churches. But historical work is supposed to be more scientific and descriptive, even though it is a commonplace that true neutrality is a myth (Marshall 2002, p. 3).

It is impossible to deny that using ordinary theology historically is to apply it to academic ends. But, in a larger sense, history is about recovering the shared humanity of past people, of viewing them respectfully within their own context, and regarding their lives and systems of meaning with empathy (Van Engen 2002, p. 521). The ability to approach cherished beliefs critically but sympathetically lies at the heart of a liberal arts education. Ordinary theology is, then, part of the larger human project that gives university education meaning. Like members of the public today, lay parishioners in the middle ages were not mute, disinterested in salvation, or unthinking; their thoughts are just more difficult to access.

3. Facing Death in Medieval Norfolk: A Case Study of Ordinary Theology

For the purposes of the following study of the beliefs of testators from Norfolk, from the earliest available documents to 1538, a database was constructed from a sample of 152 wills produced by men identified as husbandmen, yeomen, and gentlemen.[23] These three status groups were selected because they represent the median ranks within medieval society, they can be readily identified using indexes, and they offer good representation in will-making (Almond and Pollard 2001, pp. 52–55; Maddern 2005, p. 22). Their activities and work did not require religious education, though gentlemen at least would likely have enjoyed some school or tutoring, which did involve religious teachings (Orme 2005, pp. 63–74). The sample comes with a few caveats: first, the status groups selected comprise the lowest ranks of the gentry and the highest ranks of the peasantry and so represent a rather elite group. The benefit of selecting by status is that it takes the medieval social imagination seriously rather than constructing an artificial hierarchy as is common in studies of wills (Lutton 2006, pp. 48–49; Whittle 2000, p. 127). Second, all the testators in the sample are men. Women were not generally identified by social rank and so can only be located through the challenging work of name-linkage.[24] Finally, the study has an overall rural focus, though twenty testators came from Norwich and three from Bishop's Lynn. Testators in cities might have had greater choice in selecting religious beneficiaries and more opportunities for social ostentation.

The doctrine of purgatory, the theological explanation for requests for prayers and other types of commemorations, looms large in studies of medieval wills (Middleton-Stewart 2001, pp. 1–2; Brown 1995, pp. 1–4; Burgess 1987a, pp. 837–39; Tanner 1984, pp. 104–6). Purgatory was the mid-way point between heaven and hell, where the souls of sinners were cleansed of their unexpiated sins with purgative fire until they were sufficiently pure to ascend to heaven. The doctrine emerged in academic theology as an important step in the life of the soul in the twelfth century as a development of existing commemorative practices and became ubiquitous throughout the medieval world (Le Goff 1985, pp. 67–70; Duffy 1992, pp. 301–3). The concept of purgatory could exert a positive

23 The National Archives and Norfolk Record Office wills indexes are available online: TNA, "Discovery Catalogue," The National Archives, http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk; and NRO, "Search for Wills and Other Probate Records," NRO Online Catalogue, http://nrocat.norfolk.gov.uk/DServe/public/searches/nroprobate.htm. Wills from Norfolk were proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (PCC), the Consistory Court of Norwich (NCC), the Archdeaconry of Norwich (ANF), and the Dean and Chapter Archives (DCN). The sample includes one-quarter of all wills proved by husbandmen in the Norfolk courts (37) and all their PCC wills (1), all yeoman wills in Norfolk courts (55) and all their PCC wills (4), and all gentleman wills from the ANF (4), one-half of the NCC wills (32), and all their PCC wills (19). The "Norwich Wills Database" is a relational FileMaker Pro 2013 database that contains information about the 152 wills, 2074 heirs, and 2810 bequests, of which 1809 are cash bequests. The earliest will is from 1438; 1538 was chosen as the end date because it was at this point that Henry VIII's reforms reached parish practice (Hutton 1987, pp. 116–18).

24 Female bequests follow distinct patterns (French 2008, pp. 37–49).

influence, as a spur toward charity that offered a comforting alternative to hell, or it could be imagined negatively, as a demi-hell where the souls of the forgotten molder, crying out for salvation. Because the soul in purgatory cannot impel its own release, it must either wait out its time there or be aided in its journey by the prayers of the faithful, who can prevail upon God's mercy and speed the dead more quickly toward heaven (Matsuda 1997, pp. 1–33; Marshall 2002, pp. 7–13; Duffy 1992, pp. 343–54). The practice of granting indulgences that could partially or entirely forgive penance due for sins developed alongside the doctrine of purgatory. In 1343, papal decree confirmed that the Church had access to a store of merit in heaven that it could dispense on behalf of confessed and repentant sinners who performed certain devotional acts, either shortening or eliminating their stay in purgatory (Matsuda 1997, pp. 25–26; Swanson 2007, pp. 10–9). It was the abuse of this system for financial gain that reformers railed against in the early part of the sixteenth century, sparking a vehement debate over purgatory in England in the 1530s (Marshall 2002, pp. 47–92).

And yet, the word "purgatory" is entirely absent from the wills in this sample. "Judgment day" appears in two threats to potentially unreliable executors, who should perform their duties "as they wylle answere beforn God at the day of Dome."[25] Heaven appears, too, in that testators will often leave their souls to "all sayentes in hevyn."[26] It is also clear that at least some wills were made in the hope that they might aid their creators in achieving salvation: two testators declare in their preambles the hope that they might be saved and "cum to the joies of eternall felicite."[27] Everyone in the sample would have been familiar with the concept of purgatory, given that it was part of basic Church teachings and tales and poems about it were extremely popular in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Duffy 1992, pp. 338–43; Marshall 2002, p. 12). Middle English texts like *The Pilgrimage of the Soul, The Gast of Gy*, and *Revelation Shown to a Woman*, in which the authors describe terrifying but ultimately hopeful visions of the afterlife, offer valuable insight into late medieval conceptions of heaven, hell, and purgatory (Matsuda 1997, pp. 60–70; Duffy 1992, pp. 338–54). But the wills themselves tell us little about how purgatory impacted on people's ordinary theology. As Clive Burgess observes, testators would choose to invest in chantries even when they could acquire a larger number of masses more cheaply (Burgess 1987a, pp. 849–50). Likewise, Robert Swanson notes that the amount of time indulgences offered did not correspond to their price, and purchasers did not necessarily treat their accumulated spiritual treasure as a kind of numerical account (Swanson 2007, pp. 403–5). If indulgences and masses were not viewed as spiritual currency, to be accumulated at the right price, then what beliefs, attitudes, or goals guided medieval will-makers as they selected their bequests?[28]

As the following examination reveals, testators sought to preserve the roles that they had occupied in life, suggesting a strong belief in the continuity of personal identity after death (Le Goff 1985, p. 77). They located salvific power in the people and institutions that surrounded them most closely and sought to remain vividly present in the memories and prayers of these groups (Burgess 1987b, p. 191; 1987a, p. 848). Contemporary models of sainthood motivated some bequests, though the desire for direct intercession can only be inferred. Finally, the bequests they chose varied widely, revealing the broad range of beliefs about death in late medieval England (Lutton 2006, pp. 196–97). The fires of purgatory may well have sparked underlying anxiety about salvation, but testators were able to choose how and how much to invest in the afterlife. Astley observes that in the modern day, mortality often stimulates religious reflection, and in this medieval sample, too, the choices that people made when facing death provide important indications about the beliefs that guided their lives (Astley 2002, p. 70).

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25 NRO, NCC Register Caston 67. A similar warning appears in NRO, NCC Register Gelour 1.
26 NRO, NCC Register Johnson 29.
27 NRO, NCC Register Attmere 184; see also NRO, NCC Register Cobald 92.
28 My questions and interpretations were influenced by Megan McLaughlin's perceptive observations about prayer for the dead in the early middle ages (McLaughlin 1994, pp. 234–49).

Family came first in the distribution of cash wealth (see Table 1). Testators with underage children left the smallest portion of their cash for religious purposes, only between 8% and 34%. Testators survived by adult children left approximately 60% of cash bequeathed to religious or charitable ends, but, as executors and beneficiaries, friends and family usually also received the bulk of land and moveable property. Unmarried testators with no children devoted the largest portion of the cash in their wills to religious purposes, at 75%. Norfolk testators, then, saw maintaining and supporting their wives and children as a major responsibility as they faced death. At least eight testators even sought to control the behavior of their dependents by providing instructions for the education of children or making bequests contingent upon their good conduct. For example, Francis Calybut doubled the bequest he left to one of his sons, "if the said Thomas be a preest as I wold he shulde be," perhaps in the hope of increasing the number and effectiveness of prayers offered for his soul, and left money for another son to study law, if he was inclined, "but I wyll that my sonne John [his executor] take good hede that this good be not spent in vayne."[29] Other testators specified that they hoped their wills would prevent conflict over their property or made bequests conditional upon the cooperation of their heirs (Middleton-Stewart 2001, p. 44). Richard Harvey intended that his will would serve for the "advoydyng of trobyll that here after myght inchaunce to ensewe" and instructed two of his heirs not to visit any "bosynes or troble" upon his executor.[30] In these acts of family management, testators attempted to preserve their role as *paterfamilias* from beyond the grave. In some sense, these considerations are more practical than theological, but they also speak to an unwillingness to relinquish control over the deeds of the living, and to the importance of preserving virtue and obedience within the family. Without that, the testator's bequests might go unheeded.

Table 1. Percentage of cash bequeathed for religious and charitable purposes, of total cash bequeathed by Norfolk testators.

	Married Testators		**Unmarried Testators**	
Testators With:	%	Number	%	Number
Underage Children	15	(34)	34	(6)
Both Underage and Adult Children	15	(13)	8	(4)
Adult Children	61	(35)	62	(13)
No Children	54	(32)	75	(15)

Source: Norwich Wills Database. See n. 23, above, for wills sampling method. *Note*: For each family type, the average amount of all cash left for religious and charitable purposes was divided by the average amount of all cash bequeathed; calculations exclude crops and unvalued objects.

Testators sought to preserve their position in their parochial communities, too, both socially and religiously (Marshall 2002, pp. 34–35; Middleton-Stewart 2001, p. 68). William Liteprowe explicitly intended to maintain his rank in death as in life and asked that half of his moveable goods be sold in order to "brynge me onestly to the erthe and to kepe for me at my departenge onestly as it be hoveth for a man of myn astate."[31] Three other testators made bequests that continued a pious practice undertaken in life. Thomas Blakney instructed "that ther be kepte iii lyghtes evry sonday before the blyssyd trynyte in Honyngham church and one before saint Xristopher duryng the terme of ten yer lyke as I kepe them,"[32] and John Cusshyn asked that a perpetual light be kept burning every Sunday "before owr lyttell ladyes awlter" at the cost of all future occupiers of his land, just as he maintained it during life.[33] Robert Reydon wanted to be buried in the church, "afore the deskes where I was wont

[29] TNA, PROB 11/18/250. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for their interpretation of Calybut's bequest to his son Thomas.
[30] NRO, NCC Register Godsalve 176.
[31] NRO, ANF Register Liber 5 (Cooke), fol. 42.
[32] NRO, NCC Register Johnson 205.
[33] TNA, PROB 11/24/143.

to sey my prayers and before seynt peter the holy apostell."[34] By maintaining lifelong devotion to a particular saint, Blakney, Cusshyn, and Reydon all implicitly ascribe to a belief in intercession, a key aspect of the theology underlying sainthood and, implicitly, of purgatory. According to Astley, the beliefs of churchgoers must be more than surface-level in order to qualify as ordinary theology; they must influence their behavior, becoming part of the believers' *praxis* as they go through life (Astley 2002, pp. 114–16). Although we can only infer the beliefs of these testators from their bequests, their continued devotion to a particular saint suggests that their faith regularly guided their actions.

Gentlemen in particular claimed the interior of the parish church as their own: 78% of gentlemen requested burial within the church, compared to 58% of yeomen and only 16% of husbandmen. Burial in the church was more expensive but also placed the testator's body closer to the masses that took place within; post mortem proximity to the eucharist could, perhaps, intensify the salvific power of religious services. In claiming the church interior, gentlemen also inscribed the social relations of their local community onto the geography of the parish, maintaining their role as prominent congregants into the next life (Middleton-Stewart 2001, pp. 68–77; Daniell 1997, pp. 96–102). But burials both within and outside the church had the effect of creating a spiritual network among the dead, preserving ties established during life. 39% of testators specified that they wanted to be buried beside a loved one or an image of a saint. Burial alongside relics or images of saints was a well-established practice and was likely intended to invoke the saint's intercession, but the beliefs that underlay burial beside kin are less clear (McLaughlin 1994, pp. 30–31). Certainly, kin had a special duty to remember and pray for the dead, but the tenderness in these requests for internment beside children, spouses, and friends speaks more to affective connections than self-serving investment (Duffy 1992, pp. 349–53). Astley observes that ordinary theologians often turn to sympathetic, rote responses in the face of tragedy or sorrow rather than demanding creativity or innovation (Astley 2002, pp. 77–79). In the case of testators who asked to be buried beside a loved one, tradition and emotional sensitivity guided their burial preferences.

The purpose of an ostentatious burial location or tomb was, in spiritual terms, to attract prayers from viewers and passers-by, but it also served as an expression of the continuing individuality of the testator (Middleton-Stewart 2001, pp. 260–74; Marshall 2002, pp. 22–23; Duffy 1992, pp. 332–34; Binski 1996, pp. 102–15). Patrons of the fabric of the church could make a literal mark on the physical context of worship. Bequests to the repair, embellishment, or rebuilding of the local church were second only to obligatory tithe payments in their frequency, with 45% of husbandmen, 66% of yeomen, and 69% of gentlemen leaving money toward this purpose.[35] Here, 34% of all these bequests were made for a specific part of the church; the steeple or bell-tower and the bells attracted 48% of these specific bequests. Bells were used to keep time, to call for prayer, and were believed to speed the soul toward heaven. Contributing to their maintenance, or in the case of two testators purchasing an entirely new bell, was to make oneself a part of the rhythm of life and death in the parish (French 2001, pp. 146–47; Marshall 2002, pp. 14–15). Leaving money for repair of the church had another function: benefactors were remembered on the bederoll, a list of patrons whose names would be read out at a yearly anniversary mass (Duffy 1992, p. 334; Marshall 2002, pp. 24–25). Some testators sought to have their names entered on the bederoll of more than one church: 40% of gentlemen left money to other parishes, as compared to 28% of yeomen and 16% of husbandmen. This accords with the larger economic structures of the countryside in that gentlemen held more land across a greater geographical area.[36] As their sphere of influence in life had been larger, so it was after death.

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34 NRO, NCC Register Ryxe 243; see also (Duffy 1992, p. 332).

35 See the discussion of tithes below, and compare to (Lutton 2006, pp. 90–95; Dinn 1990, pp. 390–99; Middleton-Stewart 2001, pp. 188–96, 206–12; Tanner 1984, pp. 126–31).

36 The spread of landholding is also visible in tithe payments: 27% of husbandmen, 15% of yeomen, and 5% of husbandmen left tithe or high altar payments to churches other than their local parish church.

Some testators sought to bring their presence into the church in an even more intimate way by leaving particular adornments to it. Some of them were to be purpose-made, but in other cases, testators left objects or garments they wanted to be adapted for the purpose, like Simon Clere and his chalices,[37] or Robert Day, who asked "that my gowne of crymyson damaske be made in ii vestmentes," one for his parish church and the other for a neighboring church.[38] In doing so, they brought the mundane into contact with the divine and associated themselves with the miracle of the mass by proxy through the use of their chalice or the wearing of their best vestment (French 2008, pp. 44–46; Duffy 1992, pp. 330–31). Adornments might also bring testators closer to the saints: a contemporary Suffolk testator left a pair of silver rosaries and three gold rings, "sett therto with a crosse and a hert of sylver," to Our Lady of Woolpit, on the condition that her caretakers display them around her neck perpetually.[39] His jewelry would glorify the saint and provoke her intercession on his behalf. All these bequests show a personal attachment to the environment of piety, a factor that Astley says is often key in religious learning (Astley 2002, p. 9).

Funerals, anniversaries, and chantries were perhaps the most powerful example of the desire to be remembered after death. The details of the funeral were usually left to custom, though some testators were more specific: 28% of them made bequests toward their funerals, and 11% left money intended to boost the number and status of attendees, generally along the lines of 4d to every priest who attended, 2d to every cleric, and 1d to every layperson.[40] The details vary, but the overwhelming impression is that these testators sought to marshal a host of people immediately after death whose grateful prayers might provide the soul with speedy relief (Marshall 2002, pp. 18–9; Middleton-Stewart 2001, pp. 116–17). They may have believed that the spirit of the dead occupied a liminal space for a brief time soon after decease as it awaited a preliminary sentencing and transport to purgatory (Matsuda 1997, pp. 31, 65). Prayers were supposedly most effective during this crucial time. The relative scarcity of funeral bequests could suggest that most testators were too poor to pursue this option, that they were satisfied with conventional funerary customs, that they made less formal arrangements outside their wills, or that they did not view the period immediately after death as crucial for their eventual deliverance into heaven. Only eight testators requested remembrance at intervals of the seventh and/or thirtieth day after burial (Lutton 2006, pp. 60–67; Burgess 1987a, p. 841; Dinn 1990, pp. 539–40). For some, the period soon after death was a focus for expenditure and even anxiety; for others, it passed unremarked. These marked differences in postmortem remembrance reflect the highly individual nature of ordinary theology. Because personal beliefs are generally not developed or applied systematically, Astley argues that subjectivity is a hallmark of ordinary theology, in contrast to the normativity of academic theology (Astley 2002, pp. 42–44, 134–36).

Anniversaries, or obits, were the opposite of a quick fix; they provided a long-term reminder of the presence of the dead. During the obit, which was generally held on the anniversary of the testator's death or a specified saint's day, the hearse and burial equipment would be set up in the church, and the liturgy and rituals of the funeral would be repeated in full (Burgess 1987b, pp. 183–91). Burgess suggests that this arrangement was developed to bring the dead as vividly as possible into the prayers of the living, thus increasing their efficacy, especially in the case of long-term or perpetual obits where the dead may have faded from memory (Burgess 1987b, p. 191; 1987a, p. 848). If so, it would contribute significantly to the overall impression that testators believed that preserving their individuality was key to salvific remembrance. But bequests for obits are rare among Norfolk testators, though it is possible that some were established through extra testamentary provisions (Burgess 1987b, pp. 193–94). Only nineteen testators, or 13%, requested yearly obits; eight of these were to be kept perpetually or

[37] TNA, PROB 11/15/539. Bequests of this type are common in women's wills (French 2008, pp. 37–49).
[38] NRO, NCC Register Briggs 29.
[39] NRO, NCC Register Ryxe 243.
[40] See, for example, NRO, NCC Register Popy 440. Compare to (Lutton 2006, pp. 60–67; Dinn 1990, pp. 518–35; Middleton-Stewart 2001, pp. 115–18; Tanner 1984, pp. 98–100).

until the money ran out, and eleven were of temporary duration, lasting an average of sixteen and one-half years.[41] This may have been due to the difficulty of implementing bequests over a long period of time, or to the general expense; it is also possible that some obits were established through extra testamentary provisions. Testators determined to establish an obit, particularly a perpetual one, had to go to great lengths to ensure its continued performance (Burgess 1987b, pp. 197–204).

Most Norfolk testators who gave money for memorials chose to concentrate on the years immediately after death by establishing a temporary chantry. Executors were directed to pay an annual salary to a chantry priest, an unbeneficed cleric who would celebrate mass daily for the benefit of the testator and other specified souls (Burgess 1985, p. 49). Here, 41% of all testators endowed a temporary chantry, but, like obits, chantries might be established through *inter vivos* transactions and so would not always appear in wills (Burgess 1987a, p. 855). There is a hint of this in the will of John Sparrow, who directed his son to "kepe and perfourme all suche covauntes as is made towchyng the chauntre of Oxburgh accordyng to the wrytyng thereof."[42] Perpetual or even purpose-built chantries were the ultimate in luxury, yet all but three chantries in this sample were limited by time or available resources, and even these three were not described as perpetual. 95% of the chantries in this sample were to be sited in the testator's own parish church. 63% of chantries were to last one year or less, and 88% of them for a maximum of five years.[43] Even a temporary chantry came at a high price: testators generally paid between £5 6s 8d and £6 per year to their priest. In the schema of purgatory, dedicated masses were supposed to be the most efficacious for the soul, and so their spiritual value may have been commensurately higher. But chantry priests performed other functions as well; they were expected to help the local curate in his duties, thus improving the quality of parish services, and they sometimes found work as teachers (Burgess 1985, pp. 52–60; 1987a, pp. 849–51; Kreider 1979, pp. 40–70). John James was explicit about his expectations: he appointed Sir George Jeffrayson to serve his chantry for one year, "to thintente he shall teache my son John."[44] Setting up a chantry thus provided spiritual benefits both to the testator and to his former neighbors, whose gratitude might result in more prayers. For testators who believed strongly that prayers could impel their souls out of purgatory, a chantry was a means of ensuring constant remembrance throughout the year after death, while for testators concerned about the quality of services in their parish, it offered an opportunity to supplement the divine office, improve the quality of pastoral care, and educate their children.

Chantries served another function: they could reinforce networks among the dead. Only 6% of testators set up a chantry solely for their own benefit, while 53% named more than two intended beneficiaries and 23% more than three. 63% of testators shared their chantry with the souls of their friends, 39% asked that all Christians be commemorated at the daily mass, and about 20% remembered wives, fathers, and mothers.[45] The most interesting category are people described as "benefactors" or "good-doers," who were included 17% of the time. Inherent in this style of address was a feeling of mutual debt: Richard Godwyn endowed one of his three chantries "for all the sowles that I have had ony good of for the wiche I am bounde," while Adam Hodershale went further, naming "Roger Myller for who I am debt bounde to prey fore and for all thos soules that I am debt bounde, as god knowethe me, to prey for."[46] Whether the assistance these testators had received was spiritual or material, post mortem prayer perpetuated a system of dependency among laypeople, not only between laypeople and clerics (Bossy 1983, pp. 37–43; Middleton-Stewart 2001, pp. 119–20; Marshall 2002, pp. 35–37; Matsuda 1997, p. 33). Adam Hodershale, at least, believed that God kept an account of all the prayers promised and received, so maintaining reciprocal remembrance became spiritually imperative.

41 Compare to (Lutton 2006, pp. 60–67; Dinn 1990, pp. 542–53; Middleton-Stewart 2001, pp. 137–40).
42 NRO, NCC Register Popy 455.
43 Compare to (Lutton 2006, pp. 55–60; Middleton-Stewart 2001, pp. 140–47; Dinn 1990, pp. 687–736; Tanner 1984, pp. 100–1).
44 NRO, NCC Register Hyll 110.
45 Compare to (Dinn 1990, pp. 714–17; Lutton 2006, pp. 59–60).
46 NRO, NCC Register Woolman 25; NRO, NCC Register Popy 574.

Connections among the dead are visible, too, in bequests to the candles and torches that were set before images of saints or the cross. Saints have already appeared in burial arrangements and bequests of objects, and it is hardly surprising that the lights devoted to their altars and paintings attracted special attention across the social spectrum. All three ranks expressed similar levels of devotion to these lights, perhaps because bequests could be as small as one pence. 26% of husbandmen, 25% of yeomen, and 36% of gentlemen left money to maintain saints' lights.[47] The Blessed Virgin Mary, who frequently appears as primary intercessor in tales and poems about the redemption of souls, was by far the most popular, and attracted 27% of bequests (Matsuda 1997, p. 65; Duffy 1992, pp. 318–19). The others were scattered; the rood, the second most popular beneficiary, accounted for only 9% of the 138 bequests. This suggests that testators by and large chose for themselves which saints they considered most efficacious on the basis of personal preference or established relationships. Ten testators, including Simon Clere, singled out a particular saint in their preambles as their "avow" or patron (Dinn 1990, pp. 235–36). Just as bequests to funeral attendees were expected to elicit prayer, so too gifts to saints could put the saint in the testator's debt, binding them to pray God for mercy on the soul in purgatory. But equally, they could express personal devotion to a saint or thanks for help apparently offered during life (Duffy 1992, pp. 160–63). Relationships between saints and their adherents, particularly among the gentry, were imagined much like the vertical bonds of affection and responsibility cultivated between lords and vassals (Carpenter 1987, p. 68; Duffy 1992, p. 161–62). Just as ordinary theology is idiosyncratic, so too the beliefs about sainthood that underlay these relationships were highly individual and reflected a testator's particular identities and experiences.

Special masses could also harness divine power and are the bequest type that most clearly demonstrates a belief in testators' ability to buy their way out of purgatory. Three special masses feature in the sample: the Trental of St. Gregory, the *Scala coeli* mass, and the comparatively recent mass of the Five Wounds. The Trental of St. Gregory received its authority from a famous ghost story, while *Scala coeli* masses and the mass of the Five Wounds came with a Papal indulgence (Duffy 1992, pp. 370–73; Swanson 2007, pp. 55–56, 264–65).[48] Both a mass of *Scala coeli* and the Trental of St. Gregory promised the soul immediate release from purgatory, while the Five Wounds offered to reduce the sinner's sentence by one-seventh. They were a comparative bargain: a Trental of St. Gregory cost only 10s, as compared to at least £5 6s 8d for a one-year chantry. But for all their authority and expediency, they were not very popular among the Norfolk testators. Only six left money for a Trental of St. Gregory, and only three requested a *Scala coeli* mass or a mass of the Five Wounds. Compare that to the fourteen testators who requested ordinary trentals, a series of 30 masses following after burial that also cost 6s but offered no special promise of salvation.[49] Thus, although a few testators found indulgenced masses attractive, most felt that the salvific power of ordinary memorials was sufficient.

The larger world is almost entirely absent from the wills, except for that of John Cobb, who left money for a priest to undertake a pilgrimage to Rome on his behalf.[50] Most testators concentrated giving on their local parish, which laid one significant claim on testamentary wealth: in the bequest for under- or unpaid tithes, the obligatory one-tenth tax owed to the Church (Swanson 1989, pp. 210–15). This is the most consistent of all the bequests made, and reflects both testamentary practice and the active contribution of clerical scribes who employed a language of allegiance and regret: "for my tithes negligently forgottyn . . . "[51] Indeed, gentlemen, who were likely the most literate group of the sample, most frequently omitted to leave money for tithes: only 78% made the customary bequest, as compared to 93% of yeomen and 92% of husbandmen. The other two institutional bequests that appear regularly are a token sum to the cathedral in Norwich, in 24% of wills, and to the houses of friars there and

47 Compare to (Lutton 2006, pp. 82–90; Dinn 1990, pp. 183–240; Middleton-Stewart 2001, pp. 217–25; Tanner 1984, pp. 82–4, 118).
48 Requests for special masses and ordinary trentals were spread evenly across the three social statuses.
49 Compare to (Lutton 2006, pp. 68–69; Dinn 1990, pp. 482, 555–59; Middleton-Stewart 2001, p. 121; Tanner 1984, pp. 102–3).
50 NRO, NCC Register Popy 179.
51 NRO, NCC Register Popy 179.

in larger Norfolk towns, in 26% of wills.[52] The leper houses at the gates of Norwich and Bishop's Lynn also attracted donations, though less so, at 19% (Tanner 1984, p. 133). Some testators in this way acknowledged the diocese and other county institutions but for the most part had narrow horizons. This is especially true for husbandmen, only 8% of whom gave to friars and 5% to leperhouses. The local focus of most wills lends support for their use as a source for ordinary theology, which is guided more by personal experiences than abstract principles (Astley 2002, pp. 21–25, 42–44, 134–36). The established Church may have had spiritual power and institutional oversight, but at the moment of death, testators concentrated their thoughts on the places with which they were most familiar.

Charity to the poor and sick was largely the domain of yeomen and gentlemen. Only one husbandman left money to the poor, a penny dole at his funeral, as compared to 29% of yeomen and 33% of gentlemen who left money for alms.[53] The discrepancy may be due to expense; 37% of testators who gave alms set aside a small sum to every poor household in the parish or every poor person who attended the funeral and therefore had to be confident that their funds could stretch far enough. But other testators left a set amount, and the difference may instead reflect the role of yeomen and gentlemen as distributers of largesse in life, or at least their self-perception as heads of the community and what this role entailed (Dinn 1990, pp. 636–38; Campbell 1942, pp. 314–47, 379–88). Indeed, four gentlemen and two yeomen left money to all the householders in their local area or tenants on their farms, whether or not they were poor.

As in life, those with more material resources could choose from a broader range of commodities. The wills of husbandmen are, on the whole, shorter and lacking in specific detail. They left a smaller portion of their cash for religious purposes, 13% compared to 28% for yeomen and 26% for gentlemen.[54] And yet, they, too, would have been remembered in the bederolls of the local churches whose repairs 45% of them funded, in the temporary chantries 21% of them endowed, and in the prayers of the loved ones they supported. They were also remembered by the religious gilds to which they belonged. These gilds were fraternal organizations dedicated to a saint whose members collectively raised money for the parish, charity, and each other's funerals. In cities and towns, gilds might be linked with civic government or particular crafts, though even in rural villages membership offered social, financial, and religious benefits (Swanson 2007, pp. 280–84; Bainbridge 1996, pp. 19–21; Farnhill 2001, pp. 9–12, 60–80). Gilds were supported by a nearly equal proportion of all testators; 32% of husbandmen, 31% of yeomen, and 40% of gentlemen left money to at least one gild.[55] As members of a gild, testators could expect to be included in its yearly prayers for the dead; and indeed, the two gentlemen who paid lump sums to be made gild members on their deathbed did so explicitly in order to "be prayed for by them and ther prestis according to tholde, goode, and laudable custome ther used."[56] A lack of deathbed provision for obsequies or alms, then, does not necessarily imply a disbelief in the salvific power of prayer or charity. In the case of gild members, it means that investment in both these potent forces would have been spread out over the course of a life. Gild members harnessed the collective power of their prayers and gave an opportunity for those of lesser means to gather around themselves a community of remembrance resembling that of their wealthier peers (Bainbridge 1996, pp. 83–89; Farnhill 2001, pp. 77–78; Dinn 1990, pp. 535–38; Duffy 1992, pp. 141–54).[57]

52 Compare to (Lutton 2006, pp. 80–82; Dinn 1990, pp. 466–75; Middleton-Stewart 2001, pp. 57–58; Tanner 1984, pp. 5–7, 119–21).
53 Compare to (Lutton 2006, pp. 95–98; Dinn 1990, pp. 633–39).
54 These averages were calculated using the median amount of cash bequeathed, rather than the average, because a few far larger bequests skew the results.
55 Compare to (Dinn 1990, pp. 316–53; Middleton-Stewart 2001, pp. 151–56).
56 TNA, PROB 11/25/325; see also TNA, PROB 11/14/508. John De Boye, left a silver bowl with a gilt lid to a gild, in return for which he asked them to include him, Thomas Raynhold, and all their benefactors in their prayers at their yearly dinner: TNA, PROB 11/17/152.
57 The social range of gild membership is debatable; for one view, see (Bainbridge 1996, pp. 104–5); for another, (Farnhill 2001, pp. 42–59).

4. Conclusions

This study is only regional, and different patterns of bequest and belief have been found even within communities in Norfolk (Lutton 2006; Tanner 1984). Some of the inconsistencies are no doubt due to patchy coverage and the variability of the evidence. But, on another level, the differences between these Norfolk testators and will-makers in other areas reflect the many opportunities available to late medieval testators as they settled their accounts, spiritually and materially, and the very individual nature of their religious beliefs.

Modern ordinary theologians, in Astley's estimation, are involved in a process of sifting through religious teachings, texts, and traditions to find which ideas and practices feel most spiritually resonant. Their beliefs emerge from their own experiences and from affective recognition of personal truths (Astley 2002, pp. 39–44). On their deathbeds, medieval Christians likewise chose which components of the faith they considered most salvific. They made their choices in accordance with contemporary norms but could find room for individual expressions of piety. Some testators gave generously to repairing or renovating the fabric of their parish church, investing their funds in bells and steeples; others focused their efforts on the adornment of the church, including donations of their clothing or plate. Still others concentrated their bequests on maintaining the parish community, through donations to the poor, doles to mourners at their funerals, and requests for ongoing remembrances. The theological systems that underlie these choices—belief in purgatory and saintly intercession—went unstated. They can be partly reconstructed, but these wills betray, too, attitudes toward death that are affective rather than analytical. Responsibility for the welfare of kin and community and the preservation of social roles guided many of the bequests. Testators looked not only to their own interests but also to those of their relatives and neighbors through the provision of ongoing prayers and charity. There is a sense throughout these wills that earthly ties persist long past the death of family members, into perpetuity.

What, then, does "ordinary theology" have to offer scholars of historical theology, whose subjects cannot engage in conversation and whose investigations are largely academic? In the first place, it directs our attention back to the people who filled, and may sometimes have paid for, the pews (French 2001, pp. 162–70). It forces us to ask how we might assess their faith; what sources provide the most direct access to their concerns and considerations? It returns a degree of agency, intellect, and humanity to medieval people that is often effaced or at least sidelined by our perceptions of the power and rigor of the medieval Church. Medieval people could choose the extent of their investment in religion. If the established Church thrived, it was because pennies poured in from paupers as well as princes. If the parish church was adorned, it was because someone saw fit to replace its windows and paint its walls. If, on the other hand, the nunnery crumbled and the pilgrimage center was abandoned, it was because people directed their salvific beliefs elsewhere. This is not to say that the institutional Church was absent in the formation of ordinary religion in the middle ages. As in modern ordinary theology, figures possessed of clerical authority exerted influence, sometimes violently, on the views and behaviors of their parishioners. But there was space for individual opinion and action, not only in lollard conventicles or the anchorholds of mystics, but also in the daily life of the men and women who entered the churches, made confessions, and asked questions. To deny their curiosity and capacity for independent thought is to flatten the historical landscape. There was a larger conversation taking place about how best to live a Christian life in the changing world of the late middle ages and how best to die a Christian death. It is in this conversation between the academic or formal theology of the Church and the concerns and interests of its parishioners that "ordinary theology" comes into its own.

Acknowledgments: My thanks to Fordham University for its generous support, to J. P. Hornbeck II for drawing my attention to Jeff Astley's work, to Carole Rawcliffe and Maryanne Kowaleski for their thoughtful comments and corrections, to Maureen Jurkowski for her help in researching Simon Clere, to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful critiques, and to the archivists at the National Archives in Kew and the Norfolk Record Office in Norwich for their diligent assistance. All errors are my own.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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