BAPTISM, SPIRITUAL KINSHIP, AND POPULAR RELIGION IN LATE MEDIEVAL BURY ST EDMUNDS*

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Baptism was one of the main socio-religious rituals of the later Middle Ages, symbolically expressing the entrance of an individual into the Church and, by extension, into society as a whole. A child who died unbaptized was regarded as having passed away outside the Christian community, and infants were therefore baptized either on the day of their birth or the following day. There are accounts of dead children being 'miraculously' restored to life with help of the saints, being baptized and dying immediately afterwards as members of the Church.[1] Nevertheless, baptism. and spiritual kinship in the later Middle Ages have been largely neglected by historians. Local studies of popular religion in England's urban communities either ignore baptism and spiritual kinship altogether or at best refer to them only in passing.[2] This neglect is not a result of the absence of sources. Late medieval baptismal ritual is preserved in the Sarum Use and wills contain numerous references to spiritual kinship. There are, moreover, a number of general studies of late medieval baptism: Fisher's edition of the baptismal rite in the Sarum Use provides a basis for examining the institutional aspects of the ritual, while the studies of Bossy and Hanawalt give vital new insights into spiritual kinship through their use of anthropological concepts.[3] This article examines the role of baptism

[1] R.C. Finucane, 'Sacred Corpse, Profane Carrion: Social Ideals and Death Rituals in the Later Middle Ages', *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death*, ed. Joachim Whaley (London: Europa, 1981), 54; B.A. Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 172.

[2] Only one local study of late medieval English popular urban religion mentions spiritual kinship – L.M.A. Higgs, 'Lay Piety in the Borough of Colchester' (University of Michigan Ph.D. thesis, 1983), 140, 210–11. Other case studies of popular urban religion not mentioning spiritual kinship are N.P. Tanner, 'Popular Religion in Norwich with Special Reference to the Evidence of Wills, 1370–1532' (University of Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 1973) published as *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich, 1370–1532* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984); J.A.F. Thomson, 'Clergy and Laity in London, 1376–1531' (University of Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 1960) and 'Piety and Charity in Late Medieval London', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, xvi (1965), 178–94; D. Jones, 'The Church in Chester, 1300–1540', *Chetham Society*, vii (1957); P. Heath, 'Urban Piety in the Later Middle Ages: The Evidence of Hull Wills', *The Church, Politics and Patronage in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. R.B. Dobson (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1984), 209–29.

[3] J.D.C. Fisher, *Christian Initiation: Baptism in the West* (London: S.P.C.K., 1965); John

and spiritual kinship in late medieval Bury St Edmunds, borrowing approaches and concepts from anthropology. In addition it will be argued that the article illustrates a number of fundamental aspects of late medieval popular religion that are important for the study of this field in general.

Baptism is a ritual and, as the anthropologist Victor Turner has written, 'ritual reveals values at their deepest level . . . men express in ritual what moves them most, and since the form of expression is conventionalized and obligatory, it is the values of the group that are revealed'.[4] Historians of popular religion have always studied ritual, but many have either excluded altogether, or labelled as superstitious, apparently marginal rituals that were integral to the contemporary belief system. The emphasis of anthropologists and 'ethno'-historians on the relative coherence of any religion encourages historians to study all rituals and aspects of those rituals.[5] More specifically, baptism is a 'rite of passage', one of a series of rituals accompanying important turning-points in an individual's life, such as birth, puberty, marriage and death.[6] Rites of passage are particularly important in small-scale societies for allotting specific roles to individuals and relating them to the social whole.[7] In late medieval England the central rites of passage were baptism, marriage, and the funeral.

Through baptism godparents joined the natural kin of their spiritual charges and shared responsibility with the children's real parents for their spiritual and material welfare. The baptismal rite in the Sarum Use, describing the ritual practised in southern England in its final form before the Reformation, outlines the godparents' duties as follows:

Bossy, *Christianity in the West, 1400–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 14–19, and 'Blood and Baptism: Kinship, Community and Christianity in Western Europe from the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Century', *Studies in Church History*, x (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973), 132–5; Hanawalt, *Ties*, 172–5, 246–8.

[4] V.W. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 6.

[5] See C. Geertz, 'Religion as a Cultural System', *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. M. Banton (London: Tavistock, 1966), 1–42; H. Geertz, 'An Anthropology of Religion and Magic, I', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vi (1975), 71–88; Turner, *Ritual Process, passim*; V.W. and E. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), *passim*; J.-C. Schmitt, ' "Religion Populaire" et Culture Folklorique', *Annales ESC*, xxxi (1976), 942. For historical studies of ritual using anthropological ideas see C. Phythian-Adams, 'Ceremony and the Citizen: The Communal Year at Coventry', *Crisis and Order in English Towns, 1500–1700: Essays in Urban History*, ed. P. Clark and P. Slack (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 57–85; M. James, 'Ritual, Drama and the Social Body in the Late Medieval English Town', *Past and Present*, 98 (1983), 3–26; D.H. Sachs, 'The Demise of the Martyrs: The Feasts of St Clement and St Katherine in Bristol, 1400–1600', *Social History*, xi (1986), 141–69.

[6] A. Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. M.B. Vizedom and G.L. Caffee (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960); L. Mair, *An Introduction to Social Anthropology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 207–10; Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, 2–4 and *Ritual Process*, 94–5, 126, 131, chapter 5 *passim*. Victor and Edith Turner have been most effective at developing Van Gennep's work.

[7] Mair, *Introduction*, 209–10.

God faders and Godmodyrs of thys chylde whe charge you that ye charge the foder and te moder to kepe it from fyer and water and other perels to the age of VII yere, and that he lerne or se yt be lerned the Our Father, Hail Mary, and I believe, after the lawe of all holy churche and in all goodly haste to be confermed of my lorde of the dyocise or of hys depute.[8]

The entrance of the godparents into their spiritual children's real kin was emphasized by a taboo on sexual relations between people related spiritually, described by John Mirk in his late fourteenth-century *Instructions for Parish Priests* as the 'cosynage' of the baptized.[9] Mirk gives details of the prohibited degrees of marriage created by spiritual kinship.

> Alle these be cosynes to hym for ay,
> That none of hem he wedde may:
> The preste that foloweth [baptizes], the prestes chyldere, the preste,
> And the chyldes fader and moder, the godfader and hys
> Wyf knowe be-fore folghthe [baptism], the godfather chylderen,
> the chyldes moder and hys godfader, et cetera.[10]

The Sarum Use provided an official liturgical framework within which the late medieval faithful could structure their interpretation of the ritual. Specific evidence relating to baptism and spiritual kinship in late medieval Bury comes exclusively from wills. Wills naturally tell us more about people's responses to impending death than about their life-time beliefs and about practices such as baptism. Consequently any statistics taken from wills relating to baptism must be treated with caution. The Bury St Edmunds will collection is, however, a particularly rich documentary source. Thanks to the town's privileged status as a peculiar jurisdiction, all but six of the 1,181 extant Bury wills made between 1439 and 1530 were proved before the abbey sacrist's court. The surviving probate registers therefore contain a comprehensive collection of Bury wills, with only the loss of one register, covering the years 1483–90, marring its completeness. Although many of the poorer townspeople certainly did not make or enroll their wills, the registers contain wills made by a broad social spectrum of men and women.[11]

Baptism is referred to directly in only one late medieval Bury will.

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[8] Fisher, *Christian Initiation*, 166. Burning and drowning ('fyer and water') were the two most common causes of accidental death to children in the Middle Ages: R.C. Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England* (London: Dent, 1977), 109–10; Hanawalt, *Ties*, 175–82.

[9] Hanawalt, *Ties*, 246; Bossy, *Christianity*, 18, and 'Blood and Baptism', 134; John Mirk, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, ed. G. Kristensson (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1974), 77 (line 179).

[10] Mirk, *Instructions*, 77 (lines 173–8).

[11] For the debate on testamentary evidence, see in particular C. Burgess, 'By Quick and by Dead: Wills and Pious Provision in Late Medieval Bristol', *English Historical Review*, cii (1987), 854–6, and '"For the Increase of Divine Service": Chantries in the Parish in Late Medieval Bristol', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, xxxvi (1985), 46–7; Thomson, 'Piety and Charity in Late Medieval London', 178–82; J.J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 2–18; Tanner, *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich, passim*.

Agas Herte, who made her will in 1522, left 'to the chyrche of Seynt Jamys a basen and a ewer of pewter hamerd, to be usyd at crystnyng of chyldern in the seyd chyrch as long as it will indure'.[12] This 'basen' was presumably some kind of portable font. Godparents are specifically mentioned by five testators out of a total of 1,181 between 1439 and 1530, a scarcity explained by the likelihood that most testators would have outlived their spiritual parents. In 1496 Robert Hervy left 1s. 8d. 'to Syr John Sygo my gostly Fader', and Isabel Anderson, who made her will in 1528, left 3s. 4d. to 'Margaret Wodhok my god mother'.[13] John Berdewell, whose godmother Isabel Laverok left him her house in 1479, remembered her in his two-year chantry when he died in the following month.[14] Both the Berdewell and Laverok wills hint at the reciprocal nature of the relationship between godparent and godchild, an aspect that will become clearer below. Real parents are mentioned in 13 per cent (12/96) of references to funeral prayers in late medieval Bury wills, while godparents are never specifically mentioned. God-parents would have been included in the prayers for 'all Christians' or 'all the faithful dead', but it is the references to specific people in prayer bequests that indicate the significance of their relationship to the deceased, as perceived by contemporaries. Spiritual kinship was not therefore usually seen as an important relationship in the afterlife.

Godchildren were more commonly remembered in wills. In Bury 13 per cent (154/1,181) of testators between 1439 and 1530 made bequests to their godchildren, contrasting with 8 per cent (16/203) of Colchester testators in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.[15] There is some indication that the relationship was regarded as more important from the 1490s onwards than at the beginning of the period under examination (table 1). This growth cannot be explained simply by the fact that wills after 1491 are more detailed than before; an equal proportion of testators made bequests to godchildren between 1459 and 1468, when wills were relatively short, as in the more detailed wills made between 1511 and 1520. The general increase in the number of references to godchildren over the years 1439–1530 rather suggests that the relationship was perceived by testators as more relevant at the end than at the beginning of our period. Differentiation between real children and godchildren is usually made clear in the wills by the use of the words godchild (*filiolus/filiola*), spiritual child, 'child at the font' or 'godsib'. The use of the term 'child at the font' echoes the baptismal rite at which the godparents were instructed to 'raise him [the godchild] from the font'.[16]

[12] Bury St Edmunds Records Office (BRO), Sacrist's Court (all subsequent references to wills are to the probate registers of the court), p[robate] r[egister] Hoode, fo. 97.

[13] BRO, pr Pye, fo. 48; pr Hoode, fo. 140. See also pr Hoode, fos. 17, 132.

[14] BRO, pr Hawlee, fos. 275, 277.

[15] Higgs, 'Lay Piety', 210–11.

[16] Fisher, *Christian Initiation*, 177. This phrase is also found in late medieval Lincolnshire wills: see *Lincoln Record Society*, x (1918), 2, 118, 142.

Table 1
Bury St Edmunds Wills containing References to Godchildren, 1439–1530 (Clergy and Laity)

	all wills	wills mentioning godchildren	
		number	percentage of total
1439–48	131	4	3
1449–58	103	9	9
1459–68	122	18	15
1469–78	195	19	10
1479–82	75	8	11
1491–1500	170	30	18
1501–10	150	27	18
1511–20	148	22	15
1521–30	87	17	20
TOTAL	1,181	154	13

Godparenthood usually replicated parenthood, with the selection of one man and one woman, although three godparents could be chosen. When three godparents were chosen a boy had two godfathers and one godmother, a girl two godmothers and one godfather. There were few restrictions imposed on the choice of godparents. The Sarum Use forbids only monks and nuns, a husband and wife together, and those 'not instructed in the faith' to be godparents.[17] The child's real parents were also forbidden to act as the godparents, unless the infant was close to death when born. This practice is noted by John Mirk.

> And yef the cas be-falle so,
> that men and wymmen be fer [hem] fro,
> Then may the fader wythoute blame
> Crysten the chylde and yeve hyt name;
> So may the moder in suche a drede,
> yef scho se that hyt be nede.[18]

These limited exclusions left a large pool of potential godparents to choose from.

The choice of godparents and the godparent/godchild relationship, in Bury as elsewhere, were used both to extend the kin group and to strengthen existing family ties. In 91 per cent of cases there is no

[17] ibid., 177.
[18] Mirk, Instructions, 75 (lines 135–42).

surname evidence to indicate kinship between godparent and godchild. In these cases godparenthood was probably often a means of extending the kin by instituting a quasi-familial bond between unrelated families.[19] Nine per cent of the Bury godparents had godchildren with the same family name, while some others may have been related although they had a different surname. In sixteenth-century Champagne the godparents of the first-born child were usually its grandparents.[20] Hanawalt, however, argues that amongst the English peasantry in the later Middle Ages godparents were not selected from the child's real kin.[21] In late medieval Bury it is clear that kin members were sometimes chosen as godparents and, while there is no evidence that grandparents were chosen, uncles certainly were. In 1498 Edmund Stanton left houses and a considerable acreage of land to his nephew and godson, also called Edmund Stanton; he had no son of his own to inherit the property.[22] Similarly, Reginald Chirche, a burgess who made his will in 1499, left his nephew and godson £10, making him his heir if his eldest son died without issue.[23] Spiritual kinship could therefore be used to strengthen family ties, firstly by giving them a sacred aspect, and secondly by ensuring that the family would retain its social and economic status. In a period of high mortality and frequent failure of heirs, the adoption of natural kin as godchildren and surrogate heirs ensured family continuity. Thus baptism created a flexible relationship that could be adapted to a variety of socio-economic uses.

Bossy argues that the formal relationship created between the spiritual and real kin, by implication a social and economic relationship, was more significant than the religious obligations of the godparents to their godchildren.[24] It is impossible to test this hypothesis in relation to late medieval Bury, and Bossy perhaps underestimates the importance of the godparents' spiritual duties. Nevertheless, the evidence concerning inheritance in Bury does indeed show that spiritual kinship could be significant in socio-economic terms. Bossy has further argued that godparent and godchild in the later Middle Ages were usually from the same social group, although occasionally a poor godparent was chosen for a wealthy child as an act of piety.[25] In Bury, by contrast, a higher proportion of wealthy than poorer testators made bequests to godchildren, perhaps indicating that wealthy people were preferable as godparents even for poorer children. The Bury

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[19] Bossy, 'Blood and Baptism', 133; Hanawalt, *Ties*, 247–8.

[20] A.N. Galpern, *The Religions of the People in Sixteenth Century Champagne* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), 44.

[21] Hanawalt, *Ties*, 247, though Hanawalt's argument is not specifically related to rural society; many of her examples being drawn from urban centres, e.g. York.

[22] BRO, pr Pye, fo. 63.

[23] ibid., fo. 74.

[24] Bossy, 'Blood and Baptism', 133–4.

[25] Bossy, *Christianity*, 16.

testators have been divided into three social groups according to the value of their customary high altar bequests in lieu of unpaid tithes. Although a controversial method of assessing status and wealth, comparison of high altar bequests with testamentary wealth (the total wealth bequeathed in a will) and with the early sixteenth-century lay subsidy assessments has revealed a marked degree of correspondence.[26] Table 2 shows that 8 per cent of testators in the poorest high altar bequest group remembered godchildren in their wills, in contrast to 18 per cent of the middle group and 22 per cent of the wealthiest group.

Table 2
Social Distribution of Bury St Edmunds Testators mentioning Godchildren, 1439–1530, according to their High Altar Bequests

amount of bequest	total making bequests	wills mentioning godchildren	
		number	percentage of total
up to 3s.	598	47	8
3s. 4d.–6s.	236	43	18
6s. 8d. and above	280	62	20
TOTAL	1,114*	152*	14*

*67 testators out of the total of 1181 and two out of the 154 mentioning godchildren made no high altar bequest.

These disparities may be due, of course, to the last group having more assets to bequeath to people outside the immediate family. However, it should be stressed that increased wealth resulted in greater obligations to the family, and this phenomenon could rather be an indication of the importance of economic patronage in late medieval urban society.[27] Rural migrants entering Bury, and poorer people already resident in the community, could advance economically and socially by securing the patronage of the rich, while in rural areas this strategy was less important.[28] This is shown clearly in funeral prayer bequests, many of which name the specific people or groups of people

[26] S.H. Rigby and R.B. Dinn, '"Decline" and "Oligarchy" in English Late Medieval Towns', unpublished conference paper given at the colloquium on fifteenth-century history, Glasgow, September 1986.

[27] For the large family obligations of a wealthy town-dweller: C.L. Burgess, 'Chantries in Fifteenth-Century Bristol' (Oxford University D.Phil. thesis, 1981), 1–33.

[28] The importance of patronage is stressed by J.I. Kermode, 'The Merchants of Three Northern English Towns', *Profession, Vocation and Culture in Later Medieval England*, ed. C.H. Clough (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1982), 7–48.

who were to be prayed for. In Bury, the testator's 'benefactors' are listed in 13 per cent (12/96) of funeral prayer bequests, while they never appear in the villagers' wills from the nearby rural Blackbourne deanery, to the north of the town.[29] The choice of a wealthy godparent for a poorer child may have been similarly valuable for the latter's social and economic advancement. In return the godparent, or indeed the 'benefactor', could depend on the beneficiary to arrange prayers for their souls when they died.

Some Bury townspeople had large numbers of spiritual children. The most common bequest in the wills was simply 'to every godchild', but even testators mentioning only one godchild may have been referring to a favourite godchild, while godchildren who predeceased their godparents were probably excluded from their godparents' wills. However, some testators name many godchildren. Thomas Kirman, a priest who made his will in 1509, lists nine godchildren by name, while in 1511 Isabel Wilott and in 1519 Margaret Newehawe each name five godchildren.[30] Isabel Alleyn, who made her will in 1522, suggests that she had too many godchildren to name in her will. As well as making legacies to three named godchildren, Isabel left 1s. 'to every of my godchyldern that be nat namyd' in the will provided that 'myn executors have perfyght knowlage that they be my godchyldern'.[31] In general, the tendency towards multiple godparenthood in late medieval Bury indicates that some people were considered preferable to others as godparents. This is supported by the frequency of bequests to godchildren in the wills of laymen, women, and secular priests. In Bury, between 1439 and 1530, nearly twice as many female as male testators made bequests to godchildren, 19 per cent in contrast to 11 per cent (table 3). This may indicate that women took their spiritual duties more seriously than men, a point supported by the fact that women in late medieval Bury were more likely than men to own religious images and rosary beads and to be members of socio-religious guilds.[32] Twenty-three per cent of secular priests mention godchildren in their wills (table 3). Secular priests, while forbidden by their vow of celibacy to have children of their own, were in a sense compensated by being allowed godchildren. In addition, the clergy were, at least in theory, the best qualified people in the local community to give children religious instruction.[33] Finally, wealthy people may have been selected because of the potential material benefits to their spiritual children.

[29] The rural wills have been selected from the three sample decades – 1449–58, 1491–1500 and 1521–30. For references to 'benefactors': Kermode, 'Merchants', 20.

[30] BRO, pr Pye, fo. 205; pr Mason, fos. 17, 32.

[31] ibid., pr Hoode, fo. 104.

[32] Bequests of domestic images: laymen 0.3 per cent (3/887), women 7 per cent (17/232). Bequests of rosary beads: laymen 2 per cent (16/887), women 18 per cent (41/232). Membership of socio-religious guilds: laymen 9 per cent (83/887), women 18 per cent (42/232).

[33] The level of the secular clergy's religious education is examined in detail in P Heath, *The Parish Clergy on the Eve of the Reformation* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), chapter 5.

Table 3
Categories of Bury St Edmunds Testators mentioning Godchildren, 1439–1530 (Clergy and Laity)

	all wills	wills mentioning godchildren	
		number	percentage of total
lay men	887	95	11
lay women	232	45	19
secular priests	62	14	23
TOTAL	1,181	154	13

The relationship between godparent and godchild was a reciprocal one. The godparents' obligations to their godchildren were both spiritual and material and are outlined in the Sarum Use, quoted above.[34] In addition, godparents made voluntary donations of different magnitudes to their spiritual children in their wills, indicating the varying warmth and tenacity of their relationship. Most bequests are small cash donations given either 'to all my godchildren' or to named godchildren, although occasionally the legacies were much more generous. The examples of Edmund Stanton and Reginald Chirche, who made their godsons their heirs, are noted above. There are also three other cases of godchildren inheriting either their godparent's house or money from its sale.[35] Another testator, Anne Baret, who made her will in 1504, instructed that her godson, Edmund Goodbody, was to serve her twenty-year chantry should he be ordained as a priest, the clearest example in Bury of the godparent acting as patron.[36] The trust that could exist between godparent and godchild is illustrated by Edmund Stanton in 1498 and Joanna Emmys in 1502, who both appointed their godsons as executors to their wills.[37]

Godchildren were, in turn, expected to repay their godparents' spiritual and material benevolence when the latter died. Four testators expressly required their godchildren to pray for their souls. For example, John Steward, who made his will in 1500, states 'that yche of my godchyldern have 4d. to prey for my soule'.[38] This probably made explicit a generally tacit assumption that the recipients of all bequests

[34] Fisher, Christian Initiation, 166.
[35] BRO, pr Hawlee, fo. 75, 196; pr Pye, fo. 188.
[36] ibid., fo. 162.
[37] ibid., fos. 63, 122.
[38] ibid., fo. 113.

would pray for their benefactors' souls. The godchildren's obligations to their godparents are also reflected in the wills of the three Bury testators who asked their godchildren to carry their bodies to the church or grave, a practice apparently not referred to elsewhere.[39] For instance, William Brown, a smith who made his will in 1525, left 4d. 'to every won of the wych [every godchild] shall bere my coorse to chirch and to the grave'.[40] The godparents had once participated in their godchildren's first rite of passage, baptism, at their entry into the church and society; the godchildren now reciprocated by their own participation in their godparents' final rite of passage, the funeral, as the latter joined the 'age-group' of the dead.[41] The reciprocal duties of godparent and godchild in this context perfectly complement one another, since the medieval funeral celebrated a metaphorical rebirth into the 'age-group' of the dead, a rebirth that was annually commemorated at their obit or anniversary.[42]

As rites of passage, baptism and the funeral can be analysed in terms of three distinct and recognizable sections: the rite of separation, to remove the actor in the ritual from his or her previous state; the liminal phase, when the actor is without status; and finally the rite of reintegration, when the actor's new status is confirmed.[43] William Brown's request for his corpse to be carried at his funeral by his godchildren echoes the godparents' duty in the liminal phase of the baptismal ritual, when they carried the infant from the church door to the font where the final confirmatory rite took place. The liminal phase of Brown's funeral was the carriage of his body, his 'coorse', to the church and to the grave, where his new status as a member of the 'age-group' of the dead was confirmed. The significance of this act was enhanced by giving larger legacies to godchildren carrying their godparents' bodies than to other godchildren. Thus in 1499 David Umfrey left 'to eche of my godchildren that shall bere my body to church 2s. and each of myn other godchildren 1s.'[44]

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[39] ibid., fos. 80, 158; pr Hoode, fo. 164. This practice is not mentioned in other studies of late medieval piety or in printed collections of wills from the diocese of Durham, *Surtees Society*, ii (1835); Lincoln district probate registry, *Lincoln Record Society*, v, x, xxiv (1914, 1918, 1930); the city of Wells and Somerset, *Somerset Record Society*, xvi, xix (1901, 1903); or Lancashire and Cheshire, *Chetham Society*, xxxiii, li (1857, 1860) and *Record Society for Lancashire and Cheshire*, xxx (1896).

[40] BRO, pr Hoode, fo. 164.

[41] For the dead as an 'age-group' see N.Z. Davis, 'Some Tasks and Themes in the Study of Popular Religion', *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, ed. C. Trinkaus and H.A. Oberman (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), 315, 327, and 'Ghosts, Kin and Progeny: Some Features of Family Life in Early Modern France', *Daedalus*, cvi (1977), 92–3.

[42] Peter Brown argues that the martyrs of late antiquity had 'triumphed over death', and that saints maintained an almost living presence through their relics: *The Cult of the Saints* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981), 75–6. For the continuity of this belief into the later Middle Ages see Finucane, 'Sacred Corpse', 52, 60; A. Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 40–77, esp. 41–2.

[43] Bossy, *Christianity*, 14–19; Turner, *Ritual Process*, chapters 3 and 5 and *Image and Pilgrimage*, 2–4.

[44] BRO, pr Pye, fo. 80.

Umfrey's bequest to his godchildren distinguished between those carrying his corpse and those not carrying it, but the most common distinction was made between godchildren with, and those without, the godparent's Christian name. Godparents played an important role in naming children, often giving their spiritual offspring their own name.[45] Thus Godwin Shipdam, a priest who made his will in 1471, had two godsons both called Godwin, while in all 34 per cent of Bury godparents had godchildren with the same Christian name.[46] In some cases larger bequests were made to those with the godparent's Christian name than those without, indicating a special bond between the godparent and spiritual children bearing his or her name. In 1493 Agnes Ridges left 1s. 8d. 'to yche off myn godchildren beryng my name', while William Parmenter, who made his will in 1458 bequeathed 'all my godchildren with my name at baptism 1s. 8d. and each of my other children at the font not named [with my name] 1s.'[47] Christian names were usually the names of saints and the sharing of a saint's name by both godparents and godchildren created a triangle of spiritual affection. Godparent and godchild were spiritually and materially linked, but both were ultimately connected to a common 'higher godparent', the name-saint.[48] The sharing of the name thus created a special three-way bond between godparent, godchild and name-saint, the saint being the protector and intercessor for those bearing his or her name.

A number of conclusions can be drawn about the nature of baptism and spiritual kinship in late medieval Bury. Specific evidence for baptism itself is lacking, but it has been assumed that the Sarum Use provided the basic liturgical framework in Bury. Evidence relating to spiritual kinship in the town, the relationship resulting from baptism, is much greater. The Sarum Use suggests an apparently one-sided relationship, the godparent acting as the provider of material and spiritual sustenance to the godchild. However, examining official ecclesiastical texts alone conceals the reality of popular practice, in this case the reciprocal nature of their relationship. Godchildren were expected to pray for their godparents' souls in purgatory when the latter died and, in some cases, were even asked to carry their godparents' biers at the funerals. It has been argued that this was a re-enactment of the baptismal ritual, the funeral representing the godparents' rebirth or rebaptism. In social and economic terms spiritual kinship could either ensure the preservation of wealth and status within the family, by the adoption of spiritual

[45] Galpern, *Religions of the People*, 43; Tanner, 'Popular Religion in Norwich', 165; Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 58.

[46] BRO, pr Hawlee, fo. 80.

[47] ibid., fo. 62; pr Pye fo. 39.

[48] Galpern, *Religions of the People*, 44, mentions a reference to the testator's name-saint as 'Saint Claude my godfather'

children who were their godparents' blood relations as heirs, or be a source of patronage for those not related by blood. In both situations the godchildren were probably expected, in return, to pray for their godparents' souls. Secular priests and lay women appear to have regarded spiritual kinship as more significant than did lay men. For secular priests spiritual children were perhaps a substitute for real children, while the particular piety of some women may have strengthened their relationships with their spiritual kin.

Baptism and spiritual kinship in late medieval Bury St Edmunds can also be examined within the broader context of popular religion, described by Natalie Zemon Davis as 'religion as practised and experienced and not merely as defined and prescribed'.[49] A number of implicit but crucial aspects of popular religion can be developed from Davis's pliant and general description, all of which can be found reflected in the practice of spiritual kinship in Bury. First, official and unofficial Christianity should not be seen as two separate, self-contained, vertical belief-systems, the second being a distortion of the first.[50] Religion as a whole should rather be described as a continuum, with official and unofficial Christianity at two points on a horizontal line. Although at their poles they may be radically different, there can always be a dialogue of beliefs and practices between them. The liturgy and sacraments, therefore, provided a religious framework for the whole Catholic world, but in each geographical area the faith acquired numerous unofficial accretions.[51] In the case of baptism and spiritual kinship, the doctrine of purgatory and the notion of intercession were found throughout the medieval western Church, while the baptismal rite in the Sarum manual was practised throughout southern England. On the other hand the local aspect of popular religion is shown by godchildren carrying their godparents' biers and by the socio-economic importance of the relationship, which probably varied from community to community.

[49] N.Z. Davis, 'From "Popular Religion" to Religious Cultures', *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research*, ed. S. Ozment (St Louis: Centre for Reformation Research, 1982), 322. Cf. R.W. Scribner, 'Ritual and Popular Religion in Catholic Germany at the Time of the Reformation', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, xxxv (1984); W.A. Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth Century Spain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[50] See the criticisms of the 'two-tiered model' of popular religion in Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 18–19. Cf. Scribner, 'Ritual and Popular Religion', 74 *et passim*; R.W. Scribner, 'Interpreting Religion in Early Modern Europe: Review Article', *European Studies Review*, xiii (1983), 90–5; Sachs, 'Demise of the Martyrs', 143; Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, 145; Christian, *Local Religion*, 178; Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), xiv, xix; Davis, 'Some Tasks and Themes', 307–36 and 'Religious Cultures', 324. The model is used in relation to late medieval popular religion by M.G.A. Vale, 'Piety, Charity and Literacy among the Yorkshire Gentry, 1370–1480', *Borthwick Papers*, 50 (1976), 2.

[51] The local context of popular religion is stressed by Christian, *Local Religion*, 3, 182, and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, 189–90. The notion of dialogue is found in Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, 189; Scribner, 'Ritual and Popular Religion', *passim*; J.-C. Schmitt, *The Holy Greyhound Guinefort, Healer of Children Since the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1–8; Davis, 'Religious Cultures', 323–4; Davis, 'Some Tasks and Themes', 312–13; Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture*, 222–3.

Secondly, if popular religion is the 'religion as practised and experienced' by all members of society, then it is not solely the religion of subordinate groups.[52] Clearly this does not mean that the popular religion of all social groups and the clergy was identical, just as popular religion varied in nature from area to area. Nevertheless, in late medieval Bury spiritual kinship was not limited to the subordinate social groups in the community, but was a relationship entered into by the secular clergy and by lay men and women of all social strata.

Thirdly, the relative coherence of popular religion needs to be recognized. Baptism and the funeral were therefore closely related rituals, the former celebrating the entrance of an infant into the 'age-group' of the living, the latter celebrating the entrance of the deceased into the 'age-group' of the dead. Such details as the carrying of godparents' biers by their spiritual children were integral to these rituals. In addition, these details tell us about the relationships amongst the spiritual kin in this life, as well as about the dialogue between the living and the 'age-group' of the dead. This dialogue illustrates the way in which reciprocity in the middle ages structured the relationships amongst the living and between the living and the dead.[53]

Fourthly, and finally, the notion of the relative coherence of popular religion may help historians avoid making too rigid a distinction between 'correct religion' and 'superstition'.[54] This distinction may be coloured by the religious upheavals of the sixteenth century, a point clearly illustrated by a letter from John ap Rice, one of the official visitors to the monasteries, to his superior Thomas Cromwell, referring to Bury St Edmunds abbey. The abbey contained 'moche vanitie and superstition', including 'reliques for rayne and certain other supersticiouse usages for avoyding of wedes growing in corn', while the abbot himself 'semeth to be addict to the mayntenyng of such supersticious ceremonies'.[55] The use of the word 'supersticiouse' to describe their rituals and relics would surely have surprised the abbot and his monks, who saw all these 'usages' as integral to their religion.

The evidence presented in this article is intended to show the benefits of an anthropologically-informed concept of popular religion. A mass of descriptive information relating to late medieval popular

[52] Scribner, 'Ritual and Popular Religion', *passim*; Christian, *Local Religion*, 147; Galpern, *The Religions of the People, passim*; Higgs, 'Lay Piety', 20.

[53] The importance of reciprocity is stressed by N.Z. Davis, 'Anthropology and History in the 1980s: The Possibilities of the Past', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, xii (1981–82), 270; Galpern, *Religions of the People*, 28, 50; Edmund Leach, *Social Anthropology* (London: Fontana, 1982), 149–52, J.T. Rosenthal, *The Purchase of Paradise: Gift-Giving and the Aristocracy* (Toronto: Toronto University, 1972), *passim*; J.T. Rosenthal, 'The Fifteenth-Century Episcopate: Careers and Bequests', *Studies in Church History*, x (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), 117–27; C. Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), 33.

[54] This is a distinction found in quite up-to-date works, such as Higgs, 'Lay Piety', 197 Cf. H. Geertz, 'An Anthropology of Religion and Magic, I', and K. Thomas, 'An Anthropology of Religion and Magic, II', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vi (1975), 71–109.

[55] British Library, MS Cotton, Cleopatra, E iv, fo. 120v.

religion exists, and this information acquires an increased significance when examined within such a framework. The use of this approach may help the historian to interpret popular religious beliefs and practices with greater clarity, or at least to avoid the blatant imposition of modern value judgements on to medieval evidence. In the words of the Soviet historian, Aron Gurevich, it is 'productive to interpret medieval culture as "another" culture, admitting that it is not our culture and that the criteria for evaluating it must be sought within itself'.[56]

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[56] Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture*, 216.