CHAPTER EIGHT
ORDINARY SOTERIOLOGY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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SUMMARY

The chapter first introduces the concept of ‘ordinary theology’, understood as the theology and theologising of those who speak of God reflectively, but who have received little or no theological education of a scholarly, academic or systematic kind. Ordinary soteriology, by extension, is the account of what Jesus does for human salvation that is offered by those who have received little or nothing by way of formal theological education.

Data on this topic were collected from forty-five regular Anglican churchgoers by means of in-depth interviews. Analysis of these data specified three main soteriological positions, identified as exemplarist, traditionalist and evangelical. The paper portrays and analyses each type, employing illustrations from the data, and discusses various soteriological issues in relation to each of them. It also explores a number of other soteriological difficulties.

The pastoral, theological, educational and evangelistic implications of the findings are briefly discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of ‘ordinary theology’ arose in response to the questions, Where does theology belong? Who does it and who owns it?

At one time the answer would have been clear: theology is a clerical task, one of the parson’s trades. But over many years in many countries the clergy have gradually lost their dominance over theology to an increasingly secular academy. This has been widely welcomed by the academy. Scholars reflecting on theological education routinely criticise the traditional ‘clerical paradigm’ that restricted the scope of theology to knowledge required by the Church’s professional leadership. They are less tempted, however, to take up the radical plea voiced by Edward Farley for a return to an earlier view of theology as a fundamental dimension of every Christian’s piety and vocation. He variously describes this feature as a ‘disposition’ or ‘orientation’, the ‘personal
knowledge’ that attends salvation, and ‘the wisdom proper to the life of the believer’. It was a form of theology that was not abstracted from its concrete setting. It was understood, rather, as personal knowledge of God, and was concerned with and developed within ‘the believer’s ways of existing in the world before God’. Farley claims that this enduring orientation, the ‘sapiential and personal knowledge’ that attends salvation, is ‘a part of Christian existence as such’. This, he writes, is ‘theology in its original and most authentic sense’ (Farley, 1983: xi, 35–37; 1988: 81, 88).

That such a theology has no clerical restriction is clearly only part of the story; it is also not limited to the scholar or teacher. In this account of things, academic theology has no privilege or pre-eminence. Hence this form of theology may be lay in several senses: not only is it shared in by the whole Church, it is also the theology that typifies the non-expert—the person who has received little or no scholarly, academic theological education. In this latter sense it may be described as ordinary theology. In recent studies we have defined this type of theology, in terms both of content or outcome, on the one hand, and pattern or processes on the other, as the theology and theologising of Christians who have received little or no theological education of a scholarly, academic or systematic kind (Astley, 2002; Christie, 2005; Christie, 2007).

Those who wish to understand this phenomenon will need not only to recapture an earlier understanding of theology, but also to rid themselves of the derogative connotations of the word ‘ordinary’. That which is ordinary is ‘of the usual kind’, it is ‘normal’ in one sense of that significantly ambiguous word—as ‘regular’ or ‘typical’. In this sense there is nothing wrong with being ordinary. But to many, whatever is customary and widespread seems on that account commonplace, trite and inferior; and therefore to be dismissed as terminally uninteresting. Thus, while many definitions of theology begin in an admirably democratic way, unpacking the word in terms of a person’s God-talk or reflective speaking of the divine, most of them then proceed to limit its arena of application to sophisticated and disciplined forms of reflection that are appropriate only to a minority of Christians—that is, to an intellectual élite. They permit only a nod in the direction of a more generic or broader sense of the word ‘theology’ that embraces the nonacademic.

We believe that we need to make more than a polite gesture in this direction for several reasons. From a pragmatic perspective, those who are engaged in Christian communication, pastoral care and worship