

Lay Religion and Pastoral Care in Thirteenth-Century England: the Evidence of a Group of Short Confession Manuals

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How much did medieval lay people know about Christianity? Which religious observances were expected of them? Recent studies have often suggested that ecclesiastical expectations of the laity were relatively low overall, even if some laypeople exceeded these basic requirements. For example Norman Tanner and Sethina Watson have argued that although medieval churchmen had high aspirations for the laity, they were also willing to tolerate ignorance, in a pragmatic attempt to keep as many people within the church as possible.¹ This and some other surveys of medieval religion have also suggested that for many medieval Christians, as long as they accepted some core beliefs, religion was more about participating in the rituals than about having a high level of doctrinal knowledge.² While broad surveys like these have often (although not always³) emphasised low expectations of knowledge and the importance of ritual, more narrowly focused studies offer a different picture, especially for the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Numerous studies of English parishes in this period have shown that at least some laypeople had a good understanding of Christianity as well as participating enthusiastically in parish rituals.⁴ By the fifteenth century some wealthier laypeople were petitioning the papal penitentiary for portable altars, private chapels, and the right to

¹ N. Tanner and S. Watson, 'Least of the laity: the minimum requirements for a medieval Christian', *Journal of Medieval History*, 32 (2006), 421.

² Tanner and Watson, 'Least of the laity', 403; John Arnold, *Belief and unbelief in medieval Europe* (London, 2005), 40; Robert Swanson, *Religion and devotion in Europe c. 1215—c. 1515* (Cambridge, 1995), 26-7; Colin Morris, *The papal monarchy: the western church from 1050 to 1250* (Oxford, 1989), 499. See also Jean-Claude Schmitt, 'Du bon usage du "Credo"', in: *Faire croire: modalités de la diffusion et de la réception des messages religieux du XIIe au XVe siècle* (Rome, 1981), 343.

³ For a greater emphasis on knowledge see the brief account in Andrew Brown, *Church and society in England 1000-1500* (Basingstoke, 2003), 49.

⁴ One of the most influential has been Eamon Duffy, *The stripping of the altars: traditional religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven, 1992).

choose their own confessor, again suggesting a high level of engagement.⁵ However, the sources on which these studies are based, including wills, churchwardens' accounts, books of hours and the records of the papal penitentiary survive in greatest numbers for the fifteenth century and it is difficult to know how far back to project the picture that they give us. Even Eamon Duffy, who has written persuasively about the religious knowledge and engagement of the fifteenth-century English laity, has suggested that thirteenth-century churchmen had much more modest aspirations for their flocks.⁶

This poses a question: where did these engaged laypeople come from, and when? There is some evidence that suggests they should be pushed back to the thirteenth century. For example David Postles has argued that the custom of donating money to pay for candles offered laypeople the opportunity to express internal devotion from the early thirteenth century onwards.⁷ Changes were also taking place at parish level prior to 1300 which required parishioners' input. From the late eleventh century, many parish churches were rebuilt, and they continued to be embellished and extended into the thirteenth century.⁸ During the thirteenth century parishioners also gradually took on responsibility for the upkeep of parts of the parish church and its equipment, a development which encouraged some to take an active role in their parishes as churchwardens.⁹ These changes must in turn have had an impact on at least some laypeople's experiences of religion.

In addition to changes at parish level, the thirteenth century also witnessed important changes in the way educated churchmen thought about pastoral care in the wake of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215.¹⁰ This council sought (among other things) to improve clerical education and the pastoral care of the laity, by introducing new measures and

⁵ P. D. Clarke, 'New evidence of noble and gentry piety in fifteenth-century England and Wales', *Journal of Medieval History* 34 (2008), 26.

⁶ Duffy, *Stripping of the altars*, 62.

⁷ David Postles, 'Lamps, lights and layfolk: "popular" devotion before the Black Death', *Journal of Medieval History* 25 (1999), 113.

⁸ C. Davidson Cragoe, 'The custom of the English church: parish church maintenance in England before 1300', *Journal of Medieval History* 36 (2010), 27-8.

⁹ Cragoe, 'Custom', 36.

¹⁰ For an overview of this see Morris, *Papal monarchy*, 490-6.

reinforcing practices were already developing. In particular, the Council ruled that all Christians should make confession and receive communion at least once a year, at Easter, and emphasised the priest's role as a 'doctor of souls' who should advise penitents according to their circumstances. The Council also encouraged bishops to find educated men to preach in their dioceses. These measures did not lead to instant changes, but in the decades after 1215 English bishops incorporated many of the Council's decrees into their own diocesan legislation¹¹ and the requirement for preachers and confessors also came to be partially fulfilled by the friars, especially in urban areas. The Council's decrees on confession and preaching also stimulated the writing of many new manuals teaching priests and friars how to preach and how to hear confessions, both in England and elsewhere in Europe.¹²

Numerous historians have sought to establish how far all this was put into practice at parish level but they have often come to different conclusions. With regard to confession, some have pointed to evidence that individuals could get away without confessing for years on end,¹³ while others have disagreed, arguing that it is impossible to generalise from anecdotal evidence of non-compliance and suggesting that after 1215 annual confession seems to have been accepted as the norm, even if those confessions were not always detailed, soul-searching affairs.¹⁴ The frequency and quality of preaching has proved similarly contentious. Interpretations of the situation in thirteenth-century England have ranged from that of John Moorman, who claimed that 'in the thirteenth century a sermon was a rare event,' to that of D. W. Robertson, who argued

¹¹ Marion Gibbs and Jane Lang, *Bishops and reform 1215-1272* (London, 1934), 113-22; H. Birkett, 'The pastoral application of the Lateran IV reforms in the northern province, 1215-1348', *Northern History*, 43 (2006), 212.

¹² On these see Leonard Boyle, 'Summae confessorum', in: *Les genres littéraires dans les sources théologiques et philosophiques médiévales: définition, critique et exploitation* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1982), 227-37 and Pierre Michaud-Quantin, *Sommes de casuistique et manuels de confession au moyen âge (XII-XVI siècles)* (Louvain, 1962).

¹³ Mary Mansfield, *The humiliation of sinners: public penance in thirteenth-century France* (Ithaca, 1995), 77.

¹⁴ Joseph Avril, 'Remarques sur un aspect de la vie religieuse paroissiale: la pratique de la confession et de la communion du Xe au XIVe siècle', in: *L'Encadrement religieux des fidèles au moyen âge et jusqu'au Concile de Trente* (Paris, 1985), 354-8; Alexander Murray, 'Confession before 1215', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser. vol. 6 (1993), 63; Tanner and Watson, 'Least of the laity', 407.

that regular Sunday preaching was the norm, an interpretation recently echoed by Roberto Rusconi.¹⁵

Related to these debates is an even more difficult problem: that of assessing levels of religious knowledge among both the clergy and the laity. The pronouncements of thirteenth-century bishops on this issue are often gloomy in tone. Robert Grosseteste claimed in his statutes for the diocese of Lincoln in c.1239 that some adults did not know the Lord's Prayer, Creed, Ave Maria, or how to make the sign of the cross. Bishops' estimations of the clergy were not always much better. John Pecham, archbishop of Canterbury, when he set out the knowledge that he wished priests to preach to their parishioners at the Council of Lambeth in 1281 at the Council of Lambeth, opened with a complaint about 'the ignorance of priests.'¹⁶ Some recent historians have been inclined to accept this picture of ignorance (while acknowledging that exceptions existed).¹⁷ Others, however, argue that Pecham was setting out a minimum standard of knowledge which many priests and laypeople would already have met,¹⁸ or believe that the problem needs further detailed study.¹⁹

Surprisingly, most of the historians working on these questions for the thirteenth century have paid little attention to one important set of sources: the confession manuals produced in the wake of the Fourth Lateran Council. Instead many have used sermons and other preaching aids such as *exempla* (short moral stories),²⁰ or the statutes of

¹⁵ John Moorman, *Church life in England in the thirteenth century* (Cambridge, 1945), 77; D. W. Robertson, 'Frequency of preaching in thirteenth-century England', *Speculum*, 24 (1949), 377; Roberto Rusconi, *L'ordine dei peccati: la confessione tra medioevo ed età moderna* (Bologna, 2002), 66.

¹⁶ *Councils and Synods*, 269, 900.

¹⁷ C. S. Watkins, *History and the supernatural in medieval England* (Cambridge, 2007), 74; C. H. Lawrence, 'The English parish and its clergy in the thirteenth century', in: Peter Linehan and Janet L. Nelson, ed., *The medieval world* (London, 2001), 661-3.

¹⁸ R. M. Haines, *Ecclesia anglicana: studies in the English church of the later middle ages* (Toronto, 1989), 133-4; L. Boyle, 'The *Oculus Sacerdotis* and some other works of William of Pagula', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th ser. 5 (1955), 82.

¹⁹ Jeffrey H. Denton, 'The competence of the parish clergy in thirteenth-century England', in: Caroline M. Barron and Jenny Stratford, ed., *The church and learning in later medieval society: essays in honour of R. B. Dobson* (Donington, 2002), 285.

²⁰ Alexander Murray, 'Piety and impiety in thirteenth-century Italy', in: G. J. Cumming and D. Baker, eds., *Studies in church history 8: popular belief and practice* (Cambridge, 1972), 83-106; Alexander Murray,

diocesan councils.²¹ Those historians who have used confession manuals have focused primarily on the longer, more sophisticated manuals, such as those of Robert of Flamborough, Thomas of Chobham, and Guillaume Peyraut, but there remain many shorter ones, often still in manuscript.²² The purpose of these short manuals was to summarise the basic information that a priest or friar needed in order to hear confessions and they were probably able to reach a wider range of clergy than longer, more challenging and more expensive confession manuals. This is not to say that short confession manuals are an unknown source. Scholars including Pierre Michaud-Quantin, Leonard Boyle, Joseph Goering and F. A. C. Mantello have done crucial work in identifying and editing texts.²³ Some historians of confession have discussed them briefly²⁴ and they have been used to study attitudes to sex and contraception,²⁵ but their comments and assumptions about lay religious knowledge and observance have received little detailed analysis.

Short confession manuals are important sources for lay religion for several reasons. Firstly they focus on the everyday problems that their authors thought priests were likely to encounter. While longer confession manuals sought to be comprehensive, the short ones were necessarily much more selective, giving only the most relevant essentials.²⁶ Secondly, as will be discussed below, they survive in relatively large numbers from the thirteenth century and later. Thirdly, these works often borrow heavily from each other,

'Confession as a historical source in the thirteenth century', in: R. H. C. Davis and J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, ed., *The writing of history in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1981), 275-322.

²¹ Tanner and Watson, 'Least of the laity'; Birkett, 'Pastoral application'; Haines, *Ecclesia anglicana*, 129-37.

²² Rusconi, *Ordine dei peccati*; Carla Casagrande and Silvana Vecchio, *I sette vizi capitali* (Turin, 2000), 90-3.

²³ Michaud-Quantin, *Sommes*. See also Leonard Boyle, *Pastoral care, clerical education and canon law 1200-1400* (London, 1981) and the studies and editions by Joseph Goering and collaborators cited in the footnotes below.

²⁴ Siegfried Wenzel, *The sin of sloth: acedia in medieval thought and literature* (Chapel Hill, 1967), 83; Rusconi, *Ordine dei peccati*, 93-6.

²⁵ Jacqueline Murray, 'Gendered souls in sexed bodies: the male construction of female sexuality in some medieval confessors' manuals' in: Peter Biller and A. J. Minnis, ed., *Handling sin: confession in the middle ages* (Woodbridge, 1998), 81-3; Peter Biller, *The measure of multitude: population in medieval thought* (Oxford, 2000), 193-207.

²⁶ Michaud-Quantin, *Sommes*, 10.

but they do not do so word for word. They display significant levels of variation, both between texts, as different writers added or omitted material, and sometimes between manuscripts of the same work.²⁷ These variations suggest that scribes and authors thought about the content of these texts and adapted them intelligently. This does not mean that the texts can be taken uncritically as unmediated evidence for lay religion. They were not only written for use with lay penitents, as some of the questions in them were aimed at the clergy. It is also questionable how far they were read by parish priests or friars engaged in day to day pastoral care although they sometimes claimed to be written for these groups.²⁸ More fundamentally, we cannot know how far real confessions followed the templates set out in these works. Nevertheless, they sought to be practical and the variations and copies that survive suggest that they were seen as useful, at least by their copyists. Their views of lay religious knowledge and observance – both what they hoped for and what they thought was possible – therefore deserve to be taken seriously.

This paper will focus on a group of short confession manuals which draw on the *De modo confitendi* of Robert Grosseteste, bishop of Lincoln (d. 1253) and which discuss the religious knowledge and obligations of the laity in particular detail. The first part of the paper will introduce these texts. The paper will then go on to examine, first, their expectations of penitents' religious knowledge. The authors of these texts assume that at least some penitents did know basic points of doctrine, but they were less confident about newer forms of religious knowledge. The final part of the paper will focus on religious practice. Here the authors seem to have been confident that penitents were performing some religious practices, although not necessarily in the correct way, but they were much less confident about others. Overall, however, their expectations of lay knowledge and practice are surprisingly high.

²⁷ Joseph Goering and F. A. C. Mantello, 'The early penitential writings of Robert Grosseteste', *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale*, 54 (1987), 59.

²⁸ Joseph Goering, *William de Montibus: the schools and the literature of pastoral care* (Toronto, 1992), 63.

Short Confession Manuals

De modo confitendi is the most widely copied of several short confession treatises written by Grosseteste and it has been dated by its editors to between 1214 and 1225.²⁹ Among other things, this treatise included a list of questions to ask penitents in confession, structured around the seven deadly sins (the ones on sloth have been summarised by Siegfried Wenzel³⁰), followed by questions about sins against the sacraments. This question list circulated relatively widely in thirteenth-century England: although the full *De modo confitendi* survives in only two thirteenth-century manuscripts, the list of questions survives separately in a further eleven.³¹ Moreover, at least half a dozen other short confession manuals drew on Grosseteste's work when compiling their own question lists.

This paper will make extensive use of two confession manuals which drew on Grosseteste and which I am engaged in editing. They are about 4-5000 words long and contain very full lists of questions to ask penitents in confession which follow Grosseteste on some points but they also add significant new material. The first of these begins with the words *Animetur primo confitens...* ('First let the person confessing be encouraged...'; number 0436 in Morton W. Bloomfield's catalogue of treatises on the virtues and vices).³² It survives in two thirteenth-century English manuscripts: London, British Library Additional manuscripts 30508, folios 169r-79v, and 22570, folios 200v-203r (a slightly abridged version). Leonard Boyle has suggested that Add. 30508 originated in a Dominican setting shortly after 1260 and was used for teaching friars pastoral theology,³³ and a Dominican origin is also possible for Add. 22570. Like Add. 30508, it is small and easily portable, and the main text in the volume is the *Summa de Penitentia* of Raymond

²⁹ Goering and Mantello, 'Early penitential writings', 57

³⁰ Wenzel, *Sin of sloth*, 83-7.

³¹ Goering and Mantello, 'Early penitential writings', 75-80.

³² M. W. Bloomfield, *Incipits of Latin works on the virtues and vices* (Cambridge, MA, 1979); R. Newhauser and I. Bejczy, *A supplement to Morton W. Bloomfield et al., Incipits of Latin works on the virtues and vices, 1100-1500 A.D* (Turnhout, 2008).

³³ Leonard Boyle, 'Notes on the education of the *fratres communes* in the Dominican order in the thirteenth century', repr. in: Boyle, *Pastoral care*, 261.

of Peñafort, a confession manual that was widely used by the Dominicans as a textbook. Nevertheless, *Animetur primo* itself does not contain any obvious signs of mendicant origin, such as questions like ‘Where do you come from?’ which imply that the confessor does not already know the penitent.³⁴ It begins by telling the priest to ask the penitent about his or her knowledge of Christian doctrine, before moving on to an unusually long and detailed list of questions about sins ‘against the faith’, namely magic and divination. Then follow lists of questions about each of the seven deadly sins, and finally a list of questions about ‘sins of the tongue’, such as lying and slander. Some of these questions are similar to those found in *De modo confitendi*, but others do not have parallels elsewhere.

The second treatise begins with the words *Sciendum est autem sacerdotibus* (‘Priests should know...’) or *Penitens accedens ad confessionem* (‘When the penitent comes to confession...’), as some manuscripts have a prologue and some do not (numbers 3827-9 and 5306 in Bloomfield). It survives in sixteen manuscripts copied between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries. *Sciendum est autem* begins with an introduction which tells the priest how to put the penitent at ease and instructs him to ask about the penitent’s knowledge of Christian doctrine, before listing questions about the seven sins, the Ten Commandments and the five senses. It then gives general information about which sins a parish priest is qualified to absolve and how to assign appropriate penances to sins. Very little of this material is original. The question lists draw on Grosseteste’s *De modo confitendi* (with some additions and alterations) while the first section on the penitent’s knowledge of Christian doctrine abbreviates parts of a longer confession manual, the *Summa Confessorum* of Thomas of Chobham, completed shortly after 1215³⁵ and other parts of the text copy Richard of Wetheringsett’s *Summa ‘Qui bene presunt’*, written in the 1220s. It is difficult to date the text closely, but it must have been composed after the 1220s and before the later thirteenth century, which is the date of the earliest manuscripts. The intended audience of the treatise is unknown and the

³⁴ In contrast to J. Goering and P. Payer, ‘The “Summa Penitentiae Fratrum Predicatorum”: a thirteenth-century confessional formulary,” *Mediaeval Studies* 55 (1993), 6.

³⁵ Thomas of Chobham, *Summa confessorum*, ed. F. W. Bloomfield (Louvain, 1968), 242-3.

provenance of its earliest manuscripts mixed. Of the five manuscripts dated to the thirteenth or early fourteenth century, two were in monasteries;³⁶ one belonged to a Cambridge MA and rector who left it to Pembroke College Cambridge;³⁷ and two are of unknown provenance.³⁸

Several other similar confession treatises survive in manuscript and some will be cited in this paper, when they differ in interesting ways from Grosseteste's *De modo confitendi*, *Sciendum est autem* and *Animetur primo*. These include treatises in Worcester Cathedral Library MS Q.61, folios 1r-8v, dated to the thirteenth or fourteenth century (number 1212 in Bloomfield and at Worcester early) and Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 157, folios 259r-260v, dated to the last quarter of the thirteenth century (number 3831 in Bloomfield; provenance unknown but it does contain a power of attorney given to the rector of a parish church in 1319).³⁹ In addition to these treatises inspired by Grosseteste, short guides to confession and the seven sins were also circulated by bishops Alexander Stavensby of Coventry (1224-37), Walter de Cantilupe of Worcester (1240), and Peter Quinel of Exeter, who reissued Cantilupe's treatise in 1287.⁴⁰ These works are useful to compare with the Grosseteste-inspired treatises, but they do not contain such detailed information about lay religious practices.

In contrast to the treatises of Stavensby, Cantilupe and Quinel, which were composed for parish priests in particular dioceses, the intended audience of the Grosseteste-inspired texts is not clearly stated. It is possible that they were composed and copied as part of Grosseteste's own attempts at reform, but there is no hard evidence of this. *Animetur primo* was copied by Dominicans, but may not have been composed for them. The

³⁶ BL MS Harley 209, at Abingdon and Cambridge University Library MS Ii.i.22, at Norwich Cathedral Priory.

³⁷ Cambridge, Pembroke College MS 238.

³⁸ Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College MS 362/441 and Oxford, Corpus Christi College MS 360.

³⁹ R. M. Thomson, *A descriptive catalogue of the medieval manuscripts in Worcester Cathedral Library* (Woodbridge, 2001), 157-8; F. Madan and H. H. E. Craster, *A summary catalogue of western manuscripts in the Bodleian Library at Oxford* vol. 2, pt. 1 (Oxford, 1922), 149-50.

⁴⁰ *Councils and synods with other documents relating to the English church part II, AD. 1205-1313*, ed. F. M. Powicke and C. R. Cheney (Oxford, 1964), 214-26, 1060-77; J. Goering and D. Taylor, 'The *Summulae* of bishops Walter de Cantilupe (1240) and Peter Quinel (1287)', *Speculum*, 67 (1993), 576-94.

intended audience for *Sciendum est autem* seems to be the secular clergy rather than the friars, since it contains extensive sections on the sins that a parish priest is not qualified to absolve, but the known provenances of its manuscripts also point to other contexts, particularly monastic ones. It is possible that further study of a larger number of these texts might reveal further distinctions between secular, monastic and mendicant works, but it is difficult to identify any major differences. The other contents of many of the manuscripts of these texts are similar to those of later ‘priests’ manuals’ described by Pantin and Haines: treatises on confession, preaching, the sacraments and other theological topics.⁴¹ However, the most that can be said definitely is that short confession texts were copied in a range of ecclesiastical settings in the thirteenth century, secular, mendicant and monastic, and that their copyists were interested in pastoral care and clerical education.

This practicality is also reflected in the texts themselves. They include questions aimed at a wide range of penitents: clerics and laypeople, rich and poor, men and women. In some cases they specify that particular groups should be asked certain questions. For example, *Animetur primo* subdivides its section on the sin of avarice into questions for different occupations including merchants, labourers and physicians, while Grosseteste’s *De modo confitendi* asks married men about how they treat their wives and clerics about how they perform their religious duties.⁴² In Worcester Cathedral Library MS Q.61, the copyist also thought explicitly about female penitents. Where most other texts imagine the priest addressing the penitent as ‘Brother’, this one occasionally reads ‘Brother or sister’, and in one question for lords, this text reads ‘lord or lady’.⁴³ These details suggest that, even if these treatises presented an idealised view of confession, some copyists were thinking about the diverse needs of real penitents.

⁴¹ Haines, *Ecclesia anglicana*, 156-79; W. Pantin, *The English church in the fourteenth century* (Cambridge, 1955), 277-80.

⁴² London, British Library MS Add. 30508 [hereafter *AP*], ff. 172v-77r; Goering and Mantello, ‘Early penitential writings’, 84.

⁴³ ‘Frater vel soror.’ ‘Si dominus vel domina.’ Worcester Cathedral Library MS Q.61, ff. 1r, 1v.

References to lay religious belief and practice are frequent in these treatises. As already mentioned, several of the treatises tell the priest to begin the confession by asking the penitent whether he knows some basic points of doctrine. Other references to lay religion occur in the suggested questions about the seven sins, where penitents are asked whether they have neglected various religious duties. The location of this material varies.

Animetur primo scatters questions relating to religious observances under the sins of pride, anger, avarice, sloth and gluttony, while Grosseteste's *De modo confitendi* places them under sloth or in the questions on sins against the sacraments and *Sciendum est autem* puts most under sloth. These questions indicate the religious provision the authors of these texts thought was available and how much activity they hoped for from both laity and clergy. The nuances of the questions are also significant. When asking about some religious practices, the questions assume that penitents will not have done them at all, whereas for others, they focus on penitents who do them in the wrong way. In this way they shed light on the assumptions of some educated, pastorally minded churchmen about the range of religious beliefs and practices that existed at parish level.

Religious Knowledge

The basic information that the short confession treatises seek about penitents' religious knowledge is broadly similar: does the penitent know the Lord's Prayer and the articles of faith contained in the Apostles' Creed?⁴⁴ In common with other thirteenth-century treatises, they do not specify whether the penitent should know these in Latin or the vernacular, but Jean-Claude Schmitt has suggested, plausibly, that they were to be recited in Latin and explained in the vernacular.⁴⁵ Some writers also looked for ways to check that penitents really had learned these things. *Sciendum est autem* said (quoting Thomas of Chobham) that if penitents did not know them, no penance should be given unless they promised to learn as soon as possible, while the treatise in Worcester MS Q.61 told the

⁴⁴ 'Utrum sciat symbolum et orationem dominicam.' *AP*, f. 169r; 'utrum teneat rectam fidem et utrum sciat symbolum apostolorum et orationem dominicam.' Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College MS 362/441 [hereafter *SEA*], f. 40v.

⁴⁵ Schmitt, 'Bon usage', 349.

priest to listen as the penitent recited the Creed, Lord's Prayer and Ave Maria.⁴⁶ These requirements were not new in the thirteenth century. Eleventh-century English church reformers had stressed that priests should teach their parishioners the Lord's Prayer and the Creed, and although this disappeared from episcopal legislation in the twelfth century, one twelfth-century continental confession manual was already encouraging priests to ask penitents about these things in confession.⁴⁷

Unlike earlier reformers, however, many thirteenth-century confession writers also asked for further knowledge. Here the treatises differ from one another more significantly. *Animetur primo* gave only general requirements: did the penitent 'believe in God and everything that Holy Church believes'?⁴⁸ Walter de Cantilupe and later Peter Quinel took the same approach: the priest was to ask 'if the penitent is Christian, that is, if he has faith,' and then instruct him in the articles of faith 'which he does not know.'⁴⁹ As Tanner and Watson have pointed out, general prescriptions like these could cover a low level of explicit doctrinal knowledge, but this was not necessarily seen as a problem. Some ecclesiastical writers did not see a high level of knowledge as necessary or indeed appropriate for the laity.⁵⁰ However, this view was not shared by all of the short confession texts, and some required that penitents know other specific bodies of knowledge. For example, after telling priests to test penitents on the Lord's Prayer, Creed and Ave Maria, the author of Worcester Q.61 added that 'if the person confessing is believed to be unlearned [*simplex*] and ignorant, the priest should instruct him in the Ten Commandments of the Decalogue.'⁵¹

⁴⁶ 'Quod si nesciat, non est ei iniungenda penitentia nisi promittat pro certo, quod quam citius poterit, utrumque addiscet.' *SEA*, f. 40v (cf. Thomas of Chobham, *Summa confessorum*, 242); 'Inquirat si sciat symbolum et orationem dominicam et Ave et audiat [my emendation; manuscript reads 'audeat']'. Worcester MS Q.61, f. 1r.

⁴⁷ Watkins, *History*, 72; P. Michaud-Quantin, 'Un manuel de confession archaïque dans le manuscrit Avranches 136', *Sacris Erudiri*, 17 (1966), 29.

⁴⁸ 'Si in deum credat et omnia que sancta ecclesia credit.' *AP*, f. 169r.

⁴⁹ 'Si penitens est Christianus, id est si fidem habeat. Quo invento, doceat eum sacerdos articulos fidei quos ignorat.' *Councils and synods*, 1074.

⁵⁰ Tanner and Watson, 'Least of the laity', 400.

⁵¹ See above, n. 46. The text continues: 'Postea si confitens simplex et ignorans creditur, instruat eum sacerdos in decem preceptis decalogi.'

Sciendum est autem added two further points that priests should particularly encourage the unlearned (*simplices*) to believe in: ‘the remission of sins through the sacraments of the Church, as is established in the Church’ and ‘the communion of saints, that is, whoever is in [a state of] charity is a partner in all the good things which happen in the Church and whoever is in communion here with the just in grace and the Christian life, will be in communion with them in glory.’⁵² The reference to the sacraments is especially interesting because unlike the rest of the Creed, this knowledge was relatively new. The number of sacraments was only fixed in the twelfth century and the point about the remission of sins began to be added to the articles of faith in the thirteenth.⁵³ *Sciendum est autem* was therefore seeking to inculcate some rather more recent theology alongside older schemes of Christian knowledge. The short treatise in Bodley MS 157 went further still, giving a long list of specific doctrinal points that the priest should instruct the penitent to believe:

‘Brother, believe also that in the celebration of the mass the true body of Christ, which he took from the Virgin, is present in the form of bread; and the true blood of Christ, which he poured out for us on the cross, [is present] in the form of wine. Those who take up this body and blood worthily, that is, in a state of faith and hope and charity, accept it to the salvation of their souls. Those who take it unworthily, that is, in a state of some mortal sin, take it to their judgement and damnation.

Brother, believe also that if you are in [a state of] charity, you are a partner in all the good things which happen in the Church. This is the communion of saints.

Brother, believe also that original sin, which we have contracted from Adam, is remitted in little children by baptism. And in adults any act of sin is remitted by true contrition of the heart, and confession by mouth, and satisfaction in deed. And if confession and

⁵² ‘Et precipue instruendi sunt simplices ut credant remissionem peccatorum per sacramenta ecclesie ut institutum est in ecclesia, et ut credant sanctorum communionem: hoc est qui in caritate est, particeps est omnium bonorum que fiunt in ecclesia, et qui communicat hic cum iustis in gratia et vita christiana, communicabit cum eis in gloria.’ *SEA*, ff. 40v-41r.

⁵³ Joseph Goering, ‘The *Summa “Qui bene present”* and its author’, in: *Literature and religion in the middle ages: philological studies in honour of Siegfried Wenzel*, ed. Richard Newhauser and John A. Alford (Binghamton, NY, 1995), 148.

satisfaction, and even baptism, are lacking in adults, I say that as long as these things are not held in contempt but desired, contrition alone is sufficient, as is clear in the case of the lucky thief who for his true contrition of the heart deserved to be heard by the Lord, [the Lord] saying “Today you will be with me in Paradise”.

Brother, believe also that on the day of the final judgement we will all rise from the dead in body and soul.⁵⁴

This text is very unusual in requiring such a long list of points, but it shows what one ambitious writer thought that penitents were capable of.

A further important form of religious knowledge was the knowledge of how to make confession. Roberto Rusconi has argued that this was new knowledge in the thirteenth century and that in the early part of the century, at least, some confession writers did not expect the laity to know how to confess in an ‘ordered’ way, that is, according to the seven deadly sins. For example Robert of Flamborough, who completed a long confession manual between 1208 and 1213, complained that many laypeople confessed their sins in a disorderly fashion.⁵⁵ Of the short confession manuals, *Sciendum est autem* is the most detailed here and, as with other forms of knowledge, it gives a mixed picture of how much laypeople knew. On the one hand, the anonymous author quoted a passage from Thomas of Chobham, in which Thomas advised priests to instruct penitents instead of just ordering them abruptly to recite their sins.⁵⁶ Rusconi argues from this that

⁵⁴ ‘Frater crede etiam quod in celebratione misse est uerum corpus christi in forma panis quod sumpsit de uirgine et uerus sanguis christi in forma uini quem effundit pro nobis in cruce. Quod corpus et quem sanguinem qui digne assumunt, scilicet in fide et spe et caritate existentes ad salutem anime sue accipiunt. Qui indigne sumunt scilicet existentes in mortali aliquo, ad iudicium et dampnationem suam sumunt. Frater crede etiam quod si es in caritate particeps es omnium bonorum que fiunt in ecclesia. Hoc est communio sanctorum. Frater crede etiam quod in paruulis per baptismum remittitur originale peccatum quod contraximus ab Adam. Et in adultis remittitur quodlibet actuale peccatum per ueram cordis contritionem et oris confessionem et operis satisfactionem. Et si desint confessio et satisfactio et etiam baptismus in adultis dico dummodo non habeantur contemptui, set in desiderio sufficit sola contritio ut patet in felici latrone qui pro uera cordis contritione audiri meruit a domino, dicente “Hodie mecum eris in paradiso.” Frater crede etiam quod in extremi iudicii die omnes resurgemus in corpore et anima.’ Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 157, f. 259r.

⁵⁵ Rusconi, *Ordine dei peccati*, 83.

⁵⁶ ‘ualde indiscretus est sacerdos qui non instruit penitentem, sed incipit ex abrupto dicere, “Dic tua peccata.”’, *SEA*, f. 42r; Thomas of Chobham, *Summa confessorum*, 265.

Thomas did not expect penitents to know how to make an ordered confession without instruction, and this is plausible.⁵⁷ However, although he copied this passage, the author of *Sciendum est autem* indicated that some penitents would know rather more. In one of the few passages in the treatise for which I have not been able to identify a source (although it may exist) he advised that ‘as [the penitent] is confessing his sins, the priest should listen in silence, and with his face turned away, so that he does not by looking at him confuse and impede the penitent.’ Bodley MS 157 gave similar advice in almost the same words.⁵⁸ For these penitents the problem was seemingly not ignorance but embarrassment. Again, however, the unlearned, the *simplices*, might need more help: ‘If the penitent is *simplex* and does not know how to accuse himself in confession, then he should be instructed by the priest as to what he should repent of, that is, the seven criminal sins.’⁵⁹

Finally the treatises make assumptions about who was responsible for teaching religious knowledge. They vary in their answers. Grosseteste’s *De Modo Confitenti* and Worcester MS Q.61 held penitents responsible to some extent for their own learning, asking among their questions on sloth, ‘If he has neglected to learn the Creed or the Lord’s Prayer.’⁶⁰ Nevertheless, both of these texts, and the others, also discussed teaching. Some of this was probably assumed to take place within the family. Under the sin of sloth, Grosseteste asked if husbands ‘instructed’ their wives, and both he and *Sciendum Est Autem* asked if parents ‘educated’, ‘instructed’ and ‘corrected’ their children.⁶¹ This may well have included religious education, although it is not spelled out. The treatises assign more specific responsibility for religious teaching to other individuals, laypeople as well as priests. Grosseteste asked, in his questions on the

⁵⁷ Rusconi, *Ordine dei peccati*, 90.

⁵⁸ ‘Illo ergo peccata sua confitente, sacerdos in silencio audiat et uultu dimisso, ne aspiciendo penitentem confundat et impediatur,’ *SEA*, f. 42r; MS Bodley 157, f. 259r.

⁵⁹ ‘Si autem penitens simplex fuerit et nesciat se accusare in confessione, tunc instruendus est a sacerdote de quibus debeat penitere, scilicet de vii criminalibus peccatis,’ *SEA*, f. 42r.

⁶⁰ ‘Si neglexerit Symbolum vel Dominicam Orationem addiscere.’ Goering and Mantello, ‘Early penitential writings’, 83; Worcester MS Q.61, f. 1v.

⁶¹ Goering and Mantello, ‘Early Penitential Writings’, 84. ‘Si filios et filias debito affectu non educauerit. Si pro loco et tempore instruxerit et corripuerit.’ *SEA*, f. 43v.

sacraments, if penitents had ‘raised someone from the holy font [in baptism] without knowing the Creed. If he has neglected to teach his spiritual sons [*filios spirituales*] the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer.’⁶² The term *filios spirituales* is ambiguous. It usually meant godchildren, and the idea that godparents were responsible for teaching basic religious knowledge was not new: it went back to at least the sixth century and was taken up by Carolingian reformers.⁶³ The fact that the question follows another one about godparenthood also suggests that this interpretation is likely. However, *fili spirituales* was sometimes also used to mean penitents, so the passages could also refer to the parish clergy’s responsibility to teach their parishioners, especially since the treatises contain some other questions aimed at clergy.⁶⁴ In c. 1239 Robert Grosseteste told rectors and parish priests to teach the children of their parishes basic prayers, so this interpretation is consistent with his wider programme of pastoral care.⁶⁵ It is also possible that the two interpretations are not mutually exclusive and that different readers understood them differently.

The treatises do not tell us everything that the thirteenth-century laity knew about Christianity. People very likely learned about religion in ways not mentioned here: from images in churches, drama, and (for some) reading.⁶⁶ The knowledge that they gained from these sources may well have been very different from the formal mnemonic schemes of Creed, seven sins and Ten Commandments. Robertson and more recently Rusconi have argued that sermons often focused on explaining that day’s biblical text, rather than on inculcating schemes of knowledge, even if some bishops did try to ensure that preaching covered the new schemes and some thirteenth-century sermon collections did so.⁶⁷ Surviving thirteenth-century church art does not focus on the new schemes of

⁶² ‘Si ignorans Symbolum aliquem de sacro fonte levaverit. Si filios spirituales Symbolum et Dominicam Orationem docere neglexerit.’ Goering and Mantello, ‘Early penitential writings’, 86.

⁶³ Joseph Lynch, *Godparents and kinship in early medieval Europe* (Princeton, 1986), 318-28.

⁶⁴ D. R. Howlett, ed., *Dictionary of medieval Latin from British sources*, vol. 4 (Oxford, 1989): ‘filius’.

⁶⁵ *Councils and Synods*, 269.

⁶⁶ Swanson, *Religion*, 71-87.

⁶⁷ Robertson, ‘Frequency of preaching’, 377; Rusconi, *Ordine dei peccati*, 67. On sermons see Carla Casagrande, ‘La moltiplicazione dei peccati: i cataloghi dei peccati nella letteratura pastorale dei secoli xiii-xv’, in: *La peste nera* (Spoleto, 1994), 262.

knowledge either. In E. W. Tristram's survey of thirteenth-century wall paintings, only one painting of the seven sacraments is noted (and even this identification is questionable), one of the works of mercy, and two of the virtues and vices. Far more common are scenes from the life of Christ and the life of the Virgin and images of the saints.⁶⁸ Teaching based on these subjects would give a different kind of knowledge, more focused on narrative and less on lists of points to memorise. These comparisons highlight how novel the thirteenth-century confession treatises' approach to religious knowledge was. Although the Ten Commandments and Seven Sins had long existed, they now had a new prominence, which is also reflected in the statutes of some thirteenth-century bishops (including Grosseteste), who required priests and laity to know them.⁶⁹ Despite their comparative novelty, however, their authors assume that the new schemes were making headway among some of the laity.

Overall, the confession treatises give a very mixed picture of lay religious knowledge. Some laypeople are assumed to know the Creed and the Lord's Prayer and how to confess according to the seven sins, even if shame might make them reluctant to do so in practice. This could not be taken for granted, however, and all texts also assume the existence of an unknown proportion of *simplices*. When they moved beyond the Lord's Prayer and the Creed into more advanced and recent schemes of religious knowledge, the authors of the confession manuals were much less unanimous. They were also less confident of penitents' knowledge, advising priests to instruct rather than test. Nevertheless, they were prepared to introduce this newer material and they did not assume that all lay Christians only knew the bare minimum or less. Instead, they indicate that penitents' knowledge of Christianity ranged over a relatively wide spectrum. At the bottom end were the 'unlearned' people about whom some thirteenth-century bishops complained in their synodal statutes. At the top end of the spectrum, however, the authors of confession manuals imagined laypeople who knew and did much more.

⁶⁸ E. W. Tristram, *English medieval wall painting: the thirteenth century* (Oxford, 1950), 469-77.

⁶⁹ Tanner and Watson, 'Least of the laity', 401.

Religious Practice

In addition to knowledge, the confession treatises also mention a range of religious practices that they hoped for from penitents. Their authors write about these religious observances in different ways. They present some practices as the norm, even if not all penitents did them, or did them correctly; while for other practices they assumed that penitents might not have done them at all.

Firstly, all of the treatises mentioned regular prayer and attendance at mass, asking if the penitent does these things ‘at the obligatory time’ (*tempore debito*).⁷⁰ They did not usually specify what the obligatory time was, presumably because they expected priests to know. Only one of Robert Grosseteste’s confession treatises, *Perambulauit Iudas* (aimed initially at a monastic audience), was more specific, asking if penitents have neglected to hear mass ‘at least every Sunday,’⁷¹ but this was unusually precise and it seems likely that weekly attendance at mass was rather ambitious for the laity. In 1291 Pecham complained about poor Sunday church attendance and visitation records from later centuries suggest this was relatively common.⁷² It is therefore likely that the anonymous authors of the other treatises, and perhaps also Grosseteste himself in his *De modo confitendi*, preferred to leave it to individual priests to decide which times were appropriate and what level of non-attendance was tolerable.

Animetur primo further emphasised that it was not just important to turn up to mass, but to arrive on time (it asked if penitents had come late) and also to be in the right frame of mind: during prayers and divine services, had they been ‘wandering and undevoted in

⁷⁰ Goering and Mantello, ‘Early penitential writings’, 83; *SEA*, f. 43v.

⁷¹ ‘Neglegxisti... missam audire, ad minus in omni die dominica.’ J. Goering and F. A. C. Mantello, ‘The “Perambulauit Iudas...” (Speculum Confessionis) attributed to Robert Grosseteste’, *Revue Bénédictine*, 96 (1986), 161.

⁷² Moorman, *Church life*, 69; Tanner and Watson, ‘Least of the laity’, 409.

heart or intent on worldly cares?’⁷³ This suggests that for some, the problem was not non-attendance but attendance with the wrong attitude. This is also suggested in the treatise’s reference to laypeople who saw the mass as a chance for social display: ‘If he has ever absented himself from church or the divine office out of shame, because he did not have beautiful clothes, or despised others who were filthily dressed because of their poverty and [despised] to sit next to them in church?’⁷⁴ This emphasis on attitude as well as participation is a distinctive feature of *Animetur primo* and recurs elsewhere in its discussion of religious observances, as discussed below. As Wenzel has argued, many confession treatises focus on measurable external behaviour rather than internal attitudes,⁷⁵ but the author of *Animetur primo*, at least, was interested in internal devotion too.

‘Obligatory times’ probably also included feast days. One of the miracles of Thomas Becket, dated to 1173, mentions feasting and drinking on feast-days as an English custom, suggesting that they were observed in some form, even if people did not always go to church.⁷⁶ A longer confession manual written after 1235 by Odo of Cheriton, a Kentish priest educated in Paris implies that unlearned *simplices* would go to church on feast days, even if they did little else. Odo imagined a *simplex* who did not know how to make confession describing his religious activities in these terms: ‘Note that some *simplices* who do not acknowledge any sin before the priest say, “I do not remember that I have offended God. I eat, I drink like the rest of the faithful. I hear mass on feast-days.”’⁷⁷ Nevertheless, even if it was the norm to attend mass on feast days, the author of *Animetur primo* was well aware that some people did not do so. He asked, under the sin of pride: ‘If he has disdained to observe the solemn masses of the saints and feast days

⁷³ ‘Si accidiosus fuerit in seruiio dei omittendo horas et missas temporibus debitis, uel tarde ad eas ueniendo. Si in officio dei et orationibus suis uagus fuerit corde et indeuotus, aut tunc cura terrena intentus.’ *AP*, f. 172r.

⁷⁴ ‘Si ab ecclesia uel dei officio se propter pudorem subtraxerit, eo quod non habuit pulcra indumenta, uel alios sordide indutos propter eorum paupertatem contempserit et iuxta eos in ecclesia sedere.’ *AP*, f. 170v.

⁷⁵ Wenzel, *Sin of sloth*, 88.

⁷⁶ *Medieval popular religion 1000-1500: a reader*, ed. J. Shinnors (Peterborough, Ontario, 1997), 164.

⁷⁷ ‘Nota quod quidam simplices coram sacerdote nullum peccatum recognoscentes dicunt “Non sum memor quod deum offenderim. Comedo, bibo sicut ceteri fideles. In festis audio missam.”’ Odo of Cheriton, *Summa de Penitentia*, Cambridge University Library MS Dd.xi.83, ff. 38v-39r.

that are laid down in statute by the church, either in his own person or through his servants and animals.⁷⁸ The positioning of this sin under the heading of pride may suggest that encouraging others to break feast days could be a way of displaying wealth or power, rather than (or as well as) a matter of economic necessity. Alexander Murray has identified preachers in thirteenth-century Italy who likewise complained that it was difficult for servants to attend mass on feast days⁷⁹ and *Animetur primo*'s comments suggest that for some, this was also a problem in England. Nevertheless, it does not seem to have been a major concern for English churchmen, as the other short confession manuals do not mention the problem.

Animetur primo also referred to those who misspent feast days:

If he spends the time allowed to him by God fruitlessly and especially if on feast days he does not occupy himself well and in the service of God, or gives himself over to harmful games and excessive drinking and suchlike, as those people do who go to dances and play at dice and suchlike. And to these people can be explained the manifold sins which arise from these kinds of games, both to themselves and to others who stand around and pay attention to such things.⁸⁰

Odo of Cheriton's description of a *simplex* who ate and drank like the other faithful implied that this *simplex* also observed fast days. Several of the short confession treatises mentioned breaking fasts in their sections on gluttony, adding it to the questions in Grosseteste's *De modo confitendi*, where it is not mentioned. *Animetur primo* told priests to ask whether penitents broke fasts, either on fast days or when they had been required to

⁷⁸ 'Si sollempnitates sanctorum et dies festos ab ecclesia statutos, tam in propria persona quam in seruis et iumentis seruare contempserit.' *AP*, f. 170r.

⁷⁹ Murray, 'Piety', 93.

⁸⁰ 'Si tempus sibi a deo concessum infructuose expenderit et precipue si diebus festiuis bene et in seruicio dei se non occupauerit, uel lusibus noxiis aut potacionibus superfluis et huiusmodi uacauerit ut faciunt qui ad coreas uadunt et ad taxillos et aleas et huiusmodi ludunt. Et possunt eis exponi multiplicia peccata que ex huiusmodi lusibus proueniunt et quo ad seipsos et quo ad alios circumstantes et intendentes talibus.' *AP*, ff. 172r-v.

do fasts as penance, or ate meat at the wrong times ‘without necessity’. In a similar vein *Sciendum est autem* asked about eating too early ‘especially on fast days’, eating meat on fast days and breaking fasts.⁸¹ Beyond these basic sins, *Animetur primo* also mentioned a more creative way of breaking the rules on fasting: ‘If he is in the habit of eating spices or electuaries on fast days, solely out of indulgence or to take away the tedium of fasting in this way, and not for a medical cause.’⁸² Spices or drugs which could be seen as medicines were perhaps an acceptable way to break fasts, but their overlap with foodstuffs meant that this was also a way of eating on the sly. It may even be a reference to medieval drug-taking, although in the absence of other sources, this is very difficult to say. These treatises recognise that some people will not fast, but as with attendance at mass, many of their questions are directed at people who know when the fast days are but break or bend the rules. They therefore suggest that fasting was accepted as the norm (as has also been suggested for later centuries⁸³) even if not everyone followed the rules in practice.

The treatises also underlined the desirability of listening to sermons and again they criticised those who did not do so properly more often than they criticised those who did not do so at all. *De modo confitendi* asked if penitents set little store by (*parvipenderit*) preaching and the other treatises copied this, sometimes also asking if penitents ‘perverted’ what they heard.⁸⁴ Again *Animetur primo* gave more details, focusing on attitude as well as actions: ‘If he comes unwillingly to sermons, or is a sleepy, talkative or negligent listener there.’⁸⁵ The implication of these comments is that the authors believed

⁸¹ ‘Si carnes scienter tempore indebito et sine magna necessitate comederit. Si ieiunia sibi iniuncta uel ab ecclesia statuta sine necessitate fregerit.’ *AP*, f. 177r; ‘Si prepropere scilicet ante horam debitam maxime in ieiuniis comederit... Si carnem tempore indebito comederit uel si ieiunia iniuncta confregerit et qua de causa.’ *SEA*, ff. 44r-v.

⁸² ‘Si species uel electuaria diebus ieiuniorum consueuit comedere, solum propter uoluptatem uel tedium ieiunii sic auferret et non propter causam medicinalem.’ *AP*, f. 177v.

⁸³ Tanner and Watson, ‘Least of the laity’, 417.

⁸⁴ Goering and Mantello, ‘Early penitential writings’, 83. ‘Si uerba predicationis paruipenderit uel peruerterit’ Worcester MS Q.61, f. 1v; ‘Si uerbum predicationis audierit et paruipenderit uel peruerterit,’ BL MS Arundel 52, f. 66v.

⁸⁵ ‘Si inuite ad sermones uenerit aut ibi sompnolentus aut garrulus uel negligens auditor fuerit.’ *AP*, f. 172r.

that sermons were available for the laity to listen to, undervalue, pervert or gossip through, although they did not specify how often.

A number of treatises were also interested in the frequency and conscientiousness with which penitents made confession, although surprisingly this is not universal; *Sciendum est autem* does not mention it. Those treatises which did mention the issue listed several ways in which penitents might cut corners in confession. In *De modo confitendi* Robert Grosseteste asked in his list of questions regarding sins against the sacraments:

If he sets little store by confessing after he has sinned.

If he has gone to confession falsely [presumably, made a false confession]

If he divides his sins [perhaps between different confessors or by making distinctions between more and less serious sins] or beyond this, is silent about the circumstances.

If he has disdained to do the penance enjoined on him...

If he has taken communion while in mortal sin, or if a priest has consecrated [the Host], or if a subordinate has assisted at the altar [while in mortal sin].⁸⁶

Animetur primo's list, under the heading of sloth, is rather different:

If after he has lapsed into sin, he delays converting to the Lord and confessing and sets others a bad example by his habits, or by his boldness in sinning.

If he neglects the penance enjoined on him, entirely or partly.

If he has ever knowingly ministered or celebrated or received the body of Christ, while in a state of mortal sin.

Or has he pretended that he confessed in Lent when he has not confessed and so gone through the year eating meats and so on?

⁸⁶ 'Si confiteri post lapsum parvipenderit. Si simulate ad confessionem accesserit. Si peccata dividerit vel ultro circumstantias siluerit. Si sibi iniunctam penitentiam facere contempserit... Si existens in mortali peccato communicaverit, vel si sacerdos confecerit, vel si minister in altari ministraverit.' Goering and Mantello, 'Early penitential writings', 86.

If he has ever, out of love for some sin that he was committing, abstained from receiving the body of Christ at the obligatory time.⁸⁷

Again Grosseteste and the anonymous author of *Animetur primo* paid most attention to those who bent the rules rather than those who failed to observe them altogether. Even those who did fail to go to confession might pretend that they had done so, which suggests that annual confession was seen as the norm, even if it was not always scrupulously observed in practice. It also corresponds with the implication in *Sciendum est autem* that some penitents would already know how to confess according to the seven deadly sins.

However, the treatises do not assume that every religious observance desired by thirteenth-century churchmen was accepted as the norm by the laity. Their comments on confirmation suggest a different story. Here they ask only if the penitent has neglected to be confirmed or to get his children confirmed.⁸⁸ There is no suggestion that people bent the rules, but rather an assumption that they might not follow them at all. This is plausible, because confirmation required a bishop and may have been relatively rare in thirteenth-century England despite the efforts of some bishops and archbishops, including Grosseteste, to promote it.⁸⁹ Some of the treatises also mention other areas in which penitents are imagined not to comply at all. *Animetur primo* envisaged that some penitents would not take excommunication seriously: they might have contact with excommunicates, defend them or even allow themselves to be excommunicated.⁹⁰ Both *Animetur primo* and *Sciendum est autem* also envisaged penitents who did not give alms

⁸⁷ ‘Si lapsus in peccato tardiauerit conuerti ad dominum et confiteri et aliis malum exemplum prebuit sua mora, uel peccandi audaciam. Si penitentiam sibi iniunctam neglexerit omnino uel in parte. Si unquam scienter in mortali existens ministrauerit uel celebrauerit, aut corpus Christi recepit, uel finxit se confessum in quadragesima quando non fuit confessus et sic transierit annum comedendo carnes et huiusmodi. Si unquam propter amorem alicuius peccati in quo fuit abstinuit se a perceptione corporis Christi tempore debito.’ *AP*, f. 172r.

⁸⁸ Goering and Mantello, ‘Early penitential writings’, 86; ‘Si confirmari neglexerit uel circa suorum confirmationem negligens extiterit.’ *SEA*, f. 43v.

⁸⁹ Tanner and Watson, ‘Least of the laity’, 405.

⁹⁰ ‘Si scienter communicauerit cum excommunicatis uel ipsos in peccatis suis fouerit uel defenderit, uel si ipse propter suam inobedientiam uel contumaciam permisit se excommunicari.’ *AP*, f. 170r.

to the poor. Here, as with confirmation, they asked about those who did not give alms at all, rather than those who did so half-heartedly.⁹¹

Conclusion

The short confession treatises show some educated thirteenth-century clergy trying to create a level of lay religious knowledge and practice higher than that assumed by some historians. They have the highest expectations for attendance at mass, confession, and fasting and lower ones for some other activities, notably confirmation. They also assume regular provision of religious services: even though not everyone did these things in practice, the authors of the treatises often assume that the opportunity existed: that mass was said ‘at the appropriate times’; that at least sometimes there were sermons available, even if the laity failed to turn up or did so in the wrong frame of mind; and that annual confession was viewed as the norm. Their picture of lay religious knowledge suggests more variation. They all required knowledge of the Lord’s Prayer and the Creed. Some penitents might also know the newer forms of knowledge which were becoming increasingly prominent in thirteenth-century synodal legislation, such as how to confess according to the seven sins, but this could not be relied on, especially since these forms of knowledge were probably not consistently reinforced by other means of communication, such as paintings or sermons. Thus for the authors of these treatises, the religion of the laity ideally involved both knowledge and participation in the rituals of the church. They did not prioritise rituals over knowledge in the way that some historians have suggested, although they might find participation in rituals easier to measure and enforce.

To some extent, these high expectations stem from the fact that they are confession texts, which set out an ideal, from which sinners regrettably departed. In this they differed from sermons and synodal statutes, which were primarily concerned with criticising bad practice and ignorance, and so give a more negative picture of both clerical and lay

⁹¹ ‘Si unquam elemosinas dederit.’ *AP*, f. 170v; ‘Si indigentibus tempore necessitatis non subuenerit et cum miseris misericordiam fecerit.’ *SEA*, f. 44r.

religious practice. Nevertheless, even if they are idealised, the confession treatises give a good indication of what their authors hoped for from the thirteenth-century laity, as well as what they assumed to be possible. Nor are they blindly idealistic. The variations between different treatises and manuscripts suggest that their authors and copyists were not simply copying the aspirational tone of a conscientious bishop like Grosseteste unthinkingly. The authors were also well aware that penitents were more likely to know some aspects of doctrine, and to participate in some practices, than others. They of these treatises never say explicitly that their comments are modelled on their contact with the laity, as do the authors of some thirteenth-century *exempla*,⁹² but it seems likely that some of them were.

The short confession treatises do not tell us everything about thirteenth-century lay religion. To build up a fuller picture of this, they need to be compared with the other sources that mention parish life and the laity, such as bishops' registers or hagiography, but that is beyond the scope of this paper. Because they are lists of sins, they say little about engagement in voluntary religious practices, although *Animetur primo* mentions a few possibilities when it asks whether penitents have gone on pilgrimage or abstained from sex out of hypocrisy or vainglory rather than devotion.⁹³ Nor do they mention the cult of the saints or the sacramentals and other rites which are likely to have been an important part of thirteenth-century religious life, as they were in later centuries.⁹⁴ A further omission is that, again with the exception of *Animetur primo*, they say little about unorthodox beliefs or ritual practices which might be classed as magic, although these topics can be found in longer confession manuals.⁹⁵ Instead they focus on enforcing a defined set of observances and beliefs, rather than on regulating the whole of the laity's religious lives.

⁹² Murray, 'Confession', 289.

⁹³ 'Si abstinentiam uel peregrinationem uel huiusmodi opera spiritualia propter ypocrisim uel uanam gloriam fecerit.' *AP*, f. 170v.

⁹⁴ Joseph Goering, 'The changing face of the village parish II: the thirteenth century', in: *Pathways to Medieval Peasants*, ed. J. A. Raftis (Toronto, 1981), 324-5.

⁹⁵ Catherine Rider, 'Magic and unorthodoxy in late medieval English pastoral manuals', in: *The unorthodox imagination in late medieval Britain*, ed. Sophie Page (Manchester, forthcoming 2010) and 'Medical magic and the church in thirteenth-century England', *Social History of Medicine*, forthcoming 2010.

Not every parishioner or every priest would have lived up to the treatises' standards, of course. The authors recognise the existence of ignorance and non-participation, and these problems persisted into later centuries, but this does not necessarily mean that most laypeople were ignorant. Each generation would need to be taught these things anew and in the fifteenth century, when there is much more evidence of lay involvement in parish life, confession manuals still talked about the need to teach the young and 'other symple persones and rude' about the Ten Commandments and the seven sins.⁹⁶ Overall, the treatises show that educated churchmen with an interest in pastoral care sought to create high expectations and thought that these might be attainable, even if not everyone met those standards in practice.

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⁹⁶ Duffy, *Stripping of the altars*, 58.