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INTRODUCTION

IN 1328 THE VICAR of St Breock, a parish just outside Wadebridge in Cornwall, received a letter from his bishop, John Grandisson. For a parish priest this would not have been an especially common occurrence, and its arrival may have unnerved him. A letter from the bishop meant that something was afoot: perhaps some sought-for favour had been granted or, as was the case in this instance, unwelcome trouble was brewing. The letter had been written at Clyst, one of the bishop's residences, and was dated 22 June. It read:

> On behalf of some of your parishioners who have sent us an irritable petition intimating that you, against the custom long observed in the said parish regarding the payment of mortuaries, have rashly and without cause molested and unsettled them: not wishing to fail in the defence of the rights of these parishioners, our tenants, we order and exhort you to desist from all molestation, introducing no novelty until we shall be fully informed about the matter by some trustworthy men unsuspected by either party. Otherwise, we are not able to lie, we shall use whatever lawful ways and means we may to ensure that the injury done to them by you is stopped, and corrected according to the exigencies of the law.[1]

The vicar of St Breock cannot have remained unruffled by this threatening message. Bishop Grandisson was a powerful man, not only in the church, but also among the landed elite of the West Country and of the kingdom.[2] His appointment as bishop had taken place only the previous August, and this angry fulmination arrived in St Breock even before he had been enthroned in Exeter cathedral. The unfortunate vicar's existence was about to be disrupted by a bishop making a statement about episcopal power.

We know about the message because Grandisson, following the common practice of most English bishops since the middle of the thirteenth century, made copies of all his outgoing correspondence in a register. Bishops' registers

are full of similar letters, taking an interest in the conduct and income of the local clergy, haranguing them, insisting that they change their ways: this was the daily grind of administering a diocese. There was a certain amount of idealism in play, with grand references to ancient customs, rights, and the law, but the bishop was also acting in his own interests. He was the lord of a manor within the parish of St Breock, benefitting from his control of some of the land and labour there, and the parishioners had complained to him in this dual capacity. What was the substance of their grievance? The vicar appears to have been collecting 'mortuaries' from the parishioners, which were payments to the parish church from the goods of deceased relatives, ostensibly in lieu of tithes unpaid during life. It was normal for these payments to be made to the rector of a church, the priest who possessed the 'benefice' or living, but St Breock was served by a vicar, in other words a deputy (from the Latin *vice*). The rector had been given leave of absence to study, and his deputy was almost certainly trying to make his salary go further by claiming the mortuaries.[3] It is hard to say exactly why the parishioners were upset, but most likely they feared being asked to pay twice (to the rector as well as the vicar), or even three times (to their lord the bishop as well, in the form of a 'heriot' or secular death duty). Although England in 1328 was recovering from the famines that had struck between 1315 and 1322, and the 'great pestilence' was twenty years away, clergy and peasantry alike were always keen to protect their means of subsistence.

Grandisson for his part rarely did things by halves, and the rumbling menace of this letter is rather typical. It exudes the self-assurance of power with its evocation of the force of the law, the rights of his tenants, and the ancient customs of the parish. It is also a missive acutely aware of the impact it seeks to make, namely the arrival of awesome secular and spiritual power in the small world of a Cornish parish. And yet its actual substance reveals a very different power dynamic. The bishop was not able to act in as summary and decisive a fashion as his rhetoric implies he might have wished. He had heard a complaint and he feared his interests might be compromised, but he did not know the local context, and he had not heard all sides of the story. Instead he had to postpone his pursuit of the 'exigencies of the law' until he had heard from 'some trustworthy men unsuspected by either party'. Who were these people? What did they do? Why did bishops need them?

The answers to these questions will unfold in many directions in this book, until they have extended so far as to demonstrate the need for a complete reconceptualization of the medieval church. In short, the 'trustworthy men' (in Latin *viri fidedigni*, literally 'men worthy of faith') were predominantly lay (that is to say nonclerical) witnesses and jurors who made the medieval church what it was between about 1200 and about 1500. In 1200 the adjective *fidedignum* was already an old word, used in the first millennium to refer to the gospels and their authors, some saints, and other holy men, and in the

eleventh and twelfth centuries to refer to living informants by historians and collectors of miracle stories. But it did not yet form part of the discourse of church administration, and was notably absent from the vocabulary of Gratian, the twelfth century's most influential legal writer.[4]

Some clues as to their role and importance are contained in Grandisson's letter, and much of the evidence on which the ensuing interpretation is based comes from thousands of similar documents recorded in the registers of scores of bishops from across England between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries. The challenges of governing a church are revealed in Grandisson's language. We can perceive a tension between 'long observed' custom and the 'novelties' brought about by trying to make a living. At first glance custom is being praised and novelty denigrated, but a bishop's role and intellectual formation suggest something more ambiguous. He would have seen himself as both the guardian of a stable and well-ordered creation, and as the reformer of a fallen humanity and the builder of a church. Grandisson's recorded deeds show him adopting both personae. The power that bishops wielded in pursuit of these conceptual contradictions was both spiritual and temporal, deriving from their status within a hierarchy and their possession of frequently enormous landed wealth. But this did not mean they could act alone, and it was both in order to promote reform and to arrest change that bishops sought out allies in the parishes. They could not operate without such knowledge of local realities as only the locals could provide. And that is the dynamic that I shall explore in this book. It was a relationship that made the church.

The importance of the relationship between 'trustworthy men' or *viri fidedigni*, on the one hand, and bishops, on the other, is further indicated by the pattern of communication implied in Grandisson's letter. In it we see that parishioners petitioned the bishop and he responded by writing to the offending priest, saying that information would be gathered from 'trustworthy men', and that action would follow. There would also have been a report from this panel of adjudicators, and other stages of consultation and documentation, which survive less often, may have been undertaken. We can begin to see that governing a church was not simply a question of how forcefully a bishop could proclaim his authority. Even an expression as forceful as this letter had to acknowledge the gulf that separated the bishop from his subjects, and his reliance upon judgements other than his own. Furthermore, the requirement that his informants should be not only trustworthy but also 'unsuspected' hints at a nagging doubt about involving laypeople in the business of rule. These are all themes whose significance I will explore in the coming pages. Reading such letters at face value might encourage a view that the late medieval church was composed of institutions at two very different and separate levels: the diocese and the parish. But as this brief dissection of just one example has shown, to do so would be to miss the real location of institutional dynamism, which was in the communication and interaction between the two.

The institutional history of the medieval church has become something of a poor relation within the wider historical discipline in recent decades, despite, or perhaps because of, its importance to the origins of professional historiography in so many European countries. My purpose in this book is not to make a plea for the restoration of the sort of ecclesiastical history that dominated the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The legacy of that tradition, in describing organizational structures and the emergence of offices and record-keeping procedures, as well as in editing documents, retains enormous value in its own right, but its potential to inform the history of a living social world is limited.[5] The medieval church has been much described, but its existence and character little analysed.[6]

In reaction to the traditions of ecclesiastical history the past forty years have seen historians turn in droves to the study of lived religion as a changing, dynamic, varied, and above all human phenomenon. Influenced by the anthropology of religion and often conducted across the divisions between formal academic disciplines, this movement in historiography has sought to understand religious experience in terms of gender, age, status, language community, devotional preference, identification with particular saints or cults, and a host of subtle individual negotiations of the boundaries between heresy and orthodoxy. In this movement the subjectivity of experience has been a touchstone for authenticity, and the individual Christian—rather than 'the church' as an institution—has become the primary focus of enquiry.[7] During this time the practice of ecclesiastical history has continued, but it has not responded as much as it might to the questions and methods that characterize the history of religion. As a result the 'institutional church' tends to feature most often as a backdrop to the stage upon which more exciting historical questions are addressed. But this need not be so. A wholly new set of questions can be asked of the 'institutional church' if we just change our perspective, and thinking about that letter to the vicar of St Breock in 1328 has shown us what some of these might be.

What I propose here is a new sort of institutional history, one that could be summed up in the phrase 'a social church'.[8] This is a history that treats as inseparable the influence of actions and phenomena usually studied disjointedly as religious, social, cultural, political, economic, and institutional history; it is a history in which the impact and effects of institutional action are essential to explanations of its nature and meaning. As well as being an amalgam of clergy, bishops, law, and formal institutions, the church was simultaneously an identity, something to which people felt they belonged, and an endlessly shifting constellation of real relationships: their belief, belonging, and identity experienced in relation to specific people. Because the church meant all these things, it makes little sense for historians to study the institutions, the identity, the belief, the belonging, and their socioeconomic situation as if they were not all mutually constitutive. The starting point for analysis, suggested

by the example from early fourteenth-century Cornwall, is the observation that in deciding upon obligations arising from membership of a parish and the passage from life to death, neither the parishioners nor the bishop possessed the capacity to effect change on their own. Each appealed to the other for assistance, making plain their symbiosis and mutual historical development. We might say that both the character of life in the parish and the bishop's government of his diocese were formed by the interaction between the two. The clergy, though they were often central to the lives of parishes and the work of dioceses, found themselves caught in the middle of this alliance between bishops and 'trustworthy men'. Thinking of parishes and bishops as part of a 'social church' therefore necessitates a more expansive definition of 'institutions', seeing them more as the sum of multiple actions and habits of thought rather than simply as organizational structures. It is an approach heavily influenced by the sociology of interaction, which sees repeated patterns of human connection as the building blocks of all social phenomena, by the so-called 'new institutional economics', which interprets individual transactions as constitutive of (and not just reactions to) the 'rules of the game', and by feminist history writing, which sees patriarchy as a dispersed and adaptable institution without any single definitive location.[9] The ways in which this scholarship has affected my thinking will become apparent in the following chapters.

I will pursue this new history of the church by putting the 'trustworthy men' centre stage as the vector for communication between bishops and parishes, the site where processes of mutual formation affected both institutions. There will be two distinct, and yet closely connected, strands to my investigation. First, to take a cue from the keyword itself, the *fidedigni*: trustworthy people or people worthy of faith. What was the faith, the *fides*, of which they were worthy? What relation did it have to the faith that all Christians were supposed to have in God? What did it owe to legal conceptions of good faith, or feudal ideas about fidelity? How was it connected with the con*fide*nce essential to the conduct of everyday life? Why was this name used, especially when other terms were available to describe local collaborators with governmental power, as we shall see in Chapter 4? What were its connotations, and what meanings of faith—such a ubiquitous and malleable word in medieval culture—did it incorporate? Second, bearing in mind the distinction that Bishop Grandisson was careful to make between 'some . . . parishioners' and 'some trustworthy men', how did the act of discrimination inherent in trusting affect both parish society and the bishop's government of his diocese? Calling some people trustworthy was a choice with real social consequences. Who could be trustworthy in the bishop's eyes? Because the trustworthy men were living people, and not just a figure of speech, such questions have to do with material inequality, and I will ask how a bishop's attributions of trustworthiness (and by implication untrustworthiness) intersected with the multiple existing inequalities of life. Did the concept and the sociology of the 'trustworthy

men' merely echo constructions of gender difference and the facts of social stratification, or did they in turn affect those fundamental aspects of life? The faith that made the church was the trust placed in these men; the inequality that made the church was the social status that enabled them to be trusted.

It is fair to say that beyond a community of specialist scholars the medieval church has not enjoyed the academic attention that its interest and importance merits. To some extent this is because it is church history, but the fact of it being medieval history has also played a part. Medieval history is so often assumed to be irrelevant to broader historical concerns. Yet, as a phenomenon in global history, the medieval church is of considerable significance, being the complex institutional expression of a major world religion at a crucial time. It is worthy of study in its own right, but also as something amenable to comparison with other religious institutions or other governing systems. Indeed, by engaging critically with the massive and varied scholarly literature on trust in disciplines as diverse as economics and the philosophy of science, I hope that study of the medieval church can not only be enriched in itself, but also make a contribution to other fields of enquiry. Indeed a medievalist's perspective on the study of trust immediately disrupts a whole series of complacent assumptions about 'modernity' that have come to dominate thinking in the social sciences, and by coupling the study of trust with the interrogation of inequality, it is also possible to confound some of the more developmental and celebratory accounts of 'Western' history.

In order to reframe this study of the medieval church, each of the four parts of the book begins with a short introduction situating the discussion within the scholarly literature on trust, inequality, and a number of related topics. The chapters in Part I examine three components in the late medieval culture of trust, namely belief in God (Chapter 1), trust and promises (Chapter 2), and faith as an element in personal identity and reputation (Chapter 3). All of these fed into the contemporary meaning of *fides*; they had their distinct histories and implications, but they also overlapped with one another in conscious and unconscious ways. Part II identifies the trustworthy men, beginning with their emergence as a feature of ecclesiastical rhetoric in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Chapter 4), and the impressions that bishops had of them as collaborators with episcopal power (Chapter 5), before looking in detail at the identities, social status, and economic position of named trustworthy men (Chapter 6). The conclusions of these chapters then contribute to a discussion of faith and inequality in the parish in Part III, looking first at the ways in which trustworthy men could and could not be said to have represented their communities (Chapter 7). Inequality is revealed as fundamental to the church's reliance upon so-called trustworthy men, and I show (in Chapter 8) how the impact of this was felt differently in changing conditions between about 1250 and about 1500, in the varied landscapes of England and the wider British Isles. Discussion of faith and inequality is concluded with

an intimate history of life lived alongside the trustworthy men (Chapter 9), where the social capital accrued from collaborating with bishops is shown to have been a major contributor to enduring, and worsening, social inequalities. In Part IV the relationship between parish and diocese is looked at in detail from the bishop's perspective, describing the ways in which bishops thought about knowledge and testimony when dealing with hundreds of people they did not know and of whose motives they were suspicious (Chapter 10), before examining three areas in which the trustworthy men made the power of bishops what it was. These are the management of financial transactions of various kinds (Chapter 11), coping with change in the material world (Chapter 12), and probing relationships through subtle judgements about character, intentions, and belief (Chapter 13). In all of this we will see bishops gaining power by commodifying social relations for their institutional benefit. This leads to a discussion of the role of information and trust in shaping the late medieval church (Chapter 14).

Finally, before launching into the enquiry proper, it is worth pointing out what I am *not* doing in this book. In arguing that the church was made by faith and inequality, the two principal attributes of the 'trustworthy men', I may risk giving the impression that I am resuscitating two corpses of historical prejudice. One is that the medieval centuries were an 'age of faith', a naïve view of the period as a time of unquestioning faith, which has been inflected as credulity or piety depending on the writer's point of view. This position was attacked in the 1970s by historians who argued that Christianity was never more than a thin veneer of elite culture prior to the sixteenth century, and in some cases beyond. However, that revisionism was equally condescending towards the majority, who were cast as the bearers of folkloric traditions, their capacity for engaging with cognitive belief implicitly denied.[10] In opposition to both these approaches, I assume that faith was such a pervasive and multifarious concept affecting so many areas of life, that there was no-one who did not experience it and think with it in some fashion, but also that no two people had precisely the same conception of faith. Faith certainly made the church, but not in the way you might think. Equally, the European Middle Ages, and especially the medieval church, are frequently bywords for intolerance and ideological control, so my assertion that inequality also made the church could be mistaken for a rather totalitarian view of ecclesiastical power.[11] On the contrary, feeling like a member of the church did not depend upon the coercive power of bishops or inquisitors, and one of the leading arguments of this book is that ideas about belonging and belief were formed at every location within the 'social church', though especially where people of different social and cultural backgrounds had to negotiate one another's divergent perspectives and relative power.

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