

## CHAPTER ONE

# Vernacular Christianity

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One of the authors used to begin his Christianity classes by inviting students to consider two statements and to decide which provided a more appropriate description of the Christian faith. The two statements were:

- (1) Christians believe that Jesus Christ is of one substance with the Father.
- (2) Christians in Britain eat Christmas puddings on 25 December.

By far the majority of students voted for the first statement. It is an important doctrine, defining the Incarnation, which is a central tenet of Christian theology, and it is part of the Nicene Creed, which many Christians recite weekly during congregational worship. By contrast, the second seems frivolous. Christianity purports to offer salvation, teaching that it is brought about through God becoming human, and dying on the cross to redeem humankind from sin; this is certainly not achieved by eating a Christmas pudding. One might also point out that, historically, the Church has excommunicated those who have denied the full deity or the full humanity of Jesus Christ, whereas there is no compulsion for any Christian to observe popular Christmas customs. However, it remains true that there are more Christians who erect Christmas trees and hang up stockings than understand what it means for Jesus Christ to be of one substance with the Father, or indeed most of the other doctrines defined in the traditional creeds.

In 2016, Ligonier Ministries carried out a survey of religious belief in the United States, in which a sample of 3,000 American adults were asked to evaluate a number of key statements relating to the Christian faith. These are some of the responses.

### The State of American Theology. Statistics derived from Ligonier Ministries, 2016.

	Agree strongly/ Somewhat (%)	Disagree strongly/ Somewhat (%)	Not sure (%)
'God is a perfect being and cannot make a mistake.'	66	25	10
'There is one true God in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.'	69	20	11
'Biblical accounts of the physical (bodily) resurrection of Jesus are completely accurate. This event actually occurred.'	64	22	13
'Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God.'	57	34	13

	Agree strongly/ Somewhat (%)	Disagree strongly/ Somewhat (%)	Not sure (%)
'Jesus is truly God and has a divine nature, and Jesus is truly man and has a human nature.'	62	25	14
'The Holy Spirit is a force but is not a personal being.'	56	27	17
'The Holy Spirit is a divine being but is not equal with God the Father and Jesus.'	28	51	21
'The Bible, like all sacred writings, contains helpful accounts of ancient myths but is not literally true.'	44	45	11
'The Bible was written for each person to interpret as he or she chooses.'	51	40	9
'The Bible is 100% accurate in all that it teaches.'	47	43	10
'Heaven is a place where all people will ultimately be reunited with their loved ones.'	60	26	14
'There will be a time when Jesus Christ returns to judge all the people who have lived.'	59	26	15
'The church should be silent on issues of politics.'	54	35	12
'There is little value in studying or reciting historical Christian creeds and confessions.'	26	58	16

Of course, it must be noted that not all the respondents were self-declared Christians, but a 'demographically balanced online panel'. The estimated Christian proportion of the United States population is reckoned to be between 67.2 per cent and 75 per cent according to different surveys, which somewhat mitigates the results. Some of the statements too are matters for debate, on which disagreement is permissible – for example, the inerrancy of scripture. What has disturbed some theologians, however, is the response to the statement 'Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God', a statement to which some 75 per cent of Christian evangelicals assented (Weber 2018). From a theological standpoint, of course, this is a heresy which aroused bitter controversy, notably between Athanasius and Arius in the fourth century CE, and which was resolved in favour of Athanasius. The Council of Nicaea, in which the dispute was resolved in 325 CE, pronounced that Jesus Christ was 'eternally begotten of the Father', and not created, as Arius contended. The orthodox camp felt strongly enough to state that 'those who say ... "he came to be from nothing" ... the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes' (Stevenson 1974: 366). To anathematize is literally to 'pronounce accursed', but the pronouncement was more than a mere insult: it was a statement about Arius and his supporters were to be regarded as outside the Christian fold, and that the mainstream Orthodox Church would

not recognize their sacraments, and that anyone seeking readmission to the mainstream Christian faith would have to undergo baptism again. Respondents should have been familiar with the statement in the Nicene Creed, which many of them would recite on a weekly basis; if they were unfamiliar with the Creed, they might at least have recalled the famous Christmas hymn ('O come, all ye faithful'), which has a pair of lines which describe Jesus Christ as 'Very God, Begotten, not created'.

The point is not simply that the average Christian is not a theologian, but rather that there is a sharp contrast between Christianity's fundamental teachings and what the average believer believes and practises. Most Roman Catholics and Anglicans are content to recite the ancient creeds ritualistically, but if they were asked to explain the contents, it seems likely that they could only do so in a very rudimentary way. The average Christian, who attends church only infrequently, may recite the Creed as a ritual activity, but little more. This is not to say that there is one model of being a Christian from which these people are somehow falling short, but rather that they practise it in other ways, for example by occasionally attending weddings and funerals within a Christian context and by celebrating the major Christian festivals of Christmas and Easter, but not necessarily within the context of a Christian congregation. Those Christians, who are in fact the majority, buy Easter eggs, and eat Christmas puddings.

In what follows in this anthology, we are not concerned with the theological issues of whether Jesus Christ is of one substance with the Father, or whether he is eternally begotten and not created, and what such statements mean. There is an important sense in which the academic study of religion is not concerned about religious truth. It is not that religious truth is unimportant, but rather that truth is the province of the philosopher of religion and of the theologian. What concerns those who embark on the study of religion is what believers do, and how they implement their beliefs and traditions, which is often very different from the expressions found in its history or in its official statements.

Traditionally, the study of Christianity has encompassed three broad areas: systematic theology, ecclesiastical history, and biblical exegesis. To these three, some might add a fourth, namely pastoral theology, which addresses areas such as homiletics, counselling, and other practical areas of professional ministry. Although all these disciplines are vast, the scope of the subject matter is clear, and they have formed the basis of seminarian training for centuries, and focused on key doctrines, texts, and events in the Christian Church's history. Accounting for the activities of the rank-and-file laypeople who count themselves as Christian or engage in activities that derive from the Christian faith is a much vaster enterprise and has a much more nebulous subject matter.

In what follows, we are concerned not merely with what self-defined Christian laity believe and practise but with a range of practices that in some ways relate to the Christianity. As we have mentioned above, there are many Christian-related activities that are popular not only with those who would define as Christian, but also with those who would not. As Margaret Wilkins points out in her chapter on 'Calendar' (Chapter 9), there is a kind of liturgical year which parallels the Christian calendar, which is observed by people who would regard themselves as secular rather than religious. Although only 4.7 per cent of the British population attend church on any given Sunday (Faith Survey 2015), the popularity of Christmas, Valentine's Day, 'Pancake Day', Easter, and Halloween is highly visible. Whatever people's reasons for celebrating these festivals, they are plainly related to the Christian faith, and hence ought to be of interest in studying Christians.

The focus of this anthology is therefore on how ordinary people draw on the ideas and customs derived from Christian traditions. Inevitably, the question arises as to the

scope and limits of the subject matter since it is not always clear whether one is dealing with a phenomenon that is Christian-derived, whether it should be regarded as a secular folk custom, or whether it is a custom that derives from a synthesis of both. Shrines dedicated to Christian saints are in many cases pagan shrines, which Christians have appropriated, either as an attempt to supersede the previous forms of devotion or as syncretism. To return momentarily to the theme of Christmas puddings, traditional recipes contain thirteen ingredients, signifying Jesus Christ and the twelve apostles (Leach and Inglis 2003). There is a tradition that preparation of the pudding should commence on the twenty-fifth Sunday after Trinity since the collect (a particular type of prayer in the liturgy) for that day begins, ‘Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people: that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may of thee be plenteously rewarded.’ (Book of Common Prayer 1662/1968: 143). Another tradition suggests that each member of the family should stir the pudding in an east–west direction, reminiscent of the travels of the three Magi. When Thomas Cranmer compiled the Book of Common Prayer, he was unlikely to have been thinking of Christmas puddings when he penned this collect (which, incidentally, has given that particular Sunday the nickname of ‘Stir Up Sunday’), and we cannot be certain at what point such association was made.

A further question also arises as to what the boundaries of the category of ‘Christianity’ are. In this collection of essays, we have confined our attention to mainstream Christians. However, one might legitimately ask what mainstream Christianity is. Certainly, those Christians who belong to a member Church of the World Council of Churches (WCC) are unarguably mainstream Christians, albeit of different varieties. However, not all denominations have chosen to affiliate with the WCC, and others affirm their commonality as Christians by joining other ecumenical bodies, such as the Evangelical Alliance. The situation of small independent churches is less clear: where a congregation is independent and not accountable to any supervisory body, then effectively it can believe and practise as it sees fit. The term ‘Christian’ and traditional symbols such as the cross are not patented, and anyone can use them. In what follows, we have avoided adjudicating on which bodies should or should not be labelled as Christian; however, we have chosen not to include numerous organizations that are sometimes labelled as ‘New Christian’, such as Christadelphians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, the Unification Church, or other organizations whose Christian identity is often questioned. This is not to say that they are uninteresting, but rather that boundaries have to be defined. In general, mainstream Christians have reacted badly to movements that have added to their scriptures, or who have suggested that Jesus’s salvific work was incomplete, and that some further messiah is needed. As a general rule, those denominations that accept the authority of Jewish-Christian scripture and affirm the traditional creeds, together with the doctrine of the Trinity, can be regarded as mainstream.

## DIFFERENT LAYERS OF ALLEGIANCE: ‘GREAT’ AND ‘LITTLE’ TRADITIONS

The content of the various chapters acknowledges the importance of studying the popular expressions of Christian traditions. This raises the question of how we characterize these versions and how they relate to the hierarchical and institutional forms of Christianity that have been traditionally studied academically. A number of models have been suggested

to characterize the differences between the various levels at which religion operates. One such scheme was suggested by the anthropologist Robert Redfield (1897–1958), who distinguished between what he called ‘the great tradition’ and ‘the little tradition’. Redfield writes:

The great tradition is cultivated in schools and temples; the little tradition works itself out and keeps itself going in the lives of the unlettered in their village communities. (Redfield 1956: 70)

An anthropologist, Redfield made a study in depth of the Tepoztlán people of Mexico, an agrarian community. Redfield’s interest in small self-sufficient communities was not merely that they were under-researched at the time, but that they were manageable groups for research purposes, in contrast with larger industrial communities, or with society in general. They served as part of the building blocks of wider society, thus contributing to a greater understanding of human behaviour by providing a ‘conceptual model’. Redfield referred to a community of this kind as ‘the little community’ – an expression which served as the title for his 1955 study, which was followed by his *Peasant Society and Culture* (1956). Such groups were characterized by dependence on land, and they tended to be isolated, living apart from urban communities, which were more highly developed economically and technologically. Redfield describes them as ‘peasants’, and as ‘primitive’, often preliterate, and hence without any recorded history or literature. Their customs and traditions, which were often unique to the community, were therefore drawn from oral transmission. They tended to be homogeneous, without diversity of ideas and customs, and they tended to be slow to change, in contrast with urban society, which responded rapidly to developing technology. The role of the anthropologist was to study the ‘lattice’ of relationships which build up within such a society – the relationship between peasant and landlord, relationships within households and neighbourhoods, and the role of markets in defining relationships between individuals.

To what extent is Redfield’s analysis applicable to the study of Christians? Redfield is certainly drawing attention to the kind of distinction with which we are concerned, namely a ‘textbook’ version of the Christian faith, in contrast with the versions that are lived out in practice. Although Redfield assumed that there was a contrast between urban and rural practice, the popular expressions of the Christian faith which we shall discuss here are found both in the city and in the country. Popular Christmas customs can be found in both environments. The terms ‘great’ and ‘little’ are also problematic. If the distinction is intended to suggest that one is larger than the other, then this is not necessarily the case. If ‘great’ is intended to denote superiority, then Redfield’s thesis could be construed as a form of elitism. Are the intellectualized scholarly versions of the Christian faith superior to its popular expressions? This could be disputed on a number of grounds: at a popular level, scholarly versions of Christianity are frequently disparaged – it is not uncommon for members of a congregation to criticise a sermon for being ‘too theological’, implying that something more homely and practical is to be preferred. After all, did not Jesus say, ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.’ (Matthew 18:3)? Paul echoed this sentiment when he wrote, ‘Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?’ (1 Corinthians 1:20). In any case, with increasing standards of literacy and education, it is certainly no longer the case that either country-dwellers or Christian laity are unlettered.

## ‘OFFICIAL’ AND ‘POPULAR’ EXPRESSIONS?

An alternative way of distinguishing different expressions of the Christian faith is to suggest a contrast between ‘official’ and ‘popular’ religion. Both terms need some clarification. ‘Official religion’ frequently denotes the form of religion, or a denomination, that is formally recognized by the state, often given special rights and privileges, and used for state ceremonial occasions. This form of religion is sometimes referred to as civil or civic religion, meaning the expression of religion for state purposes. This sense of ‘official’ contrasts with another important sense of the word, which denotes those beliefs and practices that are sanctioned by the relevant religious authorities, and which may or may not be heeded by the laity. Official religion in the sense of state religion can be both popular and ecclesiastically official; for example, the laying of wreaths at cenotaphs on Remembrance Day (11 November) in Britain is a ritual that involves both lay people and clergy, and which continues to grow in popular observance.

The other sense of ‘official’ that is used to contrast with ‘popular’ marks a distinction between those expressions of (in this case) Christianity which are defined and sanctioned by Church authorities. Thus, the Nicene Creed is an official expression of Christian doctrine which, as we have noted, is formally recited during worship but is little understood. The Roman Catholic Church’s prohibition on abortion is part of its official teaching, but yet, of the total number of legally recorded pregnancy terminations carried out in the United States in 2014, 24 per cent of the women defined themselves as Roman Catholic (Jerman, Jones and Onda 2016).

What one means by ‘popular’ needs clarification. Some scholars have regarded popular religion as, in the words of Harvey Cox, the ‘faith of those groups which have been least integrated into the premises of modern society’ (Cox 1984: 240). A fair amount of literature has been written on ‘the religion of the oppressed’ and encompasses a variety of approaches. Some of these have been explicitly theological, for example, those liberation theologians in Latin America, such as Leonardo Boff, who have combined Marxist ideas with Christian doctrine, highlighting those parts of the Christian faith and its scriptures that advocate release from oppression. Others have developed practical ways of alleviating suffering, such as relief organizations like Christian Aid, Catholic Agency For Overseas Development (CAFOD), and the Fair Trade movement, which seeks to ensure that workers in economically underdeveloped countries are paid a fair wage for their labour and produce. Christians, too, have actively campaigned against oppression and injustice, and one does not have to look hard to find examples such as Martin Luther King’s Civil Rights movement, which gained prominence in the 1960s to empower black people and secure equal rights for them. Much Christian social action is aimed at combating evils such as slavery, human trafficking, poverty, famine, debt, and a host of other conditions that can be construed as oppression.

All these issues are highly important, but some comments are needed on how they relate to the methodological issue of comparing and contrasting the concepts of official and popular religion. First, as we have noted, the focus of the present volume is not theological, and it is not our purpose to analyse the theology of the liberation theologians. Second, popular religion as we have construed it goes wider than an examination of the plight of the oppressed and how they use their religion to cope with it. Some Christians may use a saint’s shrine to pray for betterment, and this is certainly of interest to our present study, but this is only part of what the world’s Christian populace do in the

name of their religion. As Paul Vanderwood (2000) points out, the oppressed often turn to the Church's official amenities for practical help. Praying to the Virgin Mary, receiving the sacrament and seeking counsel from a priest are all activities in which the poor and the oppressed engage, and they are all endorsed – indeed provided – by the Church's hierarchy. Also, if the oppressed resort to unofficial practices, they are not alone in doing so: as Vanderwood notes, those who are well integrated into society can also engage in actions that might be regarded as popular religious expressions. Placing a Saint Christopher medallion on the dashboard of one's car, for example, is not uncommon among Roman Catholics.

Further, any distinction between official and popular has to acknowledge that there is an interchange between the Church's officially sanctioned beliefs and practices and popular devotion, as well as areas where any such distinction is blurred. Take, for example, Catholic shrines that have originated from apparitions of the Virgin Mary. The most famous of these is Lourdes, where Bernadette Soubirous (1844–1879) received visions in 1858 of a young woman who claimed to be the Immaculate Conception, and who requested the building of a chapel at nearby Massabielle. As is well known, some 5,000,000 pilgrims now visit the shrine each year. The phenomenon of apparitions, as they are called, shows considerable blurring of boundaries between 'official' and 'popular' Catholicism. The Catholic Church requires careful investigation to be conducted before acknowledging the authenticity of such apparitions and building such shrines. Marian shrines are typically associated with healing, which is frequently the reason for pilgrims journeying to them, and miraculous cures have been claimed. In 1905, Pope Pius X required proper investigation of the alleged miracles, resulting in the establishment of the Lourdes Medical Bureau, which has formally authenticated sixty-nine remarkable cures. Here, private revelation and popular devotion, which gave rise to the shrine's creation, have interacted with the official Roman Catholic hierarchy, who have pronounced on issues relating to authenticity, as well as funded the establishment of the shrine, which is owned by the Church and has now a £23 million annual budget. Bernadette was formally beatified by the Church in 1925 and canonized as a saint in 1933; hence, Bernadette is officially part of Roman Catholicism. However, despite the official recognition given to Bernadette and Lourdes, it is not a requirement that a faithful practising Catholic must believe in the authenticity of Bernadette's vision, or that the shrine genuinely offers miraculous cures.

### 'FOLK RELIGION'

Comment should also be made of the concept of 'folk religion', which may be thought to characterize the subject matter of this volume. The term 'folk religion' is contested, and at least one scholar – Leonard Primiano (1995: 38) – contends that the term is pejorative and should not be used. The term originated in 1901, when a German Lutheran pastor by the name of Paul Drews (1858–1912) coined the expression to signal to his ordinands that they were likely to encounter at local level variations to the set liturgy of the Church. However, the term was later appropriated by folklorists, although with no agreed meaning. Folklorist Don Yoder defines folk religion as 'the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion' (Yoder 1974: 14) and distinguishes five different senses in which the term has come to be used:

- (1) It alludes to the survival of earlier stages of religious and spiritual development to the establishment of the dominant religion. For example, a popular Christian shrine may have previously belonged to a pagan goddess: shrines dedicated to Saint Bridget are characteristic of this phenomenon.
- (2) The expression may signify the ways in which the 'official' religion has mixed with ethnic practices. In Haitian Vodou, for example, the Virgin Mary features prominently in their shrines, mingled with various indigenous spirits – loa – which are typically identified with Christian saints.
- (3) 'Folk religion' can sometimes be taken to denote the practice of rituals and customs, sometimes associated with mythology, which may be regarded as superstitions. Practices like crossing one's fingers or touching wood in wishing for luck – practices in which Christians frequently engage – are such examples.
- (4) There are interpretations and uses of religious concepts which are given by the people, but which are not endorsed by the religious hierarchy or by the scholar. A baseball player who uses the verse, 'I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me' (Philippians 4:13, KJV) as an affirmation to bring success employs the Bible as a set of sound bytes for personal encouragement, regardless of the original meaning and context.
- (5) Yoder's final definition incorporates all of the above, making up 'the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion' (Yoder 1974: 14).

In this anthology we are not primarily concerned with examples of syncretism, where other religions and cultures have appropriated parts of the Christian faith, for example, the spiritist religions of Santeria, Candomblé, and Vodou. Such developments and innovations fall within the sub-discipline of the study of new religious movements. We are also not concerned with folk practices that are unrelated to Christian practice, such as popular superstitions and good luck charms. Our focus is in one sense narrower than that of Yoder, but in another sense wider: it is narrower in that we have excluded discussions of popular practices that are plainly unrelated to Christian traditions, but it is wider in the sense that our interest is also on how rank-and-file Christians practise their religion, both inside and outside the theological and liturgical context.

## VERNACULAR RELIGION

A concept favoured by folklorists in place of 'folk religion' is 'vernacular religion'. Folklorists Leonard Primiano and Marion Bowman object to the former term on the grounds that it suggests a contrast between a religion of the people and 'official' or 'institutional' religion. As both authors point out, so-called institutional religion is not monolithic; hence, some religious activities may be 'official' from one standpoint and 'unofficial' from another. (Primiano 2012: 384; Bowman 2014: 102). With this in mind, what are we to make of Christians – of whom there are quite a few – who worship with more than one denomination? There are some individuals known to the authors who are happy to attend public worship on some Sundays at an Anglican cathedral, but to intersperse this with attendance at Pentecostal services. Whether or not the office-bearers of either tradition are happy with such dual allegiance, it is not part of the expectations



of either. Yet, from the standpoint of the student of religion, it ought to be worthy of interest that there are Christians who adopt such practices. Another example may be what a Christian does during Lent. It is not an institutional expectation that the rank-and-file Christian gives up luxuries, although it is not uncommon for clergy to recommend such a practice. What if a group of Christians decides of their own accord to organize their own group for prayer and Bible study during that period? Is this institutional or not? There is no clear answer.

Primiano advocates the study of 'religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it' (Primiano 1995: 44). What Primiano and Bowman, and also Yoder, are urging – whether or not we retain the term 'folk religion' – is that any religious activity is worthy of note, and not merely the theological, historical, and liturgical. Marion Bowman cites the example of a Roman Catholic woman in Newfoundland who habitually chewed gum, and one night parked it on her bureau. The following day it appeared to have the shape of a statue of the Virgin Mary. She was surprised, but attributed this apparition (if one may describe the phenomenon as such) as a divine reward for her life's hard work (Bowman 2003: 285).

However, if we are to be encouraged to study 'the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people', this is of course an impossible task. Selection is needed, together with some kind of contextualizing; otherwise, we simply end up with an assortment of pleasant (or maybe not so pleasant) anecdotes. Indeed, contextualizing is essential if such stories are to have any significance, or indeed any meaning. The fact that the gum resembled the Virgin Mary, rather than looking vaguely like some other human being, makes a story worth noting, and her recognition of the shape as Mary relies on a familiarity with a religious tradition. To attach significance to the phenomenon, the woman must have had at least some rudimentary knowledge of who the Virgin Mary is, and the role she plays in the Christian story, that she is the mother of Jesus, and the 'Mother of God' in the Catholic tradition – otherwise her experience would have been unremarkable. Further, if such a phenomenon is of interest, it needs to be discussed within the context of some wider question. For example, it might be asked to what extent there are popular 'apparitions' of Mary (or other notable religious figures), what significance is attached to them, or in what circumstances they typically arise.

These observations raise the question of the framework that we have adopted in this volume. The overall question that we raise is: How does the 'ordinary' Christian understand and practise his or her faith? The ordinary Christian is typically not a theologian, historian, or Bible scholar, so our focus is on the ordinary Christian experience. However, as with the owner of the gum image of Mary, one cannot separate ordinary experience from these more scholarly aspects, and one cannot make sense of ordinary experiences without some reference to doctrine, tradition, scripture, or liturgy.

In response to this quandary, Chryssides and Wilkins have previously suggested a tripartite model for the ways in which one may follow a Christian path, based upon previous models of Weightman and Spiro, which they define as salvific, ethical, and pragmatic (Spiro 1971: 140–1; Weightman 1987: 43–46; Chryssides and Wilkins 2011: 5–7). Some Christians seek to attain salvation – a state which Christianity offers to all. Reaching the kingdom of heaven is something that all Christians are invited to aspire to, and, particularly in the Protestant tradition, it can be done by a mere act of faith. Other Christians – or indeed those same Christians – may use Christian teachings and practices as guidance for life. Christians, as well as their Jewish counterparts, draw on the Ten Commandments to govern the lives, but the Bible offers more than a set of rules

and regulations: Jesus was renowned for illustrating points of the Jewish law in parables, giving concrete illustration to how one should live. It would be surprising to meet a Christian who was not familiar with the parable of the Good Samaritan, for example.

The third layer at which Christian's practise is at a pragmatic level. For some, it offers personal empowerment. One of our former students, a Christian, once said 'I go to church every Sunday to psych myself up for the week.' (This did not preclude him from practising Christianity at other levels; after graduation he gained employment doing Christian social work.) Christians may use their faith for comfort and solace, to cope with life's difficulties, to seek guidance and courage to face life's demands, or at times for material benefits. Indeed, one book devoted to prayer states, 'To pray for money or for a car, if you are in real need of them, is just as spiritual as to pray for consolation in bereavement, or for courage to face danger' (Winward 1961: 65). Many churches also serve as a home for service to the community or for encouraging recreational activities: a cursory glance at many churches' notice boards or newsletters will indicate a range of activities whose purpose is not overtly spiritual – parents' and toddlers' groups, badminton clubs, 'knit and natter' meetings, quilting, photography, and many more. There are churches that have reinvented themselves as community centres partly to make churches more user-friendly as a form of evangelism, but more importantly to recognize that communities have pragmatic needs that they can help meet by upgrading their premises and ensuring that they are utilized throughout the week and not merely on Sundays.

## THE SCOPE OF THE HANDBOOK

Our aim of 'studying Christians' needs explanation. To claim to study 2.3 billion people is, of course, an impossible task, and each individual has his or her own ways of expressing his or her Christianity. What we seek to explain is what Christians of the various traditions are likely to experience and practise in the name of their religion. Different members of the same congregation may attend worship at different times and with different frequencies, and we have sought to include the so-called 'cultural Christians', who may attend a church very infrequently, but yet draw on ideas that have their roots in Christian traditions. Christians, too, will notice different things about their faith and will have different levels of understanding. Clearly, it would be inappropriate simply to relate what the average Christian, if asked, would tell about his or her experience of Christianity – otherwise we would simply end up with descriptions of what was visually and audibly obvious. Students of religion are invariably encouraged to go beyond the descriptive and to offer analysis and explanation.

Clifford Geertz (1973) is credited for introducing into the study of religion the distinction between 'thin' and 'thick' description. A thin description describes no more than the basic sounds, sights, and physical movements that could be apprehended by anyone who was not familiar with the relevant activity. If we did not know how to play the game of chess, we could only report seeing two people sitting at a board with black and white squares, moving different wooden objects around, whereas once we understand the game we can offer informative comment, such as 'White moved the knight to c6, putting the black king in check.' By similar logic, understanding what Christians do demands probing behind what we see and hear and using background knowledge to explain what is happening. Suppose we attend a church service and observe that it concludes with the woman minister raising her hand and saying, 'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.' Thus far this is thin

description, since it reports no more than the visually and audibly obvious. To understand what is happening, we need to understand something of the background to this service. We might note, for example, that the officiant is a woman, which demonstrates the denominational attitude to women's ordination. Noting the denomination is vital to understanding the action. Was it done from the pulpit, rather than the chancel? If so, this reflects the Presbyterian emphasis on preaching, and their lack of regard for employing the rest of the church furniture. She pronounced a benediction and used the word 'you' rather than 'us': this indicates that she is an ordained minister, rather than a student in training, who would not have the authority to pronounce a blessing. What was the hand movement like? If we are observing a form of worship in the Protestant tradition, she probably did not make the sign of the cross, but perhaps the hand movement consisted of raising the thumb and the adjacent two fingers, which can signify the three persons of the Trinity. There is much that can be added to the description of a simple movement which yields understanding of what is taking place. There still remains, however, the further question of the extent to which the average attendee at this service understands what is happening, and the significance of the words and liturgical movements. In all probability, we would find differences in what members of the congregation could explain, or even in what they noticed. Put simply, the experiences of individual Christians will be diverse, even when experienced in a shared time, place, or space.

### 'BAD' CHRISTIANS

We have noted that both theology and the academic study of religion have traditionally included the 'authorised' expressions of Christianity, to the exclusion of the beliefs and practices of ordinary believers. It is also the case that scholars have tended to focus on the ideal, rather than the real. Many of Christianity's exponents (academic and lay) have highlighted its role in Western civilization, its ethic of love, its role in education, its music, literature, and art, its theology and philosophy, its humanitarian work, and so on. However, not all Christians are so public-spirited. The violent conflict in Northern Ireland is firmly grounded in centuries of animosity between Catholics and Protestants. Many Christian leaders – not merely their followers – have been convicted of crimes spanning murder, robbery, embezzlement, tax evasion, and polygamy, to name but a few. The recent prominence that has been given to sexual abuse by clergy, and the ways in which such crimes have been covered up by Church leaders, both in the Roman Catholic Church and in the Church of England, indicates the inappropriateness of uncritically portraying Christians as people who act out Christ's ethic of love.

Some commentators have now devised the term 'spiritual abuse' (Hilborn 2018) to describe inappropriate behaviour, often by clergy, that is specifically related to religious people and contexts, although the differentiation of this from 'mainstream' understandings of abuse is being challenged (Oakley 2018). A sizeable number of members of congregations have recently come forward to mention ways in which clergy's behaviour has been coercive, controlling, or manipulative, and how they sanction it by invoking scripture or the will of God. Such actions are explicitly religious and should not be separated away from Christians' lives and identities. Unfortunately, much public discourse does precisely this. One section of a BBC website, aimed at explaining the Christianity for schoolchildren, has headings such as 'How do Christians respond to crime in society and those who commit crime?', as if Christians and criminals are two separate categories (BBC 2018). Clearly, this is not the case, and prison chaplains will acknowledge

that they minister to many self-defined Christians, among others. (Christians comprised 48 per cent of the UK prison population in 2018.) Contemporary scholarship therefore needs to meet the challenge of this public discourse which creates a false binary between being Christian and committing harmful acts. Certainly, to perpetuate this dichotomy would be inappropriate; indeed, the Bible teaches that ‘all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’ (Romans 3:23), and that Jesus Christ offers forgiveness to sinners, however heinous they may be.

‘Bad’ Christianity does not consist merely of Christians who commit crimes. Numerous Christian organizations have been identified as ‘hate groups’: notable examples include the Westboro Baptist Church, noted for its strong opposition to homosexuals; Kingdom Identity Ministries, who state that ‘the White, Anglo-Saxon, Germanic and kindred people to be God’s true, literal Children of Israel’ (Kingdom Identity Ministries 2018); and the Irish Republican Army, who conducted a campaign of violence in Northern Ireland, and whose public discourse and identity were framed largely within a Catholic world view, albeit with a complicated relationship with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Ireland (Berman, Lalor and Terode 1983). Instead of defining such organizations and individuals away as ‘not real Christians’, scholarship needs to engage with the lived realities of Christians’ lives – which are often played out in complex, troubled, and divisive social and political contexts – to understand the light and dark, the mainstream and the undercurrent, the compassionate and the combative.

Indeed, ‘bad’ Christians may act as a reminder as to how we should approach the study of all Christians. We must not engage with Christians expecting to find a textbook essentialism of a character-type. Not all Christians believe the same things (even regarding key concepts such as Jesus, God, Trinity and salvation), and these beliefs are embodied and performed in the lives of Christians in diverse ways which can be contradictory and confusing. This is not a modern phenomenon – Christianity has been made up of dynamic and diverse groups of people from its inception. It is these people who have shaped institutions, hierarchies, teachings, and doctrines, as much as they have shaped everyday practices, localized traditions, and popular forms of practice. In his definition of vernacular religion, Primiano is careful to note that vernacular is not to be understood as in opposition to official; *all* religion is vernacular religion. This is crucial for our current study. When we study everyday Christians, we must be aware that that this is representative of *all* Christians – from Popes to playgroup leaders, Civil Rights champions to church cleaners. By engaging with the lived realities and expressions of individual Christians’ lives, we may begin to understand the diversity of the complex category of ‘Christianity’.