Ordinary Theology as Lay Theology: Listening to and Learning from Lay Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper offers a general overview of Jeff Astley’s conceptualization of “ordinary theology”, first developed in 2002, together with an apologia for its study and for its relevance for theological and ecclesiastical debate.

Ordinary theology is first defined, located and explicated, and the use of the adjective “ordinary” defended, along with the significance of the ordinary for Christian theology and spirituality.

The nature of ordinary theology is then briefly portrayed in terms of its linguistic style or form (rich in story and metaphor; aphoristic, autobiographical and unsystematic), its posture (midway between kneeling and sitting theology) and its voice (on Ursula Le Guin’s account, closer to the mother tongue than to the father tongue). The notion of ordinary theology is further related to Edward Farley’s delineation of the early understanding of theologia, as well as to the popular accounts of John Cobb, Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson.

The paper then discusses the understanding of ordinary theology as lay theology, noting three possible meanings of that phrase (to designate a theological theme, the theology of a group within the Church, or theology that is non-expert). It goes on to argue for the significance of ordinary and lay theology both within the wider theology of the Church and in dialogue with academic theology. In this context, it makes particular reference to the relevance of ordinary theology to the concept of the consensus fidelium, in dialogue with some aspects of George Lindbeck’s work; and concludes with an argument for the importance of theological listening in ordinary theological research, and therefore in more
general theological discussion in Church and academy. This includes an argument for a two-stage process for a fuller study of ordinary theology, which comprises both theological listening and description, on the one hand; and a (separate) critical appraisal of the resulting data, in which the normative criteria of academic and ecclesiastical theology are employed, on the other. The importance of this latter process is acknowledged, but the author contends that it should never disable the empirical stage of listening to ordinary theology (which enables others to learn from it) by silencing or side-lining the voices of ordinary theologians.

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What is Ordinary Theology?
For over ten years now I have used the phrase, “ordinary theology”, which I define as “the theology and theologizing of Christians who have received little or no theological education of a scholarly, academic or systematic kind” (or, more generally, as “the content, pattern and processes of ordinary people’s articulation of their religious understanding”). I accept that theology is not merely God-talk but must include “some element and some degree of reflection”; while insisting that “ordinary theologians” think about and reflect on what they believe, even though these reflections are rarely as precise, coherent, systematic or
dispassionate as the academy expects, and never engage only their faculty of cognition (ASTLEY, 2002, 1, 55-57, 140-145).

I use the English adjective “ordinary” in its non-pejorative sense, applying it to what is “customary”, “usual”, “regular” and therefore “common” (in its non-pejorative sense). What is ordinary is what is statistically normal, whether or not it fits the prescriptive norm of some doctrinal – or scholarly – standard or moral ideal. “Ordinary” is the term that British interviewees use of themselves and their theology: “Why are you asking about me and my beliefs and values? I am just ordinary.” But, to speak paradoxically – by adopting the other connotation of ordinariness, as marking out what is not interesting, excellent or remarkable – the people who make such self-deprecatory claims often go on to disclose a quite extraordinary ordinary theology, which may be refreshingly vivid, illuminating, original and profound.

Of course, I have my own theological agenda and convictions in speaking up for ordinary theology. These include the claim that our everyday world and ordinary life is the primary locus of our spiritual health. I therefore agree with Charles Taylor and many others that our dignity, and our understanding of what it is to be human, is ultimately grounded here, and properly so from the perspective of a properly Christian spirituality (TAYLOR, 1960, 1989). Ordinariness, it has been said, is “our indispensable anchorage: without it we are nothing and nowhere … This perception of the religious weight of ordinariness can deliver people from the tyranny of various sorts of spiritual elitism” (CUPITT, 2003, 50).

People’s ordinary theology is significant, partly because it is inevitably important to the ordinary Christians themselves. Their beliefs and values matter to them, often very much indeed. And they “work” for them, in the sense of providing the resources of meaning and spiritual strength that they employ to lean into the force fields of their lives (in James Fowler’s memorable phrase), enabling them to cope and even flourish, day to day, as they
face and live their lives, and then eventually face and live their deaths. Be it ever so inchoate, unsystematic and even confused, ordinary theology is a theology to live by.

Although I define ordinary theology in terms of its innocence of an academic theological education, in my portrayal of it I paint a picture that is only ever different in degree (if you will forgive the pun!), and not different in kind, from more scholarly and academic – and, often, ecclesiastical – types of theology. This is inescapable, as ordinary theology precedes academic theology in the minds even of university-trained theologians, and often continues “within them”, like the heartwood of a tree, influencing their later theology from “the inside”, “from the heart”. Ordinary theology represents for such a person the deep-seated and hard to change beliefs and values that they first learned, often at their first carer’s (usually mother’s) knee, or from more violent contact with her disciplining hand. Inside most academic theologians, therefore, an ordinary theologian often lies hidden, sometimes deliberately hidden. But, in my view, academic theology especially comes alive spiritually and humanly when that inner ordinary theology finds powerful expression in a second, different voice, through the more careful and considered language and arguments of the scholar.

Ordinary theology and academic theology may be treated like ideal types, in the sense of constructs that stress certain elements common to most cases of a phenomenon, without claiming to correspond to all characteristics in any one particular case. As such, they occupy the two ends of a continuous spectrum.

In its form or style, ordinary theology is more likely to be aphoristic and anecdotal, autobiographical and unsystematic; and rich in affect-freighted story and metaphor. Its models have not yet been qualified, shaped and clarified to any great extent, so as to create concepts apt for drawing inferences and creating systems, as in more academic forms of theology.
In its *posture*, ordinary theology lies closer to von Balthasar’s “theology at prayer” than the more considered and dispassionate “theology at the desk” (BALTHASER, 1960, 224). Perhaps its stance is half-way up from kneeling; but it is not yet quite the sitting theology of the theologian in the study, consulting open books in which he reads the academic theologies of others, and with his pen in his hand to formulate and communicate his own. Certainly it is not the holding-at-arms’ length theology of a full-blown, no-holds-barred critique of faith. (I have argued above, however, ordinary theology does possess its own species of a questioning and self-critical dimension.)

Ordinary theology’s *voice* lies closer to the “earthbound, housebound”, “mother tongue” of conversations within relationships, to steal a metaphor form the novelist Ursula Le Guin (LE GUIN, 1989, 147-151), than it does to the “father tongue” of one-way communications and apparently disinterested analyses which, Le Guin argues, one has to go to college fully to learn (cf. LEES-SMITH, 2013).

Ordinary theology and academic theology differ in their *place of work* also. Ordinary theology is learned in the home and the street, and in the workplace, pub and playground. It is, however, articulated somewhat rarely, and often only when conversations in these non-Church, everyday settings take a deeper, more personal and more serious turn. Ordinary theology is nonetheless very common, in the sense that it is very widespread; its territory is not limited to those with an academic theological education. *Theologia* in essence and origin was the Christian’s faith become reflective in her or his life. For Edward Farley, theology in its earlier history was not yet and assuredly “not just the scholar’s possession, the teacher’s trade”, but rather “the wisdom proper to the life of the believer”. Prior to the institutionalization and professionalization of theology in later periods as a scholarly discipline or inquiry, it was – and still is for the great majority in the Church – a fundamental dimension of Christian piety and vocation: “the reflective wisdom of the believer” and “a part
of Christian existence as such”. Thus conceived, theology basically represents an existential and practical, and not an abstract or theoretical, knowledge and understanding of God (FARLEY, 1983, 31-37, 47, 156; 1988, 81, 88).

Although ordinary theology may be found anywhere, I focus here on ordinary theology as the reflective God-talk of ordinary Christian believers. On this understanding, we may agree that this form of theology is a “task laid on every Christian” (MOLTMANN, 1997, ix). Yet it is also true that to some extent “all Christians already are theologians”, and that “the only place that authentic theology can begin is with the real beliefs of real Christians” (COBB, 1993, 17, 41). For Stanley Grenz and Richard Olson, too, “theology is inescapable for all thinking, reflecting Christians and the difference between lay theologians and professional theologians is one of degree not kind” (GRENZ/OLSON, 1996).

In principle, my term ordinary theology might be extended even more widely. In 1996 I wrote quite generally about the “school theology” of children and teenagers, applying this term (but not yet describing it as “ordinary” theology) even to those who were agnostic or atheistic (ASTLEY, 1996). For if theology is understood in an unrestricted way as our reflection on what we take to be ultimate, then everyone has some sort of theology as everyone has some sort of faith, believing in something or someone. Even if we insist that ordinary theological discourse must have some form of explicit reference to God, even unbelievers – and certainly those who embrace other theistic traditions – have some beliefs about God. Grenz and Olson argue that theology is “any reflection on the ultimate questions

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1 Grenz and Olson identify a whole spectrum of increasing levels of reflection in theology, from that of an unreflective “folk theology”, by way of their intermediate categories of “lay theology”, “ministerial theology” and “professional theology”, to the “highly speculative, virtually philosophical” form of academic theology that is “often disconnected from the church and has little to do with concrete Christian living” – and is therefore (like folk theology) “of little value” and may even be “dangerous to the task of examining, understanding and articulating Christian faith”. These distinctions, however, are rather specific to the particular context of the US educational system and churches, and perhaps the authors’ theological perspective.
of life that point toward God”, and later widen their definition further to include anyone who “reflects on the great ‘Why’ questions of life”, including artists who raise the question of God only implicitly, even by denying it (citing Woody Allen as an “anonymous theologian”).

**What is Lay Theology?**

Returning to the narrower Christian context, however, I must now seek to respond to the question I have been set: Is ordinary theology a *lay* theology?

In English, the phrase “lay theology” may be construed in a number of different ways. First, it may be used topically or thematically, on the model of such phrases as “sacramental theology”, “liturgical theology” or “educational theology”, to denote a theology of, about or applied to some entity, phenomenon or practice: in this case, the laity, who are defined (alas, negatively) as that part of the whole people of God who are not ordained ministers (cf. KRAEMER, 1958; GIBBS/MORTON, 1964, 1971; KÜNG, 1971, 363-387). Defined in this way, the term designates a part of ecclesiology. ²

A number of the things that I have written about ordinary theology fall under this heading, insofar as they include some theological reflection on the status and role of the beliefs of ordinary Church members – that is, of the vast proportion of the Church. But the main argument I appeal to when encouraging clergy to take seriously the ordinary theology of their congregations, and of others within their wider geographical parish or field of mission and ministry, is not primarily based on any “theology of the laity”. It is, rather, that some insight into their congregation’s beliefs and values is essential to their work as clergy. In order to exercise their ministry properly, priests and others engaged in Christian education, preaching, apologetics and evangelism, as well as those involved in the Church’s pastoral

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² The content of ecclesiology is distinctive among Christian doctrines, in being the Church’s normative teaching about itself together with the exploration of these teachings.
endeavours, need to listen far better to – and know far more than most do about – the beliefs 
and values that are held by those adults and others for whom they exercise this ministry of 
communication and care (ASTLEY, 2002, 145-148). Patently this is a pragmatic justification 
for the study of ordinary theology. I trust that it is one that all clergy and ministers will regard 
as valid, although I despair that – at least in England – the curriculum of ministerial education 
and training seems to pay very little attention to what most churchgoers actually believe. (I 
suppose that may be because clergy, or their mentors, do not have a sufficiently high view of 
– which may be related to a fairly low theology of – the status and significance of the lay 
members of the Church, and of what they think.)

But in what I have just argued it is clear that we may also treat lay theology in a 
second way, simply as a convenient term to label the theology held by lay people, as distinct 
from “clerical theology” or “ministerial theology” if these phrases are understood to denote – 
in a similarly descriptive fashion – the theological and ethical views held by clergy. Of course 
both of these “group theologies”, in this second sense of lay theology and clerical theology, 
may include a theology of the laity (in our first sense) as a part of their theological 
reflections; and these normative theologies concerning the theological status of the laity 
within the whole Church may be identical across the two groups. But often it isn’t; for in 
thought as elsewhere, Bernard Shaw’s wise saying too frequently finds an application: “All 
professions are conspiracies against the laity”. (Admittedly, he was writing about medical 
doctors.)

But lay theology is a designation that is patent of a third interpretation: as a theology 
that is largely located in and owned by lay people, as in the second understanding, but in this 
case only because it is “not expert”. This is the theology possessed by those who are not 
“professionally qualified” (and therefore academically trained) in theology. It can therefore 
include those who are not members of the Church. This understanding of “lay” is common in
English and covers much of what I intended to convey by originally adopting the adjective “ordinary”. In this sense, ordinary theology is lay by definition (ASTLEY, 2002, 64). However, now the contrasted object is not the theological reflections of the clergy but the academic theology of those within the academy – and, to some extent, the conceptual and systematic theology of the Church’s teaching and teachers. Ordinary theology is thus distinguished from the “extraordinary” (unusual; less common or widespread) theology of the learned.

I am persuaded that a great deal of the theology that is presented by clergy in sermons and pastoral conversations fits well into my category of ordinary theology, as it too is spiritually-oriented and affective, anecdotal, rich in imaginative story and metaphor, personal to the point of being autobiographical, and so on. It is not – or not obviously – the highly rational, systematized and abstract theologizing of the academy, despite the fact that clergy are trained in such academic theology. And quite right too, I think – on both counts!

The American philosopher, Paul Holmer, makes much of the importance of learning religious concepts as part of the life of faith, but he insists that what must be learned does not include the abstract and specialized concepts of academic theology. Most Christians do not need them, just as the car mechanic does not need to know or use the concept of atomic weight.

Using concepts like those for foods, for cars, and for everyday things does not presuppose knowledge of the concepts for vitamins, atomic weights, or other specialist-described ingredients. Likewise, the concepts of theistic metaphysics are not components in most of the concepts of God wrought for us by Scripture, prayers, and liturgy – perhaps, too, by most sermons. (HOLMER, 1978, 174)
The rich, workable and livable concepts of religious faith are what we need in religious devotion and other practices – including the communication of religion. By contrast, the technical concepts of an academic or dogmatic theology, Holmer contends, “mean less” and “have very little work to do” in the life of faith. Religious experts (saints, spiritual teachers and counsellors, priests, pastors, preachers, healers, confessors, evangelists) need not necessarily be theological experts in any academic sense. As I have argued elsewhere, there are significant advantages for clergy that come from learning academic theology (ASTLEY, 2013b, 47 n. 2), but this does not mean that they should often directly use that form of theology in their communication with ordinary theologians.

Therefore clergy, although technically not ordinary theologians on my definition (because their training includes academic theological education), might and should communicate and express – and may indeed largely spiritually live by – ordinary theology’s form, style, posture and voice (as characterized by my portrayal of ordinary theology). They still possess this ordinary theology inside, of course, or at least should be able to emulate some of its more valuable characteristics.

Further, many lay – in the sense of “not ordained” – members of the Church are most expert academic theologians. Indeed, in many congregations and even denominations, such theologians heavily outweigh the academic theology group within the clergy, both in number and in academic distinction.

So the relationship between ordinary theology and lay theology is rather more complicated than one might have expected.

*Sensus fidelium*

I now wish to address two areas that could be of signal importance for the topic of marriage and family life, as they are for the discussion of many other issues within the life of
Christians and that of the Church. The notion of a *sensus* (or *consensus*) *fidei* or *fidelium* – a sense or appreciation or agreement about the faith shared generally by the faithful – is alluded to by some Christians, and especially by Catholics. The claim that this can be a source or touchstone of theological faith is, of course, rather contentious. Even its advocates are cautious.

Thus the Roman Catholic International Theological Commission of 2011 (*Theology Today*, 3 § 34) argues that, while it is “a criterion for Catholic theology”, the *sensus fidelium* is not simply the majority opinion in a given time or culture (but neither is it an echoing back of the teaching of the magisterium). Rather, it is “the sense of the faith that is deeply rooted in the people of God in the Church”. The Commission adds that this *sensus fidelium* requires clarification and articulation by theologians of what Catholics actually believe.

Nicholas Healey writes about the contribution of ordinary theology positively, but cautiously, along these lines:

Reception is … not merely passive acceptance, perhaps taking some time to accomplish. Rather, it is a genuine test of a teaching’s truthfulness, its liveability, as it were. This could be the case only if grace is at work for the good of the church amongst ordinary theologians. … I should note that I do not mean to propose that ordinary theology should necessarily have a formal role in the church’s deliberations, nor do I advocate for a democratic church or wish to “celebrate” the people in some kind of anti-elitist manner. My primary point, with Barth, is that human confusion does not hinder grace from achieving God’s providential will in and through our confused efforts (*Dei providentia et hominum confusione*). Rather, the confusion should be acknowledged and addressed theologically. On that ground, an account of the concrete church can reckon with the Christianity of everyone, from the most
insouciant to the most eager member of the church. The church can never do without
its leadership and this, I would say, for practical as well as doctrinal reasons, must
take the form of an official magisterium. We probably need academic theology, too.
But they are not enough to make the church the church, if we consider the church as it
really is, in its relation to God. (HEALY, 2013, 19-20)

According to George Lindbeck, the Holy Spirit may preserve the Church from error
through the *consensus fidelium*, provided that this is restricted to “competent practitioners of
religion” who have “effectively interiorised” the grammar of their faith, since these are those
who are best able to judge doctrinal proposals. Although he insists that only a minority, those
who are “saturated with the language of scripture and/or liturgy”, are likely to have such
competence; he also acknowledges a wider “passive [theological] competence” that can
recognize misdescriptions that “violate the deep grammar of faith” (LINDBECK, 1984, 79,
99-101, 288; ARMSTRONG, 2013, 71). Lindbeck thus gives at least some role to those I
have called ordinary theologians in discerning the normative claims of religion.

In my view, ordinary theology may be seen as part of a developing Christian tradition,
and as the locus of a continuing divine revelation, by those of us who are willing to allow
such things (see BROWN, 1999). And if God does continue to reveal truths about Godself,
only a minority of clerical and academic theologians would argue that such disclosures would
be limited to members of the clerical or academic professions. If the Church ignores its own
ordinary theology it may be cutting itself off from a rich source of religious and moral
insight. In the final chapter of *Ordinary Theology* I therefore make several bold claims,
including the following (ASTLEY, 2002, 158-159, 162).
First, despite acknowledging the distinction between a descriptive account of what we believe and a normative account of what we should believe, I argue that “surely a strain, if not a paradox, is created when theology identifies as ‘Christian doctrine’ or a ‘doctrine of the church’ beliefs that many ordinary Christians do not share.”

Secondly,

Empirical facts about what Christians believe need to be taken account of; they are not necessarily to be read as definitive for Christian belief. Even so, we may argue that there is something unstable in any account of Christian doctrine that ignores substantial minority views (and in some areas majority views) within the laity, particularly if they are common among the theologically “linguistically competent”.

Thirdly,

All Christians have a responsibility to make Christian moral and spiritual judgements about the beliefs, attitudes, values and practices that exist within a society, and to decide on the basis of such judgements whether we should welcome or resist their growing influence in the church. What none of us can do is to pretend that such things are not already flourishing inside our church walls. They are, and it is inevitable that they will, since being the church in the world involves being open to the world’s changes. Ordinary theology is the species of Christian theology most likely to reflect them and best placed to respond to them. It is the church’s front line.

Listening

We will not learn about the theology and ethics of ordinary theologians unless we are willing to listen to them. Of course, like all language, ordinary theology can only be understood in the context of the language-users’ context and living practice. But when clergy or academic
theologians seek to infer beliefs and motivations solely from other people’s (non-linguistic) behaviour, without listening in depth and in detail to what ordinary theologians actually say about what they believe, what they do and why they are doing it, the results can be highly misleading. For these epistemic reasons, the academy and the Church must listen more and listen better. And for pastoral reasons, too, obviously.

Listening is an expression of respect. It is a deeply affirming, and therefore deeply pastoral activity. Mary Clark Moschella, in a book entitled *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, reminds us that “listening is that crucial act of love for which human beings long” (MOSCHELLA, 2008, 254). Listening tells people that they matter, and that – and therefore, or because – their thoughts matter. Certainly, the theology of ordinary theologians matters to them; and it should matter to us if they matter to us. But I would also argue, adopting a wider – and thus more realistic – view of the Church, God’s revelation, and the point, power and purpose of theology, that academic and ecclesiastical theologians may learn a great deal from listening to these more hesitant, tentative, undeveloped, softly spoken and stumbling versions of Christian theology. This claim represents my theological justification for the study of ordinary theology: in helping us learn about the variety of lived and “working” theologies, ordinary theology research has the potential to aid us in formulating more believable and workable conceptual and systematic forms of theology.

To quote Moschella further, however, “listening is difficult because it requires us to give up the role of expert, and become a learner again” (142). Counsellors and empirical researchers know that the virtue of humility is therefore essential to their task, along with some measure of gentleness, sensitivity and openness (KVALE, 1996). In particular, humility is expressed in the self-corrective reflective listening that requires the listener always to be asking herself, and at some point – if possible – her interviewees as well, “This is what I hear;
but have I understood it/you, is this their/your view of things?” This is listening *in depth* (cf. ASTLEY, 2002, 110-122, 147-148).

In advocating research into people’s ordinary theology, I plead for the development of skills of theological listening: that is, of listening out for people’s discourse *as* theology. Listening to and describing another’s theology is itself a theological act, according to Don Browning, for constructing such an account involves employing an interpretative framework (BROWNING, 1991, 47, 64). And to listen out for ordinary theology is to take ordinary people’s verbal expressions to be expressions of something that is (in my wider sense) *theologically* significant for them. But we cannot really divorce that judgement from our conception of what it is for anything – including ecclesiastical and academic theology, and our own theology – to be *theologically* significant or meaningful: *what it is for any belief to count as theology* (ASTLEY, 2002, ch. 4; 2013a, 3-7).

None of this should be taken to imply that any individual’s ordinary theology is always accurate or even just true, let alone always and in every aspect life-giving; any more than that is automatically the case for all academic theology or ecclesiastical theology. Hence, for a *complete* study of ordinary theology, I believe that we require not only a first stage of proper empirical listening; but also a later, second stage that engages a proper logical and theological (and, I now think, moral, religious and spiritual) critique of what that listening uncovers. It is this second stage that is, or should be, the controversial element; but which must also be sufficiently self-aware and self-critical about the philosophical and (academic and ecclesiastical) theological criteria – and of any moral, religious and spiritual criteria – that it employs. Note, however, that this is a *second and separate* stage of (broadly) theological debate: it would be inappropriate, unhelpful and disabling if these criticisms were incorporated in any way into the first stage interview process. It is imperative that this theological critique does not bleed back into, and thus obscure, the pastoral and research task
of listening to what it is that people are actually and honestly and personally confessing about what they believe and value.

Once we have heard people properly, however, I do not see how our hard critical reflection about what Christian theology (and religion, spirituality and ethics) should be can ever remain quite the same. With these new data on the table, ordinary theologians will inevitably become another conversation partner in that ongoing debate. We shall have heard that ordinary theologians have something theological to say on their own account, something to say in addition to the scriptures, the interpretations of these scriptures, and all the other elements of the tradition that have been revealed or discovered or intuited or argued, and then developed and passed on, over the two millennia of the Church’s life and thinking. What ordinary theologians have to contribute is also something that is separate from and in addition to whatever we acknowledge to be the Church’s contemporary authoritative voice as a teacher of doctrine; and in addition to the disciplined theological expertise of academic theology, which itself informs, critiques and sometimes opposes the Church’s traditional or current teaching.

Alongside these big hats and big intellects, and their big authoritative words, we have now also recognized, identified and heard the still, small, hesitant voice of the majority who have been called into membership within Christ’s Church. And I suspect that once that has happened, we shall not be able to unhear what we have once heard there.

References


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