

# Church and Climate Change in Counterpoint

An Ethnography of Environmental Engagements within the Danish People's Church.



Katinka A. Schyberg  
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Business IT Department  
IT University of Copenhagen

**Supervisor**

Steffen Dalsgaard

**Co-supervisor**

Cecilie Rubow

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## Abstract

In this thesis I explore what was at stake for church actors as the demand and desire to respond to climate change travelled in and through the Danish People's Church in the years 2020 to 2022. This thesis depicts a period in the life of this national church in which the problem of climate change became a shared matter of concern. What kind of matter it was, however, was disputed and in the thesis, I describe some of the efforts church actors made to define as well as respond to it. Based on material collected through ethnographic fieldwork conducted intermittently between February 2020 and September 2022, I describe the practices of various actors in the church – pastors, deans, gardeners, project managers, and energy consultants – as they engage in “greening” the Church. I show how grappling with the problem of climate crisis actualized other, already established problems within the Church and in Christianity – such as that of an unresolved state-church relation, a distant God, and an ambivalent Protestant relationship to the material - and revealed the tensions within them. I argue that engaging with climate change incites church actors to question, undo, but also retain some of the key distinctions that are understood to organize the Church. As such, I show how distinctions such as those between religion and politics, the material and the immaterial, the human and the non-human, and God and the world, are questioned, negotiated, and the relation between them potentially reconfigured. In order to describe the particular dynamics of relating and separating, retaining unity and difference, within this process of reconfiguration - this undoing and redrawing of boundaries that I argue takes place in the various greening efforts within the Church - I evoke the concept of counterpoint.

## Resumé

I denne afhandling undersøger jeg hvad der skete, da et ønske - og et krav - om at den danske folkekirke skulle forholde sig til klimaproblematikken tiltog i styrke i årene 2020 – 2022. Afhandlingen skildrer en periode i folkekirkens liv, hvor klima kom på den fælles dagsorden, men hvor der endnu ikke var enighed om, hvilken slags problem klima var og burde være – eller ikke være – for kirken. Baseret på materiale indsamlet gennem etnografisk feltarbejde udført i perioden februar 2020 til september 2022, beskriver jeg nogle af de bestræbelser, kirkelige aktører gjorde for at definere og respondere på klima som et relevant, kirkeligt problem. Jeg beskriver hvordan klimaproblematikken blev til noget forskelligt i hænderne på forskellige aktører i kirken – præster, provster, gartnere, projektledere, og energikonsulenter – og hvordan deres svar derfor tog sig forskelligt ud. Jeg viser derudover, hvordan håndteringen af klimaproblematikken aktualiserede andre underliggende problemer i kirken og i kristendommen – såsom et uafklaret stat-kirkeforhold, en fjern Gud, og et ambivalent protestantisk forhold til materialitet – og fremviste de iboende spændinger i dem. Jeg hævder, at en række centrale distinktioner gøres relevante og potentielt åbne for forandring, idet kirkeaktører begynder at forholde sig til klima. Således viser jeg, hvordan forholdet mellem religion og politik, det materielle og det immaterielle, det menneskelige og det ikke-menneskelige, og Gud og verden, gøres til genstand for refleksion og forhandling og at forholdet mellem dem potentielt re-konfigureres. For at beskrive denne ophævelse og gentegning af grænser, som jeg hævder finder sted i de forskellige grønne indsatser i kirken, benytter jeg mig af en figur fra musikalsk komposition, nemlig kontrapunkt. Jeg hævder at arbejdet med klima i kirken, såvel som kirken selv, bedst kan beskrives som kontrapunktisk, idet det er præget af flerstemmighed, konflikt, og en stærk vægtning af enhed.

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## Prelude: Spruce Complications



I get into the backseat of the black Ford Mondeo. Louise<sup>1</sup> and Camilla are already in the front seat, chatting and laughing. Two other gardeners, Susie and Randi, are driving in front of us with Søren, the churchyard manager, in his red Tesla. I hardly recognize them all as they have exchanged their usual dark green work clothes and practical braids with flowery blouses, bright jeans and sandals. Today we are doing a very different kind of work than weeding burial plots and cutting hedges into shape: we are going on an inspirational tour to three so-called ‘forest cemeteries’ in the east of Zealand so that the gardeners can be inspired in their efforts to establish such a section in a corner of their own, more traditional churchyard. As Søren had explained to me, burial sites with a more ‘natural’ look are popping up everywhere due to popular demand. People no longer identify with the hedges and white gravel of the traditional cemeteries, he said. Rather, as a response to climate change - he reckoned - people want more ‘wild nature’ and are therefore requesting to be buried among trees. But this tale is actually *not* about such new trends at the cemetery, but about something Louise is about to tell me as we drive through the landscape and pass an old medieval church:

“In there I won the championship in spruce decorations a few years back,” she says and points out the window to the small churchyard surrounding the church. “They had arranged a

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<sup>1</sup> I have out of simple anthropological convention chosen to provide most people who appear in this thesis with names of my own making - unless the appearances I refer to have been public ones. Although it might be easy to identify individuals for people are familiar with Danish church life, the anonymization will at least give people the benefit of doubt.

fantastic spruce day (*grandag*)," she says to Camilla. "Spruce day?" I ask, intrigued. Louise explains that a spruce day is when one churchyard invites employees from other churchyards to make spruce decorations with them so that they may inspire each other. "It makes sense," she says, "as we are all doing the same thing year after year, but in slightly different ways. It is inspiring to see the variations and share new methods or styles with each other." A few gardeners had mentioned spruce to me in my first week of fieldwork at the churchyard: "You *must* come back when we make spruce decorations," they said. This would be in November; we were currently in June. I had thus understood that decorating with spruce for the Christmas season was important for the gardeners, but I had not yet realized the scope of the practice. I now realized what many Danish citizens perhaps already know: decorating graves with spruce is something that takes place at *all* Danish cemeteries, *every* year. "It is tradition," Louise says, as she realizes my lack of knowledge. In their team, she says, 24 gardeners spend two months and 23 tons of spruce every year to cover the five churchyards they tend. They begin right after the autumn break in order to be done on the first Sunday of Advent, which is the unofficial national deadline for spruce decorations.

Embarrassed by my lack of cultural intimacy with an apparently important tradition around how we treat the dead in my own native country, I want to learn more. "Where does this tradition come from?" I ask. Louise hesitates and says: "Well, I think it has just always been like that..." She looks at Camilla, her senior, for help. Camilla explains that originally, spruce was put on the grave sites to protect fragile flowers. According to her understanding, priests were ahead of their time in terms of importing exotic botanicals, which had a hard time surviving the Scandinavian winters. However, by now, she says, the plants have adapted to the Danish climate and the tradition is solely aesthetic. Camilla appreciates the spruce covering on her mother's grave, as it would otherwise look quite barren in the winter; covering the graves with thick spruce, she says, gives the impression of protecting the dead from the cold.

"But I'm actually really tired of that spruce," Camilla suddenly says after we have been passing through the rural landscape in silence for a few minutes. "I have done it so many times now. And if you want to talk about climate change, well, then spruce is some of the worst! It is sprayed with huge amounts of pesticides and must emit tons of carbon." This is the first time any of the gardeners have raised the issue of climate change without encouragement from me, and I take out my notebook, implicitly encouraging the conversation to go on so that I might finally get some input for answering the question from my university colleagues about how the green transition of the Danish People's Church is going. But, despite the spruce-related carbon emission, Camilla and Louise agree, spruce will probably not be phased out in the near future: "It is such an important thing for the grave owners. It is what we get the most comments about," Louise says.



She describes how grave site owners are quick to complain if the decorations “are not as they should be”. Perhaps they have received too little spruce this year compared to last year or to the neighbor – they do after all pay for it - or they are unhappy that spruce has not arrived at their grave site yet. “And then you have to explain to them that it is because that beech tree near their grave site - which quite well could have been the reason why they chose that spot in the first place - is still shedding its leaves and that you have to wait until they are gone before you can put the decorations.” In fact, another gardener told me while we were brushing brown leaves off the grave sites later that autumn, it has become quite complicated with the spruce as seasons shift due to climate change. Often, not all the leaves have fallen off the trees by the time the gardeners should begin spruce decorating, which results in an unpleasant mix of spruce and decaying leaves on the sites. And on the other side of Christmas, the spruce turns brown quickly with the rise in temperature, even in the winter. We laugh a little over all the spruce complications.



“It will take a long, long time with the green transformation in the Church,” Camilla then says, steering smoothly out of a roundabout. Many of the parish council members are very conservative (“and old, haha”), she says, and imitates them with a stern tone of voice and a lifted finger: “We must do as we usually do.” I have heard this issue raised in other contexts as well: change in the church is slow, because the church is managed by parish councils, which consist of voluntary laypeople; the citizens with the time to engage in this work are often retired and therefore from older generations.

But then, after a short pause, Camilla adds: “But this reluctance toward change can also in a way be justified.” She takes another thoughtful pause before speaking again. “Because when people are in grief, they request that things are done in the way they usually are. In such a situation



people *want* rituals and traditions.” Like many other gardeners I have talked to, she explains that many people visit the graves of their loved ones right around Christmas. Spruce marks this as a special time when we remember our dead. Louise, who feels invited to think further on the subject of spruce, says: “Tradition is in a way also what legitimizes the Church, and what the Church should safeguard. It is about things being repeated every year and having rituals in place when someone dies or when someone gets married. This is something people can lean into if they experience tragic events – they need to have something to lean into, something steadfast,” she says. It has suddenly become a very serious and existential conversation. Louise shrugs. “So, it's a heavy boat to turn! But if the grave site owners become very climate-conscious, then it might be over with spruce.” She jokingly adds: “We could put up these small signs on the grave sites declaring how much carbon they have emitted.” We all laugh at what seems a ridiculous suggestion.

Camilla has been a little quiet. She says that she likes the spruce season, because it entails a different kind of work and rhythm at the cemetery than usual. It represents, well, just such a little “something else”. When they are done with the decorations, they usually celebrate it with open sandwiches. And then, she adds, as we drive into the parking lot at our first stop, it is also important that they are guaranteed work in the winter. Otherwise, there is a risk that gardeners will be hired for the season only, and she certainly cannot afford that. Spruce provides income for the cemetery and work for the staff. And perhaps this is another true source of the tradition: according to a landscape architect who specializes in cemeteries and whom I speak to later in my fieldwork, the encompassing spruce covering of Danish cemeteries was in fact invented to employ people during the Second World War, so that they would not be forced to work for the Nazis.

## Introduction



In January 2020, the ten bishops of the Danish People’s Church (*Folkekirken*) stated in the minutes from their tri-annual meeting that, being a public institution, the People’s Church should support the Danish government’s goal to reduce Denmark’s carbon emissions with 70% by 2030. The then-social-democratic national government was in the process of passing a ‘climate law’ in which they committed themselves to reach this goal as a way of manifesting their commitment to an ‘ambitious’ green politics<sup>2</sup>. The Church is not mentioned in this law, but it is nonetheless noted in the bishops’ minutes that if the goal is to be reached, the Church ought - in their opinion – to do its part.

This, however, was according to *them*. Because, as a former Minister of Ecclesial Affairs stated in response to a bishop’s engagement with the matter on an earlier occasion: “What ten bishops say in chorus is equal to the chorus of ten greengrocers” (Rønn Hornbech 2019). Hornbech’s statement captures a common understanding of the People’s Church as not being built around hierarchical authority but rather as being a ‘well-ordered anarchy’. The Church, I was told by my interlocutors in the Church, is not organized in a way that allows any one person, office, or organ to make decisions on behalf of the whole. Decision-making, like resources, is distributed through a decentralized structure along several different institutional axes organized around parishes, deaneries, and dioceses (S. Andersen et al. 2012). Hornbech’s statement summarizes the gist of the critique that was leveled at the bishops from many quarters within the Church after their announcement: namely that, as the People’s Church is not hierarchically organized, the bishops should not be considered as holding the authority to speak on behalf of the entire Church. In fact, as I would learn as the controversy around the bishops evolved, *no one should*.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2020/965>

Besides the issue of authority, the bishops' statement also created controversy because climate change up until very recently had been considered a *political* issue in Denmark; an issue that would mobilize and divide political parties. Most people with an opinion about the Church in Denmark do not want the Church to be political in the sense of being involved with party politics. As the Church is supposedly for the entire Danish people it should not create divisions among its members by making political statements or alliances. It should preach the Gospel. Thus, by evoking the Church as an actor in the fight against climate change, the bishops were unrightly 'hitching the church to a political wagon'. By doing this, some argued, they risked sacrificing the Church on the 'bonfire of climate politics' (*klimapolitikens bål*)<sup>3</sup>.

Environmentally concerned theologians and pastors – among them proponents of the network called Green Church (*Grøn Kirke*) - argued that the issue was not first and foremost political, but *theological*: God gave humans the responsibility of taking care of Creation (*Skabelsen*) and enact Christian stewardship (*forvalterskab*).<sup>4</sup> The Church should do so practically – sorting waste, planting trees, and so on – but it should also play a role in inspiring people to rethink their relation to nature and their fellow non-human beings, to encourage care, wonder, and appreciation of the material world. To this came a counter-theological attack: The bishops and other actors who were perceived to 'preach' green transitioning were criticized for promoting 'justification-by-works' (*gerningsretfærdighed*),<sup>5</sup> for pointing fingers at others' sinfulness, and believing that they could do good deeds to redeem their own. That is an 'un-Lutheran' approach to Christianity, these critics argued. Christianity offers no prescriptions for how to act or how to organize society, and sorting waste must never be framed in a particularly Christian register.

Finally, there were those who placed the matter within the institutional structure of the Church: If the government decides that the Danish State has a certain goal that all public institutions should partake in reaching, this obviously includes the Church. It is not a political or theological matter, but a matter of being part (in lack of a better wording) of the state. This, however, is continuously discussed within the Church, as a principled agreement has never been reached on the constitution

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<sup>3</sup> Høgh, Marie. 2020. "At fedte kirken ind i klimapolitik er ren og skær gerningsretfærdighed ved højlys dag". Jyllands-Posten. 21. januar 2020. <https://jyllands-posten.dk/debat/kommentar/ECE11891029/at-fedte-kirken-ind-i-klimapolitik-er-ren-og-skaer-gerningsretfaerdighed-ved-hoejlys-dag/>. Bramming, Torben. 2020. "Sognepræst: Kast ikke folkekirken på klimapolitikens bål". Kristeligt Dagblad. 14. januar 2020. <https://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/debatindlaeg/sognepraest-kast-ikke-folkekirken-paa-klimapolitikens-baal>.

<sup>4</sup> Gjerris, Mickey. 2020. "Biskoppers klimamål – symbolpolitik eller fyrtårnsteologi?" Kristeligt Dagblad. 20. januar 2020. <https://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/kommentar/biskoppers-klimamaal-symbolpolitik-eller-fyrtaarnteologi>. Fischer-Møller, Biskop Peter. 2020. "Vi skal passe på Guds skaberværk". roskildestift.dk. 21. januar 2020. <https://roskildestift.dk/nyheder/nyheder/arkiv-2020/vi-skal-passe-paa-guds-skabervaerk>.

<sup>5</sup> Høgh, Marie. 2020. "At fedte kirken ind i klimapolitik er ren og skær gerningsretfærdighed ved højlys dag". Jyllands-Posten. 21. januar 2020. <https://jyllands-posten.dk/debat/kommentar/ECE11891029/at-fedte-kirken-ind-i-klimapolitik-er-ren-og-skaer-gerningsretfaerdighed-ved-hoejlys-dag/>.

of the Church and its relation to the State (Christoffersen 2012). The Danish People's Church is the established church of Denmark, it is financially supported by the State and supports the state administration by for example being in charge of civil registration; its pastors are employed by the state, and it is mandatory for the monarch to be a member. But it is not defined as a 'state church', but rather as 'the *People's* Church'. That the Church is naturally included in the government's political goals, is thus also a controversial view - even if this argument was put to depoliticize the issue. Hence, when a particularly outspoken bishop was interviewed about the whole affair by the newspaper The Christian Daily (*Kristeligt Dagblad*)<sup>6</sup>, he did indeed also assert that there had been a misunderstanding: the bishops had not demanded anything specific of anyone. It was not that the Church *itself* should have a goal of reducing its emissions by 70%, but simply that the bishops thought that the Church should *support* the Government's goal of doing so. It is certainly not about top-down management, he assured the readers of the Christian Daily.

The controversy around the bishops' announcement marked the beginning of my fieldwork in the Danish People's Church. It marked it not only in the calendar, but also made its mark on how this fieldwork would turn out to be and what it would be about. Because the controversy indicated that things were about to change in the Church with respect to engaging with the problem of climate change – the issue that I had sat out to study. As the short description of some positions above conveys, it was no straight forward thing for the Danish Church to engage with – or even define - the problem of climate change in 2020. Much was at stake for church actors – the globe, the Church, and even Christianity - in defining and delimiting the problem in specific ways so that a response could be formulated in an appropriate register. The bishops were not the only, nor the first, church actors who found it necessary to address the problem of climate change on behalf of the Church – the organization Green Church (of which we will hear more about) predates them by a decade - but their announcement introduced and enforced the issue as one of concern for the entire Church organization, animating what church actors themselves call the 'well-ordered anarchy' in all its unity and diversity.

In this thesis, I explore the tensions and the transformations of churchly engagements with the issue of green transitioning as it played out in the years 2020 - 2022. I explore what was at stake for various church actors as the demand and desire to respond to climate change

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<sup>6</sup> Skov Hansen, Mette. 2020. "Biskop føler sig misforstået: Vi har ikke et klimamål for folkekirken". *Kristeligt Dagblad*. 18. januar 2020. <https://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/kirke-tro/biskop-beklager-misforstaaelse-vi-har-ikke-et-klimamaal-folkekirken>.

travelled in and through the Church<sup>7</sup> in these years where such demands and desires intensified and made green transitioning a shared ‘matter of concern’ (Latour 2004) for the Church. I had initially set out to study how knowledge about climate change was interpreted in the Danish People’s Church, and how it was translated into ethical reflection and, ultimately, action. Climate change, I had hypothesized, raises pressing questions for humanity about how to inhabit their natural environment and properly care for their resources, their fellow human beings, other species, and the future. Christian traditions have a long history of foregrounding and engaging with such questions, which, ultimately, are questions about how to live an ethical life. Furthermore, Protestant traditions - such as that of the Danish Church - are characterized by an ambivalent relationship to the material, the fleshy and the worldly, making the question of how to live ethically in the material world ever-present (Keane 2007; M. E. Engelke 2007; Opas and Haapalainen 2017; Bielo 2018). As such, a Lutheran Evangelical church that strives to become more environmentally sustainable, seemed to offer a privileged ethnographic gateway for studying how people engage with the ethical questions raised by climate change. How, I asked, is awareness about human induced climate change translated into action among actors within the Danish People’s Church?

I have explored this question through ethnographic fieldwork in stretches of varying intensity in the period between February 2020 and July 2022.<sup>8</sup> My fieldwork spans a period in the life of the Church in which green transitioning has, in fact, become a matter of shared concern that has both stirred up all the different - and differentiating - positions within the Church, and has assembled new alliances and collective projects. Because if the controversy around the bishops at the outset of my fieldwork had made it seem impossible for the Church to ever formulate a unified response to climate change, my fieldwork came to an end on quite a different note: in early 2022, a formal project called “The Green Transitioning of the Danish People’s Church” was launched as a means of facilitating a green transition of the Church as a unified institution. Something had indeed changed – the bishops, for example, went from being accused of sacrificing the Church on the political bonfire of climate change politics, to be part of the steering board in the national project, seemingly now without any accusations of politicizing.

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<sup>7</sup> Throughout the thesis I shift between addressing the Danish People’s Church as “the Danish People’s Church”, “the Danish Church”, and simply “the Church” depending on context. However, it is the same church institution that I refer to by those names. When I write “church” without a capital C, it refers to parish churches or churches in general.

<sup>8</sup> As I will explicate further in a later section, my fieldwork was to a large degree marked and shaped by the covid-pandemic. My fieldwork primarily took place between February and November 2020. I was then on maternity leave until October 2021, but checked in regularly with some of my key interlocutors and kept an eye on the various social media and news sites related to Danish church life. Between November 2021 and September 2022 I continued making field visits and interviews, but not full-time.

In my account of the efforts of various actors within the Church - pastors, deans, project managers, and engineers – to ‘green’ the Church, ranging from wilding the cemetery lawns, to replacing oil burners, commissioning carbon mappings, and rethinking the scope of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, I pay particular attention to how such projects evoke and trouble a number of key organizing distinctions in the Church and in Christianity at large and reveal the tensions and potentials for transformation within them. I show how tensions between *tradition* and *continuity*, *materiality* and *immateriality*, *religion* and *politics*, some of the key binaries at work in Danish Christianity and church-life were evoked and challenged as church actor grappled with the issue of climate change in the years 2020-2022.

The distinctions I here point out, are similar to those that in various ways and by various scholars have been delineated as typical of modern, Euro-Americans societies (Latour 1993; Law 1993). They are close to those dualisms of nature and culture, religion and science, human and non-human, and the secular and the religious, that Bruno Latour has argued constitute the ‘modern constitution’ (1993). I evoke them here *foremost* as emic, rather than analytical distinctions. It was through fieldwork that I saw distinctions being evoked between politics and theology, the material objects and the immaterial symbolic meanings attached to them, the wild nature and the cultivated garden, and how they were brought forth in the context of discussing the possible ways in which the Church could respond to the problem of climate change. The people I met in the Church – whether that be theologians, engineers, or gardeners – themselves talked about the relationship between culture and nature, religion and science, theology and politics, and so on, problematized and reflected on the way such distinctions organized their Church and society more broadly. They were keenly aware of such ‘modern’ orders, sometimes celebrating them, sometimes troubling them.

In this thesis I show how awareness of climate change in the Church magnifies and potentially disturbs such distinctions. I argue that the climate crisis brings to the fore the tensions inherent to these binaries by exhibiting how the supposedly separated domains are not as separate, nor as pure, as they are evoked to be. This, I argue, leads to different efforts within the Church: that of reinforcing them, ushering things into their proper domains *and* that of making active efforts to destabilize them, pushing for a thorough mixing of what was thought of as separate. Hence, what I describe throughout the chapters in this thesis is how the relation between different domains is negotiated, and how they in the period of my fieldwork underwent re-configurations. I observed such re-configurations in-the-making, and the best images I have been able to draw of them, resemble those of *contrapuntal compositions*.

Counterpoint is a compositional technique used in polyphonic music that is characterized by involving several, self-sustaining and concurrent melodic lines. In contrapuntal compositions the various voices oscillate between “moments of resonance and harmonization as well as dissonance and incommensurability” (Reinhardt 2015). That is, in counterpoint, voices perform and respond to each other with both pleasant and jarring effects. In social terms one might say that they both agree and disagree - and agree to disagree (Heywood 2015). Composer David Matthews (2006) renders counterpoint as almost a kind of democratic practice:

[Counterpoint] is conversation: it acknowledges the presence and participation of the other. Two independent voices may be played by the same musician, on a keyboard for instance, but they are more often given to two players, who must listen to each other. It is significant that counterpoint grew to maturity in Europe where the concept of democracy was born.

In this oscillation between harmony and dissonance, repetition and inversions, each voice contributes to a whole and vice versa. Each listen to the others, continuing its own passage without ever leaving the others alone. In musical theory the way in which the individual melodic lines respond to each other is described as “answers” that takes the form of imitation, echoes, and inversions. Inversion is, literally, the turning upside down of a melodic line. This implies that the variations in, and differences between, the voices are not sought connected by way of synchronizing them, but by way of clever counterpoint that follow strict compositional rules devised to maintain a careful balance between harmony and dissonance.

I am not very knowledgeable in the field of music and to consider my use of counterpoint as frivolous would be no understatement. However, contrapuntal composition evokes a structural figure that draws our attention to diversity *and* unity, disagreement *and* agreement, separation *and* relation, self-sufficiency *and* dialogue – oppositional pairs that nonetheless co-exist. The different voices within such a composition enter into various kinds of relations - inversions, imitation, alternations - much like what the actors that this thesis is concerned with do, but also like the terms – the before mentioned distinctions - with which church actors themselves are concerned. In the account, I offer you on the coming pages, such counterpoints – divergences, inversions, and dynamics of part-whole relations - take center stage, as I describe how church actors grapple with an issue that seems to overflow the domains and categories usually organizing the modern, and even to a high degree secular (Iversen 2019), church institution.

This point is important for the overall argument of this thesis, which is that when church actors navigate the terrains of climate change mitigation, they do so by a set of coordinates that, on the one hand, organizes their efforts, but on the other hand are revealed as being precarious

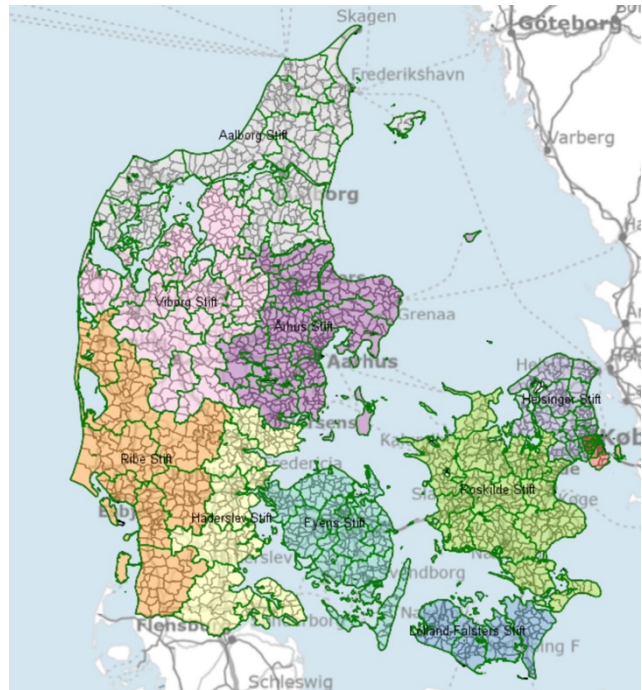
and open to change. In the thesis I show how the organizing distinctions between religion and politics, the material and the immaterial, the human and the nonhuman, God and the World, are magnified, negotiated, and their boundaries potentially decentered as church actors grapple with the acknowledgement of human induced climate change.

In what follows, I describe the research design and process that this thesis is the result of. This includes accounting for the fieldwork the thesis is based on, and for how I came to define the field in which it took place. I then delineate the analytical contexts and what has informed the questions and argument outlined in this opening section. Lastly, I provide an outline of the thesis.



## The Field: The Danish People's Church and its Multiple Crises

The Evangelical Lutheran Church is the established church of Denmark. This implies that it is written into the constitution as one of four pillars of Danish society, the others being the monarchy, the government and the courts of justice. The Church is made up of 2200 parishes, which are organized in administrative units called deaneries, and beyond those, in the eleven dioceses (see map). The parishes are managed by elected members of the congregation who make up the parish councils of which the parish pastor is also a member. By January 2024, 71.4% of the Danish citizens were members of the Church, and it is their membership taxes – which is collected by the municipalities – that primarily funds parish life and buildings<sup>9</sup>. Clergy, however, are employed and paid by the state, and are also overseers of administrative tasks for the national government.



In chapter 1-3 we will learn much more about the organization of the Church, its history, and its relation to the state, as these are all matters that came to matter as the Church grappled with how to respond to climate change during the period that my research spans. Because even if the Church is written into the constitution and that many Danes are members of it, there is a lot of different interpretations of what its role and nature is – both among members, employees and in the general population. This has to do with diverging opinions on theology and church-state relations, but it also has to do with a degree of opacity around how the Church is in fact organized and governed. As mentioned in the above, a constitution for the Church has never been made (Christoffersen 2012), and while formal arrangements have been made in a number of separate laws, it is hard for most people to obtain an overview and overall reasoning of the church organization. That this is the case was for example conveyed to me by a dean<sup>10</sup> when I interviewed him - for the second time - about the organizational structure of the Church by the end of my fieldwork:

<sup>9</sup> Membership tax rates vary between 0.5 and 1.5% depending on which parish one belongs to.

<sup>10</sup> A dean is a pastor who has taken up an administrative position as the superintendent of a deanery and undertakes this task in collaboration with the deanery committee that consists of democratically elected parish council members.

Katinka: The last time I was here, I obviously did not know very much about how the Church was organized. I have now had it explained a bunch of times, but I am still a bit confused

Dean: [laughing] Then you've gotten it completely right.

During my fieldwork I received a lot of different and conflicting explanations of how the economy, hierarchy, and decision-making processes worked from actors related to the church (parish council members, church tenders, gardeners, church consultants, etc.). Hence, while it is useful to have a few facts about the formal organization of the Church, its size and structure, to get a general idea of its scope and formal position in Danish society, in this thesis I explore how the Church was in fact explained and enacted in various ways in situations where the issue of climate change was made relevant. I had a lot to learn myself, as I was not very knowledgeable about the Church – of which I am in fact myself a (passive) member – and to conjure it up as an ethnographic object proved difficult in itself.

## Finding and Constructing a Presumably Empty Field

In the very early stages of my project, I visited an associate professor of theology in her office at the University of Copenhagen. I had been put in contact with her by my supervisor, who had asked a contact of his at the Faculty of Theology whether someone in the department worked with the topic of 'green churches' and would be willing to have a chat with me about it. An associate professor, Marie, volunteered, stating in the e-mail that she had just come back from an event, where she had debated – and critiqued – such churchly initiatives. As I walked over to her office at the University of Copenhagen – located in a building only 200 metres from my own university – I was still undecided on whether I should put my audio recorder to use as I would in a regular ethnographic interview. Was I about to interview an interlocutor? On the one hand I expected Marie – a trained theologian - to be someone who had an opinion on how Christians and/or the Church ought to deal with the question of climate change based on her presumed dedication to Christianity. As someone who had stakes in conveying to me how the Church could or ought to deal with green transitioning, I regarded her as an informant; as someone who was part of what I studied. In that case it was of utmost importance that I recorded what could turn out to be vital information. But on the other hand, it could also be that I was rather about to visit a kind of secondary supervisor for my thesis, i.e. an academic co-observer of the phenomenon I was setting out to study. In that case, it would be rather inappropriate asking for permission to record our conversation.

These reflections reveal that I was not so sure about what kind of meeting I was preparing for and that this had to do with my yet unclear understanding of how my field was in fact bounded. I was not acquainted with church life in Denmark, and as I was setting out to make it a field for ethnographic exploration, I thought of it as having a kind of border I could cross. I imagined ‘church life’ to be a kind of separate realm within society, even if I knew that its inhabitants were also part of society. I thought I was somehow on the outside, poking on its edges to find a way in. I found myself in the position of wanting to enter into the field, but not really knowing where it began or ended.

This is obviously a common problem in all anthropological fieldwork: how do we bound and perform our field (Marcus 1995; Coleman and Collins 2006; Candea 2007)? But even if it is a common problem, it is also always unique to the place and problem one is working with. In my case, I had set out to study distinctively *Christian* approaches to the climate crisis in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark – what difference, I had asked, does Christianity make (i.e. Cannell 2004) in engagements with climate change mitigation? I therefor considered the problem of delimiting my field to be bound up with the problem of discerning the boundary between ‘the secular’ and ‘the religious’. This made me confused about Marie and The Faculty of Theology, which is seemingly *both* – and both so institutionally and epistemologically. The Faculty of Theology at the University of Copenhagen is the oldest of the University’s six faculties. It is located at a large campus that it shares with the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Law. As part of the University of Copenhagen, it is state-funded and provides free education for Danish and EU citizens. In its own words, it emphasises ‘basic research’, academic freedom for its scientific staff, and has as its aim to provide “the general public and academics with an enlightened, critical and creative basis for reflection on fundamental and topical questions concerning religion, existence and ethics”.<sup>11</sup> Its aims are thus not the production of normative, religious claims about the world, but of scientific accounts within the Enlightenment tradition that assumes objectivity to be a scientific ideal. From a modern, common-sense perspective, the Faculty of Theology is, as such, a secular and scientific institution, not a religious one.

However, it is also the Faculty of Theology that educates those who go on to become pastors in the Danish People’s Church. A degree in theology from one of the two faculties of theology at Danish public universities (or an equivalent academic institution) is a prerequisite for entering into the Danish Church’s pastoral seminary where the practical aspects of priesthood are taught. The Faculty of Theology at the University of Copenhagen is thus regarded as the supplier of religious expertise and leadership for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark. When there

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<sup>11</sup> <https://teol.ku.dk/english/research/research-strategy-2020-2023/>

is currently a lack of pastors in the Church, church actors are lobbying to make the national government increase – and thus allocate funds for - the number of students admitted to the public university programmes in theology. Furthermore, when theologians-turned-pastors take office in a parish within the Danish Church, they are employed and paid by the Danish state. Hence, even if the Faculty of Theology is not, as such, a part of the Church, it is closely tied to it and many of its students consider one a natural prolongation of the other. This relation that both separates and conjoins - the Church and the university - is emblematic for the complex relations between Church and state, the religious and the secular, in Danish society, as will become evident throughout the course of this thesis.

In my attempt to delimit my field as a distinctively *Christian* field, I was confused about the theologians at the university due to my own attempts at parcelling the Church out from other, presumably secular, spheres of society. I was performing what Bruno Latour would call the ‘work of purification’ that characterizes the moderns (Latour 1993): separating the religious from the scientific, the Church from the secular university. This rendered theologians as ‘hybrids’ (ibid.), a mix of the two. From this perspective, Marie was both a co-observer of the phenomenon – Christian approaches to climate change - and a part of it. Where did that leave my recorder?

Things were not cleared up by my meeting with Marie. Quite the opposite. The first thing she said to me after she had welcomed me in her bright, spacious office, displaying books from floor to ceiling, was that my project was, really, a thoroughly *theological* project.<sup>12</sup> In my e-mail to her prior to our meeting I had explained that I had set out to understand Christian perceptions of ‘nature’, and how perceptions of human and divine agency and responsibility influenced interpretations of climate change in the Danish Church. Reading aloud from my e-mail, Marie said that these questions about the agency of God and humans, the nature of materiality, and the place of humans in relationship to both, were some of the most fundamental questions within theology.

Furthermore, she made me aware of an assumption she saw as underpinning my questions: I seemed to presume that something like a shared conception of the problem of climate change could be identified within the Danish Church. As though my research could provide me with one answer to the question of how God’s place and agency in relation to the material world was conceived of. As she saw it, she explained, there is as broad a spectrum of different conceptions of that as well as of the climate crisis among Christians in the Danish People’s Church as there is in society at large. There is no causal link between being a member of the Church and the way one

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<sup>12</sup> In fact, such interesting overlaps between theological and anthropological projects and concepts are the topic of a flourishing and sometimes ‘awkward’ (Robbins 2006) conversation between anthropologists and theologians (Robbins 2020; J. D. Lemons 2018; Tomlinson and Kabutaulaka 2020; D. Lemons et al. 2022). In some of the chapters of this thesis I - albeit indirectly – contribute to this, see especially chapter 4 and 5.

perceives the environmental crisis. Furthermore, Marie said, *neither is there one perception of what Christianity is within the Church.*

I must have looked a little dumb founded, trying to accommodate this realization of an imploded object: If I had approached the Danish Church as a site where I could undertake a study of how the climate crisis is interpreted and acted upon from a Christian perspective, then a church that did not agree with itself about what Christianity is or how to approach climate change would indeed be a difficult place to find an answer. Marie suggested that I should consider getting a theologian on board as a co-supervisor, and for the duration of our meeting she took on this role (and one might say subjecting me to the position of a theology student). She explained to me that the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark have a shared confessional foundation,<sup>13</sup> but that because the Danish Church is not fundamentalist in the way it approaches the Bible (*tekstfundamentalistisk*), nor its confession (*bekendelsesfundamentalistisk*), this foundation is made up solely of texts in need of interpretation. While this corpus does seemingly point out some fundamental truths – such as Jesus being the son of God and so on – much can be disagreed upon (such as for example whether marriage is in fact a Christian sacrament or whether or not an infant is saved only after being baptised, which is something that the Church is currently debating within itself without ever expecting to come to agreement about).

Ethnographic studies of the Danish Church confirms that church life is characterized by a variety of not always reconcilable interpretations of Christian doctrine. Based on her ethnographic studies of ritual practice and religiosity in the Danish Church, Rubow (2000) suggests that the Danish Church is one field, but that this field “is not at one with itself” (ibid.15). By this she means that the Church encompasses a diverse array of perceptions of Christianity and even of the Church itself various. Rubow tries to bring order to this variety by delineating two models of religiosity: one with an inclination to a literal interpretation of the Bible and one more inclined to a symbolic interpretation centring on narrative (ibid.). However, she also points out how most people she interviewed – pastors as well as lay members - move in and out of these models and seem to inhabit both of them simultaneously. They may ascribe to literal *and* symbolic interpretations and ways of believing simultaneously or slide between them throughout their life course – or simply throughout the week, she writes (ibid.175). Based on interviews with pastors in the Danish Church, Rubow argues together with theologian Anita Engdahl-Hansen that Christianity seems to be “enacted in diverse ways within the single religious institution of the Danish People’s Church” (Rubow and Engdahl-Hansen 2015, 72)., Rubow and Engdahl-Hansen suggests so based on their

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<sup>13</sup> The creeds are the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the Augsburg Confession, and Luther’s small catechism (Folkekirken.dk 2024)

analysis of how pastors sometimes and sometimes not – and for very different reasons – will allow the pre-Christian practice of placing horseshoes in the church during wedding rituals as bringers of luck. The authors state that although their particular analysis focuses on the horseshoe, they could have chosen a wide range of other objects – candles, music, the eucharist, God, even - that would also have displayed a “multiplicity of christianities” within the single institutional setting of the Danish Church.

What we cannot show, but nevertheless want to claim, is that this shoe at the threshold of the church is, in fact, continuing all the way to the altar. Take God, the Bible, the afterlife and therefor also Christ himself, and you will get entangled in strife, disturbance and controversy. Thus, rationalizations are continuously questioned, and few agree about what religion is, what Christianity does, and whether magic and religion are entangled in ritual practice. (ibid.74)

Besides there being several christianities within the church they also suggest that there might even be multiple Danish People’s Churches!

Returning us to Marie’s office, she tried to calm me, stating that the lack of an unequivocal confessional foundation does not imply that everything is ‘chaos’: there is actually quite a lot of system to it, she said, if one begins to discern the way people – pastors, theologians, church members - distribute themselves in the theological landscape. Marie then went on to draw up what she suggested I could consider a compass for me to navigate by, delineating two main coordinates, that of ‘immanence’ and ‘transcendence’. Theological positions within the Danish Church, she said, emphasise one or the other in relation to different questions, and theological conflicts often evolve around their specific configuration. I will get back to the distribution of such different theological positions later on in the thesis (especially in chapter 2 and 5). There is also a strong will, she said, to retain the Church as a unity so that it indeed can remain the established church of Denmark. Cecilie Rubow (2007; 2011b) seconds this, as she writes that despite fundamental disagreements about Christianity and the nature of the Church diplomacy and mediating forces are equally dominant:

When one church appears to be of such decisive value - a church defined by the most dominant parties as 'spacious' - diplomacy and amicable solutions are immediately sought, and self-restraint is called for as soon as conflicts have broken out. Admittedly, these strategies do not imply that attitudes change for that reason or that opinions are reshaped by each other. Rather, it is at the more structural and organizational level that diplomacy is often exercised, i.e. with arrangements and processes that make it possible to reorganize while retaining

exactly the same oppositions and disagreements as before. (Rubow 2007)  
(author's translation)

Hence, it may be that the Church is not a *homogenous* unity, but it is nonetheless a unity that is highly cherished and sought to be protected by those who have stakes in it – despite their disagreements. And, in fact, also because of them. Because Rubow highlights that since the Church's establishment as the People's Church, it has been an ideal that it should encompass and accommodate the various Christian convictions held by the people; it ought to be 'spacious' as Rubow state in the above quote. (I will attend to this term and its status as a paramount value in the church organization in chapter 2.)

While it seems self-evident to me now (and perhaps it has done so to the reader all along) that the Danish Church is not made up of one Christian perspective or conviction, Marie's comment nonetheless came as a kind of devastating surprise to me. Her comment implied that there was no such thing as a particular Christian way of approaching climate change, nor Christianity itself, within the Danish People's Church. Although I was aware of the anthropological proposition that one ought to speak of *christianities* rather than Christianity (Robbins 2003, 193), I had nonetheless thought that I could approach the Danish Church as a community subscribing to a particular kind of Christianity, which furthermore, would entail a particular approach to climate change. I had approached it as though the Danish Church was similar to the conservative Evangelical youth ministries I had studied in the United States in connection with my master's thesis where many practices evolved around *harmonizing* one's convictions with those of others (Schyberg 2014). Or perhaps as a church similar to those described by anthropologists around the world where Christianity can be said to be realized in particular kinds of ways (S. F. Harding 2001; Robbins 2004; M. E. Engelke 2007; Keane 2007; Mayblin 2010; Bielo 2011; Webster Joseph 2013; Haynes 2017) and where fundamental disagreements easily leads to denominational schisms (Bialecki 2014; Handman and Opas 2019). However, the Danish Church is of a particular kind due to its close connection to the Danish state and its aspiration to be the church for the entire Danish people. This entails that it since its establishment has held an ideal of being able to encompass the broad spectrum of theologies and Christian beliefs held be Danish citizens (more on this in chapter 3). This organizational – indeed national - ethos matters a great deal, as we shall come to see, for how the Church can deal with something like the climate issue. When this issue travels into the Church, in other words, it stumbles not only into a religious worldview but also an organization with is particular history and national imaginary.

I have offered you this account of my meeting with Marie, because it says much about the kind of object I understand this thesis to be about, namely a national Church marked by heterogeneity and national unity – by anarchy and order – and in which one answer to a question is never enough, because one always will be able to find the opposite viewpoint within the fold. It is an object that one pastor suggested to me must be ‘an empty object’ seen from an anthropological perspective, seeing that there is, as he wrote, not in fact “a religious community” to study, but only an institutional frame for practicing one’s faith. After my encounter with Marie, I began formulating my project as being about the *different approaches* to nature and to climate change mitigation within the Danish Church. My object had gone from being about a *Christian* approach to climate to the *different approaches* within the church *institution*. Early on, then, Marie attuned me to the differences rather than the commonalities within my field. It is, of course, not enough simply to point out heterogeneities - as Anne-Marie Mol and John Law reminds us (Law and Mol 2002) - we must take a step further and probe into how such complexity and variation is enacted in practice and how variation is dealt with. That I will also attend to the on the coming pages.

I also invited you to the meeting with Marie to give you a glimpse of the steep learning curve that the research for this Ph.D. has entailed - even if it has been undertaken by someone who is close to being native to the field, yet who is still so far from it. This thesis is a story about how I worked my way through the National Church of my own native country: through the well-ordered anarchy, its history and people, and found quite the opposite of what the beforementioned pastor had suggested was ‘an empty object’: namely a constantly overflowing field that it was impossible to ever really exhaust or sum up.

### **What is the status of the Church in Denmark today?**

This question was actualized during my fieldwork as an effect of the covid pandemic, which in Denmark went under the name ‘the corona crisis’. Because when the Danish prime minister ordered a society-wide lockdown on March 10<sup>th</sup> 2020, was the Church included? Should and could baptisms be cancelled? Funerals? Could society make do without such existentially important rituals for a while? Even if this question was raised in a specific and limited state of exemption, people could not help but to raise it up to be a larger question of the general status of the Church in Danish society. How necessary was the Church really? When the Church increased its transmissions of services on national radio and when parishes began to stream not only services but also other types of churchly activities, people argued that this also counted as collective religiosity and that the churches did not need to be opened, risking that they could harbor so-called high-contagious



events. The Church should by no means be where a deadly disease was spread.<sup>14</sup> Others were furious when, at first, the Christmas services were cancelled. What kind of society kept its supermarkets open but closed the churches? Surely a society without spirit, a society of ‘consumers’ not of human beings; a society that had lost its spirit.<sup>15</sup>

The various comparisons between the Church and other institutions are revealing of how differently the Church is perceived by Danes both within and outside the Church. In her comparison between the Church and supermarkets, the pastor cast the Church as special due to its spiritual dimension, something that no other societal institutions can offer. But then some argued that theaters and museum also cater to the spiritual, existential, aspects of human life and that if the Church were to be kept open when other places were closed down, then theatres and museums should as well. In a recent book, a group of established church scholars do indeed compare the Church to other ‘cultural institutions’ in Denmark in order to argue that such institutions offer society what “money can’t buy” and should therefore be preserved as important pillars of society (Iversen et al. 2019).

Such comparisons between the Church and other institutions in society serve to highlight the relevance of a church that has been said to be in ‘a crisis of relevance’ (Rasmussen 2010). What does the Church offer, it is asked? What difference does Christianity make (to awkwardly paraphrase one guiding question for the anthropology of Christianity, ie. Cannell 2004)? The Danish Church is slowly bleeding members, and many churches are so empty on Sundays that mass is cancelled, and churches are renamed as “event churches” (*lejlighedskirker*) – churches without congregations and regular gatherings. As legal church scholar Lisbet Christoffersen (2012) notes, the Danish constitution establishes the Lutheran-Evangelical Church as the official church of the Danish people premised on the status of it being *the majority church* (ibid.241).<sup>16</sup> When the constitutional act was made in 1849 the Evangelical Lutheran Church was indeed the majority church, seeing that in the period of absolute monarchy - which the constitutional act replaced – it was mandatory for all Danish citizens to be members of the King’s church in order to have civic

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<sup>14</sup> “Ansatte i kirker frygter smittespredning til jul: Opfordrer til at aflyse gudstjenester.” 2020. DR. December 18, 2020. <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/ansatte-i-kirker-frygter-smittespredning-til-jul-opfordrer-til-aflyse-gudstjenester>.

<sup>15</sup> Danish Broadcasting Corporation. 2020. “Sørine Gotfredsen advarer mod at lukke kirker til jul: ‘Du kan ikke sammenligne kirker med fitnesscentre og Røverkøb.’” DR.dk. December 18, 2020. <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/indland/soerine-gotfredsen-advarer-mod-lukke-kirker-til-jul-du-kan-ikke-sammenligne-kirker>.

<sup>16</sup> The Evangelical-Lutheran Church is established as such in the fourth amendment of constitutional act of 1849: §4 The Evangelical Lutheran Church shall be the established church of Denmark, and as such shall be supported by the state. According to Christoffersen in the initial draft of the constitution from 1849, there was an additional sentence in the amendment stating that it was the Evangelical-Lutheran Church “as the church to which the majority of the people belong” that was to be the established church of Denmark (ibid).

rights. The constitutional act turned this relation on its head, so to speak, as it stated that the Evangelical Lutheran Church was no longer the monarch's church - a state church, that the monarch could use as a political instrument - but *the People's Church*. From then on, it was the monarch that was required to be a member of the church of the people<sup>17</sup> and not vice versa, deeming the monarch to in fact be the only citizen of Denmark without religious freedom. But that it is specifically the Evangelical-Lutheran Church that the monarch has to be a member of, and that the state supports economically as well as symbolically, is premised on the fact that it is in fact the majority church (ibid.240).

However, since the 1970ies membership rates have been steadily decreasing - in 1990, 89 % of Danish citizens were members of the Church, and by January 2024, the number was 71.4% (Poulsen et al. 2021a). In recent years the number of people who consider themselves irreligious or agnostic, or to adhere to other religions than Christianity, have been growing steadily (ibid.). In some big cities, less than 50% of infants are baptized, and as Christoffersen points out, there is a limit to how long that can be outweighed by the 90% in the Northern part of Jutland (ibid.). Every so often the question arises whether Denmark should at all have an established national church that is privileged over other religious communities. The Church is, in other words, in 'a crisis of relevance' (S. M. Rasmussen 2010). Even if Christianity is still perceived by many Danes to be the natural backdrop for Danish society (Poulsen et al. 2021a), it is not quite as naturalized and invisible as it was before. It is in competition with other worldviews and religions, and as more and more people leave the Church, it is becoming imaginable it might disappear one day.

### **A Church in and Outside of Time**

When the climate crisis became a shared public matter of concern in late 2019, it came to intersect with the crisis of relevance. Because according to some church actors – some of whom this thesis is about - the two crises combined, makes a situation in which the Church has a chance to once again make itself relevant: by addressing the climate crisis, changing itself in the face of it and aiding all those who are trying to do the same, the Church has something relevant to offer contemporary people and Danish society at large. Prior to the intense secularizing efforts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it used to be so that the Church influenced, contributed to, and organized societal matters such as education, charity and health services. Before the welfare state institutionalized such things up through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was to a large extent the Church that took responsibility for them. It is often argued that the Danish welfare system was in fact built on Christian values and especially

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<sup>17</sup> “§6 The King must belong to the Evangelical-Lutheran Church”

on the parable of the good Samaritan: society ought to take care of those in need. The climate crisis – according to some of my interlocutors – requires a similar Christian approach and this implies that the Church ought to regain its societal engagement and make itself relevant in contemporary attempts to reformulate what ‘the good life’ and society ought to be, now that a new consciousness about the environmental impact of current ways of life has emerged.

Others argue that those who think this way are the very reason for the risk of the Church outdated itself. Society has always changed, and the legitimacy of the Church is precisely its stability and its commitment to something that is ‘outside of time’, they argue. Commenting on the recent abdication of Queen Margrethe the Second, the editor in chief of Kirke.dk, raised this point as he compared the monarchy with the Church: both of these institutions, he posited, are “hopelessly archaic” and “no one in their right mind would suggest establishing them today”. Nonetheless, he continued, 70% of the Danish population support the monarchy, and the same goes for the Church: 70.4 % of Danish citizens *remain* members. The reason, he argued, is that such institutions offer a refuge from ‘the modern’ – “a counter-culture to development, performance, self-determination, innovation, and digitalization” (Gade 2024b). Gade concluded that there is no rational or principled arguments for maintaining neither the monarchy nor the Church, because “the whole point of them is that they represent something that is the antithesis to the rational and principled: tradition, faith and spirit” (Gade 2024b). From this follows that if the Church wants to keep its relevance it ought to highlight its *universal* relevance - its Christian messages about the universal fundamentals in human life - rather than attending to those matters dictated by the tide of the time and by political battles (O. Jensen 2020). It is exactly by *not* changing that the Church can remain relevant in all times – also in the context of climate change where the Gospel itself may inspire even if it does not directly address the climate issue (ibid.). It is, in other words, sustainable to remain the same.<sup>18</sup>

This tension between embracing and resisting culture has been a recurring one in the history of Christian churches (Lardy, n.d.). In her anthropological study of Catholic engagements with environmentalism, Camille Lardy (2022) describes how the Catholic Church in France has always experienced a contradictory ‘double demand’ to both be ‘of its time’ and to ‘combat this time’ (ibid. 15). The climate crisis can be said to represent a similar kind of ‘double demand’ for

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<sup>18</sup> It is not that anyone – to my knowledge – reject that climate change is a real problem, but many actors within the Church see it as a contemporary societal and political matter and not a churchly one. All church actors I met agreed that it was a good idea to try to reduce the climate impact of church life, but to do was simply a part of being a responsible citizen or public institution and should not be articulated as part of any particular religious conviction. More on this in chapter 2.

the Danish Church as it incited church actors to ask: what difference does and ought Christianity and the Church make in Danish society in a time of climate crisis?

This question is in fact very close to the one Fenella Cannell (2006) opens one of the foundational texts for the establishment of an anthropology of Christianity with, as she asks: “What difference does Christianity make?” (ibid.1). Cannell posed this question as kind of disciplinary conversation-starter at a time where it had for long been custom for anthropologists to simply see Christianity as a “secondary phenomenon or top-coat that has been applied by external forces to the cultures they are studying” (ibid.12). However, Cannell encouraged a head-on engagements with what Christianity is and, importantly, with all the very many things it is. She suggested that one of the questions anthropologists ought to ask was “what, in any situation is Christianity, and how can one possibly discern its lineaments from that of the social context in which it lives” (ibid.14)? Cannell, in other words, encouraged anthropologists to attend to what might characterize Christianity – the religion that most anthropologists, according to Cannell, simply took for granted that they knew what was (ibid.3). However, Cannell’s question about what difference Christianity makes, does, as Tomlinson points out, have some limitations: when an anthropologist asks about the difference Christianity makes, she renders Christianity as something that comes “from the outside, as it were, and reshape things” (Tomlinson 2017, 2). If Christianity is “a difference maker” as Tomlinson writes, “then it cannot be the grounding text” (ibid). Tomlinson points out that from a theological point of view, Christian cosmology is, however, the grounding text, and ‘culture’ is what is understood to be able to make different differences (ibid.).

I would add, that in the context of studying a country that has had a national church for centuries and in which most citizens acknowledge their ‘culture’ to be built implicitly on Christian values, it also seems difficult to answer the question of what difference Christianity makes. Because how would one know what Denmark would be like without it? However, what I found during the course of fieldwork was that my interlocutors were in fact themselves very preoccupied with this very question: What difference, they asked, *can* and *ought* Christianity make? And, furthermore, what difference can and should – or should not - *the Church* make? When the Church was confronted with a demand to engage with the issue of climate change, such questions became key points of contestation - as also outlined in the opening section of this introduction. In what way was the Church supposed to make itself relevant in the context of Denmark’s green transitioning? Hence, rather than it being me, who in this thesis pursue the question of what difference Christianity makes, I trace church actors’ own discussions of this very question.

My fieldwork, then, came to be about how the Church tackles the dual crises it is experiencing: that of the climate crisis and that of being relevant to the society in which it is located. A third crisis, that of covid-19, brought this to the fore.

## Fieldwork and Research Design

Before embarking on fieldwork in the Danish People's Church I did not know very much about it despite the fact that I am, at least formally, a member, and often has gone to mass on Christmas day, occasionally for funerals, weddings and baptisms. I have been brought up in rather agnostic, if not straight forward atheist, families and milieus, and in the liberal-cum-leftist private schools I went to as a child and teenager the otherwise mandatory curriculum in Christianity had been substituted by readings of Norse mythology and the subject 'cultural history'. Hence, I knew little of the Church's teachings and nothing of its organizational structures.<sup>19</sup> I had no map on which I could draw out a well-planned itinerary, and so, in order to pursue my interest in how the Church dealt with green transitioning, I looked for a way to contact it. This was when it started to dawn on me that the Church was much different than I had expected. I had naively thought that I could contact something like a main office and ask where and how the issue of climate change was being dealt with within the Church. But the Danish Church cannot be approached as an institution in which someone has an overview of what is going on. On the contrary, one of the main tenets of the Church seems to be that no one should be able to know (and thus control) what is going on in the 2.200 parishes of the country. It is part of the organizational ethos of the Church that all parish churches are locally and (almost) independently run (see chapter 3). There is no head office and no grand overview. Hence, early on I learned that the Danish Church is very decentralized and that few people know what others are doing within it.

I then sought out practices, peoples, places, and texts that in one way or the other could qualify as having to do with churchly and/or Christian ideas of, and practices in relation to, climate change. I employed what is in popular parlance called the 'snowball-method': starting in one place and letting who and what I encountered lead me further on. This included for example participating in a conference about sustainability on cemeteries, a parish debate night about the UN development goals, a presentation by a pastor on the Church's (benign) reception of Darwin (and why she found that it was wrong), a two-day seminar (and annual social event for the congregation) about Christianity and Science, and the quarterly meetings in the Green Church board. This was also when my meeting with Marie took place (as described earlier) and I realized

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<sup>19</sup> This, I should add, is a rather common Danish experience – even to those who are members of the Church.

that not only does no one know what goes on in the Church in terms of engagement with climate change, such engagements may also be very different in terms of their (more or less - and differently - theologically informed) aims and reasons. Hence, I threw myself into a myriad of situations, people, and places that I understood to be more or less explicitly engaging with questions about Christianity and climate change within the Danish People's Church. I thought this would be the beginning, and that after a month or two, I would be able to design a more focused fieldwork. Five weeks later, the Danish Prime Minister ordered the first covid lockdown.

### **Lockdowns and Openings: Fieldwork during a Pandemic**

By now, most of us have probably forgotten what it was like living through the covid pandemic. At the time I am writing this, covid has been normalized, tamed, in Danish society. Most people have been vaccinated several times, and there are no requirements of being tested or of isolating oneself with a cold. But in the first year of the pandemic, which was also the year I did fieldwork, society as we knew it changed completely from one day to the other, changing the rules of most games. We stayed inside our homes, doors locked, bikes parked. We experienced and participated in the world through our media platforms more intensely than ever before in my lifetime. We saw footage of the empty streets outside; of foxes and squirrels in the big intersections of Paris; of other people caught in their homes and different circumstances, like us. For a moment we did not recognize our world. This also meant that although I was doing fieldwork in my own country, 'at home', many things were strange and unfamiliar to me – as were they to others. We all became aware of the traces we leave in the world and the potential consequences they may have for others (Schultz 2023). To care and relate entailed keeping a distance and we learned how to 'be together apart'. To meet other people once that became possible was not just business as usual: everyone had to tune into each other and to learn how to be together again. In that sense, doing anthropology at home was - in certain ways - marked by a sense of unfamiliarity.

The conditions for undertaking fieldwork were also changed radically from one day to the other. Anthropology is indeed, as Marilyn Strathern (2020) has noted, a discipline whose knowledge-production takes place through forging not only epistemological but also interpersonal relations. Lockdowns and social distancing, obviously, made this difficult and sometimes even unethically to do. I had not managed yet to establish close enough ties with anyone in the Church to be naturally included in anything and there were few opportunities to meet new people with whom to establish relations with. One of the things I have marked down in my fieldwork-diary is that I found it impossible to plan anything. Nobody wanted to promise that anything would indeed happen, and if they dared to, things got consecutively cancelled. Organizers of events in the Church kept the number of participants to a minimum, and if you were a stranger, you were unlikely to be

invited in. Many parish council members and volunteers in the Church were considered as being at risk due to their age, which meant that many employees – including pastors – in the Church had to be extra careful. The anthropologist too.

The lockdown and the following year of ever-changing guidelines and restrictions made it difficult to plan things in a more systematic fashion. Any hope that I had had of becoming able to make a well-thought-out research design, or even just a plan, was eliminated by the pandemic and the lockdowns it effected. As anthropologist Andrea Ballestero said in an online Ph.D. course, I participated in during the lockdown about how to carry on with one's research during the pandemic, to experience change and disturbances is part of any fieldwork, and doing fieldwork might in its very essence be defined as the “art of moving with the changes and constantly re-finding one's path” (Ballestero et al. 2020). Many researchers found their path online, moving relations, research questions, and methods into the digital sphere. So did I - to a certain extent. I made frequent use of the Facebook profile I had established for the purpose of research and followed the debates around how the Church should navigate the pandemic on that platform as well as on other media sites such as Kirke.dk and the Christian Daily. I also made extensive use of the online media archive of Danish media publications, where I was able to trace earlier debates about the Church's engagement with what had been considered political and/or controversial issues, in order to better understand the positions evoked in the context of the climate issue. Hence, a lot of the material for this thesis is in fact media material, which I in my analyses treat as voices from the field.

However, even if Daniel Miller (2020) argued in an inspirational video for Ph.D. students that doing fieldwork online is the same as fieldwork in any other place in the sense that it is equally about spending enough time with people to make it possible to see recurrences and patterns, I did not move my entire fieldwork online. While I agree that fieldwork online is as *valid* as any other kind of fieldwork, online fieldwork would in the context of my research project provide me very different answers to my questions about the Church and climate change than fieldwork away-from-the-keyboard. This is especially so because the Danish Church remains one of the least digitalized public institutions in Denmark. Hence, even if some churches began experimenting with online services and inspirational videos from pastors preaching by the sea or in their gardens, fiddling with strange camera angles and dealing differently with the doctrinal quandary over whether digital communion qualifies as a sacrament or not (a study worth pursuing on its own, but more so to learn about digital transitions than green ones), most other activities – such as meetings in various green church groups that I had planned to participate in – were not moved online but simply cancelled.

Hence, instead of moving my fieldwork online altogether and, consequently, change my research questions, I decided to continue being an opportunist and simply participate in whatever it was possible to participate in away-from-the-keyboard. In the before mentioned course, the anthropologist Anand Pandian encouraged us to recompose the problem we were facing to be: “What can be done now, under these conditions? And with whom?”. The conditions enabled, I gathered, co-presence with people outdoors. In the Church, such people could be found at the cemeteries. The cemeteries were never under lockdown due to their importance during a pandemic that no one knew how lethal would be. The cemetery tenders kept working and they were even quite busy due to the prospect of potentially having to handle more burials - and because we had just entered the spring where everything starts to bloom and therefore according to Danish cemetery aesthetics needs thorough cutting and straightening. I had on an earlier occasion met a gardener who managed a large cemetery and who I knew had an ambition to create a so-called ‘forest cemetery’ to accommodate a new desire in the Danish population to be buried ‘closer to nature’. He agreed to let me take part in his and his employees work for a few months (1,5 to be precise) in the role of gardener, which included weeding and decorating burial sites and urn holes, as well as participating in meetings and inspirational trips to cemeteries with the aim of establishing burial areas with a more ‘natural look’.

While the part of my fieldwork that I spend at the cemeteries has unfortunately not made it very much into this thesis, it had a decisive effect on what the thesis came to be about. Because to spend time with the gardeners weeding, decorating, cutting, gossiping about the leadership of the churches and attending parish council meetings to argue for the right to proper working conditions, provided me with insights into the Church that I had not originally searched for. Besides learning about various practices, dilemmas, and visions pertaining to green transitioning in cemeteries, my encounter with the cemetery tenders made me realize all the professional and practical work that goes on within and participates in shaping the Church institution. I was introduced, in other words, to what might be called the ‘professional’ Church and its population of not only gardeners, but also engineers, project managers, architects, historians, custodians, and communication employees. The Danish Church is a workplace with many different professions and where people are occupied with as diverse activities as the cutting of hedges, installments of heat pumps, budgeting, organ maintenance, and with the crafting of sermons. This great variety of professions and tasks is reflected in two recruitment campaigns from 2018 and 2020: "The People’s Church – a down to earth-workplace" (accompanied by an image of a gardener in the cemetery), and "The People’s Church – a workplace with high ceilings" (accompanied by a



picture of the inside of a large cathedral). These two campaigns capture very well the span of my field: it encompasses both practical tasks, dirt, carbon date, and high-brow theological thinking.

However, that I have studied the professional Church also implies that I have paid attention to everything *besides* what we commonly associate with church life, namely the religious practices undertaken by church members, individually as well as collectively. The congregation and its lay members are conspicuously absent from my account of the how the Church engage with climate change. This might seem paradoxical, seeing that in the self-understanding of the Danish Church, it is exactly the people, the congregation, that makes up the Church. But given the pandemic conditions that marked the beginning of my fieldwork, congregational life was hard to enter (as described in the above), and I had to find other paths. The opportunism prompted by the pandemic led me into domains of church life that I had initially not given much thought, and which came to shape what this thesis is about, namely just how many things the climate crisis touches upon in the Church and how it does not only influence *explicitly* religious practices and worldviews, but also the (religiously informed) organizational logics and practices of maintenance that uphold the Church as an institution. What I describe in this thesis is thus to a large extent that which takes place ‘behind’ what is usually at the center of studies of religious communities – its institutional infrastructures (ie. Handman and Opas 2019), so to speak. And this is in fact something that has recently been called for within the anthropology and Christianity.

In their introduction to a recent special issue on Christian institutions and denominational infrastructures, Courtney Handman and Minna Opas (2019) argue that such infrastructural aspects of Christian communities have been largely neglected in the anthropological literature on Christianity where questions of religious subjectivity, ethics, and mediation have attracted much more attention (ibid. 1001). In a somewhat ironic tone, they suggest that this omission might be due to the overly *material* nature of institutions and infrastructures. The irony is derived from the fact that much anthropological work on Christianity is concerned with how Protestants *themselves* have an ambivalent relationship with materiality (Keane 2007; M. E. Engelke 2007; Bielo 2018; Opas and Haapalainen 2017). Handman and Opas implicitly suggest that anthropologist have adopted their interlocutors downplaying of materiality and therefore disregarded the institutional and denominational infrastructures of Christian communities. However, Handman and Opas argue that institutional structures, material infrastructures, and denominational differences often matter very much for the Christians who engage with them – even when they sometimes tend to downplay it - and that by attending to such infrastructural tensions anthropologists may learn much about what matters to Christians and about how Christianity matters in the socio-cultural contexts of which it is a part (ibid. 1011).

To conclude, my fieldwork and the field it can be said to have taken place within took on its particular form for two different reasons: 1) the covid-19 pandemic, and 2) the Church's own decentralized but highly organized institutional structures, and the multiplicity of actors and perspectives it encompasses.

### **Listening to a Rush of Stories**

If my first step in fieldwork had been to try to map out Christian engagements with climate change in the Danish Church, the second step was to let go of the idea of a comprehensive map (which, if one reads the anthropological literature (Candea 2007; Fortun 2009) is in any case a hopeless effort). In doing so, I have been inspired by Anna Tsing's method of listening to "a rush of stories" (Tsing, 2015, p. 38). Tsing proposes this method based on her own acknowledgment of – or proposition about - the current state of the world. The world is fragile, precarious, unforeseeable, she argues. It cannot be summed up neatly, but appears, instead, "patchy" (), as she writes. This patchiness is revealed as the simplifying narratives that have kept it in order – those "handrails of modern stories that tell where everyone is going and, also, why" (ibid.2) - have been destabilized by the environmental, political and economic crises. This world, Tsing writes, cannot be grasped with any of the well-established, modern narratives at hand because such narratives are built on presumptions of progress. The kind of twentieth-century scholarship that advanced modernity's story of progress, Tsing contends, "conspired against our ability to notice the divergent, layered, and conjoined projects that make up worlds" (Tsing, 2015, p. 22). In her search for ways of stretching the imagination so as to be able grasp the world anew, Tsing points to polyphonic music:

Polyphony is music in which autonomous melodies intertwine. In Western music, the madrigal and the fugue are examples of polyphony. These forms seem archaic and strange to many modern listeners because they were superseded by music in which a unified rhythm and melody holds the composition together. In the classical music that displaced baroque, unity was the goal; this was "progress" in just the meaning I have been discussing: a unified coordination of time. In twentieth-century rock-and-roll, this unity takes the form of a strong beat, suggestive of the listener's heart; we are used to hearing music with a single perspective. When I first learned polyphony, it was a revelation in listening; I was forced to pick out separate, simultaneous melodies and to listen for the moments of harmony and dissonance they created together. This kind of noticing is just

what is needed to appreciate the multiple temporal rhythms and trajectories of the assemblage. (ibid.24)

To listen to polyphonic compositions requires, as Tsing writes, that one does not only listen for a main melody, one main narrative, but pays attention to several melodies of equal importance that are played simultaneously. To conceive of the world as polyphony entails attending to diversity rather than to search for simplicity, for a hero, a villain, or any other one explanation. To capture a world that cannot be neatly summed up, Tsing invents this method, a form, that does not aspire to any totalities.

The idea that listening to and telling a rush of stories can be conceived of as a method; and a method that is particularly well-suited to convey a situation or a world that can be conceived of as “polyphonic”. As sites and venues for fieldwork were closed down and I had to find other paths, I came to include more and more surprising things in what I called my field. My material is, indeed, made up of a “rush of stories” from a diverse array of locations as I was not able to stay for very long in any one place but had to continuously move around. The stories I have constructed out of interviews and interactions with church actors are not grounded in the same practices, nor in the same view of the Church, climate change, or Christianity. Each of the chapters attend to very different aspects of church life. However, there is a point in having them side by side. The point of having them side by side is to show that the climate crisis touches on so many different things in the Church and that it, as such, overflows what is usually kept aside in studies of religious communities. Furthermore, when attending to climate change in this way – as something that overflows - the Church also shows itself to do so: by approaching the study of a church with an attention to climate change, the Church comes into view as a site of various types of engagements, practices and perspectives. Besides being caused by the pandemic, the patchy polyphonic – and indeed contrapuntal - nature of my fieldwork and the material it produced, is also an effect of the nature of the Danish Church itself. The Danish Church is – as discussed in the above - a place with no central organization and thus a lot of freedom for its constituent part to make choices for themselves. I became interested in describing the diversity that this kind of church organization entails - to stay with the Church as indeed a polyphony of christianities, practices, perceptions, and places. Hence the material I have gathered for this thesis does indeed seem “polyphonic.” This is due both to the way I have conducted fieldwork (during a pandemic) and to the way the Danish Church is organized and conceived of (i.e. as a well-ordered anarchy).

Besides the two months of intense participant observation at the cemetery, and a five-day long course on eco-theology at the Centre for Continuing Education for Pastors within the Danish Church that took place at a refugium in the countryside of Jutland, I did not spend time on a day-to-day basis in any particular locality. As described in the above, the covid lockdowns initially made this impossible, but it was also that I along the way picked up an interest in the heterogeneity of the Danish Church. Rather than being interested in how a single congregation or organization dealt with green transition, I became interested in how the issue of climate change was diffracted as it travelled through the Church and how it took on very different meanings and had very different implications at various sites within the organization. I, in other words, came to ‘perform’ my field (Coleman and Collins 2006) differently, so that it was not defined by place and locality, but rather by the institutional borders of the Church and the internal contestations over its core that the climate issue incited. There were, however, recurring activities that I took part in, of which I will list a few: I took part in four quadrennial meeting in the steering group of the organization Green Church and meetings in two other local Green Church groups learning about the visions and the vistas for green transitioning within the churches; I went on about 20 visits with energy consultants who had been hired by deaneries to asses and optimize the energy use in specific parish churches and buildings (and a single crematorium) around the country; I participated twice in the annual, professional-cum-academic conference on Danish cemeteries, listening to presentations about biodiversity in church dykes and the recycling of grave monuments and also offering a presentation myself on the tension between continuity and change in decoration practices; I took part in five meetings in a local parish reading group dedicated to the subject of “nature” and long confusing discussions about the aesthetics of religious experience; I attended a Green Church conference gathering various representatives from Green Churches who aired different opinions about what that at all meant; a seminar on ‘public theology’ that also gathered church actors with different opinions on what *that* meant; a week-long course for pastors about eco-theology that touched upon pilgrimage, Hartmut Rosa, and the crafting of sermons; and in many more activities that will appear in the stories I will tell throughout the thesis. Furthermore, I have undertaken 37 formal, semi structured interviews with 7 pastors; 4 deans; 1 bishop; 2 energy consultants; 2 cemetery gardeners; 2 diocesan administrators; 1 expert on church legislation; 1 project manager for project The Green Transitioning of the People’s Church (FGO); 1 secretary of Green Church; 1 board member and 1 political strategist from the National Association of Parish Councils (*Landsforeningen af Menighedsråd*), 2 trained architects who served as official cemetery consultants, and 1 historian, who served as the official church consultant from the National Museum. Several of them I interviewed twice in sessions ranging from one to three hours of length.

And then, of course, I had innumerable conversation with people in the context of events such as the ones listed above.

As this list displays, I sought out people who took up quite different positions in the Church and who held different kinds of expertise and knowledge, as well as stakes in how the churches would go about their engagements with climate change mitigation. However, I did not give equal weight to everyone in the Church. As I became interested in how the Church organized the issue of Green Transitioning – theologically as well as institutionally – I primarily followed actors who engaged explicitly and actively with this very issue. The voices who are critical of environmental initiatives within the Church are not as well represented as others but appear mainly through the depictions those I have talked to have provided me with and materials from the public debate – opinion pieces, media appearances and other publications. While I sought them out with different objectives in mind, I presented my overall ambition to them in a similar way: namely, that what I wanted to learn about how the Church responded to the problem of climate change. As such I might have transferred my own interest in ambivalence and dilemmas to my interlocutors. At least, in all the conversations I had, people seemed to make a virtue out of always being able to argue for the opposite position of the one they were just defending. If they took a stance on something, they were keen on also rendering the opposite position plausible. This is where the polyphony showed to be, in fact, a complicated contrapuntal composition.

I have come to see my fieldwork as pursuing a number of parallel and interconnected paths in a topographically irregular landscape: One path is populated by various Green Church-working groups and their promotion of a holistic and explicitly Christian approach to climate change (see especially chapter 2); one by debaters and political controversies in the Christian public (defined loosely as discussions taking place in *The Christian Daily*, on Facebook, at public seminars and conferences, and at *kirke.dk*) (chapter 1, 2, 3 and 5); one by energy consultants, heating pumps, and others engaged in energy optimization projects within a Church where the materiality of church objects must never outdo the immaterial meanings they are supposed to carry (chapter 4); and, finally, one by pastors and their attempts to articulate an eco-theology fit for a time of climate crisis (chapter 5). Hence, my field is not defined as one locality, nor one group of people united by a one point of view, but spans a wide range of people, practices, and points of views. What brings them together in this thesis, is that they explicitly engage with how to continue and potentially change church life in the context of climate change. As such, what this thesis presents is a study of a polyphony of different people, perceptions, practices, and positions that exist in the Danish People's Church when it comes to the issue of climate change.

In the next part of this introduction, I describe what I mean when I suggest that this can best be described with a particular concept derived from the composition of polyphonic music, namely counterpoint.

## Analytical Contexts and the Research Imagination

As Kirsten Hastrup (2003) writes, the empirical world that one encounters as an anthropologist does not lend itself easily to delimitation (ibid.15). People and ideas move and change, and new connections can always be forged (ibid.). Thus, Hastrup states, it is only by delimiting the empirical that one can obtain some kind of cohesion in one's project. In order to see something clearly, in other words, one has to cut some things away and cultivate a more intense attentiveness to others. One way of delimiting one's attention is to place one's project in relation to current or ongoing discussions within the existing literature (Gammeltoft and Bundgaard 2018, 28). To contextualize, in other words (ibid.) This is what I set out to do in the next four sections, where I delineate various discussions pertaining to climate change and Christianity that frame my own engagements with the Danish Church and the issue of climate change.

However, before delving into these thematical and analytical discussions, I would like to briefly explicate how I understand the work such a move is performing. Contextualization is, of course a staple in anthropological analysis (Dilley 1999) and is generally understood to be the act of interpreting an empirical object by drawing connections between it and its surroundings, thematically and regionally (ibid.), or, in the traditional anthropological monograph, between the various institutions and logics within a given culture (Strathern 2020, 10). To trace connections – to undertake 'contextualizing moves' as Roy Dilley calls it - entails drawing forth certain aspects of the object one wants to know about; to 'delimit' it, as I quoted Hastrup for calling it in the above. However, as Dilley also draws attention to, even if contexts are often treated as given or as self-evident constructs, which connections are made is a matter of interpretative choice. In other words, to contextualize is not a matter of pointing to already existing contexts, but of *performing* them - and of doing so with certain interpretive goals in mind (ibid.). Marilyn Strathern describes this slightly differently as she suggests that it is not even only that a certain ethnographic object of study is *interpreted* through certain contextualizing moves, but that such objects *emerge through them*. By this she means that the anthropological entities described in the work of anthropologists are not something that is already there, waiting to be discovered, but that they only appear in the presence of the 'specifying apparatus' of the anthropologist herself (Strathern 2020, p18). In evoking this term – 'specifying apparatus' - Strathern is drawing on (but not synchronizing herself with) Barad's

argument about phenomena and apparatuses, and how the latter in fact produce the former (Barad 2007). Barad draws this conclusion from her elucidation of Niels Bohr's experiments that revealed how light can appear as either waves or particles depending on which experimental apparatus it is diffracted through. This implies, according to Barad, that phenomena (light-as-particles or light-as-waves) are not *mediated* through apparatuses but have in fact no existence without them (Strathern 2020, p18). As such, phenomena are, according to Barad, the effect of "intra-acting agencies" (ibid). Taking off from this, Strathern suggests that making an ethnographic object conjures up an anthropological entity that can be compared to what Barad calls a phenomenon (Strathern 2020, 17).<sup>20</sup> That is, when anthropologists provide descriptions of phenomena in the world – Melanesian gift economies or the moral torment of newly converted Christians, for example – such descriptions can be conceived of as the effect of 'intra-acting agencies': of the encounter between the anthropologist's perceptual tools and those of culture she is confronted with *and* the way in which these come to intra-act and extend each other (Strathern 1991, 55). In *Partial Connections* (1991), Strathern evoked the image of a cyborg to describe a similar conception of how the anthropological account and the anthropologist herself is a "integrated circuit between parts that work as extensions of another"<sup>21</sup> (ibid.55). Anthropological writings, as I understand Strathern here, are the effect of multiple (contrapuntal) conversations happening at the same time – between anthropologist and field, and within the anthropologist herself and the various perceptual tools she holds.

Casper Bruun Jensen (2021) makes what Strathern writes slightly more concrete as he suggests that the accounts provided by anthropologists and STS scholars like himself, are the result of a cross-reading of 'sets of materials', of which some are 'data' and some are 'theory'. According to him, the ethnographic research process consists in having various encounters with other people's ways of "giving shape to the world" (ibid.125) – and such people, he argues, are both those one meets in the field and in the readings undertaken at the desk. Hence, inspired by Strathern, Jensen suggests that we perceive the problems and views articulated by people in the

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<sup>20</sup> The 'specifying apparatus' that Strathern is concerned with in the context of making this argument is the anthropological concept of 'relations' and the way it conjures up the anthropological entity per excellence: namely 'social relations' (ibid ref). Hence, while Barad's project is distinctively anti-discursive and entails a rejection of "concept" as an overly human-based notion, Strathern exclaims that she has "work for the concept" (ibid. 17). In Strathern's view, concepts are apparatuses - in Barad's sense - as they can be considered devices "through which people organize their thoughts and give accounts of a world populated by other thinkers and speakers" (ibid.17). As such, Strathern positions concepts (in not only a discursive form) at the heart of what makes up people's worlds – including those of anthropologists themselves.

<sup>21</sup> "The anthropologist's writings form a kind of integrated circuit between parts that work as extensions of another. As a field of extensions, the cyborg moves without travelling, as one might imagine the effect of jumping in one's thoughts from one Highland society to another or from one aspect of social life to another. The circuit still seems centered, however, on the perceptual tools of the anthropologists" (ibid.55).

field and by the authors of academic texts to be on the same level, so to speak, in the sense that one is not supposed to *explain* the other, but that each of them can extend one another in the researcher's imagination. He suggests describing the author, who eventually produces the text, as writing from a particular 'research imagination' (ibid.129), which describes the particular way of giving shape to the world that has taken shape through the process of performing such cross-readings. In this way of understanding analysis, what is context and what is contextualized, what is foreground and background, becomes less clear. As Strathern (2020) writes, it is widely acknowledged in anthropology "that what gets reported as analytical frameworks (method and theorizing implied) invariably contextualize what gets reported in the first place—we can call them analytical contexts" (ibid.18).

When I in the following sections outline the analytical contexts for the description of the Church and its climate engagements that I offer in this thesis, I understand this as a way of conveying to you how I have come to arrive at just this description. The literatures I delineate, and their way of giving shape to the world, have informed how I have come to understand what I learned about the Church through fieldwork. This also worked in the opposite direction: what I encountered in the field, extended the readings I was undertaking. This process produced a research imagination – a way of giving shape to the sets of materials explored in the process of research – that is attentive to *contrapuntal dynamics*. Hence, after having delineated the analytical contexts in the next four sections, I proceed to outline what has come to be the guiding analytical prism for the thesis, namely the contrapuntal.

### **Cultural Climate Change**

Within the past two decades, anthropology has become acutely aware of and attuned to the problem of climate change as a relevant anthropological topic (Barnes et al. 2013; Susan Alexandra Crate and Nuttall 2016; Susan A. Crate and Nuttall 2009; 2023; Hylland Eriksen 2021; Wit and Haines 2021). As Hylland Eriksen (2021) notes, it is not so that anthropologists have not previously been aware of the interrelations between humans and their environment, nor that they have not taken account of the damaging effects humans may have had on it, but what defines more recent engagements with the environment has been the realization of how thoroughly humans are shaping – and altering – the very planetary conditions for the eco-systems of which they are a part (ibid). In 2000 the engineer and atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000) coined the term the "Anthropocene" to describe our current geological epoch as one in which humans - *anthropos* in Greek - have altered the planet so much that it is today constituted by human activities through and through. The term "the Anthropocene"



is thus meant to demarcate a new planetary epoch in which the bio-geophysical composition and processes of the earth are shaped and fueled predominantly by human activity (ibid.). Although the notion of the Anthropocene originated in the natural sciences, the term has since travelled into the humanities and social sciences where it is used as an entry point to studying how climate change is not only a geo-physical problem that must be solved by the natural and technical sciences, but also a thoroughly cultural problem that ought to be attended to by anthropologists (Barnes et al. 2013; Susan Alexandra Crate and Nuttall 2016; Eriksen 2016; Hulme 2017b). Such an approach is necessary, scholars argue, because the problem of climate change too often is delegated to the natural and technical sciences, whereby analyses of causes as well as solutions are stripped of cultural contextualization (Hulme 2009; 2017b; Callison 2014).

This lack of cultural contextualization was, in fact, also what motivated the research project “Socio-Cultural Carbon” (SOCCAR) that this Ph.D. project has come out of. The SOCCAR project, formulated and spearheaded by Steffen Dalsgaard, was devised to provide ethnographic insights on how carbon emission data are interpreted and translated into action – or not – by people in different socio-cultural contexts. What makes people act on data, the SOCCAR project asked. And how come people in the global north, who have so much knowledge about human induced climate change, continue to partake in accelerating it? The project suggested that answering such questions require an anthropological understanding of how people’s social, cultural and material relationships play a significant role in how they conceive of and act upon carbon data. The approach we – the project’s participants – took, thus echoes Crate and Nuttall when they argue in the first of their three edited collections on ‘Anthropology and climate change’ (2016, 2021, 2023), that climate change ultimately ‘is about culture’ (2016:12). By this they mean that climate change is the result of how certain cultures have developed (i.e. ‘consumer culture’); that it requires cultural change to mitigate it; and that interpretations and responses to it are shaped by local worldviews and indigenous knowledges about climate change (2023). Climate change is, in other words, not *one* unequivocal, global phenomenon, but takes various forms as it is experienced, interpreted, and responded to in different socio-cultural contexts. As touched upon earlier, Anna Tsing invents a name for this situation of multiplicity: the “the patchy Anthropocene” (). The Anthropocene is a global phenomenon – and important to recognize it as such – but it is a thoroughly ‘patchy’ one, in which a multiplicity of lifeforms is destroyed and produced (ibid.). Drawing on a metaphor from music theory, Tsing suggests conceiving of this patchy Anthropocene as a “polyphony,” and encourages us to cultivate the ability to listen to many voices simultaneously.

Such a polyphony of voices can indeed be found within what has been called ‘climate change reception studies’ (Rudiak-Gould 2011; Wit and Haines 2021), in which anthropologists -

alongside human geographers and environmental sociologists – describe how climate change takes particular forms - environmentally as well as cosmologically - in particular localities (Susan A. Crate and Nuttall 2009; Susan Alexandra Crate and Nuttall 2016; Susan A. Crate and Nuttall 2023; Hastrup and Rubow 2014; Dürr and Pascht 2017). Such studies are often focused on small-scale societies and aim to excavate cultural logics and worldviews that make people interpret and respond to climate change in different and particular ways – especially in ways that are not solely based on the natural sciences (Chua and Fair 2019). According to Crate and Nuttall (2023), anthropology has an important contribution to make in producing insights into how “people perceive and make sense of their surroundings, how they create their worlds of social relatedness, and how they nurture multi-species relations” (ibid.). Practices such as global climate engineering, decarbonization projects, and the redesigning of economic systems are certainly important, but according to Crate and Nuttall they are often driven by governments and transnational organs that are not necessarily in tune with how most people “imagine their own futures at the level of household, community, place, and region” (ibid.). Such initiatives thus neither take into account the cultural values and human practices that are causing the problem in the first place (mostly, according to the authors, in the Global North), nor those that inform how people perceive and respond to it, and from whom there might be something to learn (for example indigenous peoples in the Global South) (ibid.). Echoing this, Mike Hulme argues that for climate policy to be effective, it has to “tap into intrinsic, deeply held values and motives” (Hulme 2017a). This is where religion, according to Hulme, can play a role: while economic, scientific and technical analyses of climate change can tell us about the mechanisms of climate change, they cannot tell us what might constitute ‘the good life’ in the transition to a different kind of society. If people are to be mobilized to change their lives, religions may be what will provide the ‘values’ that will enable such a change (Fair 2018, 4).

This, in fact, seems to be one of the main motivators for many studies of how specifically *religious* communities approach climate change. Hence, in a sub-field of climate change reception studies, anthropologists have attended to how religious worldviews influence how people understand and respond to climate change (Fair 2018; Rudiak-Gould 2011; Haluza-DeLay 2014; Rubow and Bird 2016; Bertana 2020; Kempf 2020). On the one hand, such studies are guided by the path Hulme delineates as they examine how religious communities interpret and mobilize responses to climate change based on the particular ‘spiritual resources’ they are perceived to hold (Rudiak-Gould 2009; Bomberg and Hague 2018; Clissold et al. 2023; Fair 2018). On the other hand, studies of religious receptions of climate change have been carried out to understand climate change *skepticism* – especially the kind that is prevalent among the outspoken Christian right in the

US (Edvardsson Björnberg and Karlsson 2022; Eckberg and Blocker 1989; Peifer, Ecklund, and Fullerton 2014), but also among Christians in other parts of the world (Taylor 1999; Donner 2007; see also Fair 2018). The targeting of Christianity as a source of climate change denial is widespread and takes its clue from, among others, Lynn White's (1967) critique of Christianity as entailing an anthropocentrism that legitimizes human exploitation of nature (which I will get back to in chapter 5). But according to Fair (2018), it also stems from the fact that many scholars working on the topic of climate change and religion presume that religious worldviews are antithetical to scientific explanations of climate change and that they therefore can potentially be an impediment to climate change mitigation efforts (ibid. 5). Such an approach has then incited others – including Fair herself (2018) - to show how religious worldviews might in fact not be irreconcilable with climate science (Rubow 2009; Rudiak-Gould 2009; Sheldon and Oreskes 2017), and, furthermore, how it is important to take seriously religious worldviews as important explanatory and moral frameworks that needs to be engaged in projects of climate change mitigation if they are to have success (Rubow and Bird 2016; Nunn et al. 2016).

Following Fair (2018), what I take from this is that in many studies of religious perceptions of climate change, there is an inbuilt motivation on the side of researchers to either explain how religious worldviews is an impediment to, *or* a resource in, climate change mitigation (e.g. Pepper and Leonard 2016; Clements, Xiao, and McCright 2014). While I certainly acknowledge such efforts as an important component in mitigating climate change, this is not the route I take in this thesis. Rather than attending to how actors within the Danish Church are either hindered or compelled to engage with climate change by their particular religious or cultural worldviews, I explore how engaging with climate change impinges on such views. My interlocutors were certainly themselves interested in articulating answers to the question of what difference the Church and Christianity could make (ie. Cannell 2004) in regards to climate change. But what I found was that as they tried to answer this question, they were, in fact, confronted with questions about *what Christianity and the Church at all is*. Hence, with my account of climate change engagement within the Danish Church I show that it is not only that church actors decipher climate change through a religious or cultural logic, but also that climate change brings them to interrogate and question such logics. This analytical attention to how the climate crisis confronts people with questions about how they usually perceive and organize their world is inspired by discussions of the climate crisis as it appears in specifically Euro-American contexts. In the next section I turn to a particular strand of anthropological thinking about climate change as a problem that challenges Euro-American and distinctively 'modern' (Latour 1993) perceptions of the world. Such 'modern'

perceptions are - as I then move on to point out in the subsequent section - often associated with Christianity in various ways within the anthropological literature.

### **Modernity and Climate Crisis**

When Bruno Latour (1993) read his newspaper in 1991, he noticed something peculiar about it - something, we are led to think, that for the most part goes unnoticed. Within the same article, whether it is about the aids pandemic, the hole in the ozone layer, or a new vaccine, strange bedfellows mix: any one story crosses the otherwise nicely sectioned newspaper as they assemble chemical *and* political reactions, science *and* religion, humans *and* nonhumans, culture *and* nature (ibid.1). But while Latour notices this mixing and appreciates how the depicted phenomena – and the depiction itself – transgress what is commonly held to be different domains, the newspaper itself seems to ignore it. It remains parted up in distinct sections such as ‘politics’, ‘science’, ‘economy’, and ‘culture’, pretending that the stories within these sections are indeed about *either* ‘politics’ *or* ‘science’. According to Latour such sectioning is in compliance with what he calls ‘the modern constitution’ (ibid.); that which moderns<sup>22</sup> live by. The modern constitution is, according to Latour, upheld by two distinct and separate processes: 1) the practice of ‘purification’, of parting up the world in two distinct ontological zones, the human and the non-human, and the partitions that follows from this such as culture and nature, politics and science, and then, 2) the parallel process of ‘translating’ across those zones, revealing and creating new hybrid objects (that then requires new acts of purification) (ibid.11). These two practices depend on each other, and Latour argues that the more one believes in the work of purification - the more one rejects to think across the purified domains - the more hybrids will breed (ibid.). According to Latour this way of thinking about the world was developed in early modern and Enlightenment political theory, where modern society came to be envisioned as being based on an ‘epistemological separation of powers’ (Howles 2018, 92), in which the laws of nature, as described by the emerging discipline of the natural sciences, were distinguished from the world of human affairs (ibid). Nature is, according to the modern constitution, understood as something independent of culture: it is ‘out there’, working in accordance with its own inner logics and evolutionary dynamics. Latour traces this concept of nature back to early modern science,<sup>23</sup> and its study of patterns and laws that promoted a view of

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<sup>22</sup> Latour’s concept of the moderns should not be understood as designating group of people or a specific time frame. Rather, Latour uses the term to designate something like an epistemological regime: to be modern entails thinking about the world in accordance with the modern constitution.

<sup>23</sup> Latour here points specifically to seventeenth-century scientist Robert Boyle as a main figure. In his laboratory, Boyle performed experiments by way of various apparatuses – the air pump among them – that purported to demonstrate the universal laws of nature

nature as something that has always existed in the same way, as it can be relied on to act in the same way every time it is examined (ibid.28).<sup>24</sup> At the same historical juncture and in a kind of parallel logic, concepts of ‘society’ and ‘culture’ emerged. Latour specifically evokes the work of Thomas Hobbes who, according to Latour, laid the groundwork for moderns to think of themselves as the sole creators of social organization, and thus of their own destinies (ibid. 30). Latour summarizes it by the maxim: “human beings, and only human beings, are the ones who construct society and freely determine their own destiny” (ibid. 30). Hence, modernity came, according to Latour, to consist in a quasi-law-like separation of the natural sciences and the human, social and political sciences, a divide to which corresponds two transcendent epistemological categories: “Nature” and “Society”. The moderns have, in Latour’s words “cut the Gordian knot with a sharp sword: to the left, knowledge about the things, to the right, the interests, politics and powers of humans” (ibid.21). They cry “let us not mix earth and heavens, the global and the local, the human and the non-human!” (ibid.21).

According to Latour, this constitution persists to the present day (Latour 2013), but is brought into question by the environmental crisis. Latour (1993) points specifically to 1989 as a year in which a vital shift took place: This was the year that the Berlin wall fell *and* the year of the first official conference addressing alarming changes in the climate (ibid.8). To Latour this conjunction of events indicated a transition from a concern with ‘man’s exploitation of man’ to a concern with how capitalism was based on man exploiting *nature* (ibid.8). Capitalism enjoyed a triumph, just to be overwhelmed by doubts about what the cost of its survival was, Latour writes. Some moderns began to question themselves, asking if they really should have tried to “become nature’s masters and owners” (ibid.9).

After seeing the best of intentions go doubly awry, we moderns from the Western world seem to have lost some of our self-confidence. Should we not have tried to put an end to man's exploitation of man? Should we not have tried to become nature's masters and owners? Our noblest virtues were enlisted in the service of these twin missions, one in the political arena and the other in the domain of science and technology. Yet we are prepared to look back on our enthusiastic and right-thinking youth as young Germans look to their greying parents and ask: ‘What criminal orders did we follow?’ ‘Will we say that de didn’t know?’ (ibid. 9).

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<sup>24</sup> This is, of course, what Latour shows us is in fact not what such experiments did and Boyle knew this: the apparatuses and the scientists *produce* (importantly, not “construct”) facts on the basis of their experiments, rather than revealing what something “natural” would do on its own. However, based on Shapin and Schaffers account of Boyle and Hobbes parallel work, Latour argues that such a view of a natural domain nonetheless became what moderns came to think that nature was: out there, stable and indifferent to culture (ibid. 28).

Latour argues that the environmental crisis compels moderns to reevaluate their modernness. In fact, the crisis might even represent an opportunity “to repair the modernist experience at a very fundamental level,” he argues (Latour 2009, 462). Because according to Latour, the environmental crisis illuminates the double betrayal of modernity: not only does it reveal how modernity holds within it its own ending as the continuous exploitation of nature by the human species undermines the very living conditions for this species, it also reveals how the ‘work of purification’ that produces and upholds key modern domains and dualisms – such as Nature and Culture, Science and Politics - is an impediment to realizing how the world is much more embroiled and entangled than what such domaining allows.

Latour’s analysis of climate change as an event that unsettles modern distinctions is echoed by anthropologists, who make similar arguments and who furthermore take it upon themselves to explore how the world might be approached without presuming the categories of ‘Nature’ and ‘Culture’ or any other sharp separation between the ‘human’ and ‘non-human’ (A. L. Tsing 2015). As Chua and Fair (2019) write, social scientists have of course for long questioned the universality of such concepts and categories, but the climate crisis – and especially with the advent of the idea of the Anthropocene – has put them into even starker relief, seeing that it has, in fact, become impossible to tell what is ‘natural’ and what is ‘cultural’, ‘human’ and ‘non-human’ (ibid.8). Anna Tsing draws our attention to the shared prefix attached to the Anthropocene and the discipline of anthropology: both are about the *anthrōpos*. And according to Tsing (2016), it is exactly *anthrōpos* that is challenged by the advent of the Anthropocene, as it is simultaneously revealed that humans are inextricably entangled with other lifeforms *and* that it is the Enlightenment narrative of Man as ‘exceptional’ and as floating above other beings that is now leading him to his own destruction. Hence, the concept of “the Anthropocene” spurs a questioning and problematization of how the human and its relations to the rest of the other-than-human world is, has been, and ought to be imagined. Some scholars take this as an invitation to experiment to see ‘what else is there’ (Ejsing 2022) once such distinctions are given up. This has for example spurred a wide range of so-called multi-species studies (Lien and Pálsson 2021), where not only humans that take center in anthropological accounts but also mushrooms (A. Tsing 2012), dogs (Kohn 2007), muskox (A. O. Andersen and Flora 2023), and plants (Ahl Sofie Isager 2018). Such studies take the opportunity to see ‘beyond humanity’ (Ingold 2013), and thus decenter what is traditionally taken to be *the* anthropological object of study, namely the “*anthrōpos*”.

Latour himself, suggests that the moderns replace their inclination to ‘modernize’ with what he instead calls to ‘ecologize’ (Latour 1998). To ecologize entails disturbing and dissolving modern separations and dualisms in order to acknowledge how things in the world might

be connected up differently, indeed constituted differently, from what the modern constitution has held them to be. Quite concretely, he for example suggested (in 1998), that green politics ought not to be contained within a green party, but rather, as political ecology implicitly implies, be acknowledged as a dimension of all other political areas.

These discussions about how the climate crisis potentially opens up and unsettles the modern worldview frames my attention to what happens as actors within the Danish Church take it upon them to engage with climate change. I find this to be a relevant framing given that Protestantism is often said to be entangled with a modern worldview in so many different ways (Weber 1930; Cannell 2006; Keane 2007; Asad 2007; Daggett 2019) - which is what I will attend to in the next section.

### **Christian Modernity**

In *Christian Moderns*, Webb Keane (2007) argues for a particular convergence between Christianity and what Latour refers to as ‘the modern constitution’ (ibid.7). In fact, Keane argues that the modern constitution is the effect of a certain semiotic ideology that derives from Protestantism (ibid.14). Keane opens his book by relaying a critique of pre-formulated prayers put forward by the English – and thoroughly Calvinist - poet John Milton in 1649, who argued that standardized prayers constrain the individual's thoughts and his freedom of expression. Keane argues that Milton’s liberal and distinctly Protestant charge against pre-formulated (Catholic) prayers can be conceived of as an expression of a particular ‘semiotic ideology’<sup>25</sup> in which “submitting to discursive forms is not only a theological error or an affront of God: it threatens to undermine the agency proper to humans” (ibid.2). This semiotic ideology came into being as a part of the Protestant Reformers’ iconoclasm and critique of the comprehensive Catholic church institution. It dictates that agency cannot be invested in material things, as agency is a property of human subjects only. According to Keane it is this Protestant semiotic ideology that underpins Latour’s ‘modern constitution’ and what Keane calls ‘the moral narrative of modernity’ (ibid.5). Because modernity, Keane argues, centers precisely on the idea of the subject being emancipated from material constraints:

[M]odernity is, or ought to be, a story of human liberation from a host of false beliefs and fetishisms that undermine freedom (...) Briefly, in this narrative, progress is not only a matter of improvements in technology, economic well-being, or health, but also, and perhaps above all, about human emancipation and

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<sup>25</sup> A semiotic ideology is according to Keane what directs the sorting out of proper relations among, and boundaries between, words, things, and subjects, and especially, how agency is distributed.

self-mastery. If in the past, humans were in thrall to illegitimate rulers, rigid traditions, and unreal fetishes, as they become modern, they realize the true character of human agency”. S. 5-6

Modernity is, in other words, about emancipating the subject from constraints caused by earlier (i.e. Catholic) inclinations to ascribe power to objects and materials (ie. ‘unreal fetishes’). Keane suggests that even if it is often argued that it was Enlightenment philosophy that grounded morality in autonomy and thereby made the distinction between subject and object necessary (ibid.13), the moral narrative of modernity bears just as much on religious – and specifically Protestant – conceptions (ibid.14). It is due to the Protestant emphasis on emancipating the individual subject from anything that may constrain its capability of self-transformation that the modern work of purification becomes necessary. In this perspective, the modern narrative is in continuation with a Protestant conception of agency, freedom and the subject.

Convergences between Protestant and modern (including anthropological) ideas about individualism and agency have been noted, interrogated and challenged in other anthropological discussions of Christianity (Asad 2007; Cannell, n.d.; 2005; Bialecki and Daswani 2015; Bialecki, Haynes, and Robbins 2008). Hence, in an early review article of the emerging field of anthropology of Christianity, Bialecki, Haynes and Robbins (2008) observe a tendency within the literature to focus on how Christianity’s can serve as both “a vector for modernity and as counter-narrative to modernity” (ibid.1151). By this they mean that Christianity is either described as a force of modernity in cultures that have recently converted to Christianity, bringing with it an individualizing effect that (may or may not) displace more relational, non-modern worldviews, or as representing an anti-modern, distinctively conservative stance, in societies where Christian communities are positioned in opposition to more liberal forces (ibid.). Two ethnographies of Christian communities in Denmark (Borish 2004; Buckser 1996) tackles this connection between Christianity and modernity head on, and in both cases Christianity is rather explicitly posited as being a *vector* for modernity. Andrew Buckser (1996) opens his ethnography of the Danish Island of Mors by the empty church of Galtrup: This church, he writes, was once full of people and religious fervor, but by 1992 it was mostly empty and in risk of permanent closure. Buckser uses Galtrup church as an entry point for describing a presumed decline in religiosity among the Danes. Such a decline is not exclusive to Denmark, Buckser writes, and has commonly been explained by so-called secularization theory that has posited that the process of modernization would eventually diminish religious institutions (ibid.2) As many others in the 1990ies, Buckser was dissatisfied with this theory, as religion did not, in fact, seem to fade away, but was rather reemerging full force in Western societies. Like Susan Harding (2001), who undertook an anthropological study of



conservative Americans in the early 1990ies due to her surprise of the force with which they had suddenly reemerged in the US public, Buckser sets out to study why religion had indeed *not* disappeared on this Danish Island. However, his study was not motivated by an increase of *public religion* in Denmark – in fact, quite the opposite. Because at first glance, he writes, a study of Denmark seems indeed to confirm the secularization theory: Denmark and Scandinavia generally appear to epitomize progressive, modern, secular society<sup>26</sup>: “For most writers, Denmark offers a shining example of the relationship between the rise of modern society and the decline of religion” (ibid.226), he writes. However, this picture is not, in fact, accurate, Buckser argues, because even if regular church attendance is low, most Danes are – now as then – members of the Danish Church and most life-rituals such as marriage and funerals are undertaken in the church (ibid.227).<sup>27</sup> Secularization theory, Buckser suggests, could probably describe this either as a last hold-out of religion that will eventually be diminished or as an intentional critique of and resistance to secularism. But Buckser finds none of those explanations plausible, as the religious communities he found at Mors neither rejected secular society nor the natural sciences – they, in fact, embraced modernity in many ways (ibid.229). What Buckser eventually concludes is that secularization theory has gotten wrong what religion on Mors is all about: it is not about an irrational belief in a supernatural divine that is at odds with the worldview offered by the modern/secular/natural sciences. Rather, Buckser argues that religion is a way of making sense of oneself as well as of the social relations one must navigate (Buckser’s book is from 1999 - the highpoint of social constructivist explanations of religion!). This, he argues, is something anthropologists studying non-Western society have always known: religion is about social classification and identity (ibid.223). And in Denmark, Buckser argues, it is Christianity – more precisely a certain kind of Christianity that emerged in 19<sup>th</sup> century Denmark spearheaded by the poet and pastor NFS Grundtvig – that has shaped the identity of the Danish population as distinctively modern. Buckser offers a historical contextualization to explain this: when the social upheavals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century challenged the old social order, causing the social classification system that had organized life on Mors and in Denmark more generally to lay in disarray, a new, modern social order was developed that entailed more social mobility and egalitarianism. How were Morsingboere to make sense of this new order and their place in it? Buckser argues that it was certain Christian movements that offered them a view of the Christian individual, community and nation, which gave the inhabitants

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<sup>26</sup> “With their superbly functioning welfare states, their unusually well-educated population, their high-technology industry, their commitment to racial and sexual equality, and their embrace of rationalism in government, Denmark and its neighbors embody both the aspirations and the fears of modern Western social reformers” (ibid. 226).

<sup>27</sup> This combination of high church membership rates and low church attendance have been described as the “Scandinavian Paradox” ().

on Mors, and Danes more generally, a framework within which to understand the cultural, political and social power and mobility they suddenly had (ibid.236). It gave them, Buckser argues, ‘a new picture of themselves’ (ibid.235). Hence, according to Buckser, religion on Mors is in fact deeply interrelated with the production of the modern, secular, nation state and its subjects. In his ethnography of the Danish Folk High Schools, which were also established under the influence of NFS Grundtvig’s ideas, Steven Borish (2004) offers a similar argument. Like Buckser – but perhaps in an even more explicit praise of Danish society<sup>28</sup> - Borish argues that Denmark’s successful and surprisingly non-violent transition to modern society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century heavily relied on Christianity, and especially Grundtvigianism. I will have occasion to return to Grundtvig’s influence on Danish identity and self-perception (in especially chapter 3) and to the portrait of a secularized Protestantism in Denmark, that has not been eradicated by secularization but rather underpins it. This is indeed also the narrative that many of my interlocutors in the Church has provided me with. Christianity has not gone away as predicted by secularization theory but neither has it, as in the cases described by Harding and others gone public. Rather it has been privatized and secularized, living on as implicit cultural values. However, the climate crisis, as I will show, brings some of my interlocutors to argue that perhaps this withdrawal has been a mistake – perhaps the Church ought to indeed be more public, more political even, in order to make a difference in a time of crisis.

As a last contextualizing move, I bring in discussions about crisis, change, and continuity in the anthropology of Christianity, as I here have found a way of attending to how the climate crisis incites both projects of destabilizing and reconceptualizing the distinctions and relations of the world, and of retaining them.

### **Crisis, Change *and* Continuity**

Joel Robbins (2007) has suggested that, historically, anthropologists have tended to look for what is reproduced, what continuous, rather than what changes in the societies they studied (ibid.). Whereas sociologists were assigned the task of describing the changes and developments of and in industrialized societies, anthropologists were dedicated to studying the enduring cultural patterns of other societies that had not undergone the revolutions that Euro-American countries had (ibid.10). Hence, many ‘traditional’ anthropological theories have, according to Robbins, had social reproduction at their core (ibid.). Anthropologists of such bends would approach people's tales

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<sup>28</sup> In fact, it is worth taking note of how these two accounts of Danish modernity and moderate Christianity are both produced by North Americans who explicitly frame their interest in Denmark by comparing it to the US where we get the impression that both Christianity and modernity has gone awry.

about their experiences of radical change – for example as an effect of colonization and missionization - with a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (ibid.12), which entailed that a successful analysis was one that could show how old ideas and structures lived on underneath the supposed change (ibid.). This rested on a foundational anthropological assumption about how cosmological and religious structures are so deep-seated in cultures that new kind of events are interpreted in accordance with them. However, Robbins wanted to conceive of the Urapmin, whom he did fieldwork among in the early 1990ies, in another way. The Urapmin had begun to convert to Christianity in the 1960ies and in the 1970ies they experienced a charismatic revival; they began to “feel God in their bodies” as they explained to Robbins. According to their collective memory, *everything* had changed during a revival in 1977. Rather than pursuing an interpretation of what persisted in Urapmin culture in the face of what the Urapmin themselves described as a radical change, Robbins took their experience to be a challenge to anthropological theories of cultural reproduction. Robbins intervention produced the concept of ‘rupture’, which since has become an influential concept in the anthropology of Christianity as “a term that both describes Christian experience and unsettles anthropological modes of representation” (Simon Coleman in Lemons et al. 2022, 528).

While this development in anthropological theorizing happened by taking actors’ categories ‘serious’, Robbins argues that such conceptualizations of radical change eventually “wandered a bit from the actors’ categories that first stimulated their development” (Robbins 2020, 32). In his more recent work (2020), Robbins therefore offers the theological concept of ‘interruption’ as another alternative to the continuity-thinking he previously attributed to anthropological thinking. This alternative came from Robbins encounter not with his Urapmin interlocutors, but with his *theological* ones. Referring to the work of theologian Johann Metz, Robbins writes that “the shortest definition of religion is interruption” (ibid.43). To convert to Christianity (perhaps again and again) entails what another theologian, Eberhard Jüngel calls an elemental interruption in the self’s way of reproducing itself (Jüngel in Robbins 2022, p. 44). When God reveals himself to a person – when God steps “in between me and myself”- the person is suddenly thrown into reconsidering how he or she understands himself and the life she leads. This kind of interruption involves a risk: the subject might cease to exist as it cannot go on as it has usually done. In other words, this kind of interruption – the interruption caused by revelation - requires of the self to renew itself. According to Jüngel, human beings are – by God - created to be interrupted – by God - and they can therefore let themselves be interrupted without fear of non-being. They can, in fact, expect rebirth, as interruption entails that some of what was dead can be resurrected.

To Robbins the main affordances of employing a concept of ‘interruption’ rather than one of ‘rupture’, is that interruption involves a way of attending to how the end of something might also imply the beginning of something else (ibid.51). Hence, in situations of radical change, ends and beginnings are interconnected. Employed as an anthropological concept, ‘interruption’ would point more towards a future than ‘rupture’ does, Robbins argues. In a similar intervention, Naomi Richman and Derrick Lemons (2022) suggest replacing ‘rupture’ with ‘repair’, so as to be able to attend to how in situations of change, people “seek to restore a sense of wholeness - within themselves, their communities, with God(s) or the cosmos at large” (Richman and Lemons 2022, 337).

Jon Bialecki (2014) indirectly offers another model of continuity and change at play in Christianity. Drawing on Deleuze’s idea of the virtual and the actual, Bialecki suggests conceiving of Christianity as a specific, yet flexible ‘diagram’ that allows for the (re-)actualizations of a specific set of virtual problems (Bialecki 2017). In James Bielo’s apt recap (2017), Bialecki suggests conceiving of Christianity “as a virtual field defined by problems that require actualization” (Bielo 2017, 134).<sup>29</sup> Problems should in this context not be understood as jigsaw puzzles that can be solved once and for all, Bielo explains, but are rather like “steady churning engines, keeping religions in motion by continually producing new formations. In turn, phenomena like the dizzying plurality of global Christianities (and their attendant range of beliefs, practices, and institutions) are all attempts to resolve a shared bundle of virtual problems” (ibid.). According to Bialecki, the formation of different denominations, for example, can be seen as “different and differing solutions to an insistent Christian problematic” (2014)<sup>30</sup>, namely that Christianity in its own understanding

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<sup>29</sup> Bialecki devises this theoretical model to account for the great variety of Christianities in the world while still leaving open the possibility of speaking of Christianity as an object. Bialecki is doing so in a response to an assertion made by Joel Robbins () at the very outset of establishing an anthropology of Christianity, namely that such a new field of study, dedicated to the study of communities that perceive themselves to be Christian, should not be too preoccupied with the question of what Christianity *is*. Robbins asserted in 2003 that “[t]here are many kinds of Christianity, and when the number of different kinds is multiplied by the number of different situations in which they have been spread and the number of different cultures to which people have adopted them, it is hard to escape the conclusion that at best we are dealing with Christianities rather than with Christianity, and that at worst these Christianities really have rather little in common with one another” (2003: 193). Years into the life of the new discipline, Robbins’ agnosticism towards the question of what Christianity is, has been taken up, and deemed insufficient by, among others, Bialecki (2012). Bialecki argues that perhaps there is something to be said about how we may conceive of something called “Christianity”, and he does so by proposing the idea of “virtual Christianity” ()

<sup>30</sup> Bialecki (2014) compares the sociological and the anthropological engagements with denominations. On the one hand, he delineates sociological theories of denominations, inherited from Weber, Troeltsch, and Tonnies, that delineate a standardized life-cycle of denominations, involving growth, schisms, splits, new growth, institutionalization and then new schisms (ibid.). On the other hand, Bialecki finds anthropological accounts of denominations which display “a dizzyingly diverse view of the capacities and forms that these movements can take as well as of the way in which they can be combinatorially articulated with other entities—including not just other denominations but also the state” (2014, p194). Bialecki argues that these two views of denominations as either developing according to certain schemas or as something unpredictable and heterogenous can be reconciled by casting Christianity as a diagram that

cannot be fully realized in any concrete instantiation as it is supposed to transcend the mundane world and the interests embedded in it. However, whenever it is sought organized, institutionalized, it cannot completely escape the world and the mundane interests that define it (). In a similar vein but within a very different theoretical universe, Webb Keane (2007) suggests that Christianity's 'restlessness' – its tendency to continuously produce new reform and revival movements at an extraordinary pace – derives from a recurring conflict between “purifying projects of transcendence” and then counter movements toward “materialization” (ibid. 41). Like Bialecki, Keane argues that Christianity is not made from scratch in every new locale, as conflicts like the one just mentioned, cuts across any particular instantiation of Christianity, but that transformation, nonetheless always remains a ‘lurking possibility’, due to the sense of revival and reform that is at the heart of Protestantism - even in its most routinized and institutional forms (ibid. 50).

This restlessness, this capacity for renewal and variation, is also what Bialecki draws attention to with his idea of Christianity as a constant actualization of the same set of problems: every time the same unsolvable problem is iterated, actualized, in a new situation, under new circumstance, something new may happen:

This play of a continual break that yet harkens back to a still-insisting problematic means that at some level, we could grasp these instances of repetition as moments of open potentiality, of various ways forward that rise up and are delineated by the “event” of the juxtaposition of both the problematic and the circumstances that it is realized in (Bialecki 2012).

It is, in other words, a repetition of the kind Matt Tomlinson (2014) attributes to Søren Kierkegaard: every repetition involves the risk of failure and potential for change (see also Butler 1997 for a similar concept of repetition). This can be thought of as evolution without a specific telos, a constant expanding on an original impetus: a set of unsolvable problems (ibid.196).<sup>31</sup> As Simon Coleman (Coleman 2019a) points out, Bialecki's theory carries resemblances with Marshall Sahlins' idea of 'active history' (ibid. 185), in the sense that Christianity is delineated as a tradition in which new iterations of old problems require constant re-engagement and *resolution* whenever it is confronted with the new.

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renders certain actualizations of the virtual possible. A diagram, in Bialecki's rendition of Delanda's evocation of it, is the coordinates for a “space of play” (ibid. 311). There may be, then, a dizzying array of denominations, various actualizations of the virtual, but they are all the outcome of a specific diagramme.

When I began my research on the Danish Church, my supervisor Cecilie Rubow, who has been studying the Church for decades, appreciated the way I got carried away by the passionate debate and seemingly irreconcilable positions inside the Church, but she also said that in her experience all new issues have to pass through the same “mill”: every new challenge is referred back to a set of basic problems and a grid of positions within the Church. Whenever the Danish Church encounters new specific problems – such as for example the question of gay marriage or of green transitioning – such problems quickly become hinged on well-known, more fundamental problems, such as that of the relation between the state and the church (which I treat in chapter 1 and 3), between politics and religion (chapter 2), or between dialectic and contextual theology (chapter 5).

What I find in all these suggestions about Christian change and continuity, is an idea of ‘the new’ as something whose newness is negotiated in dialogue with that which already is. What Bialecki and Robbins describe – in each their very different ways – is that people make sense of what happens by way of a compass already at hand - but a compass that is flexible enough to point in different directions, as well as to have its magnetic field slightly re-attuned. It is a way of thinking about change that at once takes into account that convention is part and parcel of social life, but that it not so fixed that it cannot be altered and give way to new inventions.

Rubow further posits, that in regard to the Danish Church “[i]t is especially in *crisis* situations that an observer can gain insight into the kind of tensions that exist, and how they escalate and are minimized” (Rubow 2011b, 8) [my emphasis]. Crisis, in other words, brings positions and tensions to the fore. Joseph Webster (2019) suggests something similar when he suggests that denominational conflicts is a privileged site for studying how Christians reformulate theological concerns in institutional and material forms. Denominational conflicts, Webster suggests, often entail “elaborate theological claims and counter-claims through which people reflexively conceptualize ‘tradition’ or ‘the past’, ‘freedom’ or ‘constraint’” (ibid.1005). During my fieldwork this was indeed the case during the first months of the covid pandemic where church actors were in great disagreement about how the Church ought to act (as discussed in the above). This also spurred theological disputes about the scope of communion – could it take place between people who were only connected through the computer? Disagreements came on full public display, and the fact that church actors also disagreed over who could and should make the call – who is, really, in charge of the Church? – dragged the conflicts out.

In STS studies the terms ‘breakdown’ and ‘inversion’ are used to describe how infrastructures – those “technologies and arrangements that, by design and by habit, tend to fade into the woodwork” (Bowker and Star, 1999) – only become visible upon failure. When working,

infrastructures are simply ‘what facilitates the flow of other things’ (Larkin 2013); they are the invisible background upon which what really matters take place. As Blok, Nakazora, og Winthereik (2016). write, infrastructural breakdowns perform a kind of “naturally occurring infrastructural inversion”: as infrastructures fail to work, they become visible, open to inquiry.

I find this connection between breakdown and visibility to be useful to think with in the case of the Church and climate crisis: the climate crisis can be conceived of as an infrastructural breakdown (Bowker and Star 2000) where the institutional, material, but also epistemological and moral infrastructures come to the fore. Combined with Robbins’, Keane’s, and Bialecki’s theorizations of change delineated in the above, I suggest that such situations hold potential for change: breakdowns functions as interruptions that incite people to look at themselves anew, and potentially begin a process of critique and repair. Reinhardt Koselleck has famously pointed out the connection between ‘crisis’ and ‘critique’:

“From Reinhardt Koselleck’s Critique and Crisis, we learn that critique emerges in ancient Athens as the jurisprudential term *krisis*. Nearly untranslatable from the holistic Greek context to our much more compartmentalized one, *krisis*, integrates polis rupture, tribunal, knowledge, judgment, and repair at the same time that it links subject and object in practice. Krisis refers to a specific work of the polis on itself – a practice of sifting, sorting, judging, and repairing what has been rent by a citizen violation of polis law or order.” (Brown 2013, p. 3)

I take the climate crisis to be a crisis that has exactly that effect in the Danish Church: a situation in which something has been rent and must analysed, judged and ultimately repaired. When the Church begin to ponder climate change, its material, spiritual, epistemological and organizational infrastructures become visible in a new way, open to critique and repair. This makes it possible for church actors as well as the researcher to see aspects of the Church that most often goes unnoticed – suddenly, the ‘heart of the church’, as one energy consultant said to me, as we entered the basement of a church building to audit its energy use, is as much the oil burner as the altar. As an effect of such infrastructural inversions, churches and windmills, Jesus and microbes, tombstones and heat pumps are exhibited as being intimately – and awkwardly – related. Hence, in the midst of a crisis, this thesis takes the opportunity to take a fresh look at church life.

I also show, however, how dealing with the problem of climate crisis actualized other, already established problems within the Church and the tensions inherent to them. I show how church actors come to question, defend, undo, and resettle the distinctions that organize the Church when such distinctions in one moment seem the very impediment to mitigating climate change and in another the only key. Hence, in this thesis I show that ‘the modern constitution’ is

still very much at work in the Church, but so are efforts of ‘ecologizing’ (Latour), of destabilizing boundaries and mixing what was previously considered separate. Hence, I argue that the climate crisis does to Christianity and the Church what the world has always done to it: it makes it reinterpret its own sources and tradition, grabbling with the same problems over and over again, causing schisms, reformations, and new inventions.

## A Contrapuntal Imagination

In an interview about her approach to anthropology Marilyn Strathern states that for her doing anthropology is about ‘arriving at a good description’ (Borić 2010). And according to Strathern, good descriptions are not driven by abstract theoretical schemas, and neither should they take them as their end goal. Rather, anthropology is about finding the right vocabulary – and thus the right concepts - with which to describe something (ibid.281). The vocabulary used in anthropological descriptions, Strathern argues, “is a solution to a problem”. It is a way for the anthropologist to best possibly expound someone’s view of the world to those people who do not speak their language (ibid.). During the process of working on this project, the concept of counterpoint has appeared as the best possible solution to how best to describe what I was faced with in the Church, when I went there to understand how it grappled with the problem of climate change. Counterpoint, then, is not a theory that *explains* what goes on, but a concept – an ‘image of thought’ - with which I can arrive at a good description. It is, in Casper Bruun Jensen’s vocabulary, the way I have come to give shape to my materials as an effect of the research process itself and the encounters it has brought me - with people in the Church as well as in the literature. It is, as such a concept that emerged through the research process, and that has eventually come to serve as a companion concept also in the writing up of this thesis.

In his novel *Point Counter Point* (Huxley 1928) the English writer and philosopher Aldous Huxley makes use of contrapuntal composition. This for example comes to show on the first five pages of the novel, which depicts the character Walter Bidlake as he leaves his home to attend a party. His girlfriend is reluctant to let him go, as she fears that he is involved with another woman and that she might be losing him. And she is, in fact, because Walter has indeed met another woman and is eager to get out of the door to escape the desperate grip of his girlfriend and be instead in the company of Lucy. But he is aware of his treachery and for five long pages we are invited into his thoughts as they oscillate between blaming himself, blaming his wife, turning over the matter in his mind, reaching and leaving different conclusions by way of evoking various relational



commitments and betrayals. It is a dizzying almost exhausting read as Walter flicks and spins positions and intentions in a manner where it seems any conclusion can be countered by another.

My experience of doing fieldwork in the Danish Church has been akin to the experience of reading *Point Counter Point*: every time a conclusion was presented to me by one interlocutor, another one would say the opposite. A graduate student in religious studies, who had written her master thesis on the organization Green Church, told me that she had had a similar experience and that she had struggled to make section headers in her thesis, because it seemed that any header could also be the reverse, state, in fact, the opposite. And it is not just that any matter has multiple renderings, but also that being able to take into account counterpoints seems to be something akin to a virtue in the Church. In my experience, anytime a statement is made about something within the Church, it is made with an awareness of there being multiple other interpretations and opinions.

I suggest that the compositional technique of counterpoint is an especially apt figure for capturing how the different voices in the Church counter each other; how they do not align but take up positions that are opposite to, but not separate from, each other; how they all understand themselves to contribute to the same unity, while continuously pulling it in different directions. Although I do not understand *exactly* what happens when the different melodic lines in a node sheet for a contrapuntal composition moves up and down together or apart, responding to each other by way of ‘inversion’ or ‘imitation’, or by temporarily following each other, I do recognize it in my material: In the Church there are a great many melodies playing at the same times, responding to each other, diverging, intertwining, moving through harmonic encounters as well as through dissonance. If internal disagreement has a tendency to lead to denominational schisms in some Christian communities, the propensity for disagreement within the Danish Church seems to be contained within the institutional form. To make room for difference and disagreement is, as I will attend to in later chapters, praised as paramount values in the organizational ethos of the Church. It is telling, perhaps, that the title of a book published by a small group of theologians and pastors within the Church, who did not accept Luther’s doctrines wholesale, was “Is there room for us?” (Højlund, Hornemann Kragh, and Jacobsen 2022). They did, in other words, not consider leaving the Church, but argued within a well-established discourse in the Church, namely that of the Church as ‘spacious’ (*rummelig*). To disagree with the basic doctrines of the Danish People’s Church did not result in a schism but rather in a negotiation of how wide the span of convictions within the Church could be. Contrapuntal dialogues are something quite different from outright conflict leading to fatal schisms, as the voices also support and depend on each other even in situations of dissonance. I regard this as a polyphony of different voices in a contrapuntal composition, moving in and out of each other by way of echoing, imitating, altering, and inverting each other.

I am, however, not only interested in the variation but also in the patterning. Even if there is a lot of variation – a polyphony of theological, liturgical, practical, and organizational perspectives and practices – there is also an order to it – a ‘well-ordered anarchy’ to keep with my interlocutors’ self-description. My material conveys a Danish Church that is full of different voices that speak in different registers, keys, and about different things, but that are all dedicated to the same unity, namely *the unity of the Church*.

The concept of counterpoint evokes an image of something that encompasses unity *and* diversity, separate, yet also related voices. So is the Church that I encountered: a composition of diverging and converging voices that together form - and are formed by - a unity, even if it is not one of harmony. I will attend to these two dynamics – relating *and* separating, unity *and* diversity - in one last framing of the account I offer in this thesis.

### **Relating and Separating in an Ecological Mess**

Overall, my account is defined by an attention to the dynamics of *separating* and *relating*, and how the acknowledgement of human induced climate crisis incites people in the Church to reconsider and – potentially - reconfigure the entities and relations that they understand the world to be made up of. Latour’s theory of modernity and his thesis about what the environmental crisis confronts it with, frames my interrogation of what happens as the Church acknowledges climate change as a crisis that has to do with how humans organize - materially as well as epistemologically - their societies. I find it a particularly productive frame, given that the Christian (but also non-Christian) church actors that this thesis is about, often are ascribed a position right at the center of the ‘modern constitution’.

In her most recent book, Marilyn Strathern (2021) argues that as a response to the current “ecological mess”, “[a]n academic consensus of a sorts in today’s world is that its inhabitants must more than ever understand the relations that compose it” (2021:167). What Strathern points out, is that many people today – anthropologists among them, and, I would add, some of those people I have met in the Danish Church - who are concerned with the present ecological crisis, argue for an increased attention to, cultivation of, and even reinventions of *relations*. Relations between human and non-humans, between people in the Global North and the Global South, behavior and its effect on the environment, and so on. The increase in temperatures, the extinction of species, and the catastrophic weather phenomena are posited as complex problems, emerging from a multiplicity of relations, but also from a neglect of acknowledging them, caring for them. Strathern writes:

Those who have acquired a new sense of the fragility of the world as an ideobio-physical-social entity, articulate the new demand to grasp the

interdependence of beings and entities of all kinds. (...) How can we not be reading, Skafish (2014: 30) implies, apropos one academic dispute, but “in light of an ecological crisis demanding reinventing the relations between human and nonhuman”? (ibid.168)

But Strathern also writes that while there might be a desire and a need for acknowledging the relations that compose today’s world, the concept of “relations” that Euro-Americans have at their disposal needs careful scrutinization. As Strathern shows us, it comes with a certain baggage and makes the world in particular ways. More specifically, what Strathern shows in her exposition of the concept of ‘relation’ (and the expositional work it itself does for Euro-Americans) is that it entails a cosmology of entities-plus-relations (ibid.7). Hence, to evoke relational images always also entails separating out the related things from each other.

Concerned also with the modern epistemology of Euro-Americans, Latour inverts, so to speak, this image. According to him, moderns are not first and foremost obsessed with relating, but rather with *separating*. Moderns, he argues, seek to order the world through ‘the work of purification’, as discussed earlier. The modern constitution is upheld by parceling things out into their proper domains (ibid.13). “By all means”, the moderns seem to say, “let us not mix up knowledge, interest, justice and power. Let us not mix up heaven and earth, the global stage and the local scene, the human and the nonhuman” (ibid 2-3). Hence, while Strathern highlights that even as Euro-Americans seek to relate things closer, they also – sometime unwillingly - separate them, Latour highlights how the modern inclination to purify entails a continuous breeding of hybrids. It might be that the newspaper is parted up in sections corresponding to the pure categories of “Politics”, “Culture”, “Economy”, but the stories and phenomena that sprawl across the pages, evidently cross such sections wildly. If carefully attended to, they are “hybrids”, constituted by a mix of those things that the so-called moderns try to separate out from each other. Strathern deals with “Euro-Americans,” “Anglophone,” or “Naturalists”, Latour with “the moderns”, but they are concerned with delineating the same epistemological regime, deriving from the Enlightenment where they both begin their accounts and particularly from the scientific revolution and social philosophy developed in this period of Anglophone history. This was when what Latour – inspired by Whitehead – calls ‘the bifurcation of nature’ was achieved, and when a particular way of thinking about kinship and knowledge emerged, as Strathern (2020) argues, which delineated ‘modern society’ as one populated by bounded individuals, whose relations to each other were external to themselves, not defining for their identity (ibid.37).

Both Strathern and Latour are concerned with describing a specific epistemological regime, but whereas Strathern makes no claims as to whether there is something that is more “real” than what Euro-Americans presuppose as they articulate their world, its entities and relations, Latour is in the business of ontologizing. He suggests that the categories, domains, and bounded entities that moderns purify into being, do not exist as such, but are continuously enacted and reenacted in ways that could be otherwise. However, what we learn from both Latour and Strathern about the heirs of the Enlightenment - the Moderns in Latour’s vocabulary, or the Euro-Americans in Strathern’s - is that they are persistently caught up with *the dynamics of relating and separating entities out from each other*<sup>32</sup>. They do not dwell in a world of imbroglios, of entities only being the appearances of relations (Gell 1992), but continuously make distinctions, identifying what it is that is mixed together, related, and entangled. As both Latour (1993) and Strathern (2020) suggest, the ecological crisis disturbs this work, inciting an attention to how things are related, how they are and perhaps ought not to be as detached from each other as they have thought to be within the modern period. Here I particularly take my clue from Strathern’s suggestion to not rest with, to not unreflectively accept, present formulations of relating but to attend to the very many things implied by the term and the baggage it comes with in terms of doing as much separating work as that of relating. Inspired by Strathern’s observation of a heightened sensibility towards relationality and of efforts at relating things tighter, I attend to how the acknowledgment of climate change incites projects of relating – but then also, separation - in the Church. I argue that actors in the Church do indeed carry out projects that aims at decreasing the distance between things such as the domains of religion and politics (chapter 2), the Church and the State (chapter 3), the material and the immaterial (chapter 4) between the human and the nonhuman (chapter 5), God and the world (chapter 2 & 5). But I *also* attend to how such projects do not *only* entail bringing things closer to each other, but also entails separating them:

I conceptualize these continuous efforts of separating and relating, always doing both at the same time, as *contrapuntal movements*. I urge you to listen for them as we move through this thesis.

### **Unity and Diversity – the Contrapuntal Church**

Two calls co-exist when it comes to what is needed from the discipline of anthropology in a time of global climate crisis: one is for the furthering of *holism* (Hylland Eriksen 2020), the other for the furthering of *particularism* (Crate and Nuttall 2023). Holism is called for based on an acknowledgment of the all-encompassing nature of the climate crisis; everything is indeed related in this ecological mess and rather than treating things isolated we ought to reckon with the

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<sup>32</sup> It is important to note here that Strathern is careful to note that even if what she is describing is distinctively Anglophone, it does not preclude the possibility of it being defining features of other worlds to.

relatedness of the world (ie. Strathern 2020, 167). The call for particularism is based on an acknowledgment of the situatedness of peoples' lives, their particular cosmologies, worldviews or 'worldmaking projects', as Crate and Nuttall (2023) call it. There is no 'one size fits all', when it comes to making changes in the face of climate change, and it is pertinent to pay close attention to the situatedness of this global phenomenon. While Anna Tsing encourages us to listen for polyphony rather than a simple beat, in order to let go of an overarching narrative about what she calls the patchy Anthropocene, I suggest that the paradox she is describing of thinking about a situation at once as a totality *and* as something in which the parts do not all fit together, can be captured by the figure of counterpoint. Because it does in fact not seem to be quite right when Tsing states that it was only in genres of music that *superseded* polyphonic baroque composition that unity was the goal. In fact, the polyphonic – and therefore - contrapuntal compositions of the Baroque period in music was as much about unity as it was about diversity (Davidsson 2002). To compose and perform polyphonic music was, according to astronomer Johannes Kepler, an expression of the cosmic order and flow of time:

Thus it is no longer surprising that Man, aping his Creator, has at last found a method of singing in harmony which was unknown to the ancients, so that he might play, that is to say, the perpetuity of the whole of cosmic time in some brief fraction of an hour, by the artificial concert of several voices, and taste up to a point the satisfaction of God his Maker in His works by a most delightful sense of pleasure felt in this imitator of God, Music." (Cited in Davidsson 2002, 79)

Similarly, in his *Harmonologia musica* (1702) German organist Andreas Werckmeister was captivated by the "curious harmonies" of counterpoint and its mysterious properties that were "nearly beyond the understanding of men" (Yearsley 2002, 18). The movements of voices in invertible counterpoint, Werckmeister writes, are similar to those of the planets and contrapuntal composition therefore mirrors the workings of the divinely created universe – it is "a mirror of nature and God's order" (ibid.). Johannes Bach is renowned for being one of the most sophisticated composers of counterpoint. With his contrapuntal compositions, Bach was, according to Gaines, "attempting to come as close as anyone had come before to the celestial music of a divinely ordered universe, the very music of Creation" (Gaines 2005).

Even though this description of the search for unity challenges Tsing's claim to the opposite in Baroque music, it nonetheless supports her argument about how to approach the 'patchy Anthropocene' quite well. In the cosmology conveyed through contrapuntal composition in the Baroque, the cosmos is both about *diversity* and *unity*. The music is driven forward by

independent voices, moving like planets in their own orbits, but together they express an order, a cosmic unity. This is not, however, an order of homogeneity, but a unity of difference. Each of the “voices” perform their own melodic lines, but they also enter into dialogue with each other, react and respond to each other, sometimes supporting each other in harmony, and sometimes by crashing into dissonance threatening for a moment the sense of unity.

This, I contend, is an apt image for (re)describing what church actors themselves call ‘the well-ordered anarchy’: it is a unity - and cherished for being so - that has an order, but the function of the order is to protect the freedom to diverge. There is, in other words, a valuing of the tension between order and freedom, unity and diversity, and an attempt to always have both in mind. As such, using contrapuntal composition as analytical prism in-fold into the very writing of the thesis a metaphor also apt for describing the Danish People’s Church in itself. Hence, I evoke the figure of counterpoint as a concept - an ‘image of thought’ (Viveiros de Castro in Strathern 2020, x) – that I was brought to redescribe the Church with, in order to explicate what was at stake for it as it tried to change itself – but not too much – in the face of climate change.

## Ethics and Positioning

One of the things that characterizes the anthropologist’s research imagination, is that her discipline acknowledges the professional experience of research as also a thoroughly personal one. The anthropologist is her own instrument, as it is commonly said, and whatever insights her fieldwork elicits, they are the effect of concrete encounters between herself and other people. Hence, as a final step in this introduction, I offer a few reflections on how certain positions and ethical considerations on my behalf also took part in the production of the anthropological description I offer in this thesis.

### **Fieldwork at Home - the Familiar and the Strange**

Dear Steffen. I am writing to you from ‘the field’. But I am also writing to you from my desk with a view of my backyard in Nørrebro that I have looked out on every day for the past 14 years of my life. In a few moments, my daughter will arrive home with my mother, meatballs will be prepared and the limits to face painting will be discussed. In other words, I find myself in the middle of everyday life as it also looked a month ago, when I first “went on fieldwork”. I’m pondering what this implies about the state of “doing field work” that I am in. Because I don’t exactly immerse myself in anyone else’s everyday life - which is what I have always thought fieldwork was basically all about? - and when I finally immerse myself in something it is abruptly punctuated by family obligations, practical

tasks, and conversations with acquaintances that, to put it mildly, have no traces of Christianity. At the same time, even listening to friends' and family members' reflections on the ethics of oat milk and air travel puts me in fieldwork-mode. I now observe closely my own reactions to political statements in the newspaper and suddenly find that even Morten Messerschmidt's [national conservative MP] views on "Danish values" are interesting and worth taking note of. And what - I find myself asking - is going on in the church next to the playground where I have spent lots of time in recent years without paying any attention to the imposing building? In other words, I am constantly on fieldwork, while simultaneously struggling with the feeling of it not being intense or strange enough. - Letter to supervisor from the field, March 2020

In the anthropological textbooks, it is often emphasized that an essential component of fieldwork is to immerse oneself in the field by moving one's life into it (McGrahnan 2018, 4). I did not move very far to do fieldwork, but I continued in many ways the everyday life I have with my family. I agree with McGrahnan that ideally fieldwork is practiced in such a way so that "research and personal life are [...] interwoven in that they take place in the same domain" (ibid.4). To really 'grasp the native's point of view', one has to at least mimic to live under similar circumstances to those of one's interlocutors. However, my interlocutors live in and under various circumstances in Denmark; they belong to different cultural and social segments, different towns and countrysides. My field is, as discussed earlier, not in fact defined by either a locality or something that takes the form of a community on an everyday basis. Rather, my field is defined by a problem and how it is dealt with in various ways within a national and highly decentralized organization. And the people that populate what I have called my field, are those who spend their professional lives (for some, of course, this is better described as vocation than it is for others) in the Church. I have not followed people home or intentionally (although obviously conversationally) inquired about their personal lives; I have, so to speak, left them at the doorstep of the Church institution.

I did not experience a sudden, overwhelming culture shock - such as what anthropologist can sometimes report on - that interrupted my usual set of coordinates. Not even when I found myself in church contexts that I otherwise rarely find myself in did the world seem strange. The kind of church actors I spoke to were in many ways familiar to me - we shared cultural references and societal concerns. At the same time, of course, what I learned during fieldwork has, in fact, shaken much of what I thought I knew. But rather than it being an effect of 'the shock of the new', it rather happened in a series of small seismic shakings of what I thought I already knew about Danish society and the role of Christianity and of the Church. When doing fieldwork in one's

own society many things seem at first glance recognizable, intuitively interpretable. The ethnographer understands the language of the field, knows much about its historical, political, geographical, and cultural context already, and has been confronted, at least peripherally, with the phenomenon under study perhaps many times during her life. She holds already a certain “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld 1997). with her field. To embark on fieldwork in such contexts close to ‘home’ thus entails a process of defamiliarization, of “making the familiar exotic”, as is often said as the other part of the anthropological maxim “to make the exotic familiar” (Eriksen 2001). Hence, the fieldwork I have undertaken has to a large extent been a process of undoing my own, already established, analyses. Our intuitive analyses – what we might also simply call preconceptions, or cultural worldview – have often become rather automatic and not necessarily geared towards “telling us more than we knew to ask” (McGraham 2018, 7). But to learn more than we knew to ask is exactly what I think fieldwork is about. Hence, to do fieldwork at in my native (and rather small) country more than anything requires that we engage with our own preconceptions and the cultural logics they built on.

In this thesis I try to treat such established understanding, such preconceptions, as the outcomes of intuitive analyses that can be interrogated and unpacked. The process of unpacking my preconceptions has been spurred by and intertwined with the process of approaching the object anew. One of the more concrete things I did to be able to understand what I thought I already knew, was to subscribe to the (physical) newspaper *The Christian Daily* (*Kristeligt Dagblad*) and the online media platform *Kirke.dk* that are both widely consulted by church actors. Throughout most of my fieldwork, I consulted these media platforms alongside the paper I usually read (the perhaps least religiously inclined national newspaper in Denmark). I also closed my personal Facebook account and created an account where I only connected to, and followed people, places, and events that I understood to be associated with the Church and thus to be more or less part of what I was constructing as my field. While the corona pandemic was raging outside, and I for a moment had been banned from any physical encounters with the people I wanted to learn about, my window onto them and to Danish society at large was for a time primarily these media platforms. This meant that while society momentarily came to look quite unfamiliar, I added to that unfamiliarity an extra layer by experiencing it through media platforms that laid out the situation quite differently from my usual platforms.

### **Ethical Saturation and Hesitation**

According to Joel Robbins (2004), venturing into a field marked by Christianity, entails encountering an intense preoccupation with what it means to pursue the “good” and the “right”,



and to discern when one might not be doing so. In fact, as Robbins suggests, studies of Christian lifeworlds almost inescapably summons the scholar to engage with questions of ethics and morality. In this thesis I combine my anthropological interest in Christianity with an interest in how people grapple with climate change. And venturing into a study of this topic potentially also entails a preoccupation with discerning what is “right”, “just” and “unethical” – in the academic literature, on the researcher’s side and on that of her interlocutors. I have, in other words, journeyed into terrains heavily marked by ethical projects and positionings.

Crate and Nuttall (2023) draw our attention to two motives for studying local approaches to and comprehensions of climate change: One is to examine how people reason about the world in order to find out what to tap into in order to incite them to make changes. The other motive is to study local knowledges about climate change in order *to learn* something about how to for example adapt to environmental changes or how to live in other kinds of relationships with non-human beings. Crate and Nuttall would probably agree that a study of the national Church of one of the countries in the world that emits most carbon dioxide per capita holds potential to contribute to the first of these goals.

One the one hand I agree: it is certainly pertinent to attend to why it is that despite being highly informed citizens, the Danish population does not look like it will be able to reach any of the goals that have been set in the hope of halting the lethal curves of global warming. One the other hand I do not want to frame my study as one that interrogates how people can be so wrong, how mistaken they are, or as one that only take an interest in them in order to educate or critique them. That is not my errand. Rather, I am interested in attending to how actors within the Church grapple with a lot of difficult dilemmas as they are faced with the demand – and desire – to make changes in the face of climate change. As Crate and Nuttall also makes us aware, how people respond to climate change is deeply entangled with the values and visions they have of the “good life”. When such values and visions clashes with what is required of us to do in the present situation, I do not think they should be discounted as denial (Norgaard 2011) but rather as dilemmas. The result is that I in all questions I treat in this thesis, I strive to stay with the dilemmas - ‘stay with the trouble’ (Haraway 2016) - rather than to point out how easily they can be solved from another perspective. I try to cultivate what Kofoed and Staunæs (2014) describe as ‘an ethics of hesitation’: a strategy that insists that research “also includes an ethical obligation to ‘not be too certain’.” (2015). Hence, even if I am concerned about climate change and also has pursued this topic of research because of this concern, I see my role as an anthropologist to attend to this issue in order to learn more about it, rather than being able to confirm my own or others’ opinions. I have therefor also purposefully sought out the dilemmas people in the Church encounter as they

deal with the issue, picking up on why things are never as clear cut as we could wish for as we try to solve a crisis.

## Outline of Chapters

The thesis proceeds in five chapters each revolving around a specific approach taken to climate change mitigation by church actors.

If the relationship between the State and the Church can be conceived of as a marriage – as it indeed often is - the increasing pressure on and within the Church to respond to climate change in the years 2020-2022, exposed this marriage to be a very complicated one. This is what I will show in the first three chapters of the thesis, where I attend to how the climate crisis and the efforts to respond to it actualized the relationship between the State and the Church in Denmark and exposed the effects it has on how the Church could engage with the matter. I interrogate why it was so hard for the Church to commit to the national emission goals in 2020, and what might have changed in 2022, where “The Green Transition of the People’s Church” emerged.

In the first chapter, we begin from a position outside of the Church, looking in, as I explore how the prospect of – and objection to - six super windmills in the vicinity of a small village church incited a public controversy around the privileged position of the Church in Danish society. The controversy came to exhibit the interconnectedness between Church and State, and in doing so stimulated negotiations over what the role and status of the Church ought to be in a society supposedly undergoing a green transition. I show how the relationship between the State and the Church was laid out in different ways by actors in public and political discourse, and sometimes in ways that incited demands of divorcing the two from each other as the Church was cast as reactionary ‘stumbling block’ to the green transition. The controversy forced the Church into a complicated balancing act of preserving its own status and legitimacy, which in this case relied equally on preserving itself as cultural heritage and on convincing society of its continued relevance in a time marked by climate crisis.

In the second chapter we move slightly closer into the Church as we learn about the organization Green Church - and its critics. When I began my fieldwork in early 2020, Green Church was the only organized effort to engage with climate change in the Church. It was, and remains to be, the most controversial one as well. Hence besides introducing Green Church and this organization particular way of responding to climate change, the chapter is also about the two main critiques that has been mounted at Green Church since it was established in 2007, namely

that it ‘politicizes’ and ‘moralizes’, when it suggests that churches engage in climate change mitigation. In the chapter I explore what this might mean and which conceptions of the distinction between ‘politics’ and ‘religion’ such accusations bear on.

The third chapter takes off from the controversy caused by the bishops’ announcement in early 2020 and trace the developments that eventually led to the establishment of an official response on behalf of the Church in 2022. I first explore the cultural values and organizational ethos that underpin the statement made in relation to the controversy that “10 bishops = 10 green grocers”, which is meant to imply that neither the bishops, nor anyone else, may speak on behalf of the entire Church. I show how the values of ‘spaciousness’ and ‘religious freedom’ and the organizational ethos they form for the Church were implicitly as well as explicitly used in the service of rejecting the kind of engagement with climate change that first Green Church and then the bishops suggested on behalf of the Church. I then argue that a particular form of carbon accounting came to provide the Church – squeezed as it is in between ideals of church-state separation and internal egalitarianism and ‘spaciousness’ – with a way of maintaining both its (partial) independence and its (partial) spaciousness. The method of carbon accounting showed to be particularly well-suited because it enabled the Church to speak as a unity without in fact letting anyone speak on behalf of it. I end the chapter by hypothesizing that this method might show to change the Church more than it is supposed to, given that the act of accounting for oneself might infer responsibility to that self, requiring it to not only account for itself, but also to in fact act *as* a unity.

In the fourth and fifth chapter I interrogate what happens as engaging with the issue of climate change brings the materiality of church life as well as of Christian cosmology to the fore. In chapter four, I explore how projects of reducing the carbon footprint of church life foreground the distinction between materiality and immateriality that organizes Protestant convictions about what matters in Christianity (namely that which is *not* matter). I show that as the logic of carbon accounting travelled into the Church, everything came to be cast as material and, hence, potentially as dispensable from a Protestant perspective. I argue that this forced church actors to confront the fuzzy Lutheran boundaries between matter and meaning - captured in the term “adiaphora” - that has otherwise prevailed in the Danish Church, and to actually determine what matter really matter.

In the fifth - and final - chapter I explore the endeavors of environmentally concerned pastors to articulate an eco-theology fit for a time of climate crisis. I show how re-describing the God-world relation as one defined by ‘deep incarnation’, enables the pastors to establish the grounds for extending the commandment to love one’s neighbor to also encompass non-human others. I argue that as the priests are trying to bring the world and God, the human

and the nonhuman closer together, in order to, ultimately, enact Christian love, they are dealing with a problem that pertains to discerning and articulating the right relational configuration, that is *the optimal distance*, for care.

The short conclusion restates the main findings of this thesis in the light of what has been presented throughout the chapters.

## Chapter 1 Tilting at Churches: Infrastructural Battles and the Privileged Position of the Danish Church

*Just then, they discovered thirty or forty windmills in that plain. And as soon as don Quixote saw them, he said to his squire: "Fortune is guiding our affairs better than we could have ever hoped. Look over there, Sancho Panza, my friend, where there are thirty or more monstrous giants with whom I plan to do battle and take all their lives, and with their spoils we'll start to get rich. This is righteous warfare, and it's a great service to God to rid the earth of such a wicked seed."*

*"What giants?" said Sancho Panza.*

*"Those that you see over there," responded his master, "with the long arms—some of them almost two leagues long."*

*"Look, your grace," responded Sancho, "what you see over there aren't giants—they're windmills; and what seems to be arms are the sails that rotate the millstone when they're turned by the wind."*

*"It seems to me," responded don Quixote, "that you aren't well-versed in adventures—they are giants; and if you're afraid, get away from here and start praying while I go into fierce and unequal battle with them."*

*And saying this, he spurred his horse Rocinante without heeding what his squire Sancho was shouting to him, that he was attacking windmills and not giants.*

Don Quixote, Miguel De Cervantes, 1605

On October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018, the large Danish utility company HOFOR contacted the municipality of Vesthimmerland to inquire about a particular area within the municipality that was deemed highly appropriate for the erection of windmills. A few months later, in early 2019, a meeting ensued between HOFOR and two representatives from the municipality. According to the sparse minutes from this meeting, HOFOR was in the process of developing a project proposal entailing the erection of six 'super-windmills' in the area. The minutes note that HOFOR was informed by the municipal representatives that one of the prospective windmills was planned to be positioned within the remote protective zone of a small parish church, the church of Gundersted.

The municipal employees had furthermore relayed to HOFOR that windmill projects in this area often generate a lot of inquiries from citizens and organizations who want to obtain information about the project's details and gain access to administrative, political, and technical documents pertaining to such projects. This project was no exception, which is why I can relay its development in quite some detail below.<sup>33</sup> Windmill projects generate a lot of affect and controversy and, as was implied by the municipality employees, they ought not to be taken lightly. Neither was this one. In fact, these particular windmills in Vesthimmerland made it all the way to parliament, where on February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022, MP Signe Munk from the Socialist Party questioned the then social democratic Minister of the Interior and Housing, Kaare Dybvad. The publicly available transmission from the parliament chamber shows Munk, a woman in her mid-thirties, informally dressed in a bright blue dress, inquiring about the Minister's opinion on the fact that the Danish People's Church "holds a special right to veto the erection of windmills in the proximity of church buildings"; a right that she had recently learned had been exercised in Vesthimmerland to the effect that the erection of the six super-windmills had been delayed. Munk wanted to know what Dybvad, as the minister responsible for such matters, was going to do to get this privilege annulled as soon as possible? Seeing that the Danish landscape is sprinkled with churches, Munk said, such a right to veto can surely only be considered a stumbling block for the green transition, and therefore in line for immediate dissolution.

Alongside churches, windmills take center stage in this chapter of my account of climate change and the Church and the complex contrapuntal dance between them. More concretely, the chapter revolves around the abovementioned six windmills, whose prospective erection in the proximity of a medieval church became the subject of a public controversy related not only to the status of windmills but also to that of the Church. Windmills are considered one of the central technological instruments in the establishment of a sustainable energy infrastructure in Denmark. A broad majority in the Danish parliament has agreed to a goal of quadrupling the production of wind and solar energy in Denmark by 2030, which means that, in addition to the approximately 4.200 larger windmills already erected on Danish soil, a lot more are planned to emerge. This will entail a conversion of Danish energy production away from dependency on fossil fuels, but it will also entail that the Danish landscape and its inhabitants – humans, animals, plants, and, of relevance to the specific interest of this thesis, churches - will have to accommodate very

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<sup>33</sup> A comprehensive pdf package of all the documents pertaining to the case, from the first note made by the municipal employee in 2018 upon receiving the first phone call from HOFOR to the (stalled) status of the project in late 2021, can be found online, as it has been put there by someone who must have requested access to the public records. Many more documents have been produced since, as the case travelled into the general public by way of critical media coverage and politicians picking up on its principled character.

large technical objects that are neither quiet nor invisible. Windmills are tall and sweeping constructions and their physical affordances do not only amount to their capacity for producing energy, but include the production of noise, shadows, and vibrations. These physical affordances are not unimportant as it does indeed give them enemies – the Church sometimes included. People worry about noise pollution, about the flight of rare birds and young families from already dwindling rural towns, about a frightening skyline dominating the horizon of their everyday life or their funeral, and about church towers being visually decapitated. So although windmills have become somewhat a symbol of green transitioning in Denmark, they also cause controversies wherever they are erected (Papazu 2017; Clausen, Rudolph, and Nyborg 2021; Kirkegaard et al. 2022). In this chapter I am concerned specifically with the position of the Danish People’s Church as an institution in such controversies. The case in Vesthimmerland, where the diocesan authorities had exercised their right to object to windmills, produced a heated discussion in the public media and among politicians, revolving not only around the case in question, but even more so around its principled implications. The Church does hold a ‘special right’ – indeed, a politically appointed responsibility - to object to the erection of tall constructions in the proximity (<4,5km) of church buildings if such constructions are understood to threaten the cultural heritage value that churches in the landscape are understood to represent. The reasons that the Church has been assigned this right are historical as well as political, and the arrangement is an example of how the Church as an institution is bound up with and holds a privileged position in the political and bureaucratic infrastructures of Danish society as well as in claims to what constitutes Danish national identity (Poulsen et al. 2021a; Iversen et al. 2019; Nielsen 2014).

Just as windmills are placed outside and often far away from churches, this chapter begins from a position ‘outside’ of the Church; it takes its point of departure from the attacks on the Church’s privileged position that were launched as the public became aware of the diocesan authorities’ politically assigned right to object to windmills. The public controversy around the windmills in Vesthimmerland brought an otherwise quite opaque relationship between the State and Church out into the open for public scrutiny and questioning, bringing political actors to require that the Church’s status in matters of national planning was annulled. Politicians, organizations, citizens and journalists argued that in a time when climate change mitigation ranks high in Danish society, it seems ‘unreasonable’ that undisturbed views of churches in the landscape could ‘short circuit projects of green transitioning’. To object to windmills was rendered as an inappropriate stance to take, and that it furthermore was the State that gave the Church the right to do so, was perceived as ‘undemocratic’ and ‘out-dated’.

In his critical analysis of the politics of wind energy, anthropologist Patrick Bresnihan (2022) argues that windmill resistance is often put forward as ‘idiotic’. Opposition to wind turbines, he writes, which goes against common-sense calls for quick and necessary green energy transitions, are therefore commonly considered to be an example of mistaking windmills for giants in the way Don Quixote does in the passage that opened this chapter. The English expression ‘tilting at windmills’ is derived from Cervantes’ novel and is used as shorthand for ‘attacking imaginary enemies’ (ibid.164). Hence, when someone is accused of ‘tilting at windmills’ it implies that their interpretation of a situation is mistaken; that they see enemies where there are none. However, inspired by Isabelle Stengers, Bresnihan suggests that rather than dismissing ‘idiotic stories’ – such as that of Don Quixote’s attack on windmills – such stories can be attended to with an intention of ‘slowing down’ interpretation (ibid.). To listen to, rather than dismiss, supposedly idiotic interpretations of a situation is a way of challenging hegemonic accounts and logics. This is necessary in the case of windmill opposition, Bresnihan argues, because he is critical of the view of wind turbines as constituting an “innocent move toward a cleaner, more sustainable future” (ibid.156). Bresnihan finds that there are reasons to be critical of wind energy projects as in many cases they can be understood as “a continuation of the extractive logics of the past that have not served the majority well” (ibid.154). He argues that wind energy infrastructures are established by global energy companies, who are not driven by an ecological concern, but by interests in generating profit, often at the expense of the interests and well-being of the local – often geographically, politically, and economically peripheral – population living in the areas where wind turbines are projected and built. Rather than dismissing the concerns about wind turbines that those affected by them may have as ‘idiotic’, Bresnihan suggests that by attending carefully to them, it becomes possible to see the complex field in which wind energy projects are introduced. By attending not just to the hegemonic story about windmills as the key to a sustainable future, one might find that there are other things that matter in the situation of ecological crisis than the speed with which windmills are erected. Controversies stemming from windmill opposition, in other words, reveal the many different stakes of those who are affected by windmills and that the measures taken to mitigate climate change happen in complex cultural fields.

While the Danish Church can hardly be grouped with the peripheral populations that Bresnihan has in mind, I do welcome Bresnihan’s invitation to ‘tilt at windmills’, which in this context implies using the controversy around the windmills in Vesthimmerland as an opening to attend to how something more than windmills and green transitioning was at stake in this controversy. What was at stake was the position of the Church in Danish society and the role it has hitherto been prescribed politically, administratively, and culturally. The controversy and the



many stories about how the Church is and ought to be related to windmills show how the climate crisis challenged the privileged position and role of the Church in Danish society as the value of green transitioning came to take political priority. When the Church was accused of ‘tilting at windmills’ and only being interested in preserving and protecting what already is, it was rendered as being out of step with time and with the contemporary concerns of society. This forced the Church into a complicated balancing act in the debate, as it strove to preserve its status as the National Church; a status which rests, on the one hand, on a view of the Church and its material manifestations as valuable cultural heritage and relevant markers of national identity, and, on the other hand, on the Church being deemed of continued relevance in a time marked by climate crisis where changes and transitions are necessary. As such, this chapter focuses on how the political ambition to perform a transition of Danish energy infrastructures from fossil sources to green ones affects the Church. As I show, the Church’s strategy in this case rested on providing an account of the relation between the Church and the State that places both the Church and the alleged value-conflict between change and preservation *inside the State itself*. As such, the controversy exposes an inherent tension that resides not only within the Church, but in society at large, where desires to preserve and to renew exist side by side in a tension that the demand for a green transition intensifies.

## Merographic Politics

To delineate how the Church’s position in regard to windmills – and in Danish society at large – was challenged and defended, I draw on Casper Bruun Jensen and Randi Markussen’s idea of ‘merographic politics’ (2001). In their study of a controversy around whether the medieval Mårup church building (which, at the time of writing, was well on its way to tumbling into the ocean) should be preserved, Jensen and Markussen dissect the discursive resources that actors draw on to argue for their preferred solutions to the situation. Jensen and Markussen show how various actors frame their arguments for and against preserving the church by contextualizing the church and its surrounding landscape in different ways. The coastal area where the church is situated is naturally eroding, and to preserve the church would entail taking measures to halt this process so as to prevent the church from, literally, falling into the ocean. Preservation proponents base their argument on the building’s cultural significance. A non-interventionist camp, however, argues that it is the coastal landscape itself – with or without a church building – that is to be considered unique and worthy of preservation. Preserving the coastal area and its naturally occurring erosion,

therefore, would be at odds with any measures required to save the church, as they would meddle with the landscape's natural development.

Constructing an argument in this context, Jensen and Markussen argue, can be conceived of as attempts “to frame the context in which questions should be answered in a specific way” (ibid.797). In their analysis Jensen and Markussen outline several different framings of the situation, including various (incommensurable) historical accounts of the church, legislation regarding the preservation of landscapes and of cultural landmarks, evaluation of the site as a tourist attraction, and discourses around modernity and its discontents. Mårup church and its surrounding landscape can be seen in the contexts of cultural heritage protection, environmental protection, local history, tourism, and so on. And depending on how each context is framed, different answers to the question of the future of the church can be given. In such framings what is, for example, ‘natural’, ‘cultural’, ‘ethical’, ‘economic’ and so on may swirl around and change position – such as when preserving a ‘natural’ landscape can both be achieved by humans intervening and by letting go. Jensen and Markussen depict how the different actors in the controversy offer different contexts as a means to argue for different answers to the problem. To analytically handle a case that is “so abundant in complexity, heterogeneity and, one might say, confusion” (799), and where the construction of arguments hinge on the attempt to frame the context, Jensen and Markussen suggest the idea of ‘merographic politics’. They source the term merographic from Marilyn Strathern (1992), who coined the idea of ‘merographic connections’ to describe a distinctively Euro-American mechanism of defining entities by way of contextualizing them (ibid.72). Strathern traces this idea of knowledge production as an effect of forging connections – of contextualizing – to the emergence of the scientific worldview in the Enlightenment. According to Strathern, the conception of knowledge production that emerged in this period involved “explaining discrete phenomena by reference to the forces, logics, or structures that held them together” (Strathern 2018). To produce knowledge about a certain phenomenon, a certain entity, involves understanding it in relation to something else. In her most recent book, *Relations* (2020), Strathern writes that the idea of ‘merographic connections’ is “a phrase that formalizes what is commonplace in English usage: the fact that nothing is simply part of a whole insofar as another view, another perspective, may redescribe it as part of something else” (ibid.6). Strathern herself use the example of the relation between state and religion to define this further:

Religion and state (say) may be shown to relate to each other in this or that respect, while the analytical discreteness of each is retained by the fact that either may also be related to quite distinct segments of social life, as when mystical

belief (or population statistics) is regarded as part of the one and not the other.<sup>34</sup>

(p6)

The state and religion can be seen as related in a historical exposition, but they can also be differentiated when religion is thought of in terms of its spiritual doctrines and the state is thought of as an administrative system. They are, as such, merographically related: they can be seen as part of each other, but they are also distinct, depending on the way connections are drawn. Merographic connection describes a mechanism of relating that entails delineating both similarities and differences: from one perspective, religion and state can be seen to overlap, and from another to differ. Entities are in this merographic perspective what Jensen and Markussen describe as ‘Janus-faced’: they can appear in different ways, according to who frames the context in which they are to be known. According to Janet Dolgin (1993), Strathern uses the term merographic “to describe her society's ability to produce unending new realities by shifting levels or altering contexts and connections” (ibid.490). Unending implies that in the Euro-American imagination entities are not only two-faced like the figure of Janus, but can potentially be infinitely contextualized, as one thing can always be connected with any other thing, that will draw it forth in order to be known in a specific way.

While Jensen and Markussen (2001) do not exactly define the concept ‘merographic politics’, what I understand from their analysis is that the politics around Mårup Church are defined by various ways of framing and determining the context in which the question of the church’s future should be answered. Jensen and Markussen show that what takes place in the controversy around Mårup Church is a constant re-contextualization of the church and the landscape of which it is a part. They are concerned with how all the entities evoked in the debate – which (in their ANT inspired approach) include the church, the coast, nature, culture, tourism, Danish society, religion, and the law – have an ability to be Janus-faced, “to change appearance, depending on who is talking about them” (ibid.797). By contextualizing – or, in the terms of their analytical vocabulary, merographically connecting - the church and the coast to history, nature, tourism, and so on, those entities continuously change appearance, enabling different answers to the question of their future.

Inspired by Jensen and Markussen’s analysis of the merographic politics around Mårup church, I suggest that the controversy around the Church’s position in matters of windmills

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<sup>34</sup> Strathern uses the example of state-religion relations to say something about how two things can be connected, on the one hand, but on the other hand can also be seen as distinct. This is also what I use her quotation to say something about. However, a perhaps funny detail is that while Strathern highlights population statistics as that which separates religion and state, population statistics is in fact one of the main overlaps between the State and the Church in Denmark, as it is the parishes that are responsible for the registration of births and deaths in Denmark. This speaks to the unique church-state relation found in Denmark when compared to other countries..

can, in similar vein, be understood to be made up of different ways of framing the context in which the question of the Church's appropriate position can be answered. That is, I suggest that each of the various arguments about the Church's future position brought forth in the controversy around windmills is construed by way of merographically connecting it to various other entities, such as buildings, landscapes, bureaucratic structures, concepts of cultural heritage and national identity, and the Christian concept of neighbourly love. Much, I suggest, depended on how different actors contextualized the Church in this controversy. Hence, on the following pages I lay out how the different arguments construed by the participating actors were based on different ways of contextualizing the Church and its interests. Whether the Church was defined as, for example, an interest group among other civil interest groups, as cultural heritage, as part of the political and bureaucratic system, or as a religious force had consequences for how to answer the question about what its position ought to be on windmills.<sup>35</sup>

I begin with the voices that were critical of what they considered an inappropriate privileging of the Church and who called for a dissolution of the Church's power to function as a 'stumbling block' to the green transition.

## The Church as Interest Group

When the socialist MP Signe Munk brought up the issue of the Church's position in relation to windmills, she referred to a newspaper article that offered a thorough and critical account of the case in Vesthimmerland. On February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022, the left-leaning newspaper *Dagbladet Information* had published an article with the title "Churches Use Right to Veto to Fight Windmills".<sup>36</sup> The article was accompanied by a drawing of what seems to be God pulling up



windmills from the ground (see picture 1). The article explains how the ten dioceses had used their right – a right that the article implies is quite surprising, almost like news - “to contest and delay green energy utilities” more than ten times since 2017.

The article specifically reports on the ongoing case in Vesthimmerland, which at the time was being processed by the Minister of the Interior and Housing after the diocesan authorities had objected to the project in July 2021. The article quotes the mayor of Vesthimmerland explaining that the

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<sup>35</sup> I, as author of this text, obviously also becomes a participant in such merographic politics, as I make choices about which actors and contextualizations to include in my account of the case.

<sup>36</sup> Bahn, Martin. 2022. “Kirker bruger vetoret til at bekæmpe vindmøller.” *Dagbladet Information*, February 1, 2022.

green transitioning of the municipality “has been put on hold” while they await the minister’s verdict. The minister is the only one who can decide to overrule a diocese’s objection to a project of this kind. The mayor argues that the involvement of the diocese as an actor in municipal planning projects pertaining to windmills obstructs the democratic processes: “This rule is an offence to our democracy. There is a democratically elected city council, and all the represented parties are in on the green transitioning. And even so, it is as though we are knocked back to square one.” According to him, the interest of the Church ought to be levelled with the concerns of other interest groups.

The journalist interviews several members of Parliament from across the political spectrum. In his own words, the MPs all express surprise as he “disclosed the information” about the Church’s special “right to veto” and the way it has been employed in recent cases. It is unusual to hear about the Church as an active agent in such bureaucratic-cum-political matters because, although the Church is the national church of Denmark, Danish society is generally understood to be organized in a secular manner in which the religious and the political are separated (Iversen 2010). The responses that the journalist quotes politicians for are indeed also about how such a privileging of the Church in matters of planning seems inappropriate. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the spokesperson for the far-left party, Enhedslisten, opines that it is indeed a very peculiar arrangement that “the sight of churches in the landscape has become so sacred” that it may end up affecting the country’s ability to reach its climate goals. MP Munk of the Socialist Party says “time has run out for the churches to have a veto right to object to windmills”, rendering the arrangement outdated. Finally, the spokesperson for the liberal party Venstre suggests that the case shows that the arrangement allows for a “selfish perspective” on the side of the churches and their wish to be visible in the landscape. “The surrounding society”, he argues, “has new needs in regard to undertaking a green transition, and the right to veto makes such a green transition just the more difficult”. He is, in other words, suggesting that the right of the Church is used only in its own interest and that this is at odds with the interests of the rest of society. The green transition is already complicated, he states, due to the special and incommensurable interests at stake. By providing particular groups a right to veto, things only become more complicated. A spokesperson from the Social Democratic party provides the same argument, stating that she does not find it reasonable that the concern of churches should weigh higher than concerns about, for example, business development and housing – “we all have to yield”, she argues. As such, the Church is cast as one interest group out of many who ought to bring their interests and stakes into the democratic process of negotiations and compromises.

The position and aim of the article are clear: the reader ought to be disconcerted by a legal mechanism that secures the privileged position of the Church – one interest group out of

many - in political matters that are of importance to society at large. The arrangement, in the eyes of these critics, enables the Church to pursue its own interest in maintaining its status in the landscape and to value this higher than the advancement of the much-needed green transitioning. The op-ed of the regional newspaper of Northern Jutland echoed this position, stating that it was ‘far out’ that the churches held a special right to veto simply to preserve the cultural heritage of the churches, when citizens and companies had to settle with a regular right of consultation. That the churches are in this position is both ‘outdated’ and ‘unfair’, as there should be no room for such narrow interests. The media coverage of the case in Vesthimmerland offers many examples of similar comments that cast the special right of the diocesan authorities as outdated and undemocratic. Many critics called for an annulment of the right – a ‘purification’ (Latour 1993) of Church-state hybridity, one might say – requiring of the then-Minister to separate the interests of the Church from those of the State.

MP Munk took this position as she encouraged the Minister of the Interior and of Housing to work towards withdrawing what she considered a privilege afforded to the Church. This is how she laid out the situation in Parliament:

“We have approximately 2,000 churches in Denmark. They are well distributed across our quite lovely country, and every one of them may, in fact, say no thanks to windmills, if they can as much as catch a glimpse of them in the horizon. (...) Anyone must surely be able to see that we have a problem, because the churches' right to say no to windmills is being used in a way that slows down the green transition - in which we all have an interest. As the Minister is the one who will be sitting at the end of the table of the upcoming negotiations of the Planning Act, and furthermore is the one who can actually decide to remove this stumbling block in the Planning Act, I would therefore like to hear what the minister will do about it.”



When Munk relays the resistance towards windmills as coming from the individual churches, she separates the interests of the churches from those of Danish society at large. As such, the churches are framed as interested in maintaining their own status, their own undisturbed gaze of themselves on the horizon, while the interest of the general ‘we’ that Munk understands herself to represent is on the side of the windmills. Windmills, in this case as in many others (Blok 2016), are linked to the green transition, both technically and symbolically. Hence, Munk presents it as a battle about more than churches or windmills in the landscape: it is about whose and which interests count the most in the steering of society.

With Jensen and Markussen’s concept of merographic politics in mind, we might say that the critics construct their arguments by framing the context for answering the question of whether the church ought to have a right to veto or not in a specific way. By merographically connecting the Church to an interest in self-preservation, and the State to what they deemed society’s general interest in performing a green transitioning, the critics frame the situation as one in which two separate actors – the Church and the State - are in disagreement over what is most important to society – churches or windmills - and whose interests should count the most. The Church, these critics suggest, should be contextualized as one interest group out of many, who pursue their own special interest – in this case in preserving the view of their churches – of itself, so to speak - in the landscape. The government, on the other hand, is contextualized as representing the ‘surrounding society’ and its general interest as performing a green transitioning. Into this landscape, the erection of windmills is inserted as a project of interest to society, meaning it ought to be the national and democratically elected politicians who make decisions on such a matter – not interest groups. It is not that the critics deem the interests of the churches to be unimportant or illegitimate (although they do, a little bit); instead, they suggest that the interests of the churches ought to compete with all the other specific interests held by citizens, organizations, and corporations, i.e. the Church is just one interest group out of others. Hence, by contextualizing the Church as just one more interest group in democratic processes, each pursues its own interests, the answer to the question of whether it ought to have a privileged position or not is, naturally, that it should not. The special right of the Church ought to be annulled if the democratic process, where interest groups are heard but not privileged over each other, is to be preserved.

Let’s go back, for a moment, to the situation in the parliamentary chamber, where the then-Minister of the Interior and Housing responds to his colleague’s critique. Because he does not, in fact, do so with a straight answer. Instead, he offers an alternative framing of the context in which the Church’s objection to windmills can be understood.

## The Church as Cultural Heritage

The minister, a smartly dressed man in his mid-forties, rises from his chair, his speech manuscript firmly clutched between his hands, and responds to Munk's indignant questions with a highly technical answer, delineating the process around windmill objections:

“The municipalities are responsible for taking into consideration what we call national interests in their overall planning. Such interests include, among other things, cultural heritage. Churches in the landscape are considered as such. It is the Minister of the Interior and Housing who demurs municipality plans that are not in agreement with national interests. In the case of protecting churches in the landscape, it is the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs that requests the National Housing and Planning Agency (*Bolig- og Planstyrelsen*) to object to specific municipality plans. In the case of local development plans any minister can file objections to issues pertaining to the particular domain that he or she is responsible for. The country's ten diocesan authorities (*stiftsøvrigheder*) have that same right.”

The Minister here describes the bureaucratic process around local planning as it is delineated in the National Planning Act (*Planloven*). The National Planning Act is a national law that establishes the framework of legal provisions for local planning in Denmark. It was designed to secure coherent and desirable planning throughout the country, which implies that societal and national interests in land use are taken into account in municipal and local planning projects. At the time of the controversy in Vesthimmerland, the four national interests were delineated as ‘business development’, ‘national and regional structures’, ‘nature and environmental protection’, and ‘cultural heritage and landscapes’ (The Danish Business Authority 2018). The Minister also explains that the right of the diocesan authorities (a bureaucratic entity whose function I return to in a later section) to object to windmills exists because churches in the landscape are designated as *cultural heritage*. This implies that the interest in preserving the view of Gundersted church in the landscape was not at odds with the interest of society, but rather a *national* interest; something that it had been politically decided to protect.

As argued by Birgit Meyer and Marlene De Witte, what is considered cultural heritage might refer to the past, but is not automatically and directly inherited from the past (2013). Cultural heritage formation is, according to Meyer and De Witte, a “complicated, contested political–aesthetic process” (ibid.276), that involves concrete acts of “selecting, setting apart, designing, fashioning, and inscribing cultural forms as heritage” (ibid.280). What is considered cultural



heritage is actively made and unmade as societal actors make claims as to what defines their culture. Once cultural forms are brought into the framework of heritage, they are, according to Meyer and De Witte, made to assume additional or even new value; they are, Meyer and De Witte suggest, “sacralized”:

The powerful effects of such framing become clear once it is realized that even ordinary everyday objects, coded as heritage, may be elevated to the level of the extraordinary and achieve a new sublime or sacred quality. (...) Indeed, not unlike religion, heritage formation involves some kind of sacralization, through which cultural forms are lifted up and set apart so as to be able to speak of what is considered to be central to social life. (ibid.276)

That heritagization entails a kind of sacralizing means, according to Meyer and De Witte, that what is deemed cultural heritage is taken to express something about what is – or ought to be - central and significant for society.

So what does it imply that churches-in-the-landscape in Denmark are considered to be cultural heritage? Why are such landscapes ‘set apart’ and valued as important ‘cultural forms’? What are they perceived to be able to express about Danish society? And what kind of arguments about the Church's position in Danish society does a contextualization of the churches as cultural heritage enable?

As a way of attending to how specific things are made to represent cultural heritage, Meyer and De Witte suggest paying particular attention to what they call the ‘aesthetic practices’ and the ‘politics of authentication’ that go into sacralizing particular cultural forms heritage. This entails pursuing questions such as “which aesthetic practices are involved in profiling cultural forms as heritage? What are the politics of authentication that underpin the selection and framing of particular cultural forms?” (ibid.276). In the next sections, I pursue these questions in the process of showing how the Church in Denmark is contextualized to be as much a *national* institution as a *religious* one, and how this duality in its status is both challenged by the accusation that it is a stumbling block to the green transitioning, and used as an argument for preserving its position as it is.

### **Churches in the Landscapes as Markers of National Identity and Idyll**

On July 6th, 2021, the diocesan authorities of Viborg made use of their right to object to municipal planning projects, as established by §29, no. 3 in the National Planning Act, when they handed in a formal request to the Ministry of Ecclesiastical affairs to submit an objection to the project to the National Housing and Planning Agency. In the objection letter the diocesan authorities argue that

Gundersted church, as a cultural-historical landmark, holds value as heritage, and it is therefore of national interest to preserve it. However, their argument is not about the church as such, but rather about *the view* of the church in the landscape. According to the expert assessment offered by the Royal Architect (*Kongelige Bygningsinspektør*), who is formally appointed by the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs to advise the diocesan authorities in such matters, the erection of the super windmills would blemish such a view. Her assessment of the windmill project's aesthetic consequences for the church-in-the-landscape was – as is obligatory - attached to the objection letter:

The church of Gundersted is located beautifully and elevated in the landscape allowing for many undisturbed sights of the church. This will be significantly influenced by the proposal to erect windmills. From appendix 1: Visualisation no. 21, page 61, Gundersted, Brusåvej, it is evident that the new windmills will be very disfiguring and visually disturbing for the approach to Gundersted Kirke and when arriving at the church. The wings of the windmills will be rotating right behind the church, in approximately the same height as the church tower, which is a shame and an obstruction of the experience of the freely visible church.

What the Royal Architect evaluates is the sight of the church and the way it stands out in the landscape, elevated and undisturbed. It is, indeed, *the very sight of the church-in-the-landscape* that it is of national interest to preserve. In a similar windmill objection letter, a diocesan administrator spelled out this in more straightforward prose:

It is in the State's interest that the individual elements and wholes of the country's cultural history are preserved. The churches of the Danish People's Church constitute a cultural environment that is particularly worthy of preservation, and it is such environments that the diocesan authorities strive to protect. The churches are the village's most important cultural-historical monument and often a prominent landmark in the landscape. Structures, buildings, and other interventions must therefore be placed and designed in a way that do not obscure or spoil the experience of the church and its immediate surroundings. (...) The churches are important cultural landmarks in the Danish countryside. In the church reception areas, consideration of the church's status and the experience of the church from the open country must be given great weight. The purpose of the guideline regarding church viewing areas is that this status of the village churches and churches in the open country is not obscured or impaired by construction, establishment of technical facilities, etc.

The argument offered by this diocesan administrator<sup>37</sup> is that churches more generally are important cultural historical monuments and landmarks in the Danish countryside. As monuments, they are defining for the villages they are in and for the Danish countryside surrounding them. Thus, it is not only their status as monuments that gives them this significance; it is the ‘environment’ they constitute. What is of cultural heritage value is, presumably, the view of churches in the landscape. This implies that the diocesan authorities have the right to object to tall constructions – skyscrapers, industrial chimneys, windmills, etc. – within a certain proximity of a church building if they are perceived to disfigure the culturally valuable view-of-churches-in-the-landscape. As the Royal Architect argues in the case of Gundersted, it is because of their size that the windmills will destroy the experience of the sight of the church. Churches, one is tempted to say, ought not to have competition in the landscape.

The aesthetic judgments presented by the architect and the diocesan authorities are framed in distinctively secular registers – not religious ones. The aesthetic value of churches-in-the-landscape is tied to the way they define the Danish landscape as cultural-historical navigation points – not religious ones. When contextualized as cultural heritage, we might say, the churches in the landscape are regarded as much as *cultural* forms as *religious* ones. This is defining for how heritagization works, Meyer and De Witte (2013) argue. They argue that when religious forms are framed as cultural heritage, they are ‘profanized’ in the sense that they are lifted up to represent society, or culture, more than religion:

While the very setting apart of certain cultural forms as “heritage” taps into religious registers of sacralization, in many instances the re-formation of religious forms as “heritage” entails a process of profanization through which their initial sacrality is being lost. In short, two processes are at the heart of the interplay between the fields of “heritage” and “religion.” First, the heritagization of the sacred: how religious traditions become represented and recognized (or contested and rejected) in the framework of “heritage.” And second, the sacralization of heritage: how certain heritage forms become imbued with a sacrality that makes them appear powerful, authentic, or even incontestable. (ibid.277)

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<sup>37</sup> The diocesan administrator who has authored the objection refers to two statutory declarations regarding the Danish People’s Church’s church buildings and cemeteries to clarify what it is that the diocesan authorities are responsible for overseeing: §1, stk. 3 in declaration no. 1156, of September 2016, and §29 in declaration no. 1172 of September 19th, 2016. The first obliges the diocesan authorities to ensure that “the cultural values (*kulturværdier*) associated with church buildings and cemeteries are not diminished”, and the second obliges the parish councils – which are under the supervision of the diocesan authorities – to ensure that “the church and the cemetery’s adjacent surroundings are not built upon or used in a distasteful (*skammende*) manner”.

Hence, Meyer and De Witte delineate two processes involved in the dynamics of heritagization and sacralization in contexts where it is *religious forms* that are lifted up as valuable *cultural forms*: on the one hand, what was initially conceived of as religious is de-sacralized as religious forms in the process of heritagization are deemed valuable as *cultural* rather than *religious* forms. That is, they are deemed valuable to the social context, about which they are perceived to express something central, rather than outrightly for their religious content. On the other hand, Meyer and De Witte argue, heritagization is in itself a process of sacralization as certain cultural forms – religious or not – are demarcated as expressing what is central – sacred in Durkheim’s sense – to social life (ibid).

From this we can draw that when churches-in-the-landscape are contextualized as cultural heritage, the interest in protecting the view of them - from for example windmills - can be conceived of as a secular and distinctively national interest, preserving what is deemed central to society – namely a particular landscape populated by churches. Delineated as a cultural form, such a landscape adds value as it is deemed significant for Danish culture. But why are landscapes-with-churches-in-them ‘sacralized’? What does this express about Danish society? Why are views of churches in landscapes valued higher than views of, for example, windmills? Could landscapes with windmills not just as well be deemed beautiful?

This aesthetic judgment, I suggest, has to do with a particular perception of Danish national identity. In a study of Danish landscape painting, art historian Gertrud Oelsner (2022) argues that the depiction and celebration of particular Danish landscapes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century played an important part in the intense nation-building efforts that took place in this period (ibid.). Certain Danish landscapes – mainly in rural Northern Zealand - were elevated to represent Denmark and the imagined national community that was taking shape (ibid.). As in many other European countries, 19<sup>th</sup> century Denmark was marked by a transition from absolute monarchy to constitutional democracy. In Denmark, the effort to establish a nation state was inspired by German romanticism (Østergård 1992; Feldbæk Ole 1991; Korsgaard, Kristensen, and Siggaard Jensen 2017). German philosophers such as J. G. Herder and J. G. Fichte had suggested that a people is defined by a common spirit, a *volks geist*, a common language and a strong connection to a bounded territory. In this romantic view of a people, national identity is linked to territory. Denmark’s official national anthem, for example, is from this period (1819) and celebrates the Danish landscape with its many coasts, beech trees, and curved hills as a means to express the particular history and character of the Danish people. Hence, an important component in the nation-building effort was romanticization of the Danish countryside,<sup>38</sup> which can be seen in the

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<sup>38</sup> Timothy Morton has offered a similar account of English romanticization of nature in the 19th century (2007 - *økologi uden natur*). According to Morton this period’s representations and celebrations of nature offered a concept of

way landscapes were represented, constructed, and canonized as being particularly Danish in Danish paintings (Oelsner 2022).



*Since its inception, Danish national identity and the idea of a national community has been associated with images of the Danish landscape and many of the canonized paintings from this period depict what has since come to be perceived as typical - or perhaps rather emblematic – of Danish landscapes (Oelsner 2022).*

When the Planning Act delineates protection of cultural heritage landscapes as a national interest, it is because the Danish landscape is a particularly treasured marker of Danishness. Resistance to windmills in Danish landscapes is rooted in many different concerns, including noise, nature conservation, and decreasing property value, and among them is a concern that they will disfigure what is considered a distinctively Danish landscape. This is argued by political and public debaters and, as we saw above, by the National Planning Act, which deems certain landscapes to be of national interest to preserve.

A recent campaign by the energy company Andel, which invests in green energy technology such as windmills, tackled this concern head-on in an attempt to combat windmill opposition. Their campaign revolved around the slogan “It is time to change the image of Danish Idyl - if we want to preserve it?”. This slogan was explicated in a well-produced and aesthetically beautiful three-minute video that opened with a series of images of what is popularly considered Danish idyl: romantic paintings of rural landscapes (such as those Oelsner (2022) has argued contributed to the canonizing of certain landscapes as particularly Danish) sprinkled with churches, manor houses, cattle, and oak trees, as well as contemporary drone-photographed panoramas of laughing children running through yellow rapeseed fields and family gatherings under the shade of broad tree crowns. Then, suddenly, sounds of thunder and a bleak montage of extreme weather

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nature as something that exists for the sake of human flourishing - aesthetically as well as resource-wise. Nature was constructed as something ‘out there’ that can be either tamed or enjoyed. He offers the term ‘romantic consumption’ to describe this way of conceiving of nature. In Denmark this ‘romantic consumption’ of natural landscapes was closely tied to the promotion of a new national identity.

phenomena – water, fire, mud - and frightened people. A voice-over comes to our rescue, stating that if we want to keep our Danish idyl, we need to change the image of it. And then: cut to some of the most iconic images of the Danish landscape – but now with windmills in the horizon:



*Contemporary version of P. S. Krøyer, A Summer Night on the Southern Beach of Skagen, 1893*

The campaign was based on interviews with Danish laypeople who dreaded a loss of beauty and serenity in landscapes where windmills were to be erected. The video represents the grief of the opponents as misplaced – framing them as, in fact, ‘tilting at windmills’ – and posits the idea that, rather than windmills being the biggest threat towards those beloved landscapes, the danger, in fact, comes from objections to them. The message of the campaign is that sometimes, to preserve something – the Danish idyl in this case - something else must change.<sup>39</sup>

While Andel’s campaign was not directed towards resistance based on the desire to preserve churches in the landscape, the objection to the windmill in the vicinity of Gundersted church was grounded in a similar concern about how the windmills would disfigure a cultural landscape. In this aesthetic judgment of windmills, specific landscapes were considered to be of cultural heritage value because of the churches placed in them. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Danish landscape was indeed “sprinkled with churches” (as MP Munk said in the beginning of this chapter), and in many of the Romantic depictions of the Danish landscape they figure as either fore- or background.

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<sup>39</sup> This might be seen as an example of what Nancy Munn (1986) has called ‘value transformation’: to realize one value “helps you towards realizing another one you count as even higher” (Robbins 2015:21). Hence, by realizing the value of green transitioning – in other words by accepting windmills on the horizon – Danes can realize the even higher value of retaining a much beloved Danish landscape.



*Vinderød church in Frederiksværk, 1837, J. T. Lundbye (1818-1848)*



*Prospect of Lyngby, 1803 – 1810, C. W. Eckersberg (1783-1853)*

But their ubiquity is not the only reason that they have made it into these paintings by renowned Danish painters J. T. Lundbye and C. W. Eckersberg. A more plausible reason is that the Romantic canonization of specific landscapes in the nation-building efforts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Denmark was closely tied to Christianity (Buckser 1996; Borish 2004; Hall, Korsgaard, and Pedersen 2015). One of the central contributors to constructing an idea of the Danish people was, for example, the priest and poet N. F. S Grundtvig (Borish 2004; Korsgaard 2014; Vind 2015). Inspired by German romanticism and its view of territorial and cultural unification and identity, Grundtvig conceived of the Danes as a special, Godly-ordained people who, in the course of history – and with the right *bildung* – would come to realize themselves as the highest spiritually developed people among the world’s peoples (Vind 2015; 1999). The nation, in his view, had a distinctively religious tinge. Grundtvig was very influential, and while his ‘biblical nationalism’ – which is how historian Ole Vind describes Grundtvig’s linking of the Danish nation and Christianity (Vind 1999) – was perhaps not shared by everyone, the idea of Danish national identity that took shape in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was bound up with the idea of the Danish people as being distinctively Christian. The period was marked by religious revivals and this renewed religiosity in the population was channeled into the nation-building efforts, defining the Danish nation as a particularly Christian nation (Hall, Korsgaard, and Pedersen 2015). In 1849 the Danish nation-state was founded, and the constitution (which is almost identical to today) established the Evangelical-Lutheran Church as the church of the people – The Danish People’s Church – and listed the Church as one of society’s four pillars. So while it might be that the churches-in-the-landscape were, to a certain extent, de-sacralized as they became valued as cultural forms, it did matter that they were Christian churches.



This historical narrative of the Danish people as a Christian people is materially manifested in the church buildings and churchyards. Churches-in-the-landscape are considered cultural heritage because they express this link between Danish national identity, rural landscapes, and Christianity. This link is considered historical, but it is nonetheless still deemed relevant and worth preserving (i.e. the Planning Act). As I described in the introduction to this thesis, few Danes attend church regularly, but more than 70% of the population nonetheless remain members. Many of them, recent surveys show, remain members of the Church even if they do not consider themselves religious. In fact, religiosity is one of the least articulated reasons for being a member of the Danish Church (Poulsen et al. 2021a, 24; Krogsdal 2012). Much more commonly articulated reasons for membership pertain to tradition and a desire to participate in the preservation of cultural heritage (Poulsen et al. 2021a, 18). According to a recent survey, 58% of the respondents said that a main reason for remaining a member of the Danish Church was a wish to preserve the material, as well as immaterial, cultural heritage that the Church represents, including buildings (ibid.).

This is of course not unrelated to religion, as it is specifically church buildings that are posited as markers of cultural identity in the landscape - not industrial complexes or roundabouts. Hence, if churches-in-the-landscape are taken to be “cultural forms that express something central about social life” (Meyer and De Witte), the fact that the forms are distinctively Christian implies that the cultural heritage is so, as well. As sociologist of religion Jes Heise Rasmussen (2018) has shown in his examination of church closings, church buildings are of great importance to members of the Danish Church because they by many are understood to be material manifestations of the long history of Christianity in Denmark (ibid.). The authors of the abovementioned survey argue that for many of the respondents, the desire to preserve churches as cultural heritage is not only about preserving the physical buildings, but also about preserving Christianity as a historical component of Danish national identity: “The wish to preserve the historical church buildings can both be an expression of preserving the aesthetics of the architectural constructions and simultaneously an expression of a desire to preserve the national cultural history that the People’s Church is a part of” (Poulsen et al. 2021a, 35) (author’s translation). That is, members consider the Danish Church to be a central part of Danish history, society and culture (Poulsen et al. 2021b, 268). The authors furthermore argue that one of the reasons membership rates in the Danish Church are still quite high compared to neighboring countries is that membership is based on an interweaving of several collective identities pertaining to the nation, the family and Danish society at large (ibid.). Membership in the Church is understood to connect individuals to collective identities that, more than being framed as religious,



are framed as historical, cultural, and kinship-based collectives. Danes, in other words, perceive church membership as ‘part of culture’ (ibid.23). That membership is part of culture refers both to the ways in which the Church functions as a common framework for life events such as baptism, confirmation, marriage and burial, even for people who do not consider themselves to be religious, and that membership of the Church implies being a member of a nation perceived as closely tied to Christianity historically. Christian values, traditions, and holidays are understood to create social and cultural coherence in society (Iversen et al. 2019). Danish national identity has what sociologists of religion Warburg, Larsen, and Schütze (2013) have called a ‘civil-religious’ tinge in the sense that state, church and nation have been conjoined with the effect of ‘sacralizing’ the Danish people.

To conclude, rendering churches-in-the-landscape as cultural heritage can be said to entail both a de-sacralizing of the churches and a sacralizing of a Danish landscape marked by Christianity. The churches are, on the one hand, desacralized as they become culturalized, historicized, and tied to the Danish nation-state – perhaps more so than to Christianity and the spiritual purposes it is understood to serve – and on the other hand, the Danish nation-state – together with its landscapes – is sacralized, as their identity is entwined with the Christian church. The preservation of churches in the landscape is on the one hand a national, non-religious interest of a society celebrating itself, and on the other hand it reveals how such a national interest and self-perception is deeply tied to Christianity.

Below I outline another way of framing the context in which to understand the Church’s objection to windmills. This contextualization, provided from actors *within* the Church, entails an even further secularization of the Church. The argument they offer goes that the Church was, in fact, not even acting as the Church when it objected to windmills, but *as the State*.

## The Church as Governmental Sector Authority

A few weeks after the critical news article about the case in Vesthimmerland triggered controversy, the bishop of Viborg offered his take on the matter in a commentary published in the newspaper The Christian Daily (*Kristeligt Dagblad*) under the headline “Wrongful Accusations: The People’s Church Does Not Stand in the way of a Green Transition”.<sup>40</sup> In *Information*’s article the bishop had been presented as ‘head of the diocese’ and, hence, as the one responsible for handing in the objection to the municipality’s windmill project. In his own opinion piece, the bishop set out – as

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<sup>40</sup> Stubbjær, Henrik. 2022. “Fejlfyldte anklager: Folkekirken står ikke i vejen for grøn omstilling.” *Kristeligt Dagblad*, March 13, 2022. <https://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/debat/fejlfyldte-anklager-folkekirken-staar-ikke-i-vejen-groen-omstilling>.

he formulated it himself – to “clarify a number of things” that he found had been misunderstood about the position of the Church in regard to windmills. The main purpose of his piece was to counter the image of the Church as an institution that was against green transitioning. As another bishop stated in her response to the matter, such an accusation could have consequences for how the Church was perceived, as it risked deeming the Church outdated and irrelevant to contemporary Danish citizens.<sup>41</sup> The controversy around windmills could, she argued, potentially add to ‘the crisis of relevance’ that I outlined in the introduction to this thesis, as the Church would be perceived as being conservative and out of step with reality. It was therefore of utmost importance to church actors contributing to the public debate about the case in Vesthimmerland to counter the image that was being drawn of the Church as a ‘stumbling block’ to the green transition.

The point of clarification that the bishop of Viborg argued most forcefully for in his opinion piece pertained to the technicalities of Church-state relations. He found it pertinent to specify exactly which churchly entity it was that could object to windmills. He wanted to make it clear that neither ‘the churches’ nor ‘the Church’ could object to windmills. Rather, it was the *diocesan authorities (stiftsøvrigheden)*. This, he explained, is an entity comprising a representative of the state and a representative of the Church, who together form a so-called ‘sector authority’ (*sektormyndighed*). Sector authorities are decentralized governmental entities within the national political system whose task it is to safeguard the national interests in matters of regional, municipal and local planning. The task of a diocesan authority is twofold: 1) to secure the legal and financial steering of the diocese, which involves management of both state funds and membership payments; and 2) to act as a governmental sector authority in the context of regional, municipal, and local planning.

This small, administrative entity, the diocesan authority, seems to say quite a lot about Church-state relations in Denmark, and about how the Church is not only a religious community, but also a national institution. The diocesan authority, as the highest administrative layer in the diocese, oversees the financial and legal administration within all the diocese’s parishes. Administratively, a diocese consists of three parts: 1) the bishop, 2) the diocesan authority, and 3) the diocesan administration. And the diocesan authority consists of the bishop, who represents the Church, and the *stiftsamtmand*, who represents the State. Directly translated, *stiftsamtmand* is something like ‘the diocese-county-commissioner’ – that is, a collocation of terms for a churchly

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<sup>41</sup> Gaarden, Marianne. 2022. “Kirken river ikke vindmøller op med rode. Den planter skov og nærer fællesskab.” *Information*, February 15, 2022. <https://www.information.dk/debat/2022/02/kirken-river-vindmoeller-rode-planter-skov-naerer-faellesskab>.

(‘diocese’) and a state-administratively (‘county’) authority. The position as *stiftsamtmand* is entrusted to a senior government official – a secular bureaucrat who engages in church administration on behalf of the State. The composition of the diocesan authorities is thus supposed to ensure that the state and the Church are equally represented in a churchly, administrative entity that has both religious and non-religious responsibilities in the management of the Church. The fact that the bishop is both the religious overseer of the diocese and part of the diocesan authority implies that the bishop has two positions in the diocese: a religious and an administrative one. The position is ‘complex’, as is stated in a ministerial document that lays out the functions of the ten diocesan authorities within the Church (ref), as the bishop’s clerical and administrative tasks are often closely related in the day-to-day work. And this shows in general the complexity of the diocesan administration that finds itself in an overlap between Church and state.

If we see the relationship between the Church and the state as a marriage – as a popular Danish saying goes - the diocesan authorities might be the closest thing we have to their offspring. Or perhaps, following Alfred Gell’s (1999) conception of Marilyn Strathern’s semiotics, they can be conceived of as the ‘appearance’ of a relation (ibid. 35). Rather than an *entity*, the diocesan authorities is the *appearance of the relation* between the State and the Church. When the diocesan authorities carry out their role in matters internal to the Church – for example keeping an eye on the administrative and economic steering of the parishes – the presence of the *stiftsamtmand* ensures that the State is involved in Church matters, and when the diocesan authorities carry out their role in matters of municipal planning, the presence of the bishop ensures that the perspective of the Church is taken into consideration. In their marriage, we might say, they are obliged to respect the interests of both their descent groups. Importantly, however, the perspective of the bishop in the context of being a part of the diocesan authority is not the perspective of the entire Church, but the perspective of *the Church as a national institution* with the administrative responsibility that comes from being so. Hence, the role of the bishop within the diocesan authorities is as an administrative employee of the Church, not a religious authority as such.

As this constellation shows, and as sociologist of religion Marie Vejrup Nielsen (2014) asserts, the Church is quite closely tied with the bureaucratic system in Denmark. Since the early institutionalization of the Evangelical Lutheran church during the Reformation, the National Church has been assigned administrative tasks and responsibilities, first for the Crown and then for the democratically elected government. The administrative overlap between state and Church has historically been found mostly in the parishes. It is especially the parish structure that has, according to Nielsen, been central to the development of the political dimension of Danish society and the founding of the welfare state. This is due to the way the parish is the structural unit within

the Church where the Church is closest to its members. This closeness, Nielsen argues, has been used by the Crown, and later the democratically elected government, to manage the Danish population (ibid.30). The parish priest, for example, used to be an automatic member of various governmental boards, including those in the schooling system and what later became the municipalities (ibid.). Still today, it is the parishes that handle civil registration in Denmark (ibid. 29). Although most other political functions of the parish have been handed over to the municipalities, curiously enough it reappeared during the covid pandemic, when so-called lockdowns of society were based on infection rates in parishes.<sup>42</sup>

The point is that the Church is not exactly a delimited institution with a structure serving only its own purposes but is – and has been for centuries - also an active part of the political system and bureaucratic infrastructure. This was the main argument that the bishop was making in his clarification of what went on in Vesthimmerland, as the first salvo in the public debate painted Gundersted church, as well as the overall Church, as being against green transitioning and as pursuing its own interest of remaining the highest landmark on the horizon. The bishop asserts that it was, in fact, neither the particular church of Gundersted, nor the Church as such that opposed the windmill, but the diocesan authorities acting as a governmental sector authority. As a governmental sector authority, the diocesan authorities are responsible for securing national interest in preserving the cultural heritage values that the churches and their position in the landscape are perceived to represent. This implies that it was a national, governmental authority pursuing national interests in a local planning project that objected to the windmill project in Vesthimmerland. According to the bishop's way of framing the context for the windmill objection in Vesthimmerland, then, it was not the Church that opposed windmills, but the diocesan authorities working on behalf of – or indeed, *as* - the state, safeguarding the national interests that the state has in matters of planning. Hence, not only was the Church not against green transitioning, it was not even the Church as such that was opposed to windmills in the vicinity of church buildings; rather, it was the state itself.

From this, the bishop argued, it follows that it is a misunderstanding to call the diocesan authorities' right to object 'undemocratic': the diocesan authorities have, in fact, been assigned the responsibility to object to planning projects that compromise the view of church buildings by the democratically elected government. The diocesan authorities work on behalf of, or indeed, *as* the State in this matter, safeguarding the national – not churchly – interest of

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<sup>42</sup> Denmark's strategy for opening up society after the complete lockdown in the Spring of 2020, was based on comprehensive, daily testing of the population. This comprehensive testing enabled authorities to monitor infection rates very closely, and to order lockdowns of limited areas. This strategy made use of the parish structure as the monitoring of infection rates and the ordering of local lockdowns were based on parish borders.

preserving cultural heritage landscapes. And according to him, this is a good thing for democracy, because from a democratic perspective, the diocese is ideally located far enough from municipal politics to be unmoved by the economic, political, and personal interests of local actors, yet also closer to, and thus more attuned to, local conditions than the politicians in parliament, who are mostly located in the Capital.

Furthermore, in support of his argument that it is in fact not the Church that opposes windmills, the bishop underlines that the diocesan authorities do not base their verdict on opinions offered by local church actors, but rather on those made by professional experts, namely the Royal Architect and consultants from the National Museum. The bishop highlights this to counter the allegation that the Church is guarding its own religious interests by objecting to windmills. The diocesan authorities base their objections on perspectives offered by professional experts, external to the Church, who attend to the church-in-the-landscape as an aesthetic and cultural-historical phenomenon, not as a marker of religious presence. As such, the bishop renders it as though the diocesan authorities not only have a secular function, but also that they base their judgment of a prospective windmill project on a distinctively secular view of the church buildings. It was thus not an assessment of the impact of windmills on the religious significance of Gundersted church being present in the landscape that would incite the diocesan authorities to object to the project, but rather a professional, expert assessment of the impact of windmills on churches-in-the-landscape as cultural heritage.

To conclude, the bishop's way of contextualizing the Church and its relation to windmills defines the Church as much more than a religious community (although he also underlines that it is so, as I discuss in a moment): In matters of national planning, the Church is part of the state and participates in safeguarding secular and national interests, not first and foremost religious ones. The Church is in such situations protecting the visibility of churches in Denmark not for their religious purposes but rather for their secular and distinctively nationalistic purposes, namely the preservation of Danish cultural heritage buildings and landscapes.

If the objection to windmills in Vesthimmerland expressed a conflict of interests, this conflict seemed to be as much inside the state as between the state and the Church. Rendered as cultural heritage, the interest in preserving the churches in the landscape was not only a special interest of the Church, but an interest of the nation at large, safeguarded by the state. This was also the way the then-Minister framed the context for answering the question about what the relation between churches and windmills ought to be. Let us now attend to the way he answered this question in the end.

## A Difficult Trade-Off

After the Minister had outlined the legal basis for the special right of the diocesan authorities in matters of planning, he responded to MP Munk's request to change the arrangement that privileged the Church's interests over those of the rest of society. He explained that ever since the ambitious goals had been set for a green transition in Denmark, conflict had increased between those who wanted windmills installed and those supporting the preservation of churches-in-the-landscape. This showed, he said, that the arrangement ought to be reconsidered, and that, being the minister responsible for this domain, he would take it upon himself to do so.

He had already been at this task in the weeks leading up to being questioned in Parliament by MP Munk, as the main actors of the controversy in Vesthimmerland had invited him to mediate between the parties in the case. The Minister of the Interior and Housing is the only one who can overrule an objection made by the diocesan authorities in matters of planning. Most commonly local actors - the municipality and diocese – work it out between them, finding compromises and agreements without having to bring in the national government. But in case of unbridgeable disagreements, the Minister can be called upon to mediate or, as a final resort, to pass the final verdict. The Minister had therefore undertaken the three-hour trip from the capital to Vesthimmerland to inspect the area for himself and speak with the actors involved. A new report broadcast on February 21<sup>st</sup> on the regional channel TV2 Nord showed the Minister visiting Gundersted church.<sup>43</sup>



While a voiceover explains the case, the minister is seen hiking around the cemetery with a rather large company of people: the bishop, the mayor, parish council members, activist citizens, and the Minister's



<sup>43</sup> "Kirke nedlægger veto mod vindmøller: Nu går minister ind i sagen". 21-02-22, 2022. *TV2 Nord*. TV2 Nord. <https://www.tv2nord.dk/vesthimmerland/kirke-nedlaegger-veto-mod-vindmoeller-nu-gaar-minister-ind-i-sagen>.

bureaucrats are all there. The minister is holding an image in his hand that simulates how the horizon will appear if the six windmills are erected. He shifts his gaze between the image and the horizon in silence, while people around him, also gazing at the surrounding landscape, scrunch their eyebrows and – it seems - discuss the aesthetics affordances of the prospective view. The bishop is interviewed, explaining that if the six giant windmills are erected, they will appear to ‘slice’ the church tower when seen from afar; when a coffin is carried out from the church in connection with a funeral service, the windmills will make the entire horizon spin. The mayor is next to be interviewed. With a stern look on his face, he says the objection made by the dioceses is a ‘spanner in the works’ of the democratic process and, more importantly, the green transition.

A local resident is then interviewed on a muddy field, shaking her head as she points out where the six windmills will be erected and laments how much they will come to dominate the landscape. We have not heard much from local windmill opponents from Vesthimmerland, whose



concerns – judging from commentaries in the local newspapers – seem to be less about the church and more about the way the windmills would ruin the skyline, scare away birds and potential new tenants and reduce property values, as well as about how the profits from the project would end up in the pockets of big companies in Copenhagen.

While I have omitted such perspectives from my account of the controversy in order to focus on the arguments for and against the Church’s special right, it is worth mentioning that one of the key points in the controversy was whether the position of the diocesan authorities had been taken advantage of by local windmill opponents, who were against windmills for reasons unrelated to the church as such. Local windmill proponents even accused one local windmill opponent of targeting a seat on the parish council so as to continue his fight against windmills from inside the Church, so to speak. While this way of framing the situation in Vesthimmerland is certainly interesting for an analysis of how the position of the Church in Denmark is perceived, I mention it here merely as another way of framing the context of the church’s position and its objection to windmills. This is a framing that casts the Church as a political instrument for laypeople – and an inappropriate one, since it mixes politics and religion in a tactless way. In the television reportage, the bishop counters the accusation by explaining that it is not the individual churches that can object to windmills, but the diocesan authorities, and that the parish council in Gundersted therefore has had nothing to do with the matter. Although the bishop lays out the



formal process around windmill objections in a way that lays the accusations to rest, it would make for an interesting empirical study to focus on how church and local politics mix in practice in Danish villages.

However, to return to my focus on arguments constructed for and against the Church's special right, rather than on how the right is used, the then-Minister contextualizes the Church and the windmills in a particular way to construct both an argument and a solution to the problem. In an interview outside Gundersted church, he framed the situation like this:

It is a trade-off between two very important considerations. One the one hand, we must of course undertake a green transition. After all, it is our future. On the other hand, we must also protect our historic monuments and our cultural history.

This was a trade-off between two interests that, as the Minister of Interior and Planning, were both his responsibility to decide on. Now that the municipality and the diocese had disagreed on whether the windmill project undermined the cultural heritage represented by the Gundersted church, the decision had landed on his desk. And while this was a specific case, it was not unique, and it touched upon a more principled issue concerning what ought to be prioritized politically in matters of planning. The minister spoke of it as a conflict between two important values, or what we might call, using a lens provided by Joel Robbins's theory of values (2013), a 'value conflict'.

Robbins suggests that all cultures are marked by more or less stable value conflicts, but that in periods of cultural change, such conflicts come to the fore (ibid.). Inspired by Dumont, Robbins conceives of values as "those elements of culture that structure the relations between other elements" (Robbins 2007). In this perspective, values are not just subjective or within the individual consciousness; rather, they are what organize cultural orders (Robbins 2004, p11). This entails that actors within a culture are motivated by, and guided in, their actions by values that are inherent to the cultural system of which they are a part. According to Robbins, a fruitful anthropological approach to the study of culture is to attend to how values are ranked and related to each other in the value systems guiding specific cultures (2013). While Dumont's theory of values is concerned with how cultures are organized around a paramount value that ranks and keeps all other values in stable hierarchies, Robbins is interested in how values may both compete and conflict. Cultures – and especially those Robbins calls 'pluralist' cultures – can be organized around equally important values rather than a paramount one. Cultures, Robbins posits, are marked by more or less stable value systems depending on how well worked out the hierarchy is between the values (Robbins 2007). In periods of cultural change, however, value conflicts come to the fore. The kind of cultural change that Robbins himself has been most preoccupied with is the kind of



change that has concerned many anthropologists, namely that spurred by colonial or missional encounters in which one value system is introduced to – or indeed, impressed on - another. In Robbins’s ethnography of the Urapmin in Papua New Guinea, for example, the introduction of Christianity into the traditional Urapmin culture entailed a value conflict between the (Christian) value of lawfulness and the (Urapmin) value of willfulness (Robbins 2004). The hierarchy between these values was settled, but their coexistence was uneasy and, in many situations, realizing the one would be at the expense of the other. This, Robbins argues, produced endless moral torment for the Urapmin.

To return to Vesthimmerland, the ‘moral torment’ of the Minister who had to choose between two equally important considerations is a bit different, since the kind of cultural change that I suggest is causing his torment is not a product of different cultures coming into contact with each other, but rather of a new value being introduced as a means to counter a crisis. As the minister himself said, since ambitious climate goals had been set for Denmark in order to effect a green transition, more and more conflicts had broken out between churches and windmills. The ambitious climate goals that the Minister is referring to were set by his own government in 2020, with the Danish Climate Law articulating a goal to reduce Denmark’s carbon emission footprint by 70% by 2030. The threat of climate change is understood to increase as long as Danish – and global - society does not change its ways, and this has made green transitioning a politically desirable goal to be realized – “that is our future to do that”, as the Minister said. In Robbins’s value framework, green transitioning can be rendered as a value in the sense that it is a desirable goal for actors and society to realize, and something that motivates and guides actors as they make choices and priorities. However, as people seek to realize the value of green transitioning in concrete projects, the attempt stumbles into an already existing value system, for example the one established by the Planning Act with its four national interests, and it finds itself in competition with values such as that of cultural heritage protection. When a project aimed at realizing one value – green transitioning - is at odds with another – cultural heritage protection – a value conflict can be said to arise.

At least, this is a reading of the situation that is very close to that of the Minister himself: the controversy around windmills and churches is about two conflicting values, that of cultural heritage and that of green transitioning; a “difficult trade-off”. While many of the critics calling for the annulment of the Church’s special right to object also deem it something like a value conflict, they render it as a conflict that was played out between two actors – the Church and the state – who each pursued different values (self-preservation and green transitioning). The Minister reconfigures it as a conflict within the state itself, as it seeks to safeguard two important national

interests: cultural heritage preservation and green transitioning. This was a conflict that he was made the one to judge in – and so he did.

A few months after this visit and after being questioned in Parliament, the then-Minister decided to overrule the diocese and allow the municipality and HOFOR to move on with their plans. In his official ruling, he stated that he did not find that the windmills would affect the view of Gundersted church enough to diminish the cultural heritage value that it represented. In this case, both values could, in fact, be realized, he claimed. However, he also proposed an amendment of the Planning Act that would 1) reduce the protective zone around churches so that only if windmills were planned closer than 2 km to a church building could the diocesan authorities make objections, whereas earlier that zone had been 4,5 km, and 2) that ‘climate’ was added as one of the national interests that municipal and local planning projects had to take into account. Hence, he made the interest in green transitioning an official national interest to be safeguarded in matters of planning. His successor managed to get political backing for these amendments in 2023, which implies that the right of the diocesan authorities has been territorially delimited, and that climate is deemed as important an interest as cultural heritage protection. In other words, the two values of green transitioning and of cultural heritage protection were now officially levelled, cementing the value conflict as an enduring one.

The controversy around the windmills in Vesthimmerland was narrated by the public media as one in which the Minister overruled the interests of the diocese and reduced the influence of the Church in matters of green energy projects. When the Minister overruled the diocesan authorities, he implicitly suggested that the green transition was more important than the undisturbed view of Gundersted Church (although he insisted that both values were intact even if the windmills went up). One political commentator even described the Minister’s handling of the particular case as a ‘testing site’ for what he conceived to be the social democratic government’s strategy to prioritize climate politics higher than any other political issues, such as those of culture and religion<sup>44</sup>.

In the preceding sections I have presented the arguments and accounts of the relations between the Church and the state, windmills and churches, green transitioning and cultural heritage, offered by politicians and commentators who spoke mainly of the Church as a secular institution. I will now turn to arguments offered by church actors who spoke of the Church as a religious institution

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<sup>44</sup> *Kristeligt Dagblad*. 2022. “Biskop om ophævelse af vindmølle-vetoret: ”Det er sådan, spillet er”,” April 7, 2022. <https://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/kirke-og-tro/biskop-om-ophaevelse-af-vindmoelle-vetoret-det-er-saadan-spillet-er>.

that, rather than being at odds with green transitioning, was a driving force in it. This will offer one last way of framing the context in which to answer the question of what the Church's role ought to be in regard to windmills.

## The Church as a Relevant Religious Resource

When the bishop of Lolland-Falster diocese saw the drawing that accompanied *Dagbladet Information's* article about God pulling up windmills from the ground, she 'felt compelled to respond'. This is how she opens her own contribution to the debate in a commentary published by the same newspaper on February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2022. The title of her piece is "The Church does not pull up windmills by their roots. It plants trees and nourishes community",<sup>45</sup> and like the bishop of Viborg, from whom we heard in an earlier section, the purpose of her contribution is to counter the characterization of the Church as being against the green transition. Whereas the bishop of Viborg did this by clarifying the technical details of state-Church relations, deeming the conflict between windmills and churches as a dilemma inherent to the national interests, the bishop of Lolland-Falster frames the context for her argument slightly differently. Her defense of the Church is concerned with the Church itself and does not touch upon State-Church intertwinement in bureaucratic processes. Rather, she connects the Church's relation to the green transition with the doctrines of the Church. According to the bishop, the drawing in *Information* suggests that Christianity is opposed to the green transition. This, she argues, could not be further from the truth. It is quite the contrary: Christianity, she writes, "offers us the kind of community, the kind of relatedness, that will enable us to care for the climate collectively" (*ibid.*). If we are to counter climate change, she continues, we have to cooperate and this requires that we attend less to the individual, and more to the collective. This is what Christianity is all about, she concludes. Christianity and the Church is not the problem, but what is *needed*:

It is perhaps one of the biggest misunderstandings of our time that we consider people as isolated individuals, because in doing so we easily come to overlook our connectedness with each other. The pandemic has been a lesson in the connectedness of humanity and the necessity of thinking and acting collectively. Handling the climate crisis requires the same understanding of the connectedness

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<sup>45</sup> Gaarden, Marianne. 2022. "Kirken river ikke vindmøller op med rode. Den planter skov og nærer fællesskab." *Information*, February 15, 2022. <https://www.information.dk/debat/2022/02/kirken-river-vindmoeller-rode-planter-skov-naerer-faellesskab>.

of humanity, and precisely here Christianity offers an update of the software in our collective imagination.

In later chapters I delve into theological arguments about the climate crisis in more depth. Here, I highlight Garden's contribution as an example of a voice insisting that neither Christianity nor the Church is against the green transition – quite the opposite, in fact: Christianity is what society needs if it is going to succeed with the change. The Church is connected to a much-needed “update of the software in our collective imagination”, Garden asserts, pointing to a new project initiated by the Church called The Green Transition of the People's Church (more on this in a chapter 3) which, on the same day as Dagbladet Information published the drawing of God pulling up windmills from the ground, had hired two new employees. In other words, on the same day that the Church was accused of being against green transitioning, the bishop muses, it had kickstarted its nationwide effort to undertake the transition. This project was also mentioned by the bishop of Viborg diocese, who argued that just because the diocesan authorities safeguard the national interest in cultural heritage protection, this does not mean they have the final word in how the Church as an institution relates to the green transition. The Church, as he argues, is not the sum of the diocesan authorities and cultural heritage protection. The framing of the context for defining the Church's relationship to the green transition could just as well be established by highlighting the Church's project of green transitioning. The bishop of Viborg had also highlighted how he himself had always been a vocal proponent of green transitioning projects of all sorts, had “walked with the farmer in Malawi” and experienced first-hand how extreme weather phenomena destroyed the livelihood of people in such places. In the televised reportage from Gundersted church, he wears an eye-catching pin with the symbol of the UN development goals on his jacket.

What the two bishops are at pains to signal is that the Church is more than a national institution that safeguards the State's interests in cultural heritage protection. It is also defined by promoting a religious worldview that may offer an important ‘software update’ to a society that seeks to change itself. This is a contextualization that connects the Church much more actively to the present and the future – and to *change* - than to preservation and the past. And this is important for the Church as it fights for its image as still being relevant enough for the Danish population to remain the one privileged religious community in Denmark, the National Church – apropos the

crisis of relevance discussed in the introduction to this thesis. The argument that bishop Garden is constructing is that the Church is more than relevant: in fact, it is necessary, if Danish society wants to mobilize the kind of collective action and thinking necessary to undertake a transition. Christianity is depicted as sort of a power of cohesion – as in this illustration of the monthly magazine for the High Schools. Here NFS Grundtvig is depicted as what in fact keeps the windmills running – more relevant than ever, we might say.



On the other hand, one of the ways in which the Church can maintain its status in society seems to be by asserting influence in decisions about cultural heritage protection. Although the bishop of Viborg went to great lengths to argue that it was in the interest of the state and not the Church as such that the diocesan authorities safeguarded the view of churches-in-the-landscape, the Church, when looked at from one perspective, certainly has interests in being deemed cultural heritage and in protecting this status. While windmills might be a new national symbol, the fact that churches-in-the-landscape are as well, naturalizes the presence of Christianity in Denmark, legitimizing its close ties to the state. Hence, the legitimacy and relevance of the Church seems to rest simultaneously on the churches having the status of cultural heritage – a historical force – and on being deemed relevant as a religious resource in contemporary society, including the crisis it is in the midst of.

In his study of how English cathedrals function as both tourist destination and as ritual spaces, Simon Coleman (2019b) argues that several regimes of experiencing, managing and using the churches may exist alongside each other. Heritage tourism and the use of churches for religious ceremonies involves, Coleman contends, distinct experiential regimes. Sometimes they are experienced as being juxtaposed, sometimes adjacent, and sometimes even co-present. He suggests that they are, as such, not only “echoes or reversals of each other”, but perhaps also “interrelated” (ibid.126). Rather than simply de-sacralizing churches, Coleman suggests that heritagization may introduce an additional regime of experiencing the churches that is not at odds with the religious uses of the church buildings but may interact with each other. The continued relevance of the Danish Church seems to rest on a similar interrelatedness of heritagization and continued religious activity. As another bishop, the bishop of Ribe diocese, stated in his contribution to the debate that to render objections to windmills in the proximity of churches as a conflict between the Church

and green transitioning, was “a false dichotomy”.<sup>46</sup> When the diocesan authorities take part in assessing windmill projects, they are concerned with cultural heritage protection, and not with being for or against green transitioning, the bishop argued. He found that the article published in Information escalated a conflict that did not exist. The Church was not against windmills, but the diocesan authorities played a part in ensuring that windmills are erected *with consideration and care for* the churches in the landscapes. Most often conflicts do not arise, he argued, as the municipality and the diocesan authorities find good compromises by simply having a dialogue. This kind of argument is meant to highlight that interests that are seemingly incommensurable do not have to be at odds with each other but can be secured by way of compromise. The Church can encompass an interest in both (cultural heritage) preservation and change (updating the software of society) without pitting them against each other, this bishop argues. This, then rests on the Church being a secular and a religious institution simultaneously but not at the same time.

Hence, to counter the accusation of the Church functioning as a stumbling block for the green transition and to retain its status, church actors had to do two things: 1) they had to prove that the position the Church was granted by the National Planning Act was democratically legitimate and that it was not the Church as such that was a stumbling block, but rather that society itself had an interest in preserving the churches-in-the-landscape as cultural heritage and that the diocesan authority was the right (secular) authority to do this; and 2) they had to prove that the Church was not against green transitioning but actually a relevant actor in achieving it.

## Conclusion: Staying Relevant to stay the Church

The public controversy around the windmills in Gundersted tells us something: for the Church, the stakes are high when it comes to matters of the green transition, for it is connected to its privileged position as the constitutionally established National Church of Denmark. Even if church actors went to the length of rendering the right of the diocesan authorities as a democratic, almost secular arrangement, the controversy nonetheless places the Church at risk of being interpreted as going against green transitioning and, as such, as being irrelevant in a society where this value ranks high. While the diocesan authorities have been appointed the responsibility to safeguard the national interest of cultural heritage protection in the Planning Act for decades, it nonetheless seemed to come as a surprise to the broader public – including members of Parliament - when the

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<sup>46</sup> Westergaard, Elof. 2022. “Biskop: Det er at skabe en falsk konflikt at sætte folkekirken og vindmøller op som modsætninger.” *Jyllands-Posten*, February 5, 2022. <https://jyllands-posten.dk/debat/breve/ECE13705197/det-er-at-skabe-en-falsk-konflikt-at-saette-folkekirken-og-vindmoeller-op-som-modsaetninger/>.

Vesthimmerland case appeared in the public media. Despite their different ways of reporting on the case, most media<sup>47</sup> accounts presented the right of the Church – and the fact that it had used it in cases like the one in Vesthimmerland – as something that would surprise, and potentially outrage, the reader. Should the Church really hold a privileged right in matters of the green transition to pursue its own interests? This seemed to be an ‘outdated arrangement’, and one that potentially privileged the ‘selfish interests’ of the Church over those of the State and ‘the surrounding society’, as the MP from Venstre, whom I quoted earlier, put it. The call for an annulment of the privileged position of the Church was based on a particular forging of relations: The Church is (merographically) connected to cultural heritage protection, and the rest of society – citizens, politicians, and the State - with the green transition. By establishing these entities as differing from each other, and those interests as incommensurable, the critics opened up a space for action: the relation between the Church and the State could be severed, enabling the State to pursue its democratically legitimate interest without having to take into account that of a particular interest group, namely the Church.

The national controversy around the windmills, then, took off from what some political actors presented as an inappropriate privileging of the Church in a time of climate crisis. The critics framed the situation as a conflict between the values of green transitioning and cultural heritage, between the interests of a future-oriented State and a backwards-looking Church and demanded that the Church, as a special interest grouping, should not be in a privileged position in terms of pursuing that interest in matters of local planning.

The responding church actors, on the other hand, rejected this rendering of the situation. They did not accept the view of the Church as a particular group or organization within the wider population that gets to express its special interests. In the case of windmill objections, it is not the Church that acts, but the diocesan authorities, who are representing a national – not religious - authority that was devised to serve and support democratically elected politicians. They perceive themselves, in other words, as acting *as* the State. Rather than there being two different entities with dissimilar viewpoints, church actors insist on there being an overlap between the state and the Church. The State and the Church are one in this matter, incarnated in the bureaucratic entity ‘the diocesan authority’. The bishops rejected the representation of the situation as one of *external* relations between the State and the Church, but rather rendered the State as being constituted by *internal* relations between representatives of state and Church. Hence, when the diocesan authorities object to windmills, this is a situation in which the State itself is in a dilemma,

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<sup>47</sup> The case was first treated by Dagbladet Information and soon after in most other national media outlets, such as the Denmark’s Public Broadcasting Company, TV2, Politiken and Berlingske

pursuing interests that are at odds with itself: green energy and cultural heritage preservation, windmills and churches.

In the next chapter we move a little further into the Church itself. Because it has not only been proponents of windmills that have cared about the position of the Church in regards to climate change and green transitioning: since the early 2000s, the organization *Grøn Kirke* (from here on Green Church) has been working to green the churches of Denmark. In the next chapter I describe how and why such a project was considered controversial at the outset of my fieldwork and how it rested on the negotiation of another relationship, namely that between religion and politics.



## Chapter 2 Green Church and the Contested Core of Christianity

“We see the destruction of the earth's environment and climate as an expression of a crisis that cannot be understood or solved from only taking economic or technological approaches. The crisis is just as much an ethical and spiritual crisis. (...) By virtue of the Gospel, churches have an important message to contribute with to climate change mitigation efforts and to the ethical considerations pertaining to how to change our way of life. It is therefore of great importance that the churches in Denmark - in collaboration with churches and faith communities across the globe - engage in words and actions and point to ecologically, socially, and spiritually sustainable ways of living.” - Green Church (2017) [author's translation]

“When Creation is in distress as a result of climate change, we obviously have a responsibility towards it – as we do for everything else. But we do not have a special green or divine responsibility as Christians, and the Church is not a world-improving enterprise with political goals and a special moral sensibility. However, it seems like this is what the bishops have imagined. And that is exactly what the problem becomes when the Church gets enmeshed in climate politics: when the Church becomes political, it concomitantly becomes moralizing, and the priests become moral linesmen who shout "shame on you" from the pulpit every time you consume too much, have too many children, fly too often - or too far - or succumb to the temptation to eat steaks on a Friday night. Flight shame. Meat shame. Climate shame. [...] It is self-justification [*gerningsretfærdighed*] in broad daylight.” – Marie Høgh (2020), pastor and conservative Christian debater [author's translation]

When the bishops' announced their support for the national emission goals in 2020 – as described at the outset of this thesis - this prompted reiterations of a critique that had been mounted at the organization *Grøn Kirke* (from here on “Green Church”) for a decade. Since its establishment in 2007, Green Church has promoted the view that churches ought to attend to climate change as a problem that concerns the common good of humanity and Creation at large – as argued in the opening quote above. Green Church suggests that the Church has an important role to play, as the

problem of climate crisis requires not only technical and political solutions, but also spiritual ones that touch upon how humans may come to live more sustainable lives. However, such a stance has been controversial within the Danish Church for the reasons articulated by Marie Høgh in the second quote that opens this chapter: to argue for churchly engagements with climate change breaches the boundary between ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ that otherwise defines and confines the domain of religion in the (semi-)secular state of Denmark. Indeed, any suggestions provided by the Church as to how people ought to live their lives, must be considered inappropriate ‘politicization’ seen from this position. Representatives of Green Church suggests that even if climate change is considered a political issue, it transgresses the distinction between the religious and political as it concerns the common good of humanity, which is, in fact, what Christianity is about. In that sense, some Green Church representatives argued, Christianity is indeed ‘political’ – but, importantly, not in the same way as what their critics posited.

Recalling the overall interest that this thesis pursues, namely how church actors simultaneously overcome and retain certain distinctions in response to the climate crisis, this chapter’s focus is on how different ways of perceiving the distinction – indeed the boundary – between religion and politics were brought to the fore and negotiated as the Church confronted the issue of climate change. Christians around the world have their own particular ways of defining the relation between religion and politics, as well as their own particular ways of defining what those terms might mean (Tomlinson and McDougall 2012). In this chapter I interrogate what it might mean when Green Church is accused of ‘politicizing’ when it argues that the climate crisis ought to be addressed within a Christian register and churchly context.

As such, this chapter introduces the organization Green Church and its particular way of defining the issue of climate change, as well as the measures that ought to be taken to mitigate it. After describing the organization Green Church’s approach to climate change, the chapter looks at the two main critiques that have been mounted at it since it was established in 2007, namely that it ‘politicizes’ and ‘moralizes’ – accusations as those raised by the conservative pastor Marie Høgh in the above quote. I show how different ways of defining the issue of climate change called forth the organizing distinction between religion and politics in different ways and enabled different legitimate ways for the Church to respond. I evoke Latour’s description of ‘the work of purification’ to tease out various ways church actors patrolled and upset what was considered the borders of the domains of religion and of politics. On each side of the debate – for and against Church engagement with the issue – such distinctions were important to retain in their different ways. Furthermore, I argue that it was not only climate that had to be (re)defined before an appropriate response could be mustered, but Christianity as well. Hence, in this chapter the

issue of climate change becomes a prism through which the work of defining, relating, and separating ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ comes to the fore.

Before presenting Green Church and its critics, I touch briefly on how my exposition of their positions can be considered part of a broader anthropological exploration of Christian engagements with worldly and/or political matters.

## Christians and their Worldly commitments

At the outset of their edited volume on *Christian politics in Oceania*, Matt Tomlinson and Debra McDougall (2012) evoke Fenella Cannell’s question ‘what difference does Christianity make?’. They note that this is not only an analytical question, but also a question Christians in Oceania ask themselves: What is the importance and significance of churches and of Christianity in social life? In Oceania, Tomlinson and McDougall argue, the difference Christianity makes is always political (ibid.). However, the authors feel compelled to add that there is something paradoxical about this claim, seeing that anthropologists and other scholars who have tried to discern ‘the difference that Christianity makes’, often suggest that modern Christianity is distinct because it insists on religion and politics as distinct and separate things (ibid.). Tomlinson and McDougall suggest that many studies of Christianity within anthropology have been inspired by Talal Asad’s (2007) analysis of how Protestantism itself holds an image of religious practices and piety as being something separate from ‘the entanglements of sociopolitical life’ and ‘bureaucratic institutions’ (Tomlinson and McDougall 2012, 3), and that they have therefore paid attention to how Christians themselves emphasize individual belief over institutionalization, meaning over form. However, Tomlinson and McDougall argue that it is not all forms of Christianity that are keen on delimiting spiritual life from worldly commitments or institutions, and in their edited volume on Christian politics in Oceania, many of the contributions present cases where Christianity serves as an overt public and political force.

Indeed, the focus on Christian politics – which Joel Robbins suggests may at once denote the relations and contestations between denominations or stances within them, and the way Christianity influence society in political matters – must be said to have been with the anthropology of Christianity from its very outset, even if it has not been its dominant focus. Indeed, in their early review of the emerging anthropology of Christianity, Jon Bialecki, Naomi Haynes and Joel Robbins (2008) point to the increase in the political and public presence of Christianity around the world as a reason for anthropology’s revival of interest in Christianity (ibid.1141). By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the so-called ‘secularization thesis’, which deemed religion to be something of the past in

societies undergoing modernization, had (as also discussed in the introduction to this thesis) proven untenable (Buckser 1996). Around the world new religious movements and sentiments emerged, proving to be lasting forces in society (ibid). Bialecki et al. (2008) describes how fieldworkers in Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Oceania and Latin America encounter, to their surprise, devout Christian populations and communities. In the context of Europe and North America, it was particularly the appearance of Christian movements in the political and public sphere that caught anthropologists' attention. Susan Harding (2001), who took some of the first steps towards establishing Christianity as an anthropological object of study in its own right, was alerted to the topic in the 1980s by the reemergence of a politically outspoken, conservative Christian movement in the US. In her ethnography of such movements, Harding describes how conservative Christians had been in exile from the public and political sphere in the US for the most part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century after having been defeated by liberal forces – Christians as well as secular – and had lost, among other things, their strident battle to ban the teaching of evolution in the public schools. However, as the counterculture movements of the 1960s gained in strength, conservative Evangelicals were galvanized to break their 'cultural exodus' to combat the perceived threat to Christian values and resume the campaign to improve the morals of the world. Hence, the world-denouncing Christians went into the world to change it.<sup>48</sup> Based on his study of a more recent generation of Evangelicals – the 'Emerging Evangelicals' - and their revolts against Evangelical culture, James Bielo (2011) (2011). suggests that Evangelicalism in the US is best perceived as a 'dialogical tradition' (ibid.). By this he implies that the history of Evangelicalism in the US has been defined by a constant emergence of new generations breaking with their predecessors. A key point of contestation in such schisms has been the question of what kind of engagement Christians ought to have with secular culture and/or national politics (Bielo 2009; S. F. Harding 2001; 2009).

Scholars focusing on the US context might be said to describe Christian engagements with what Bialecki deems an inherent 'Christian problematic' (i.e. Bialecki 2014), namely the question of whether Christians should be in, of, and/or against the world.<sup>49</sup> Camille Lardy (2020)

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<sup>48</sup> Harding (1991) gives another reason for the absence of Christianity in anthropological accounts of the US, namely that conservative Christians had up until then largely been ignored by liberal anthropologists like herself. They were perceived, she says as the 'repugnant cultural Other' to progressive, liberal Americans. Due to this antipathy towards conservative Christians in the US, anthropologists did not find Christians – certainly in the US and perhaps around the world - to be the kind of native voices anthropologists should empathetically try to understand.

<sup>49</sup> The American theologian Richard Niebuhr's delineation of this problem is often referred to (Bialecki 2014; Tomlinson & McDougall 2013) when pointing to this inherent tension within Christianity: "Place this society in the world, demanding that it be not of the world, and strenuous as may be its efforts to transcend or to sublimate the mundane life, it will yet be unable to escape all traits of conspiracy and connivance with the worldly interest it despises. Yet on the other hand, Christian ethics will not permit a world-fleeing asceticism which seeks purity at the cost of service. At the end, if not the beginning, of every effort to incorporate Christianity there is, therefore, a compromise" (Niebuhr 1957 in Bialecki 2014, p.195).

describes this problematic eloquently as she notes how the Catholic Church in France has always navigated a “‘contradictory double demand’ to be both ‘of its time’ (*de son temps*) and to ‘combat this time’ (*combattre ce temps*)” (ibid. 15). The Church, Lardy writes, has therefore continuously engaged in negotiations over how to both inhabit the secular order of modernity and resist its gradual slide away from the values of Christianity. In their accounts of Christianities around the world, anthropologists have explored variations of this problematic with studies of topics such as Christian nationalism (Haynes 2021; Webster 2020), biblical advocacy and public religion (M. E. Engelke 2013), faith-based activism (Elisha 2008; Lardy, n.d.; Immergut and Kearns 2012), and Christian cultural politics (Johnson 2010; S. F. Harding 2009). Such studies show the various ways in which Christians define and negotiate the boundary between Christianity and the secular, political, and/or public sphere, and each presents different answers to the question of whether Christians ought to embrace, critique or seek to improve the world/society/culture in which they live.

As Tomlinson and McDougall (2012) argue, the first analytical step in an interrogation of how Christians grapple with the question of not only what difference Christianity makes, but also what it *ought* to make, must be to ask what sorts of distinctions are locally relevant (ibid). How are terms such as ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ evoked and delineated, and what kinds of relationships between them are established and/or contested? This is the task in this chapter: to interrogate what is meant when a group of environmentally concerned Christians are accused of – and criticized for – ‘politicizing’ and ‘moralizing’ when they speak about climate as a relevant issue for the Church to address and for Christians to engage with. Certain ideas about what makes up ‘Christianity’ and ‘politics’ underpin such accusations – as well as the responses to them provided by those accused. As such, what looks at first like a controversy around the issue of climate change is eventually revealed as being about what defines Christianity, the political and the relationship between them.

## Green Church

When I began my research in late 2019, Green Church was the main – if not the only – organized effort to promote environmentalism in Danish churches. It was what most church actors I met thought of – if they could think of anything at all – when I asked them how green transitioning was addressed within the Danish Church. As I describe in the following chapters, other voices, as well as organized ways of approaching a transition to a green Church, emerged during my fieldwork, but here I zoom in on the organization Green Church and its particular way of defining and responding to climate change. This organization has over the past decade indirectly shaped the

discourses on green transitioning within the Danish Church as a reference point for both what churches *ought* to do and what they *ought not* to do.

Green Church has existed since 2009, when it was established as a working group within the National Council of Churches in Denmark (NCCD).<sup>50</sup> During my fieldwork, the group had 12 members and included several pastors from the Danish Church as well as representatives from the Catholic Church, non-denominational churches, the Christian aid organization *Folkekirkens Nødhjælp*, and other Christian organizations, including the Scout Movement. The working group gathers four times a year to plan and evaluate different activities, such as a yearly conference, the production of inspirational materials for churches, and the facilitation of local networks and workshops around the country. The initiative revolves around what they call ‘the Checklist’. The work of Green Church is religiously framed and motivated.<sup>51</sup> The theological foundations for the working group are delineated in a three-page document posted on the Green Church website. According to this document, Green Church grounds its work on the Christian conviction that:

As the creator and sustainer of the world, God rejoices in all that has been created. Creation is a generous and undeserved gift that God has entrusted to humanity so that they may steward it in praise of God and in the service of all present and future life on earth. (Green Church 2017)

The idea of the world as ‘God’s Creation’ that humans should take care of as good ‘stewards’ is a common way of framing Christian engagements with environmentalism, promoted by various environmentally concerned churches and Christian organizations around the world (Edvardsson Björnberg and Karlsson 2022). This, however, does not mean that what such organizations mean by ‘Creation care’ is the same. To perform creation care can mean many different things for different Christians – across the world and within Denmark - depending on their specific theological interpretations of the position of the human, the nature of Nature, and the relationship between God, humans, and the world (Peterson 2000; Rubow 2011a; 2020; Pepper and Leonard

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<sup>50</sup> The Danish Council of Churches is an ecumenical organization funded by its members and includes a broad range of Christian churches in Denmark, including the Danish People’s Church. Besides the Green Church working group, the council has two other working groups dedicated to ecumenical dialogue and to the promotion of equal rights for religious communities within Denmark. It is therefore not completely correct to call the Green Church an organization (even if many people I met in the Church thought of it as so) as, strictly speaking, it is a working group placed within the larger organization of the NCCD.

<sup>51</sup> In the last part of this thesis, I look more closely at attempts made by my interlocutors to formulate explicitly *theological* responses to the climate crisis and to develop ‘eco-theologies’ that take nature and the non-human into account. Here, however, I am concerned with how actors involved in the network around the Green Church perceive of their position in the public sphere as Christian environmentalists (however theologically diverse such a category is) as well as with their reflections on how and whether religion and politics ought to be associated.

2016; Tomlinson and Kabutaulaka 2020). Within the Green Church working group and among the more than 300 ‘green churches’ in Denmark, different interpretations of what it means to ‘take care of Creation’ also proliferate, ranging from perceiving humans as ‘stewards’ of Creation, to seeing them as inextricably linked with it. This is so because they are informed by various theological traditions – ranging from Catholic to Pentecostal, Methodist, Lutheran Evangelical – and all the variations within each of these traditions. I will not go into such variations here, as what I am mostly concerned with is to establish that the Green Church working group takes a Christian approach to climate change mitigation and is guided by the conviction that churches have something specific to contribute to general climate change mitigation efforts:

We see the destruction of the earth's environment and climate as an expression of a crisis that cannot be understood or solved through economic or technological approaches alone. The crisis is just as much an ethical and spiritual crisis. (...) By virtue of the Gospel, churches have an important message to contribute to climate change mitigation work, as well as to ethical reflections on how to change our way of life. It is therefore of great importance that the churches in Denmark - in collaboration with churches and faith communities across the globe - engage in words and actions and point to ecologically, socially, and spiritually sustainable ways of living. (author's translation) (Green Church 2017)

This statement displays the religious register within which Green Church addresses the climate crisis and the way it perceives the issue of climate change. According to Green Church the climate crisis is not only about imbalances in the earth's ecosystems or about how to develop technological solutions to them, but also about something that needs ethical deliberation and that concerns humanity's way of life. Hence, while it speaks in a religious register, what it speaks about is not solely faith, salvation, or individual piety, but also about how to organize life on earth. The Gospel, it posits, has something to say about this. This also becomes evident when surveying the Checklist [*tjeklisten*], which is at the heart of the Green Church initiative.

### **The Green Checklist**

To be able to officially call oneself a ‘green church’, a parish must have undertaken at least 26 of the 50 measures listed on the Green Church Checklist.<sup>52</sup> I will dwell on this list for a moment to

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<sup>52</sup> The process of attaining the status of ‘green church’ is based on self-reporting, and there are no control mechanisms in place for assessing whether a church has actually taken the 26 or more reported measures on the checklist. As Julie, the secretary, said to me during an interview in her office in Copenhagen, the Green Church takes a “soft approach, based on trust”. The goal is that as many churches as possible take measures to become greener and the bar has

clarify how Green Church defines what kind of matter climate change is and thereby prepare the ground for introducing the kinds of critiques mounted at it from other corners of the People's Church. The Checklist sketches what it entails to be and become a 'green church' – something that, according to a textual rubric on the Checklist, 'affects the whole life of the church' (Green Church 2023). And the measures do indeed seem to touch upon all aspects of church life. Here is a small sample:

1 . We conduct at least one yearly service dedicated to Creation – outdoors if possible.

....

6. We raise money to support churchly environmentalist and climate mitigation projects in the world's poorest countries and/or endangered areas.

...

11. We primarily use durable tableware rather than disposable ones.

...

17. We procure environmentally certified products for cleaning and maintenance of office and outdoor areas.

...

22. We use flowers and bouquets with the lowest possible environmental impact, i.e., flowers and greenery from the cemetery, locally grown flowers, paper flowers, or LEGO flowers.

...

27. We use LED sources for light

...

41. We establish and support natural habitats for wild animals and plants on the church's outdoor areas

(Green Church 2023)

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therefore been set rather low, making room for both those who can just barely accomplish 26 action points and for those who really "run with it", as Julie says.

<sup>53</sup> Jensen, Ole. 2020. "Jeg har stor respekt for Grøn Kirke. Jeg deler målsætning, men ikke kirkesyn og gudstjenestesyn." *Kristeligt Dagblad*, August 20, 2020. <https://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/debatindlaeg/jeg-har-respekt-groen-kirke-jeg-deler-deres-maalsaetning-men-ikke-kirke-og>.



As this sample illustrates, the Checklist spans a wide, almost dizzying, array of objects, actions, and domains. It suggests that being a 'green church' involves careful attention to everything – from plates to God, light bulbs to flowers and even those disadvantaged areas of the world so very far from Denmark. Climate change and the responses to it cannot, according to this list, be contained within any delimited domain of church life; they are tangled up with everything. To become a green church involves working across otherwise demarcated areas of responsibility in church life, altering the practices of pastors as much as those of gardeners, vergers, and cleaning personnel. It implies dealing with the same problem within multiple registers – in secular as well as spiritual realms – and attending to the Church organization as both a religious and a material infrastructure. Furthermore, the checklist assembles things that seem to be very different in size and scope, and it does so in an un-hierarchical way. On the checklist all measures are equally big and count equally much on one's way to becoming a green church. As such, the list suggests that climate change transgresses traditional scaling – the big problem is in the small things, and the small things can make a big difference.

The checklist is an attempt to point out some concrete measures that churches can take to become more sustainable, but the form these suggestions take - a list - retains this sense of there being many other things one could do to mitigate climate change. It points out, for example, that computer and office machines should be turned off when not in use, but it says nothing about coffee machines or the sustainability of the priest's gown. In their introduction to the edited volume *Complexities* (2002), Annemarie Mol and John Law define lists as a way of ordering that "makes no claims to inclusiveness" (ibid.14). They contrast lists with classificatory systems that, according to them, "makes cages, big cages that are then subdivided into smaller ones, like the system that covers the animal kingdom: individuals go into species, species into families, and families come together into the genus" (ibid.). A list, they suggest, is different in that it "doesn't have to impose a single mode of ordering on what is included in it. (...) It remains open, for a list differs from a classification in that it recognizes its incompleteness. It doesn't even need to seek completeness. If someone comes along with something to add to the list, something that emerges as important, this may indeed be added to it." (ibid.14). Law and Mol suggests that lists are "sensitizing but open to surprise" (ibid). That is, they specify, but do not make a final definition of anything – items may be added, lists may be expanded.

The Checklist is thus not a complete recipe, but a list of *some* things one *can* do. Even if the list to some extent cut the problem down to size by providing specific pointers to how one may deal with it, it also has the opposite effect: it displays the overwhelming span of the problem

by highlighting all the places where something can be done. It signals that to become more sustainable potentially touches upon all aspects of church life in an infinite number of ways. In fact, the last part of the Checklist is an invitation to churches to note down additional things they have done: “There may be many green initiatives that are not covered by this checklist’s items and sections. They also count! Add your own idea and measures here.” (Green Church 2023). To become a green church through ticking some of the boxes is not the end point but rather the beginning of a continuous effort to become greener and greener. It should be considered ‘a lever for green projects’, as one board member told me, or ‘a mirror that one can check oneself in’, as another stated. As such it scales it two-ways as it cuts the potentially endless problem down to size, while also encouraging its users to be ‘sensitive to surprises’, to consider that there are many more things one can do, than what happens to be listed.

If we ‘moderns’, as Latour (1993) suggests, usually organize our world by way of ‘purification’ and ‘domaining’, keeping such things as nature and culture, politics and science, history and myth, separate, Green Church’s checklist seems to mix together things that to a modern sensibility belong to separate domains. Climate Church appears to be a thoroughly hybrid object according to this list. As Latour also suggests, this may be exactly what the environmental crisis does: it disturbs the work of purification, revealing the imbroglios of ‘natureculture’ that all phenomena, according to Latour, really are (ibid.). But if Latour’s task as an observer of the moderns was to reveal such imbroglios, to display how the moderns were, in fact, producing an abundance of ‘hybrids’ as they carried on with their modernizing efforts, Green Church’s checklist seems to be doing this work all by itself as it evokes climate change as a situation in which everything is indeed related, entangled, mixed. It points out that what becomes relevant for church actors once they begin to ponder climate change and their role in mitigating it ranges from tea candles to airplanes, from fertilizer to God’s love. As a problem requiring solution, climate change overflows all boundaries and framings of domains in social life, as the changes are caused by factors so numerous and interrelated that it is impossible to account for them all.

The checklist, I suggest, renders climate change as something akin to a ‘total social phenomenon’ (Mauss\_1954): something that “informs and organizes seemingly quite distinct practices and institutions” (Edgar 2002, 157). To consider climate change as a total social phenomenon implies conceiving of it as something that activates – and therefore transcends – a great many domains within a society, being “at once legal, economic, religious, aesthetic, morphological and so on” (Mauss 1954, 76). Mauss developed this concept in his study of what he conceived of as ‘primitive societies’ that were not as differentiated, not as parceled up into domains and spheres as he understood modern societies to be. Leaving such archaic classifications apart, I

want to highlight how the climate crisis, in the hands of Green Church, makes relevant a concept that was developed to capture a form of social organization very far from ‘the modern constitution’ as outlined by Latour (1993). The climate crisis, it seems, induces Green Church to override – or even undermine – what is considered characteristic of modern society, namely the distinction between domains.

And this is not the only domain-crossing phenomenon that Green Church delineates with its list: looked at from the opposite view, the list reveals how the Church is a site where climate change’s overflowing capacity becomes highly visible because churches themselves work across so great a range of domains and scales – from the work of weeding the cemeteries to the praise of the almighty God. The Checklist makes visible how the church institution exceeds what we usually think when we think about Christianity; the Church encompasses much more than what strictly pertains to faith and ritual, it also has a material infrastructure that is made visible by the engagement with climate change.

So, while the checklist highlights how an awareness of climate change and its sources turns numerous things into problems and sites for change in churches, it also exhibits how Green Church finds that churchly engagements with climate change have the potential to touch all aspects of church life and disturb those distinctions that usually – and in what might be specified as modern and commonsensical terms – organize the Church, namely the distinctions between the spiritual and the material, the secular and the religious, faith and institution.

The Green Church Checklist represents the widest, most inclusive and comprehensive rendition of the problem that one can find within the Danish Church. This all-encompassing definition of what climate change touches upon – and therefore demands a churchly response to – is the reason that the organization was at the center of much controversy when I began my fieldwork, and why it has not been invited into all corners of the Church. What kind of ‘matter of concern’ (Latour), climate change was supposed to be for a Christian church was disputed. As we will learn on the coming pages, other actors in the Church cut the problem differently and dismiss some of the action points that the Checklist lists as relevant. It might come as a surprise for the reader, but many church actors posit that it is especially the *theological*, the *Christian* aspects of Green Church’s checklist that should not have made the cut. Green Church presents climate change as something akin to a ‘total social fact’; others consider it something that ought to be contained and dealt with within a much more limited register, such as the political or the purely technical. As a result of Green Church’s rendering of the problem of climate change as one that pertains to faith as well as practice, theology as well as consumption patterns, the working group was – and still is – accused

of ‘politicizing’ and ‘moralizing’, two cardinal sins (to use an apt analogy) within the Danish Church. We examine these critiques in the next section.

## Green Church Critics

When I began my PhD research in 2019, Green Church was navigating a fine balance of wanting to promote climate awareness and action in churches without being accused of either ‘politicizing’ or ‘moralizing’. As one member of the Green Church working group explained to me, it is a widely shared opinion in Denmark, as well as in the Church, that the Church is not a *political* actor. Religion and politics must be kept apart, which implies both that politicians ought not to argue religiously, and that the Church should keep to its own spiritual domain. To be the *people’s* church entails that the Church is for all Danish citizens, and therefore it cannot take one stance on any political issue. And, indeed, when I began my fieldwork in the winter of 2019, climate change *was* considered a political issue associated with left-wing politics. To bring up the problem of climate change in a church context was therefore perceived by many church actors to be an inappropriate mixing of religion and politics that created divisions within a church that is supposed to accommodate everyone. ‘What about the conventional farmer’ was a rhetorical question that was often evoked in critiques of Green Church. ‘How can he feel welcome in church on Sundays if the church has initiated a political fight against him?’

The critique of Green Church as ‘moralizing’ is based on a certain take of what it implies to be a proper Protestant and the argument is based in theological rather than organization/institutional terms: to ‘moralize’ implies pointing to certain actions being better than others from a Christian perspective. And that, according to Green Church critics, is un-Lutheran to the extent that all humans are equally sinful in the eyes of God and can be equally redeemed through faith notwithstanding the good work they have done. To promote certain actions as ‘good’ is to suggest that those who undertake them are somehow better, closer to redemption, than others. While this in itself is a theological error, as what distinguishes Protestants from Catholics is apparently the maxim of ‘sola fide’ (which teaches that faith is the only prerequisite for salvation) such a promotion of good deeds also implies a delineation of which kind of Christian is ‘better’ than other kinds; an impossible and dangerous act of differentiation that is not for humans to perform, it is argued.

To sum up, the first critique is about differentiation based on political conviction and the second, about an inappropriate differentiation between sinners and saved. As we will see, they are interrelated. I turn now to specific articulations of Christian taboos against delineating what entails good Christian conduct in regard to the environment.

## The Church Porch

In connection with the controversy spurred by the bishops' announcement in early 2020 and the ensuing debate about whether the Church should take a stance on climate change mitigation, the pastor and theologian Ole Jensen (1937 – 2021) was referred to as both a predecessor to, and a critic of, Green Church. Jensen has been a recurring figure in the (limited) history of Christian environmentalism and has on many occasions written and spoken about the environmental crisis in very theological terms. In 1978 he published the book *I Vækstens Vold* (“In the Grip of Growth”), in which he presented a piercing critique of Western culture and the capitalist principle of growth that he found it to be increasingly built on. Many of the pastors involved in Green Church referred to this book and described their coming of age as theologians in the 1980s as deeply inspired by Jensen's theological perspectives on the environmental crisis. However, Jensen himself was skeptical of the initiative taken by Green Church – not because he disagreed with their view of the climate crisis, but because of the way they institutionalized it in a churchly context. In a commentary in the *Christian Daily*<sup>53</sup>, he wrote the following about his agreements and disagreements with Green Church:

Just like Green Church [...] I am a climate alarmist. I find it very difficult to see that humanity will manage to save even a barely habitable earth before it is too late. [...] Everyone should take seriously that this is about to be the last call. I don't understand how anyone can think of it as not being that bad. I will continue to contradict them. But when I enter the church porch [våbenhuset] I put the discord on standby - just like people used to leave their weapons there. We who go to church all come with our different opinions. But inside the church we share the very elementary things of having been granted life, of being (equally much) sinners, acquainted with suffering and to be destined to grow old and die. (O. Jensen 2020)

Jensen argued that Green Church breached an important boundary when they encouraged churches to engage explicitly in climate change mitigation and integrate ‘green’ messages into their sermons. The boundary he pointed to was quite concrete: the church porch, which refers to the small entrance hall of a church, where, supposedly, congregants used to leave their weapons before entering the church space. In fact, in Danish the church porch is called *våbenhuset* which, directly translated, becomes ‘the house for weapons’.

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<sup>53</sup> Jensen, Ole. 2020. “Jeg har stor respekt for Grøn Kirke. Jeg deler målsætning, men ikke kirkesyn og gudstjenestesyn.” *Kristeligt Dagblad*, August 20, 2020. <https://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/debatindlaeg/jeg-har-respekt-groen-kirke-jeg-deler-deres-maalsaetning-men-ikke-kirke-og>.

Hence, although Jensen himself is alarmed by the environmental crisis and wants to call on people to take action before it is too late, he does not find that it is *the church's* role to do this. What is supposed to take place within the church, according to Jensen, is the preaching of the Gospel and nothing else. When people come to church, it is implied, they gather to be reminded of the Gospel and that which pertains to them *all*, namely the gifts of life, sin, pain, and death. This is what unites the congregants despite the political and cultural differences that may also define them. If churches promote a certain approach to climate change mitigation, he argued, they patent what it means to be a Christian: “If you say that you are a Green Church, you turn your perception of what constitutes ‘Christianity’ into a kind of ism.”

The consequence of Jensen’s viewpoint is that the pulpit ought not to be used to preach on issues that *divide* people – such as climate change. The Church should preach the Gospel, and then, when churchgoers leave the Church and act as citizens, they might have been inspired by the Gospel itself to form their own opinion on political matters. Even something like an open Checklist delineates in terms too concrete what it implies to live out the Christian faith; it systematizes and institutionalizes Christianity – patents it - in an inappropriate, even dangerous way.

Another pastor, Brian, who I interviewed in late 2020 in his vicarage – a red-brick single storied house from the 1970s – provided me with a similar critique of Christian engagements with the climate issue. According to him, the main problem was that by engaging with the issue of climate change in a Christian register, the Church risked simply ‘riding the tides of the time’, as he put it. I had contacted Brian because he had publicly expressed concerns about initiatives such as that of Green Church, even if he did not disagree with its concern about the climate crisis. He was not against the Church taking measures to optimize energy consumption and other technical solutions, but he was wary about any rhetoric that leaned too much on the political atmosphere of the time. He said that he met many people –including among his own parishioners – who wished the Church could guide them in political matters by offering teachings on what would be right and wrong to do from a Christian perspective. “People would like to be relieved of having to form an opinion on all those matters we are confronted with as political subjects,” he said. To him it was essential that the Church did not provide such guidance. The Church, Brian stated, cannot provide answers; one must make up one’s own mind and know that God cannot be made accountable for one’s conclusions. Environmental action belonged to the political sphere, Brian argued, and is something individual people - within the Church and outside of it - can form their own political opinions on. It should not be preached by the Church.

The critique of Green Church raised by Ole Jensen and Brian are not, as such, based on a disagreement about whether climate change is a problem. Rather, the disagreement revolves around what the role and scope of the Church and of Christianity is. According to these Green Church critics, the role of the Church is solely to preach the Gospel, and this, according to them, says nothing final about how people should translate the Christian messages into actions or opinions on political matters – either in their private lives or as part of the Church. This implies that anything that is perceived to be a point of worldly contestation is - according to these critics - a political or moral issue, not a Christian one, and should be left at the church porch.

### **Christianity Outside of Time**

The Green Church actors I spoke to were well aware of such criticisms and referred to them often in my conversations with them. According to them, the critics revealed not only a particular take on what kind of issue the climate crisis is – namely a political one – but also a specific definition of Christianity. To delineate their critics’ position, they provided me with a historical contextualization of certain theological developments within 20<sup>th</sup> century Denmark – a chronicle that is widely shared by historians of church and Christianity (O. Jensen 2007; Svinth-Værgø Pøder 2015) – and has resulted in a view of the Church as the antithesis to political life. The story goes that the Great Wars effected a particular Danish version of Lutheran theology that came to dominate in the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but that still affects how many Danes perceive of the relationship between church and politics, Church and Society. This theology was influenced by a certain kind of theology that emerged in Germany as a response to the atrocities people committed and witnessed during the first world war. This new theological orientation was called ‘dialectical theology’, and its main proponent was German theologian Karl Barth (Jensen, Knudsen, and Stjernfelt 2014, 2045–57). During the first world war, Barth witnessed how the Church in Germany uncritically supported the bloodshed while purporting to partake in improving the world. Germany and other European countries were at the time dominated by the so-called liberal theology that promoted a belief in the possible betterment of humans in ‘this’ (as opposed to ‘the next’) world. Only a few theologians of the time expressed resistance to the war, among them Barth. He and a few other German and Swiss theologians insisted that humans were incapable of knowing – as Hitler professed to do – what a good society looks like. To strive for a totalitarian system like the Nazi regime – and to claim that this was in the name of God – amounted to hubris, because what God wants and what he deems ‘good’ is not accessible to humans (ibid.). The war had left people with a new recognition of humans’ capacity for evil and God’s distance from the world. Proponents of the new dialectical theology believed God could not be known or found in this world; he was transcendent, of another kind, and incomprehensible to the human experience (ibid.). If any human

claimed to know what was good and right to do, this could only be based on a projection of their own human nature, which – according to this strand of theology – is inherently fallible. Hence, theology should not engage with or pursue contemporary, this-worldly ideas promoted by politicians, scientists, economists, and so on. Theology should be concerned with the Gospel, with Man’s acknowledgment of human sinfulness, and with relying on and receiving – undeservingly so – God’s mercy. The theologians who resisted and critiqued the German Church’s endorsement of Hitler’s regime were proclaimed as heroes in the aftermath of the war and they became very influential, including in Danish theology. Here the existentialist philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard - whom Karl Barth was very inspired by - had already left his mark, preparing for a particular version of Danish dialectical theology, which came to be called ‘existential theology’ (*eksistensteologi*) (Svinth-Værgø Pöder 2015).

There have, obviously, also been other theological developments in Danish theology – among them Scandinavian creation theology, which posits a rather different and less split relationship between God and the world, and, as I delve into in chapter 5, this is the strand of Danish theology that many Green Church proponents pick up on. However, dialectical theology had a significant influence on the increasing withdrawal of the Church and Christianity from other realms or modes of life, resulting in a conception of religiosity as private and of the Church as an institution that ought to primarily be occupied with individual faith. This theologically driven development within Danish Christianity fitted well with the realization of a secular nation-state where social services and education were provided by the State (not the Church), and where religion kept to its side of the private/public divide.

Today, dialectical theology and its sharp separation between God and the world, the human and the divine, is most prominently represented by the conservative Lutheran group *Tidehverv*. While this group is not very big, it has been very influential (Pedersen 2017, 85) and visible in both the Christian and secular public sphere as some of its proponents have been in Parliament as members of a specific (right wing, anti-immigration) party and others have sharp pens that they put to work in opinion pieces. In his ethnographic studies of *Tidehverv*, Morten Axel Pedersen (2018; 2019; 2017), describes how his interlocutors do not just find it ‘immoral’ but also “downright sacrilegious to try to bring about any human progress and societal development in the world” (Pedersen 2019, 94). They do so because, according to them, it is impossible for humans to assume God’s vantage point and thus to know God’s will (ibid. 89). Pedersen argues that *Tidehverv*’s approach to Christianity is best described as a kind of ‘ethics of anti-piety’ (Pedersen 2019, 99) – that is, an ethics about *not trying to be good*. *Tidehverv*’s basic convictions are summed up in a statement that is often evoked as a way of both celebrating and mocking the view



that it expresses: “God is all; I know nothing; and you are an idiot” (Pedersen 2017, 92). This statement is supposed to convey that any impression a person may have of humans’ ability to do good is an illusion - and if anyone thinks they know, they should be contradicted - as it is fact only God who knows. If it is so, as Joel Robbins suggests, that there is a certain disposition towards ethics in Christianity - a demand for ‘moral transformation’ that spurs the Christian subject to engage in both personal and collective ethical work on improvement (Robbins 2004, 193) – then Tidehverv is something of an outlier in the general picture. To its proponents, Christianity is not, as Pedersen states, about becoming ‘good humans’, but rather about becoming ‘good at being fully human’ (Pedersen 2017), which entails sinning (and acknowledging that this is what one does).

One might wonder why members of this group find themselves in Parliament (and they certainly discuss this very question among themselves.<sup>54</sup> The explanation is that to them, politics is an altogether different matter than faith: politics is about how (the fallible) human society is organized and this has nothing to do with God. To them, there is a strict separation between the world and God, and therefore also between the political and the religious. Pedersen quotes one prominent member of Tidehverv as stating that “the basis of politics is made up of fallible and frail humanity”, and that, in politics, “absolute leaps and holy revolutions are another word for self-deification and demonism” (Krarup in Pedersen 2017, 95). To Tidehverv, then, politics is a human affair and must not involve ideologies or illusions of human ability to improve things in any radical way. There should be no references to universal human laws or absolute rules of law; what exists in political society are those idiosyncratic conventions developed in a particular national or otherwise concretely delimited community (Pedersen 2017, 96). Hence, when Christians associated with Tidehverv enter politics, it is not to evangelize or make politics Christian, but to partake in distinctively human affairs – especially by countering those who unconsciously ride the tides of the times or appeal to anything resembling ideology or idealism.

To return to Joel Robbins’ (2004) description of Christianity as entailing an ethical disposition, it makes for an interesting comparison to note how the Urapmin Robbins studied in Papua New Guinea posit an equally strict separation between politics and faith. They, too, strive to separate Christianity from ‘the hurly burly of local politicking’ because they regard the practice of politics – which in this case is understood to be what big men do as they make claims and negotiate the terms for worldly matters – as being characterized by a form of aggression that they find antithetical to Christian virtues and values. However, whereas Tidehverv would agree on such

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<sup>54</sup> Mikkelsen, Morten. 2000. “Politisk teologi eller religiøs politik.” Religion.dk. February 17, 2000. <https://www.religion.dk/nyheder/politisk-teologi-eller-religios-politik>.

a distinction, they would posit that the only possible life for humans is in the midst of this ‘hurly burly’. A Christian life is a human life. According to the Urapmins, on the other hand, to live a Christian life entails being critically *opposed* to political life. Big man politics, according to Robbins, is demarcated as an internal ‘outside’ to Christian community. For Tidehverv and dialectical theology we might suggest the opposite: when entering the church or when experiencing a blitz of revelation one is for a brief moment brought outside of the hurly burly of human and political life, and as such we might say that it is the *religious* that is demarcated as an ‘internal outside’ to human society.

While Tidehverv members are few and their position rather radical, there are many adjacent positions within the Danish Church that share their distaste for moralizing. Hence, when Marie Høgh (a former member of Tidehverv), whom I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, argues that the church is not a world-improving enterprise, this is what she means: no institution that is organized in this world – including the Church – has access to knowing how God would have wanted it to be. Humans cannot call upon God in their claims to how society ought to be organized or how people ought to act as citizens. Like the two critics above, Ole Jensen and the pastor Brian,<sup>55</sup> the problem Høgh sees with Christian responses to the climate crisis is that by applying biblical interpretations of what is right and wrong to particular political issues, Christianity is used to judge the way people behave in their everyday life and the decisions they make as citizens and members of the this-worldly society.

In the critiques of churchly engagements with climate change that I have outlined here, to ‘politicize’ and ‘moralize’ are perceived to go hand in hand. This is so because taking a stance on a political matter that touches upon how to best live one’s life – in private, in the church, or as a citizen of society – implies making claims about what the Gospel has to say about such matters and this, to take the next logical step, entails deeming those who live and think differently to be lesser Christians – for example the conventional farmer. In other words, to point to certain worldly commitments as particularly Christian would patent what it means to be a good Christian, when this is something that cannot be known for sure. Hence, when the Church gets itself involved with ‘climate politics’ it starts ‘moralizing’ in the sense that it pretends to have a special ‘moral sensibility’ from where to judge right from wrong.

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<sup>55</sup> It is important to note that neither Jensen nor Brian are by any means associated with Tidehverv. In fact, they would probably be in opposition to it on many issues, each in their different way. The various positions that I outline in this chapter are thus not in opposition to each other on all axes, but make up a complicated contrapuntal composition. Two positions might agree on a certain point and be in opposition to the third, but be in complete disagreement on another point, one of them finding themselves in a new alliance with a position that they disagree with on another matter. The oppositions I have been concerned with here are those on whether – and if so, in what ways – church actors and the Church can address matters that are considered political.

Once these critiques of Green Church come into focus, it becomes evident that views on what difference Christianity ought to make in the green transition also hold different claims to what Christianity *is*. To someone like Jensen (who, it must be stressed, is in no way associated with Tidehverv and does not share the dualistic worldview of dialectical theology), the only (huge) things that can be preached about in church are those things that are universally shared by humans, which are - as I quoted him saying earlier – “the very elementary things of having been granted life, of being (equally much) sinners, acquainted with suffering and to be destined to grow old and die”. This, presumably, is the core of Christianity and that which it is the Church’s role to preach.<sup>56</sup> As I discuss in the next section, proponents of Green Church deemed this to be too ‘minimal’ a Christianity for their liking – and for their desire to respond to climate change.

## Mixing the Potatoes and the Sauce

When I began my research on Green Church, its proponents – and especially those in the working group – were spending a lot of time countering the accusations of ‘moralizing’ and ‘politicizing’. First, they did so by arguing that they did not want to point fingers at anyone. At the first Green Church working group meeting I attended in early 2020, Mary – a parish pastor - opened with a brief reflection in which she commented on what she said was an often-raised critique of Green Church, namely that they ‘create divisions’.

Here we must insist that the basic idea is that everyone is worthy. There is no one who is better than others. It is important that we are attentive to our consumption patterns and lifestyle, but we must not clamp down on specific things - for example, flying. We are not to judge what is right and wrong. We do not want to - as we are sometimes accused of doing - persecute anyone. You have been a farmer based on the knowledge you have had available.

Like Mary, the secretary for Green Church, who was also trained as a theologian, said that she put much effort into using her words correctly whenever she communicated on behalf of Green Church, so as to avoid alluding to climate change mitigation as something that had to do with salvation or doing good deeds.

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<sup>56</sup> As noted, this does not mean that Jensen does not think that there are important perspectives on environmentalism in Christian cosmology. He just did not think that such perspectives should be preached or articulated by the Church as an institution. Caring for creation is certainly a theological issue to Jensen, but this should not be translated into a political one in the Church. As Rubow (2020) notes, to speak about environmentalism in Danish theology does indeed entail complicated balancing acts!

However, while my interlocutors in Green Church rejected the idea that it is possible to achieve one's own salvation, all of them articulated in one way or another that they thought a person's actions must be a result of his or her faith. It will not do, one working group member said to me when I interviewed him, to confine Christianity to the kind of 'existential prison' that he found many Green Church critics doing. "Then I can sit there and ponder my own death – Søren Kierkegaard and I!" he exclaimed, ironically. Henrik, another pastor, presented a similar digest of the anti-Green Church position, describing it as a kind of 'minimal Christianity': a definition of Christianity that delimits it to pertaining only to the inner, existential realm of the believer and speaking nothing of the world or how to live in it. He narrated the story of 20<sup>th</sup> century Christianity in Denmark as a story of a societal exodus: Christianity and the Church, he explained to me, have been relegated into a tiny corner of society, having only been ascribed a role as the place people go to when they engage with individual matters – such as faith, doubt, sin, love, suffering - and not collective ones. To delimit Christianity and the role of the church in this way, represented to him an 'overly hygienic' (*overdriven hygiejnisk*) way of thinking:

It's an overly hygienic way of thinking, a tendency, isn't it? Separate places on opposite sides of the plate. Gravy and potatoes not touching. I think you could probably make some interesting analyses of this on an anthropological or psychological level. You can't step on the lines, right? But I think you have to step on the lines.

According to Henrik, Christianity has everything to do with how one lives one's life – individually as well as collectively. A person's faith ought to be expressed in action, he argued – not to ensure salvation, but as a natural effect of the joy and gratitude for life that one experiences as a Christian. And according to him this was, in fact, a Lutheran position. I write 'in fact', because Luther's teachings are also used to *critique* Green Church for insinuating that good deeds are necessary for salvation, as mentioned earlier. One of the primary doctrinal teachings of Luther - and the other Protestant Reformers – was that salvation is by faith alone (*sola fide*). However, in an article from a Danish journal of theology, Henrik highlights Luther's small *Treatise on Good Works* (1520) as an argument for Christian engagements with climate change mitigation. According to Henrik, it was not Luther's intention to discourage good deeds, as Luther had asserted that 'from faith must spring good deeds'. In this thesis Luther was responding to the critique that he was discouraging good deeds when he criticized the many Catholic practices of his time. Good deeds, Luther responded, are those that glorify God and are the outcome of the individual's faith in Him. This brings Henrik to the conclusion that it can be considered Lutheran to care for Creation, as this is to glorify God.

In less exegetic terms, the pastor Sarah, whom I also interviewed, argued that this means that if one actually believes in the importance of neighborly love, one will not blindly buy clothes that have been produced under slave-like conditions - or buy a big steak that will make so many of the world's species suffer eventually. If one believes in the Godly command to love one's neighbor, one will try to treat other people in careful ways and not support trade that exploits them.

Mary, a warm and elegant pastor in her late forties, said that she considered environmental issues akin to other issues that the Church cares for:

It was the Church that developed systems for public healthcare, education, care for the poor and deprived, social aid, all of those things, that today have become part of the welfare system. So in that way I think that once there were people who saw that other people were suffering and saw that they needed help. Now we see that there is an earth that needs care.

She added that caring for the environment ought to be as natural for the Church as baptizing children. She explained that she had once been asked to write a commentary for the *Christian Daily* to explicate her opinion on the question of “whether humans ought to care for the environment or wait for God to do so”. Her response, she said, had been that no one would dream of suggesting that we'd leave the upbringing of our children to God alone. Humans have been granted responsibility here on earth and therefore they should obviously also take responsibility for the environment. While we were speaking, the sun broke through the cloudy sky outside of Mary's vicarage – a newly restored farmhouse from the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the countryside of Zealand – and, suddenly, as if she had just realized something, Mary reached for the switch next to her, turned off the lamp above us, and almost inaudibly murmured “well, that doesn't make any sense”. To me she said that although she did not believe in salvation being achieved through good works, neither did she believe “that God had reserved a special place in heaven for those people who have done nothing good”, implying that she found the idea that Christianity is only about acknowledging one's sins and not trying to do anything about them to be quite erroneous.

The account these Green Church proponents give us of Christianity is thus very far from what Christianity entails for the abovementioned group Tidehverv. There is not, as there is for Tidehverv, as great a divide between the perfect divine and the imperfect world, as God's goodness is understood to be channeled through people as they act from a place of faith. Returning to Robbins's identification of a certain ethical disposition in Christianity (2004), this is a much more apt way of describing Green Church proponents' delineation of what it implies to be a Christian: it implies being concerned with realizing what is 'good' (ie. Robbins 2013a). However, the kind of Christian ethics delineated by the Green Church proponents above is, I suggest, less focused on

the moral transformation and improvement of the *individual person* and more on how he or she engaged in improving the world. Based on her study of environmentalist Catholics, Camille Lardy (2020) argues that it is worth distinguishing between Christians who enter the public sphere to become *better Christians* themselves or to convert others – in other words, to evangelize – and then, on the other hand, those who enter the political sphere to create *better worlds*. While these two things are certainly interlinked, Lardy highlights a difference that I think is useful for describing the efforts of Green Church: when they argue that Christians and their churches ought to address the climate crisis, they do not see it as their goal to make more or better *Christians*, but rather to influence the societal efforts of tackling climate change, and thus ‘making better worlds’ (Lardy 2020). And this is where Green Church is confronted with the distinction – indeed, normative separation - between politics and religion. This is the focus of the next section, where I describe how Green Church not only offers another definition of Christianity than Tidehverv and their kindred, by invoking a specific notion of the political.

### **Worldly Commitments**

Green Church actors wanted not only to convince the sceptics of the naturalness of engaging in Creation care as a Christian, but also to argue that the Church had something to offer society in this regard. Peter, who was a member of the Green Church working group and a bishop at the time of my fieldwork, was very active in this regard and went – unofficially – under the nickname ‘the green bishop’. Peter often addressed the climate issue in his public appearances – speeches, interviews, columns – and one of his frequent ways of responding to the question of what we can do to counter climate change was that “we should all sing the hymn *Rise up, all things that God has made* before eating our organic porridge in the morning”. This hymn, which was written by the Danish priest and writer of hymns, H. A. Brorson in 1734 and is one of the most favored hymns in Denmark today, is a praise of God and all various elements of the natural world that Brorson believed God to be the creator of – birds, stars, grass, fish, and grain. To a journalist from the Christian Daily in 2021, Peter said:

I am certain that if we [sang this hymn] we would awaken our senses to notice how amazing this world is. Then we would not simply take the trees out there in the yard for granted or take it to be the most natural thing in the world that the birds are singing. Then we would become aware of it. And that is the first necessary step for us to care for nature. It is that we become attentive. It is that we care about it. And this is not a romanticization of nature - we know that nature is brutal. But thinking about nature as something that has value in itself and that we as humans can take responsibility for it - because we can consciously relate to it - is a perspective that we as a church, with the language we have, the hymns,

the theological perspectives we have - can contribute with in order to complement what natural science teaches us about nature. The church can speak into our world, whereas natural science speaks more to our intellect.

He repeated this argument when I interviewed him, stating that it was important to have more than one language about the world: “When a carpenter looks at a tree, he sees timber. And of course, that can be what it is, but it is also so much more: a place for building a nest, a provider of fruits, a living organism, and so on. Christianity offers a poetic-religious orientation towards nature that can make us care for it,” he said.

Peter spoke about it as though the practice of singing Brorson’s hymn is one that everyone could take up – not only persons devoted to the Christian faith or worldview. He also renders the language that Christianity can offer a ‘poetic-religious language’, stripping it of its Christian specificity. This seems like an instance of something that is quite common in Denmark, namely to evoke Christianity as a cultural rather than a religious resource. Denmark is generally perceived to be a Christian country - even by citizens who are not believers - and Christianity is perceived to be a provider of values for Danish society (as also discussed in chapter 1) (Iversen et al. 2019; Poulsen et al. 2021b). Many Danes consider themselves to be ‘cultural Christians’, a widely acknowledged term used to describe those to whom Christianity is important as a historical force, as a provider of life transitional rituals, and/or for its messages of neighborly love, freedom and egalitarianism, but not necessarily so for its ontological statements about the existence of God or about how the world came into being (Krogdahl 2012; Poulsen et al. 2021a). As one pastor argued in an opinion piece on the Christian media site Kirke.dk during my fieldwork, this can be conceived of as a kind of ‘secularized Christianity’<sup>57</sup>, which is a similar term to that of ‘culturalized religion’ suggested by sociologists Avi Astor and David Mayrl (2020) to describe “forms of religious identification, discourse, and expression that are primarily cultural in character, insofar as they are divorced from belief in religious dogma or participation in religious ritual” (ibid.). When Peter suggests that Christianity can offer an *additional* language about the world in a time of climate crisis, one that complements other languages such as the scientific and the economic languages, he is speaking into this cultural landscape. What Christianity can offer in the context of climate crisis is widely beneficial and it should not, as he has stated on an earlier occasion, remain within a ‘cheese dome,’ where it will suffocate, but rather speak into ‘common, ordinary life’<sup>58</sup>. Hence, when Peter

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<sup>57</sup> Nørkjær Franch, Hans. 2022. “Sognepræst: Kristne værdier er en slags sekulariseret tro.” *Kirke.dk*, May 10, 2022. <https://www.kirke.dk/debat/sognepraest-kristne-vaerdier-er-en-slags-sekulariseret-tro>.

<sup>58</sup> Fyens.dk. 2009. “Politiske præster | fyens.dk”, 23. december 2009. [https://faa.dk/debat/politiske-praester-2022-12-13\(2\)](https://faa.dk/debat/politiske-praester-2022-12-13(2)). Last visited on January 3<sup>rd</sup> 2023.

is asked what he thinks Christianity can contribute – what difference Christianity can make – he uses the term ‘common life’ to evoke a common society to which Christianity can offer something. In his statements it is not that he suggests that it is *itself* Christianity can offer - he is not out to evangelize; rather, he presents Christianity as a kind of resource in worldly matters.<sup>59</sup>

Henrik, the abovementioned pastor who was also a member of the Green Church working group, argued that the churches have a vital role to play in cultivating what he called the *selvfølgeligheder* (‘naturalized presumptions’) that guide peoples’ behavior in regard to the environment. In an interview on the website of the Danish Environmental Protection Agency (*Miljøstyrelsen*), he answers the question of what the Church can contribute to the behavioral changes necessary to counter climate change in the following way:

The task of the church is primarily a spiritual task - we are talking about preaching the Gospel, right. This means that the Church must try to create spaces where we can all find our spiritual potential and find our way back to what matters. In other words, when we need these behavioral changes - which we most definitely do - then there are lots of things that must be done: political things, technological things, among others. But the church, the church, must work on our language and our naturalized presumptions (vores selvfølgeligheder). We of course do this in the church services, but we also do it through many other activities with children, young and old, through outdoor services, pilgrimages, devotions, farmers markets, and all sorts of other things, where we are reminded of things that are obvious, but which we have forgotten – joy, gratitude. The problem with our behavior is that we base it on certain naturalized presumptions (selvfølgeligheder). But when what we take for granted comes out of a fridge, or is produced by television, YouTube and whatever, then nature loses its naturalness (selvfølgelighed). If humanity is to have a future, it must rediscover nature’s selvfølgelighed. And the church contributes, alongside many other social institutions, by working with the spiritual, the religious. (...) The church has a

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<sup>59</sup> However, the message of Brorson’s hymn and of Peter’s own statements is not exactly that nature has value only in and by itself, but rather that it has value because it has been created and is upheld *by God*. According to Peter, God is, in fact the creator of everything - humans as well as the scientific facts that humans have developed languages to discern. It might be that a tree can be seen as timber and be employed in building a house, but its nature is that it is God’s creation. In other words, while Peter suggests that the poetic-religious language offered by Christianity is one among others, the particular ‘language’ or view of nature he suggests society can benefit from entails ontological claims that render all the other languages subordinate to it. Christianity ‘encircles’ them, one might say, borrowing a phrase from Simon Coleman, ‘without destroying them’ (Coleman 2019, 186). So, while Christianity can be presented as a complementary pair of glasses – a presentation that adheres to the rules that set up the modern constitution, in which science, religion and politics should be kept apart – they do indeed seem to be the glasses that – according to what Peter told me - reveal to us the very constitution of the universe. I return to this in chapter 5.



very important role to play in offering the Danes - showing the Danes – other possible ways of being human. (Author's translation)

Henrik does not only offer a description of the role of the church in this quote, but also a kind of analysis of what drives human behavior. People's behavior is shaped by what they have learned to take for granted. The climate crisis, he seems to say, is a result of people having learned to take for granted what consumer and media culture promotes as natural. Christianity can offer other ways of being human and can, according to Henrik, 'work on' what we take for granted. The role of the Church is to produce new common sense; to make it natural to value nature more than what can be consumed on YouTube. It seems to me that Henrik explicitly renders the Church as an institution that participates in producing *culture*. He does not (only) encourage people to turn away from the world and seek divine revelation but suggests that the Church can influence human conduct by working on naturalizing certain presumptions over others. We might say that he formulates a critique of a specific culture (created by YouTube and consumerism) and suggest that the Church participates in creating a new one.

In her study of what she calls 'trans-Evangelicals' – a new generation of Evangelicals who fully embrace yet critique secular culture - Susan Harding (2009) offers a diagnosis of what she deems 'a post-secular world':

The narrative and classificatory discourses that divide the world into two opposed categories or orders, secular and religious, is no longer, or, at least, is less, hegemonic. The historical vision of modern secularity, which narrated the eclipse of religion and rule of secularity in public life, is passé. (...) It is a postsecular world in the sense that religion is less of a separate social domain and more a field, or fields, of subject-making practices that are evidently secular as well as religious. (ibid.191)

The Danish religious and political landscape is very different from that of the US and Harding's analysis cannot be mapped one to one on to the Danish case. But what Henrik is suggesting, seems – at least to a certain extent – to be something similar to the trans-evangelicals: he is arguing for religious engagement with and in the world, and in matters that have until now been deemed secular, and thus political – i.e. climate change. And as we will see in the next section, he – alongside others – are trying to do so without breaching the secular order, by redefining what counts as 'political' and in what way.

### **Lutheran Secularism**

It can quickly turn into politics - it's one thing to encourage people to sing a hymn about creation and quite another to participate in a climate demonstration. Those are completely different things. There are many people who ask us to support or get involved in what they are doing. Someone wanted for example to make a demonstration and have us on the banner, but they had an aggressive undertone, and we can't be part of that.

(Julie, secretary for Green Church)

The Church usually posits that it would like to be political in the sense of being involved in society, but not by engaging with party-politics. Even if there is wide support of the green agenda, this is still perceived to be a political matter in the latter sense. That is just ridiculous.

(Sarah, pastor in a parish church)

I don't think we should use the Bible to make party programmes or things like that. I am very much in favor of separating religion and state, administration and political life. But if the church is to have any justification, then we must be people who reflect on how we should see the issues in our lives in the light of what is written in the Bible.

(Mary, pastor and member of Green Church working group)

When Tomlinson and McDougall (2012) advise us to approach Christian actors' categories of 'politics' and 'religion' without presuming that we know exactly what they mean, they also suggest that one way of pursuing such an inquiry is to probe for the presumed *limits* to Christian actions. That is, "what kinds of actions are considered off-limits for Christians, or at least for those individuals most responsible for representing, acting on behalf of, or speaking for the church as a whole?" For Green Church – as for Tidehverv – this line was drawn around what they deemed to be 'political'. However, as the above three quotes from Green Church representatives hint at, they did want Christianity to be something that touched upon contemporary, societal issues. Although all of the Green Church representatives that I interviewed asserted that they were not suggesting that the Church becomes 'political', they always added that by this they meant that the Church ought not to engage in what they called 'party politics'. The Church should not and could not side with any political party, nor could it be active in the kinds of politics that has to do with power struggles within the formalized structure of the State. However, they all found that the Church could and should provide perspectives and values on the issue of climate change and, for some of them, this could indeed be called 'political', albeit in a different kind of way than what they called 'party politics'.

Henrik, for example, agrees that the Church should not politicize, if what is meant by that word is engaging in the kind of politics that 'divide people', he said – 'the kind of politics

having to do with winning and gaining power?. But surely, he says, on the other hand, everything has a political dimension and so does Christianity.

K: There are those who say that Green Church politicizes...

M: I am not of the opinion that we are politicizing, but erm... When I say that, it is because I would like to maintain the word 'politicize' to be something negative. And we do not do that. But there is perhaps something in regaining a political awareness, a political self-understanding, that the Church has forgotten, has been separated from. Because there cannot be an institution in this world that does not have a political dimension. That would simply be nonsense. So of course the Danish Church has a political dimension.

K: What does it mean when you say a political dimension?

M. Many things, it means many things. That is, from loyalty to the state and government to more ethical things. (...) I can't see it any other way than that a belief in Jesus Christ must mean that, in 2020, one must advocate for democracy. Then you must be democratic. This is - I say - an implication of having faith in Jesus Christ in our time. It can of course be denied. You can say that faith in Jesus has nothing to do with being in favor of democracy or dictatorship. But I don't agree with that. I believe faith in Jesus Christ has a liberating potential in that it entails having respect for each other and for other peoples, etc., It is therefore incompatible with tyranny, oligarchy, Putin, etc. I am actually saying that Christianity has these consequences. On a very large, overall level. Not party politics, because there aren't any parties in the Danish parliament that don't support democracy, right? (...) So I am more of the current that goes in the opposite direction of what has gone on in the twentieth century. In the twentieth century it has moved more towards separation. Because Christianity has become smaller and smaller, less and less about social engagement, and now I think it must go the other way.

However, even if Henrik found that Christianity is political insofar as it implicitly points to democracy as the best possible way of organizing society and that the Church ought to offer Danish society perspectives on climate issues, he was also adamant about why he found Christianity and the Church should be kept out of national politics: Christianity must never be polluted by power.

The reason that religion and politics ought not to mixed is that faith in Jesus Christ is so great and boundary-breaking, that if you want to try to implement it politically, it will end in a dictatorship. Then it will force all those who do not have the same mindset as me to do exactly what I think. And that is a theocracy. And we are all strongly opposed to that - you can't force people to love their neighbor - and that is why religion and politics must not be mixed. But I do not think that it should be separated either.

Hence, the separation between religion and politics in the secular-nation state of Denmark is, from this perspective, not a means of protecting the rational political sphere with religious perspectives (such as classic secularism theories would have it), but *about protecting religion from power interests*. This, Henrik argued, is the reason behind Luther's teachings on the two realms, secular and spiritual, which – as also claimed by prominent church scholars – can be said to have formed the way Danish society has been organized.

This take on how religion and politics ought to be related was articulated by the dean of the central deanery in Copenhagen, Anders Gadegaard, who during my fieldwork published a book on the relationship between politics and faith. Gadegaard made himself known to the general public early in the 2000s, when he gave shelter to rejected asylum seekers in the Copenhagen Cathedral, and, in effect, performed civil disobedience. He is thus known for not shunning involvement in 'political' issues and he is quite a controversial figure.<sup>60</sup> Gadegaard reiterates the historical analysis provided to me by Green Church members, as he writes that there has been a widespread rejection of mixing faith and politics within the past 70 years of Danish history. In Denmark, 'Faith and politics shun each other like oil and water', Gadegaard writes, paraphrasing what, according to him, is a widespread opinion. He also quotes a widely used maxim coined by a former prime minister, namely 'religion is a private matter' – a statement that serves the same function that Alistair Campbell's statement 'we do not do politics' serves in Britain, according to Matthew Engelke (M. E. Engelke 2013). Gadegaard, however, does not consider faith and politics to be at odds with each other. In similar vein to what Henrik told me, he writes:

If politics is about the way we distribute resources and the way in which we organize our society, then no conversation that touches upon the most essential between us can avoid being political. And that ought to be one of the most inescapable criteria of relevance for preaching the Gospel. (Gadegaard 2019, 14)  
(author's translation)

In the book, he offers his take on Luther's teachings about the two realms:

The spiritual regimen is the religious realm where God rules through the free, persuasive power of the word. This space must be kept free of political power (...) [T]he worldly regimen is defined by being governed by the power of the sword, that is, the right to govern the citizens by way of legislation, violence, and deprivation of liberty. Both forms of government are necessary for the

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<sup>60</sup> It is important to state that Gadegaard is not a part of Green Church, but when I bring him in here, it is because he articulated a similar approach to the relation between religion and politics as did Henrik.

maintenance of society, and both forms of government need each other. But they must also be kept separate. Secular power must not be used in the spiritual realm. (...) People could not be forced to believe, and the priests could not be forced to preach as the monarch wanted. (...) In a similar way, the spiritual regimen was not to be exercised in the worldly realm, because where government must be undertaken by law and force, it is not the freedom of the Gospel that reigns. As we are all sinners and often serve our own good rather than that of others, we cannot be governed by the commandments of the Spirit. We must be compelled by the law to do the good that we do not do of ourselves. (...) And the spiritual regimen must inspire us to act in the interest of our Neighbor in worldly life. You might say that the two areas must not be mixed, but they must not be isolated from each other either. (Gadegaard 2019, 41) (author's translation)

Mixing the regimens, Gadegaard then argues, leads to theocracy – a religious dictatorship – and keeping them completely separate leads to pure relativism. The latter, he suggests, is the most common in secularized societies and, as he sees it, this often leads to fragmentation, individualization and the dissolution of community. One must, according to Gadegaard, try to find the right balance: the two regimens must neither be mixed, nor isolated from each other, but be regarded as mutually constitutive.

We are dealing here with a particular version of the secular that differs from other common perceptions of secularization as a neutral separation of faith and politics, Church and State. In the anthropology of secularism, for example, religions are often thought of as something that are 'inside' secularism, implying that it is secular society that makes room for religion (Harding 2019). In other words, a secular state is one in which the governing authority and the public sphere are cleansed of religion, but where room has been made for citizens to practice their religiosity. The non-religious state and public sphere surround and regulate religion. This is so because secularism is presumed to imply that there is not a religious foundation for society, but rather a foundation based on Enlightenment ideals of freedom of speech and state-sanctioned civic rights. The state is defined as non-religious and understood to encompass religion. What I hear my interlocutors saying, on the other hand, is that it is *the secular society that is encompassed by Christianity*. In what Gadegaard – and Henrik - argue about the two realms, it is not secular society that encompasses religion, but the other way around: a religious organization delimits the domain in which power can be exercised. To define 'the secular' as that which Luther describes in his teachings of the two regimens, delineates a secular state as one in which the religious and the political are, in fact, not only co-existing but co-dependent as equally important ingredients in

God's government of the world: on the one hand, people are governed by the free movement of the spirit, inspiring and inciting them to live by their faith in God and inspire others to do the same, and on the other hand, people are governed by the Crown's sword in those cases where, as humans, they are incapable of channeling God's spirit. This implies that a 'secular society', from this perspective, is one in which a small sphere of political life has been demarcated for where power and force can be used. God cannot be called upon in performance of human power, as Gadegaard argues above – that would amount to theocracy and tyranny. But he also argues that in all matters of life – political or not – Christians ought to be inspired by God and live by his words. "Faith without political engagement", Gadegaard writes, "is not faith at all. Because from faith in God comes a sense of responsibility for the common good" (Gadegaard 2019, 14). Those in power cannot rule in the name of God, but God rules people - if they let him. This is also the reason that Danish law states that the legislative power may, in fact, not be put to use in ways that compromise the Evangelical Lutheran creeds that form the confessional foundation of the Danish Church.<sup>61</sup> This implies that what Gadegaard and Henrik are arguing for is not exactly the post-secular, but a secularism that is Christianly defined.<sup>62</sup> The importance of separating religion and politics is integral to both the Danish Church and the Danish State, but whether this means that Christianity has been relegated to a small space within society, or that political power has, is up for debate.

What I take from this is that, in the view of society that Henrik and other Green Church proponents articulate, the distinction between the religious and the secular is just that: a distinction, not a *separation*.

### **Conclusion: The Politics of Christian Politics**

As Latour (1993) has argued, climate change challenges and transcends the distinctions and domains that modern society is understood to be organized around. Climate cannot be reduced to being only a scientific, technical, political, economic or cultural problem. The problem exceeds such epistemological purifications. On the one hand, this means that church actors such as Green Church come to consider climate change to be a relevant issue for the Church to respond to - it is, as they argue, also a spiritual problem as it has to do with how people live among and treat each other. But dealing with this kind of problem also represents a problem to the Green Church as well as other actors related to the Danish Church, because the 'hybrid' nature of climate change

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<sup>61</sup> "KIU, Alm.Del - 2022-23 (2. Samling) - Endeligt Svar På Spørgsmål 1: Spm. Om Kirkeministeriets Retlige Vurdering Og Andet Relevant Materiale Vedrørende Udvælgelsen Af Store Bededag Til Eventuel Afskaffelse, Til Kirkeministeren." 2023. Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs. <https://www.ft.dk/samling/20222/almDEL/kiu/spm/1/svar/1926251/2654339/index.htm>.

<sup>62</sup> Talal Asad's argument that the idea of secular society is a Protestant production bears resemblances with this argument, but it is also quite different (Asad 2007)

implies that it is always also political. If climate change indeed shows modern purifications to be inadequate, then this implies that ‘the political’ – that which is associated with ideology, conflicts of interests, and power struggles - cannot be delimited. Hence, because the climate crisis transcends societal and epistemological domains, the distinction between religion and politics is called into question – what defines each and how do they overlap? This challenges the Danish People's Church.

Different ideas about what makes up the political, then, seem to be at play. Hence, if preaching about how people ought to act in the world – that we, for example, must be charitable - can be said to be political, (some of) my interlocutors would say that, yes, what we do is, then, ‘political’. But only insofar as this is not confused with the other meaning of the word, namely politics as related to party-politics and struggle for power over resources. When the pastor Henrik says that he finds that the Church ought to create new (and truer) ‘naturalized presumptions’ (*sejlfølgeligheder*), it is ‘political’, he says, in the sense of it concerning the common good, but decidedly *not* in the sense of concerning party-politics, of asserting power over anyone. Green Church-representatives defense for embracing something that they call ‘political’ is to ask: what is Christianity if it says nothing about how we should act in relation to others or to Creation? What, then, is the Church's right to existence in this society? However, it is only ‘political’ in the sense of having to do with the common good of Creation, it is about striving for better co-existence. The only goal is to care for God's Creation – not to create divisions. The critics of Green Church - incl. Tidehverv - this very thing, preaching care for Creation from the pulpit, is considered to be political precisely because it concerns how people should act on a problem that concerns the temporal, the contemporary, about which people can have many different opinions. To evoke something like Christian ethics entails politicizing the only space within human society that is not political, not tainted by human interests and ideologies in one way or the other.

Climate change, Green Church proponents argued, is not only a political issue, but *also* an existential and spiritual issue. It is an issue that touches upon everything and that can therefore not be delimited to be a narrow political problem. Furthermore, the political is not only that which takes place in ‘party-politics’ or at the center of government but is *also* that which concerns how people treat each other and nature and the taken-for-granted truths they live by. To talk about such things is political in essence. However, it is also *Christian*. Christianity, Green Church actors argue, speaks of *more* than only the individual and its salvation: it *also* speaks about how to treat each other and Creation – like the kind of politics just outlined. They want to renegotiate the role and place of the Church in society – make it matter – by softening the separation between religion and the public sphere. However, they do not want to conflate the

religious and political all together, and they therefore introduce a distinction between politics-as-that-which-concerns-the-common-good and politics-as-power. The climate crisis also incites them to suggest a new role for, and definition of, Christianity and the Church in Denmark, as they argue that for too long has the Church kept to itself. Like climate change, they argue, Christianity also transgresses some of those domains that modern society has been organized around. Christianity is about how people live together and treat each other and is, as such, 'political' in essence. But, importantly, political in a specific sense of the word: Christianity is political insofar as politics is about organizing collective life. What Christianity is *not* is politics-as-power – that must be left to 'party-politics'. Hence, even if they retain the boundary between religion and politics, they draw it instead between religion and politics-as-power.



## Chapter 3 The Footprint of an Anarchy: Counting Carbon in the Church

At the beginning of 2020, the Danish People's Church was encouraged from two sides to take part in achieving the Danish government's official goal of reducing Denmark's carbon emissions by 70% by 2030. First, the ten bishops within the Church stated in the minutes from their triannual meeting that, in their opinion, the Danish Church, being a public institution, should support the government's reduction goal, as well as take measures to reduce the Church's own emissions. Then, a few weeks later, the political party Alternativet [*the Alternative*] proposed a new law that would make it mandatory for the Church to lease its land exclusively to organic farming and reforestation projects. The Danish Church's responsibility for contributing to the reduction of national emissions was thus directly addressed both from within, by the bishops, and from outside, by politicians in Parliament. Seeing that the Church is a public institution, it is perhaps not surprising that such actors find the goals set by the national government to pertain to the Church. The Church is written into the Danish Constitution as one of the four pillars of Danish society and, although it is partly funded by membership taxes, it also receives substantial funds from the State for, among other things, the employment of clergy (i.e. priests, bishops, deans). Furthermore, other private organizations, public institutions in Denmark and abroad, and even national churches in countries such as Norway,<sup>63</sup> England<sup>64</sup> and Sweden<sup>65</sup> have, in recent years, committed to specific carbon reduction goals and made sometimes quite detailed action plans on how to reach them.<sup>66</sup> However, both the statement made by the bishops and the law proposed by Alternativet spurred significant controversy, and the suggested bill was defeated by a large majority of parties represented in Parliament, while the bishops had to backpedal after being accused of misusing their bishoprics (Bramming 2020; Skov Hansen 2020).

The statements spurred controversy for similar, though slightly different, reasons related to the organizational ethos of the Church, its relationship with the State, and to the

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<sup>63</sup> Already in 2012, the Church of Norway committed to take measures to reduce their carbon footprint (Den Norske Kirke 2012). At their meeting in September 2021, the Church of Norway Synod furthermore committed to becoming carbon neutral by 2030.

<sup>64</sup> In 2022 the General Synod of the Church of England approved a 'route map' for how the Church of England could become carbon neutral by 2030 (Church of England 2022).

<sup>65</sup> In 2019 the Swedish Church officially stated that it was committed to becoming carbon neutral by 2030 (Svenske kyrkan 2019).

<sup>66</sup> Taking into consideration what we learned in the previous chapter about the taboo against speaking religiously about the issue of climate change from the pulpits of the Danish Church, it is interesting to note that all the three churches that I just mentioned - the Norwegian, English and Swedish - argue in highly religious terms for why the climate issue is an important matter for the church to address and mitigate.

principled relation – indeed separation - between religion and politics in Denmark. In the previous chapter I explored how one reason for finding it problematic to suggest that the Church should get involved in the climate issue was grounded in a resistance towards the Church making moral claims in political matters, and thus patenting what Christianity is. In this chapter I attend to how the controversy also revolved around another – yet related – question, namely about whether anyone – be they a bishop or the State – can speak, make decisions, or take responsibility on behalf of the entire Danish Church. Most church actors would reply in the negative: in order for the Church to in fact be the church of the *entire Danish people* in all its diversity it ought to be a decentralized organization - a ‘well-ordered anarchy’ as it is popularly called by church actors - and no one should therefore be able to dominate it or speak on its behalf.

However, in early 2022 something called *Folkekirkenes Grønne Omstilling* (“The Green Transition of the Danish People’s Church” – from here on FGO) appeared in the news and on a website with that very name. The Danish People’s Church had formulated a collective response to climate change in which it promised to play its part in the national effort to green Danish society. If the controversies in January 2020 made it seem as though such a response was an institutional impossibility, something had changed. Or perhaps it had not: Even if the Church seemingly spoke in one voice, declaring itself a responsible, unified actor, I argue that the method the declaration built on, that of carbon footprint calculations, enabled the Church to display accountability without, in fact, establishing an accountable entity. As such, this chapter shows what unfolded as carbon was introduced as a resource to think with, evaluate by, and act upon in the Danish People’s Church.

In the chapter, I interrogate this shift, and to what might have changed - and what might have not changed so much. The chapter depicts a development that took place within the period of my fieldwork (2020-2022) in terms of how the Church as a unified institution found that it could and should deal with the problem of climate change. In this period, climate change went from being either something a minority dealt with as an all-encompassing problem (i.e. Green Church) that *ought* to be addressed by the Church, or as something that was deemed a political issue and therefore *outside* the proper domain of the Church (as discussed in the previous chapter), to becoming something that the Church formulated a united – but distinctively non-religious - response to. In the chapter I show what happened as the Church both resisted and was drawn into the logic of carbon footprint calculations, and how the prospect of such calculations influenced the negotiations of the relationship between the State and the Church. For the most part this is a relationship that goes unnoticed, but when discussions about the national reduction goals also came to touch upon the Church’s contribution to these, it came under public scrutiny. The chapter shows

how accounting for carbon emissions was used in the service of achieving what is otherwise deemed impossible: to speak on behalf of the Church without compromising either its internal ‘religious freedom’ (*trostfrihed*) or its ethos of ‘spaciousness’ (*rummelighed*). I argue that the method of calculating and displaying carbon footprints as a response to climate change offered the Church a way of simultaneously showing responsibility and not compromising on the principle of decentralisation.

I also, however, end by speculating that the introduction of such a carbon logic may indeed come to change the Church more substantially than what it was supposed to. As critical scholars of environmental accounting have argued, accounting practices cannot be considered a neutral device, but is a practice that affects the reality it accounts for (MacKenzie 2009; Lovell and MacKenzie 2011; Lippert 2015; Blok 2011). While such scholars are mostly concerned with how accounting for carbon emission as a way of governing climate change shapes the reality of climate change and the politics of mitigating it (Lohmann 2006), I am in this chapter concerned with how carbon accounting might also shape the Church organization itself. Because not only can carbon footprint calculations as a form of accounting be said to organize how the Church approaches climate change, it might also change the organizational structure, and indeed principles of the Church, as it renders it as a unity. As a form of accounting, carbon footprint calculations might participate in organizing the Church more uniformly than church actors would in fact like it to be. Hence what I suggest is that climate change mitigation in the form of carbon accounting might have an unintentional organizing effect on the Church, so that it is *not only the Church that organizes climate change mitigation, but also climate change mitigation that organizes the Church*. To account for an anarchy might also show to be a way of organizing it.

To understand this, it is necessary to learn what kind of church we are talking about. In the coming pages, then, I unpack certain aspects of the Church’s organizational structure and the values underpinning them – what I call its ‘organizational ethos’. I focus specifically on three key values, each of which underpin this way of organizing the Church and with which the controversies around carbon emission goals collided, namely those of ‘freedom’ (*frihed*), ‘equality’ (*lighed*), and ‘spaciousness’ (*rummelighed*). I begin by taking a step back to Green Church, as the story of how this initiative was conceived and established tell us something about not only the theological complications around green initiatives in the Church, but also organizational ones.

## The Church as it is

Green Church was, in fact, not originally initiated by the Council of Danish Churches but was, according to Henrik, whom we met in the previous chapter, placed there after having been deemed

“too political” to be part of the Danish People’s Church. Henrik was one of the initiators of Green Church in the early 2000s and is, at the time of writing, still a central member of the working group. In February 2020 I visited him in his office – a corner room in the suburban house that serves as his vicarage, crowded with books by a surprising array of authors including Nietzsche, Marx, Heidegger, and Luther – to interview him about his work with Green Church. After having addressed his own work with formulating an ‘eco-theological virtue ethics’ – something I will get back to in the last chapter of this thesis - Henrik recounted the process of trying to institutionalize environmental engagements within the Danish People’s Church; a process that had eventually led to the establishment of Green Church in the Council, and *outside* the Church. Since Henrik had completed his Ph.D. on environmental ethics at the Faculty of Theology at Aarhus University in 1996 and had taken up a position as parish priest in Central Jutland, he had become increasingly impatient with the Danish Church in terms of engaging with the environmental agenda. He had been pursuing different ways of doing within the scope of his position as a pastor, but he wished for more collective, institutionalized efforts similar to those that had been undertaken in the Norwegian church. Then, in 2003, he recounts how he read about a Danish priest – Ruth van Gilse - who had participated in a cruise in the North Sea with other religious leaders and representatives from European protestant and orthodox churches. They had gathered to discuss the need to protect the increasingly damaged marine environment of the sea. According to a short news article in the Danish Christian Daily,<sup>67</sup> which I believe must be the one, Henrik had read back then, the cruise had resulted in the signing of a collective declaration, the ‘Geiranger declaration on responsible stewardship’ (Nordsøseminaret 2003). This declaration, signed by 40 representatives from various national churches in Northern Europe, phrased the environmental problems in Christian terms – much like those Green Church eventually formed around - and declared both a responsibility for and an intention to engage with the ecological problems in practical as well as religious terms:

The ecological problem is not simply economical and technological, but also deeply spiritual and moral. In gathering, we recognize the urgent need to unite in responsible stewardship to protect the complex ecosystem of the North Sea, and thereby to sustain the development of life and culture along its coasts. In a world whose finite resources are subject to ever-increasing demands, we are reminded of the virtue of self-restraint, an essential element for human fulfilment. Our

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<sup>67</sup> Vincent, Claus. 2003. “Kirker vil redde Nordsøen.” *Kristeligt Dagblad*, June 30, 2003. <https://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/danmark/kirker-vil-redde-nords%C3%B8en>.

God-given human responsibility is to care for creation, sharing and not simply exploiting its resources (Genesis 2:15). (Nordsøseminaret 2003)

The North Sea Sail, which the cruise was called, was organized by the Church of Norway's Council on Ecumenical and International Relations on the initiative of the ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Archbishop Bartholomew - "the Green Patriarch", as his nickname goes.

As part of his exposition of the interaction between environmentalism and religiosity in Norway, historian of religion Tarjei Rønnow (2011), describes how this cruise did not only gather representative from European churches, but also people from "the worlds of business, management, science, and the environmental movement", including two Norwegian cabinet ministers (Rønnow 2011, 45). While Rønnow perceives the content of the declaration, and the mix of actors participating in the North Sea Sail as "an affirmation of the degree to which [the Norwegian] Church is accepted as an important partner in environmental campaigns" (ibid.), the Danish news coverage of the Geiranger declaration was, however, mostly concerned with the participation of the Danish pastor van Gilse, and in which capacity she had signed the declaration. The cruise took place in the context of the quinquennial Conference of European Churches (KEK)<sup>68</sup> and van Gilse had taken part in this as a representative of a council in the Danish People's Church, dedicated to inter-church dialogue (The Council on International Relations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (*Det Mellemkirkelige Råd*)). According to the reporting journalist for the Christian Daily, it had caused a bit of stir in KEK that the Danish pastor had signed the declaration, because the Danish Church is known in "those circles" for being rather reluctant towards joining anything (Vincent 2003). Hence, in the article, van Gilse gives a brief comment, stating that she, of course, has made everyone aware that she *did not sign the declaration as a representative of anything* – including the Danish Church - but solely as 'herself'. This comment, it seems, is not only directed to "those circles" but also to those Danish readers who would have been stopped in their tracks if they had learned that a Danish pastor had signed such a declaration on behalf of the Danish Church.

The fact that it was perceived as controversial that a Danish pastor signed the declaration says something about how the Danish Church was expected to (not) engage in issues that are not considered purely religious – as we learned about in the previous chapter. It was, at the time, not only surprising, but also quite unthinkable that a representative of the Church would make statements about environmentalism. This differed from the situation in Norway, where it

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<sup>68</sup> KEK er et fællesskab af 114 protestantiske, ortodokse, anglikanske og gammel-katolske kirker i Europa. Konferencens formål er at fremme kirkens enhed og at præsentere et fælles kristent vidnesbyrd til Europas mennesker og institutioner. I Danmark er Baptistkirken, Metodistkirken og folkekirken medlemmer af KEK. Danske Kirkers Råd er associeret organisation i forhold til KEK. Folkekirkens mellemkirkelige Råd varetager folkekirkens kontakt til KEK.

was, as a starter, the Church of Norway who had hosted the event, and, secondly where church actors were welcomed as an actor in environmental activism. Rønnow (2011) cites a passage from the coverage of the Geiranger declaration in one of Norway's largest national newspapers, in which the Church is warmly welcomed as an actor that was perceived to be able to establish legitimacy around the issue of climate change. The church, Rønnow writes, "seems to have been given the role as mediator between the hard facts of science and the routines and activities of everyday life, as a provider of moral justification" (ibid.66). Rønnow furthermore states that the environmental engagement of the Church of Norway in the early 2000s "points to important changes in the way the Church views its role in current Norwegian society, as a provider of cultural values, rather than a safekeeper of a sacred tradition" (ibid. 66). Hence, in Norway, according to Rønnow's analysis, the church entered into the arena of environmental politics and was welcomed. Judging from my own interlocutors mentioning of the Church of Norway, the role of the church remains the same in Norway: to contribute to green transitioning as a *moral* authority.

When compared with the Norwegian coverage of the same event, the tone of Danish receptions were a lot cooler (even mocking ()), revealing an at the time widespread skepticism toward Christian incursions into the political sphere. When one bishop for example was asked about why the Danish Church had not been officially represented on the North Sea Sail, he responded:

Bishop: It might have something to do with the fact that the Danish Church does not have a stance on environmental issues

Journalist: Why is it that you do not have that when other Nordic countries do?

Bishop: Among other things this is due to the fact that no one can speak on behalf of the Church on political matters. In the other Nordic countries, the bishops or the synod (krikerådet) can produce a collective, political statement, in the orthodox church the Patriarch can do so, and so on. (...) But in Denmark we have a tradition that dictates that the Church as an institution does not engage in politics. Our main task is to preach the Gospel. [author's translation]

Despite such comments, Henrik had contacted the pastor who had (not) represented the Danish Church in the North Sea, and together they put climate on the agenda of The Council on International Relations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark [*Det Mellemkirkelige Råd*]. However, Henrik explains that after a rather short period, certain right-wing politicians noticed what was going on and indirectly disrupted it.

When the members of the Council realized that this went on, it turned political. Because the The Council on International Relations is financed by the Danish Parliament. This means that DF [*The Danish People's Party*] had a lot of influence. And DF hates and has always hated everything having to do with... They were climate deniers, right? Green Church was one of the worst things they could imagine. Therefore the then general secretary of the council assessed that it was politically problematic that we were inside the Church.

Besides presumably being 'climate deniers' this was also the heyday of *Tidehverv's* representation in parliament, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Hence anything that smelled like Christian charity work in the Church caught their disapproving attention.<sup>69</sup> Henrik explained that the foreperson found that the initiative taken by Henrik and van Gilse better be taken elsewhere. After this institutional exodus, the initiative was adopted by the ecumenical Council of Churches, where it remains anchored today. This, however, does not mean that it is not present within the Church, as most of those Christian churches that have formally become 'green churches' belong to the Danish Church. And during my fieldwork, more than half of the members of the working-group were pastors in the Church. Here they had to navigate – as described in the previous chapter – never becoming political in the wrong way.

Some members of the networks found this balancing act quite perplexing. During my fieldwork, I for example participated in Green Church's annual conference; a conference that gathered around 70 representatives from various local Green Church-working groups in parishes around the country, including pastors, gardeners, parish council members and volunteers around the theme "Church, Climate and Social Justice". After the chairperson of the Green Church working group had opened the conference with a presentation of the current and most recent projects and initiatives in the network, a slim, middle-aged man stood up, indicating by raising his hand that he had something to say: "Do you ever discuss whether you should take an approach just a tad more aggressive? We are, obviously, speaking from a perspective of eternity, but perhaps we have to run a bit faster, nonetheless? Or yell a bit louder? Never have I met so gentle a bunch of activists!" *Gentle activists*, that was his verdict. And he evidently did not mean this as a compliment. One member of the working group took it upon him to answer, and he said that it was in fact a very intentional strategy to be 'gentle': "When we do not wish to be a political party it is not because we do not dare," he said, "but because we ought to be *as the Church is*".

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<sup>69</sup> Other news coverage from the years 2003-2004 relays how politicians who were also associated with Tidehverv argued for closing the Council of International Relations – see Vincents, Claus. n.d. "Fortsat uenighed om mellemkirkeligt råd." *Kristeligt Dagblad*. Accessed June 18, 2024. <https://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/kirke-tro/fortsat-uenighed-om-mellemkirkeligt-rd>.

What he meant by “as the Church is” in this context can only be deciphered by reading between the lines. What we learned about the fine line around the core of Christianity is one helpful resource to draw on, but there is more to it than that. It also has to do with the organizational principles of being a church for the people – a well-ordered anarchy – where no one may rule over others, and everyone are supposed to be equal. More on this in the next section, where I take us back to where this thesis began, namely to the ten bishops who in 2020 offended against such principles.

## 10 Bishops = 10 Green Grocers

When the bishops dared to air their opinion on how they thought the Church’s should support the national reduction goals in 2020, they were (as recounted earlier) met by fierce criticism grounded in what amounts to a kind of organizational principle, namely that ‘what ten bishops say in chorus is equal to that of ten green grocers’. That is, no one is in the position to speak on behalf of the Church, which ought to remain a decentralized, non-hierarchical organization. During my fieldwork, I heard the peculiar form of organization that the Church takes being described in various ways: a ‘well-ordered anarchy’ (*et velordnet anarki*); ‘the shapeless Church’ (*den konturløse kirke*) implying an open and unbounded entity; a church that ‘has five million faces – at least’ (referring to the approximate number of Danish citizens); ‘a byzantine labyrinth’ (*en byzantisk labyrint*) referring to the difficulties of figuring out who holds authority and/or responsibility on specific issues; and, poetically, that ‘it is the parish that breathes life into the Church’. These nicknames underline, among other things, how the Danish People’s Church has a strong tradition of being ruled locally and ‘from below’; that it is the Church members – today approximately 71% of the Danish population - and the parish councils that make up the Church rather than the clergy, the State, or any other single authority (J. Rasmussen 2021). They emphasize that decision-making is decentralized, hinting at an egalitarian, or at least anti-hierarchical, ethos (as also argued by Iversen 2019). That is, bishops are no more important than greengrocers – and moreover, what they think of the national 70% reduction goal does not represent the rest of the Church’s members.

There are theological reasons for the emphasis on the Church being a decentralized, non-hierarchical organization. The Danish Church is an Evangelical-Lutheran Church, and it builds on the Lutheran idea of ‘universal priesthood’ (Iversen et al. 1996; Iversen 2019). Luther is often quoted by church actors for stating that “anyone who comes crawling out of baptism has been consecrated as priest and bishop”. All (baptised) individuals are equally sinful, equally redeemed,



and equally submitted to God's rule<sup>70</sup>. Within the Danish Church the clergy therefore hold intellectual authority within certain domains, but they are not elevated over other individual believers, and they hold no formal power over them (ibid.). Priests are understood – emphatically – as *serv*ing the congregation while the bishops have an *administrative* and *overseeing* position. Neither are positions of rule or positions from which coercive power can be enacted.

When the ten bishops made a statement about how they thought the Church should support the reduction goal set by the national government and were met by the view that ‘a choir of 10 bishops equals that of 10 greengrocers’ (as referred to in the beginning of this thesis), the critique was informed by this Lutheran take on egalitarianism as a guiding principle for church organization. The opinion of bishops matters as much as anyone else's within the Church when it comes to what the Church ought to do. This is something that surprises many native Danes, as bishops seem quite authoritative when they appear in public in their beautifully adorned clothing, often posing in front of Denmark's most impressive cathedrals. One bishop even himself expressed surprise about his position when he was interviewed on Danish Public Radio about the issue of power distribution in the Church (Danish Broadcasting Corporation 2020). He said that when he made the shift from being the executive director of a large, private organisation to becoming a bishop, he had to accommodate to a new perception of what it meant to be the head of an organization. If one understands authority and influence to be based on power over resources, he said, the bishops must be seen to hold very little of that. Many people are surprised to learn, he said, that bishops have, in fact, “very little money to back any initiatives that they would like to see realized”. A maximum of 1% of the monetary resources obtained through church taxes within a diocese are redirected to the Diocesan Council. In another context during my fieldwork, I overheard the chairman of the National Association of Parish Councils say that the Church follows “the good old principle of letting the people who make the most important decisions on behalf of an organisation be in control of the distribution of resources”. And in the Church, he said, that ought to be the lay members. It is, indeed, the *People's Church*, not the clergy's.

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<sup>70</sup> It is this kind of conception of human-divine relationships that have made anthropologists who study societies that have recently converted to Christianity take note of “the individualizing force of Protestantism” (Bialecki et al 2008:1147). According to a early review of the anthropology of Christianity, ethnographic accounts of societies that, prior to converting to Christianity were characterized by a relational social imaginary, show that Christian conversion “shifts the primary locus of obligation away from lateral social bonds among consociates toward dyadic bonds between an individual and a divine alter” (ibid.). This extrication of the individual from the collective by way of positioning it in a constitutive, hierarchical relationship with God also implies that in the realm of humans, equality is emphasized over hierarchy. This might be conceived of as a kind of egalitarian ethos in so far as it paves the way for a critique of the assertion of (human) power: “The subordination of human relationships and obligations to divine authority [...] serves not only to individualize the Christian subject, but to empower him or her to challenge existing social hierarchies by emphasizing the equality of all people before God” (ibid. 1148).

However, it is not only the theologically informed egalitarian principle of universal priesthood that is alluded to when people argue for preserving the decentralized organization of the Church. The egalitarian imagination also has another, albeit related, source: much more often it is evoked with reference to the values of ‘spaciousness’ (*rummelighed*) and ‘religious freedom’ (*trosfrihed*). If one wants to understand why it has been considered controversial to address climate change as a churchly matter, the values of spaciousness and religious freedom are worth interrogating, as they are defining for the manoeuvre room for church actors in matters of political and national interests. There is in this vision of the Church organisation an emphasis on the combination of individual freedom and collective commitment, heterogeneity and unity, of freedom within the bounds. Below I scrutinize some cultural understandings embedded in values of spaciousness and religious freedom and the organizational ethos they form for the Church. This exposition serves the purpose of exploring what underpins the statement that ‘ten bishops are equal to ten greengrocers’ and why it seemed so impossible for the Church to commit to something like the national reduction goals in 2020. What underpins it, I argue, is a certain valuing of egalitarianism and of difference, both captured by the term spaciousness.

### **A Church of and for the People**

The People’s Church was established in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which was a period marked by religious awakenings in Denmark. At the time, Denmark had a number of different church communities who, although all adhered to Lutheran Evangelicalism, were in conflict with each other over key theological issues, such as the conditions for baptism and salvation, the morality of worldly life, spiritual gifts, piety, and the authority of bishops (Holm 2012). In the processes of crafting the first constitutional act and writing into it the establishment of a national church that would not be the Crown’s but the people’s, there was little agreement on what such a national church should look like (Christensen 2012). How it should be constituted in terms of its theological freedom and breadth, how authority should be ascribed and distributed, and what its relation to the state should be, were all up for dispute (Holm 2012). For 200 years Denmark had a state church governed by an absolute sovereign, the Danish monarch – who, among other things, had considered the Church as part of the country’s Enlightenment strategy (Korsgaard 2014) as well as of its bureaucratic infrastructure (Nielsen 2014). The Reformation in Denmark, which was effectively achieved in 1536, had meant dethroning the Catholic bishops and installing the monarch as the sovereign over the kingdom of Denmark as well as over the Church as an institution (Rubow 2011b). In the period of absolute monarchy the State and the Church were in fact so closely tied that if a citizen insisted on leaving the Church, he would lose his rights as a citizen (S. Andersen et

al. 2012). With the replacement of the absolutist constitution with a democratic one in 1849 – one that entailed religious freedom and citizen rights – the old state church had to be replaced by a new kind of church, a church for the People, not of the Crown (ibid.).

According to church historian Anders Holm, the debate around the constitution of such a new, national church for the people was dominated by three positions: 1) Some argued for a state church that would be solely governed and regulated by the – now democratically constituted – state; 2) others argued for a synod, which meant that the church would have an internal, governing organ made up of clergy (and, potentially, lay) representatives; and finally, 3) the now famous priest and poet NFS Grundtvig argued for a ‘People’s Church’, in which there would be no central governing organ. This, Grundtvig argued, would allow for doctrinal variation between and within the local congregations, who would not be forced to comply with a narrow interpretation of ‘official Christendom’ (a phrase he borrowed from the philosopher and critic of institutionalized faith, Søren Kierkegaard<sup>71</sup> (Holm 2012)) that was defined and handed to them from a central governing organ, be that the bishops or the state. Only in this way, Grundtvig argued, could the ideal of spiritual and religious freedom be practiced – an ideal that he as a Lutheran and as a child of the European democratic revolutions of his time cherished deeply (Vind 2015). Furthermore, according to Grundtvig, the more inclusive the Church could be in terms of enrolling already existing Christian communities into it – despite their differences – the more it would represent ‘the people’, which Grundtvig valued as much as he valued individual freedom (ibid.). To be truly Christian, for Grundtvig, meant that one had freely made one’s choice to have faith in God; thus, only by being free to choose could Danes become true Christians. So rather than having a centrally governed church in which a synod decided on a narrow delineation of the proper theology and practice, the church ought to have religious freedom within itself. Grundtvig imagined a People’s Church that would be ruled locally, not by the clergy or the state, but by the people: a church that would be ‘spacious’ enough for there to be freedom for each individual member and congregation to practice their Christian faith as they saw best. This would furthermore ensure that the various Christianities practiced within Denmark could all fit within the church, and thus not establish themselves as denominations separate from the National Church.

### **Making and Taking Room**

In Danish the term ‘*rummelig*’ is used to describe the physical dimensions of material spaces but it can also be used figuratively to describe a desirable social attitude and sociality in which there is

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<sup>71</sup> A surprising alliance between otherwise deeply antagonistic theologians of the time <https://www.yumpu.com/da/document/read/31588744/kirkeordning-og-kirkeforstaelse-grundtvig>

‘made room for everyone’ (Anderson 2003), as well as to describe the virtue of being able to ‘accommodate’ (*rumme*) others. “Rummelighed”, which can be directly, albeit clumsily, translated into ‘spaciousness’, is in this use a normative term that denotes a cultural value (Robbins 2018) pertaining to social behaviour as well as attitude. More often than being described as simply being spacious, the Church is described as *valuing* spaciousness (Dylander 2023). It is thus a normative ideal – a value to hold and strive for in both principle and practice. It is associated with terms such as ‘inclusivity’ and ‘tolerance’. In the Church’s self-understanding, ‘spaciousness’ is a key value that captures its desire to be broadly inclusive (Rubow and Engdahl-Hansen 2015, 74) – broad in terms of type and class of people, as well as of political conviction and theological variation. It is tied to the constitutional – and Lutheran - principle of *trosfrihed*, which can be translated into ‘religious freedom’, but which is more accurately prescribing the ‘freedom to believe’ (whatever one wants). There is broad consensus that these values ought to define the organizational foundation of a church that is supposed to be the Church for the entire Danish people. That the Danish Church is called the *Folkekirke*, which is a compound noun consisting of ‘people’ and ‘church’, is meant to highlight that the Danish Church is not just a Lutheran Evangelical Church, it is also the Church of the Danish People (Hall, Korsgaard, and Pedersen 2015), and, importantly, not of the Danish State (Dabelsteen 2012).

The principles of spaciousness and religious freedom have underpinned the organization of the Church since it was established, and they are widely understood to be just as relevant – if not more so – today. In the document that expressed the newly elected government’s vision for Danish society in 2022, for example, it was stated that:

Denmark is a Christian country, and the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church holds a special status as the People’s Church. The government will sustain this special status. We want a church for the people that is based on freedom [*frihed*], equality [*lighed*] and spaciousness [*rummelighed*]. At the same time, it is crucial for the government that there must be freedom to believe in what one wants, as long as it is done with full respect for the right of others to do the same.

While church actors argued that this could be taken to mean many different things – and therefore potentially nothing (Dylander and Lützen Ank 2022) - there was (and is) agreement about how these values imply that no one should have to submit to a very narrow theological doctrine or a political ideology within the Danish Church, but that there should ‘be room for’ (*være plads til*) each member or congregation to form their own opinions and beliefs - albeit within the bounds of the broad tradition of Lutheran Evangelicalism and the specific creeds and confessions that the Church builds on (Gade 2022).

The value of spaciousness figures in other anthropological studies in Denmark (Krøijer and Sjørsløv 2011; Anderson 2003; Bruun 2011), and often in concert with the value of social equality (Bruun, Jakobsen, and Krøijer 2011). In her study of Danish children's participation in sports associations, for example, Sally Anderson (2003) notes the emphasis put on 'making room for everyone' and how this entails both an intention to include children of different classes and temperaments in the activities, *and* an intention to prevent individual children from taking up too much space – physically as well as socially – as this would entail taking space from others (*ibid.*). To practice spaciousness in this context means to limit oneself for the sake of making room for others. It is at once an ideal of inclusivity and difference *and* of downplaying what might 'stick out' and take up space. Here the literal sense of the word 'spacious' plays into the figurative as social space is thought of as having boundaries and being limited in much the same way as a physical space (Krøijer and Sjørsløv 2011).<sup>72</sup>

To evoke spaciousness as a value can be used to demand a right to take up part of a space, on the one hand, and to demand of others that they take up less space, on the other hand. It can be used as an argument for difference and inclusion *and* against 'sticking out' too much. Hence, in spaciousness lies both the value of the right to be different, to *autonomy* (Krøijer and Sjørsløv 2011), and the value of an inclusive, *egalitarian* sociality, in which it is implied that there are limits to one's autonomy (Anderson 2003). This points to an inherent tension in the value of 'spaciousness': the ideal of having the right to differ is integrated with the ideal of an inclusive sociality, in which room should be made for everyone – although no one should therefore take up *too much* of the space. Hence, spaciousness implies making room for difference, by not letting anyone dominate – this, as we will see has consequences for how a 'spacious' church can set goals in regard to climate change.

The case of egalitarianism in the Danish church - bound as it is with the value of spaciousness - also seems to be a bit different from what Marianne Gullestad (1991) suggests is a specific Scandinavian idea about equality, that is 'equality as sameness'<sup>73</sup>. According to the value of

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<sup>72</sup> In Stine Krøijer's work (2011) on a particular group of youth activists in Copenhagen, spaciousness is also evoked in this double sense. In the early 2000s, the youth activists (popularly known as 'The Autonomous') fought to retain a building provided by the municipality in which for more than a decade they had been experimenting with alternative forms of sociality, norms and activities. When the municipality decided to sell the house and evict the youth, they took to the streets to protect what they understood to be under threat, namely the 'diversity' and 'spaciousness' of the city and of Danish society more generally (*ibid.*). There should 'be room', they exclaimed, in society and in the city for different types of sociality. As the demonstrations escalated and turned violent the youth activists, whose fight for spaciousness had otherwise met support from the general public, were critiqued for taking up space in the city in an inappropriate manner (*ibid.*). They themselves, it was argued, showed the opposite of spaciousness as they prevented the livelihoods of others.

<sup>73</sup> Krøijer and Anderson's ethnography nuances the otherwise dominant analytical framework for understanding Scandinavian sociality, namely that of 'Scandinavian egalitarianism' as it was famously coined by Norwegian

spaciousness in the Danish Church, equality seems to be about avoiding making things – people and beliefs – the same. It is a resistance towards being (forced into) being too much alike<sup>74</sup>. *Actually*, equality and freedom seem to be *confirmed* when disagreement is allowed to arise, as this is a sign of religious freedom, which again is a sign of no one in the Church being able to dominate others (for such a view see Høgh 2023). Hence, equality is preserved as differences are evoked and accepted. An example may serve:

In the late summer of 2022, the Church was at the centre of critical attention concerning different interpretations of spaciousness. This year marked the tenth anniversary of the institutionalization of same-sex marriage in the Danish People’s Church. However, some saw this anniversary as an occasion to demand that the Church would go even further in terms of giving same-sex couples possibilities for church weddings (Wejse 2022). As it is today, couples have the right to be married in any church that is part of the People’s Church, but individual priests can – if it is against their personal faith – decline to conduct the ceremony and appoint another priest. In 2022, 10 years after this directive was implemented, critics argued that priests within the Church should not be able to decline to marry same-sex couples. The Church should be “spacious”, they argued (*ibid.*), and allow for love between people of all kinds. But interestingly, it is argued from other actors within the Church, it is exactly in the name of ‘spaciousness’ and of one’s freedom of religion, that priests should be free to hold their own convictions about the matter (for such a view see Hansen 2022). To argue for the exclusion of such religious views would actually make the Church *less* spacious, as it would demand a kind of sameness that compromises the right and freedom to think and believe differently (*ibid.*). Within the liberal Grundtvigian tradition, a spacious Church leaves room for non-tolerant individual believers and is spacious precisely because of it. Hence, spaciousness in this case can be evoked as a value in both arguments *for* the acceptance of same-sex marriage in the Church (‘the Church cannot exclude anyone but must accommodate love in all its many forms’) and *against* it (‘there should be room for differing perceptions of Lutheran

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anthropologist Marianne Gullestad. In the early 1990s, Gullestad (1991) formulated what can be considered a ‘gatekeeping’ concept for the anthropology of Scandinavia (Bruun, Jakobsen, og Krøijer 2011), namely ‘equality as sameness’ (Gullestad 1991). The gist of Gullestad’s argument is that in Scandinavian countries equality is conceived less as equal opportunity or equal freedom, than as the quality of being ‘alike’ (*ibid.*). The equality that Scandinavian cultures value and practice is based on a culture of ‘avoiding difference’ and ‘stressing similarities’, Gullestad argues. This is a specific conception of equality based on an imagination of homogeneity; ‘equality as sameness’, as she states. She contrasts this with the American version of equality which, according to her, implies ‘equal opportunity (i.e. to become different)’ (*ibid.* 4).

<sup>74</sup> Cecilie Rubow (2000) makes a similar observation, as she suggests that the Church cannot be included in the observation made by other ethnographers of Denmark, who argue that Danes generally seek to maintain an illusion of a homogenous society. Although the Church institution is organized by way of laws that establish some sort of homogeneity across the parishes, Rubow also takes note of a general perception and recognition of heterogeneity as what marks the Church landscape (*ibid.*16).

Evangelicalism within the Church – including the perception that marriage is only between individuals of opposite genders’.)

To return to the question that this chapter sheds light on, namely what happened as a carbon logic travelled into the Danish Church, what this preceding exposition of the organizational values of spaciousness, egalitarianism and religious freedom is meant to clarify is how such values were implicitly as well as explicitly used in the service of rejecting the kind of engagement with climate change that the bishops suggested on behalf of the Church. When the Church was encouraged from several sides to support - as a unity – the national reduction goals, the rejection of doing so was posed as a critique of what church actors understood as an attempt to streamline the Church and eradicating the freedom of its members. To be spacious and to protect the freedom of Church members entail that each congregation can respond to the climate crisis in whatever way they themselves find the most suitable. This solution, however, was not completely satisfying to the newly elected government in 2020, who had been elected on – among other things – promises of an ambitious climate strategy. As I will describe in the next section, political pressure was put on the Church to develop collective responses to the climate crisis if it wanted to avoid governmental interference.

## The State and its Power(s)

In January 2020 – a few days after the bishops’ statement - the left-wing political party Alternativet proposed the passing of a new law that would oblige the Church to lease its land exclusively to organic farming or reforestation projects. Each parish owns significant tracts of land, which the parish councils often decide to lease to local farmers to earn money for church activities. The proposition made by Alternativet entailed that the Parliament, being the supreme legislative body of Danish society, would regulate this matter, restricting the parish councils to making use of their land exclusively in the abovementioned ways. This proposition evoked as much of an outcry as the suggestion made by the bishops, as it was understood to violate the principle of keeping a healthy distance between the State and the Church. As one bishop stated in an interview in the Christian Daily: ‘Even if it is a good idea that the land is farmed organically, it should be something that the local parishes decide themselves. It shouldn’t be forced on them from the national government’ (Hein 2021). In other words: it may very well be that church actors agree with the goal of politicians, but they do not agree with the method. If the State begins to legislate on the basis of political interests, this will compromise both the spaciousness and the religious freedom of the Church’s members (as discussed in the previous chapter).

However, while the idea of the State enforcing such a law on the Church caused controversy, it was not, as such, unconstitutional. Parliament *can* pass laws that apply to the Church (Christoffersen 2012) - and has done so in the past for example in regards to same-sex marriage as discussed earlier. But how it may do so – and whether it should – is a source of ongoing debate, as is the very nature of the relationship between the State and the Church. It has in many ways been Grundtvig’s vision of a spacious church for the people that has come to dominate the organizational ethos of the national church, but no one can really be said to have won the constitutional battle as it has, in fact, never come to an end (Holm 2012). In the Constitution of 1849, it is stated that “the constitution for the Danish People’s Church should be decided by law”. This is known as a promissory clause (løfteparagraf), which at the time of writing indicated that an agreement on the shape of such a constitution had not yet been reached (Holm 2012). The paragraph, however, is still there, unchanged and exhibiting that - even if most Danish citizens are unaware of it - the relationship between the Church and the State remains principled (albeit not formally) unresolved (Christoffersen 2012).

The unresolved nature of this relationship creates a space for much disagreement about the scope of the State’s political and legislative command over Church matters and what an appropriate use of it is (Christoffersen et al. 2012). While the Danish Constitution secures religious freedom, there are limits to what aspects of religious life can be regulated politically. This includes those things that fall within the ‘inner issues’ (*indre anliggende*) of a religious community (Ministeriet for Ligestilling og Kirke 2012), such as the details of religious doctrines and liturgies. In short, those things that pertain to the religious content of the religion. Such issues are bounded off from what is called the ‘external issues’ of a religious community, which is everything related to how a religious community is organized and managed. Such matters – economy, estate, and so on – fall within the domain of national law. While this separation is relatively clear in the case of most other religious communities, it is a different matter with the Danish Church. This is because what is ‘inner’ to the Church is, in fact, not completely outside the influence of the legislative power of Parliament (Ministeriet for Ligestilling og Kirke 2012) – not even if the distinction is continually evoked to suggest so in the context of Church politics. In a memorandum from the Ministry of Ecclesiastical affairs on how the terms apply to the Danish Church, it is stated that:

In current law, no distinction is made between the internal and external affairs of the Danish People’s Church. It must be understood that it is generally assumed that the internal affairs of the Church are not exempt from the competence of the legislative power. The Church’s highest decision-making bodies are made up of Parliament and the Government. (Ministeriet for Ligestilling og Kirke 2012)



It is furthermore explained that, as there is no central governing organ within the Church, it is de facto the government and the parliament that are the highest governing organs in the Church.

When the Danish Constitution was crafted in 1849, the Church was supposed to have its own governing organ but, as neither politicians nor church actors could agree on how such an organ should be constituted, the abovementioned promissory clause was inserted in the interim. That it is the State that functions as the highest governing organ for the Church is thus by default, rather than because of a decision. But although this is the formal arrangement, the disagreements around who ought to be able to make decisions on behalf of the Church are still as vigorous as they were in 1849, and the mandate of the State to govern is not accepted uncritically. The unresolved nature of the Church's constitution creates much disagreement about the scope of the State's political and legislative command over Church matters and what an appropriate use of it is (Christoffersen m.fl. 2012).<sup>75</sup>

In place of principled clarity on the question of how far 'in' to the Church the State ought to reach, a particular *tradition* of governance – or rather, non-governance – has been established, my interlocutors would tell me. In other words, generally speaking, the State simply does not assert itself. In an official ministerial memorandum, the State's reticence to legislate on Church matters is defined as a 'constitutional custom' (*forfatnings sædvane*). During the period of my fieldwork the then Social Democratic Minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs explicitly referred to this tradition in connection with a controversy around whether the Church should allow congregations to discriminate against female pastors:

Personally, I have no doubts about my opinion on that: one should not discriminate on the basis of gender. But to say that in interviews or other places where I am asked to respond to the matter as the Minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs... Normally, of course, a minister would try to establish a political

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<sup>75</sup> To complicate matters further, the Constitution and the Danish Laws, when taken together, dictate that the legislative power may not be put to use in ways that compromise the Evangelical Lutheran creeds forming the confessional foundation of the Danish Church. This means that while the Church's 'inner issues' can be regulated by the State, the State can do so only in accordance with that 'inner' entity itself. What is inner and outer to the Church, sacred and profane, is thus thoroughly mixed up. When a congregation takes a position – for example, that it will not appoint a female pastor – it can be argued that such a conviction falls under the category of 'inner issues' because it has to do with beliefs held by the congregation. This is why the Church (and other acknowledged religious communities) are exempt from the Equal Opportunities Act. But when actors – bishops among them – argue that the dispensation ought to be withdrawn for the Church, they base it on the assertion that a male-only pastor law cannot be theologically justified (even if some minority groups within the Church think it can), and hence should fall within the 'outer issues' of the Church (Folkekirken.dk 2022). This makes the employment of priests (who are paid by the State) an 'external issue' as well, since it places it within the domain of national law. The same distinction between inner and external issues was evoked and negotiated in the case of same-sex marriage: is it about civil rights or the religious constitution of the 'inner' Church? Thus, how far 'in' Church matters the State ought to reach with its legislative power is continually disputed.

mandate to legislate based on his or her political opinion about a matter. But not in regard to the Church. Here you ought to respect the tradition of making decisions based on dialogue and in collaboration with one another. In keeping with tradition, it is to a high degree the Church itself that must take the necessary steps forward. (Danish Broadcasting Corporation 2022)

The point is that the Minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs does not decide very much, even if she or he has the legislative power. The Minister is expected to listen to the various church actors and to enter into dialogue with them about the issues that concern them – but she should intervene only on the initiative of the Church itself. Hence, while Parliament can, in principle, make quite far-reaching decisions on behalf of the Church, it does not do so due to a certain ‘tradition’ of respecting the religious freedom within the Church, as well as its sovereignty – even though this sovereignty, as we learned from the controversy around the bishops, cannot be pinned to any particular position within the Church.

That the Church is in principle, but not in practice, governed by the State safeguards the decentralization and egalitarianism within the Church, as it entails that no one within the Church can claim coercive power. In other words, it is, we might say, *because* the Church is a (kind of) state Church, that it can remain egalitarian. In Denmark the State is, one might say, the guardian angel of egalitarianism – not only between individuals, as God and Luther have it, but also institutionally, since no Christian clique or faction can overrule another. If the Church was ‘freed’ from the state, it would have to establish its own governing organ – a synod, for example. In such a constellation – which has been realized in other countries, for example Sweden – one runs the risk, my interlocutors would say, of losing that cherished spaciousness and religious freedom.

Above I have sketched out some of the values embedded in the Church as an organisation and placed them in the sociopolitical landscape of early 2020, when establishing carbon emission reduction goals was a national concern. Below I trace what happened in the Church after the controversies in early 2020 had receded, while the pressure on the Church to respond to the issue of climate change increased.

### **Animating the Well-Ordered Anarchy from Above**

It seems that the argument of ‘ten bishops equals ten greengrocers’ could have been what put an end to both controversies – the one spurred by the bishops and the other by Alternativet. The Church could have avoided involvement in the climate agenda and the nightmare of conceiving of a process for how to act without forcing any single parish, member, or pastor to submit to anyone else. But here the State suddenly raised its head. It would not leave the Church be. Although

Alternativet's proposition was rejected by politicians and church actors alike, it was interpreted by the people I met in the Church as a looming threat. Following the processing of the proposition in Parliament, the then minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs put pressure on the Church to develop collective solutions if it wanted to avoid governmental interference. This was not a pressure communicated to the public, but one that, according to my interlocutors in the Church, took place in various meetings between the minister and the different church organisations throughout 2020. As one representative from the National Association of Parish Councils said to me when I interviewed him about the matter, the minister – as well as other politicians – were “putting feelers out in the Church” to know whether church actors intended to do something about the matter themselves or if regulative interventions would become necessary. This interpretation of the situation was shared by most church actors I spoke to: the political system would stay out of the matter, on the condition that the Church figured out its own way of doing *something*. This was the State displaying its mandate to govern.

This threat evoked two interrelated nightmares for the Church: namely that of state intervention, of manifesting a hierarchy between the State and the Church, *and* that of the establishment of an internal hierarchy and authority to mobilize the Church as a unity. Hence, the threat of law evoked a kind of catch-22 for the Church: to keep their independence from the State *and* protect the ideal of spaciousness by keeping internal leaders at bay, the members of the Church had to act as a collective body, a unity. The problem the Church was confronting, then, was how it could possibly respond to climate change as *the* Church, showing itself to be a responsible societal actor, if no one was authorised to articulate a position on its behalf. As we see in the next section, a response on behalf of the entire Church was formulated and institutionalized in late 2021 – even if the controversies in 2020 made it seem as though such a response was an institutional impossibility. This response hinged on the methods of carbon footprinting.

## The Green Transition of the People's Church

The threat of state intervention stirred the oceans of the People's Church during my fieldwork and led to the announcement in late 2021 of an official response to climate change from the Church. This took the form of a collaboration between the collegium of bishops, the National Association of Parish Councils, and the Association of Deans, who together launched the project “The Green Transition of the People's Church” (*Folkekirkenes Grønne Omstilling* – from here on FGO). This project - and the collaboration behind it - was based on a programme in the form of a 12-page document stating that the Church as a “unified organization” would pursue its commitment to

contributing to “the green transitioning of society” (FGO 2021). The project was planned to run for four years, from 2021 to 2025, and its concrete goals were that by 2025 all parishes and deaneries would have formulated their own local ‘green’ strategies; that tools, guides and inspirational materials had been developed for the parishes and deaneries to use in the realization of such strategies; that regulations hindering or delaying sustainable initiatives would be adjusted; and that a mapping of the Church’s overall carbon footprint had been undertaken at the beginning to form a baseline so that, when it was remapped at the end of the project period, the results of the work could be measured.

It is the last goal that I will be particularly concerned with. Because seeing that FGO did not, in fact, have a mandate to make anyone within the Church do anything, it seems that the success of the project relied on these measurements and the reductions they would – hopefully – display. Although all relevant church actors – lay and clergy – were carefully represented in the programme’s steering board through their democratically elected representative bodies (to ensure that it was neither one nor the other who spoke on behalf of anyone), the project was not given a mandate to make any decisions on behalf of the Church or the individual parishes. Its mandate was simply to gather and disseminate knowledge, to inspire, and to document the actions those it sought to inspire had undertaken. According to John, who has an MSc in Nature and Forest Management and was employed to manage the project in late 2021, the project was something akin to a ‘nudging campaign’. We can disseminate information, motivate and inspire, he said to me when I interviewed him in early 2022, but we cannot force anyone to do anything. This was an important basis for forming the collaboration in the first place: initiative, action, and funds ought to come from below. And, paradoxically, that the project was not argued for within an explicit Christian register such as the initiatives taken by Green Church. I will have occasion to return to this later in the chapter.

The Church’s official approach to green transitioning was thus not to make specific reduction goals and carve out a clear path for how to reach them. Rather, what it could do was make a ‘nudging campaign’ that consisted of disseminating information to the parishes and deaneries, and then hope that on their own initiative they would take measures that contributed to the green transitioning of society. The strategy was thus in line with what the Church has always kept to: that of decentralized decision-making. This, at least, was the intended *internal* effect of FGO’s approach. The communication strategy of the project was from the outset very careful to communicate that it was established to support initiatives taken from the local level of the Church. But the project was supposed to signal something altogether different to the outside: namely that the Church as a “unified organisation” (FGO 2021) was taking responsibility for its green transitioning. This was indeed what the State had demanded of it. But how, one may justifiably ask,

can dissemination of information about possible measures that is already available to the public qualify as taking responsibility for green transitioning?

This is where carbon numbers enter the stage as a key actor. Because this, it seemed, all relied on FGO's ability to document that things were in fact being done in the Church that were positively contributing to the national project of reducing Denmark's carbon emissions. In the next section we examine how carbon numbers came to organize the response of the Church to climate change, and how carbon numbers may in turn have organized the Church in a particular way.

### **A Technology of Distance**

FGO's programme document states that the project was informed by an "acknowledgment of the fact that the legitimacy of the People's Church in the context of national debates about green transitioning depends on the Church's ability to document and make visible local progress and results by way of joint statistics, knowledge and communication" (FGO 2021). One important goal for the project was therefore to make the Church's contribution to achieving the national reduction goals visible in not only qualitative terms but also in quantitative ones. As an energy consultant specializing in church buildings said to me at the beginning of my fieldwork, local initiatives to reduce energy use had been undertaken for many years in parishes and deaneries, but knowledge about such efforts was not archived anywhere; hence it was unknown to both the public and the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs. Such initiatives could not represent the Church as a whole, and that was, it seems, what Parliament was asking it to do. To account for the Church's overall reductions in carbon emissions would, however, show the responsibility taken by the Church as a unified organization. A big chunk of the 18,7m DKK allocated for the project was therefore devoted to commissioning a complete mapping of the Church's carbon footprint, and to developing methods for the continuous monitoring of emissions. Such monitoring could show the improvements that local church actors had taken on their own initiative. The project management could 'nudge' them to take such initiatives, and by measuring and monitoring carbon emissions, they could confirm that their nudging campaign (or other factors) influenced the Church to take responsibility for contributing to the 'green transitioning of society' (ibid.). And much was, as we have learned, at stake in being able to document such an act of taking responsibility.

Like in much corporate carbon accounting (Lippert 2011), the role of carbon footprint calculations seems to be twofold here: on the one hand, they enable the Church to trace and document reductions and, on the other hand, they communicate responsibility on behalf of the Church. These two functions of employing carbon footprint calculations in the Church's response to climate change were laid out to me by an energetic and charismatic dean in Eastern

Jutland – someone who can be considered a pioneer in counting carbon in the Church. While many parishes and churches have had their energy consumption calculated and assessed in terms of kWh and amounts of fuel for their heating systems, by 2020 carbon had not yet been employed as a measuring stick. But in the Spring of 2020 a comprehensive carbon footprint mapping was carried by this dean – the first of its kind in the Church context.

I interviewed the dean, Søren, a few months after the project was completed and a report had been launched. Søren explained how he had initially formed the idea of performing the mapping when he heard one of the bishops explaining what the bishop collegium had meant when it stated that the Church ought to contribute to the government’s reduction goals:

So I am there, right, taking a look at those bishops when they have to answer questions: ‘Well, then, how do you plan to do this?’ This moves us immediately into the empirical. You are pushed into having to deal with some numbers. You must consider some practical, concrete categories. And that immediately challenges the bishop. He is standing there, in front of Roskilde Cathedral on TV and he says something like ‘Hmm ... Well... I guess we can't very well isolate that... There are some issues with the architecture. And with cultural heritage perspectives...’ So he stands there and actually becomes a bit meek. How can we actually do this? And that is, then, what I bring down here to where I’m sitting. Because I’m positioned somewhere else. I am positioned where the Church operates. (author’s translation)

To Søren the bishops seemed like they were simply “voicing good, but abstract intentions” that had no bearing on any facts. Søren wanted to bring the issue of climate change mitigation from the sphere of opinions and intentions to that of actions and practices. He wanted to take up the challenge of figuring out the pragmatics of how a reduction of carbon emissions could be achieved. What would have to be done? What were the facts? The job of a dean, he said to me, is about managing the practicalities of church life – of taking action, not simply airing opinions. He thought the bishops were far removed from reality and he wanted to prove that the Church – on a local, operational level – was genuinely able to do what the bishops could only dream of.

The first step in achieving this seemed to Søren to be to account for the current level of emissions; to create a baseline and to create indicators of where it made the most sense to direct one’s attention and efforts. Data was needed, he told me, for the efforts in the Church to be efficient – “we have to know what we are doing”. But he also described at some length – and in the genre of a thrilling story – how he gathered a group of passionate people in his deanery to develop the project; how they invited church employers and employees – parish council members, gardeners, church tenders – for a big dinner (“you must not underestimate the importance of a well set table”,

as he said to me) and on a veritable “road trip” to various parishes in the deanery to discuss the issue and bring everyone on board.

And then, about two-thirds into our interview, a fundamental shift took place in our conversation. From narrating the project's timeline, ambitions, and manoeuvres, he suddenly told me that this entire story that he has been telling me is, in fact, the one he told all the people in his deanery as a tool to engage them in the green agenda. He said that he, in fact, understood his own role as dean primarily as that of a ‘storyteller’ – someone who could interpret what was going on and make sense of what courses of action should be taken and why. To make use of numbers and facts, he said, establishes legitimacy around the stories one tells and hence contributes to engaging people in them. He had therefore carefully and continuously narrated the project based on a plot that cast the deanery in its entirety and the individuals partaking in the project as ‘frontrunners’ in the Church’s green transitioning. It was a motivational story, a rhetorical trick, a sleight of hand. And this was the case not only with the story, but with the whole carbon mapping ambition as well. The numbers were produced to do what the bishops were incapable of: establish legitimacy around disparate and individual greening efforts made within the Church, to show that the Church as an entity was serious. The carbon footprint project was a strategic device meant to engage and organize people toward a common goal. On the one hand, it derived its legitimacy by drawing on what Søren referred to as ‘science’. On the other hand, it motivated people by way of its narrative of the visionary deanery.

In our interview, Søren seemed to provide me with two logical strands pertaining to carbon footprinting. First, he showed how the Church could operate and not just ‘express intentions’, arguing that knowing the facts and basing one’s strategies upon them is superior to ‘just talking’. Carbon footprinting equals qualified action. In the second part, he turned this idea of fact-based ‘operationalizability’ – this ability to know and act rather than simply think and dream – into a device that could engage people. To refer to the project as based on facts helps to establish it as sound and serious. To frame the project as such is a way of mobilizing people to act. Suddenly the carbon mapping project seemed to be *the alibi* for engaging people passionately in the green transitioning. Hence, the ambitious project of undertaking a carbon mapping project was not (only) the practical means of achieving carbon reductions, but also a means of engaging people in the climate issue. Søren had engaged his colleagues and parishioners in a project he found important, not by telling them (only) that it is important, but by positioning him and them in a relationship to the Church's top officials, who purportedly do the talking but not the walking. The deanery was configured as a frontrunner by way of presenting parishioners’ efforts as a case of working from the facts.

Søren's sudden turn in our interview exhibits a theory about numbers in the form of carbon footprints as something that can be used strategically as acts of communication. What Søren let me in on was that numbers do not signify only what they purport to represent – in this case, the amount of carbon emissions; they also signify responsibility and genuine action. He contrasted the use of measurements and numbers against the mere expression of good intentions that he saw the bishops expressing. In the theory of numbers presented by Søren, numbers are 'performative' (Lippert 2016): they enact environmental engagement simply by being evoked.

The deanery's report - which he called "a story supported by numbers" - became a key reference point for people who were in one way or the other engaged in climate change mitigation within the Church. The deanery's project is mentioned several times in the documents and correspondence that led to the establishment of FGO<sup>76</sup>. John, the FGO project manager, had a similar take on the purpose of displaying carbon footprint in the Church's mitigation efforts (although he did not exactly say that they served as a 'rhetorical trick'). It was vital, he said, that the project was able to show results that could be measured quantitatively and not just qualitatively – that they 'could be nailed to the church door' (a Danish saying that implies a statement is the truth and can be defended as such). Being the largest civil organization, what the Church did and what it was guided by in its mitigation efforts should be 'transparent and sound'.

This perception of the function of numbers can be described by what Theodore Porter has called 'mechanical objectivity' (T. M. Porter 1995). Answering his own question of why numbers have become such an authoritative and convincing device in science as well as in neoliberal government, Porter argues that it is because they purport to produce objectivity (ibid.). To produce, collect and display numbers, he writes, is based on strict, mechanical rule-following and is thus supposedly freed from subjective interpretation: "It implies personal restraint. It means following the rules. Rules are a check on subjectivity: they should make it impossible for personal biases or preferences to affect the outcome of an investigation." (ibid. 4). Porter argues that mechanical objectivity has a powerful appeal to the public as it establishes a sense of accountability. Numbers can be trusted as, in contrast to politicians – or even scientists – they are disinterested (). When John says that the Church's reduction efforts need to be framed in a manner that shows their results to be indisputable and trustworthy, it is based on a perception of numbers as conveying facts that are objective. It is by displaying indisputable results that the Church can show that it is more than talk, as he and Søren agree. The numbers, then, serve as more than simply displaying supposedly objective facts about the world: they also communicate that the Church takes its

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<sup>76</sup> I obtained all the documents and e-mail correspondences that had involved the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs.



responsibility to the State and the public seriously. The appeal to mechanical objectivity serves the purpose of satisfying the State so that it will keep a proper distance to the Church.

Porter's suggestion to think of numbers as 'a technology of distance' (1995) takes on a quite literal meaning here: FGO can be said to use (carbon) numbers as a way of keeping the State at bay. According to Porter, numbers are such powerful communicative devices because they can be used to communicate across distance and differences (ibid. ix), This is due to the "strict rules" for collecting them and the way they convey results in "a familiar, standardized form", which makes it possible for someone who was not present to understand what went on (ibid.). As such, numbers can function as a shared language between distant, communicating parties. This implies, Porter argues, that a reliance on numbers minimizes the need for personal knowledge and trust (ibid.). Numbers are therefore not only a technology of distance in the sense that they overcome distance, it is also because they by working across distances can upkeep them (ie. the communicating parties do not have to become more intimate in order to understand and trust each other).

Recognizing numbers as simultaneously overcoming and retaining distance, one might say that the production of carbon numbers in the Church simultaneously creates a desired distance between the State and the Church, *and* the necessary proximity between them to make the Church accountable in the eyes of the State. The numbers bring the dispersed climate action of the Church close enough for the State to 'see' it and trust that the Church will take responsibility on its own, rendering state intervention unnecessary. Hence, in the context of the Danish Church, the idea of numbers as a 'technology of distance' can be used to describe how the Church deploys numbers as a way of keeping the State at a distance. However, something more is implied by Porter's suggestion to think of numbers as a technology of distance, namely the way numbers create distance to what they enumerate (T. M. Porter 1995, ix). In the next section I will attend to how this aspect of numbers as a strategy of *external* communication was also important for the Church in its grapplings with the *internal* problem of acting like a unity without in fact wanting to be one.

### **Divided by Faith, Unified in Numbers**

What I provided in the above section was something like an account of the analyses of the function of carbon numbers that people in my field express. Here I add an additional analysis of the effect of introducing carbon footprinting into the Church. Because carbon footprinting also did something else, which was, one might say, a prerequisite for the presentation of the Church as a responsible societal actor: accounting for the Church's carbon footprint cast the Church as one. The Church can, in fact, be said to leave *one* footprint - even if it does not have one voice. Hence,

while carbon footprinting serves the double purpose of creating legitimacy and motivation, on the one hand, and of holding the State at bay on the other, it does so by achieving what is otherwise impossible: it represents the Church as a single entity.

This is the subject of this last part of my exposition of what role the prospect of carbon footprinting played in the Danish Church response to climate change in the years 2020-2022. In the section above, I described how John and Søren agree that scientific measurements are important for the Church, because numbers are perceived to be devoid of subjective interpretations and indicative of a sound and operationalizable approach to climate change mitigation. This was important to communicate to the State as evidence that the Church was a responsible actor in the green transitioning of society. In many ways this seems like a typical case of accountability being used as a means of neoliberal governance to prevent state regulation, corporations (or, indeed, churches) present themselves as self-motivated, responsible, and accountable actors in the green transition (Lippert 2016). But what is remarkable about the case of the Danish Church is that there is, in fact, *no one to really hold accountable*. Or at least, this is the state of affairs that the Church has been eager to protect: that no one can make decisions on behalf of the entire Church, and no one can be responsible for everything that goes on within it. The presentation of a carbon footprint, however, does seem to render the Church as an entity that can be held responsible. The footprint passed, in other words, as a speaker on behalf of the entire Church – something that no person, office, or law was supposed to be able to accomplish. Hence, it is worth attending more carefully to what was taking place when the use of carbon numbers presented itself as a way for the Church to represent itself as a responsible actor. How come carbon numbers were internally accepted as a way of aggregating and representing the Church? As we have learned, other ways of attempting to enroll the Church as an actor in Denmark's green transition had been unsuccessful, spurring accusations of 'moralizing' and 'politicizing' the Church (as discussed in Chapter 2) and of compromising the 'religious freedom' and 'spaciousness' of the Church. The answer, I suggest, has to do with the way numbers gloss over particularities and purport to be free of interpretation and value (Porter 1995).

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the most dominant actor working with green transitioning in Danish church contexts in 2020, was Green Church (*Grøn Kirke*). In my interview with John, he referred to Green Church as FGO's predecessor of sorts. He called them 'rubber boot theologians', casting them as frontrunners, yet also, perhaps, of too radical a kind to ever become mainstream. "You know, the rubber boot biologists of the 1970s were also those types who wore certain sweaters and smoked 'funny tobacco'," as he put it. As we learned in the last chapter, Green Church's approach was – and still is – theologically based. The working group

behind the Green Church frame their initiatives in a Christian vocabulary of ‘stewardship’ and ‘care for Creation’, rendering the climate crisis as not only a technological and economic crisis, but a moral and spiritual one. According to John and other people I spoke to – including Green Church members themselves – this approach was the reason that by 2021 the Green Church had never managed to attract more than 10% of the parishes making up the Danish Church since its establishment in 2009. The abovementioned values of ‘spaciousness’, combined with a widespread reluctance towards any kind of self-justification, caused many parish councils to reject the Green Church approach, deeming it – as discussed earlier – to be politicizing and moralizing.

The success of FGO, John asserted, therefore depended on the *avoidance* of theology. “It might seem paradoxical,” he said, “given that we are talking about the Church”. But once something becomes a theological matter within the Church, he went on, conflicting interpretations proliferate, things begin to go around in circles, and nothing can ever be decided upon. Hence, theology is conspicuously absent from FGOs programme (FGO 2021). As I was granted access to public records by the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs pertaining to the project and its establishment, I could read through several versions of the programme and trace how, as the project developed, less and less references to Christianity were made. Hence, in the first version of FGOs programme description, the programme listed five focus areas out of which one was titled ‘Meaning’ (*mening*)<sup>77</sup> and held arguments about how Christianity deems ‘nature to be valuable in itself’ and that humans are supposed to be ‘good stewards’. However, in a later version, this focus area had been renamed to ‘Motivation and Inspiration’ and, finally, on the website it is called ‘Inspiration and Co-Creation’<sup>78</sup> and makes no reference of Christianity at all. Rather, the Church is described as Denmark’s largest civil organization, who collaborate with municipalities and other local actors around concrete projects, and whose members are “ambassadors for the green transition in local communities” (“Om Folkekirkens Grønne Omstilling” 2024). When I asked an official about this change (in a short interview over the phone) he said that the whole Church was supposed to be able to identify with the project, and as there are theological variations within the Church, those things that might spur disagreements had been toned down. You can perhaps imagine the exasperated responses Green Church representatives offered to me, as I discussed this act of purification with them. The Green Church secretary sighed and exclaimed “Come on! The Church is so much more than a civil organization and heat pumps!”. According to her, theology was in fact the *only thing* that legitimated a response from the Church to climate change seeing that

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<sup>77</sup> The others were: Energy reductions, transport, recycling and consumption.

<sup>78</sup> “Om Folkekirkens Grønne Omstilling”. 2024. Folkekirkensgroenneomstilling.dk. 12. juni 2024. <https://folkekirkensgroenneomstilling.dk/om-folkekirkens-groenne-omstilling/om-fgo>.

there are so many other organizations that are far ahead in terms of gathering and disseminating knowledge about how to reduce the climate impact of organizations. The bishop, Peter, who was, in fact both a member of the Green Church working group and of FGO's steering board, made an ironic remark about how, whenever he would speak about the climate agenda with the other bishops, they would agree that it is an important problem to tackle, but that they – in Peter's paraphrasing - would then say to him: "But could we please keep it to being about organic coffee, heat insulation and windmills, and institutional responsibility. Do we need the theology?" Peter said that he would then respond to them "What are you saying? That you do prefer to be free of theology? That's interesting! I think we should divulge that to the Christian Daily: the bishops would like to dispense with theology!" I think, by now, we understand the positions of each of the parties involved: to speak about churchly engagements with climate change within a Christian register is controversial and divides church actors. Hence, the way FGO has been phrased as a thoroughly pragmatic and scientifically based project that deals with things that one can 'make univocal conclusions about', as John said, implies that church actors supposedly can gather around to support it without all their internal differences getting in the way. FGO can evoke a collective motivation *towards* something, John said, making it possible to actually get things done.

I suggest that Porter's argument about numbers as a technology of distance (1995) can also be used to shed light on the function carbon numbers had *internally* in the Church. While numbers could serve as a way of inserting distance between the State and the Church, Porter also writes about the distance between numbers and the reality they serve to represent. The bridging of distance that numbers enable, Porter argues, hinges on a creation of another kind of distance, namely *a distance between the numbers themselves and that which they enumerate*. Numbers bridge the distance between communicating parties by way of being one step removed from the concrete, particular reality that they are devised to describe. Very few numbers and quantitative expressions pretend to provide complete and accurate descriptions of the world, but rather conveniently summarize complex relations (ibid. ix). Hence, besides working across and thus retaining a distance between communicating parties, numbers can also be said to create distance in the sense that they gloss over the particularities of the things counted (see also Espeland 1997; Dalsgaard 2013; Lippert 2018). So, while the representation of the world through numbers may produce *proximity* in terms of enabling knowledge to travel across distance, it also creates distance, in that "it erases the local, the personal, and the particular" (Espeland 1997, 1107). As Espeland states, referring to Porter, "standardizing calculations make the characteristics of those creating and manipulating the numbers less salient, inserting distance between the numbers and their users" (ibid.1108).

If there are (theological and political) disagreements around whether, how, and on what basis the Church should perform a green transitioning, these differences do not interfere with the production and presentation of carbon footprints. Numbers about carbon emissions are perceived to be sufficiently distant from the intentions and interpretations of people (i.e. carbon emission reduction numbers do not in themselves express the intentions and opinions of the individual parishes) to not be threatening the individual parishes' right to have their own opinion. It is not only the mechanical objectivity that numbers purport to embody that serves the Church's purposes, but also the way numbers can conceal as much as they can reveal.

In a Danish Church context, the use of numbers perceived and presented in this way is clever, because any occasion for moral, theological, and political interpretation will make differences appear and conflicts arise, as John describes. The Church is not supposed to agree with itself, and there should always be room for different perspectives, different interpretations. Carbon numbers circumvent this resistance towards unanimity as they do not, in fact, reveal anything about the opinions or motivation of the people in the parish councils who are supposed to produce the numbers - those whose practices are causing the emissions in the first place. It is method that renders green transitioning a thoroughly organizational and technical problem, not a moral or theological one. Hence, each parish can count their carbon emissions for different reasons – with or without an attention of reducing them, but the communicative strategy of providing a carbon footprint of the entire church is not compromised by such internal differences. Carbon numbers conceal a great deal about what goes on in the Church in terms of taking responsibility for the green transitioning. But they do signal that the Church is attending to its emissions.

On the one hand, this can be said to be the purpose: the Church ought to show itself as a unified actor, and the carbon numbers should, as a first step, establish it as a responsible one. Numbers, in other words, makes the Church *one* and *responsible* in the same move. But what has not yet been touched upon in the Church or by FGO is what happens when the Church's emissions come on full display for everyone to see. I will end this chapter with a small speculation on what might happen when the carbon footprint is measured and displayed to the public.

## An Accountable Church?

In the late summer of 2023, a map of Denmark was displayed on national television showing the size of the territory that the diocesan authorities have the right to reject windmills in. The dioceses have, as discussed earlier (Chapter 1), special rights and responsibilities to reject windmills near church buildings in the rural landscape of Denmark because of their role as protectors of the

national cultural heritage. Since this special right came to the public's attention in 2022 (Bahn 2022), there has been much controversy around it. It was opponents of the right who went public with the map, knowing it would spark an outcry against the special status of the Church. The visualization showed that if all churches protested against nearby windmills, it would be close to impossible to realize the transition to wind energy that much of the Danish climate mitigation strategy is based on. In addition, many of the churches are located on the west coast of Denmark – the windiest region in the country. The map was shown and debated on prime-time national television and the role of the Church in the green transition (again) became the object of public dispute.

The case displayed that the public is not indifferent to the position of the Church in the green transition (as discussed in Chapter 1) – and that the Church can be held accountable for its conduct in the matter. It also showed that the public's interest in the position of the Church grew exponentially when data about it became publicly available. To be accounted for, or indeed, to account for oneself publicly invites the gazes of others who might conduct a critical examination. This fact informed one dean's reflections on the method of carbon footprinting when I interviewed him about the newly established FGO: what would come after it, he asked? The mapping might have been enough to calm the waters and avoid state intervention, but knowledge sometimes produces new commitments and new responsibilities, he said. "It is all very well with simply stating abstract goals of reductions, and displaying it by way of carbon footprints, he added, but we all know that, if the hoped-for reductions do not show themselves, we enter a new stage: finding someone to hold accountable", he said with a grave look upon his face.

As Judith Butler points out, 'accountability' has a double meaning: it refers to both what it is possible for a subject to be 'held responsible for' and to how a subject can make itself 'intelligible' (2005). According to Butler, accountable subjects come into being through a relation to an Other who demands of them that they make themselves intelligible in moral terms. The Other's question about who you are, Butler writes, requires that you provide an account of yourself that is comprehensible to the Other. The account must therefore take a form that is not the subject's alone, but that is recognizable to the Other. Hence, the way in which a subject can make itself known to an Other – and thus emerge as a morally accountable subject – is grounded in a 'shared horizon of intelligibility' (ibid.) that determines which moral questions can be formulated and which moral judgments can be made. As a subject has to provide an account of itself, it is the

‘shared horizon of intelligibility’ that determines the moral codes that the subject can be judged in relation to - what it can be successfully held accountable for<sup>79</sup>.

Carbon emission numbers is the kind of language that the National Danish Government itself employs as a means to be held accountable for the changes – the reductions – it itself has promised the population to achieve. Even if the Church does not commit to any specific reduction goals - such as for example the national goals - when it provides an account of itself by way of carbon emission numbers, such goals might nonetheless be implicated in that very method itself. By making itself intelligible to the State (and to the public) as a unified, responsible actor in the very same language of the State itself, it engages in the kind of moral subjectivation that Butler outlines: it provides an account of itself within a shared horizon of intelligibility, constituted by certain moral codes – in this case pertaining to carbon emission reductions. That is, by accounting for itself in a language that the State recognizes, namely that of carbon footprint calculations, the Church opens itself up to the moral evaluation inherent to the method itself<sup>80</sup>. The carbon footprint map may turn out not only to represent the Church’s emissions, but also incite demands on what those emission will be in the future.

Writing about financial reporting and auditing, Keith Hoskin (1996) defines the practice of accountability as something that “engages the self insistently” (ibid.265), because it demands that one not only describes past performances and present circumstances, but also bases one’s choices on future potentials (ibid.). While it may have provided the Church with a bit of internal peace to let itself be held accountable for only its aggregated carbon emission reductions, this type of accountability practice tends to have deeper effects in the long run, Hoskins argue. Accountability practices tend to both display responsibility for actions taken, as well as shaping what actions can and will be taken at all (see Strathern 2000 for a similar point about auditing). It conflates what *is*, with what *ought* to be, as Hoskin write (Hoskins 1996, 270).

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<sup>79</sup> I am aware that Butler is speaking about human-subjects and not organizations. However, I find that Butler’s image of how a subject that could potentially become many different versions of itself is called forth as a singular subject as it is asked to give an account of itself. In the same way I suggest that the Church which is in fact multiple in the sense of being made up of many different parishes and positions is called forth as a singular entity as it suggests to account for itself by a single carbon footprint.

<sup>80</sup> While I do not pursue this here, the idea of the Church accounting for its carbon emissions in order to show itself to be a climate responsible actor and implicitly state that it intends to improve itself, has an air of *confession* about it. At least if we take confession to imply an act of examining oneself in front of a moral authority in order to make this authority accept what one is offering as a sign of a desire to improve – ultimately with the goal of being forgiven/redeemed. The carbon footprint seems indeed to be a way of exhibiting - as a first step - all the things that the Church has not done so well (emitting lots of carbon), and as a second step, to display an intention to improve. This, at least, can seem to be the case if the accounting is not meant to carve out a specific goal but simply be a baseline to be compared with in the future - where the Church has hopefully – according to its own aspirations - done better.

Hence, while this remains speculative the calculation of the Church's as well of the parishes carbon footprints may very well turn out to organize the Church more than it has perhaps hoped for: the (carbon) account it provides of itself, may in fact make demands on who that self becomes.

## Conclusion: Preserving Status Quo

This chapter has shown how carbon footprint calculations was used in the Danish Church's efforts to both communicate environmental responsibility and to protect "the well-ordered anarchy" of the Church, i.e. its decentralized organizational structure, heterogeneity in terms of (Christian) beliefs and political convictions, as well as its independence of the State. As a way of accounting for itself, carbon footprints render the Church as a unified actor that takes responsibility in the green transition but without, in fact, claiming anything about who or what the Church is, what it believes, and/or what it does to mitigate climate change. While it is perhaps unsurprising that numbers could serve as "a technology of distance" in terms of keeping the State (and the public) at bay – this is, one might say, ESG reporting in a nutshell - a more surprising function is this, that the numbers also served as a technology of distance in terms of keeping theology and the church organization apart. As I have shown in this chapter, carbon footprint calculations was chosen as a preferred method, so as to prevent theological discussions and conflicts to arrive around the issue of climate change. By way of the numbers, the church could present itself as a unified actor, despite the internal rifts and disagreements over whether or not the issue of climate change should at all be a matter of concern for the Church. I also argue that a specific act of purification had to take place in order for the Church to engage with the climate issue, namely an act of defining climate change as what in the Church's own terminology can be called an "outer issue". That is, an issue that does not have anything to do with theological, doctrinal, or liturgical concerns, but is a purely organizational issue. Only by deeming it to be such a matter, could the Church retain its spaciousness and not remain caught in the debates around whether a churchly engagement with climate change entailed politization or moralization.

An additional and much less intended effect of the carbon footprint is that when it presents the Church as a unity (in order to keep the State at bay), such a footprint might also in fact enact such a unity and render it accountable and, indeed, governable. As a first step, the numbers are meant to be a method of representation, but they may also produce what they represent in a certain way: a governable Church-entity. Indeed, when FGO finally launched their carbon footprint map in early 2024 (after my fieldwork had come to an end), the editor of the



influential media Kirke.dk, wrote that the map had prospects that might make “more anarchistically inclined parish councils sit uncomfortably in their chairs” (Gade 2024a). Because the carbon footprint is not only a novel way of representing the Church in terms of it representing it by way of carbon, it is also novel in the way it provides an overview of the Church and offers (at least potentially) detailed information about each of the parishes. Such a detailed – and even accessible – map of the Church has never existed before. Such a mapping of the parishes' consumption “down to the smallest microscopic detail” as the editor wrote, “opens up entirely new possibilities for many other economic management and saving measures than those purely climate-related.” The anarchistically inclined parish councils will, perhaps, ask themselves: what comes next? Hence, as a first step, carbon footprint calculations may serve to preserve the much cherished, internal “well-ordered anarchy” of the Church, but in the longer run, I hypothesize, it may also threaten it as giving an account of oneself (Butler 2005) tend to not only have communicative effects but also affect the one doing the accounting. To account for itself — by way of a carbon footprint might show not only to produce the illusion of a Church as a unity – an illusion that serves the purpose of keeping the State at bay and of protecting internal heterogeneity - but also move it in the direction of becoming so.

By way of interrogating the carbon monitoring project in the Danish Church, this chapter has shown how such a discourse came to play a pivotal role in enabling the Church to protect some of its founding values, namely the Danish versions of religious freedom and inclusivity, captured by the terms *trosfrihed* (“freedom in faith”) and *rummelighed* (“spaciousness”). The method of carbon footprint measurement offered the Church a way of communicating accountability, without having to hold any one actor or entity accountable. The carbon footprint renders the Church as a unified societal actor without, in fact, claiming anything about who or what the Church is, what it believes, and/or what it does to mitigate climate change. Hence, carbon accounting serves to protect ‘the well-ordered anarchy’ of the Church: its decentralized organizational structure, its heterogeneity in terms of (Christian) beliefs and political convictions, and its independence of the State.

## Chapter 4 The Church without Organ(s)

1. Built on the Rock the Church shall stand  
even when steeples are falling,  
Crumbled have spires in ev'ry land;  
bells still are chiming and calling,  
calling the young and old to rest,  
but above all the soul distressed,  
longing for rest everlasting.

2. Surely in temples made with hands  
God, the Most High, is not dwelling;  
high above earth his temple stands,  
all earthly temples excelling.  
Yet he who dwells in heav'n above  
chooses to live with us in love,  
making our bodies his temple.

3. We are God's house of living stones,  
built for his own habitation.  
He through baptismal grace us owns  
heirs of his wondrous salvation.  
Were we but two his name to tell,  
yet he would deign with us to dwell  
with all his grace and his favor.

N. F. S Grundtvig, 1836

Translator: Carl Döving

In this chapter, I focus on how the climate crisis brings the materiality of Danish church life to the fore. Specifically, I explore how church actors are brought to foreground and problematize *the material underpinnings of church life* as climate change mitigation is approached as a matter of counting and cutting carbon emissions. As delineated in the previous chapter, the Church's carbon footprint was in the public eye during my fieldwork period. Even if the Church did not adopt the National

Government's goal of reducing emissions with 70% by 2030, the bishops' announcement in 2020 entailed that accounting for carbon emissions would become one of the dominant ways in which church actors engaged with climate change. The carbon footprint-report issued by the Favrskov deanery in 2021 not only came to function as a model for the national approach to green transitioning, but it also had more local effects, as many deaneries from then on "wanted their own Favrskov report".

This was reported to me by the energy consultant Alex, whose energy consultancy firm specializes in providing assessments of energy consumption in churches. When I interviewed him in late 2022, he said that since the bishops' announcement - and especially since Favrskov translated it into the concrete method of performing carbon footprint calculations - parishes and deaneries had become increasingly concerned with having their own carbon emissions calculated. Alex's company had even had to hire additional employees to keep up with all the tasks they were being commissioned by parish councils and deaneries, he told me.

In this chapter, I attend to the effects of introducing carbon footprint calculations as an instrument in church actors' evaluation of church practices. I explore how the general idea of carbon as a dimension of *all* objects and activities influences the way church actors relate to and evaluate the material things around them. What happens, I ask, when the idea of being possible to assess objects and actions in terms of their carbon emissions take hold of church actors in their projects of green transitioning? What imaginative work does this kind of measurement do? This question has been pursued by other scholars in other – and very different contexts, and I will briefly touch upon that, before returning us to church life.

### **A Metric of the Human**

Geographer Gavin Bridge (2011) has suggested that carbon has become "a common denominator for thinking about the organization of social life in relation to the environment" (ibid.821). As a technique, carbon calculation has made it possible to measure not only *that* but also *how much* human activities affect the planet-altering processes (Whittington 2016). Jerome Whittington's apt description of carbon as a 'metric of the human' (ibid.) captures how carbon can be used as a quantitative tool for calculating and evaluating human practices. According to Whittington, the assumption undergirding carbon emission quantification is that carbon can come to be seen as a key dimension of all mundane human activities (p.51). Such quantification, Whittington argues, codifies human activity as a problem and as a site of intervention (ibid.). Hence, rather than being simply a technical term, political scientists Lövbrand and Stripple (2011) suggest that carbon accounting "has given rise to particular ways of 'seeing' and 'knowing' the climate" that makes it

governable in particular ways. Drawing on Miller and Rose's concept of governance as 'a problematizing activity', Paterson and Stripple (2010) argue that carbon accounting practices that operate on the level of the individual can be conceived of as 'problematizations' of individual conduct, implying that such practices bring individual behaviour to the fore as something that can be governed and intervened in (ibid. 346). As a form of governance, then, carbon accounting participates in subject formation as it becomes a lens through which the subject can evaluate and discipline itself so as to become a climate-responsible actor (Lövstrand and Stripple 2011). As such, carbon accounting can be understood to work as a form of governmentality, producing 'the carbon-calculating individual' (Bridge 2010), or, what Anders Blok (2011) describes as 'homo carbonomicus'.

Inspired by this way of looking at carbon as something that makes people 'see' climate change and their own place in it in a particular way, in this chapter I interrogate what happens as church actors begin to see and evaluate the materiality of church life through the lens of carbon. Particularly, I pursue the implications of the idea that carbon emissions can be seen as a dimension of all objects and human activities and that this problematizes and codifies such activities and objects as sites of intervention (Whittington 2016).

As scholar-activist Larry Lohmann (2009) writes, there is a wide span in conceptualizations of carbon in discourses around climate change, ranging from carbon trading schemes, scientific theories of climate change and state discourses on reduction goals to consumer awareness of individual carbon footprints. In everyday discourse, however, the term 'carbon', as Dalsgaard (2013) writes, is often used as "a catchall for all the different forms of chemical compounds and greenhouse gas emissions" (ibid.83). And this is also what 'carbon' refers to in this chapter: it is a shorthand for the carbon dioxide emitted as a waste product of the combustion of fossil fuels, because this is the general idea of 'carbon dioxide emissions' (*CO<sub>2</sub>-udledning*) that my interlocutors articulated. To most of them, the technical and political mechanisms of accounting for carbon have been 'blackboxed' (MacKenzie 2005), which means that they do not know the details of how such calculations are made, or whether it is, in fact, possible to perform them accurately.<sup>81</sup> Rather, they have become aware in a general sense that different objects and activities

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<sup>81</sup> It is, in fact, highly disputable whether it is possible to accurately account for the climate impact of products or actions (Lippert 2015). In fact, as Lohmann argues, the better acquainted people become with the actual practices of carbon accounting, the less plausible they seem (Lohmann 2009, p529). However, the very idea of this being possible seems to be influencing consumers, businesses, states and public institutions to try to 'do the math' and act carbon-responsibly (e.g. Berners-Lee 2010). This was indeed also the case among many church actors as also discussed in the previous chapter. The energy consultants performing the calculations in the churches were less certain, and by 2023 when I last spoke to the project manager of FGO he exclaimed - exasperated - that he had found out that most carbon footprint calculations were close to being 'humbug'! It was very little one could say with certainty, and hence, very little

emit a certain amount of carbon dioxide, and they use this as a yardstick for evaluating how little or how much the thing or practice contributes to the climate crisis. As you will see on the coming pages, it was not – at least at the time of my fieldwork – so much about knowing the exact carbon numbers, but rather about knowing proportions and about reducing carbon emissions where possible, whether or not one could learn about the precise effect. Hence, the focus of this chapter is the effects of *the very idea* that things and actions can be evaluated by way of a carbon yardstick – a kind of carbon imagination - and not whether it is correct or not. It is, as such, the social life of carbon I delve into.

However, whereas the abovementioned critical carbon literature explores how carbon accounting participates in subject formation (Bridge 2011; Paterson and Stripple 2010; Blok 2011) and why this approach to climate change can be seen as problematic (Lohmann 2009)<sup>82</sup> my focus in this chapter is on what happens as this kind of carbon imagination is adopted in a particular sociocultural context, which happens to be a religious one. As in the previous chapter, I take my cue from the suggestion to see carbon as an empirical phenomenon that can come to carry various meanings and functions in different contexts (Dalsgaard et al. forthcoming). In the previous chapter I explored how carbon accounting came to play a specific role in Church-State relations in Denmark and for the Church as an organization. In this chapter I explore how focusing on reducing carbon emissions influences church actors in their assessment of church objects and activities.

## Protestant Materiality and its Problems

In the introduction to this thesis I suggested that the climate crisis can be understood as an infrastructural breakdown (Star 1999). By that I meant that the climate crisis foregrounds the material underpinnings of contemporary human ways of life, both by foregrounding just how much the human species depends on the rest of the planet and its inhabitants, as well as by making people aware of how all the most mundane things they do are inextricably connected with the global climate. To begin to see the world in terms of carbon, I suggest, is one form an infrastructural inversion following such a breakdown may take. When church actors begin to assess carbon

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FGO would eventually be able to say. Unfortunately pursuing this ‘date moment’ and its loss of innocence in the Church must wait for another occasion.

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<sup>82</sup> Several critical scholars have argued that focusing on individual carbon footprints is a distraction away from the sites where real change needs to happen. As Lohmann (2008) writes: “It conceptualizes global warming primarily through complex calculations of guilt over individual ‘carbon footprints’ rather than, for example, the study of international oil politics or the history of social movements that have achieved structural change of the magnitude required to alleviate global warming” (363). I agree with such critiques, even if I do not raise them explicitly in this thesis.

emissions stemming from church practices as part of their effort to perform a green transition, the material dimensions of such practices are foregrounded. I am particularly interested in this awareness in the Church, because of the way material things are not *supposed to matter* in a Protestant Church, where immaterial faith is stressed as the only prerequisite for Christian worship and salvation. Anthropologists have highlighted how Christianity – especially Protestant forms of it – has an ambivalent relationship to the material (Keane 2007; M. E. Engelke 2007; Opas and Haapalainen 2017; Bielo 2018; Reinhardt 2016). According to James Bielo (2018) this ambivalence goes to the root of Protestantism, as one the main areas of contention between the established Catholic Church and the Reformers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was the role of material mediation in spiritual life (p.370). The break with Catholicism was based partly on iconoclastic critiques of the Catholic investment (and speculation) in material things and infrastructures. Reformers such as Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, and - to a lesser degree – Henrik Luther denied any presence of the divine in the material (Keane 2007:x). The Reformers challenged “the performative spiritual efficacy of church images, sacraments, and devotional relics” (Bielo 2018, 370) and their devaluation of materiality became what Bielo calls “a Protestant cultural inheritance” (ibid.). Matthew Engelke (2007) offers a contemporary ethnographic example of such a Protestant rejection of materiality in his account of a particular apostolic congregation in Zimbabwe that goes as far as to reject the Bible due to its materiality. The Friday Masowe, Engelke writes, strive to have a ‘live and direct faith’ that must not be hindered or distorted by anything material (ibid.). All materiality must be considered ‘barriers to faith’, they assert, including the Bible (ibid.). This entails, for example, that the congregation does not meet in a church building, but outdoors.

However, although Protestantism might be built on a devaluation of religious materiality, a downright rejection of materiality is complicated by the fact that mediation is also necessary for Christians (M. E. Engelke 2007; Birgit Meyer 2011). Engelke (2007) suggests that Christianity is – in all its various versions – defined by a ‘problem of presence’. As God is transcendent and absent from the world, his presence can only be known by way of mediation. This ‘problem of presence’ has become a central trope in the anthropology of Christianity, as many anthropological accounts of Christian communities describe the challenges of living a life that revolves around a deity that is not exactly present – at least not in the same way as other human beings or material things are. A large body of ethnographic studies of Christian materiality brings nuance to the ways the problem of presence plays out in religious practice by attending to practices and devices for mediation (Birgit Meyer 2011; Houtman and Meyer 2012; Hutchings and McKenzie

2016; Morgan 2021; see M. Engelke 2010).<sup>83</sup> Discussions of mediation can be said to be part of a broader orientation towards materiality in recent anthropological studies of religion, which entails that scholars attend to practice, senses, and materiality rather than being interested primarily in religious experiences, symbols, and texts (B. Meyer 2012; Stolow 2013; Morgan 2021). Religion is much more – more practice, more body, more material, this literature argues. In this vein David Morgan (2017) writes, in the introduction to an edited volume entitled ‘Christianity and the Limits to Materiality’ (Opas and Haapalainen 2017), that he surely cannot imagine any such limits. There are no limits to materiality, seeing that everything is material – even experiences of transcendence are mediated and take place in a physical body (Morgan 2017). According to Bruno Reinhardt (2016), this orientation toward the material in religious practice is an attempt to correct the emphasis on faith and transcendence in all religious contexts which, as Talal Asad (1993) points out, is based on a particular Protestant perception of religion and its concern with individual faith and salvation. However, Reinhardt (2016) also argues that the quite thorough turn to materiality and mediation within studies of Christianity – and religion more broadly – runs the risk of “throwing the baby out with the bathwater” (ibid.), if it casts religion as solely material. According to Reinhardt, a turn to materiality within religious studies is interesting only because of the *tension* materiality sits in with immateriality and transcendence in most religious traditions – and especially Christianity. It is exactly this tension I attend to in this chapter, as it is brought to the foreground when church actors begin to take efforts to reduce their carbon footprint.

In the hymn “The Church is an Old House” (1910), quoted at the outset of this chapter, N. F. S. Grundtvig expresses a similar downplaying of church materiality. In this hymn, which was written on the occasion of a devastating fire that partly demolished the main cathedral of Copenhagen in 1804, Grundtvig suggests that the church does not hinge on spires or bricks, but on ‘living stones’. This is Grundtvig’s term for the congregation, the living and breathing Christian disciples. It is in the believing bodies that God find his temple, not in a man-made church building, he asserts. In other words, what is supposed to matter in the Danish Church is, supposedly, individual faith and Christian community, not church buildings – and not candles, church organs, or spaghetti sauce, which are all objects that take center stage in this chapter. However, when carbon footprint calculations bring such objects to church actors’ attention because of their carbon

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<sup>83</sup> Birgit Meyer’s work on the use of sensuous media in Pentecostal practices in Ghana has become seminal within this field, and so has her basic argument that even if Protestantism itself places emphasis on immateriality, there is always a material aspect to Christian practice (Birgit Meyer 2011). Meyer bases her argument on the observation of how media-saturated the religious practice of her interlocutors was, and how sound and image media were used intentionally to ‘arouse the spirit’ (ibid.). Such media partake in the religious experience, Meyer argues, and from that, it follows that whether or not Christian practitioners want to acknowledge the importance of materiality, it *does have effects* (for a critique of this see Hovland 2018).

emitting properties, they are pushed to make decisions on whether those things are indeed important enough to keep despite their damaging effect on the global climate. Decisions must be made between this or that type of coffee for the after-service socializing, this or that type of paper for the monthly newsletter - or whether it is at all necessary to have one. During my fieldwork I witnessed how some choices were easy to make, but that most were rather difficult, because the purpose of many of the objects in the churches is to facilitate religious experiences or caring for those in need; purposes that are considered religiously and morally important. To use Webb Keane's phrase, the church is an 'ethically saturated' environment (Keane 2014), in which objects are imbued with symbolic significance when serving purposes of religious worship.

The argument of the chapter proceeds through three ethnographic cases that each revolves around an object that was foregrounded and problematized as church actors began assessing their climate impact in order to reduce it. Those objects are: spaghetti sauce, altar candles and church organs. While their natures and purposes may seem diverse, this is part of the point I want to make: when church life is assessed through the lens of carbon, such objects, which do indeed serve very different functions and carry different meanings, show up next to each other. As they are evaluated according to the new yardstick, they are foregrounded and made to matter in the same kind of way. In making this point, I am inspired by Dalsgaard's point (2013) about how carbon valuation embraces what in social life is often taken to be different and distinct value spheres. As a yardstick, Dalsgaard argues, the carbon count evaluates all forms of human action by its measure (Dalsgaard 2013, 81). Drawing on anthropological theories of value spheres, Dalsgaard argues that carbon creates commensurability across what is often thought of as "different and mutually excluding spheres otherwise based on different value systems" (ibid. 81).

As an objectified entity, carbon enables comparability and even commensurability between different forms of life and different actions across spheres. Commensuration is the process that transforms different qualities into a common metric (Espeland and Stevens 1998: 314). In this case, the metric is carbon, and while carbon is recognized as a universal standard for organic life, I will argue that it is also becoming a universal standard socioeconomically speaking by being a way to put a price on human actions, which all emit carbon. Carbon is valued not only economically but also morally—for instance, through terms such as 'the carbon footprint' as a popularized response to the scientific and financial debates. Moral value is assigned to everyday acts of consumption by measuring them against each other via carbon. Low carbon emission, such as cycling, is good—high carbon emission, such as driving your car, is bad. (ibid.94)



That is, when all human activities come to be seen through the lens of carbon, it does not only subject all mundane activities to moral evaluation, but it also becomes possible to evaluate such activities with reference to the same yardstick, even if they pertain to different value spheres. Bringing a bouquet of flowers to a funeral and driving your car to work become comparable actions, even if they serve very different purposes and would usually be evaluated with reference to different value spheres (interpersonal ethics and time efficiency, for example). Whereas previous efforts to reduce energy consumption in churches have focused on a delimited area of church life – namely heating and electricity - carbon footprint calculations entail a more comprehensive survey of church materiality. The lens of carbon emissions means not only energy infrastructures are assessed, but also consumption practices attached to the full range of activities taking place in the churches – including those involved in religious worship.

What I argue in the chapter is that, even if all objects and materiality in a Protestant church are perceived to belong to the same ‘profane’ sphere and no objects are ‘sacred’, efforts to reduce carbon emissions reveal that some things are, nonetheless, evaluated as being more religiously important than others. When pressed to make decisions on what to keep and what to cut, church actors must pass judgments on what materiality ‘suffices’ in Protestant church life (Opas and Haapalainen 2017). Such judgment entails that activities and objects that have hitherto been considered ‘adiaphora’ – that is, neither necessary for nor obstructive of salvation – must now be either defended as so important that their carbon dimension fades or pushed in a category of expendable things. The rendering of all things as comparable necessitates a range of acts and arguments of differentiation. As Dalsgaard (2013) concludes, even if carbon has the ability to cut across different value spheres and create commensurability between them, such a potential dissolution of spheres encounters resistance:

Carbon as an object and potentially as a currency makes all actions comparable and even commensurable, but there is great resistance to this dissolution of differentiations. While general-purpose money historically enabled new forms of exchange, it did not mean the dissolution of all moral spheres (Parry and Bloch 1989), and carbon as a standard or as a currency would perhaps also depend on several forms of distinction. (...) So, all values are not equal, even though carbon as a standard of comparison and measurement does align a multitude of different human and non-human practices. (ibid.95)

Although practices can be measured by the same carbon standard, a complete commensuration of such practices is most often resisted, Dalsgaard argues. This argument is based on the anthropological view of humans as ‘evaluative creatures’ and of cultures as organized around value

systems in which several values may compete (Robbins 2007a). Things might be comparable on certain scales but, as I show in this chapter, there can be several yardsticks in play simultaneously. In this chapter, then, I argue that while focusing on carbon emission potentially makes everything commensurable, such commensuration necessitates other projects of differentiation. To be informed about the carbon-emitting property of a thing sets off a process of evaluating how much of a difference this thing makes in the life of the church. The use of one yardstick provokes the use of others.

I begin with the case of a pastor's difficulties with spaghetti sauce. This case is meant to illustrate how, on the one hand, (some) church actors approach the issue of climate change as a spiritual crisis that requires a change of hearts and minds, rather than taking the attitude that new technological solutions ensure society's contemporary consumption patterns. On the other hand, however, their engagements with climate change mitigation come to be about very concrete, material matters. The pastor I am about to introduce you to, for example, deems the climate crisis to be an effect of a misguided cultural idea of material growth and suggests that the answer to it must be found in a spiritual, anti-materialist approach to the world. However, what she ends up spending most of her time on is spaghetti sauce. To deal with the issue of climate change in the Church, the materiality of church practices needs to be foregrounded. This includes the objects whose material properties are usually ignored while their symbolic or practical functions are foregrounded, for when they are held up to account for their carbon emissions, they reveal themselves as, indeed, *material*.

I use the next case about altar candles to show how focusing on the carbon-materiality of church practices pushes church actors to make choices about whether things are expendable or not. I introduce the Lutheran concept of *adiaphora* to suggest that such decision-making reactivates a Protestant debate, albeit in a new context, about which things are necessary and, indeed, appropriate in church life. Carbon emission reduction efforts, I argue, make it more difficult to retain things in church practice that have hitherto been regarded as *adiaphora* – that is, as useful, but not necessary, for Christian salvation – because carbon renders the use of potentially *all* things as problematic. Lastly, I use an energy consultant's controversial suggestion to remove church organs in the name of energy consumption reductions as a stepping stone to deepen speculation on how much the Church hinges on its material forms. Why is it so impossible to imagine a church without an organ if, as Grundtvig's hymn suggests, the Church is made up of 'living stones' – that is, of God's people, not of bricks or organs?

## Anti-Materialism and Spaghetti Conundrums

Let me introduce you to Liza, a parish pastor in a suburb just south of Copenhagen. Liza is an outspoken woman in her early fifties with a strong sense of social justice and a dry sense of humour. I had been referred to her by a member of the Green Church working group, because she had recently led her parish through the process of becoming a green church. In late 2020 I visited her to interview her about her motivations for doing so. Our conversation came to circle primarily around two things: one the one hand, Christian spirituality and anti-materialism and, on the other, spaghetti sauce. The first pertains to Liza's motivations for engaging with the issue of climate change in the first place, and the latter to what ended up taking most of Liza and her colleagues' time as they set out to realize such motivations. I will delve into both on the coming pages, and the point will be to highlight how two such things – the Holy Spirit and the sauce - come to be connected when church actors take it upon themselves to reduce their carbon footprint. As Webb Keane writes, even the most transcendental projects involve semiotic forms, and such forms unavoidably introduce materiality (Keane 2007). Even if Liza was passionate about countering the climate crisis with Christian spirituality and anti-materialism, it turned out to be the mundane materiality that took centre stage.

Liza had gone into the work with greening the church on the basis of a strong anti-materialist stance to what constitutes the good life. She told me about this as I interviewed her about the motivations and ambitions that had led her to engage with the issue of climate change. It was this position that had led her to priesthood in the first place - combined with a strong heart for social justice work. In her teenage years she had considered herself a socialist – in fact a rather radical one, she laughed. Before she signed herself up for a degree in theology, she had considered taking up sociology or political science to pursue her interest in ethical and political questions pertaining to how to organize society. But a Marxist bias in the disciplines at the time had proved too 'materialist' for her liking. She was concerned with – as she said – the responsibility that humans have for taking care of each other in a more 'spiritual' way than what Marxism suggested. The political convictions she held and a lot of the things she wanted to change in the world resonated with socialism and Marxism, but the materialistic worldview of these ideologies and political projects was limited, in her opinion; they set up 'too small a system to live in,' as she said. She had longed for something more 'spiritual' or 'immaterial' – or something that she could not really find the right words for, she said. She used the term *langhåret*, which directly translated, is 'long-haired' and denotes something alternative, nonconformist, esoteric, and intellectually abstract.

In her pursuit of something like that, she had stumbled upon the book *I Vækstens Vold* ("In the Clutches of Growth") (1978), by the Danish theologian Ole Jensen (who I also mentioned

in chapter 2). Jensen's book contains a harsh critique of capitalism and of what Jensen perceives to be a Western idolization of economic growth, which he argues has become something like a substitute for religion. Christianity, Liza explained to me, holds at its core an anti-materialist stance. As she said this, she turned around and pointed to a small crucifix in the windowsill of her office: "Critique of consumption surely comes from him", she exclaimed. In the Gospels it is *always* about countering the idea of material accumulation, she said and quoted Matthew 6:19-21: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven". According to her understanding, most religion – and certainly Christianity – is anti-material, ascetic.

Jesus is always after the rich. And we are so damn rich here in Denmark. When I say something like this, there is always someone who gets a bit like, 'Well, are you not even allowed to save up for your pension?' Yes, of course, and I do that myself, but the problem arises if we believe that this is the meaning of life. We must fight that constantly. Because it is so natural for us. We want to be safe and have a good time and all that stuff we talked about before [fancy clothes, parties, delicious food]. It is not the most important thing – but it so easily becomes so. And then it gets out of hand, and we are no longer in control of our desire. And that is what has gone wrong. We long for fullness, and then we go shopping. Shopping is some form of consolation after all, right? It is always easier to turn to material things.

According to Liza, humans are inclined to confuse their desire for 'fullness' with a desire for material things. And this is the reason for the current crisis – indeed the multiple – crises, she says: it is the 'structural sin' embedded in a societal structure that nurtures such a desire, that nurtures human greed, rather than spirituality.

That is structural sin, that's what it is. It is greed, isn't it? It is just because we want everything. It is very simple. We don't give a damn about that spirit, do we? It is invisible anyway. We don't understand what it is about. Forget it. It's much easier to... 'So now I want some food', right, and 'now we want to play some bingo', and 'now I want to watch TV', and 'now we want to get fucking drunk and party', right. Or 'now I want to climb a mountain so that I can feel that I'm strong'. So there has to be something that is EEERHHH [makes a movement with her hand like she is speeding up a car forcefully].

To let oneself be seduced by the promises of material consolation, Liza says, is ‘a scam’ – it only leads to ‘pseudo life’.

Liza’s condemnation of material desire and of materiality as something that traps, seduces, and subdues humans, has a history in Protestantism. As described by, among others, Webb Keane (2007), the Reformation was about dismantling the political and economic power of the Catholic Church to grant individual subjects their spiritual freedom. Iconoclasm – the devaluation of materiality - was one essential part of this effort. According to the Reformers, faith ought to be the only prerequisite for salvation, and the divine therefore had to be freed from religious institutions and their material infrastructures. Webb Keane describes this as forming the basis of a particular Protestant semiotic ideology in which it is essential to separate the divine from the material and agency from objects. This Protestant semiotic ideology is what forms the basis of what Keane calls ‘the moral narrative of modernity’:

Briefly, in this narrative, progress is not only a matter of improvements in technology, economic well-being, or health, but also, and perhaps above all, about human emancipation and self-mastery. If in the past, humans were in thrall to illegitimate rulers, rigid traditions, and unreal fetishes, as they become modern, they realize the true character of human agency. (ibid.5).

According to this Protestant – but also, more generally, modernist – narrative, realizing the true character of agency entails emancipating the individual subject from things that have mistakenly been thought of as powerful, such as for example religious fetishes. This narrative of modernity links moral progress to “practices of detachment from and re-evaluation of materiality” (ibid.6), Keane writes.

While Liza was not talking about investment in religious materiality, but rather in consumer goods, her statements express a ‘semiotic ideology’ similar to what Keane describes: human agency ought not to be captured by material things. Liza told me how she had experimented with meditation and other spiritual and contemplative practices as part of her pastoral practice and in pursuit of her anti-materialist ideals. What she likes about the Green Church initiative is that it acknowledges the climate crisis as a ‘spiritual crisis’ and urges countering this crisis by prioritizing other things than economy, technology, and materialism. “If we want to make changes,” she says forcefully, “it must happen spiritually. If something is to get to us, and if we are to have the power to fight for something new, for change, it has to be spiritual.” And what is unique about the Church, she adds, what it can offer, is not the organ, nor the command to love one’s neighbor, but the ‘working of the spirit’. She complains – as I have heard other pastors do – that Christians within the Danish Church often downplay spirituality because they do not wish to be mistaken for

Pentecostals, New Evangelicals or other (her words) ‘Hallelujah Christians’, and yet obviously, she emphasizes, it is the spiritual dimension that is key to Christianity. And it is also key in the fight to change society in response to climate change.

However, it was not only her reservations about charismatic Christianity that diverted her attention from both the spiritual aspect of church life and the climate crisis. In the day-to-day life of Liza’s parish, there were urgent social matters impressing themselves on her and her team. The parish where she is a pastor is marked by what she describes as ‘massive social problems’, and her church has a strong diaconal profile. Social work is close to Liza’s heart as well, even though, according to her own categories, such work is rather ‘materialist’. It is about providing concrete care for one’s neighbor – putting on bandages, filling empty stomachs. And the spiritual agenda is easily upstaged by such concrete matters, she lamented.

Indeed, I witnessed this phenomenon in the meetings Liza invited me to in the small local green church committee she had set up.<sup>84</sup> During these meetings, not many sentences were spent on spiritual or theological aspects of climate change mitigation. Besides spending considerable time on figuring out the municipality’s rules and systems for garbage sorting and taking many walks around the small church kitchen to figure out where and how the many new garbage bins could be fitted in, most of the discussions during the three meetings I attended revolved around something as mundane as spaghetti sauce. Encouraged by the Green Church checklist, Liza and her colleagues had wanted to introduce a practice of procuring food products with the smallest possible climate impact. One of the concrete measures they had wanted to take was therefore to cut down on carbon-intensive meats and introduce vegetarian alternatives. While Liza had initially thought of this as a rather easy and small change to make, in one case it turned out to be a much bigger deal than expected. In fact, it ended up taking most of the time in the meetings of the committee. The problem emerged when Liza, and a passionately vegetarian choir leader, suggested changing the menu of the monthly ‘spaghetti service’ for families. This kind of service has become popular throughout the country, as churches are trying to ‘meet people where they are’. To offer families something that fits with their schedules and needs (and thereby get them to actually come to the church), churches arrange dinners combined with small services aimed at children. As spaghetti with meatballs is a staple in many Danish homes and most children like it, it has become what most churches serve – hence: ‘spaghetti services’. The parish council had agreed to try a new menu, and lentil sauce was the choice. But, as Liza relayed to me and the rest of the committee at the first meeting I attended, the volunteers who usually prepared the meal were sceptical. They argued the children would expect something they recognize. The participants in

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<sup>84</sup> I participated in three meetings and stayed in the e-mail loop a few months thereafter.

such dinners were often families without many resources, and it was therefore only appropriate to provide them with something they liked, something they would enjoy. The volunteers were afraid to send them out the door hungry. Their task, according to themselves, was to feed the hungry children, not to challenge them or to preach a green agenda. Such families already had enough challenges. As a result of the change, some of the volunteers left altogether, Liza said, and those who stayed, looked disheartened throughout the afternoon. They had never cooked a lentil sauce before, and it caused much fuss in the small kitchen. They eventually concluded that the result was disgusting.

As the event hinged on volunteers, the whole project at one point seemed to hang on a thin thread. At one of the meetings, the question was raised whether making the meal plant-based was more important than the event itself. The question was left hanging. However, based on these tribulations, the committee decided to try out another dish for the following dinner. This time the choice fell on stuffed pita bread. However, the setup of the church kitchen made it difficult for the volunteers to prepare the meal, and they now came up with a wish-list for new appliances if such dinners were to be cooked in the future. Furthermore, there had been some worries about hygiene, as the process of stuffing pita breads involved a lot more touching than simply serving spaghetti with meatballs. Lastly, Liza said, sighing, the supermarket that usually delivered their groceries did not have sustainably caught tuna, which was to make up the protein base for the meal, and someone had had to go to several supermarkets to retrieve it. All of this had made it quite an ordeal to organize the dinner.

In fact, the meat sauce was the main issue at all three of the meetings I attended and - judging from the minutes I was e-mailed – several more after. Eventually the spaghetti services were put on hold for a few months, because the volunteers left (although, to be fair, not only because of the sauce) and new ones had to be found.

### **A Bundled Sauce**

The world is more than materiality, Liza had asserted, and the climate crisis is as well. Change happens spiritually and the change we need is to stop pursuing material consolation. However, when Liza tried to turn such theological convictions into environmentalist initiatives in the parish, the discussion ended up being about very materialist things indeed, such as spaghetti sauce. Carbon calculations had rendered meat so significant that it ought to be replaced, and Liza thought it was so insignificant it could easily be replaced. However, it turned out that such meat is not only carbon-significant, but also neighborly-love significant: the dish – spaghetti with meatballs - played a key role in some church actors' efforts to perform their Christian duty to love their neighbours, and to

them it mattered that it was this particular dish, made of these specific material components. To serve spaghetti with meatballs implied caring for the children in the best possible way.

In his work on religion and materiality, Webb Keane (2008) suggests that material forms are always more than what a certain context defines them as:

By virtue of their very materiality, forms can never be reduced in any stable way to particular intentions or meanings. One reason is an effect of what I have called ‘bundling’, the contingent coexistence of an indefinite number of qualities in any object, which always exceeds the purposes of the designer. (Flags are often made of cotton because it is pliable and easily produces a flat surface. But cotton is also flammable. No one would say that flags are made of cotton in order that they may be burned, but their wholly contingent flammability makes available a potent political symbol. Flammability is bundled together with all the other material characteristics of flags.) Bundling gives to material things (including linguistic forms) an inherently and irreducibly open-ended character. (ibid.230)

With the term ‘bundling’, Keane suggests that objects have several material qualities, and that when any one object is used to signify something specific, its material properties and affordances exceed this signification. Quoting Christopher Pinney, Keane (2007) argues that “we must consider the ways in which material things work independently of, or in contradiction to, their discursive surround. Otherwise, we risk treating humans as if their capacity to endow the world with meaning had no limits, and, I would add, as if the world holds no further surprises for them” (ibid.18). Meneley and Manning (2008) provide a memorable example of such surprising bundling in their recounting of a popular Georgian parable that involves an exploding sheep. In the Orthodox Church animal sacrifice is not officially allowed, but it nonetheless happens that individual Georgian priests agree to host such lay practices in their church. According to Meneley and Manning it is generally assumed among Georgians that priests agree to participate in animal sacrifices in turn for receiving an (in)appropriate compensation, such as a portion of the meat being sacrificed or the wine that is supposed to go with it. The story goes that some Georgians once brought a sheep to a church where a priest had agreed to participate in the ritual sacrifice of it. His role would be to bless it with a candle, which is the usual procedure. However, the trunk that the sheep had been transported in had also contained a couple of loosely sealed cans of gasoline. As the sheep was presented before the priest, it was – without the knowledge of the ritual participants – soaked in gasoline. As the priest began to make the sign of the cross over the sheep with a lit candle, the sheep exploded.



The lesson Meneley and Manning draw from this parable is about the bundled character of the candle:

As a ritual (and culinary) misfire, it reminds us that lit candles are not only signs of higher illumination, but may also combine with gasoline drenched sheep to produce incendiary devices, that a sheep as a religious sacrifice is ideally going to end up as shashlik (shish kebab), and that the village priest performing such humble spiritual tasks for his flock is also, perhaps, eager to use some religious excuse to appropriate the meat of sacrifice (and here his potential greed is highlighted by the tellers). Religious ritual and messy materiality come to a head, leaving not only a priest with a burnt beard, but also charred, inedible, and distinctly unconsecrated bits of sheep adorning a church courtyard. Obviously, contingency, risk, and bleating bombs are only some of the things that come into view when we move the spotlight from the transcendent meaning to the risky and contingent materiality of the carrier of that meaning. Material objects, precisely because they are here and now, sensuous, and not impalpable cosmological entities, are in fact able to participate in many distinct fields simultaneously. (ibid.286)

In this case it was the candle that participated in several distinct fields simultaneously. It was not only that the exploded sheep foregrounded how candles are more than what they are taken to signify. It was also that when the candle ignited the sheep, it added an extra layer of signification to the ritual: the material greed of the priest came on full display, as the event so blatantly juxtaposed “high-minded religious ritual” and “grotesque materiality” (ibid.). The parable is told in the service of popular anti-clericalism. Hence, the story about the sheep and the candle reminds us, Meneley and Manning write, of the way objects may “participate in different registers and different fields of action simultaneously” (ibid.). They are bundles of material qualities that can be used in the service of different acts of signification, sometimes simultaneously with resulting contradictories, such as when a candle is used in the service of high-minded liturgy but turns out to emasculate it.

In the case of Liza’s spaghetti sauce, something similar seems to be at stake: meatballs can be used to feed the hungry and thus show Christian care. But, due to their carbon-intensive production, they simultaneously contribute to damaging the planet those very people inhabit. While the bundling of the Georgian candle and sheep becomes evident by way of an explosion, the bundled character of meatballs becomes evident as an effect of carbon emission calculations. Carbon calculations foreground a specific material property of meatballs – and everything else in the church – that makes them problematic if a church wants to prioritize climate change mitigation.

As a yardstick, carbon emission calculations entail that whatever is consumed in daily life can (at least in theory if not yet in practice) be measured in the amount of carbon dioxide it emits and thus its effect on global warming. This is a method not only of quantification, of measuring actions and objects in terms of their emissions, but also of making such actions and objects *comparable*. As everything can be measured in carbon, objects and actions that previously belonged to different domains, spheres, and schemes of valuation are brought onto the same scale and can be compared to each other. As Dalsgaard points out, “the logic of carbon valuation builds upon the potentiality of substituting different alternative actions for each other” (Dalsgaard 2016, 68). Thus, one spaghetti sauce (with meatballs) can be compared to another (with lentils), based on an assessment of the carbon emitted by each of them. Carbon calculations lay the grounds for substituting one with the other. However, while such two material concoctions can be compared on the grounds of both being sauces and both emitting carbon, Liza’s example shows that each of the sauces also have diverging properties: they taste different and are – presumably – in different standings with children (and church volunteers). One can easily be used to care for – or at least satisfy – one’s neighbor, while the other one will challenge and potentially disgust her. Such problems related to substituting household, meat-based dishes for new, vegetarian ones are not peculiar to the church; they are familiar to many environmentally concerned Euro-Americans trying to change their lifestyle in response to the climate crisis (Varela et al. 2022; Volden 2023). Food products are valued for many other reasons than their carbon footprint (for an excellent example see Heuts & Mol 2013), and even when people want to take up a less meat-based diet, issues like convenience and familiarity can complicate and confound the best of intentions (Varela et al. 2022). With the volunteers in Liza’s church, substituting meat for lentils was difficult for them; objections included unfamiliarity with the new ingredients and recipes, fears of not satisfying their guests and appearing inhospitable, as well as the practical implications of preparing and serving the food. What I want to highlight is that the focus on carbon emissions heightens church actors’ attention to the bundled character of things. The material dimensions of objects that are usually used in symbolic acts are foregrounded – one of them being that they emit carbon. Paying attention to carbon footprint reductions foregrounds the carbon-materiality of things, and it does so in a way that invites questions about whether such things are necessary or substitutable. This, in turn invites foregrounding of the other material affordances that made those things useful for the specific symbolic acts they were deployed in.

Once church actors begin to attend to their carbon emissions to reduce them, it becomes evident that certain acts and practices with high symbolic importance in the Church are intensive carbon emitters. Objects such as spaghetti sauce participate in religious or moral fields of

action *and* damaging environmental ones – all at once. This means that church actors must decide whether to evaluate such objects with reference to their carbon-emitting properties or whether they have other properties that makes them so valuable that they must be kept – for example because of their affordances for showing neighborly love. Such decisions over whether certain objects are necessary in the Church – despite their climate impact - is the focus of the next section. Here I turn to an object more obviously related to Protestant concerns, namely altar candles, and to the category of ‘adiaphora’, implying spiritually neutral, or ‘indifferent’, things.

## Living Candles and Cynical Science

Our interview is almost over. The dean, Ove, has just finished telling me about the process of measuring the carbon footprint of the entire deanery he oversees. He is currently waiting for the report that the energy consultant is supposed to deliver with results as well as advice on how to reduce the deanery’s emissions. We have talked about the promises of data, the knowledge one needs to make decisions and spend one’s money well, and about the authority of bishops, engineers, and energy experts. It all makes sense: as the dean who oversees the deanery’s funds, and thus takes decisions on what to prioritize, he needs to know about the levels and sources of emissions in each of the parishes. He needs scientific data to base decisions on for whether to change heating systems and light bulbs, or cut down on the after-service coffee. It is a rational strategy: one should act on the basis of being well-informed.

But before we end our two-hour interview in his vicarage study, me on an algae-green woollen couch and him opposite me in a mid-century leather armchair, I have just one last question for him: are there any measures, I ask, that he will be reluctant to take even if the report shows that a certain object or activity in the church emits a lot of CO<sub>2</sub>? In other words, does he anticipate that the survey will bring dilemmas as it makes it evident that everything they do in the churches emits carbon in one way or the other? He does not think for long before he says that he has noticed that there are some places where they have taken up this “modern fiddlefaddle” of placing LED-candles on the altar; candles that never burn down. If the report promotes taking such a measure, he says, he will hesitate to embrace it.<sup>85</sup> There ought to be “living candles” (*levende lys*) on the altar, he says firmly, his eyes suddenly shining passionately from underneath his dark, bushy eyebrows. ‘Living candles’ is the common Danish phrase for wax, paraffin, and stearin candles. There is a message

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<sup>85</sup> In a carbon accounting report made by another energy consultancy firm on behalf of another deanery, churches are, in fact, urged to substitute their candles with LED candles. The report explains that the most used candles in churches are made of stearin or paraffin, which are produced from palm and crude oil – two fuels that each, in their way, are prolific carbon emitters ().

(*forkeyndelse*) in having candles on the altar that can burn down, he says: in having “something that is alive”. Is it that the candles perish, I ask, in a careful attempt to follow his way of thinking? “It is *time*,” he says, looking at me intensely while speaking carefully and slowly to make his point.

We live in time. The candles burn down. New candles must be put up. We put up nice new, unused candles for the holidays. We make a fresh start for the new ecclesiastical year. And so on. The other ones [referring to the LED candles] they simply go dik dak dik dak, right? There is no life.

He waves his hand in a steady rhythm while making a kind of dead facial expression to illustrate the presumable mechanical movements of LED candles. He then leans forward and jumps right into another example to explain what he means - or, it seems, to build a kind of argument:

Science might suggest that we shouldn't drink alcohol, that children should not have alcohol and so on. This has led some to replace the communion wine with non-alcoholic cordials. I am also personally against that. Why? Because wine – the alcohol in wine – is something that is alive. It is fermented right? We drink the wine in order to commemorate that we are receiving the life force – the life force that was in Jesus – and that this life force enters into us in order to take effect in us bodily. Unlike the dead cordial, right?

So of course, he says, you are right: he *will* find himself in dilemmas as he learns about the deanery's carbon footprint. He offers me another example: at night his church is illuminated by big spotlights. He does not know whether the energy consultant who is performing their audit has noticed these spots (if he has not, could I please not make him aware of them, he says with a little laugh, knowing that I have been following the consultant around on his assessments). But if the consultant *does* know about them, he says, it could very well be that he would find it an awful waste of energy and suggest that they would be turned off. “That would cause me much sorrow because I really want the church to light up when people pass by it in the night. I want the church to light up in the dark. The message, you know, that there is light in the dark.”

This last example leads the dean to return to a question we spoke about earlier on in our conversation, namely the role of science. He had said that, in his opinion, God has blessed humans with the gift of science so that they may use it to explore and steward God's creation in the most qualified way. We need science – carbon calculations included - to make informed decisions, he had said. But the issues he has just addressed seem to confront him with a kind of counterpoint to his own statement, and he finds it necessary to reflect further on the matter:

When you ask that way about it [the potential dilemmas caused by new knowledge] it makes me think that science is, of course, cold and cynical. As with this [corona] lockdown that we have been through, where the authorities shut everything down. Now Brostrøm [the then director of the Danish health authorities] has stated that he regrets it. He regrets that people were prevented from visiting the elderly. Like my mother of 85 who was locked up in a nursing home for a year. It was of course wise from a scientific point of view, but from a spiritual perspective, the human dimension, the emotional... Sometimes science must be able to say that we went too far. Scientifically it was wise, but humanly it went too far.

Science does not take into account what Ove calls other important ‘dimensions’ – those, it seems, that have to do with interpersonal care and responsibility. When science shows us the damaging effects of certain practices, it does not take into account effects that cannot be scientifically measured – including the effect having living, rather than mechanical, candles on the altar, or the happiness of children being served spaghetti with meat balls.

The question I posed Ove was based on my anticipation of the kind of ‘breakdown’ that I outlined in the introduction to this thesis. I expected that Ove and the congregants in his deanery would be confronted with the materiality of church life in a way that interrupted their usual ways of relating to the things around them. To map the deanery’s carbon emissions would entail foregrounding that everything they usually do to sustain church life - all their activities and all the things they consume - emit carbon in more or less explicit ways and to greater or lesser extents.<sup>86</sup> I understand Ove’s statements and reflections as an apt example of one of the dilemmas that the Church is brought into as it tries to make its own ‘green transition’ based on carbon accounting: material objects ought not to be what makes up a church (e.g. Grundtvig’s earlier mentioned hymn), but when carbon emission calculations incites suggestions to reduce or take out things, it turns out that they are important for religious reasons. Ove’s response, then, speaks to two things: first, it is yet another evocation of the ‘bundled’ character of church objects that I spoke about in connection with Liza’s spaghetti sauce problems. The two cases – the meatballs and the candles – illustrate a similar point, namely that the material properties of objects used in symbolic acts exceed those that are foregrounded by their sign-value. In regard to the candles, it is the material qualities of providing light and of changing over time that Ove highlights and wants to maintain on the altar, as these

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<sup>86</sup> As my fieldwork was coming to an end, I was unable to follow the processes that would ensue in the deaneries and parishes after they received their carbon accounts. As a result, I never actually observed such a ‘breakdown’, but I tried to anticipate this on behalf of some of the people I interviewed by asking them if there were things or practices that they would be reluctant to change even if they turned out to be high emitters.

material properties are associated with the symbolic meaning of light as God-created life and of change as constitutive of life. However, carbon emission calculations reveal that there is more in this 'bundle' of material properties and cultural meanings, namely carbon emissions. The material affordances that make the candle an appropriate symbolic vessel are exactly those that make the candle an agent in global warming.

Secondly, it speaks to the problem of Protestant materiality and particularly to the question of how much it matters and in which way (Bielo 2018). Carbon calculations entail that things that have previously been valued with reference to very different value-spheres are brought together and measured on the same scale. This makes it possible to prioritize between objects and actions in the churches that have not been thought of so closely together before – for example the objects on the altar and the machines in the gardening shed, the after-service coffee and the car of the pastor. All such things become lined up next to each other, made comparable so that church actors can prioritize and make choices about what to cut and what to keep. Ove's statements display that there are other scales of measurement that compete with that of carbon. His insistence on maintaining the altar candles for their symbolic meanings, rather than disposing of them for their environmentally damaging effects, shows that there are certain things that are of such importance that even if science shows that they have damaging effects – on the climate or on our bodies – the value of their ritual functions surpasses their ecological damage. Some things might emit a substantial amount of carbon but, when weighed in other scales – such as their ritual effect – their value might outrank their high carbon-emitting qualities. It follows that, while one effect of introducing carbon as a yardstick for everything in the church is that the barriers between value spheres such as the religious, the economic, and the environmental collapse (Dalsgaard 2013) deeming everything measurable within the sphere of environmental concerns, another effect is that the distinction between such spheres is re-established: material objects are deemed important for distinctively religious reasons. Mircea Eliade (1959) and Durkheim (1995) have famously argued that a key organizing principle in all religions is that of the distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane', according to which some things are set apart from the mundane, everyday sphere of life. From employing such a distinction, an analysis could follow that attends to how carbon accounting reveals the materiality of the Danish Church to be, in fact, organized in terms of such categories: Some things are 'sacred' in church life and cannot be evaluated by the worldly scale of carbon emissions, while other things are simply 'profane' and can easily be substituted by alternatives (such as paper cups or in-print weekly church letters). However, it seems that a Lutheran Church would object to any material object being deemed 'sacred', extraordinary, or set apart, as what Protestantism emphasises is immaterial faith and the 'living stones' that Grundtvig praised. In the

next section I examine more closely the stakes in materiality that Protestant Christians have. Ove's statements invite an interrogation of the peculiarly Protestant stakes involved in making decisions about the necessity of objects that reveal themselves as problematic due to their carbon-emitting qualities. To do so I will introduce a Lutheran concept of materiality, namely the term *adiaphora*.

### **Adiaphora – or the ‘things in between’**

As a Lutheran Evangelical Church, the Danish Church builds on a high degree of Lutheran theology.<sup>87</sup> In their introduction to the edited volume “Limits to Materiality”, Minna Opas and Haapalainen (2017) remind us that there was not only one Protestant relation to materiality during the reformation, but several. However, according to the authors, the radical and spectacular iconoclasm of certain reformers – specifically Zwingli and Calvin – have come to define the conception of Protestantism. Quoting Birgit Meyer, they argue that much research has been “privileging a particular view of Protestantism as a rational, disenchanting religion that transcends the body, the sense, and outward religious forms” (B. Meyer 2012, 743, in Opas and Haapalainen 2017). Max Weber, for example, has had a strong influence on the perception of Protestantism as a “salvation religion that moved beyond reliance on concrete material forms”, but it is often overlooked that his influential theory about Protestant work ethics is in fact specifically about Calvinism and Reformed theology, which is quite far from Lutheran theology, particularly on the question of materiality. The editors suggest that this perception of Protestantism in research has been due to the fact that much work has drawn on social-scientific thinkers such as Max Weber, Louis Dumont and Marcel Mauss, who did not engage very thoroughly with theology. Opas and Haapalainen argue that social-scientific scholarship on Christianity and materiality has mostly engaged with such purified forms of Protestantism, represented by Calvinism and Zwinglianism. This has caused a distorted lens on Christianity and Protestantism because what has been deemed ‘the Protestant lens’ has in fact been a ‘Reformed lens’ (ibid.7). The more ‘moderate’ types of Protestantism, such as Lutheranism, have been overlooked. Lutheran theology is, in fact, quite different from Reformed theology in regard to perceptions of materiality.

According to Opas and Haapalainen, Luther took up a position between Catholicism and Reformed Protestantism on the question of materiality (ibid.8). Like the other Protestant reformers, Luther found items such as candles, images, vestments, and altars to be simply ‘external matters’ that had nothing to do with salvation (Spicer 2020). However, Luther asserted that it was not the artifacts themselves that were problematic, but only the worship of them. When it came to icons, for example, the only thing the Old Testament condemned, according to Luther, was “cults

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<sup>87</sup> Even if occasionally, and also quite recently (Højlund et al 2022), there have been voices within the church who argue for a distancing from certain Lutheran doctrines.

attached to images” (Opas & Hapalainen 2017) , not the images themselves. Therefore, Luther did not support the abolition of altars, icons, and so on, and was not, as such, a proponent of iconoclasm. To replace Catholic investment in ritual objects with a new – albeit negative – investment in objects, would simply imply replacing one kind of legalism with another. To forbid such things in the context of worship would then, Luther argued, only add to their importance (Rubow & Engdahl-Hansen 2015, 85). The Christian principle of individual freedom, in Luther’s rendition of it, entailed that people ought to be free to choose how they practice their worship. He therefore suggested that the ‘external matters’ employed in a Catholic mass could be considered ‘adiaphora’ (Spicer 2020). According to Rubow and Engdahl-Hansen this term implies that things that are cast as adiaphora are considered as “matters that are not regarded as essential to faith, but nonetheless permissible for a Christian or allowed in the church” (Rubow & Engdahl-Hansen 2015, 85). Practices and objects that are deemed adiaphora can be described as ‘indifferent things’, or *‘mellemting’* – ‘in-between-things’ in Danish – which implies that they are not *necessary* for salvation, but neither do they prevent it, as long as they are not worshipped in themselves. They are things in between right and wrong, in between necessary and inappropriate. Even if objects and practices were unnecessary for salvation, Luther found that it made sense to preserve certain forms and objects in church worship for pedagogical reasons. Too swift a change in practices and aesthetics might confuse and alienate those familiar with the Catholic mass (Spicer 2020). Furthermore, Luther contended that some material forms – images and music, for example – could contribute to the spiritual awakening of churchgoers. Things that were deemed adiaphora were therefore not insignificant, but they could serve in practices of worship even if they were not a prerequisite for salvation. Thus, according to Luther, material objects did have a role to play, but a different one from what the Catholic Church had posited.

I understand the term adiaphora to denote an openness to materiality in Lutheranism, which allows for much more stuff and ‘external matters’ to participate in church life than in other Reformed churches. This is also the case in the Danish Church, where pastors have quite a free hand in terms of allowing various objects into religious worship that are not considered strictly necessary. Because Luther was concerned with countering the legalism of Catholicism, Lutherans do not have any general liturgical doctrine concerning material culture (Spicer 2020). In the Augsburg Confession, which functions as one of the Danish Church’s so-called ‘symbolic books’, it is stated that: “To the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine, the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike” (Rubow & Engdahl-Hansen 2015, 86). That is, rites and ceremonies are not God-given but man-made; as such



they are in no way sacred or necessary for maintaining the ‘true unity’ of the Church. This implies that, even if there are formal liturgical forms dictated by the official and royally ordained ‘Book of Rituals’ (*Ritualbogen*); much is left for the individual congregation to make choices about within the Danish Church. As there are few authorized elements within the ritual tradition of Lutheranism (Rubow & Engdahl-Hansen 2015, 77) the priest, who is formally responsible for the ritual acts, has a great degree of freedom in orchestrating worship and in the performance of ritual ceremonies. Anthropologist Cecilie Rubow and theologian Anita Engdahl-Hansen provide us with an example of this in their study of how pastors within the Danish Church deal with parishioner’s requests to incorporate horseshoes into wedding rituals. According to Rubow and Engdahl-Hansen it has recently become popular among bridal couples and wedding guests to take up the old, non-Christian tradition of placing a horseshoe at the entrance of the church room as a symbol of luck (*ibid.*). Rubow and Engdahl-Hansen describe how some pastors prohibited such a tradition in their church. The horseshoe traditionally symbolizes the Devil and the priests contended it was therefore at odds with the message conveyed in the church. Others argued that even if such objects have no agency themselves – either in terms of bringing luck or in attracting the Devil – to use them would indicate that faith in God and love is not sufficient in itself for instigating and sustaining a marriage (*ibid.* 81). To employ the horseshoe displayed a mistrust in God. Or it indicated that the format of the church ceremony was not enough for the individuals getting married, who therefore wanted to ‘personalize’ the ceremony, thus making it about themselves rather than God (*ibid.*). In such rejections, the horseshoe was deemed to be at odds with, or even contradicting, the purpose of the church ritual. It did not fall within the category of adiaphora. However, some priests allow the horseshoe and even incorporate into the ritual, as they deem it to be adiaphora. One priest, for example, used the term ‘blessing machines’ to address all those things that may be part of a wedding ritual – neckties, gold rings, shining cars, and so on – to mark it as an important event (*ibid.* 87). She acknowledged that people use material things to mark and accentuate the importance of the ritual and the (Christian) blessing it entails. Even if she did not share the interpretation of the horseshoe, she could incorporate it into a pastoral strategy by taking it as a point of departure to preach Christian messages – in other words, if a horseshoe is employed in a wedding ceremony as a symbol of the strength and weight of true love, the priest can use it as an entrance point to discuss the strength and weight of love in Christian terms. To recap this kind of logic, Rubow and Engdahl-Hansen state that: “In the end, the reasoning goes, the old paraphernalia are either outshone by the real thing (God’s blessing), or, alternatively, they may have opened up a path to the Church” (*ibid.* 88).

The term *adiaphora*, then, denotes the kind of leeway Lutherans have in making use of material forms in their worship practices. Material things are largely allowed in the Church and can even be considered helpful as long as they are not worshipped in themselves or in any way compromise or deflect the individual's faith in God and his freedom to worship as he wishes. But what happens, then, when things that could be deemed *adiaphoric* turn out to indirectly harm God's creation by emitting carbon? I suggest that when church actors realize the carbon footprint of such things as candles in the church, it becomes more difficult to think of them as *adiaphora* – as 'indifferent' – because a line has to be drawn: are they necessary or are they not? One cannot be indifferent to them anymore but must pass judgment on whether they are so important for worship or for Christian care that they must be kept, or whether they are in fact unnecessary.

As Rubow and Engdahl-Hansen write, "Although the principle of *adiaphora* in this Protestant church is a generally accepted safeguard against formalism and legalism, the obvious problem is to decide in which cases it is appropriate to use it. Jokingly, a priest remarked in an interview: 'If I were to forbid the horseshoe, I would also have to ask the bride to strip to the skin'" (Rubow & Engdahl-Hansen 2015, 86). What this priest conveys is that if all things in the Church that were not strictly necessary for salvation were banned, there would only be bare ground left. She says this jokingly because it is exactly *not* how it is. The churches are full of stuff that is unnecessary, but that there are not strong enough reasons to do away with.

Matthew Engelke (2007) argues that the way Christian groups relate to the material is historically formed, and often caught up in "processes of rebellion or generational change" (*ibid.*). The relationship of the Bible-rejecting congregation in Zimbabwe with materiality, for example, was developed in resistance to the colonial powers and missionaries, who stressed literacy and literature in their educational, civilizing and ultimately, colonial, efforts. Books, in other words, were used as a political tool of subjugation. The Masowes therefore rejected the idea that books could be a divine source and renounced the Bible. According to Engelke, then, how Christians in different places perceive the material forms associated with the divine is shaped by historical circumstances.

The historical circumstances that the Danish Church finds itself in today involve carbon counting. Things are being problematized according to their carbon-emitting qualities. This introduces new possible stances on religious materiality. Ove's statements about 'living' vs LED candles is a case in point: in the centuries following the Reformation, candles were used only for practical reasons in the Danish churches. They were sources of light, and it was important to differentiate this use from the status they had had in Catholic churches. Today, candles are being associated with carbon emissions, making them problematic in a new way – no longer their

association with Catholicism, but with destroying the environment. They have become problematic for secular reasons. However, what I take from Ove's way of responding to this problematization is that the secular problematization of them incites a religious defense. Ove must present me with a Christian reasoning for the importance of candles on the altar in order to argue that even if they emit carbon, they are so significant for the church rituals that he cannot replace them with something else. Hence, in one historical moment, Protestants were careful to thoroughly strip the candles of symbolic meaning - they had to disentangle candles from Catholic uses, in which they were ascribed too significant a religious role – to deem them 'just candles' in order to be able to use them. Today, it seems, candles are reimbued with symbolism, since actors within the Protestant church need to present religious reasoning to continue their use of them. When pressed by carbon emission mappings to decide on whether some things are necessary, the category of 'adiaphora' – of indifferent things – is challenged, as those things that have been living in limbo must be pushed to either the side of the line: sacred or profane.

I will now introduce one last object that causes controversy in context of carbon emission reduction projects in the church: the organ. This example gets us right to the crux of the matter: how much materiality is necessary for the Church to exist? What suffices? Can you, for example, have a church without an organ? This was suggested to me, in all confidentiality, by an energy consultant, whom I introduce in the next section.

## Vital Organs

In late 2020 I went on a road trip with Paul, the official heating, climate and energy consultant for the diocesan authorities. For two days we drove across Jutland in his 1992 Saab (sustainability is, after all, a matter of using up things, not replacing them prematurely, as he argued) to visit various churches to advise them on how to achieve the energy reductions they wished to perform and discuss the challenges pertaining to changing the indoor climate of - for the most part - very old church buildings.<sup>88</sup> The parish councils in these churches had all asked the diocesan authorities for permission to undertake projects that in one way or the other intervened in their church buildings, which were all well over a hundred years old, and most from the Middle Ages. Usually, buildings from this period are considered cultural heritage by default and placed within the category of 'protected buildings', meaning they are under the supervision of The National Agency for Culture and Palaces (*Slots og Kulturstyrelsen*), which controls what is done to such buildings to preserve them. However, church buildings that house active congregations within the Danish Church are exempt

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<sup>88</sup> According to Paul, efforts at reducing energy consumption have been undertaken for decades in parishes around the country. For most parish councils, however, such measures are not motivated by the environmental impact of energy consumption, but rather for economic reasons.

from this category by law, because they are supposed to ‘serve the needs of the congregation’ and therefore be free to undergo changes. Whereas users of formally protected buildings have limited possibilities in terms of making modifications, users of churches - the congregation represented by the parish council – have freer range in terms of modifying their buildings to make them fit their needs. The parish councils are responsible by law, however, for caring for such buildings in their possession, and they undertake this responsibility under the supervision of the dean and the diocesan authorities, the former being responsible for the economy, the latter for safeguarding the national interest in preserving cultural heritage sites, buildings and objects pertaining to the churches. If a parish council responsible for a church older than a hundred years wishes to modify the church building – perhaps they want to add an extra side-building for a growing congregation, install a more efficient heating system or take away a couple of rows of benches to make room for yoga in the church – they are required to apply to the diocesan authorities for permission. Although the diocesan authorities have the final say, they are obliged by law to seek advice from officially appointed experts on specific areas, such as the church bell consultant, the organ consultant, the cemetery consultant, the royal architect, consultants from the National Museum and Paul, the energy and climate consultant. Such advice is supposed to ensure that the diocesan authorities can and will see to it that the cultural heritage value of the churches are preserved, although they may disregard the opinion of the consultants if they find more important theological or churchly concerns taking priority.

The meetings I attended with Paul were supposed to bring out all the various perspectives that should be considered when parish councils wanted to intervene in church buildings older than a hundred years. During the roughly half-hour meetings in each of the churches, we were invited to see the church and its interior from the perspective of each of the participants – the consultant from the National Museum contextualized the church historically, the Royal Architectural Inspector contextualized it aesthetically, Paul technologically and climatically, the local pastor or bishop liturgically and ecclesiastically, and the dean economically. The church employees – caretakers, gardeners, organists – were often encouraged to speak, so that the church could be seen in the context of everyday work routines and general use of the building. Like the controversy around windmills that I described in chapter 1, these consultancy rounds could very well be described as an instance of the performance of ‘merographic politics’ (Jensen & Markussen 2001): the church in question is continuously recontextualized, seen from various perspectives - now a cultural heritage site, now a work place, now a space of worship – with ensuing consequences for how, for example, the installation of a new heat pump will be judged.

Such meetings were helpful but also quite frustrating for the parish councils, as it often turned out that there were many conflicting considerations to attend to. It can be difficult, for example, to both preserve the cultural heritage value of the church *and* update it to accommodate contemporary needs with a modern, more energy-efficient heating system. As one priest exclaimed angrily during one of the meetings (as he sensed a rejection coming of his suggestion for an additional porch to contain more congregants in what the National Museum considered a unique medieval church): “I am not the caretaker of a museum, but of a living church!” This priest articulated a tension I touched upon in the first chapter: that between the Church as a national cultural heritage and the Church as home to a living religious community. When viewed by those seeing the Church as primarily a home to a religious community - and especially a Protestant one - it seemed absurd that bricks and building structures should be seen as more sacred than the congregation and its ability to gather.

Measures to reduce energy consumption in the churches were particularly complicated by the fact that many of the cultural heritage objects within the churches – frescoes, wood carvings, artworks, etc. - are sensitive to changing levels of humidity. The frescos might thrive in a church where the temperature is turned down and the humidity increases, but the organ might suffer. And this is where I get to the organs: the main point of contestation in projects pertaining to energy reductions, Paul told me, is very often the church organ:

The big challenge is that all churches have organs. If you asked me today, that if we are to have music in the church, should we install such a mechanical organ, that is built out of wood and felt and small canals and pipes – should we install that in a church? I would say no. A church building is the least fitting for an instrument like that. If you want to have instruments that go well with the church room, you should have trombones, trumpets, something simple and portable that you can take with you. A lot of the climatic challenges that we have in the churches are related to the organ. But then people say: ‘But there have always been organs in the church!’ ‘Yes’, I would respond, ‘in the past 100 years! In the first 1000 years there were no organs.’ At that time, you could sing without it. They are expensive to buy and to maintain, and they require a lot from the space [they are in]. Many organ builders, for example, claim there must be a constant temperature in the churches. I have spent a lot of time puncturing such myths. It has to do with humidity, not temperature. If we could get the organs out, we would solve a lot of problems. (author’s translation)

According to Paul, care and concern for the organ very often gets in the way of taking measures to reduce energy consumption, because they (and their players) are so sensitive to the indoor climate

of the room they are in. I will get further into this, but first I must emphasize that Paul's suggestion is controversial. He knows this, and to this day I am unsure of whether he really means it, or if it is just a way of pushing his point. The suggestion to remove organs from church life seems for most church actors, and even Danes in general – at least at first glance – quite absurd. Churches and organs go together. Whenever I relayed his comment to other people in the Church, most have them either laughed or looked at me in disbelief. Liza, whom we met in the first chapter, certainly laughed in disbelief. She is, after all, married to an organ player. However, when I explained his reasoning – that his main concern was with energy reduction in the face of climate change – she took it a bit more seriously. And then she said “It is interesting, really. Because it is like a deep gut feeling. The organ must be in the church. It is part of the brand, I guess – kind of like beneath or above argumentation. It is just how it is. Yet why, really?” Paul's suggestion – combined with how I saw the organ becoming a key issue in many of the churches we visited, and Liza's response – made me curious. What was it about these organs? The following section is a kind of impressionistic montage of information I picked up along the way, as I began to prick up my ears whenever I heard about the organ during my fieldwork.

At the west end of nearly any parish church around the country one will find a pipe organ looming. It can be small or huge, but in most places, it takes up the entire back, mirroring the altarpiece at the opposite end of the room, i.e. the front. The organ consists of anything from hundreds to thousands of pipes, usually made of steel, forged in different widths and lengths, reaching up towards the vault – and the heavens. Each pipe has its own sound, even while being part of a larger set, a ‘rank’ with a common timbre. An organ consists of several such ranks – different voices and registers, which are controlled manually through stops manipulated by the human organist. Alongside the pocket watch, the organ was considered the most complex technological system until the telephone exchange superseded it. After that came the computer (Pippenger 1978). Because of their complexity and size, organs do not go unnoticed, as musicologist Kerala J. Snyder (2002) writes. They impress themselves on us and “invite[s] us to reflect upon matters beyond music” (ibid.2). According to Snyder's own experience, a monumental organ in a cathedral:

Draws us into a contemplation of the architecture of the great room itself. Because so much of the mechanism of an organ lies hidden from our eyes, we inquire how it works; and because most organs are so very expensive, we ask who paid for them. As the highest sounds of its mixtures and the lowest tones of its largest pedal pipes drift beyond our capacity to hear them, we contemplate the possibility that they may reflect the unheard music of the spheres. As we gaze at an organ's facade, we see in its varying pipe lengths proportions first

discovered by the ancient Greeks. And if we cannot see the organist seated behind the Rückpositiv of a large church organ, we may imagine that the Holy Spirit is playing it. (Snyder 2002, 2).

Since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the organ has been associated with church life, praised for its “phantasmagorical” qualities (Sølberg 2022). The organ incites wonder and has, according to musicologist Benjamin Sølberg “an aura of religious transcendence” (ibid.). Thomas Aquinas (1225 - 1275) praised the organ for “lifting up the souls towards the heavens” and Jesuit Athanasius Kircher's used the organ and its intricate, polyphonic nature as an allegory for the perfect, divinely created macrocosmos (Davidsson 2002, 82). In a speech delivered at the anniversary of the Danish Association of Organ players, the bishop of Viborg diocese addresses the sources of this aura directly:

God's breath brings movement. When God breathes on us by way of the Holy Spirit, we become part of God's great story. Life and unity are created. The breath of the Holy Spirit can enliven our words so that they have wings and they themselves create movement and resonance. The spirit of the Holy Spirit can be visibly manifested in an act of love. And it can come through in the music, which opens our hearts, dries up our frozen blood and creates movement. And organ music in particular can do this, because the organ derives its life from the air that blows through it. It breathes on us. (Stubkjær 2022) [author's translation]

It is, we are led to think, no less than the Holy Spirit that is being blasted into our ears by the thousand steel pipes. With declarations like this, the organ has for centuries been associated with religious life and much liturgical music has been composed specifically for organs. In many church communities, organ music is understood to be a key component of church worship. This is also the case in the Danish Church. In a recent report on the status of liturgy in the Danish Church (2019) it is stated that “[t]he church service is a musical passage. The music is not an addition, but a fundamental part of the service (...) The music is not adornment, nor an event, but is part of making the service a resonator for the Gospel” (). The report refers to Luther's ideas about liturgical music as facilitating religious experiences and quotes him as stating: “Music is the most beautiful and glorious gift God has given. It has often touched me so deeply that I wanted to preach!” (ibid.). According to musicologist William Porter (2002), Luther rendered church music as “a form of participation in the divine life of heaven” (ibid. 61). The German pastor of Otterndorf, Hector Mithobius – who, according to Porter, provided the “fullest exposition of an orthodox Lutheran position on church music in the seventeenth century” (ibid. 67) – ascribed the organist quite an important role in regard to church worship, rendering him as the only other participant in Lutheran

liturgy besides the priest that was preaching the Gospel. According to such a Lutheran position, the organist had a function similar to that of the priest in terms of facilitating a spiritual awakening in the congregation. The organ may bring congregants closer to a religious experience. Furthermore, in the context of the Danish churches, it might even be what brings them to church in the first place:

Many churches in the Danish countryside are empty most of the days of the week, and even on Sundays, the benches are nothing near filled. It is a well known and widespread problem, which often spurs the suggestion to simply close the churches. But people can be lured in, I have been told. They can be lured in by social activities, events, and, in particular, organ concerts, I have been told by parish council members around the country. Organ concerts are popular among people who do not otherwise go to church. The sound of the organ can be heard in very few places outside the churches, as organs have mostly been built for churches. In fact, Sølberg goes as far to suggest that the church room can be considered the organ's 'meta instrument': something outside of the instrument itself that enables and shapes its sound (Sølberg 2022). From this perspective it is the church that is part of the organ and not vice versa. It seems, then, that the organ depends on the church and the church depends on the organ.

The organ, however, also depends on other things: the pipes, which are often made of steel, are tuned in a specific temperature, and if the organ is played at any other temperature, it will not sound right (Pitsch, Holmberg & Angster 2010). Hence, before the organ can be played, its environment has to be heated – or cooled – to the right temperature. You must warm it up, so to speak, or 'do the foreplay', as one organist said jokingly to me. This can only be done in cooperation with the room and those who tend to it; those who turn the heat up and down, open and close the windows, install and control a dehumidifier, and organize who does what when. The organ, which is so vital to church life, requires care and cooperation with the rest of the church organism. Among many of the people caring for the church a rumour exists: if the organ is not to be damaged, the temperature in the church cannot vary too much, and it must never become too cool, too humid or too dry. According to Paul, who told me about this – and was the one who called it a rumour – there are variations in people's perceptions of what the organ cannot handle, but most of the parish council members he met, got it wrong in one way or the other. Crucially, in most churches it was believed that the church ought to be uniformly heated all year round, 24/7, to keep the organ in good shape. This fitted well with what the organ players preferred – as the energy consultant said to me sarcastically – they would like to practice whenever they desire to, and without freezing their fingers. Organs, it seems, are colossal but fragile beings. And organ players,



one parish council member whispered to me as we were discussing the complex climatic demands of the instrument in the context of an energy audit, are equally so.

In his novel *The Church and the Organ: A Village Elegy* from 1904, the famous Danish author Holger Drachmann presents us with just such a fragile soul: the sensitive and sophisticated organist, Monsieur Ollivier. The novel tells the dramatic story of a blooming, albeit suppressed, love affair between Ollivier and a young maiden. In the very beginning of the novel, we are told that the organ was the crown jewel of the village, a magnificent and enormous instrument with overwhelming powers. The church building, however, was not well-kept, caught up as it was in local feuds and politics. The building was in fact so fragile that it would not endure the force of the organ if it was played at its full potential. The organist thus had to restrain himself when playing to stop the church from falling apart – something that fitted well with his sensitive and careful nature. But such a confinement of energy was no longer possible as the two lovers, by the end of the story, gave in to each other and let their passion run wild in a pipe-accompanied embrace. The majestic force of the organ, fuelled by erotic energy, became their death, as the church building crashed upon them. The organ was, in fact, stronger than the church itself.

Another energy consultant, Carsten, agreed that organs are important and fragile instruments, but said he had spent a great deal of energy countering the rumour about organs and temperature control. Very often, when he advised parish councils to turn down the heat in their church building whenever it was not in use, they would say that doing so would damage the organ. Thus, out of respect for the church organ but based on a false belief, the most important energy-saving measure – turning down the heat in churches rarely used – was removed from his toolbox. At one point Carsten got so annoyed with this response, as he knew that it could not be true, that he set out to track down the source of the rumour. He consulted an organ tuner as well as an organ builder and received the explanation that organs can handle changes in temperature very well, but that it is the degree of humidity that ought to be kept stable. As I overheard Carsten relay this fact to a parish council who wanted to install a new electric heating system enabling them to save energy while keeping the church warm enough for the organ, the chairperson, looking stunned, said: “This means the organist has been lying to us for 25 years!”

There is, of course, a correlation between temperature and humidity. Paul explained this in a meeting during one of the church consultancy rounds I accompanied him on, when the usual concerns about the organ and the temperature popped up. Paul said it used to be true that humidity could be controlled within the churches only by regulating temperature. However, today there are systems and technologies for controlling humidity, so it is almost decoupled from temperature. Specific technological systems have even been developed for organs, so that their

humidity and temperature can be calibrated locally and just right (Pitsch, Holmberg, and Angster 2010). In almost all the churches we visited where humidity was a problem, Paul would suggest the parish councils to get a mobile dehumidifier that they could place in the church room in between services. This would free them to turn the heat up or down between services – which in some churches in the countryside only take place every third week – and they did not need any alterations to the building. However, this did not solve the problem of the organ player, who needed to practice on an instrument that relied on the church building itself.

A church caretaker, who was quite tired of all the effort the parish council went to in caring for the organ – a complicated new climate-friendly system installed to control humidity, coordinating the locking and opening of doors for an organist who preferred to practice at night, and the heater that had to be running constantly – said to me, mockingly, that “the parish council considers the organ player vital to church life – next to the Messiah!” As there are not that many good organ players around anymore, they do everything in their power to attract and maintain a good organist. Organists are well-organized in a strong union, and they know what they can demand: a comfortable temperature all through the week – even when it is snowing outside, and the medieval church is 300m<sup>2</sup> and full of holes, as the church caretaker said, rolling her eyes. “You should probably not tell anyone that I said this, but why do we not simply get rid of that organ?” she continued, knowing some would find her words close to blasphemy. “Where I grew up, in Fiji, the Methodists did very well with a simple ukulele! It is about the congregation singing together after all.”

What this church caretaker suggests, echoing Paul, is that a church does not, in fact, hinge on its organ. Like any other object in Lutheran churches, the organ has been a site of contestation before. Lutheran employment and ideas of organ music had what organist William Porter describes as ‘a golden age’ in early 17<sup>th</sup> century Germany, where devoted Lutherans elaborated on Luther’s own theological ideas about the importance of music in liturgy (W. Porter 2002, 61). However, as Pietism became more and more influential in Germany - as well as in Denmark – in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, the use of organ music in church ceremonies was challenged. The Pietists’ verdict on music - and any other worldly stimulants such as alcohol and dancing – was harsh: they condemned it. Porter describes how in 1661, Calvin-inspired German theologian Theophil Grossgebauer launched an attack on church music and especially on the organist:

There sits the organist and plays and shows off his art: in order that one man's art should be displayed, the congregation of JESUS CHRIST sits there and hears the racket of pipes, whereupon the congregation becomes sleepy and indolent: some sleep, some gossip, some look where it is not seemly. . . . Some would gladly

pray, but are prevented from doing so as they are so captivated by all the noise and clamour. (Porter 2002, p 66).

According to Porter, Grossgebauer deemed any performance of organ music that did not have, as its sole purpose, the support of the congregational singing as being against the principles of the Reformation and as reflecting “the habits of corrupt Catholicism” (ibid.). Organ music was a celebration of falsely erected idols rather than sincere worship of God. This Calvinist attack on organs prompted a direct counterattack by the Lutheran Mithobius, who published a defense of church music in 1665. Mithobius promoted a view of church music as *adiaphora*, asserting it was “neither required nor forbidden by Scripture”. In fact, Porter writes, according to this view, “organ music can be said to represent freedom from the strictures of Old Testament law and from papist ceremonial” (ibid. 67) – to play the organ was a manifestation of Christian freedom and a way of ‘participating in the divine’ (as referred to earlier). To argue that church music is *adiaphora* is thus to posit a particular kind of Lutheran freedom: it is to carve out a position between papist Catholicism and the other dogmatic reformers, who in Luther’s view risked lending as much power to the things as did the Catholics.

The organ, in such a Lutheran perspective, should remain a means of worship, not an end in itself. Indeed, etymologically, the word ‘organ’ is the result of a fusion of late Old English *organe*, and Old French *orgene* (12<sup>th</sup> century), which means ‘musical instrument’ and derives from the Greek *organon*, which denotes a ‘tool for making or doing’, an ‘organ of the body,’ and literally ‘that with which one works’. The Latin *organum* also paved the way for the verb ‘to organize’ in Old French (early 15<sup>th</sup> century), meaning ‘to construct’, or ‘establish’, and which later, in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, gained the meaning ‘to form into a whole consisting of interdependent parts’. One might say that this is part of the organ’s task in the ceremonies of the Danish churches as well: it is to organize worship, by creating liturgical passages and coherence.

From this, it follows that the organ serves two functions in the churches: it organizes religious worship and, importantly, it draws people into the churches. But, alas, the materiality of the organ also makes it difficult to reduce energy consumption in churches. Its material ‘affordances’ (Keane 2014) in the form of pipes and lungs can be praised and valued as particularly well-suited for Christian worship, but those very same material affordances can be troublesome, inappropriately dictating how the people in the church must spend their energy (in a double sense). Besides having been delegated a task, the organ requires humans to undertake tasks related to it: it may facilitate religious sensations and organize a liturgical progression of ceremonies by way of its musical capacity and sensuous properties, but it also requires tuning, maintenance of temperature and humidity levels, and a human player (who, in turn, also requires care from the church in terms

of a contract, working conditions, recognition, and planning). As such, the organ organizes not only religious experiences, but also quite a lot of practical work in a church. Much work goes into adjusting the right indoor climate in the churches to accommodate the organ; many economic resources and meetings are dedicated to restoration and maintenance interventions. Hence, an organ cannot only be considered a medium or a vessel for symbolic content; it has material qualities that organize humans and their activities in the church in other ways than what its main, intended task is. In fact, I suggest that is so with many of the objects in the church: work has been delegated to them in the service of organizing the church and the work it is supposed to do. However, such objects also assert themselves in ways that are not under the full signifying control of the humans. Objects require attention and care as they gather mould, dry out, or are revealed as damaging to the planet. We are exceeded by what we create, as Latour argues (1996).

The suggestion, then, *to take out* the organ could be read as a new kind of Pietism: Christian faith and worship ought not to be about organs or organists, but about God. It should not be our own creations and creativity that consume and captivate us – as argued by the abovementioned Lutheran Pietist Grossgebauer – but rather Jesus Christ. When the pastor exclaims that he is not “the caretaker of a museum but of a living church”, he is arguing that the church building must serve the congregation in worship by providing them with shelter, not limit their activity and growth by being required to stay the same. It ought not to be buildings and organs that dictate the form worship takes.

### **A Church without Organs**

What I offer you now is an analogy stemming from a word play that I could not let go of once it had entered my mind: The idea of ‘a church without organs’ reminded me of the idea of ‘a body without organs’ presented by Deleuze and Guattari in their book *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). Deleuze and Guattari’s project was explicitly framed as being critical of Christian ontology,<sup>89</sup> and to relate it to Christian engagements with materiality therefore sits a bit oddly (although for an interesting orchestration of an encounter see Reinhardt 2015). It might seem ‘wacky’, as Tone Walford (2021) writes about those ‘snags’ one can sometimes get in the process of analysis. However wacky such openings may seem, Walford encourages us to explore them. In encouraging us to pursue presumably strange bedfellows, Walford is inspired by the analogical practice of Marilyn Strathern. According to Strathern, to make analogies entails thinking one thing through

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<sup>89</sup> In fact, Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of the body without organs is inspired by the war Antonin Artaud declared on ‘the judgment of God’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p.150), and in the essay on the BwO Deleuze and Guattari repeatedly evoke such a judgment from a position outside as that which the BwO opposes.

another (Strathern 2006, 86). Whereas contexts are often evaluated in terms of their relevance, there is no other criterium for relevance in the making of analogies than to see whether the actual enactment of the comparison leads to something illuminating; there can “be no predetermination of ‘relevance’”, she writes (ibid.90). In response to a tendency to think only of ‘usefulness’ in terms of cause and effect, Strathern argues that it is not so easy to determine what is relevant; sometimes it is surprisingly *inappropriate* things that come to illuminate each other in an appropriate way (ibid.). Thus, Strathern finds that to think analogically allows for “experimentation with what seems appropriately inappropriate” (ibid.); it is an analytical practice that is not defined by a strict procedure but rather by the outcomes of what are not necessarily deemed appropriate comparisons from the outset. To compare the idea of ‘a church without organs’ with Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of ‘the body without organs’ does not exactly seem an ‘intuitive encounter’ (Reinhardt 2015) – in fact, if we go too far into a comparison, it would end up entailing inappropriate epistemological violence (Reinhardt 2015). However, I suggest that the analogy offers an opening for discussing the stakes church actors have in preserving or doing away with the organs in the churches.

According to Dorothea Olkowski’s (1999) interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari’s infamously complicated text, the idea of the body without organs (BwO) expresses a resistance towards wholes and forms. It is an idea of the body not as a substance, but as a “connection of desires, conjunctions of flows, continuum of desires” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 161). The BwO is not fixed, bounded, or delimited by institutions, conventions, or identities, but is the ‘virtuality’ of a body; it is potentiality, undefined and constantly in becoming. As such, the BwO represents an anti-identarian, non-essentialized conception of the subject. Guattari and Deleuze write:

Is it really so sad and dangerous to be fed up with seeing with your eyes, breathing with your lungs, swallowing with your mouth, talking with your tongue, thinking with your brain, having an anus and larynx, head and legs? Why not walk on your head, sing with your sinuses, see through your skin, breathe with your belly: the simple Thing, the Entity, the full Body, the stationary Voyage, Anorexia, cutaneous Vision, Yoga, Krishna, Love, Experimentation. Where psychoanalysis says, ‘Stop, find your self again,’ we should say instead, ‘Let’s go further still, we haven’t found our BwO yet, we haven’t sufficiently dismantled our self.’ (ibid.150)

Deleuze and Guattari developed their idea as an alternative to the bourgeois, psychoanalytical subject, whose desire was deemed repressed and contained within a subject (Olkowski 1999). The subject, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is not produced and contained within an organism, but is created - instantiated - by immanent flows of desire. According to Deleuze and Guattari, desire

is not bound in or to individual subjects, but is instead a force, a flow, that momentarily instantiates such subjects (Olkowski 1999). Their project was to free desire from subjectification, signification, and organisms and to propose the idea of “an immanent plane of desire of which all subjects are part” (ibid.). It is, then, quite the opposite of a world made up of semiotic forms and symbolic conventions.

The image of ‘churches without organs’, then, is an image of a church that is not kept in place by anything - church organs, or candles or National Museums for example - but is in constant becoming. There are certain things about the Protestant longing for a free-flowing spirit that is not bound in or by organs, institutions or norms, that resonates with the image Deleuze and Guattari draw up. To suggest that churches do not depend on organs, as Paul and the church caretaker did, and that what the Church has to offer is the ‘movement of the spirit,’ as Liza argued, suggests that a church without organs is perhaps the ideal church in relation to materiality: it is a ‘field of forces’, a place that the Friday Masowe that Engelke accounts for would perhaps dream of, a place where faith can be ‘live and direct’ and not be trapped by forms and material objects.

However, the attention given to the organs, and the fear that taking them out will empty the churches even more, shows that that the Church does depend on material forms. When parish council members are afraid that people will stop coming to church if they devalue their organs and organ players – placed ‘next to the Messiah’, as the frustrated church caretaker said – it seems that they perceive the organ to be one of the main attractions of the church. It is, in one sense, what provides it with life. Thus, organs are indeed vital and a church without an organ would be at risk of dying. However, to be fair, what Paul and the church caretaker suggested was not to simply take out the organs but to replace them with ukuleles, trombones and flutes. In other words, it is not that the church should get rid of all music, only that they should get rid of instruments that consume excessive energy – in both a mental and physical sense – and require many work routines for their upholding. Christian worship, Paul and the church caretaker suggested, would work quite as well with other instruments, other media - the spirit will flow just as easily in and through a trombone as in and through an organ.

Where I want to go with this BwO analogy is to tease out the tension between materiality and immateriality in the Danish Church. The proposal to take out the organs of the church and all the reasons why this probably will not happen any time soon, shows that immateriality and materiality is inextricably linked in the Danish Church. As Martin Luther responded when Zwingli argued that surely God could not be present in the sacraments, “God is present in your cabbage soup as in the sacrament, the difference is that God is hidden in the soup

and revealed in the sacrament”. That is, God is in fact omnipresent – present in the mundane as well as in the spectacular. But certain acts, certain situations, reveals Him to us.

## Conclusion: Matter that Matters

Webb Keane (2007) suggests – speculates, is the word he uses – that perhaps the complexity of Christianity is produced by the tensions arising between “purifying projects of transcendence” and “counter movements toward materialization”, which each provokes the other (ibid.41). Keane’s speculation is based on Latour’s proposal that purification never succeeds (ibid.). Indeed, Keane writes “religious histories show that attempts at purification produce results that seem to be inherently unstable” (ibid.). Keane’s way of making sense of this ‘failure’ of purification, is to suggest that “one source of the failure of purification is the inescapable materiality that semiotic form introduces into even the most transcendental projects” (ibid.41). That is, even if Protestant traditions are all about immaterial faith and the disentangling of human agency from the grasp of material desires, there will always be material things partaking in conveying such messages and projects. It seems to me that this is exactly what the logic of carbon calculation reveals in the Church (and perhaps outside it too): it makes church actors aware of the materiality that is inextricably part of Danish church life; it prods them to consider whether materiality disturbs or supports religious purposes. The demand to reduce carbon emissions incites discussions about the significance and importance of the material things that participate in church life as it is now. When demanding of itself that it will reduce its carbon emissions, the Church needs to figure out what material excess it can reduce. It must attend to all the practices and materials involved in church life and decide whether they are necessary enough to make up for the damage they inflict on the planet. From one perspective this should be easy, as it would supposedly be enough for Protestants to gather for worship in a large empty space where singing and praying could be carried out without the help of any carbon-emitting props – much as Engelke’s Friday Masowe do (2007). Carbon reduction efforts may incite such a ‘purification’ of religious practice (Keane 2007), deeming objects as expendable. However, as the examples I have offered in this chapter show, once church actors begin to confront the things around them, it turns out that many of the things and materials around them actually do have significance – such as organs, altar candles and meatballs. As has been argued within the critical carbon literature (Dalsgaard 2013; Knox 2018; MacKenzie 2009) carbon accounting entails making everything commensurable and comparable by way of a common measuring stick. In principle, this enables people to make rational choices about how to live in a way that emits the least carbon as possible. However, the stories I have told in this chapter show

that there are always some things – some emissions – that we cannot ‘sacrifice’. Some things are too pleasant or convenient to give up, others are invested with symbolic meanings and moral intentions. When one’s grandmother is ill or lonely, it brings her comfort if you bring her flowers; if you want to serve a family in the parish a hot meal, you want to provide them with something they may enjoy and that is rich in protein, such as meatballs. We ask ourselves whether substitutions can be found that will cause less ecological damage, but as in the case of Ove’s altar candles, it is not always easy. To use Webb Keane’s phrase, the church is an ‘ethically saturated’ environment (Keane 2014) as objects are imbued with layers of symbolic meaning, and to take any of them out entails renegotiations over their significance for the church.

I want to suggest that the term *adiaphora* captures something about contemporary church concerns *as well as* the concerns of those of us outside the church: namely the way things that have hitherto been taken for granted as mundane or ‘indifferent’ come to the fore as something we have to make moral decisions about. When everyday activities and objects – such as serving children spaghetti with meatballs - are seen through the lens of carbon by environmentally concerned subjects, the mundane becomes ‘ethically saturated’ (Keane 2014). Keane uses this phrase to describe Christian materiality and how both rejection of and investment in material objects imply ethical deliberation for Christians. It is also an apt description of the new carbon ontology in which no things can be regarded as ‘indifferent’ to global warming. Every object and action can potentially be evaluated, assessed, and deemed either expendable or important enough to keep. As it is impossible for us to ‘strip down to the skin’, as the pastor said earlier about what the consequence would be of not leaving anything to be adiaphoric in the church, carbon emission awareness pushes us not only to cut down on things but also to forge arguments about why something is so important for us that even if it contributes to global warming, we keep it. In the church, such lines of argumentation are many, but one of them is religious. Material objects serve religious reasons – something that Protestants do not usually take pride in arguing (Opas and Haapalainen 2017). Hence, an effect of carbon commensurability in the Lutheran Church, I argue, is that the climate crisis pushes objects that were living within the category of *adiaphora* to be deemed either religiously important enough to keep or religiously insignificant enough to be substituted or cut all together. When pressed to decide on whether some things are necessary, the items in the category of ‘*adiaphora*’ – indifferent things – are challenged. Prioritizations must be made between this or that type of coffee for the after-service socializing, this or that type of paper for the monthly newsletter - or whether it is at all necessary to have one. Some choices are easy to make, but most are rather difficult, because the purpose of many of the objects and much of the material infrastructure in place in the churches is to facilitate religious experiences or caring for



those in need; purposes that are considered religiously and morally important. The church shows itself to be an ethically saturated environment as objects are imbued with layers of symbolic meaning, and to take any of them out incites renegotiations over their significance for the Church – and of what makes up the Church at all! Hence, the cases I have described in this chapter show how difficult it is to do away with things in the churches because such things have been so thoroughly embedded in complex networks of signification that if one takes them out, so much falls.

## Chapter 5 Eco-Theological Relations

In late October 2021, the environmentally concerned priest Henrik sent me this picture of a tree stub that he had recently taken in the Swedish forest where he was vacationing. He sent me the picture because I had asked him to send me a picture of another tree stub that he had taken on another occasion and of which we once spoke about for two whole days. This former occasion was a morning walk Henrik had undertaken in the early hours of a dark November day in 2020 before he met me and 15 pastors in the classroom of a five-day long course about ‘eco-theology’ that he had organized. The course took place within the institutional framework of the Centre for Continuing Education for pastors in the Danish People’s Church (*Folkekirken Efteruddannelsescenter*). I too had been up early that morning and gazed fascinated out the window, where the flat, rural landscape surrounding the centre lay barren and covered in thick fog and tiny ice crystals. As Henrik had traversed this landscape, he had come across a tree stub and photographed it – something he would tell us about later that day in class.



To invite you into the kind of spaces and conversations that this chapter is based on, I will stay with Henrik a little longer before I explicate more thoroughly what this chapter is about, namely how Henrik and other environmentally concerned pastors in the Danish Church engage in formulating responses to the climate crisis in a distinctively Christian register.

Henrik had opened the course the previous evening with a presentation about the urgency of developing a contemporary eco-theology. Standing before a slide showing the increase in global temperatures, Henrik had said: “We humans have acted with very poor judgment, and the natural crises around us are in themselves reasons for engaging with ecology in theology. We must engage with our relationship to nature.” A second reason for engaging in eco-theological efforts, he explained, is internal to theology itself: “If we believe something, we need to be able to conceptualize and explain it accurately,” he said. “We need to be able to account for it to ourselves and to others, so that we can legitimize and defend what we believe in and, hopefully, inspire others.” Contemporary eco-theological efforts are, we were led to understand, both efforts of comprehending something anew and of building arguments. Henrik had highlighted how he himself was inspired by the old Church Fathers - Aquinas, Irenaeus, Luther - and that reading them in the light of the current predicament showed their continued relevance. The Church Fathers, he

argued, knew that there was coherence between God and the natural world, and that it should therefore be considered a blessing, not a curse.

And this was then he told us about the tree stub: “I took a walk this morning and I have this... some may call it odd, habit of noticing tree stubs and photographing them. I also sometimes hug trees, but that is another matter.” He paused and smiled in a characteristically self-deprecating manner, certain that his audience must have considered him eccentric. We laugh a little with him. “When I see a tree stump with all the living organisms on it – fungus and such – and the insects inhabiting it, I am reminded that there are many homes in God’s house. It makes me so very, very hopeful.” To illustrate this emotion, he briefly folds his hands, looks up and closes his eyes in a kind of prayer position.

But how do I explain that experience? I mean - to me that certainly has something to do with God. Is it a revelation? Or is it resonance? What is the difference between my experience – which I consider religious – and, let’s say, an aesthetic experience of that same shared condition?

You can tell that this is a question he has been struggling with: how can or should we explain our significant experiences in and with nature? Indeed, this is something I had been struggling with alongside him, as I throughout the previous year had attended his monthly reading circle about Christian perceptions of nature and participated in his experimental out-door ceremonies. As Henrik talked about his encounter with the tree stub, I was reminded of a video I had come across a year earlier on the website of The Danish Environmental Protection Agency, who had launched their own ‘Nature Canon’ (*Danmarks Naturkanon*).<sup>90</sup> In this three-minute video, Henrik is standing in a forest-like environment by the source of Gudenåen spring. He looks directly into the camera and opens with the question: “God and nature, God and the climate fight, how are they really connected?” About to offer us his take on what we can experience in nature, he quite surprisingly begins somewhere else:

I think, perhaps, that one can think of it as our relationship to other people: as a Christian, you say that you can meet God in the other person. We do that all the time. Because the other person makes a claim on you, you are challenged to take care of the other, to help them. The other person can also be a blessing - a child, your spouse, someone you love. A human can be a blessing because of their beauty, their goodness, all those things. One must think of *nature* that way. One must think that other humans are nature as well. One must think of... [He pauses and narrows his eyes, signaling that he is about to say something of great

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<sup>90</sup> Ref.

importance] nature as your *neighbor*. You must love your neighbor as yourself. And this might also entail making a claim on you. Nature suffers. Then we must go into battle, we must fight the environmental crisis. Hence, it is a commandment in exactly the same way.

At first Henrik is seemingly making a rather straight comparison here, as he suggests that we should cultivate the same relationship with nature as the relationship Christianity demands that we have with other people. But he is also saying that humans *are* nature, which indicates that this is not a simple comparison, but an equating of nature with humans: and since humans and nature are both nature, we should treat them equally. But he then brings it somewhere else as he then paraphrases what I later learned was the theological concept of ‘deep incarnation’ (Gregersen 2016):

I would like to make a proper theological extraction: we say that God became human in Jesus Christ. But, in fact, nowhere in the Bible does it say that God became *human*. What it says is that the Word, God’s word, became ‘flesh’ and took up residence among us. This means that Jesus became *physical matter*, Jesus became the earth, the globe, Jesus became the stardust that comes from the Big Bang. That was what God became. And that is why we say that God is also in nature, and that we sometimes can see God there.

He gazes into the forest and the camera pans away from him, resting on the scenery that we are now invited to see differently. As Henrik was describing his experiences with tree stumps in the classroom, I was back in that forest with him, and I understand that much is at stake for him in the act of photographing such stumps: it is about treating it as a neighbour, about caring for it, and acknowledging that it is loved as much by God as he - a human being - is.

Marilyn Strathern (2020) notes that the acknowledgment of human-induced climate change has incited a broad call to re-evaluate and re-think the relations of the world, and especially those between human and nonhuman beings (ibid.169). Strathern is specifically concerned with the role of anthropologists in such reinventions of relations, seeing that they hold a ‘strong vocabulary’ (ibid.12) for just that. But her observation seems apt for describing also what the ecological crisis incites the environmentally concerned pastors that you will meet in this chapter to do: for them, I argue, *re-evaluating the relations* of Christian cosmology – between God, humans, and the natural world - takes centre stage in their efforts to formulate responses to the climate crisis in an explicitly Christian register. It is these efforts of re-describing and re-relating that this chapter is about, as it pursues the question of what happens when the climate crisis becomes a matter of concern for pastors within the Danish Church.

The pastors – and a single bishop – that you will meet in this chapter, conceive of the climate crisis as something that is perhaps not exclusively a Christian issue, but one that could - and should - be addressed in a particularly Christian way. They agree that technical and political solutions are of vital importance, but they insist that the climate crisis is more than technical, more than material, and more than economic: it is also a spiritual and ethical crisis. Solutions, they argue, cannot *only* be practical, but must alter how ‘we’ (implying all humans, but perhaps mostly inhabitants of industrialized countries) relate to nature – to God’s Creation (*Skabelsen*), as they call it – to care for it. They believe that Christianity already holds all the resources to respond to the environmental challenges of today in a proper (Christian) manner; all it requires is that they approach and rediscover their own tradition in a certain way, looking past what can be deemed modernist approaches to human-nonhuman relations. In doing so, the pastors are experimenting with articulating an ‘eco-theology’, as they call it, that is fit for a time of climate crisis. This involves displacing dualisms that they find have organized distinctively modern Christian thinking. One pastor deemed such thinking ‘overly hygienic’ (*overdreven hygiejniske*), as it has been by strict separations between God and the world, the human and the nonhuman. As such, their efforts aim at situating God *in* as well as *outside* of the material world; in other words, at recasting the Christian cosmology as one marked less by dualisms and fractures and more by interrelatedness.

To these pastors, then, the problem of climate crisis requires a response that reckons with how the Christian cosmos is understood to be constituted - what the nature of its entities is and which relations there ought to be between them (Scott 2014). I argue that this theological endeavor is marked by a desire and a struggle to articulate a new sense of interconnectedness between God, nature, and humans, while still maintaining a locus for human action and responsibility – a cornerstone of Christian anthropology (that is, Christian views of the human). Recalling the overall argument of the thesis about how the climate crisis brings some of the central, organizing distinctions of the Church and of Christianity to the fore, opening them to negotiations and reorganization, the purpose of this chapter is to show how the Christian distinctions between God and the world and between humans and nature are brought to the fore by pastors seeking to respond to the climate crisis in a theological register.

While the relationship between God and the world is the subject of much theological work, it also figures prominently in the anthropological literature on Christianity (S. F. Harding 2001; M. E. Engelke 2007; Robbins 2012; Webster 2013; Scott 2015; Reinhardt 2015). Hence, within the anthropology of Christianity, it is often said that the relationship between God and the world, the human and the divine, is defined by radical difference and separation (Keane 2007, Engelke 2007, Robbins 2012); a cosmology of “giant fractures”, as Don Handelman (2008) writes.

According to Joel Robbins, one of the key features of Christianity is the split between the mundane and the otherworldly in which the otherworldly – the transcendent – is given prominence (Robbins 2012)<sup>91</sup>. There are many variations in how the tension between the transcendent and the mundane is configured and handled, and – repeating an argument made by Cannell (2006) – Robbins suggests that this variability is and ought to be a key topic for comparative research on Christianity within anthropology (Robbins 2012, p.10). Yet, anthropological accounts of the various Christian ways of delineating and engaging with the relation between God and the world rarely touch upon the environmental dimensions of this split (for an exemption see Rubow 2020). Like the previous chapter, this one focuses on the realm of Christian materiality, but in this case, it is Christian conceptions of the natural, nonhuman world that we are concerned with. When the world has come to take on a specific meaning in the context of climate change – namely that of a planet, an eco-system, a climate – I suggest that the problem of the God-world relationship is actualized in new ways (cf. Bialecki 2014).

With the specific case that I present in this chapter I add nuance to the before mentioned depiction of Christianity as a cosmology defined by radical separation, as I show how the environmentally concerned pastors engage in redescribing the God-World relation in order to advocate for a deeper kind of relatedness between God and the world than one of radical separation. Furthermore, by focusing on a distinctively theological endeavor, rather than to religious practice, I contribute to the burgeoning conversation between anthropology and theology (Robbins 2020; J. D. Lemons 2018) by interrogating a theological concept – ‘deep incarnation’ - in order to also discuss *anthropological* thinking.

Specifically, I show how the pastors engage in re-describing the relations between God, nature and humans, so that such entities are brought closer to each other, revealed to be more interrelated, yet also retain their separateness. I argue that, for the pastors, much hinges on being able to articulate what I call *the optimal distance* between God, humans, and nonhuman nature as it is in a particular calibration of proximity, yet distance, unity, yet division, that the ground for human care can be laid. I suggest that attending to the pastors attempt to calibrate *the optimal distance* for care by way of this concept, may stimulate a fresh engagement with a problem that

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<sup>91</sup> To make this claim, Robbins refer to the axial-age hypothesis, which posits that a set of revolutions across Eurasia during the period between the 8th and 3rd century BCE led to the emergence of “a basic tension between the transcendental and mundane orders” (Eisenstadt in Robbins 2012). Importantly, the transcendent was not only divided from the earthly, but was also perceived to be a “higher order”, and thus more valued than the this-worldly, Robbins writes (ibid.). Robbins is neither concerned with determining the accuracy of the hypothesis, nor does he want to endorse the idea it holds of progress, but he does find it to be a useful framework for characterizing Christianity as a tradition in which “the relationship between the mundane and the transcendent is caught between this- and other-worldly tendencies and is therefore fundamentally unstable” (p10)

anthropologists themselves are pondering, namely how sameness and difference, proximity and distance, is configured in attempts to relate in an ethical and careful way to Others – be those nonhumans (Krøijer and Rubow 2022) or those Others that anthropologists have traditionally dedicated their discipline to (Robbins 2013a).

The chapter proceeds in three steps: In the first part we will meet Peter, a pastor and bishop, who offers a redescription of the God-world relation that draws God in much closer to the world. In the second part, we will return to Henrik and his love for trees and interrogate why it is that such a drawing in closer enables care. In the last part I offer what I, inspired by (Reinhardt 2015), call a contrapuntal analysis, in which I invite in thinkers and writers from my own discipline, anthropology, and adjacent fields, who are also engaged in redescribing human-nonhuman relations as a way of responding to the climate crisis (A. Tsing 2012; Chua and Fair 2019; Lien and Pálsson 2021). By tracing resonances and differences in the anthropological and theological endeavors of redescribing relations I argue that the pastor promotes a thinking of relatedness and care that also involves radical difference and that retains the figure of the human at its centre.

## Redescribing the God-World Relation

The first time I heard the term ‘deep incarnation’, I was in the office of the bishop of Roskilde diocese on a cold winter evening in the very beginning of 2020. I was there to interview the then bishop, Peter, about his opinion on how the problem of climate change could be addressed from a Christian perspective. I had contacted Peter because he was a recurring figure in the landscape of environmentally concerned church actors. Peter was referred to as ‘the Green Bishop’, indicating his passionate dedication to issues of environmentalism. He had been a part of the Green Church steering group for many years and during my fieldwork he participated in international meetings and conferences about environmentalism in churchly as well as secular contexts. Peter was also one of the leading figures in the formation of *Folkekirkeens Grønne Omstilling*, the project mentioned earlier that was formed within the Danish Church in 2021. While Peter cannot be considered a representative of the theology of the entire Church, he has been one of the most prominent figures in the Christian public in terms of evoking theological perspectives on the climate crisis.<sup>92</sup> I had

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<sup>92</sup> Evt. The theological ideas Peter presents us with are considered controversial by some church actors, but they are also shared by various others – as it is with theological perspectives in the Danish Church. And although the pastors I have talked to, are some of those church actors who are most actively engaged in such efforts, a broader trend of rethinking Christian articulations of human-nature relations can be identified. In 2021, for example, the Danish Bible Society published a new translation of the Bible, in which the statement in Genesis 1, 28-30, that God grants humans ‘dominion’ over every living thing on Earth has been translated into humans having been granted ‘responsibility’ for them. See <https://www.bibelselskabet.dk/skal-vi-herske-over-dyrene-eller-tage-ansvar-dem>

met Peter once before in connection with a special ‘Creation ceremony’ (*skabelsesgudstjeneste*) that I had attended as part of my pre-fieldwork research in the autumn of 2019. The bishop had delivered a sermon during a highly experimental service in the majestic Cathedral of Roskilde; a service that involved various untraditional elements such as an Ignatius meditation, the distribution and touching of pinecones, and prayers revolving around fish and stars, microbes and carbon.

A few months after this first encounter, I entered through the heavy door of the old, but well-kept baroque Palace in central Roskilde that houses the diocese’s administration and the bishop’s office and home. The bishop himself welcomed me warmly and guided us into his stately office, elegantly decorated in dark green colors, polished mahogany furniture, and enormous paintings by the contemporary neo-baroque painter Thomas Kluge. A table had been set with cups and napkins, and with a gallant hand gesture, the bishop invited me to sit. He then, as though he suddenly remembered something, kneeled to open and look through his cupboards, shaking various Christmas cookie boxes before picking one to bring to the table.

In answer to my opening question about whether one could talk about a distinctively Christian view of nature, Peter said he had spent some time thinking about this very thing recently. A few months earlier, he had made use of a three-month sabbatical option available to priests and bishops within the Church. Even if he had been engaged with environmentalism for most of his life, he wanted to think more deeply about what exactly it is that Christianity and the Church could contribute in the current environmental crisis. Peter’s account of his study leave was published in the annual magazine *Prædikenpause* by Roskilde diocese and in this report, he states that the exact question he pursued was: “What light does human-induced global warming shed on Christianity and the Church, and what can the Church and theology contribute within this context?”<sup>93</sup> That is: the climate crisis has something to say to Christianity and Christianity has something to say to the climate crisis, but what?

This question had led Peter on a journey back into the history of Christian thought, as well as into the conceptual universe of the internationally renowned professor of systematic theology theologian, Niels Henrik Gregersen and his concept of ‘deep incarnation’ (2016), which the pastor Henrik outlined in the above (with ‘deep incarnation’ Gregersen, suggests that the Incarnation did not only imply that God was incarnated in a human being called Jesus, but that God assumed the entire “world of flesh” (ibid.2). This, Gregersen writes, entails that God came into “the very tissue of biological existence” (ibid.1). Hence, rather than deeming the material world as sinful, fallen, or simple as material resources for human life, deep incarnation entails that God

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<sup>93</sup> As a complement, I weave in this report to my account of what the bishop told me during our interview about his take on how nature might be conceived of in a distinct Christian manner.



has redeemed all forms of life – human and nonhuman - and is continuously present as their ‘Creator’). Peter had, however, begun by taking a small journey to Scotland, to visit the British professor of environmental ethics, Michael Northcott, whose writings had inspired him. This encounter had not only provided stimulating conversations about the hope found in nature’s own ability to regenerate, but also a thought-provoking trip to the Scottish Highlands, where Peter had seen with his own eyes the devastation caused by deforestation performed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by profit-minded landowners, leaving the area barren today. The report displays pictures of Peter and his wife posing in this barren landscape with wind in their greying hair. Peter describes how this landscape to him was an example of the dire consequences of what happens when humans pursue their own interests single-mindedly and regard the Earth as simply a collection of resources for them to use. If he had not known before, Peter understood the importance of articulating a view of nature that deemed it valuable not only to humans but also *in itself*. And this, he said to me, was a task that Christianity could and should contribute to.

Before I delve into what Peter found Christianity could contribute with to counter what I suggest he casts as an *anthropocentric* view of nature, it is worth contextualizing his efforts by pointing out that they may be seen as a response to a prevalent critique of Christianity: namely, that it is Christianity itself that has generated and shaped this anthropocentric view of nature in the first place.

### **The Anthropocene and Christianity’s Burden of Guilt**

In 2000, engineer and atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer argued that the planet had entered a new epoch in which for the first time, it would not be primarily geophysical processes that defined the constitution of Earth, but the presence and activity of the human species. Crutzen and Stoermer named this era ‘the Anthropocene’.<sup>94</sup> Although the term originated in the natural sciences, it has since travelled into the humanities and social sciences, where it is engaged with as a concept that describes – and can be used to criticize in various ways – the way human societies have come to dominate the planet and all the other species, organisms, and beings that populate it (Chua and Fair 2019). As political scholar Mads Ejsing points out, scholars within the social sciences and humanities who engage with this term commonly approach

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<sup>94</sup> In a short essay the two scientists list a number of ways in which human activities have made the human species gradually grow into a significant geological, morphological force (ibid.). They mention for example how 30-50% of the land surface had – at the time of their writing - been transformed by human action; that more nitrogen was fixed synthetically and applied as fertilizers in agriculture than fixed naturally in all terrestrial ecosystems; and that the release of SO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere by way of coal and oil burning was at least double the sum of all natural emissions from, mainly, the oceans (ibid.). The term ‘the Anthropocene’ was thus meant to capture how the bio-geophysical composition and processes of the earth were being shaped and fueled predominantly by human activity.

climate change not only as a geological or technological problem, but also as a cultural and political problem – specifically one pertaining to how human groups organize their societies and their relations to non- and more-than-human landscapes and beings (Ejlsing 2022).

Based on their review of different anthropological approaches to the Anthropocene, Chua and Fair (2019) point out a tendency within all these approaches to fuse the analytical with the political and the ethical, approaching what one studies as involving problems that needs solving (Chua & Fair 2019, p. 2). This imbrication of the analytical and the political underpins the formulations of a diverse range of scholars as they narrate the climate crisis in vastly different ways, identifying the roots of the crisis in different places and political or ethical agendas, as well as suggesting a wide variety of interventions (Chua and Fair 2019; see also Ejlsing 2022 for the same observation regarding related disciplines). In this context, the Anthropocene is not only a descriptive term, but also a political and moral concept that is used to critically evaluate the social, cultural, and political dimensions of global warming. Another key trait of the anthropological literature that evokes the term ‘Anthropocene’, according to Chua and Fair (2019), is the conception that the Anthropocene destabilizes distinctions that have long been firmly in place between nature and culture and the human and the non-human. Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty – who is often considered as having brought the term Anthropocene into the social sciences (Ejlsing 2022, 3) – argues, for example, that the distinction between ‘human’ and ‘natural’ history has become inadequate as the human species and its society-building efforts have come to be a geological force of its own (Chakrabarty 2009). With the advent of the Anthropocene, the histories of nature and society have become so inextricably meshed that one cannot be adequately told without the other. Importantly, some of these scholars assert that not only have such distinctions become impossible, but that the hubris entailed in having upheld them comes on full display: it is *because* humans have thought themselves separate from the non-human world that they have exploited and tinkered with it as they have (A. Tsing 2016; Latour 2009; 1993). The problem is, in other words, often blamed on anthropocentrism and delusions of human exceptionalism. Scholars such as Anna Tsing (2016) and Bruno Latour (1993), for example, each argue in their own way that the climate crisis has been prompted by a particular – and particularly Western - cultural imaginary that renders the human species as set apart from the rest of the beings on Earth, from nature, and from the materiality that humans themselves are made up of; matters that have been considered simply a resource for the human species and its society building efforts. Hence, it is a certain way of relating to - or *not* relating to, depending on perspective - that is evoked as the root cause of the climate crisis.

I will have occasion to return to these social scientific analyses of climate change later on in the chapter, but what I want to highlight here is how the idea of human exceptionalism is in such critiques frequently attributed to Christianity. Indeed for some critics, Christianity is even accountable for the worldview that legitimizes human exploitation of the planet's resources (Daggett 2019). A Danish sociologist of religion, André Herbener (2015), goes as far as to argue that the emergence of Christianity - together with the development of agriculture and the industrial revolution - marks what he describes (with deliberate irony) as a 'fall from grace' in human-environmental relations. It is the anthropocentric view of the world, as promoted by Christianity, which has legitimized the mindless destruction of the environment, Herbener contends. In this critique, Herbener echoes historian of technology Lynn White Jr., who attacks Christianity in the seminal essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" (1967). White's essay, which is widely referred to in discussions pertaining to Christianity and the environment, argues that Christianity is at the root of an ecological crisis that was already evident at the time of writing, due to the way it configures the relationship between humans and the natural environment. Christianity, he argued, depicts humans as the only life form made in God's image and casts it as radically different from the rest of creation. Furthermore, Christianity establishes humanity's dominion over the natural world, which in turn is reduced to a mere resource for human striving.

According to White, there is a strand within theology positing that, since God has created the natural world, we must be able to learn something about God through it (See also Haaning 2017). Hence, in the Early Church, White (1967) writes, nature was perceived to be a symbolic system through which God communicated to people. This was not a scientific approach to nature but rather what White deems an 'artistic' one. In the Middle Ages, however, nature was no longer understood as merely such a communicative, symbolic system; rather, it was conceived as able to reveal something about the workings of God's mind. As an example, White describes how the rainbow was no longer understood only as a sign of hope provided by God for humans but was studied as a sophisticated optical phenomenon that God had developed and that exhibited God's own complexity. Science was the study of God's creation, and, ultimately, of the nature of God. These two religiously informed projects – exploration and domination - merged in the 18th century and resulted in the devastating exploitation of our natural environment. Therefore, Christianity must be deemed to "bear a huge burden of guilt" for the ecological crisis, White argues (ibid.).

White's argument has become a prevalent narrative about Christianity as an anthropocentric religion that devalues nature based on its strict separation between the divine and the worldly, the human and the nonhuman. Even attempts made by theologians to articulate more

positive views of nature can be said to be marked by this kind of irredeemable anthropocentrism. According to anthropologist Cecilie Rubow (2020), contemporary Danish attempts at formulating eco-theologies do not manage to escape from anthropocentrism due to the conceptions of ‘nature’ they work from. Inspired by Gisli Pálsson’s delineation of different concepts of nature, Rubow argues that two types of nature dominate theological approaches to nature in Denmark: 1) the Big, untouched nature outside and, 2) the cultivated landscape that humans interact with as ‘stewards’ and consumers. However, according to Rubow there a third kind of nature, namely the completely entangled ‘natureculture’, as she calls it (ibid.8), in which a distinction cannot be made between the human and the nonhuman. The eco-theologies proposed by Danish theologians, Rubow argues, remain within nature 1 and 2, never truly taking into account the fact that the human is also ‘nature’. According to Rubow, the sharp distinction between the human and the non-human represents a problem for theology – as well as for other knowledge forms – if it is to grasp the current climate crisis and find viable ways out of it.

Peter and the other environmentally concerned pastors I spoke to are well aware of Rubow<sup>95</sup> and White’s analyses and agree with them – to a certain extent. They, too, are critical of the way (parts of) the human species has taken the earth to simply be a material resource for human exploitation. In a debate on Denmark’s public radio<sup>96</sup> with the abovementioned scholar, André Herbener, Henrik even says that it is “obvious” that Christianity has played a role in how human-environmental relations have developed, as it is impossible to separate Christianity from the way human culture and society in general have developed. However, according to him it is a mistake to argue that Christianity is anthropocentric. Instead, he asserts, it is ‘theocentric’: It is God, not humans, at the center of Christian cosmology. According to him, the anthropocentrism of some strands of Christianity can be traced back to the Renaissance, where the human came to stand out as exceptional for other reasons than simply a Christian worldview. Like White – and to some extent also Herbener (2015) – he argues that there are other strands of Christian thinking that crucially must be restored and deployed as spiritual and ethical resources in the current crisis. It might be that Christianity was evoked to legitimize planetary exploitation, but it is also in Christianity we will find the key to repairing the relationship humans have with the natural world.

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<sup>95</sup> In fact, the article in which Rubow delivers this particular analysis was written and published during the course of my fieldwork in a special issue on eco-theology to which several of my interlocutors also contributed. In the following months, I witnessed how my interlocutors discussed Rubow’s arguments and began addressing them in their own eco-theological efforts. I found myself on the other side, so to speak, of the flourishing exchange between theology and anthropology (Robbins 2020).

<sup>96</sup> Bruun, Christoffer Emil, dir. 2017. “Den Grønne Kirke.” *Tidsånd*. Danish Broadcasting Corporation.

With these discussions about Christianity's role and responsibility in mind, I now return to Peter, who can be understood as a participant in this kind of Christian work of repair.

### **The Deeply Incarnated God**

Back in Peter's office, I ask him what he means when he says that nature has value 'in itself'. He explains that this view of nature derives from a tradition of Scandinavian Creation Theology:<sup>97</sup>

When we think about sustainability, climate, biodiversity, and the environment in a theological context, we think about them from the perspective of Creation Theology [*skabelsesteologi*]. We think: God has created the world. The world has value in itself, simply by existing. Life has value simply by existing as it is. All living beings have value simply by existing as they are. They are parts of a whole. In biology we talk about it as an ecosystem. In theology we say that they are part of God's Creation.

That is, the value that 'all living beings' have in themselves derives from the fact that God created them, and they are part of his Creation, Peter explains. The positive Christian view of the world in Scandinavian Creation Theology is inspired by – among others – the church father Irenaeus of Lyon (130 AD), who praises God as the creator of all things. In his own time Irenaeus was in opposition to the Gnostics, who placed God in opposition to the world, as they considered the material world – all flesh – to be corrupt, a kind of mistake (Wingren 2004). Whereas the Gnostics viewed salvation as an escape from the physical body, Irenaeus conceived of earthly life as 'a gift from God' that humans ought to praise and value.<sup>98</sup>

Peter explains that he had long been inspired by Creation Theology and its praise of nature, but that he wanted to do more: he wanted to articulate the relationship between God and the environment in a 'Trinity perspective' (*treenigheds perspektiv*). This implies thinking about how the relationship between God and the material world can be conceived of *not only with reference to the first article of faith – God, the Creator – but also the second (Christ, the Son), and the third (the Holy Spirit)*. He

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<sup>97</sup> Roughly defined, Scandinavian creation theology (which should not be confused with American creationism) was developed in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a reaction to the then dominant strand of theology, German-inspired dialectic theology. While dialectic theology deemed God distant from and irreconcilable with the material and human world, creation theology in the hands of theologians such as Gustaf Wingren and K. E. Løgstrup emphasised God as the creator and continuous upholder of Creation. Rather than being far removed from the world, transcendent and distant from both the individual person and the material world, creation theology posits that God can be experienced in and known through Creation (*skabelsen*) itself and not only through the Bible or in blitz of vertical revelation such as posited by dialectic theology.

<sup>98</sup> The creation theology offered by Irenaeus is known to have greatly inspired N. F. S. Grundtvig (Wingren 2004) and has laid the ground for Scandinavian Creation Theology. Many of the more recent Danish theologians, such as K. E. Løgstrup, Ole Jensen and Jakob Wolf, who have addressed the environment as a theologically relevant issue have done so by emphasizing the value of nature due to its divinely created nature (Wolf 2012).

was especially keen on relating Creation care to Christology (i.e. theology concerned with the life and works of Jesus) which, according to Peter, has traditionally been quite anthropocentric. Much theology, Peter argues, has been concerned with why God became *human*, and what that tells us about God's solidarity with human existence, rather than with Creation as a broader, material phenomenon. One of the main tenets of Christianity, Peter argues, is that the Incarnation and the life and doings of Jesus Christ teaches us about God's nature and the way *God relates to the world*. The significance of the Incarnation, Peter says, is that it shows us that "God is not some distant, cosmic power, who is behind the universe, or behind our earth and its eco-systems," but that he cares for and sustains the world. That God incarnated himself in a human being – "a child from Nazareth" - implies that "God showed solidarity with the world".

Peter's argument seems to be that it might not be enough to stress that the world – human as well as nonhuman – has value because God *created* it; one must go further and say that by gaining a better understanding of God's *own way* of relating to Creation, humans can begin to relate to it anew. In other words, the Incarnation is rendered as an act thorough which God re-relate to the world in order to show solidarity with and to care for it. Peter's errand, then, is to emphasize God's ongoing act of relating to the world as an expression of care – and as a reason for also humans to care (much like what Henrik did in the beginning of this chapter, where I described his suggestion to extend the commandment to love one's neighbor to also encompass nature).

The emphasis on the Incarnation as an act of God showing solidarity with humans is widespread in Danish theology. However, according to Peter, it has mostly been so in quite anthropocentric terms: it has been concerned with the consequences for *human* life and salvation. What Peter wanted to push for in his formulation of a Christian response to the climate crisis is a deepening and widening of the scope of the Incarnation: the idea that God's solidarity pertained not only to humans but also to nature. It is in this regard he is inspired by Niels Henrik Gregersen's work on 'deep incarnation' (Gregersen 2016) and the thoughts of another Church Father, Athanasius of Alexandria (298 – 328 AD). According to Peter, Athanasius had challenged the conception of God as transcendent and distant from the material world by emphasizing that God incarnated himself in a physical body – in human flesh.<sup>99</sup> According to Athanasius this implies that

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<sup>99</sup> Athanasius was in a feud with the Arianians, who subordinated the Son to the Father, arguing that the Father was eternal, while the Son was begotten. Athanasius, however, insisted that God was the Father and the Son on equal terms, and that Jesus was equally divine spirit and human flesh. It is interesting to note that the Gnostics, who Irenaeus was up against, also emphasized Jesus. The difference is that whereas the Gnostics emphasized Jesus as 'gnosis' – divine knowledge, the word – Athanasius emphasized Jesus as body, as 'flesh'. To the Gnostics, the incarnation was about divine revelation, and, ultimately, about salvation *from* the fallen, material world, whereas it for Athanasius was about God's presence with the flesh (Wingren 2004). Recalling the idea of merographic politics (Markussen and Jensen 1999) that I presented in chapter 1, it seems that Christ, then, can be merographically connected either in the direction of 'flesh' or 'spirit'.

God was not a loving father from afar, but in fact *transgresses* the material world with his love. The concept of deep incarnation draws on this insight, claiming that the Incarnation does not only pertain to humans but has ‘a cosmic scope’ (Gregersen 2016, 2): God does not only assume human flesh, but *all living flesh*. Here is Peter’s rendition of the concept:

In the Gospel of John, for example, it does not say that ‘God became man’. In fact, it says ‘the word became flesh’. God's word - the force that is the origin of everything - became flesh. That is, it did not become *human*, but became *flesh*. It became flesh and blood, became part of this material world [he knocks on the table to evoke the material]. It is an overcoming, really, of thinking about the spiritual and the material as two different worlds. (...) A connection is established. It is not a connection we create with our consciousness. A connection is made between the spiritual and the material. The Word became flesh, and it became not only human flesh, but all flesh, all matter. () That the word became flesh meant that God united himself [*solidariserede sig*] with the created world. The solidarity that lies in the fact that the Word became flesh - that God became man - it was not just a solidarity with people, but also with suffering gazelles and... that God was in solidarity with the entire created world.

The Incarnation, the argumentation goes, effected that spirit and matter were conjoined not only in the human being, but in *all living beings*. The Incarnation therefore establishes a connection, Peter argues, between the material and the immaterial. A connection that he emphasizes is not only epistemological – it is not a matter of humans receiving a spark of divine wisdom, of ‘gnosis’ as the Gnostics would have it – but is a kind of radical (human as well as nonhuman) embodiment.

Back in our interview, as a final step in articulating his Trinitarian take on nature, Peter speaks of the Holy Spirit. It is not usually the Holy Spirit that is brought forth in Christian discourses on the environment, he says, but to him the Holy Spirit plays a vital role in sustaining the ‘community’, the ‘relationality’, of Creation. He mentions a third source of inspiration: the Church Father St. Basil (329-379AD) who perceived Christian fellowship as an expression of the fundamental ‘relationality’ that characterizes Creation and the Triune God, who sustains the world by way of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God’s breath, which is what “transpires between us as we are sitting here talking”, Peter says. He evokes the image of an ecosystem:

That is what the idea of ecosystem is all about: that we do not just live separately. We live with and off others, and we live in interaction with others. And this is also what is implied by the concept of the Holy Spirit. That is, it is God's breath that transpires between us. It implies that we are mutually dependent on each other and mutually each other's prerequisite for living. That is how it is with the

plants: without them there was, well, there was no photosynthesis, and CO<sub>2</sub> would not be converted into oxygen. Then it would be difficult for us to be here, right? So it is about this interdependence, this mutual obligation towards each other. [author's translation]

Hence, according to Peter's analogy, all life on Earth is sustained by the Holy Spirit, in the same way as biological life is sustained by photosynthesis. And just as biological life is defined by interdependence, so is the Godly-created life defined by interdependence. Indeed, the Holy Spirit seems to be something like a substantial force – the element of life, as Primo Levi (1975) has described carbon to be – that tie all living organisms together and sustains them thereby.

### **Countering Sanitary Thinking**

Peter concludes that by engaging with these Christian thinkers it became evident to him that the idea of the interconnectedness of God, humans, and the natural world has a long history in Christianity. This history, this 'spiritual resource', he argues, is important to bring forth because it is the rejection, or at least downplaying, of exactly this interconnectedness that has caused the environmental crisis (as discussed above). To engage with these early Christian thinkers – directly and by way of Gregersen's contemporary engagement with them – offers a welcome alternative to the kind of theology that has dominated in Denmark in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Especially since WW1, much theology, according to Peter, has focused on the individual human and its struggles with faith, sin, love and the self.

The most recent period in our history of theology has been the period after the First and Second World Wars where the whole emphasis has been exclusively on the second article of faith. That is, on God becoming man. On God's solidarity with the suffering humans. People were concerned with - when the whole world was falling apart, and they were shooting each other to pieces in the trenches of Flanders - where was God? God was the one who was in solidarity with the suffering human. This became the main header for what theology was. It tied into Kierkegaard and existentialism. And that became the core of Danish theology.

We have heard this historical analysis before: in chapter 2 of this thesis, I relayed Peter and other Green Church actors' accounts of how religion and politics, the Church and the State, have been separated from one another in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Such separations were the consequences of the way dialectic theology separated God and the world, and deemed God as a



distant, transcendent deity. I was provided this historical contextualization more than once by environmentally concerned pastors as they told me about their efforts to respond theologically to the climate crisis. From their view, Danish theology has been dominated by a particular theology that is primarily concerned with the individual, its sorrows, sins, ability to love and have faith in God and *not* with articulating Christian ways of caring for Creation or even other people. Henrik, whom we met in the beginning of this chapter, described to me during an interview, how he thought this dominant trend within Danish theology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been based on an impulse to ‘draw lines’ and ‘separate things into spheres’ such as the political and the theological, God and the world. He deems such orderings a form of “excessive sanitary thinking” (*overdreven hygiejnisk tænkning*).

What Peter and Henrik in their own words want to correct with the theological perspectives they presented to me – old and new - is to counter the idea of there being a strict separation between God and the world. The concept of ‘deep incarnation’, and the Christian cosmology it delineates, provide them with an alternative to that of dialectic theology that asserts strict separations between the material and the immaterial, the divine and the worldly. The problem, they argue, is that by keeping God and the world separate, humans have also come to consider *themselves* as separate from Creation. This makes them think that they are independent of it and can treat it as they like. A sense of distance and detachment, in this line of argumentation, is what has enabled humans to so mindlessly exploit nature. What I understand them to argue is that it is only by drawing God as well as humans closer to nonhuman nature, to unite them, that a process of environmental repair can be initiated. They are, I suggest, concerned with *reinventing the relations* of the Christian cosmos in order to create the conditions for loving the (nonhuman) world.

### **Relation as Remedy**

Marilyn Strathern (2020) argues that “the relation comes to be reinvented, or rediscovered, at moments of new knowledge-making. Reinvention happens over and over again, trivially and monumentally, this or that juncture yielding insight into some of relation’s own critical potential” (ibid.167). Strathern points to the realizations of “the precarity of species existence” (ibid.168) as one such moment that incites new knowledge making and where a reinvention of relations may take place. As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, Strathern suggests that the “ecological mess” we find ourselves in, has incited a broad call for attending to, and furthering, the relatedness of the world. “An academic consensus of a sorts in today’s world,” she writes, “is that its inhabitants must more than ever understand the relations that compose it” (2020, p167). She writes:

Those who have acquired a new sense of the fragility of the world as an ideobio-physical-social entity, articulate the new demand to grasp the

interdependence of beings and entities of all kinds. (...) How can we not be reading, Skafish (2014: 30) implies, apropos one academic dispute, but “in light of an ecological crisis demanding reinventing the relations between human and nonhuman”? (ibid.168)

Strathern’s observation is about recent developments within anthropology and related fields, where a focus on relating as a positive force have gained prominence in fields such as multi-species anthropology (ibid.). However, I find that Strathern’s observation of a contemporary inclination also captures what the acknowledgment of human-induced climate change incites the environmentally concerned pastors to do: the attempts made by Peter and Henrik to formulate theological responses to the climate crisis is a parallel instance of such attempts of re-describing relations in a moment where new knowledge or understanding is necessary in order to be able to properly care for that which has been neglected. According to Strathern, as Eric Hirsch has noted, descriptions and actions are intrinsically connected (Hirsch 2023, x). This entails that when people act – in Euro-America as well as in Melanesia - they act with respect to specific descriptions. Indeed, in her latest book (2020) Strathern declares that her interest has always been in what she calls “forms of expression and modes of argumentation, and the symbolic resources on which they draw” (ibid.x). Concepts – or “images of thought”, as she quotes Viveiros de Castro for calling them – “make the world through which we speak, no less” (ibid.), she writes. This implies, Hirsch (2023) contends in his introduction to Strathern’s thinking, that if particular descriptions are not available then it is not possible to act in the way those descriptions prescribe (ibid.x).

Peter and Henrik are trying to make the right description of the relation between God and the world, human and nonhuman, so human care for the nonhuman world can be elicited. This description hinges on relatedness as what enables such care. Peter and Henrik’s delineations of an eco-theology that takes deep incarnation as a key cosmological principle of Christianity is, I suggest, a correction to Lynn White-inspired descriptions of it as being defined by radical separation. It is such descriptions – whether forged by Christians themselves or others - that according to the pastors have legitimized human exploitation of, rather than care for, the nonhuman world. In the cosmos they sketch for us, God is not only distant from the world, but also very much in the world. The eco-theology Peter (and Henrik) offer seeks to establish other types of relations between God and the world - indeed a ‘deeper’ kind of relatedness - than one of radical separation. They want, in other words, to describe relatedness rather than separateness, proximity rather than distance in order to promote Christian care.

Hence, like the multispecies anthropologists, who according to Strathern are prompted to reinvent – indeed, to *further* - human-nonhuman relations in the face of climate

change, I argue that Peter and Henrik are responding to the climate crisis by evoking and redescribing relations – in their case, of the Christian cosmos. In fact, when I was introduced to Peter and Henrik’s theological engagements with how to diagnose and solve the problem of climate change, I got the uncanny feeling of learning to think about the climate crisis in a way that I already knew: these pastors seemed to be dealing with the same kind of problem in the same kind of way as those anthropologists who take the Anthropocene as a starting point for reimagining the relations of the world, for urging humans to “embrace their connections with other entities” (Chua and Fair 2022, 10) and to attend to “generative and affective relations beyond the human” (Lien and Pálsson 2021, 3). Such anthropologies also diagnose the climate crisis as the result of an illusion of ‘human exceptionalism’ (A. Tsing 2012) and of what Latour describes as the modern ‘work of purification’ (1993). And they, too, try to overcome this by urging us to pay more attention to the deep entanglement of human and nonhuman life (Tsing 2012), and the ensembles of more-than-human relations that define what Lien and Pálsson calls ‘extended sociality’ (2021, 4). In a similar way, Peter and Henrik also promote an analysis of climate change as an effect of anthropocentrism (to which Christianity - in some of its forms - have contributed) and an approach to solving it that emphasises more-than-human (including the divine) relationality and interdependence as key principles. In both of these projects of redescription relations, when evoked in a general sense, seem to represent themselves as *enablers of care*. There seems, in other words – and only to a certain extent - to be a shared perception of the problem and the answer to it, between the pastors and the anthropologists: *detachment is a problem, and relation is a remedy*.

By placing the two perspectives side by side, it becomes possible to tease out some of their defining features – those that converge and those that diverge. Hence, when I evoke anthropological critiques of anthropocentrism and calls for further human-nonhuman relatedness in this context, I do not intend for them to take up a traditional role as ‘theory’ in my analysis. Rather, I introduce them here as a voice *on par* with those of my interlocutors. I understand them to be addressing the same kind of problem with the same kind of relational attention as my interlocutors, but in a slightly different - but not necessarily dissonant – register. Hence, I am – as a first step - doing something that perhaps seems counterintuitive, namely pointing out continuities between a particular Christian take on human-nonhuman relations and those anthropological ones that has a posthuman inclination. This is counterintuitive because Christianity is considered to be perhaps *the* anthropocentric religion of the world, and thus incompatible with what we might describe as a post-humanist approach. But I nonetheless identify many similar speculations and projects within the two and find that to place them side by side makes it possible to tease out their similarities and differences. Inspired by Reinhardt (2015), I think of this as a ‘contrapuntal

analysis<sup>100</sup>. I show two things by undertaking this contrapuntal reading: First I would like to highlight how both of the endeavors, I describe, evoke ‘relation’ as a remedy for the ecological crisis. Relation, in these projects, is evoked, to use the terminology of Strathern, as something that carries a ‘positive tenor’ (ibid.3). Secondly, I will attend to the fundamental difference in the way the two voices deal with difference, distance and the figure of the human in the Anthropocene.

In the next part of the chapter, I begin by interrogating further why and how it is that an evocation of relations carries connotations of care and repair in the eco-theology presented by Peter and Henrik – as well as in anthropological suggestions to attend to human-nonhuman relations. To ask this question, of course, entails an implicit suggestion that it could be otherwise – care could be something that shows itself in respecting the radical otherness of an Other (Robbins 2013a; Ginn 2014; Weisdorf 2022), or as simply unrelated to something like ‘relations’ as would probably be the case in Strathern’s Melanesia, where the concept of relation as we Euro-Americans know it does not make sense. *To tease out why and in what particular form relations and relatedness show itself as a remedy* to the climate crisis for the environmentally concerned pastors, I now return to Henrik and his love for trees of which we heard about in the very beginning of this chapter.

## Love thy Nature

Henrik’s practice of photographing tree stumps can be seen as part of his larger ambition to develop what he calls an ‘eco-theological virtue ethics’. This ambition came as a prolongation of his PhD work in the early 00s on environmental ethics and theology, and his passionate engagement

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<sup>100</sup> In performing this kind of analytical move, I am inspired by Bruno Reinhardt (2015) and his performance of what he calls a “contrapuntal analysis”: In his ethnographic studies of Pentecostalism, Reinhardt noticed how his interlocutors spoke in a “Deleuzian patois” (Reinhardt 2015, 406). There was, in other words, something about their way of thinking that Reinhardt finds to be similar to the theoretical universe of Deleuze. This observation prompts Reinhardt to orchestrate what he calls an “unintuitive encounter” between the two – unintuitive seeing that Deleuze in works such as *Anti-Oedipus* “convey a libertarian ethos that testifies to a specific epoch (post–May 1968) and way of life openly antagonistic to Christianity”. (ibid. 406). Rather than explaining Pentecostal spirituality by way of Deleuze’s conceptual framework, and thereby risking “turning foes into friends”, Reinhardt pursues a contrapuntal analysis. This entails oscillating “between moments of resonance and harmonization as well as dissonance and incommensurability” (ibid.) in order to seek mutual clarification between the two. This allows him to offer new perspectives on debates pertaining to immanence and transcendence in the anthropology of Christianity. In a similar vein, I wish to address resonances and dissonances between those Protestant engagements with and conceptualizations of human-nonhuman relations I have learned about through fieldwork and those of environmental concerned, post-humanistically inclined anthropologists, that I have encountered in the anthropological literature. I too recognize these two discursive traditions as distinct, but also as having at the same time “irreducible ethico-political agendas *and* zones of translatability” (ibid). While Reinhardt is concerned with the different and overlapping conceptions of immanence and transcendence, I am interested in the different but also overlapping problematizations and conceptualizations of human-nonhuman relations, human exceptionalism, and of previous ways of parting up the world, that I find in both my field and in post-humanist approaches to the Anthropocene.

with the Green Church, which he co-founded. After finishing his PhD, he was ordained as a pastor in the Danish Church, and ever since then, he has combined his priestly duties with his dedication to environmental issues. Besides being part of the Green Church steering board, Henrik has organized annual ‘Creation services’, experimental pilgrim-services in the forest, reading groups on nature and Christianity,<sup>101</sup> written sermons about carbon emissions and consumerism, and critical commentaries for the news media.

Henrik’s ambitions to develop an ‘eco-theological virtue ethics’ rests on a desire to figure out how humans can approach climate change mitigation without making it feel like a sacrifice. We should *want* to do something, he argued when I interviewed him about this particular project in his office that was full of stacks of books from authors as diverse as Hartmut Rosa, Martin Luther, Karl Marx and Nietzsche. To act in accordance with what we know we should do, ought to be part of making life flourish - of aspiring to the ‘good life’ - in Aristotelian terms he said<sup>102</sup>. He was therefore keen on finding ways of articulating nature as something humans would and should love, feel grateful for, and wonder over. The suggestion Henrik makes in the video that I relayed at the very beginning of this chapter, is one such articulation, where he urges us to approach, indeed relate to, nature in the same way as we relate to, and care for, other human persons. We should, he says, think of *nature as our neighbor*.

To understand the implications of this suggestion, it is worth pausing to notice how what is seemingly a quite straightforward command in fact leaves quite a lot of room for interpretation. Because what does it mean to love the other *as* yourself? Does it imply that you should love yourself first? Or that the neighbor is *like* you? Or is it the same kind of love that you should show yourself and the neighbor? And who counts as a neighbor anyway? Questions of distance, similarity and modes of relating arise. Interpretations of this commandment goes a far back as Christianity itself; in fact it can very well be considered another of those ‘virtual problems’ that Bialecki (2014) describes Christianity to be defined by.

Besides the climate crisis, another context for Henrik’s particular interpretation of the commandment is that there is an ongoing debate among Danish Christians about *who* counts as one’s neighbor. Some take the commandment to imply a general attitude one must have to all

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<sup>101</sup> As part of my fieldwork, I participated in two Creation services and two outdoor services, as well as a monthly reading group in the autumn of 2020.

<sup>102</sup> In fact, Henrik tried to combine two things that many other Christian thinkers in Denmark find difficult to reconcile, namely Løgstrup and virtue ethics. Løgstrup is often credited for dismissing the existence of such a thing as “Christian ethics” and as suggests instead the idea of “ontological ethics” (Rabjerg 2017). According to Løgstrup acts of for example compassion and trust are – ideally - expressions of *life itself*, rather than of ethical subjects or cultural values. Løgstrup’s particular take on ethics have not made it into the more recent anthropological attention to ethics, but it would certainly be an interesting challenge to attend to his idea of ethics as an immanent force, an ethics not stemming from humans but the world itself.

other people, near and far, and others argue that one's neighbors are only those concrete other who are standing right in front of you, or who are part of one's family, neighborhood, or social circle; some stretch it as wide as to encompass one's countrymen, and other others all the way into eternity. The frontlines of this debate came on full display in connection with the arrival of Syrian refugees in 2015. A spokesperson for a spontaneously organized civic aid organization evoked the commandment to love one's neighbor to argue that, as a Christian country, Denmark should welcome and aid the newcomers. She was fiercely attacked by an outspoken then-member of a populist right-wing party who is also known to be a long-standing member of Tidehverv. She stated that to evoke the commandment in this context was in fact the opposite of neighborly love: it was self-love in the form of self-righteousness. She argued: "The Syrian refugees and the children in Africa are not my neighbors. It would be crazy to demand that I should love them, because I do not know them."<sup>103</sup> According to her, then, neighbor love can only be stretched to those one 'knows'.

With his suggestion to extend the commandment to include non-human others, Henrik can be said to stretch the commandment to yet another arena, namely nonhuman nature. Henrik would probably side with the first position in the debate around refugees and harshly oppose the latter debater's statement. However, in his argument too, I suggest, much seems to hinge on the kind of proximity and acknowledgement evoked by the term 'those who one *knows*'. In the statements he makes in the video, which I will now turn to, *knowledge* seems also to be an important ingredient in caring for nature.

### **A Relational Duplex**

When Henrik speaks to us from Gudenå spring in the abovementioned video, he opens by stating that he wants to address "the relationship between God and nature and between Christianity and the climate crisis". What is the connection, he asks? During the video we understand that the main question he wants to answer is how to better the human relationship to nature; to make us go into 'climate fight', as Henrik says. To answer this, he begins by talking about interpersonal relations: "I think perhaps we can think about it as our relationship with other people. (...) A child, a spouse, someone you love", he says. He suggests we think of it as our neighbor: "you must love your neighbor as yourself". It seems that Henrik is speaking analogically here (cf. Holbraad and Pedersen 2017): *he is using one relation as a model for another* in order to extend the emotional and moral associations – indeed, commandments – from the one to the another. It is analogical in the sense that Henrik and his viewers share an understanding of it not being, in fact, the same – nature is not

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<sup>103</sup> <https://www.kristendom.dk/hvem-er-min-naeste/den-syriske-flygtning-er-ikke-min-naeste>

one's child, spouse or a person one loves - but we can *think about* the relation in a similar way. As a second step, Henrik provides what he calls a 'theological extract', arguing like Peter, that the Incarnation pertained to all the 'flesh' of the world, not just the human (i.e. deep incarnation). This is why, Henrik argues, that it is possible to meet God in nature in the same way as it is possible to meet God in another human person. Here then, Henrik, extends the relation God has with humans to the natural world in another analogical move: what humans should model their relationship to nature on, is in fact God's relationship to nature. Except, by stressing not only the scope of the Incarnation, but also the *materiality* of it – "Jesus became physical matter. Jesus became the earth, the globe, Jesus became the stardust that comes from the Big Bang", he says – Henrik seems to be evoking a rather substantial relation - one that is not made by the mind, as Peter asserted earlier - but that entails that human as well as nonhuman 'flesh' has been infused with God's spirit. Hence, it is not (only) that we can *think of* God's way of relating to nature as *being similar to* the way God relates to humans, it is also substantially the same relation. No difference, Henrik argues, was drawn between the human and the non-human when God decided to re-connect and remain with his fleshy Creation – first in the form of Jesus and then in the form of the Holy Spirit (a force of relationality, as Peter described earlier). In my interview with Henrik, he said that he found that it has always been a temptation in Christian thought to make a sharp distinction between this-worldly relations and relations to God ("*at skille forholdet til denne her verden ud fra forholdet til Gud*"); to conceive, as he puts it, of this world as fallen, as an illusion, a mistake, like the Gnostics did, and to conceive of God as something transcendent, something radically different from this world. However, according to him, the idea of the Triune God implies that those relations *are the same*. The Triune God, he said, implies that "my relationship with God is my relationship to you. And perhaps my relationship with God is also my relationship with Earth." To him, he said, the basic question is whether one is engaged in 'unity-thinking' (*embedstanking*) or in 'dualist-thinking' (*dualismetankning*): is God and the world separate, or are they one? If there is coherence between the natural world and God, he said, as the (before mentioned) Church Fathers asserted, then it is a mistake to differentiate the relations between God, humans, and the nonhuman from each other. If the command to 'love one's neighbor as yourself' has been interpreted as though it meant that because God loves *you*, you should love the other (whom God also loves), then it follows that if God loves *nonhuman beings* as much as humans, such beings should be care for like neighbors in the same way as humans-neighbours.

I first want to draw attention to the fact that it seems necessary for Henrik to evoke a whole range of other relations in order to give guidance on how humans may improve their relationship to nature. And especially how the relationship Henrik wishes to extend to nature is

modelled specifically on what we might call personal relations: “a child, a spouse, someone you love”. We might even specify further and say that the kind of relation Henrik seems to refer to is what anthropologists have defined as kinship: relations that entail a kind of ‘mutuality of being’ (Sahlins 2011) or a ‘diffuse solidarity’ (Schneider 1980). They are those ‘you love’, those you feel obliged ‘to care for’ and ‘fight for’, Henrik says. However, whereas in other contexts it may be important for people to distinguish between different kinds of personal relations in order to differentiate and compare them (Strathern 2020, p55), it seems that Henrik has bundled various relations together here.

He is bundling relations this way, I argue, because the point he wants to make has to do with a certain *quality* of ‘relation’ itself - relation in its generic form - rather than with specific relationships. This, I suggest, draws on certain positive connotations of the concept of relation in Euro-American thinking. When evoked in its generic form, Marilyn Strathern (2020) suggests, ‘relation’ carries a distinctively ‘positive tenor’ (ibid.3). Strathern’s exposition of the concept of relations suggests that unqualified, relation is a motivated concept, a concept imbued with positive connotations. When relations can be evoked as a remedy to a climate crisis that is diagnosed as the result of detachment and separation it is because ‘relation’ and ‘relating’ carry connotations of mutuality, amity, and correspondence. To unpack this further, so as for it not to sound not only tautological, I turn to Strathern’s argument in some length. Strathern has paid acute attention to the way Euro-Americans think about ‘relation’ – the concept they have at hand – and the work it does in making their worlds (Strathern 1995; 2005; 2017; 2020). My exposition of her exposition serves the purpose of describing Henrik’s redescription of relations - yes, relations are indeed everywhere, like “dog-leads wrapping themselves around every foothold” (Strathern 2020, 2) - and the way this supposedly will enable Christian care for nature.

### **The Positive Tenor of Relating**

Strathern argues that the Euro-American concept of relation came to take on this particular ‘positive tenor’ due to certain developments in the early modern period, and more specifically the Anglophone Enlightenment of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Strathern’s story is about what happened in that period, but what she wants us to note is that, although a link was nearly made, it just so happened that it was not: namely, the link between individual identity and kinship relations (p135). Strathern positions John Locke as the main character of the drama she wants to unfold; a drama, she states, about something that *didn’t* happen. In Locke’s attempts to describe human cognition, he argues that knowledge about things is produced through relations: “those who have far different ideas of a man, may yet agree in the notion of a father” (ibid.28). The way we conceive of the identity of things, in other words, is relative. However, when Locke tries in his other writings to formulate an



answer to another pertinent question of his time, namely the ‘riddle of identity’, he argues that the identity of a person resides in the consistency of a consciousness that maintains an ‘I’ (ibid.37). The identity of a person is, in other words, established by way of self-relationality, not other-relationality. While on the one hand Locke argues for relations as being what produces knowledge about the nature of an object, when it comes to personal identity, relations – such as that between father and child from Locke’s example of relative terms - are not in the picture. As such, they are not seen as foundational to what came to be perceived as the identity of an individual person.

According to Strathern, to exclude kinship from discussion of identity delineates a cosmology in which individual identity is detached from - indeed independent of – kin relations. A person was imagined as a being whose relations “lie outside its essential nature” (ibid.38), a ‘person-plus-its-relations’, Strathern argues. This position relations, she writes, as a matter of ‘external’ linkages (ibid.). This is something Strathern returns to again and again: that something happened during the Scottish Enlightenment that brought into effect a notion of ‘relation’ as something that lies *between* entities and is not, as such, intrinsic to the terms being connected (contrary to how persons are thought of in for example Strathern’s Melanesia). This, Strathern suggests, had consequences for how interpersonal relations came to be perceived.

At the time when Locke did *not* connect conceptions of personal identity with kinship, Strathern describes how a parallel, yet related, development took place in the realm of interpersonal relations: It was in this period that ‘relation’ was introduced as a generic term for kinspersons – as well as for friends and other acquaintances - in English<sup>104</sup>, and not just for logical relations as it had been previously (ibid.32). Up until that time, ‘relations’ had only been a term for epistemic relations, the linking done in knowledge production (ibid.71). Now kinspersons came to be considered a person’s ‘relations’ or ‘relatives’. This increase in the use of ‘relation’, Strathern suggests, was connected to the prominence given to ‘identity’ and ‘individuals’: It was, she writes, as though there were at once more individuals and relations around (ibid.42). Strathern suggests that this change of idioms brought about new conceptualizations of interpersonal relations, including those between kin: As a generic, non-specifying term, ‘relation’ could be used to acknowledge the kinship of a person without specifying the degree of that relatedness (ibid.54).

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<sup>104</sup> Strathern is of course describing something that is on the one hand very particular to English history and the English language, and which cannot be extended 1:1 to a Danish context. But on the other hand, Strathern argues that the specifically Anglophone developments she describes, have had ramifications for Euro-American and anthropological thinking in general. That is, what happened (or not) in the period, she is describing, has expressed and/or contributed to a broader thinking in what she calls Naturalist cosmology and its distinctive relational imagination. I allow myself to make the leap and stretch her arguments about this relational imagination to also be relevant to the Danish pastors as they both draw on and experiment with redescribing relations. At some other time, in another context, it would be exciting to trace how the terminology for and conceptions of personal relations in Denmark have developed.

“Nonidentifying generics were used of intimate kin such as parents or children as well as of distant people whom one may not have heard of before they were on the doorstep” (ibid.32). This generic form, Strathern writes, “offered possibilities for modulating the range of those one did or did not wish to acknowledge” (p.54). A ‘sliding scale’ was introduced allowing individuals or families to claim or refuse relations as more or less ‘close’ or ‘distant’ to make claims to things such as social status, employment, or wealth. This implied that who a person was related to, and to what degree, was bound up with *recognition* – with knowledge, as it were. Whereas earlier terms for interpersonal connections like ‘kin’, ‘kindred’ and ‘friend’ had suggested a corporeal connection, regardless of whether it was close or distant (ibid.36), the generic term ‘relation’, Strathern argues, evoked a relation based on knowledge and recognition.

The precise significance of generics, such as “relations” and “friends” (and later “connections”) for kin ties, was that they combined recognition—acknowledging the kinship of this or that person, that is, choosing to know them—without specifying degree, without, in short, specifying the nature of the tie, and thus the kinship properties embodied in those who were related. (p.32)

This emphasis on recognition as an important ingredient in relating, Strathern argues, becomes particularly evident in the way ‘friendship’ came to represent the ideal form of relating. Earlier, ‘friendship’ had been used to designate, indeed emphasize, intimate bonds between kin as well as non-kin<sup>105</sup>. However, in the early modern period ‘friend’ took on a new meaning and significance: friendship came to designate an incorporeal, voluntary relation between persons; a personal relation based on each knowing that the other knows (that they *know* each other and recognize each other as friends). Friendship, then, came to be perceived as the ideal form of relating in modern, Euro-American thinking, because of the way it epitomized the significance of knowledge and recognition in interpersonal relations.

It is in friendship between individuals, as we are told over and over again, that the positive value of relations lies, and purportedly appears in its ideal form. The notion of friend has long been suffused with personally expressed and positive moral sentiment, and this connotation occupies center stage. Now if friendship evinces a pure form of relationality, the purity derives from idealizing the outflowing (self-)expression of untrammelled individuals, and this mobilization

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<sup>105</sup> Such bonds of friendship were exhibited in public displays of bodily intimacy – friends would, for example, be buried together “as brothers”, they would mix blood and drink from the same cup, Strathern writes (p36). During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, however, this corporeal aspect of friendship was annulled, as bodily intimacy became reserved for conjugal relations (p37).

of sentiment and feeling is— inadvertently or not—colloquially expressed in terms of the mind’s workings: friendship is nothing if it is not recognized. (p180)

Due to the unequivocal requirement of recognition and emphasis on the conscious, knowing subject, friendship is considered to be ‘relation’ in its pure form, Strathern writes. Friend carries the ‘positive tenor’ of being based on choice and not obligation (opposite kin), and of overcoming distance by admitting and acknowledging intimacy (opposite impersonal relations). Friendship is something chosen, something forged by a free and conscious individual.

Strathern speculates that recognition – which is epitomized in friendship - is considered to be so powerful, because relating cannot be taken for granted in the Euro-American cultural imagination. In an entity-plus-relation-cosmology, relations must be inferred or forged. They are not, as Strathern and others have described in their ethnographies of other cosmologies/ontologies, what comes *before* the entities (see for example Viveiros de Castro 2019). Whereas for Melanesians, entities are simply the appearance of relations (Gell 1999), in a Euro-American imagination relation is that which lies outside and between them.

This, then, implies that within an Euro-American imagination, relating happens across difference: it is because of a significant otherness that relating is done. At the same time, Strathern writes, relating is done by identifying, recognizing, some kind of similarity or correspondence between what is then considered to be related – this is the case in knowledge making as well as in interpersonal relations. Strathern posits that it is a general default position to think that the entities that are being joined “exist in a relation of (positive) mutuality, which is also—if only in the implied comparison—a point of likeness” (ibid.98). To make this point about how the concept of relation has come to imply similarity to Euro-Americans, Strathern adds Hume to her gallery of protagonists in her exposition of relations: According to Strathern, Hume presumed that a relation involves correspondence; that things and ideas become connected to each other by way of detecting similarities. Hume was primarily concerned with epistemic relations, but by drawing examples from interpersonal relations, he reveals the kind of analogical flow between the two realms that is central to Strathern’s argument: Hume evoked kinship terms as a way of illustrating his conception of how ideas can be more or less strongly connected: brothers are connected by causality and so are fourth cousins, but they are not equally close (ibid.127). Hume furthermore states that it is the degree of the connection that decides the intensity of the affection between the terms. As a relation lessens, so does the affection. The connection between a parent and a child is used as an example of the strongest of connections, but Hume notes that it is not only consanguinity that can have this effect (ibid.127). Relations between friends or acquaintances can be explained by the same principle of connections by different degrees. Hence, the conclusion

is that people become attracted to each other as they recognize something familiar or similar in each other. The more similarity, the stronger a connection, the more affection and attraction. At the heart of Euro-American kinship thinking then, Strathern argues, there is a folding-in of epistemic relations with interpersonal relations. Euro-American kinship has to do with recognizing each other, with each party *knowing* and *acknowledging* that they are related. It implies recognition of mutuality.

Hence, in the realm of knowledge making it is by identifying similarities, correspondence, between entities that knowledge is produced; relating things to each other to produce knowledge entails finding points of likeness between them. This is what grants 'relations' a positive tenor – it is, after all, in knowledge-producing endeavors “a good thing to have found it!”, as Strathern writes. This positive tenor clung to the term as it travelled into the realm of interpersonal relations. Here too, relation came to carry positive connotations in its generic form: relating entails relating at and across a distance by way of recognizing some kind of correspondence, affinity and/or mutuality between persons. As such Strathern offers a description of the Euro-American relational imaginary: “degrees of similarity and dissimilarity indicate closeness and distance, such that similarity shows itself as the basis of solidarity and common feeling while dissimilarity leads to strangeness and estrangement” (ibid.136). Strathern only hints at this, but what I think she is suggesting is that the kinds of relations that are called for by environmentally concerned anthropologists and their likes are those from which *care* and a sense of *mutuality* will emerge. Indeed, Strathern also takes note of how similarity might implicitly be a prerequisite for care. When relations can be evoked as a remedy, it is because 'relation' and 'relating' carry a positive tenor – an idea of recognition and mutuality. With this in mind, we now return to Henrik.

### **Know thy Neighbour**

Henrik's description of the relations between God, human and the nonhuman and his suggestion to relate to nature as a neighbor hinges on a particular kind of folding-in of interpersonal relations with knowledge relations: What matters is not so much whether we consider nature as specifically a child or a spouse or someone else that we love, but rather that we recognize that there is a 'relation' in exactly the kind of generic sense that Strathern writes about. It is by cultivating the same kind of relation as one has to significant others that nature will come into the orbit of a person's relational and thus affectionate universe. It is by relating – in various ways – to nature, that people will inevitably 'go into climate battle'. Henrik, in other words, evokes relation as a positive force imbued with connotations of mutuality and affection (i.e. Hume, Sahlins). The relations, he evokes, are at once *epistemic*: “We must think about our relations to nature *as* our relationship to other people”, and *substantial*: humans and nonhumans are both created and

redeemed by God, they are, indeed, the same deeply-incarnated flesh, made up of “the same dust from the Big Bang”. However, even if the nonhuman natural world is as much the ‘flesh’ that God incarnated himself in as in human flesh - and that this brings nature into the sphere of Christian neighborly love - this has seemingly not made humans care for nature in the same way as they have cared for other humans. The substantial relation is not enough to elicit care in itself: an *intentional, conscious act* must be made to forge a relation of care. That is, to relate care-fully to nature is based on a folding in of epistemic and personal-cum-kinship relations.

Equipped with Strathern’s points about Euro-American kinship-thinking, I suggest that the implications of this relational imaginary for Henrik is that in order to evoke a relation of care and mutuality, Henrik must simultaneously delineate a substantial connection between God, human, and nonhuman – one of similarity – and provide a theological explanation of it, teach us about it, in order for us to *know* about it, to acknowledge it, in order to properly relate. It is the *acknowledging* of the relation that will make a difference in regard to establishing mutuality and care. And, I argue, this acknowledgement is supposedly achieved by the description – the knowledge - that the theological concept of ‘deep incarnation’ provides; redescription – concepts, as it were - enable certain actions. As Henrik also said in the beginning of the chapter: the purpose of developing an eco-theology (what I have described as a project of *redescribing relations*) is to be able to convey what the world one believes in looks like and, ultimately to convince people about it, so that they will come to treat the natural environment more carefully. It is, in other words, necessary to provide us with *knowledge* about deep incarnation, to make us aware of just how deep our connection with the non-human nature is, if we are to practice the kind of care such relatedness may demand of us.<sup>106</sup>

What I have not touched upon yet, but which is also implied by this description of the “forms of expression and modes of argumentation” (Strathern 2020, p.x) that Henrik employs as he redescribes the relations between humans and nature, is that the kind of relation he outlines also implies *separation* and *difference*. In the next – and last – part of this chapter, I turn to the way difference and distance are also important ingredients in the pastors’ redescription of relations (between God, human, nonhumans) and their delineation of what I call the *optimal distance* for care. To do so, I also return one last time to the resonances – this ‘awkward relation’ (Robbins 2006; Strathern 1987) - I noted earlier between Henrik and Peter’s eco-theology and the anthropologists

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<sup>106</sup> The relations that *God* has to the world – human and nonhuman – is also evoked as a relation that combines substantial, kin-like relations with recognition of this relation across a distance. Hence, to the extent that human relationships to nature is modelled on God’s relationship to the world we find the same folding-in of epistemic and kin-like relations.

(and their kindreds) who in a similar way strive to redescribe human-nonhuman relations as a response to the climate crisis.

## The Optimal Distance

While there is affinity between the way the pastors and the anthropologists diagnose the climate crisis as a result of modern illusions of detachment and human exceptionalism and in how they turn to careful relating as a remedy, there is also a point on which they converge: namely on the question of radical difference and on the role and figure of ‘the human’ that emerges from such projects of relating (Weisdorf, Hoeck, and Randløv Rungby forthcoming). Because whereas anthropologists attending to human-nonhuman relations seek to challenge modern conceptions of the human as a bounded individual or a transcendental category - i.e. Man (A. Tsing 2016) - Peter and Henrik do not counter anthropocentrism by dissolving such a perception of the human. Let me proceed contrapuntally:

To at least some of the anthropologists, who engage with the idea of the Anthropocene as an occasion to reimagine interspecies relations, the idea of a transcendent figure of the human represents a problem (Lien and Pálsson 2021; Weisdorf, Hoeck, and Randløv Rungby forthcoming; A. Tsing 2012). As Anna Tsing notes (2016), even if the Anthropos – the human – is at the center of anthropology’s discipline, it is also the first to challenge any kind of claim to this being a transcendent or universal category. Especially so for those who take a post-humanist approach and seek to dislodge the exclusive attention to humans, their perspectives, and productions, that has otherwise dominated the social sciences and humanities (Chua and Fair 2019). They posit that human life is not only governed by ideas and symbolic systems such as language but is made up of all such other materials and beings that populate the world. One such anthropologist is Anna Tsing herself, who as part of her attempt at making sense of the current planetary condition - a condition she calls “Earth stalked by Man” (2016) - has engaged in challenging the figure of Enlightenment Man by attending to interspecies relations. She writes:

Species interdependence is a well-known fact - except when it comes to humans. *Human exceptionalism blinds us.* Science has inherited stories about human mastery from the great monotheistic religions. These stories fuel assumptions about human autonomy, and they direct questions to the human *control* of nature, on the one hand, or human *impact* on nature, on the other, rather than to species interdependence. One of the many limitations of this heritage is that it has directed us to imagine human species being, that is, the practices of being a

species, as autonomously self-maintaining—and therefore constant across culture and history. (Tsing 2012, p144)

Tsing argues that if one of the root problems today is the arrogance and anthropocentrism of humans, the social sciences and humanities may perhaps provide new ways of imagining the figure of the human, as well as all those other non-humans that have not been granted much attention in these disciplines (ibid.). Tsing has done so by studying Matsutake mushrooms that, by nature, are always companion species, thriving only in interspecies relations (A. L. Tsing 2015). By attending to the various “world-making projects” that evolves with, by, and around such mushrooms, Tsing suggests that the world is characterized by “contaminated diversity” (ibid.). With this term Tsing wants to capture how world-making projects – those efforts people and other species undertake to make workable living arrangements for themselves – are diverse, but that they also overlap, depend on, and contaminate each other. Nothing happens - nothing is sustained - in isolation, she argues. Survival requires collaboration (ibid. 28). “Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option” (Tsing, 2015, p. 27). Tsing proposes the image of ‘assemblage’ to describe this vision of the world, referring to the way biologist have used this concept to avoid the “fixed and bounded connotations of ecological community” (ibid.23). In the world perceived as assemblage species are seen to be influencing each other in ways that cannot be settled – they are “open-ended gatherings,” Tsing writes, that “allow us to ask about communal effects without assuming them” (ibid. 23).

Offering a similar (yet also different argument) that is not so much about crossing species boundaries but rather epistemological ones, Bruno Latour suggests that an appropriate response to the environmental crisis must entail letting go of what he deems modern inclinations to ‘purify’ (1993). In an article touching upon the green politics of his day, Latour (Latour 1998) argues that there are two paths to go down: to continue to ‘modernize’ or to instead ‘ecologize’. To ‘modernize’ entails continuing the work of purification which, as relayed earlier, entails parting up of the world into domains and oppositions such as Nature/Culture, human/nonhuman, religion/politics/science. To ecologize entails the opposite movement: to acknowledge the legitimacy of what has hitherto been considered inappropriate ‘hybrids’ (ibid.). To ecologize implies disturbing and dissolving modern separations and dualisms in order to acknowledge how things in the world might be connected up differently, indeed constituted differently, from what the modern constitution has held them to be. To ecologize is about not being sure how things are connected or separated. As such, it is the opposite of saying that ‘everything is nature’, or ‘everything is connected in a whole’. It implies not presuming big categories such as ‘Nature’ or ‘Humanity’. Latour labelled (perhaps counterintuitively) this activity of deleting the category of Nature ‘to ecologize’.

Based on this delineation of a small snippet of Tsing and Latour's engagements with how to respond to climate change,<sup>107</sup> I suggest that there are resonances with what Peter (and Henrik) are suggesting with their eco-theology. My account of Peter's cosmology *could* suggest that the cosmology he is trying to delineate is based on a desire to 'ecologize' in order to offer a counterpoint to the modernity-inflicted dialectic theology. To, in other words, "step on the lines", "mix the potatoes and the sauce", and bring God and the world, the human and the non-human, closer together in a way where they are all 'contaminated' by each other. However, there is, nonetheless, a fundamental difference: In the image Latour's conjures up of 'ecologizing' nothing can encompass something else because everything takes part in each other's making - to ecologize entails doing away with bounded wholes and entities. And in Tsing's patchy Anthropocene nothing is *not* contaminated, "purity is not an option" (Tsing 2015, 27). Peter, however, might be stressing interdependence and relationality, but in the Christian cosmology he is delineating there is a whole and a pure category: everything is, in fact, connected by one, transcendent (yet also immanent) being, namely God. God encompasses as much as he transgresses the flesh of the world, and nothing partakes in making God. This became evident when I asked Peter some clarifying questions about whether what he told me about 'deep incarnation' implies that God *is* the flesh of the world. No, he answered promptly, he was not talking about 'pantheism', the idea that the world *is* God. It is rather that "God is *in, with, and between* things. And that they are in Him," he said. Hence, God might be penetrating the world with his love and life-giving force (i.e. what Peter said about the Holy Spirit), but God is also something different from the world. In contrast to an idea of the world as eco-system *without* a God, the Christian cosmology that he wanted to promote, Peter explained, entailed that it is possible to speak of 'good' and 'evil':

With a Gaia theory you risk ending up in a kind of romanticism or complete relativism, where you cannot speak about something being better than something else because everything is simply just there. (...) It is possible to speak about good and evil in this [deeply-incarnated eco-system]. That would not be possible if you subscribe to some kind of Gaia theory. It may be that a gazelle can suffer. At least that's what it looks like when you see it being attacked by a lion. But you can't say that there is something evil or wrong about it. There is nothing evil in the lion. It's just the way the world is. But Christianity insists that there is actually good and evil. When a person is nailed to a cross and screams, it is in fact evil.

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<sup>107</sup> I know that I am setting myself up for criticism by painting with such a broad brush in regards to the enormous and enormously diverse literature that take up the problem of human-nonhuman relations in the context of the environmental crisis. I would like to emphasize that my reason for evoking some of their perspectives is to use them as a kind of counterpoint to what is going on in my own material, implying that I trace (as well as perform) resonances and dissonances in order to tease out what I want to have in my own description of the pastors.



That is to say, everything is not just. There is good and evil, and there is something good that takes precedence and something evil that interferes with the good.

Peter said that this also spoke to the nature and role of humans. Because, he said, humans are, in fact, the only beings who have been “created in the image of God”. Peter said that he knows some people find such convictions “inappropriately anthropocentric”, and that there is “a nice humility in thinking that humans are no more than the spider or the grain of wheat”, but - he continued - “there is no way out of the fact that we are the only beings who have been endowed with - as Grundtvig said - rationality, imagination, language, and self-consciousness”. And this is important, he argued, because that is what makes humans the only ‘responsible’ beings on Earth. “A lion”, he said, “cannot take responsibility for what it does. After all, it only does what it does because it is a lion. But we actually have the option of taking responsibility for whether I want to drink the coffee or I want to throw it at your head”. The human, in other words, is characterized by the kind of self-consciousness that we heard Locke talk about earlier. It is this Godly-given self-consciousness that according to Peter sets it apart from the rest of Creation. Hence, there is, according to Peter, a *radical* difference between humans and nonhumans in that humans are made in the image of God.

So, while Latour, Tsing and Peter share an impulse to de-purify, Peter maintains a whole and a position from where everything can be encompassed (Handelman 2008). Even if God is not distant from his Creation, there is still a difference between being the creator and the created; God is not identical with the world, as Peter emphasized. While the aim of eco-theology is to further God’s relatedness to the natural world and thereby counter the idea that the human is all there is, we find within this ecological thinking nonetheless that humans remain particular and unique beings. Establishing a relation of care hinges on *difference* and thus, a certain *separation* between humans and the others.

In this redescription of relations, Peter then does retain a sense of separateness between God, humans and the nonhuman. He wants, it seems, to bring them in closer but retain their differences, as this is the prerequisite for human discernment of good and evil in the world. Hence, the kind of deeper relatedness that is evoked here, is one where what is related retain their distinctiveness, differences, and to some extent also their purity. Christian care requires distance and difference, but also unity and relation – that is, *an optimal distance*.

### **Relational Implications**

Even if Strathern agrees that a reinvention of ‘relations’ might be exactly what is needed in our present ‘ecological mess’ – and that there might be work for anthropologists and their ‘strong

vocabulary of relations' in this regard - she also warns against taking current formulations of relating for granted. Concepts come with baggage, and so does the distinctively Euro-American (and, Strathern argues, anthropological) concept of 'relations' that we have at hand and as I outlined earlier. Hence, what Strathern argues is needed is not only a reinvention of *what* is related or to what degree it is so, but a new look at the actual *concept of relations*, including the symbolic resources it draws from, what it does and how it structures the world. With her exposition of relations - of which I have outlined a small part in the above - Strathern draws our attention to how the concept of 'relation', which current efforts to reinvent the relations of the world often hinge on, comes with its own baggage and ways of acting. What Strathern's exposition of the Euro-American concept of relations shows is that even in attempts to break with what we might call the 'work of purifications', the Euro-Americans who are trying to re-invent relatedness in the face of climate crisis have at their disposal a concept of relations that retain separation between what is being related. This creates certain ambiguities in the use of relational language, as it both enables a reinvention of (certain kinds of) relations (for example between the human and the nonhuman) and retains the dynamics of a world made up of entities-plus-their-relations. Commenting on a suggestion made to consider organisms - human and nonhuman - as symbiotic 'holobionts', rather than as bounded entities, Strathern writes:

In linguistic-conceptual form, if not in the authors' intentions, how relations are described may presuppose the very kind of already-existing entities to which they object. So when they talk of "inter-active relationships among species" (Gilbert, Sapp, and Tauber 2012: 326), the terms of the relation (diverse species) become, epistemically speaking, individualized, external to one another. The concept of relation may turn out to be at once key for comprehending symbiosis and an impediment to describing it. The impasse is an expositional one. (ibid.170)

Hence, as Strathern notes, even if the concept of relation seems to be what is needed for understanding symbiotic relationships, it is also what prevents us from really being able to conceive of it, because a relation between two things is premised on them being separate.

This, Strathern argues, has implications for the kind of redescription of relations that environmentally concerned Euro-Americans - including (multispecies) anthropologists - are trying to undertake. Even if they are trying to get away from a conception of the world as made up of individual, bounded agents and suggest something about unboundedness and entanglement, they end up reinstating separate entities by way of their particularly vocabulary of 'relations' and 'relationship'. Strathern writes:

It is as though efforts to dethrone the individual addressed the interpersonal, as we may imagine a modeling of interspecies relations, while ignoring the epistemic, the structuring of concepts. The point is hardly insignificant for any attempt at redescription.” (ibid.170)

Following from this is that by drawing on the concept of ‘relation’ in one’s descriptions of the human and the non-human, those two will forever orbit around each other. Their distance from each other can be negotiated and manipulated, but they will remain separated (however paradoxical that sounds) precisely by their relation. Assessing the multispecies turn in anthropology, Lien and Pálsson (2021) echo this point, as they write that even if certain discourses on the Anthropocene seek to dethrone the human from its position at the top of the hierarchy of life forms, a certain re-centering of the human is also taking place:

Recent calls for a less human-centered ethnographic approach challenge the notion that humans occupy the top of the hierarchy of life forms. But a certain re-centering is also taking place, such as in discourses on the Anthropocene, that build on the assumption that humans have become a geological force. Despite ‘writing’ themselves into the crust of the planet, humans, it is implied, are privileged beings, charged with special responsibility to speak for Gaia, and to address the global environmental problems of the Anthropocene. (ibid.9)

Whenever there are efforts to acknowledge or enhance a relation between a human and nature, or between human and non-human, a separation is simultaneously produced. Hence, if one of the goals of anthropology - and if what is needed to reckon with our current catastrophe - is ‘redescription’ of relatedness in the world, then this is not necessarily achieved by employing a concept of ‘relation’ that within itself holds an image of entity-plus-relations.

As discussed earlier, Rubow (2020) identifies a problem in Danish eco-theological attempts to approach nature and go beyond the kind of anthropocentrism that Lynn White so famously has critiqued Christianity for (potentially) possessing. To Rubow the predicament for Danish eco-theologians is that they have a concept of ‘nature’, of ‘ecology’, that never completely tears down the distinction between nature and culture, humans and nonhumans. Nature remains, to the eco-theologians, something outside of the human itself. They can thereby, Rubow argues, never reach the kind of ecology where the world is natureculture in Latour’s sense (ibid.4). Rubow draws on Latour to describe this, in her terminology, third ecology which delineates a world in which it is not possible to parcel things into separated domains:

The third ecology is the completely entangled natureculture, characteristic of the Anthropocene, where no distinction can be made between the untouched and

the cultivated (Latour). This is a total, hybrid conception of how the biological, physical, cultural, and social (etc.) cooperates that has gradually been gaining ground, since the pollution of the atmosphere, climate change and the biodiversity crisis have made it clear that humans have left more or less destructive traces everywhere in the great outdoor nature and have thereby not cared appropriately for the environment. In the third ecology, carbon dioxide is as much nature as wilderness is, and all the creatures and materials that have contributed to one's sneakers and the rest of one's indoor life constitute equally important ecological relationships. (ibid.4) (author's translation)

Although Rubow begins her analysis by stating that the starting point for speaking about ecology today must be that there are *many*, it seems nonetheless that she is also suggesting that if proper care is to be shown for the environment, it is necessary to do away with anthropocentrism, and that the only way of doing so is to acknowledge the third ecology of natureculture. Hence, Rubow's critique (because that is what I understand it to be) of contemporary eco-theologies is based, I contend, on an ontological claim about ecology - namely that ecology is the kind of natureculture that Latour describes - that is coupled with a less explicit claim about *care* as something that best arises in as complete entanglement as possible. To be 'a good steward' is, according to Rubow, not enough - one must acknowledge complete human-nonhuman entanglement - humans ought to be acknowledged as entangled with "the ecologies of carbon, water, cabbage, pigs, economies and garbage dumps". Hence, her indirect critique of Danish eco-theologies seems to be that they do not pave the way for proper care because too great a distance remains between humans and nature. Anthropocentrism remains.

## Conclusion: an ecology of relating

It becomes harder and harder in this discussion I am concerting between eco-theologians and eco-anthropologists to only ask ontological questions and not get into the business of providing ontological answers. The latter I would very much like to abstain from, as my errand is not in this thesis to solve neither the God problem, nor that of the Human (or climate change). Rather, what I want to draw attention to in my contrapuntal reading of eco-theological and anthropological engagements with human induced climate crisis is how both projects entail engagements with the question of what makes up a relation of *care*. And, more specifically: what is the *optimal distance* between the human and the nonhuman (in also its divine form) for obtaining a relation of care so that the overheated planet can be repaired. In both instances, the kind of detachment promoted by Western/modern anthropocentrism and Christianity is deemed to have been damaging.

Anthropologists as well as eco-theologians posit that things must be brought in closer; that care arises from furthering relatedness. By cross-reading the eco-theological endeavours of my interlocutors with those of environmentally concerned anthropologists it becomes possible to point out what characterizes Christian care for human and nonhuman neighbours, namely a specific answer to the question of what makes up the optimal distance for care.

Listening to Peter and Henrik as we have on the preceding pages, it does indeed seem like the human remains as something distinct from the nonhumans – even if they have, according to Henrik, become neighbors. Even if they want to dethrone the human, Henrik and Peter insist that the human is not completely entangled with the non-human but hold a special place. Although they do desire further entanglement and relatedness and a rapprochement between God and the world and between the nonhuman and the human, they do not want to achieve complete identity between any of the parties. Lutheranism cannot become ‘pantheism’, the world cannot *be* God, and the human is something fundamentally different from what is not human. The pastors want, in other words, relation without complete identification. As they try to bring God and the world closer, they must neither conflate them (pantheism), nor separate them too much (dialectic theology), but configure them in exactly such a way so as to carve out a space for caring relatedness. As such, one might argue that their use of the concept ‘relation’ is perfect in the way it retains its ‘thickness’ (Strathern 2020, p173): relation is something that lies between entities and can be manipulated, notwithstanding the nature or identity of the entities being related.

To return to my question about how the environmentally concerned pastors are engaged in redescribing relations as a response to the climate crisis, I suggest that Peter’s account of ‘deep incarnation’ and the way he uses it to argue that nature is indeed much more interrelated with – indeed interpenetrated by – God, is an example of just that: of redescribing relations as a response to the climate crisis. What I find particularly interesting about the concept of deep incarnation is the way it allows the entities that are being related to be both conjoined and separated; to enter into unity and yet each retain their identity. God and the material world are united, inseparable, but God still remains distinct from the world and the world from Him. The concept of deep incarnation enables a cosmology that destabilizes otherwise strict separations, but not one that does away with them completely.

The point is not only to show that the pastors draw on a particular Euro-American concept of relation – one that separates as much as it conjoins – but also *that a certain idea of Christian care can be teased out*. The premise for care, in the way it is articulated by the environmentally concerned pastors, is a particular configuration of separation and proximity. Care is something that is enacted across a distance – indeed requires distance in the form of difference – but also

something that gains in force when what was separated is drawn in closer to each other. Proximity equals care, and proximity is based on describing similarities and acknowledging them across a distance. The drawing in of different entities are premised on the identification of some affinity, some similarity or correspondence between the terms – an overlap, but only partial. Hence, to begin to care for nature, requires that it is drawn in closer to the human, but still remains at a certain distance. Deep Incarnation, I argue, is a re-description of the relation between God, human and the nonhumans that evokes such a relational imagination. As such, it offers a way of thinking about closer relatedness without a loss of difference. The optimal distance is one where unity is achieved, and difference retained – like a perfect contrapuntal composition.

## Conclusion: Curves and Lines

I began this thesis – quite uncommented upon - with a conversation between two churchyard gardeners about the dilemmas confronting the Danish Church when this tradition-ridden institution is confronted with the demand to change its ways in the face of the environmental crises. I also end my account of ‘Church and climate change in counterpoint’ at the churchyard in order to bring my point home that engaging with climate change reveals to church actors some of the key organizing distinctions within the Church and incites projects of changing as well as retaining them. Bear with me and let me tell you one last story:

In the very beginning of my fieldwork, I attended an annual cemetery conference organized by the University of Copenhagen and various church actors. The conference is a one-day event that attracts around 700 people and revolves around presentations offering cemetery professionals (gardeners, landscape architects, stonemasons, etc.) perspectives and advice on different aspects of cemetery work. This year the theme for the conference was “Sustainability at the Cemetery” and the presenters included a stonemason working with recycling monuments, an activist advocating a place for the UN development goals in cemetery work, a landscape architect specialized in development plans for cemeteries, and a bioethicist reflecting on responsibility and hope in a time of climate crisis. But one presenter, a churchyard manager from the east of Jutland, left a particularly strong impression on me in terms of understanding what is at stake for the Church more generally when it begins its own green transitioning.

Peter Grove is a tall, heavily built man with slow, steady movements. According to the programme, he is going to tell us about the biodiversity initiatives that had been implemented in the churchyards he manages. As he walks on to the stage it is evident that he is not especially comfortable standing in front of such a big crowd. In fact, it is a bit hard for me to see him as he seems to be almost hiding behind a big crock of flowers that is placed on the stage as decoration. “I suppose,” he begins, hesitating a bit, “that I have been invited here because I manage a handful of village churchyards, whereof one sort of ... stands out.” He looks up at his first slide, which is a photograph of a typical Danish church from the Middle Ages and its surrounding churchyard. At first glance the cemetery looks quite traditional, with white gravel and pink roses, but the subtitle on the slide – “Variety and lushness at the churchyard promotes biodiversity”- makes us aware of the exceptionally lush hedges and naturally curving gravel paths that in fact characterizes it. Peter looks up at it without saying anything for a moment, as though he himself is pondering the image. He then says that this is actually the achievement of the churchyard’s former gardener, from whom he recently took over, and that it would have been more appropriate for his predecessor to have presented his own work to us. “But you will have to make do with me,” he says, jokingly, but not

quite smiling. It is not completely clear to us that this ‘standing out’, which he is supposed to tell us about, is something he wholeheartedly appreciates.

He changes to the next slide and says in a more formal tone: “When you take over from another gardener, it is always exciting to discover what you are dealing with. To find out what this former gardener has been up to. Sometimes you find clever solutions or creative ideas. And sometimes, I have to admit, sometimes you also think to yourself ‘what on earth was he thinking?’” He gives us a kind, timid smile, then looks up at the slide, which shows a beautiful flower bed, wild-growing grass and an apple tree.

As you can see on this image, for example, the former gardener has placed wildflowers and a fruit tree there [he points up at the image] in the middle of the lawn. [He seems to be letting the image speak for itself for a moment.] And I must say... For many years I have been teaching gardeners to distinguish between what we call *havepræg* [gardening aesthetics] and *naturpræg* [nature aesthetics]. And this gardener, well, he just seems to have mixed it all together! And it kind of ... you can see that it kind of screams to each other. The wild growing grass over there, and the flowers...

He looks up at the images on his slides, quiet for a moment, seemingly unsure of what more to say about it. But then, it seems, he decides on the side of honesty:

I must admit that, intuitively, it bothered me. But it is lush! I can certainly see that. The former gardener Walter - who was, by the way autodidact - took an approach to gardening that valued biodiversity. And there is really lots of life here. And the biodiversity we want. But then, you know, occasionally the visitors also ask me whether they are supposed to eat from the tree. And they obviously feel ambivalent about it. Should we eat fruit growing in a churchyard?

He asks the question openly but with a doubtful facial expression. The next slide is an image of a white gravel path, which is characteristic for many Danish churchyards. "Here you probably notice the edges," he says, as if the picture speaks for itself. And maybe I actually do see it: it looks a bit inappropriate. Despite my limited knowledge about proper churchyard maintenance, I can see that the kind of gradual transition between gravel and grass deviates from the usual very strict borders between lawn and path upheld at Danish churchyards. “Walter made the choice not to weed the edges. Apparently, such borderlands can hold very interesting microhabitats.” Next slide. This shows an image of the old stone dykes surrounding the cemetery. Such stone dykes are a common feature of Danish cemeteries, built back in the days to prevent animals from grazing on the graves. Peter explains that Walter had begun experimenting with not removing the vegetation on the dykes,



but instead left in peace whatever was growing on the surface. Peter says he likes this idea and is curious to see which old plants and herbs might appear. However, although he enjoys the experiment, it is also quite a challenge: “Because you can well imagine that when it is windy, the wind moves along the dykes and carries different seeds into the cemetery and onto the graves. And then suddenly new flowers and plants grow here.” He points to a gravesite near the back of the image. “And then I am the one who has to weed if I want to avoid complaints. Grave site owners are rarely interested in having weeds on their site. In some places I can, of course, manage to weed them away, but I do not have that much time either.” He explains to us – in a confessional tone – that he likes the traditional white gravel because it is a little less work. “But then again,” he says, seemingly reflecting out loud, “as we heard in the first presentation today, gravel is equal to zero in relation to biodiversity and CO2. So we will have to find alternatives.” The last slide he presents us with displays the fruit tree once again. This picture, however, is more recent and exhibits Peter’s newest initiative: the wildflowers and wild growing grass have been demarcated by a sharp cut, evidently made by a lawnmower, and a sign that says “willingly wild” (*vild med vilje*). After taking this initiative, Peter explains, a lot of people have actually approached him to express their gratitude, because they had, in fact, found that it looked quite messy before, as a site of neglect, really.



Peter’s time is about to run out, and he offers his concluding remarks: “I guess we are coming to realize that we have some specific expectations for what a cemetery should look like. And that includes monoculture, cut grass and hedges, intensive care, and minimal seed dispersal. And I reckon we must find ways of changing in respect for that.”

Although this was one of my first fieldwork experiences, I can find no better way of concluding this thesis than with Peter's presentation. Because what Peter said, and especially this last picture he showed us, captures in essence what I came to learn through the course of studying climate change engagements in the Danish Church.

First of all, Peter's presentation – and the cemetery conference in general – shows that responding to climate change in a church institution touches upon and potentially alters a great range of things. This is also what I have illustrated by way of the polyphony of voices, problems and objects that I have presented in the chapters of this thesis. To approach the Church with questions of climate change mitigation brought me into contact with hedges, lightbulbs, tree stumps, Church Fathers, carbon footprints, ethics (and anti-ethics), spaghetti, windmills, church porches, tombstones, sermons, and even God the Almighty. It became clear to me that climate change does indeed “change everything”, as political theorist Naomi Klein (2015) has asserted, in the sense that everything can be approached anew from the perspective of climate change - and it can turn out to be more intimately related than presumed. Nothing can hide within the category of *adiphora* (as discussed in chapter 4) but are brought forth, requiring our attention and intervention. As a problem climate change cuts across the scales and domains that we moderns – church actors and anthropologists alike - usually sort and organize problems in accordance with. Dealing with such an issue in the Church comes to reveal usual ways of ordering in various ways and show how unstable they in fact are. It turns out that windmills are not only related to wind and national projects of green energy transitions, but also to churches and national projects of cultural heritage preservation (as discussed in chapter 1). Difficult trade-offs arise, as things turn out to be complicatedly interrelated.

Secondly, Peter's presentation tells us something about the challenges arising from responding to such a problem. To respond to the environmental crisis at the churchyard requires that alternatives are found, as Peter said. It requires changing one's ways. The way Peter's predecessor approached this was in line with what we have heard other church actors (as well as anthropologists) call for in this thesis: it requires re-thinking strict separations. For the 'gentle' Green Church activists it is the strict separation between religion and the public sphere that needs to be rethought (as discussed in chapter 2); to the eco-theologians - and multispecies anthropologists - it is the separation between the human and the nonhuman (in also its divine form) (as discussed in chapter 5); and to a churchyard gardener it is that of strictly demarcated paths. Climate change mitigation may, in other words, incite projects of acknowledging and furthering hybridization, of ecologizing, in other words. However, as Peter's presentation also shows - especially with his demarcated and signposted wilderness - is that it is not only that

distinctions and separations are diminished: projects of retaining and of reinstating distinctions are also very much at play. It might be, for example, that the Church ought to regain a ‘political self-understanding’ and contribute to solving societal problems, but such an argument about breaking down barriers, can only be made in so far that another bifurcation is asserted: politics 1 and 2. A strict separation between the church and ‘party-politics’ must be upheld, as Christian freedom must not be compromised by political power. Just like theology must be kept out of the Church’s responses to national emission goals, and a purely technical, un-interpretable answer offered (as discussed in chapter 3). And it might be that the boundary between ‘wild’ nature and ‘cultivating’ garden practices ought to be softened, but it will not make do to let everything grow wild, as this will look like neglect of the dead. Therefore, tellingly, wild areas are marked off by straight cuts and signs stating that this is indeed “willingly wild” (*vild med vilje*). In other words, the size of the difference between nature and culture, humans and nonhumans, ought to be reduced, but the significance of the human – its weeding hands and its intentions - must be preserved in order for care to be enacted and conveyed (as is the case of configuring the optimal distance for care between God, the human and the nonhuman, as discussed in chapter 5). Within each of the chapters of this thesis I have attended to how engaging with climate change incites church actors to question, challenge, but also retain the distinctions that are understood to organize the Church. I have showed that ‘the modern constitution’ is still very much at work in the Church, but that so are efforts of destabilizing boundaries, and mixing what was previously considered separate.

Lastly, Peter’s presentation spoke to the tension between continuity and change that arises as the Church tries to change (or not) its ways. In the lunch break ensuing Peter’s presentation I partook in the informal chatter in the dining area. A woman, who represented a local Green Church committee in her parish, said that she was not very impressed by the talk Peter gave. Her neighbor, a middle-aged male gardener, agreed with her: “His presentation worked almost counter to its own goal,” he exclaimed. Certainly, throughout his presentation, Peter looked like someone who argued with himself: “Is this *weird, wrong, challenging*, or is it *great*? How would I interpret this if I put aside my intuitive *gardener reaction*?” It had evidently been a challenging task for him to take over this ‘lush’, yet messy churchyard. However, to me it seemed like he expressed a kind of ambivalence that, in my reading, was a cautious openness to change. He was changing his gardening ways slightly by not simply trashing the emerging aesthetics in favor of reasserting old conventions. Instead he found a way of embracing the new, by making his own clear cut around it, demarcating that non-cultivation was in fact a kind of cultivation, neglect was in fact care. I understand this cut and the signpost “willingly wild” as an invention that enabled Peter to resolve the potential tension between tradition a change. He in fact did something radically different – letting things grow and

be – but he was able to retain the gardener as a caring human being. A similar invention - but with the opposite effect - was made by the Church when it for the first time could present a unified response to the issue of climate change, but without in fact claiming anything on behalf on anyone in terms of what will be done. Carbon calculations was an invention that – at least for now – allows things to continue as they have always done in the ‘well-ordered anarchy’ of the Church. I argue that much is at stake in such negotiations of continuity and change because climate change confronts church actors with what they care the most about and incites them to define and protect it. Hence, to grapple with the problem of climate crisis, also comes to entail grappling with what Christianity and the Church at all is. It might be that attending to the climate impact of church life deem organs, candles, and spruce excessive and dispensable, but when confronted with such an evaluation, church actors are incited to articulate why such matters may nonetheless be vital organs for a church.

Naomi Klein (2015) has stated that the problem of climate change changes *everything*. In the thesis I have showed how this – on the one hand - is not an understatement: climate change does indeed seem to touch upon *all* aspects of church life and to incite church actors to attend anew to both their most mundane, everyday practices and their most grand perspectives and perceptions of the world, the cosmos, and the human. But the thesis also shows that it, on the other hand, is an *overstatement*: some things do indeed change, but there are also lots of things that do not. In the Danish Church much effort also goes into preserving things by making changes. The formal climate mitigation project (FGO), for example, takes a form that is cleansed from theology and that did, at its conception, not set specific goals on behalf of the entire Church. At the time of writing – late 2023 - the main goal of “The Green Transition of the Danish Peoples Church” is to monitor and produce data about the local initiatives taking place in parishes and to distribute knowledge and inspiration about what local parishes can *themselves* decide to do. Hence, the Church responds to climate change as a unified actor, but with a project that has no mandate to make decisions on behalf of anyone and that makes no particular Christian claims about the state of the world. Business as usual for the “well-ordered anarchy” that the Church prides itself of being.

In this thesis I have attended to the more or less explicit negotiations within the Church over whether the climate crisis will and ought to change the Church fundamentally – organizationally, materially, and theologically – or whether adaptations and changes are rather implemented to preserve and secure continuity. The conclusion is – obviously - that it is both. However, the main goal of the thesis has not only been to show *that* the problem of climate change touches upon everything and that it incites complicated negotiations over change and continuity, but also to show *how* such negotiations play out in practice in the specific organization of the Danish

People's Church where much is at stake to preserve the status of being *relevant*. For the Danish Church, to stay relevant is dependent on both securing tradition and continuity, on being both 'outside of time', of universal validity, *and* on being a Church 'of the time', a Church that is relevant for people in the contemporary situation of – among other things – climate crisis.

While I am reluctant to frame my study of the Danish Church as one that either contributes to laying bare the reasons for why people do *not* make the right changes, or to sourcing indigenous knowledges that might be helpful in efforts to mitigate climate change, I will make the leap and argue that I with this account offer important insights into local, situated attempts at understanding and acting on what is at once a global and a (lot of) local situation(s) (Tsing 2016). I am reluctant because I do not wish to portray the at times conservatism and slowness of the Church to make radical changes as acts of being in denial (e.g. Norgaard 2011), but neither do I want to glorify it by arguing that we can learn from its ability to produce and listen to a multiplicity of voices. Rather I have been interested in attending to, and “staying with the trouble” (Haraway 2016) that the Church finds itself in when it is faced with the demand to change for climate change. And this is, in fact, the main contribution I want to make with this thesis: Although I have been telling you a story about how climate change came to influence the Danish Church, I dare to make the leap and argue that this case might say a lot about what climate change also does in other contexts. Namely, that it potentially changes everything if we let it. And by that I mean two things: science is telling us that climate change will indeed change everything if we continue as we usually do. That is, if we let it continue, nothing *will* be the same. But I also mean that by taking on the issue, by really engaging with it, it becomes clear just how many of the things we take for granted can and ought to be approached anew. Science, again, shows us that everything we do when we go about our lives has an impact on the environment. To become aware of the traces we leave in the world – by counting it as carbon for example – makes us aware of how connected everything is, and that it will indeed not be enough to change a light bulb or make do without the sauce if we really want to counter the environmental damages that are well underway. However, what I also learned from studying church actors' ways of coming to terms with a situation that to some of them indeed looked like what I just described, is that the stakes in *not* letting climate change change everything are also high. To be confronted with climate change also entails being confronted with what we have to lose, what we want to keep and protect.

The Danish People's Church has – perhaps not intentionally, and yet perhaps so – taken a contrapuntal approach to this predicament; an approach that allows for multiple things to

be said simultaneously, that insists on diversity, yet also unity, dissonance *and* resonance, and that is characterized by convention and a bit of invention.

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