‘Ordinary’ Christians and the Bible

workshop on the
beliefs and practices of ordinary Christians

perceived lack of
biblical and doctrinal literacy
Ordinary Theology

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**Ordinary Theology:**
Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology
(Aldershot, Ashgate, 2002)

Jeff Astley and Ann Christie

**Taking Ordinary Theology Seriously**
(Cambridge, Grove Books, 2007)

Jeff Astley and Leslie J. Francis (eds)

**Exploring Ordinary Theology:**
Everyday Christian Believing and the Church
(Farnham, Ashgate, 2013)
Ann Christie
*Ordinary Christology:
Who Do You Say I Am? Answers from the Pews*
(Farnham, Ashgate, 2012)

Michael Robert Armstrong
*Lay Christian Views of Life after Death: A Qualitative Study and Theological Appraisal of the ‘Ordinary Eschatology’ of Some Congregational Christians*
(DThM thesis, Durham, 2011)

Andrew P. Rogers
*Congregational Hermeneutics:
How Do We Read?*
(Farnham, Ashgate, 2015)
Definition of ordinary theology

- ‘the theology and theologizing of Christians who have received little or no theological education of a scholarly, academic or systematic kind’
- *and* which is ‘reflective God-talk or -thought’, in that it includes ‘some element and some degree of reflection’

(Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 2002, pp 56-57, 144)
Location of ordinary theology
From ordinary to academic theology.

- the pond analogy
- the tree analogy

Different in degree, not different in kind.
Nature of ordinary theology

- **form or style:**
  - aphoristic, autobiographical, unsystematic theology
  - rich in story and metaphor

- **stance or posture:**
  - religious / spiritual / salvific theology

  Cf. ‘celebratory theology’ (Rowan Williams)
  ‘kneeling theology’ (Hans von Balthasar)
  ‘onlook’ theology (Donald Evans)
  wisdom-theology
Nature of ordinary theology

- voice:
  ‘mother tongue’ theology (Ursula Le Guin)?
Paul Holmer

‘The theologian gets no new revelation and has no special organ for knowledge.’

‘He is debtor to what we, in one sense, have already – the Scriptures and the lives and thoughts of the faithful.’

‘This puts theology within the grasp of . . . someone you know down the street who shames you with his or her grasp.’

‘Theology is often done by the unlikely.’

‘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.’

Listening Ministries

- spiritual and pastoral care/counselling
- communication
  - teaching
  - preaching
  - writing/publishing
  - other . . ., including non-verbal communication . . .
- leadership
Theological Listening

• Listening out for theology

• Wittgensteinian listening
‘I recall an elderly widow asking me why God had called her two sons home before her. She proceeded to provide her own answer. She said that if she went into a garden to pick flowers, she would not choose weeds, but the best blooms. In taking her sons to himself, God had picked the best blooms.

Does this picture imply that the longer one lives, the less one counts in the eyes of God?

Obviously not. She does not push the picture in that direction. She is saluting her sons, that is all. Her practice is decisive. It need not be confused or superstitious.

On the other hand, I do not find the picture very helpful. It sustained her, but it would not sustain me. Here, she and I have to speak for ourselves.’

Insights from Learning and Education

- The centrality of the learner/believer:
  - learning occurs as the learner changes
  - learning occurs according to the mode of the learner

- my way: I tread the Way in my way
- my conversion: I acknowledge the Truth as my truth
- my faith: I embrace and hold the Faith through my faith
- my life: I live the Life as my life

Do I have any alternative?
Thomas H. Groome


‘Shared Praxis’ / ‘life to Faith to life’

1. The participants are invited to name their own activity concerning the topic for attention (present action)

2. They are invited to reflect on why they do what they do, and what the likely or intended consequences of their actions are (critical reflection)

3. The educator makes accessible to the group the Christian community Story concerning the topic at hand and the faith response it invites (teaching Story and its Vision)

4. The participants are invited to appropriate the Story/Vision to their lives in a dialectic with their own stories/visions (dialectic hermeneutic)

5. There is an opportunity to choose a personal faith response for the future (decision on how to live Christian faith)
Insights from Practical Theology

Doing theology involves a ‘mutual critical correlation’ between:

• *human life experience* (practice or concern) and reflections on it

and

• the *Christian heritage / tradition / Christian Faith / theology*
‘At the heart of living theology is the conversation or dialogue that takes place between the present situation and the scripture and tradition of our church’

(Michael West, Graham Noble and Andrew Todd, Living Theology, 1999, p 99)
Terms of conversation:

• ‘mutual critical correlation’ (‘mutual relationship of interdependence’, ‘relate together’)

• ‘dialectical theology’ (Paul Tillich)

• ‘revisionist theology’ (David Tracy)

*All Christian theology is an attempt to correlate:*
‘the meaning and truth of an interpretation of the Christian fact and the meaning and truth of an interpretation of the contemporary situation’

(David Tracy, in Don Browning, *Practical Theology*, 1983, p 62)
More terms of conversation:

- appropriation (‘take for one’s own use’)
- reception (‘consent to hear’, ‘buy, accept’)
- integration (‘combine to make a whole’)
- ‘fusion of horizons’ (Hans-Georg Gadamer)
- ‘learning from religion’
- teacher as mediator / ‘translator’
‘Doing Theology’ cycle: reflecting phase

In order to do theological reflection ... we have to develop methods of bringing into juxtaposition our present life experience and the treasures of our Christian heritage, to check one against the other, to let each talk to the other, to learn from the mix and to gain even more insight to add to the store of Christian heritage.

(Green, Let’s Do Theology, 1990, p 79)
Imaginative Seeing

‘Our task is to find some way of bridging this cultural gap and seeing connections between the Christian heritage on one side and our present experience on the other. . . . From one side of this gap to the other, we will hear resonances, sense similarities and challenges, eventually building up a whole range of sensitivities to the Christian treasure store of tradition’

(Green, Let’s Do Theology, 2009, p 82)
Ordinary Theology in Conversation

The conversation of *theological learning* is between:

- a person’s/group’s *ordinary theology*
- and
- *academic/ecclesiastical theology*
Ordinary Theology in Conversation

In (some? much?) adult Christian education or education for discipleship (and in teaching theology in a seminary setting):

• the learners’ own theology begins by being innocent of and untouched by academic theological study (ordinary theology);

• as the learners learn, their own ordinary theology interacts with any academic/ecclesiastical theology they are taught or come across.
Ordinary Theology

conversation correlation

ACADEMIC THEOLOGY

our real beliefs

Ecclesiastical Theology
How theology links experience and tradition

But what is the [conversational] link?
Metaphor: seeing one thing in terms of another

- involves spotting an imaginative resemblance . . .

- that allows us to ‘carry over’ a word or phrase between one application and another . . .

- thus giving ‘new possibilities of vision’ (Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 1985, pp 57–8)

- Jesus as a ‘shepherd’
- God as a ‘rock’
- The cross as a ‘victory’
In the hermeneutical conversation between ordinary theology and academic/ecclesiastical theology, we already have in place the possibility of a conversational link, in the form of a metaphorical bridge, because...
The metaphorical bridge

**ordinary theology** tends to be very rich in metaphor and in autobiographical stories.

the **concepts** of **academic theology** are themselves founded on and funded by narratives (including the ‘story-metaphors’ of myths), metaphors, models and analogies – and they work best when they do not lose touch with these origins.
The metaphorical bridge

• Therefore:

This hermeneutical conversation primarily begins and develops on the bridge between the theological metaphors and stories of the conversation partners on both sides of the gap.
Thus...