



Andreas Bernberg

# The Betrayal of Politics?

Diaconal and Liturgical Practices  
and the Theopolitical Character  
of the Church of Sweden

**Dissertationes Theologicae Holmienses No. 14**

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the theopolitical character of the Church of Sweden as it is expressed in its practices, and to contribute with empirically grounded and conceptual resources for ecclesiological reflections on the church's political role and identity. The overarching research question guiding this thesis is: How is the theopolitical character of the Church of Sweden enacted and negotiated in diaconal and liturgical practices in two congregations in deprived areas, and what insights does a theological analysis of these practices offer for a constructive understanding of the church's political identity and role? The thesis understands politics not primarily in terms of statecraft, but as the practices through which a common life is forged, shaped, and sustained. Methodologically, the study is a theological-ethnographic single-case study based on participant observation, shadowing, and semi-structured qualitative interviews. Practice theory is employed within an overarching ecclesiological framework, and the analysis proceeds through three movements: articulation, disturbance, and expansion. The study shows that the church's theopolitical character is enacted through roles and relationships constituted in diaconal and liturgical practices. Through these practices, the church appears as a provider of care and support, facilitator of trust, collaborative partner in the wider society, and a liturgical community in which social relationships are renegotiated. At the same time, these practices are marked by tensions of asymmetry, individualisation, segregation, and the reduction of difference to sameness. To deepen this analysis, the thesis develops the concept of iconic relationships, understood as relationships in which the meaning of the other is not fixed in advance but remains open and inexhaustible in the light of God's presence. The thesis concludes that the church's betrayal of politics occurs not primarily when it fails to enter public debate, but when it loses this iconic frame of reference.



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2026

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Dissertation presented at University College Stockholm to be publicly examined in Room 219–220 at Åkeshovsvägen 29, Bromma, 29 May 2026, at 13:00, for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Theology (Practical Theology with Church History: Practical Theology). The examination will be held in English.

*Faculty examiner:* Ulla Schmidt, Associate Professor of Church History and Practical Theology, Aarhus University

*Supervisor:* Jonas Idestrom, Professor of Practical Theology, University College Stockholm

*Assistant supervisor:* Ulrich Schmiedel, Professor of Global Christianity and Interreligious Relations, Lund University

## Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the theopolitical character of the Church of Sweden as it is expressed in its practices, and to contribute with empirically grounded and conceptual resources for ecclesiological reflections on the church's political role and identity. The overarching research question guiding this thesis is: How is the theopolitical character of the Church of Sweden enacted and negotiated in diaconal and liturgical practices in two congregations in deprived areas, and what insights does a theological analysis of these practices offer for a constructive understanding of the church's political identity and role? The thesis understands politics not primarily in terms of statecraft, but as the practices through which a common life is forged, shaped, and sustained. Methodologically, the study is a theological-ethnographic single-case study based on participant observation, shadowing, and semi-structured qualitative interviews. Practice theory is employed within an overarching ecclesiological framework, and the analysis proceeds through three movements: articulation, disturbance, and expansion. The study shows that the church's theopolitical character is enacted through roles and relationships constituted in diaconal and liturgical practices. Through these practices, the church appears as a provider of care and support, facilitator of trust, collaborative partner in the wider society, and a liturgical community in which social relationships are renegotiated. At the same time, these practices are marked by tensions of asymmetry, individualisation, segregation, and the reduction of difference to sameness. To deepen this analysis, the thesis develops the concept of iconic relationships, understood as relationships in which the meaning of the other is not fixed in advance but remains open and inexhaustible in the light of God's presence. The thesis concludes that the church's betrayal of politics occurs not primarily when it fails to enter public debate, but when it loses this iconic frame of reference.

# Ett politiskt svek? Diakonala och liturgiska praktiker och Svenska kyrkans teopolitiska karaktär

Akademisk avhandling presenterad vid Enskilda Högskolan Stockholm för disputation i sal 219–220, Åkeshovsvägen 29, Bromma, 29 maj kl. 13.00, för teologie doktorsexamen i praktisk teologi med kyrkohistoria, med inriktning mot praktisk teologi. Disputationen kommer att äga rum på engelska.

*Opponent:* Ulla Schmidt, lektor i Kirkehistorie og Praktisk Teologi, Aarhus Universitet  
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## Sammanfattning

Syftet med denna avhandling är att analysera Svenska kyrkans teopolitiska karaktär så som den kommer till uttryck i dess praktiker, samt att bidra med empiriskt grundade och konceptuella resurser för ecklesiologiska reflektioner över kyrkans politiska roll och identitet. Den övergripande forskningsfråga som vägleder denna avhandling är: Hur gestaltas och förhandlas Svenska kyrkans teopolitiska karaktär i diakonala och liturgiska praktiker i två församlingar belägna i socioekonomiskt utsatta områden, och vilka insikter kan en teologisk analys av dessa praktiker erbjuda för en konstruktiv förståelse av kyrkans politiska identitet och roll? Avhandlingen förstår politik inte i första hand i termer av statskonst, utan som de praktiker genom vilka ett gemensamt liv formas, gestaltas och upprätthålls. Metodologiskt är studien en teologisk-etnografisk fallstudie, grundad i deltagande observation, skuggning och semistrukturerade kvalitativa intervjuer. Praktikteori används inom ramen av ett övergripande ecklesiologiskt ramverk, och analysen framskrider genom tre rörelser: artikulation, störning och expansion. Studien visar att kyrkans teopolitiska karaktär iscensätts genom roller och relationer som konstitueras i diakonala och liturgiska praktiker. Genom dessa praktiker framträder kyrkan som omsorgs- och stödgivare, möjlighöjare av tillit, samarbetspartner i det omgivande samhället och som en liturgisk gemenskap där sociala relationer omförhandlas. Samtidigt präglas dessa praktiker av spänningar i form av asymmetriska maktrelationer, individualisering, segregation och en reduktion av skillnad till likhet. För att fördjupa denna analys utvecklar avhandlingen begreppet ikoniska relationer, förstådda som relationer där den andres betydelse inte är bestämt i förväg utan förblir öppen och outtömlig i ljuset av Guds närvaro. Avhandlingen drar slutsatsen att kyrkans förräderi mot politiken inte i första hand inträffar när den underlåter att träda in i den offentliga debatten, utan när den förlorar denna ikoniska referensram.

## **Enskilda Högskolan Stockholm**

Enskilda Högskolan Stockholm erbjuder utbildningsprogram i mänskliga rättigheter och demokrati, samt i teologi/religionsvetenskap. Högskolan grundades 1993 genom en sammanslagning av utbildningsinstitutioner med rötter från 1866, hette tidigare Teologiska högskolan, Stockholm, och har två avdelningar: Avdelningen för mänskliga rättigheter och demokrati samt Avdelningen för religionsvetenskap och teologi. Forskarutbildningen i Praktisk teologi med kyrkohistoria bedrivs inom inriktningarna Praktisk teologi respektive Kyrkohistoria. Utbildningen fokuserar på den kristna kyrkans utveckling och den kristna trons praktiska gestaltning, i ett konstruktivt samspel mellan empiriska metoder och teori. Utbildningen innefattar bland annat historiska, hermeneutiska, filosofiska, teologiska, sociologiska och etnologiska perspektiv.

## **University College Stockholm**

University College Stockholm offers programmes in Human Rights and Democracy and in Theology/Religious Studies. The university college was founded in 1993 through a merger of educational institutions with roots dating back to 1866, is also known as Stockholm School of Theology, and has two departments: the Department of Human Rights and Democracy, and the Department of Religious Studies and Theology. The doctoral programme in Practical Theology with Church History provides specialisations in Practical Theology and Church History respectively. It focuses on the development of the Christian church and practical expressions of Christian faith, in a constructive interplay between empirical methods and theory. The programme includes historical, hermeneutical, philosophical, theological, sociological, and ethnological perspectives.

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*To Rebecka*



## Preface

Looking back on the process of writing this thesis, the word that best expresses my feelings is gratitude. Many people have contributed to this work, and without their help, this thesis would not have been possible.

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Motala 2026-04-17

*Andreas Bernberg*

# Contents

**Preface**..... 9

***Part I Theory, Method, Background***..... 17

**1. Introduction**..... 19

1.1 Aim and Research Question ..... 21

1.2 Disposition ..... 21

**2. Situating the Study**..... 23

2.1 A Theological and Ecclesiological Study ..... 23

2.2 The Empirical Turn in Practical Theology ..... 25

2.3 Ecclesiology and Practice Theory.....28

2.4 The Empirical Turn, Church and Society.....29

**3. Ecclesiological Starting Points**..... 35

3.1 Introduction ..... 35

3.2 The Church as the Body of Christ in via ..... 37

3.3 Theology from the Middle of Things ..... 41

**4. Theopolitics**..... 45

4.1 Introduction ..... 45

4.2 Background.....45

4.2.1 The Two-Kingdom Doctrine ..... 46

4.2.2 Critique of the Two-Kingdom Doctrine ..... 48

4.3 Politics of a Common Life ..... 51

4.4 Theopolitics: Theology and Politics Intertwined ..... 57

<b>5. Practice Theory .....</b>	<b>59</b>
5.1 Introduction .....	59
5.2 Towards a Strong Programme of Practice .....	59
5.3 The Structure of Practices .....	63
5.4 The Operationalisation of Practice Theory .....	64
5.5 Bridge: Articulation, Disturbance and Expansion of the Church's Theopolitical Character .....	66
<b>6. Methodological Considerations .....</b>	<b>71</b>
6.1 Introduction .....	71
6.2 A Theologically and Practice-Theoretically Informed Ethnographic Approach.....	71
6.3 A Single Case-Study Design .....	72
6.3.1 Sample Congregations.....	72
6.3.2 Deprived Areas .....	73
6.4 Diaconal and Liturgical Practices.....	74
6.5 My Role as Researcher.....	76
6.6 Approaching the Field .....	78
6.7 Methods for Establishing an Ethnographic Material .....	79
6.7.1 Participant Observation .....	79
6.7.2 Shadowing.....	80
6.7.3 Semi-Structured Qualitative Research Interviews .....	81
6.8 Analytical Approach – Techniques and Strategies .....	81
6.9 Ethical Considerations .....	83
 <b><i>Part II Articulations, Disturbance, Expansion .....</i></b>	<b><i>85</i></b>
<b>Introduction to Part II .....</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>7. Theopolitical Relationships in the Diaconal Reception.....</b>	<b>89</b>
7.1 Introduction .....	89
7.2 The Diaconal Reception as a Practice.....	89
7.3 The Helper-Client Relationship .....	91
7.4 Relationships to the Welfare State .....	93
7.4.1 The Relationships between the Church and the Welfare State. ..	93

7.4.2 The Diaconal Worker as Mediator between the Individual  
and the Welfare State..... 95

7.5 The Diaconal Worker as Mediator of God’s Presence ..... 96

**8. Theopolitical Relationships in Liturgical Practices..... 101**

8.1 Introduction ..... 101

8.2 Liturgical Practices..... 102

8.3 Relationships to Material Objects..... 105

8.4 Relationships to Human Beings ..... 106

8.5 The Eucharist as the Centre of the Service and the Church ..... 107

8.6 The Eucharist and the Establishment of Relationships ..... 109

8.7 The Eucharist as the Renegotiation of Social Relationships ..... 110

8.8 Diversity as an Epistemological Contribution ..... 111

8.9 Frictions..... 115

8.10 The Post-Liturgical Coffee as a Practice ..... 116

    8.10.1 Relationships between the Church and Human Diversity ..... 117

    8.10.2 Post-Liturgical Coffee and Segregated Relationships ..... 117

    8.10.3 Post-Liturgical Coffee Ecclesiology and Human Vulnerability .. 118

**9. Theopolitical Relationships at the Foodbank ..... 121**

9.1 Introduction ..... 121

9.2 The Foodbank as a Practice..... 121

9.3 Relationships of Care and Support..... 123

    9.3.1 Care and Support Questioned ..... 124

    9.3.2 The Affective Dimension of Relationships of Care  
and Support. .... 125

**10. Theopolitical Relationships at the Dinner Fellowship..... 131**

10.1 Introduction ..... 131

10.2 The Dinner Fellowship as a Practice..... 131

10.3 Towards Relationships of Mutual Trust..... 132

10.4 Welcoming and Including..... 133

10.5 Relationships to the Wider Society ..... 134

10.6 Relationships to Religious Diversity..... 137

<b>11. Theopolitical Relationships at the Choir Rehearsal.....</b>	<b>141</b>
11.1 Introduction .....	141
11.2 The Larger Project .....	141
11.3 The Choir Rehearsal as a Practice.....	143
11.4 The Helper-Client Relationship.....	144
11.5 Relationships to the Swedish Society.....	144
11.6 The Relationship between the Church and the Wider Society.....	146
11.6.1 The Choir Rehearsal as a Social Respite.....	148
11.6.2 The Church and the Wider Society – A Theological Rationale for Collaboration.....	149
<b>12. Disturbance .....</b>	<b>153</b>
12.1 Introduction .....	153
12.2 The Helper-Client Relationship .....	154
12.2.1 The Institutional Character and Impersonal Relationships.....	154
12.2.2 An Individual Focus .....	155
12.2.3 The Relationship to the Welfare State.....	157
12.3 The Question of Distinctiveness.....	157
12.4 The Community of Faith and the Question of Sameness .....	159
12.5 Practices of Renegotiation and the Segregation .....	159
<b>13. Expansion: The Iconic Relationship .....</b>	<b>161</b>
13.1 Introduction .....	161
13.2 The Iconic Relationship.....	161
13.3 The Iconic Relationship as Expansion .....	163
13.4 The Struggle for the Iconic.....	164
13.5 The Iconic and the Theopolitical .....	165
 <b><i>Part III Conclusions and Discussion .....</i></b>	 <b><i>167</i></b>
<b>14. Conclusion: The Betrayal of Politics? .....</b>	<b>169</b>
14.1 Introduction .....	169
14.2 The Church as a Provider of Help and Support .....	171
14.3 The Church as Facilitator.....	172

14.4 The Renegotiation of Human Relationships.....173

14.5 The Church as Collaboration Partner .....175

14.6 Points of Disturbances .....175

14.7 The Iconic Church ..... 176

**15. Discussion .....179**

15.1 Introduction ..... 179

15.2 Church and Politics beyond the Two-Kingdom Doctrine..... 179

15.3 Theopolitics from Diaconal and Liturgical Practices .....185

15.4 Relations between the Church and the Wider Society ..... 189

15.5 Theopolitics as an Ecclesiological Concept in Deprived Areas ..... 191

**Bibliography ..... 193**

**Index of Modern Authors .....199**

**Index of Subjects ..... 201**



## **Part I**

# **Theory, Method, Background**



## I. Introduction

“The church has to be more political.” These are Karen’s words. She is one of my informants and works as a diaconal worker in one of my two field congregations. As my interview with her progressed, I realised that, for her, the Church of Sweden becoming more political was a matter of improving its communication with local politicians. It entailed communicating with those whom she regarded as being involved in politics, namely politicians. According to Karen, therefore, the Church of Sweden was not itself a political subject.

“We have to be more political.” These words may also be heard as an echo of the current debate in Swedish society, following the growing appropriation of Christianity by political leaders. On the global stage, these appropriations range from US Secretary of War Pete Hegseth praying the Lord’s Prayer, accompanied by images of the US military,<sup>1</sup> to the British context, where the far-right political leader Tommy Robinson urged his followers, ahead of Christmas, to join public carol services in order to spark “... a new Christian revival in the UK – a moment to reclaim and celebrate our heritage, culture and Christian identity.”<sup>2</sup> In the Swedish context, in the wake of this appropriation of Christianity, voices have emerged calling on church leaders to engage in political debate, not least in relation to the Swedish government’s immigration policies.<sup>3</sup>

“We have to be more political.” These words have also been heard within the Swedish theological debate, not least in theological traditions associated

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/reel/DOruFkckpot/?utm\\_source=ig\\_embed](https://www.instagram.com/reel/DOruFkckpot/?utm_source=ig_embed)

<sup>2</sup> Harriet Sherwood, “C of E to challenge Tommy Robinson’s ‘put Christ back into Christmas’ message”, *The Guardian* 7 December 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/dec/07/church-of-england-campaign-challenging-tommy-robinson-put-christ-back-into-christmas-message>

<sup>3</sup> Halldorf 2026, 74–75.

with liberation theology. In the Swedish context, the late Per Frostin envisaged such an approach, in which the experiences of the poor, the oppressed, and the silenced are given epistemological priority. Theology, Frostin argues, must stand in the service of political liberation.<sup>4</sup>

“The church is already political.” These words may be heard as a response from theologians belonging to the theological current sometimes labelled *theological ethics*. Here, theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas and William Cavanaugh argue for an understanding of the church’s own practices as intrinsically political. However, despite this emphasis on the church’s own practices, there is, with a few exceptions, a considerable lack of ethnographic accounts of actual practice.<sup>5</sup>

This thesis can be read as a response to these various voices. Throughout the project, I have sought to make sense not only of the relationship between the Church of Sweden and politics, but also of the *theopolitical* character of the Church of Sweden itself. By the term *theopolitical*, I seek to capture the ways in which theology and politics are expressed and intertwined in and through the church’s various practices. While calls for a more politically engaged church are valid, it is also important for the church to recognise and take responsibility for the different ways in which it is already politically involved. Moreover, as the word *theopolitics* imply, what I argue is that the church’s theological and political expression should not be treated separately, but be kept together. Thus, this thesis does not provide a blueprint for how the Church of Sweden should act. Instead, my elaboration of the church’s *theopolitical* character is based on already existing practices. This has been done through a field study of diaconal and liturgical practices in two congregations within the Church of Sweden located in what the Swedish police term “deprived areas.” In my analysis of these practices, undertaken with the aid of practice theory, I foreground the church’s own understanding of its practices and role in Swedish society.

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<sup>4</sup> Frostin 1970.

<sup>5</sup> An exception is Cavanaugh 1998.

## 1.1 Aim and Research Question

Against the background of these competing understandings of the church's political role, the aim of this thesis is to analyse the theopolitical character of the Church of Sweden as it is expressed in its practices, and to contribute with empirically grounded and conceptual resources for ecclesiological reflections on the church's political role and identity.

The overarching research question guiding this thesis and which I hope to answer through the course of this project is:

How is the theopolitical character of the Church of Sweden enacted and negotiated in diaconal and liturgical practices in two congregations in deprived areas, and what insights does a theological analysis of these practices offer for a constructive understanding of the church's political identity and role?

## 1.2 Disposition

My thesis is organised into three parts. The first part consists of an extended introduction where I introduce my project and situate the study to relevant research. Importantly, it is here I introduce my understanding of the concept of theopolitics. As noted, this thesis could be regarded as a theological-ethnographic project. This implies that the concept of theopolitics appears as both an *emic* and an *etic* concept, as both something derived from my overarching theologically grounded framework and as a concept originating from my unit of analysis. Thus, in chapter 3 I establish my theoretical understanding of theopolitics in order to later analyse it as an *emic* concept. As will be argued, this should not be seen as a circular reasoning where my theoretical perspective pre-determines my ethnographically established material. Having established my theological perspective in chapter 3, I then proceed to introduce practice theory as the theoretical approach through which my material will be conceptualised. Here it is important to notice the relationship between my theological perspective and my use of practice theory. While my theological perspective, described as theopolitics, establishes this thesis' theological horizon, it does not serve the role of a theory which is operationalised in the analysis. In my project, this, however, is the role of practice theory. Thus, within this thesis, I operationalise practice theory in order to generate theopolitical insights. This first part does

also include a chapter on methodology where I, among other things, elaborate on the project's abductive approach, my analytical approach and my role as a researcher.

The second part of the thesis consists of my analytical chapters. Here I follow a structure of three sequences, articulations, disturbance and expansion. In my chapters on articulation, I explicate how the theopolitical character is enacted and negotiated in diaconal and liturgical practices, while my chapter on disturbance provides an account of tensions and contradictions in the empirical material. My chapter on expansions consist of an account of iconic relationships and how such a concept offers a deepened understanding of the theopolitical character.

In my third and last part, I present and discuss my findings in relation to relevant research.

## **2. Situating the Study**

The aim of this chapter is to situate my thesis in relation to relevant research. I do so in four consecutive steps. First, I emphasise my thesis as a theological and ecclesiological project. This will be done through a brief account of research where the primary focus is on the Church of Sweden as a provider of welfare, and where I point to how such studies could be seen as a contrast to my project – in so far as my project foregrounds the theological self-understanding of church. Second, I locate my project within the empirical turn in practical theology and ecclesiology, and particular in relation to concrete ecclesiologies. Third, I situate my thesis in relation to other ecclesiological projects that draw on practice theory. Finally, I identify relevant research within the Nordic empirical turn that examines the church in relation to wider society. I will delimit my account to relevant research within the Scandinavian context. These countries share an ecclesiological situation similar to Sweden's, with Lutheran folk churches as current or former state churches.

### **2.1 A Theological and Ecclesiological Study**

To begin with, it is important to note that this thesis is situated primarily within the field of ecclesiology, where my concept of the theopolitical is used as an ecclesiological concept, as something which describes what the church is. In this respect, my focus differs from research that adopts a more religious-sociological approach and examines the role of the Church of Sweden as a provider of welfare. In what follows, I illustrate some of these approaches in order to clarify the contribution of this thesis.

The end of the state's monopoly on welfare provision has enabled other actors, including the Church of Sweden, to become involved in the provision of welfare. Consequently, a number of scholars and research projects have

examined the role of the Church of Sweden as a welfare provider in a changing context.<sup>1</sup> What these projects have in common, however, is that they allow welfare as a phenomenon to frame their inquiry. Even when theological considerations are incorporated, the horizon of understanding remains that of the church as a welfare provider.

A similar approach is evident in Jeppson Grassman's study of social work in the city of Uppsala.<sup>2</sup> When framed in terms of welfare provision, it is perhaps unsurprising that, as Jeppson Grassman observes, her informants interpret the Church of Sweden's social practices as a complement to the state.<sup>3</sup> As such, the Church of Sweden's potential roles are often described as oscillating between complementing the welfare state in moments of failure and offering something distinctive that the state does not provide.<sup>4</sup> The edited volume *Välfärdsinsatser på religiös grund: Förväntningar och problem (Religiously Motivated Welfare Provision: Expectations and Challenges)* draws on the Uppsala-based research project IMPACT: *The Impact of Religion – Challenges for Society, Law and Economy*.<sup>5</sup> The volume brings together contributions that discuss the role of the Church of Sweden as a provider of welfare services; however, a critical theological analysis of this role is largely absent. In another such project, Stig Linde and Jonas Idestrom focus on a local congregation that provides temporary shelter for refugees in cooperation with local authorities. Although the project includes ecclesiological considerations, the horizon of understanding nevertheless remains the church as a welfare provider.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, my project, instead of binding the understanding of the church to the welfare state, foregrounds the church's own self-understanding. The Norwegian scholar Gyrid Gunnes has voiced a possible concern to my account. She argues for an understanding of diaconal work as inherently contextual – a point which, she suggests, means that scholars should attend closely to contextual welfare regimes. Gunnes writes:

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance the Uppsala based project: Bäckström, Davie, Edgardh, and Pettersson 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Jeppson Grassman 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Jeppson Grassman 2001, 186.

<sup>4</sup> Jeppson Grassman 2001, 186.

<sup>5</sup> Bäckström 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Idestrom and Linde 2017. See also Idestrom and Linde 2019.

Neither as a practice, conceptualization nor critique can the field of diaconia dismiss the particular kind of welfare regime of the nation (as well as the historical, social and cultural particularities behind this regime) that governs in any particular concrete geographical location.<sup>7</sup>

While I agree with Gunnes that understandings of diaconal work and the church should be contextual, I nevertheless maintain that the significance of the welfare state should remain an empirical question, and that a one-sided focus on the church as a welfare provider risks neglecting the church's own understanding of such practices. The delimitation of the church in relation to the welfare state may well be an empirical finding; in my project, however, it is not the presupposition. Taken together, the examples discussed above point to the need for a more theologically oriented project, one in which the church's own understanding of its practices is foregrounded. It is my hope that this thesis will contribute to such work. Thus, as an ecclesiological study, my horizon of understanding is not primarily the role of the church in relation to predetermined aspects, but rather how the Church of Sweden is enacted in diaconal and liturgical practices within two congregations.

## **2.2 The Empirical Turn in Practical Theology**

According to Tone Stangeland Kaufman, Professor of Practical Theology at MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society in Oslo, recent years have witnessed a growing interest in the concrete aspects of the church – what she calls “...a major empirical turn in ecclesiology and practical theology.”<sup>8</sup> Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore suggests that this empirical turn may be seen as a shift in how theological knowledge is conceived, moving away from an understanding of practical theology as the application of doctrine:

In the 1950s and 1960s, scholars in the study of theology and religion began to challenge a structure of theological knowing particular to modernity that restricted practical theology to the application of doctrine to pastoral situations.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Gunnes 2020, 202.

<sup>8</sup> Stangeland Kaufman 2018, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Miller-McLemore 2012, 1.

It is important to note, however, that the empirical turn is by no means homogeneous and is not necessarily preoccupied with the church.<sup>10</sup>

More specifically, my project aligns with a strand of this empirical turn that Theodora Hawksley calls “concrete ecclesiologies.”<sup>11</sup> She observes a broader theological interest in the church and its practices. This turn, she argues, is not homogeneous, but includes scholars who attend to the church with concerns other than ecclesiology. Moreover, a focus on the embodied nature of the church does not necessarily entail an empirical interest.<sup>12</sup> Concrete ecclesiologies, then, share the conviction that “... the concrete church should be the starting point for theological reflection – the church as it is, as we know it, rather than what the church should ideally be like.”<sup>13</sup> Hawksley traces the theological roots of these concrete ecclesiologies to both post-liberal theology and post-Vatican II Catholic theology.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, Hawksley is reluctant to describe concrete ecclesiologies as a unified project and proposes that they should instead be characterised as what she calls a methodological common sense, defined by certain shared characteristics.<sup>15</sup> These characteristics include an understanding of the church as a social body and of theology itself as a cultural practice. Accordingly, theological inquiry may take place within academic settings and be undertaken by specialists, but also “by every Christian who reflects on his or her faith.”<sup>16</sup> Hawksley argues that, on this view, the concrete church should be regarded as a theological source, including for academic theology:

Extending the theological franchise in this way means that concrete ecclesiologies are also committed to the concrete church as the source and norm for specialised theological reflection. This means that the specialist ecclesiologist’s attention should be focussed on

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<sup>10</sup> One obvious example is the lived religion paradigm, proposed by Nancy Tatom Ammerman, where religious practices are not limited to restricted sections, for instance the church, but take place in everyday life. See Tatom Ammerman 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Hawksley 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Hawksley mentions, for instance, the works of Alistair McIntyre and, to some extent, Stanley Hauerwas. Hawksley 2012, 26–29.

<sup>13</sup> Hawksley 2012, 31.

<sup>14</sup> Hawksley 2012, 38.

<sup>15</sup> Hawksley 2012, 34.

<sup>16</sup> Hawksley 2012, 36.

real churches, their faithfulness, the shape of their witness, and the challenges they face within their particular context.<sup>17</sup>

In line with this focus on real churches, this thesis' unit of analysis consists of diaconal and liturgical practices within two congregations in the Church of Sweden. The third shared characteristic concerns the extent to which concrete ecclesiologies aim to be of use to the church.<sup>18</sup>

Stangeland Kaufman notes that an important catalyst for this development has been the conversation on ecclesiology and ethnography within the Ecclesiology and Ethnography Network, which holds annual conferences in Durham, United Kingdom. Particularly influential in this regard have been the publication of the edited volumes *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* and *Explorations of Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, as well as *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Theology and Qualitative Research*, alongside the Scandinavian contribution *What Really Matters: Scandinavian Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*.<sup>19</sup> In the Swedish context, the research seminar in ecclesiology at Uppsala University, led by Sven-Erik Brodd, who himself, however, does not work empirically, could be seen as pioneers in the empirical study of ecclesial practices with important contributions from scholars such as Sune Fahlgren, Jonas Idestrom and Ninna Edgardh. A similar approach has also been adopted in research associated with the research seminar in practical theology at University College Stockholm.<sup>20</sup>

It is worth noticing, however, how political considerations within the empirical turn in general and concrete ecclesiologies in particular, are largely absent and are not included in the mentioned edited volumes. The exception being Luke Bretherton, which I use in my theoretical framework. However, even though Bretherton employs ethnographic methods in his study of community organising, he is not studying the church's political expressions empirically. Thus, what my thesis contributes with within the empirical turn and concrete

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<sup>17</sup> Hawksley 2012, 36–37.

<sup>18</sup> Hawksley 2012, 37.

<sup>19</sup> Ward 2012; Scharen 2012; Ward and Tveit Reid 2022; Stangeland Kaufman and Idestrom 2018.

<sup>20</sup> See for instance Lockneus 2023; Mannerfelt 2023; Appelfeldt 2023; Asserhed 2024.

ecclesiologies is, for the first, that I incorporate aspects from political theology into a project on practical theology and ecclesiology. Secondly, I do this with the use of practice theory.

### 2.3 Ecclesiology and Practice Theory

Within this empirical turn in ecclesiology and practical theology, scholars commonly draw on theoretical frameworks developed in other disciplines, particularly the social sciences. In this study, I draw on perspectives associated with practice theory, especially those advanced by Davide Nicolini and Theodore Schatzki. Catalysts in the Scandinavian countries have been scholars connected to the Norwegian research project Learning and Knowledge Trajectories in Congregations, 2010-2014.<sup>21</sup> The overarching focus of the project was learning processes in congregations within the Church of Norway and the wider project, which included a number of PhD-projects, utilised perspectives derived from sociocultural learning theories, activity theory, and sociomaterial theories.<sup>22</sup>

Another work noticing is the volume *Practice, Practice Theory and Theology: Scandinavian and German Perspectives* edited by Kirstine Helboe Johansen and Ulla Schmidt.<sup>23</sup> One characteristic of the use of practice theory in this volume worth noting, and where my thesis differs, concerns the option to keep *emic* and *etic* perspectives separate. While a theological interpretation might be warranted, such an interpretation depends on the *emic* expressions. According to Ulla Schmidt, to approach a practice with an *etic* theological perspective, runs the risk of treating practice as: "...derivative of and secondary to discourse."<sup>24</sup> In contrast, throughout my thesis, I have sought to hold *emic* and *etic* theological perspectives together. Here it is important to notice how practice theory can assume partly different roles within different projects. While it is possible to use practice theory as the theoretical paradigm, in this thesis, this role is given to my theopolitical perspective. Practice theory, then, is used to

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<sup>21</sup> See for instance Saxegaard 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Tveito Johnsen and Afdal 2020, 59–61.

<sup>23</sup> Helboe Johansen and Schmidt 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Schmidt 2022, 43.

generate theological understandings. Thus, my use of practice theory in relation to theopolitics aims at keeping the *emic* and the *etic* perspectives together, where a theoretical perspective shapes the character of the understandings generated by the ethnographically established material, but where the shape and content of these expressions remain an empirical question.

In the Swedish context practice theory has been used by Elin Lockneus in her study of worshippers' liturgical practices.<sup>25</sup> and by Frida Mannerfelt in her analysis of preaching as a form of digitally mediated practice.<sup>26</sup>

## 2.4 The Empirical Turn, Church and Society

Of particular interest to my project are scholars who combine an ethnographic approach to the study of the church with an interest in how the church relates to wider society. Here it is important to note the distinction that Pete Ward, Professor of Theology at Durham University, draws between two approaches to the empirical turn. On the one hand, he argues, there are scholars for whom the empirical turn is more or less explicitly politically motivated; their turn to the empirical is driven by the conviction that attending to previously silenced and marginalised voices can be theologically generative. On the other hand, Ward argues, there are those whose turn to the concrete realities of the church is rooted in the conviction that, as he puts it, "revelation and scripture point towards divine agency in the Church and the wider society."<sup>27</sup>

The former approach is evident in Gyrid Gunnes's dissertation, *Towards a Diaconia of Displacements: An Empirical Theological Inquiry*, in which she analyses and discusses the theology that emerges in encounters between religious practice and people experiencing social disadvantage.<sup>28</sup> Her research is based on an empirical study of the Church City Mission of Trondheim and the work carried out in relation to the Church of Our Lady. Central to her study is the way in which the phenomenon of displacement – that is, when practices, artefacts, and people find themselves in unexpected contexts and roles – creates

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<sup>25</sup> Lockneus 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Mannerfelt 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Ward 2022, 12.

<sup>28</sup> Gunnes 2020.

resources for justice. In her dissertation, she engages with, discusses, and critiques, among other things, kenotic perspectives in Tryggve Wyllers's understanding of heterotopia, as well as the work of Marcella Althaus-Reid.<sup>29</sup> Gunnes's dissertation is of interest, not least because, like my project, it discusses theology and ecclesiology on the basis of diaconal practice in a context of social disadvantage. One difference between her study and the present one, however, is that, whereas Gunnes focuses on contexts of displacement – that is, the unconventional – and thus aligns with Ward's first approach, my project's ambition more closely relates to the latter. Although my focus on congregations within the Church of Sweden in vulnerable areas makes my project comparable to Gunnes's, the difference concerns a matter of degree in terms of unconventionality. Whereas Gunnes's focus is on the unconventional, my study examines relatively conventional ecclesial practices, albeit in an unconventional context.

As indicated, my focus is on the Church of Sweden as a theopolitical actor in deprived areas. In the Swedish context, the scholar Andreas Holmberg – now Bishop of the Diocese of Stockholm – and Kristina Helgesson Kjellin, researcher at the Unit for Research and Analysis at the Church of Sweden, have studied Church of Sweden congregations located in similar settings. In her book *En bra plats att vara på* (A Good Place to Be At), Helgesson Kjellin presents an anthropological study of congregations associated with the network *Framtiden bor hos oss* (The Future Lives with Us), a network with congregations whose profile is similar to that of the congregations in my study. It is worth noting, however, that Helgesson Kjellin's study is anthropological rather than theological.<sup>30</sup> Andreas Holmberg's study, *Kyrka i nytt landskap* (Church in a New Landscape), focuses on congregations belonging to the same network as that examined in Helgesson Kjellin's study.<sup>31</sup> His work however, is more explicitly theological, insofar as it focuses on what he calls lived ecclesiologies. Holmberg's findings overlap with some of the results in my thesis. His depiction of the congregations he has studied as displaying a pan-Christian

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<sup>29</sup> Gunnes 2020, 94–100.

<sup>30</sup> Helgesson Kjellin 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Holmberg 2019.

characteristic clearly resonates with my empirical findings. A point of divergence is how Holmberg's thesis focuses on the general identity of the congregations he studies, where my project specifically focuses on, what I call, the *theopolitical* dimension. This *theopolitical* dimension is another point of divergence in so far as Holmberg, even though he does reflect on the church in relation to society, does not use perspectives derived from political theology. Moreover, where my use of practice theory brings a focus on concrete practices, Holmberg uses focus group interviews which brings a primarily focus on discursive aspects.

In her dissertation, *May I Invite You to Mix at the Tables*, Laura Bjørg Petersen Serup focuses on encounters between individuals of immigrant backgrounds and those of Danish backgrounds in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark. Worth noticing is how her study shares a similar focus as my thesis, in so far as she focuses on concrete ecclesial expressions within amulticultural context, but also through her use of practice theory.<sup>32</sup>

Trygve Wyller, Professor Emeritus of Theology at the University of Oslo, has focused on the Church of Sweden in Bergsjön, Gothenburg – a congregation with a profile similar to that of the congregations examined in this thesis. In his study, he examines a collaboration between the local congregation and an association that uses the church's premises each week to provide free health care to undocumented immigrants. In the article *The Makeshift Curtain: A Generous Christianity: Ecclesiologies beyond the Religious-Secular Binary*, he analyses aspects of the project in relation to Scandinavian creation theology.<sup>33</sup> This use of Scandinavian creation theology marks a difference from my project. Drawing on the British theologian Luke Bretherton, I propose an understanding of politics where the church might find common ground with other actors. A common ground, however, should not be taken for a neutral ground. Here is a point of divergence from Wyller's perspective, which emphasises the possibility of spaces beyond the faith/non-faith binary – spaces that are more general, what he calls spaces shared by all.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Petersen Serup 2024.

<sup>33</sup> Wyller 2001.

<sup>34</sup> Wyller 2001, 189.

This theological strand is also evident in Tron Fagermoen's article, *The Distinctiveness of Diaconia and the Post-Secular Condition: Gustaf Wingren Revisited*.<sup>35</sup> Fagermoen does not work empirically, but his article shares my concern to discuss ecclesial practices beyond the dichotomies envisaged by the two-kingdom doctrine. In the article, he draws on Gustaf Wingren to articulate the distinctiveness of diaconal practices as what he calls a non-oppositional distinctiveness, which addresses certain challenges associated with the post-secular condition and, he argues, allows for a somewhat positive appropriation of the two-kingdom doctrine.<sup>36</sup> An interesting feature of Fagermoen's article is his tendency to talk about the distinctiveness of diaconal practices, but never about the distinctiveness of the church. He does, for instance, talk about how "the particular gospel is made productive in the 'world of the bodies', i.e. in the political sphere, and the clear cut distinction between the spiritual and earthly government is challenged."<sup>37</sup> Notably, in Fagermoen's account, it is the gospel which is made productive in the political sphere, not the church. In contrast, my project concerns the church as a more distinct political body.

In their article, *Listening to the Voices: Refugees as Co-Authors of Practical Theology*, Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen and Gitte Buch-Hansen draw on fieldwork with Middle Eastern asylum seekers and their processes of conversion from Islam to Christianity within the Danish folk church. Interestingly, their project does not only focus on congregations similar to those in my study, but there is also an overlap in how the Eucharist is perceived. In a way which is strikingly similar to my project, they note how the presence of a more diverse congregation has, as they put it, "nudged" congregants of Danish background towards a somewhat different understanding of the Eucharist than is common within the Church of Denmark – an understanding grounded in participation in the body of Christ, rather than viewing the Eucharist primarily as a means of grace for the individual participant.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Fagermoen 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Fagermoen 2018, 134.

<sup>37</sup> Fagermoen 2018, 132.

<sup>38</sup> Ringgaard Lorensen and Buch-Hansen 2018.

In her book *Diakonins kyrka: Teologi, kön och omsorgens utmattning* (The Diaconal Church: Theology, Gender, and the Exhaustion of Care), Ninna Edgardh, Professor Emerita of Ecclesiology at Uppsala University, approaches diaconal work from an ecclesiological perspective.<sup>39</sup> She criticises the tendency to treat diaconal work as inferior in relation to, for instance, the gospel, locating this within the broader tendency of Western modernity to regard the body as inferior to the mind.<sup>40</sup> Crucially, she argues that diaconal practices are expressions of the nature of the church no less than liturgical practices. Of particular importance to my thesis is her interpretation of Gustaf Wingren's understanding of the two-kingdoms doctrine as problematic. She notes that Wingren argues that God acts through both the worldly and the spiritual realms, with the result that diaconal work is located in the worldly realm, while the role of the church is understood primarily as preaching the gospel. Edgardh argues that such interpretations have hindered a positive appropriation of diaconal work as an integral part of the life of the church.<sup>41</sup> Edgardh argues that, in contrast to liturgical theology, where liturgy is understood not as the application of doctrine but as a primary theological expression, diaconal practices have yet to be treated in the same way.<sup>42</sup>

Edgardh's concerns overlap considerably with several aspects of my thesis, not least in the ambition to treat diaconal and liturgical practices as equal expressions of the life of the church, as well as in the focus on the concrete expressions of the church's life as theologically significant. It is particularly noteworthy that my use of practice theory leads me to treat diaconal and liturgical practices as equally embodied practices.

In relation to Edgardh's study, my own study contributes, first, an empirical approach. Although Edgardh is clearly in favour of such a move, she does not work ethnographically. Secondly, through its use of practice theory, this thesis offers tools for conceptualising these practices. Thirdly, although Edgardh criticises the two-kingdom doctrine and the way in which its reception has

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<sup>39</sup> Edgardh 2019, 27.

<sup>40</sup> Edgardh 2019, 164.

<sup>41</sup> Edgardh 2019, 182.

<sup>42</sup> Edgardh 2019, 197.

conflated the relationship between liturgical and diaconal practices, she does not offer an alternative political imagination of the relationship between the church and politics. Finally, although Edgardh elaborates diaconal and liturgical practices as a way of understanding the life of the church in the world, she does not engage explicitly with political questions. Thus, my study may be seen as making such a contribution.

In this chapter, I have situated my study in relation to relevant research. I began by contrasting my thesis with other work in the Swedish context that focuses on the Church of Sweden as a welfare provider. I then proceeded to locate my project within the empirical turn in practical theology in general, and within concrete ecclesiologies in particular. I continued by situating my thesis in relation to the use of practice theory in ecclesiology within the Scandinavian context. Finally, I related my study to other works in the Scandinavian context that focus on the relationship between the church and wider society from the perspective of the church's concrete practices.

Thus, this thesis' contribution can be seen, on an overarching level, as providing an account of the political character of the Church of Sweden from the perspective of concrete ecclesial practices. Thus, compared to more religious-sociological studies, my thesis foregrounds the self-understanding of the church. This political emphasis can also be seen as an important contribution in relation to concrete ecclesiologies.

In the next chapter, I will begin to introduce the theoretical perspective of my thesis through an account of my ecclesiological starting points.

## 3. Ecclesiological Starting Points

### 3.1 Introduction

In the following three chapters, I aim to introduce the theoretical framework of this thesis. It is important, however, to note that these chapters serve rather different purposes and relate to one another in different ways. This chapter, on ecclesiological starting points, together with the next, on politics, establishes the theopolitical horizon of the thesis. As such, they provide what I call a theoretical perspective. This should not, however, be understood as a matter of theory that is subsequently operationalised in the analysis. Rather, it indicates the character of the understandings generated by my ethnographically grounded material. In Chapter 5, however, I introduce practice theory as precisely the kind of theory that is then operationalised in the analysis.

My aim in this thesis has been to hold together my theologically informed framework, practice theory, and methodological considerations. Accordingly, my understanding of the theopolitics informs my use of practice theory, which in turn supports an ethnographic approach and the methods that follow from it. From the standpoint of my theopolitical perspective and my use of practice theory, a sole focus on text and discourse would not be sufficient. Since the relationships at issue are constituted and shaped through materially and spatially mediated practices, they are best studied as part of those practices. For this reason, an ethnographic approach has been adopted.

The following three chapters should therefore preferably be read in sequence, insofar as my theopolitical perspective warrants my use of practice theory. My use of practice theory can thus be understood as the use of social theory within a theological framework.

The primacy given to theology, however, does not entail conceiving theology and the social science in competitive terms. Rather, as Luke Bretherton –

drawing on Catherine Pickstock – has argued, theology can be understood as inherently interdisciplinary:

It is not as if one first enthrones theology as a pre-linguistic pristine edifice, and then asks, how do I communicate this? Rather, its earliest formation, integrity and canonical bases presumed mediation by means of other discourses and bodies of learning. And theology must perforce have recourse to literary and linguistic forms, philosophical analysis, poetry, music and many other disciplines and idioms of expression, in order to express herself as herself.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, theology, I would argue, would do well to invite other disciplines to contribute to theological inquiry. More specifically, in this project I aim for what John Swinton and Harriet Mowat describe as a hospitable approach to other perspectives, without ceding theology's distinctiveness:<sup>2</sup>

In being hospitable towards other forms of knowledge and alternative approaches to the world, the object is not to seek after the lowest common denominator within which dialogue can take place. It is rather to create a context wherein the voice of qualitative research can be heard, respected and taken seriously, but with no a priori assumption that theology needs to merge, follow or fully accept the perspective on the world that is offered to it by qualitative research.<sup>3</sup>

What this hospitable approach allows me, thus, is to use practice theory while keeping with my overarching theological perspective.

Importantly, the combination of a theopolitical perspective with the deployment of practice theory in order to generate theological understandings from ethnographically grounded material means that theology appears in this thesis in the form of both *emic* and *etic* concepts. The terms *etic* and *emic* derive from anthropology, where *etic* refers to concepts employed by the researcher as analytical tools, whereas *emic* denotes concepts derived from the unit of analysis.<sup>4</sup> Thus, in this thesis, the aim is to hold these two aspects together. As has been pointed out, for instance, by Clare Watkins professor of theology at Durham University, there is a temptation to separate the *emic* and the *etic*, with

<sup>1</sup> Pickstock 2016, quoted in Bretherton 2019, 179.

<sup>2</sup> Swinton and Mowat 2016, 86.

<sup>3</sup> Swinton and Mowat 2016, 87.

<sup>4</sup> Ward 2018.

the *etic* dimension either treated as normative or removed from view. Watkins writes:

If the theological response to an ethnographic study of church is heard as “correcting” the complex reality described, we can end up all too easily with another blueprint ecclesiology, albeit one decorated with a few examples from practice. On the other hand, the failure to bring practical data into an integrative relationship with the longer tradition can simply lead us to generate more and more data, information and stories without any way of discerning their significance (if any). Paradoxically, practical theological approaches can, in this way, contribute to the separation of practice and theology in church in that they simply offer the opposite to an abstract blueprint in a description of practice.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, throughout this thesis, I treat theology and theopolitics as both *etic* and *emic* concepts. On the one hand, for instance, I argue that theopolitics should be seen as an ecclesiological concept which describes an intrinsic character of what it means to be church. Thus, it should be seen as an *etic* concept. On the other hand, I argue for an understanding of theopolitics as an inherently contextual concept, where its content is not determined a priori.

The aim of this chapter is to set out my ecclesiological starting points. Drawing on the work of Nicholas M. Healy and Ola Sigurdson, it establishes a dramatic understanding of theology in general and of ecclesiology in particular, in which the Church’s concrete expressions are regarded as theologically significant. I also consider Theodora Hawksley’s critique of Healy, in which she faults him for treating theology and ethnography as functional opposites. In order to establish a more dynamic relationship between doctrine and ethnography, I follow Ola Sigurdson’s understandings of, in particular, the Incarnation.

### **3.2 The Church as the Body of Christ *in via***

As indicated, this thesis focuses not merely on practices in general but on ecclesial practices. My concern, therefore, is with what is commonly called the church. Throughout the project, I have chosen not to approach the church as just another human association but as a theologically qualified social body –

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<sup>5</sup> Watkins 2020, 5.

the body of Christ. This prior understanding entails a view of the relationship between the church and Christ that may be described as analogical. As the body of Christ, the church is not identical with Christ, yet it cannot be understood apart from him.<sup>6</sup> Implicit in this understanding is an understanding of God who allows himself to be known by creatures. To conceptualise this, I draw on Nicholas M. Healy, professor of theology at St John's College, New York. Healy can be seen as an important catalyst for concrete ecclesiologies. Not least his work *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*,<sup>7</sup> where he criticises, what he calls, blueprint-ecclesiologies.

Healy offers a portrayal of theology as a drama conducted under either an epic or a dramatic horizon where Healy himself clearly argues for the latter. The epic horizon denotes an orientation in which one observes the drama from a distance, occupying a vantage point that affords an overview of the whole story. By contrast, the dramatic horizon begins in the middle of things. As Healy puts it, a dramatic horizon:

...takes the perspective of a participant in the drama, of one who lives entirely within the movement of the play. It displays the tensive and conflictual nature of Christian existence, reflecting in its very form the ongoing dramatic struggle that constitutes discipleship.<sup>8</sup>

An important aspect of this drama, Healy argues, is that human beings are not its principal characters; the principal actor is God. The larger play consists of God's actions in creation, salvation, and consummation, and through these actions the whole of creation is drawn into the drama. It is a drama that originates in the self-giving love of the triune God, in which Jesus's suffering enables what is not God to participate in God's love.<sup>9</sup> Through God's work in Christ, in which God allows himself to be known by and through creatures, a stage is set

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<sup>6</sup> As Sven-Erik Brodd, professor emeritus in ecclesiology at Uppsala University argues, the analogical relationship between Christ and the church, implied in the concept of the body of Christ, should not be seen as an object of faith but as academic theory. Brodd 2015, 18–20.

<sup>7</sup> Healy 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Healy 2000, 53–54.

<sup>9</sup> Healy 2000, 62.

on which all creation, including the church, is invited to respond to God. Healy writes:

Thus in a way analogous to (and dependent upon) the way the Father makes room for the Son within the Godhead, God gives us a place on the stage where we may make our own free response in gratitude. Our acting space is therefore not to be thought of as somehow located in a sphere separate from God. Rather it is located within God's sphere, within the one theo-drama.<sup>10</sup>

The emphasis placed on God's prior action does not, however, deny the notion of human freedom in relation to divine action. Although, as Healy argues, the relationship between God and creation should be seen as fundamentally asymmetrical, this does not exclude our free response. This has important implications for how the church is to be studied. It means, among other things, that the church's struggles, failures, and shortcomings should be regarded as an integral part of its present identity. Thus, to depict the church as the body of Christ should not be taken as an idealistic account of a spotless church. With an appeal to Chalcedonian Christological formulations, Healy portrays the church as paradoxically related to Christ and yet fully human at the same time – an emphasis that rules out any notion of a division of labour between divine and human agency:<sup>11</sup>

Human agency is fully constitutive of all human institutions and bodies, including the church. At the same time, divine agency is fully constitutive of all such bodies, including those that are non-ecclesial and non-religious. There is nowhere where God is not creatively and redemptively present.<sup>12</sup>

If there is no division between human and divine agency in the life of the church, then – as the Swedish theologian Jonas Ideström has noted – the church should be understood as a body in which, as in Christ, the material and the spiritual, the human and the divine, are held together.<sup>13</sup> Thus the church is free to act against God's will and intentions; it is permitted to be sinful. Yet this

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<sup>10</sup> Healy 2000, 62.

<sup>11</sup> Healy 2000, 66.

<sup>12</sup> Healy 2000, 67.

<sup>13</sup> Ideström 2009, 44.

should not, Healy argues, be regarded as a departure from its true identity, but rather as part of its dramatic identity – its identity *in via*:

...our activity should be expected to run at times counter to the divine activity, manifesting our finitude and sin. When it does so, such activity still remains constitutive of the church's concrete identity, for if it did not, the church could not be said to play any role of its own in the theodrama. Its identity is thus thoroughly dramatic in form, for it is the embodiment of its struggle to follow, reject or ignore the movement of the Spirit in its midst.<sup>14</sup>

In this thesis, I use Healy's understanding of theology's dramatic horizon and of the church as a body *in via* as a basic point of orientation in relation to the church. However, there are certain problematic aspects of Healy's understanding of ecclesiology that are worth noting and in relation to which my project diverges.

Theodora Hawksley has identified a tendency among concrete ecclesiologists, Healy included, to envisage the relationship between theology and ethnography as one between functional opposites. This leads ethnography to assume, what she describes as, a thermostatic relationship to theology, where a supposed abstract theory, in terms of doctrines, are related to the "real" church. This is a relationship that, Hawksley argues, risks distorting both theology and ethnography. For Hawksley, Healy exemplifies this tendency in his insistence on beginning with doctrine in order to preserve the theological character of ecclesiological inquiry. The problem, she argues, lies in how Healy subsequently envisages a turn to ethnography following this doctrinal foundation.<sup>15</sup> The problem, Hawksley argues, is that doctrine remains theoretical and abstract, whereas ethnography is perceived as providing a straightforward account of what is taking place. Hawksley notes that Healy then proposes a negotiation between doctrine and ethnographic findings. Thus, doctrine and ethnography remain functional opposites, with abstract doctrine being tested against the empirical church.<sup>16</sup> The problem, Hawksley argues, is that ethnography cannot provide the theologian with "the real church." To assume otherwise would be

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<sup>14</sup> Healy 2000, 68.

<sup>15</sup> Healy 2010, 124–125.

<sup>16</sup> Hawksley 2012, 99.

to treat ethnography as what she describes as a form of scientific anthropology, in which the researcher goes out in order to study “reality.”<sup>17</sup> In contrast to such an understanding, but also in relation to interpretative and postmodern anthropology, she proposes an pragmatic and relational ethnography where the object of inquiry is seen as emergent and where the ethnographer not only describe the object, but also, in a certain sense, create the subject. Hawksley stats: “Ethnographic work is not just baldly representative or descriptive, but *creative*.”<sup>18</sup>

My aim here is not to evaluate Hawksley’s own position. Her critique of Healy, however, is important to notice. In my thesis I follow Healy’s notion of the church as a body *in via* and his emphasis on the dramatic character of theology. In order to avoid treating theology and ethnography as functional opposites, I will now turn to the Swedish theologian Ola Sigurdson who envisions doctrines and the church’s practices in a more dynamic relationship.

### 3.3 Theology from the Middle of Things

Ola Sigurdson, Professor of Theology at the University of Oslo, is a theologian working within the Scandinavian context who has made a constructive contribution to discussions of the identity and political role of the Scandinavian folk churches. He has also written extensively on the relationship between systematic theology and human embodiment.<sup>19</sup>

What Sigurdson offers is a way to perceive Christian doctrines, where these doctrines are not seen as abstract propositional truths, but as modes of living and relating. Importantly, doctrines, he argues are always received and understood in and through human practices.<sup>20</sup> Crucially, this reception, Sigurdson argues, should be understood as an integral part of our understanding of doctrines.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the study of, for instance, the Incarnation should not be restricted to historical research and the exegesis of Scripture but, Sigurdson

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<sup>17</sup> Hawksley 2012, 121–124.

<sup>18</sup> Hawksley 2012, 99.

<sup>19</sup> Sigurdson 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Sigurdson 2016, 478.

<sup>21</sup> Sigurdson 2016, 141.

argues, should also include how Christ has been – and continues to be – received in and through human practices. What Sigurdson implies is a view of the Incarnation as extended through time and space:

The incarnation is constituted, so to speak, not only by the fact that God becomes human in Jesus Christ, but also by the fact that this incarnation continues in people's concrete reception of Christ, which always achieves a specific form in different historical, cultural, and social circumstances.<sup>22</sup>

This extension of the Incarnation to include the contemporary reception of Christ through various practices creates, I would argue, a productive tension between written doctrine and human practices. It is also an approach, I contend, that allows me to avoid treating doctrine and ethnography as functional opposites. Even though Healy supports the turn towards concrete ecclesologies, he nevertheless maintains a separation between doctrine and the concrete life of the Church. While doctrine may have to be corrected in the light of ethnographically grounded material, it remains separate from the messy realities of the concrete Church.<sup>23</sup>

Where Healy argues that all ecclesiological inquiries should be doctrinally informed, and then, subsequently, turn to an empirical account, this thesis, following Sigurdson proposes a slightly different approach. While my ecclesiological starting points are theologically informed, I do not envision a clear division between doctrines and the ethnographically established material. If, as Sigurdson, argues, doctrines should be seen as modes living and relating, these doctrines can hardly be restricted to written accounts. Thus, my decision to approach the church as the body of Christ, should not be seen to envision a separation between doctrines and the concrete life of the church but rather to point towards these lived realities as the place where these doctrines are enacted as modes of living and relating. What it implies is that theology, with the words of Rowan Williams, should start in the middle of things.<sup>24</sup>

Crucially, following Sigurdson, I understand the Incarnation as pointing towards the theological significance of this “middle of things.” Sigurdson

<sup>22</sup> Sigurdson 2016, 583.

<sup>23</sup> Healy 2010, 123–125.

<sup>24</sup> Williams 2000, xii.

makes a connection between the Incarnation and what he describes the situated nature of human life. The word Sigurdson uses to describe this situatedness is in terms of the human life-world.<sup>25</sup> Within theology, Sigurdson argues, this life-world should not be deemed irrelevant to our understanding of theology but should be seen as the very means of our relationship to God. It is here that the significance of the Incarnation becomes apparent. The Incarnation implies a connection between a given human lifeworld and God. Sigurdson states:

If the doctrine of the incarnation refers to a divine action through which God becomes present to us as human beings, this means that God becomes concrete or even tangible in social practices and symbols but also through other human beings. God enters the human life-world, and so there will have to become a point of contact between God's advent and this life world that makes God's presence in it relevant to us creatures of this life-world in (at least) some minimal sense.<sup>26</sup>

What Sigurdson indicates, I would argue, is how theology and doctrinal considerations are not restricted to written accounts but can be seen as originating from the middle of things. As will be described in my chapter on practice theory, in this thesis, this middle of things consists of practices.

In this chapter, I have introduced my thesis' ecclesiological starting points. Following Healy I depart from an understanding of the church as the body of Christ and from a dramatic understanding of theology. In order to avoid the critique of Theodora Hawksley and treat theology and ethnography as functional opposites, I have, following Sigurdson, argued for an understanding of doctrines where these are not perceived as propositional truths but as modes of living and relating. I have, moreover, argued that Sigurdson's understanding of the Incarnation points towards making "the middle" things, the starting point for theological inquiry. Thus, this thesis's decision to focus on practices should be seen as theologically motivated. As the British theologian Clare Watkins argues:

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<sup>25</sup> Sigurdson 2020, 476.

<sup>26</sup> Sigurdson 2020, 478.

We arrive at the value and the theological significance of practices not from a sociological or political conviction, but rather as a deeply held, obvious consequence of our theological faith about the kind of God that the Christian God is.<sup>27</sup>

By introducing an understanding of theology as having a dramatic character, as well as an understanding of the church as the body of Christ, I have identified two important features that I aim to hold together throughout this thesis. Crucially, these two aspects point towards the aforementioned tension between the *emic* and the *etic* character of theology in this study. On the one hand, the dramatic horizon of theology resonates with its *emic* character. On the other hand, my prior understanding of the church as the body of Christ can be seen as an instance of the way theology functions in this thesis as an *etic* concept. Thus, throughout this thesis, my aim is to hold together both the dramatic notion of theology (the *emic*) and an understanding of the church as the body of Christ *in via* (the *etic*), in which the church's various practices are seen as aspects and expressions of the body of Christ, while their content and concrete expressions remain an empirical question.

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<sup>27</sup> Watkins 2020, 42.

## **4. Theopolitics**

### **4.1 Introduction**

Building on the previous chapter, the aim of this chapter is to extend my theoretical perspective to include politics as well and, more specifically, to explicate my understanding of theopolitics. Following Bretherton, I will provide an understanding of politics derived not from statecraft, but from the notion of a common life. The chapter will proceed as follows: I will begin by providing a background account focusing on the so-called two-kingdom doctrine, a doctrine which, in the Swedish context, has shaped the conversation concerning the relationship between the church and politics in a particular way. In light of the two-kingdom doctrine and what I am about to argue are its problematic features, I will proceed to present a possible alternative framework for discussing church and politics. Together with my ecclesiological starting points, this account amounts to a framework that allows me to interpret liturgical and diaconal practices as enactments of the church's theopolitical character.

### **4.2 Background**

As already indicated, there is a tendency within the Swedish context to treat the church and politics as separate. One possible theological reason for this is the historical influence of the so-called two-kingdom doctrine. The aim of this background section, therefore, is to introduce the two-kingdom doctrine. This serves a number of purposes. First, it provides a background to how the relationship between the Church of Sweden and politics has been perceived within the framework of the two-kingdom doctrine. Secondly, the chapter offers a critique of this doctrine and points to the need to understand the relationship between the Church of Sweden and politics differently. Thus, it serves as the

background to my presentation of the concept of theopolitics. In what follows, I will focus on scholars from the Scandinavian context.

#### **4.2.1 The Two-Kingdom Doctrine**

The following account should not be seen as an exhaustive treatment of the two-kingdom doctrine or of how it has been perceived and interpreted. My aim is to introduce its main characteristics, while also presenting some critical perspectives that indicate how the doctrine has shaped the conversation surrounding the church and politics.

According to Carl-Henrik Grenholm, Professor Emeritus of Ethics at Uppsala University, the two-kingdom doctrine should be understood in relation to several significant distinctions within the Lutheran tradition. Perhaps the most important of these concerns the proper distinction between law and gospel. Whereas the gospel is understood as God's gracious offer of salvation through Jesus Christ, apart from any works, the law is not regarded as contributing to salvation. Instead, the role of the law is twofold: to articulate God's demands and thereby convince the individual of her need for God's grace, and to stipulate what constitutes a good life. It follows from this distinction that ethics is located within the realm of the law and is therefore separated from the gospel, while also being equally accessible to all through reason and conscience. Thus, the gospel, or Christian faith more generally, is not seen as contributing anything new to ethics.<sup>1</sup> The two-kingdom doctrine, then, is based on another adjacent distinction, the distinction between the spiritual and the temporal regiments. Fundamental to this distinction is how the temporal and the spiritual is perceived to be held together by God. It is based on a theocratic understanding of human existence, and how God governs the world. In the spiritual regiment God is active through the gospel, whereas in the temporal God is seen to govern through the political authorities, at times by means of violence and coercion. Thus, what the two-kingdom doctrine implies is a clear distinction between the spiritual and the worldly realm, where politics, thus, belongs to the temporal.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Grenholm 2014, 41–46.

<sup>2</sup> Grenholm 2014, 66–67.

Within the Lutheran tradition, the two-kingdom doctrine has remained an influential building block in how to perceive the relationship between church and politics.<sup>3</sup> The Norwegian theologian Kjell Nordstokke, former director of mission and development at the Lutheran World Federation argues that the doctrine should be understood as a protection against the abuse of both temporal and spiritual powers. Thus, it is seen as a protection from, for instance the worldly powers' interference in the life of the church. At the same time, Nordstokke argues, since both realms belong to God, they should not be separated.<sup>4</sup>

According to the theologian Patrik Hagman what characterises different instantiations of the two-kingdom doctrine is that they envision a complementary and rather harmonious relationship between the church and the state:

What all standard interpretations of the doctrine of the two kingdoms have in common is the idea that Church and state complement one another, and that a situation of conflict must be understood as a temporary exception. This view has also been fully implemented in practice in the Nordic national churches. Even if, on some point, the Church might envisage criticising the state's policy or conduct, such criticism is best understood as criticism within a shared community, rather than as criticism by one social actor of another.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the two-kingdom, building on the distinction between the temporal and the spiritual realm causes a separation between the church and politics, where politics is understood as belonging to the temporal realm. This does not imply that the church does not have an opinion about politics, but it is not seen as a political actor.

In this section, I have provided a brief introduction to the two-kingdom doctrine. Given the undeniable destructive potential of hegemonic religion, however, it may indeed seem desirable to keep church and politics separate. The problem with this separation, I would argue, may be expressed in terms of mistaking the map for reality. The two-kingdom doctrine, I would argue, may be understood as a map that that prescribes a separation between religion and

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance Lutheran World Federation 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Nordstokke 2011, 27.

<sup>5</sup> Hagman 2013, 88.

the church from politics. A map, however, should not be taken for reality and it is not hard to find examples of how religion and politics are intertwined in today's world, where the regime in Iran and the Trump administration in the United States are but two obvious examples. One of the problems, then, with a map that maintains a separation between religion and politics is that it prohibits a critical discussion of how religious actors, such as the Church of Sweden, are already acting politically. Thus, the two-kingdom doctrine runs the risk of being a map which hinders the Church of Sweden for taking responsibility for its political practices and, consequently, does not help us to orientate in a landscape where religion and politics are increasingly intertwined. As indicated, this doctrine is not without its critics, and it is to some of these critiques I now turn.

#### 4.2.2 Critique of the Two-Kingdom Doctrine

To start with, it is questionable whether we should talk about a two-kingdom doctrine at all. Per Frostin (1943–1992) is one of the scholars who, in the Swedish context, have most extensively addressed the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms. His work amounts to the, perhaps, clearest critiques of the doctrine in the Swedish context. In the posthumously published *Luther's Two Kingdoms Doctrine*, Frostin questions whether it is possible to discern a coherent and clearly defined doctrine of the two kingdoms in Martin Luther's writings.<sup>6</sup> Frostin writes: "...it is impossible to summarise Luther's different statements and positions in his two regiments teaching into one non contradictory system, a Two Kingdom Doctrine."<sup>7</sup> What is worth noticing is how Frostin links the full articulation of the two-kingdom scheme with politics. He argues that a fully developed doctrine of the two kingdoms can first be discerned in interwar Germany, and that it was developed, not least, in support of Adolf Hitler's seizure of power in Germany in 1933.<sup>8</sup> Grenholm has a similar critique and notes

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<sup>6</sup> Frostin 1994, 166–170.

<sup>7</sup> Frostin 1994, 166.

<sup>8</sup> Frostin 1994, 2–9.

how the doctrine has been used to provide a theologically motivated support for various dubious political regimes.<sup>9</sup>

According to Ola Sigurdson, the two-kingdom doctrine and the way it has been interpreted has had far-reaching consequences which has to do with the embodiment of religion as such. He charges the two-kingdom doctrine to be an accomplice in a development where the embodied nature of religion in general and the church in particular is seen as secondary. The Swedish theologian Ninna Edgardh has described this phenomenon in terms of an exarnation where the body is seen as inferior to the mind.<sup>10</sup> What the two-kingdom doctrine has contributed with, Sigurdson argues, is not just a separation between the church and politics but to a distinction between the outward human being and the inward. Where the outward human being was perceived as a citizen and political, the inward human being was private and spiritual.<sup>11</sup> According to Sigurdson, such distinctions and the complementary relationship between the state and the church made sense in a unitary society where a Christian Lutheran perspective was taken for granted. Or as Sigurdson puts it, such an understanding was possible when Christianity had a hegemonic status as state religion.<sup>12</sup> In such a context, it was possible to hold the two realms together and to envision God as active in both. However, as the theological character of the worldly power faded, such a position has become increasingly difficult to maintain. However, as the state assumed a more secular character, the church, Sigurdson argues, lost its embodied nature. Sigurdson writes:

These distinctions have fatal consequences for the self-understanding of the Christian church: when the government withdraws from and forgets its theological self-understanding such that the worldly realm becomes radically secularized, religion becomes a private, passive and feminine sentiment. In other words, religion loses any notion of its institutional character; it becomes subjectivized to the degree that it loses its body, its particularity and its place.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Grenholm 2014, 70.

<sup>10</sup> Edgardh 2019, 164.

<sup>11</sup> Sigurdson 2010, 186.

<sup>12</sup> Sigurdson 2010, 188.

<sup>13</sup> Sigurdson 2010, 187.

Thus, when the outward human being loses its religious character what is left for the church is the inward, the private. This does not mean, Sigurdson argues, that the church as an institution has disappeared in a social sense. What is lost, however, is a theological understanding of its embodied dimensions where embodiment is regarded as secondary to religious faith.<sup>14</sup> The problem with this, Sigurdson argues, is that the church loses sight of Christianity as mediated and ultimately runs the risk of denying the Incarnation and turn the church into a ghost, to a voice without a body.<sup>15</sup>

What my account of the two-kingdom doctrine has indicated, is the need to discuss the relationship between the church and politics from a different framework than what the two-kingdom doctrine offers. Here, I will not discuss Sigurdson's own constructive contribution. However, Sigurdson points out some aspects which, I would argue, an account of the theopolitical character of the Church of Sweden should heed.

One such aspect is the way in which the Church of Sweden, as a state church, has historically assumed a hegemonic position in relation to other actors. As Sigurdson notes, however, an appreciation of the importance of embodiment does not necessarily entail a return to such an arrangement. It is possible, he argues, to perceive the church's embodiment and its relationship to other social groups in terms of horizontal rather than vertical relationships.<sup>16</sup>

Another aspect concerns whether the focus on the church as embodied of necessity, implies a view of the church as a closed-off body, isolated from other social bodies. This, however, Sigurdson argues, is not necessarily the only option. It is possible, he argues to envision the church's embodiment as neither in terms of an isolated body nor as, what he calls "...all-encompassing being that seeks to dominate all other embodiments"<sup>17</sup>

As noted in chapter 2, this thesis aligns itself with what Theodora Hawksley calls concrete ecclesiologies. Thus, it departs from the fundamental conviction that the concrete expressions of the life of the church should be the object of

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<sup>14</sup> Sigurdson 2010, 187.

<sup>15</sup> Sigurdson 2010, 192.

<sup>16</sup> Sigurdson 2010, 188.

<sup>17</sup> Sigurdson 2010, 194.

close attention and theological considerations. What is worth noting, however, is how accounts of concrete ecclesiologies seem less concerned with the political aspects of the church. One exception is Luke Bretherton. My turn to Bretherton, thus is motivated by the fact that he remains one of the few political theologians who have interacted with concrete ecclesiologies and his various works include accounts where he combines political theology and ethnographic research. In what follows, the aim is to present my understanding of the concept of theopolitics. I start with an account of how politics could be perceived apart from the two-kingdom doctrine. I then point out how both politics and theology could be seen as derived from the situated character of human life. A fact which highlights how I, throughout this thesis use theopolitics as both an *etic* and an *emic* concept.

### **4.3 Politics of a Common Life**

In order to explain my understanding of theopolitics, it is important to recall how the two-kingdom doctrine implied a distinction between the worldly and the spiritual and, thus, between church and politics. Within this scheme, politics is seen as belonging to the worldly realm, while the church is located within the spiritual. In this understanding, politics is associated with what is sometimes called statecraft. Thus, different political imaginations give rise to different kinds of discussion. If politics is limited to statecraft – as in the two-kingdom doctrine – the discussion of church and politics takes a particular direction. Within such a paradigm, the political significance of the church depends upon its influence on the predetermined political subject, the state. To enable a different kind of discussion, a different framework is required. In what follows, the aim is to present such a framework, in which politics is not limited to statecraft but may be seen as including practices through which a common life is forged, shaped, and sustained. Importantly, what this framework indicates is that the starting point for politics is neither the state nor political parties, but a common life.

A fundamental assumption guiding my understanding of politics and theopolitics concerns the situated nature of human life. According to Bretherton, to be human entails being fundamentally situated. Human life, he argues, may

be understood as a meshwork of relationships – with other human beings and with the rest of creation. To be human, then, is both to share in and to depend upon forms of common life. Crucially, politics in its most fundamental sense, Bretherton argues, concerns the nature and formation of this common life:

To be a human creature is to be a political animal. Humans are not created to be alone... we are vulnerable interdependent animals whose very survival depends on the care we give to and receive from others. And beyond mere survival, our flourishing depends on being embedded in loving and just forms of common life. Politics is the work of forming, norming and sustaining that common life with others.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, politics in this sense concerns the forming, norming and sustaining of a common life. Importantly, whereas the two-kingdom doctrine locates politics in the sphere of the state and in statecraft, politics as based on a common life, is not dependent on the existence of a formal state at all. One important consequence of this emphasis on a common life is that politics should not be seen as a concept imposed on the world by the researcher. Bretherton writes:

...political and moral judgments are discovered, not made. We do not impose meanings on the world by an act of will. The universe is not a blank slate passively waiting to receive the meaning humans assign it. Rather, it is pregnant with the meanings and purposes given creation by God.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, politics in this sense can be seen as inherently practical. Bretherton describes this as a politics grounded in practical reason rather than in techniques and procedures. Fundamentally, it concerns arriving at judgements about how to act, at a particular time and in a particular context, in pursuit of goods in common.<sup>20</sup> Compared with a state-centred understanding of politics, a politics grounded in the intrinsic good and necessity of association widens the scope of potential subjects to encompass the myriad practices in which a common life is formed and negotiated.<sup>21</sup> The term Bretherton uses for this common life is *the body politic*, which approximates what is sometimes called civil society. By this term, Bretherton does not envisage a sphere separate from, for

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<sup>18</sup> Bretherton 2023, 322.

<sup>19</sup> Bretherton 2023, 13.

<sup>20</sup> Bretherton 2010, 193.

<sup>21</sup> Bretherton 2019, 32–33.

instance, the state or the market. Rather, the body politic should be seen as a confluence of partially overlapping spheres constituted by different practices, as in a Venn diagram.<sup>22</sup> Bretherton states:

The civil sphere is the point of convergence, cooperation and communication that emerges out of, builds connections between, and upholds the specificities of each sphere; in short it is a form of the commons.<sup>23</sup>

In this understanding of the body politic, religious convictions play an important role and are, as will be noticed further on, integral to its formation. As Bretherton notes, this stands in notable contrast to, for instance, certain versions of political liberalism, in which religious convictions are regarded with suspicion and are required to be translated into a form of public reason accessible to all.<sup>24</sup> Drawing on the German political theorist and nazist, Carl Schmitt, Bretherton notes how convictions with universal horizons generate variations of the friend–enemy distinction, but whereas Schmitt made this distinction constitutive of the life of nation-states, Bretherton employs it to describe relationships within the body politic. Thus, the body politic should not be seen as an organically peaceful sphere, but rather as fractious and marked by competing universalisms. The various friend–enemy distinctions therefore carry the potential for enmity and conflict, yet this plurality of convictions also holds the promise of a more complex social space.<sup>25</sup> Thus, what Bretherton suggests is a conception of politics in which religious convictions are permitted to play an integral role. The friend–enemy distinction, however, should not, Bretherton argues, be treated as absolute or ontological. Rather, politics should be understood as the practice by which a common life is formed despite divergent understandings of the good. Drawing on Chantal Mouffe, Bretherton distinguishes between *the political* and *politics*. The political, on the one hand, denotes:

<sup>22</sup> Bretherton 2015, 205–206.

<sup>23</sup> Bretherton 2015, 206.

<sup>24</sup> Bretherton 2015, 191.

<sup>25</sup> Bretherton 2015, 213.

...attempts to build a common life without moving beyond the friend-enemy distinction by attempting one-sided determinations of the terms and conditions of a common life through processes of exclusion and erasure such as coercive assimilation.<sup>26</sup>

Politics, on the other hand describes:

...the attempt to construct a common life moving beyond the friend-enemy distinction through processes that respect the otherness of the other, and recognizes the conflicts of identity, vision and interest between friends and enemies.<sup>27</sup>

In such political practices, Bretherton argues, what is discovered is that we already inhabit a common world of action and meaning – a world that we, because of sin, tend to distort. In this understanding of politics, the otherness of the other is not a problem to be solved but a precondition for our own constructive participation in a common life.<sup>28</sup> Thus, an important aspect of the body politic could be described as a certain degree of openness to the contribution of other actors. In such a common life, various spheres possess resources that, at different times, may contribute to what Bretherton, drawing on the work of Jeffrey C. Alexander, describes as “civil repair.”<sup>29</sup> The need for civic repair is due to the fact that different spheres, most notably the state and the market, tend to expand and dominate other spheres. What the body politic, at its best, contributes is a more complex social space that is not determined by the logics of either the market or the state.<sup>30</sup>

...part of the church’s vocation as a *res publica* is to bear witness within this age to the possibilities of a common life that is in excess of and beyond this or that worldly order. Lung-like, the church breathes the works of the Spirit within any given spatiotemporal order, thereby oxygenating the work of being human.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, on this account, the church is not dependent on the state or any other actor for its political engagement. This does not deny the importance of statecraft, but expands the concept of politics considerable.

<sup>26</sup> Bretherton 2015, 214.

<sup>27</sup> Bretherton 2015, 214.

<sup>28</sup> Bretherton 2015, 215.

<sup>29</sup> Bretherton 2015, 208–209.

<sup>30</sup> Bretherton 2019, 386.

<sup>31</sup> Bretherton 2019, 386.

In this section, I have begun my account of the concept of theopolitics, by an act of relocation. Where the two-kingdom doctrine implies an understanding of politics as essentially statecraft, my account has pointed to the notion of a shared common life as a point of departure. In, what I have called, the body politic, different actors, the church included could be seen as political subjects contributing to this common life.<sup>32</sup> What then is the role of the church in this framework?

From the account provided thus far, the political role of the church may be described in terms of practices through which the church contributes to the formation and sustenance of a common life. In what follows, I will elaborate on this role of the church. My argument is that the church's role may be described as both distinct and undetermined.

Fundamentally, the political role of the church, I would argue, should be framed in terms of the church as witness: not to certain values or spiritual truths, but to the new creation wrought by Jesus' death and resurrection, which Bretherton describes in terms of new social possibilities. Thus, the distinctiveness of the church's political witness lies in the fact that it concerns concrete social realities. Crucially, at the same time, following Bretherton, the church's political witness may be described as undetermined.

Crucially, the tension between the distinct yet undetermined character of the church's political witness is not accidental but theologically warranted. Here, it is instructive to note Bretherton's emphasis on what he calls the apocalyptic character of politics. Importantly, this apocalyptic character has to do with time. Theologically speaking, we live in the time and tension between the new creation brought about in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, his subsequent ascension, and his expected return. Bretherton terms this time "the saeculum."<sup>33</sup> Within the *saeculum*, all social life, politics included, are characterised by the capacity both to participate in Christ's rule over creation and to work against it. Thus, within the *saeculum* politics, Bretherton argues, should be seen as inherently ambiguous and provisional. History, then, should be

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<sup>32</sup> This emphasis on a politics of common life does not, however, exclude other aspects of politics, statecraft included.

<sup>33</sup> Bretherton 2010, 16.

understood neither as a story of continuous progress nor decline and politics, subsequently is neither a tragic nor an optimistic endeavour. All human life is marked by sin, yet politics within this apocalyptic register envisages the *saeculum* as a time open to the new creation, to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, in which new social realities are formed:

*Theologically understood*, an apocalyptic orientation is neither pessimistic nor optimistic... Rather it entails trusting that history is open to change, that a new creation is coming and that the Spirit can bring into being a radical, surprising and unanticipated newness... In Christian political theology, an apocalyptic register is born out of a revelation of what is really happening from a heavenly perspective and a discernment of the active and living presence of God here and now.<sup>34</sup>

The role of the church in the *saeculum*, then, is distinct insofar as it involves bearing witness to these new social realities and thus participating in God's new creation. At the same time, it is undetermined. The new creation is not given to the church as a fixed blueprint, but in and through the risen Christ.

Adding to the tension between the old and the new creation is the tension between the incarnation and the resurrection. As noted, according to Bretherton, the resurrection implies nothing less than the transformation of the created order. Given the incarnation, however, this new creation cannot constitute a complete rupture with the "old"; such an understanding would deny the goodness of creation. Rather, the new creation should be seen as the eschatological fulfilment of any given culture. The task before the church, then, is one of continuous discernment, through which it must determine which forms of social life resonate with the new creation revealed in Christ and which do not. In this task, Bretherton accords an important role to the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit that makes God's new creation present within the church, but also in the world. The church, thus, should strive to be attentive to what the Spirit is doing both within and outside the church.<sup>35</sup>

In this section, I have framed the political role of the church in terms of witness. I have argued that the church's witness should be seen as distinct insofar as it concerns concrete social realities. At the same time, I have shown how

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<sup>34</sup> Bretherton 2025, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Bretherton 2006, 107.

the church's political witness should be understood as undetermined. The new creation to which the church is called to bear witness is not a blueprint given to the church but rather demands a constant act of discernment on the part of the church.

#### **4.4 Theopolitics: Theology and Politics Intertwined**

It is now time to draw together the account provided in the previous chapter on ecclesiological starting points with my account of politics into what I call theopolitics. My account of politics, as well as of theology, indicates how both concepts derive from the situated character of human life. As noted, to live a human life is to be embedded in a meshwork of relationships, relationships that may be interpreted both theologically and politically. Thus, what I call the theopolitical character of the Church concerns the ways in which theology and politics may be understood as intertwined and enacted in the Church's concrete practices.

Importantly, throughout this thesis, theopolitics is employed as both an *emic* and an *etic* concept. While I argue that it should be understood as an inherent feature of the Church, I nevertheless maintain that its content remains an empirical question. This simultaneous use of theopolitics as both an *emic* and an *etic* concept resembles Luke Bretherton's account of political theology as departing from already existing forms of political practice:

The focus on how Christians are already acting politically makes no inherent claim for a first-order theory of practice. Rather, it is simply an attempt to conceptualize the relationship between church, state, and market through attention to the givenness of what is already going on; that is, to the reality of existent political relationships. In attending to such practices we may discover that the already existing forms of action are suggestive of alternative ways of framing faithful witness than are currently available in contemporary Christian political thought. More significantly though, through paying attention to existent forms of political action a theological account of what faithful political action involves can be developed.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, what Bretherton indicates, I would suggest, is that practices may be observed with a particular focus and pre-understanding, in my case from a

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<sup>36</sup> Bretherton 2010, 17.

theopolitical perspective, without implying a first-order theory of practice. Thus, throughout this thesis, my aim is to hold together these two perspectives, the *emic* and the *etic*, in the study and analysis of diaconal and liturgical practices as theopolitical practices, while their theopolitical character is not predetermined but remains an empirical question.

## 5. Practice Theory

### 5.1 Introduction

Having introduced my understanding of theopolitics, it is now time to introduce another building block of this thesis: practice theory. While Chapters 3 and 4 should be seen as constituting the theoretical perspective of this thesis, practice theory will be operationalised in the analysis of my material. As noted, my use of practice theory may thus be understood as the use of a social theory within a theological perspective. In other words, I use practice theory as a tool for generating *theological* understandings.

Although my focus on practices is warranted by my theopolitical framework, my use of practice theory, and not least a strong programme of practice, strengthens this focus. Moreover, practice theory allows me to focus on the concrete practices of the Church in a structured way. Here, it is instructive to recall my account of the situated character of human life. While Bretherton envisions human life as embedded in a meshwork of relationships, he does not specify how these relationships should be conceptualised. Practice theory, however, allows me to conceptualise these relationships and interactions in a structured way, namely in terms of practices.

In what follows the aim is to introduce my use of practice theory. I do this, firstly, by an account of a general approach to practices, what is called a strong programme of practice. Secondly, I will also provide an account of Theodore Schatzki's understanding of how practices are structured.

### 5.2 Towards a Strong Programme of Practice

Crucially, Practice theory, should not be understood as a unified programme, but rather as a family of theories which, despite their differences, display certain

common characteristics. One such feature concerns a specific understanding of the social world as consisting of practices. This is implied in what the practice theorist Davide Nicolini denotes as a strong programme of practice. Here, it is instructive to note how Nicolini suggests an analytical distinction between a strong and a weak programme of practice. In a weak programme, practices are treated as the opposite of theory.

In such an understanding, for instance, various ecclesial practices could be seen as the application of certain beliefs. By contrast, a strong programme understands practice as more than mere doing or the application of theory.<sup>1</sup> As noticed, it entails a fundamental understanding of the social world, where the practices are seen as the primary unity of social analysis.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the social world is composed of practices, and the production of theory is itself a practice. Another practice theorist, Theodore Schatzki writes:

Practice accounts are joined in the belief that such phenomena as knowledge, meaning, human activity, science, power, language, social institutions, and historical transformation occur within and are aspects of components of the field of practices. The field of practices is the total nexus of interconnected human practices.<sup>3</sup>

This, I would argue, has implications for my project. As I noted in the introduction, a strong programme of practice strengthens the turn towards the church's concrete expressions. From the perspective of a strong programme of practice, a phenomenon such as, for instance, the church should not be regarded as possessing a stable core, unaffected by time and place, that is then applied in practice; rather, the church, in this perspective, consists of and is sustained by practices. This prominent role ascribed to practices, however, does not mean that phenomena such as various forms of oppression or injustice are relativised or rendered less real. What practice theory does emphasise, however, is that oppressive and harmful structures are the products of practices.<sup>4</sup>

Not surprisingly, perhaps, this understanding of practices emphasises the role of the body and materiality. After all, human action is typically embodied.

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolini 2013, 163.

<sup>2</sup> Nicolini 2013, 13–14.

<sup>3</sup> Schatzki 2001, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Nicolini 2013, 3.

As Nicolini observes, “Practices with no things and no bodies involved are thus simply inconceivable.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, within a strong programme of practice, both the body and materiality are seen as intrinsic to human practices. In the practice of the Eucharist, for example, the bread, the chalice, and the altar – together with bodies that eat the bread and drink the wine – are constitutive features of the practice. A Eucharist without bread and wine, and without bodies to eat and drink, would be simply inconceivable.

In addition to this, a strong programme entails more than describing what people do and how they do it; it maintains that practices both generate and express meaning.<sup>6</sup> Knowledge and meaning are acquired through participation in practices where practices harbour distinct horizons of intelligibility and ways of behaving that become available to practitioners through the participation in a specific practice. Thus, according to Nicolini: “Becoming part of an existing practice thus involves learning how to act, how to speak (and what to say), but also how to feel, what to expect, and what things mean.”<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that such an account of individual agency does not entail a predetermined view of human behaviour. Nicolini emphasises that although individual action and understanding must be construed against the background of practices, they should not be regarded as prescribed repetitions. There remains room for individual agency, even if agency is always related to practice.<sup>8</sup> What this implies is a less normative assumption about the character of practices than what found in the neo-Aristotelian tradition of practice theory, following Alasdair MacIntyre’s understanding of practices. While this tradition emphasises the role of practices in cultivating specific virtues and in carrying a particular tradition, practice theory, in what Ulla Schmidt calls the praxeological trajectory,<sup>9</sup> does not deny that understandings and beliefs are distributed through practices. It differs, however, in its emphasis on the more open-ended and ambiguous character of practices.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Nicolini 2013, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Nicolini 2013, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Nicolini 2013, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Nicolini 2013, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Schmidt 2022, 16

<sup>10</sup> Schmidt 2022, 42.

Moreover, as Theodore Schatzki has noted, understanding practices as a strong programme of practice implies aiming to steer a course between the often-made dichotomy of agency and structure. Schatzki notes how, on the one hand, theories emphasising the individual agent hold that: “social facts and phenomena are nothing but constructions out of, or constructions of, individual people and – on some versions – their relations.”<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, there are theories that centre on social structures and explain social phenomena by reference to them. In such accounts, the social world is interpreted in terms of phenomena such as globalisation or capitalism.<sup>12</sup> Thus, according to Schatzki, practice theory, and what he calls a *site ontology* offers a way to navigate between these positions:

In sum, site ontologies forge a path between individualism and hitherto dominant societisms. They join cause with societism against individualism in contextualizing the actions, mental states, and relations of individuals within wider social vistas. Conversely, they join individualism against traditional societisms in espying a continuity of being between this individualist stuff and the wider vista forming its context.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, rather than beginning with either individual agency or social structures, what Schatzki denotes as a *site ontology* takes practices – and the places in which they unfold – as its point of departure. A *site*, then, is the temporally and action-situated context in which social coexistence occurs.<sup>14</sup> This occurs through a combination of what Schatzki calls orders and practices. By orders, Schatzki does not mean, for example, social stability; rather, the term denotes the ways in which things hang together. For Schatzki, the principal way in which people and material artefacts hang together is through practices.<sup>15</sup>

According to Nicolini, a strong programme of practice does also hold that practices are sites of conflict, power, and contesting interests.<sup>16</sup> They are not innocent; they are the means by which inequalities are produced and sustained.

<sup>11</sup> Schatzki 2003, 174.

<sup>12</sup> Schatzki 2003, 175.

<sup>13</sup> Schatzki 2003, 174.

<sup>14</sup> Schatzki 2003, 176–177.

<sup>15</sup> Schatzki 2002, xi.

<sup>16</sup> Nicolini 2013, 4–6.

Within practices, power is conferred on some practitioners and, at times, withheld from others.<sup>17</sup>

### 5.3 The Structure of Practices

While a strong programme of practice provides a general understanding of and an approach to practices, it is also important to notice how, for instance, Schatzki talks about practices as human actions structured into practices.

Schatzki describes a practice as: "...a temporally evolving, open-ended set of doings and sayings linked by practical understandings, rules, teleoaffective structure, and general understandings."<sup>18</sup> By *shared understandings*, Schatzki denotes both practical and general understandings. *Practical understandings* imply a grasp of what is going on and what is to be done – in other words, how to carry out, identify, and respond to a given practice. Put differently, the meaning of a practice and the know-how for enacting it belong to, and are expressed within, the practice itself. Practices are therefore intrinsically social in nature, even when enacted individually, where every practice rests upon other practices.<sup>19</sup> *General understandings* on the other hand are not necessarily concerned by how to carry out a certain practice but denotes understandings germane to it. Schatzki describes religious convictions as an example of such general understandings. With *rules*, Schatzki denotes explicit formulations that guide or constrain a practice. By *teleoaffective* structure Schatzki designates the way practices are structured by their ends and purposes (*telos*) and by the affections and motivations aligned with those ends. A given action belongs to a particular practice depending on its place within a hierarchical teleological order: switching on my computer, for instance, may form part of the practice of writing an academic article, but equally of watching a film. Moreover, corresponding to these ends are feelings and motives that participants are expected to internalise.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Nicolini 2013, 6.

<sup>18</sup> Schatzki 2002, 87.

<sup>19</sup> Schatzki 1996, 94.

<sup>20</sup> Schatzki 1996, 70.

## 5.4 The Operationalisation of Practice Theory

How, then, could the theopolitical nature of the church be studied in and through practices and a strong programme of practice? Although I have already indicated how the use of practice theory may be relevant to my project, it is now time to explicate how I intend to operationalise practice theory in this thesis. In what follows, I will describe a more general operationalisation, while also pointing out how I specifically focus on how practices constitute certain relationships.

As noted, on a general level, a strong programme of practice sharpens this thesis's focus on the church's concrete practices. More specifically, in this thesis, I use the approach supplied by a strong programme of practice to indicate how theological and political understandings, theopolitics, may be interpreted as being expressed through aspects such as bodily actions and sayings, materiality, and spatiality. This, however, does not mean that the various understandings expressed by my informants are neglected. Here, Theodore Schatzki's notion of general understandings has been important in showing how the material generated through observation may be integrated with my interview material.

On a more specific note, I have operationalised practice theory in relation to my focus on relationships. As mentioned in my section on theopolitics, human beings could be seen as political creatures due to our fundamental embeddedness in a meshwork of relationships, and it is through these relationships we relate to both God and the world. Importantly, from the perspective of a strong programme of practice, these relationships are constituted and given meaning in and through various practices. According to Schatzki, there are five different kinds of relationships. He denotes causal, spatial, intentional and relationships which enable and constrain relationships. Causal relationships are established through actions which cause a change in the world, or which respond to such actions. With spatial relationships, Schatzki denotes how, in general, material arrangements are due to their place in certain practices. For instance, a church room is spatially and materially arranged by the practice of worship. Schatzki describes intentional relationships in terms of how: "Two entities can be related by way of one of them performing actions toward or having thoughts,

beliefs, intentions, and emotions about the other.”<sup>21</sup> Importantly, from a strong programme of practices, these intentions should not primarily be seen as belonging to the participants but to the practice itself and the participants could be said to possess these intentions due to their participation in these practices. Finally, relationships between human beings and material artefacts could also, according to Schatzki, be related to one another by the way they enable or constrain further actions.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, in this thesis, practice theory is operationalised through a focus on how various relationships are shaped and constituted in diaconal and liturgical practices. For instance, a diaconal worker establishes certain relationships to the people she or he interacts with. Interactions which are shaped and mediated by aspects such as spatiality, materiality, bodily actions, affections and general understandings. Thus, even though I use aspects of Schatzki’s understanding of how practices are structured, I do not use these categories as my analytical focus. In my analysis, I focus on what the practices studied accomplish, in this case the constitution of various relationships. Relationships in which the church assumes different roles.

Moreover, as indicated by my overarching research question, the focus in this thesis is how the theopolitical character of the Church of Sweden is negotiated and enacted in diaconal and liturgical practices. From a praxeological perspective, these negotiations in focus can be seen as taking place within the practices studied, in which aspects such as materiality, practical and general understandings, and a teleoaffective structure configure and organise them. More specifically, in this thesis, I focus on how these negotiations can be seen as taking place in and through the various relationships constituted. Thus, in my thesis, these relationships are understood as theopolitical points of negotiations.

In this chapter have outlined the main characteristics of a strong programme of practice and indicated their implications for theology and theopolitics. From a strong-programme perspective, accounts of concepts such as God, the incarnation, or the church should attend to the specific practices in which such understandings are acquired, shaped, and enacted. I have also described

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<sup>21</sup> Schatzki 2002, 44.

<sup>22</sup> Schatzki 2002, 98–99.

Theodore Schatzki's understanding of how practices are structured and his understandings of relationships as constituted by practices. I then described how these relationships could be perceived as theopolitical points of negotiations.

### **5.5 Bridge: Articulation, Disturbance and Expansion of the Church's Theopolitical Character**

In Chapter 3 and 4 I presented my understanding of theopolitics, which serves as the theoretical perspective of this thesis, a perspective that describes the character of the understandings generated by my ethnographic fieldwork. The current chapter has provided an account of my use of practice theory as a way of understanding and conceptualising the diaconal and liturgical practices under study. In the introduction to this chapter, I began with an account of the relationship between my theopolitical perspective and my use of practice theory. This section serves as a bridge between my three theoretical chapters and my chapter on methodology. What remains to be explicated is how I perceive the relationship between these three more theoretical chapters and my ethnographically generated material.

As described, an important aspect of a strong programme of practice concerns its relation to theory. Whereas, in a weak programme of practice, practices are seen as the application of theory, in a strong programme the social world is understood as being made up of practices, and theory-making itself is seen as a practice. In other words, as the Norwegian scholar Geir Afdal puts it: "...practice is removed from the end of the pipeline."<sup>23</sup> Thus, in this perspective, the normative is not located in theory, but should rather be seen as distributed and as present in practices as well. The Swedish ethicist Maria Ledstam describes this phenomenon as distributed normativity, in which normativity is not settled once and for all, but remains an open question.<sup>24</sup>

Throughout this thesis, I have sought to hold together my ethnographically established material and more "theoretical" perspectives in a creative tension. The purpose has been to treat practices as sources of theopolitical

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<sup>23</sup> Afdal 2021, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Ledstam 2023, 84–88.

understandings, while not losing sight of the open-ended and ambiguous character of human practices. At the same time, as has been clear, my approach in this thesis is not purely inductive, but combines an ethnographic approach with a clear theoretical perspective. In order to hold these aspects together, I have drawn on an approach derived from empirical ethics, which I here employ within my theological framework.

As will be shown in the following account, this approach may be seen as fundamentally abductive. According to Schjetne et al., a dominant feature of much ethical discourse is its emphasis on principles and values detached from actual practices, which are then taken to serve as ethical and moral guidelines. In such an approach, the normative is identified with theory. Schjetne et al. argue for a different understanding of ethical and moral reasoning. In their approach, the good and the right are not treated as detached theory, but as embedded in and expressed through practices. They argue that:

Ethics should not be understood as principles, values or virtues that are established prior to and independent of, in this case, educational practices. Rather, empirical ethics articulates the good within practices, that is, it articulates how ethics is done in everyday life.<sup>25</sup>

Here it is worth noting the convergence of their critique of ethical theory with, for instance the critique against blueprint ecclesiology within the concrete ecclesiologies. Drawing on Charles Taylor, Schjetne et al. point to the importance of practical reasoning, in which ethical reflection is situated and arises from interlocutors' concrete contexts. Moreover, such reflection should begin not with theory but with action – what people are doing and what matters to them. Accordingly, Schjetne et al. propose three phases within empirical ethics: *articulation*, *disturbance*, and *extension*.

*Articulation*, they explain, involves the search for coherence and understanding within the empirical material: it is an account of what is going on. This should not, however, be construed as a purely descriptive enterprise. Although inductively attuned, articulation is better described as an abductive process, in which reasoning oscillates between theory and empirical material. As noted, this understanding of articulation can be seen as an abductive stance

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<sup>25</sup> Schjetne et al. 2016, 30.

which resembles the argument of Timmermans and Tavory, who advocate a shift from grounded theory to an abductive approach.<sup>26</sup>

According to Schjetne et al., ethical reflection should also give an account of divergent voices and features within practices – what they call *disturbance*.<sup>27</sup> *Disturbance* is understood as a process in which contradictions and conflicting aspects are brought to the fore. This process, they argue: “means that the articulations are thrown off balance.”<sup>28</sup> Depending on the practice, this process may involve the use of theory, but disturbances can also be evident in the empirical material itself. Schjetne et al. write:

...disturbances can take the shape of conflicts, contradictions or puzzles, and they can be part of the more or less explicit self-understanding of the practice, or they can be created by the researcher via, for instance, other research or theories.<sup>29</sup>

Given the open-ended and ambiguous character of human practices, all practices carry an abundance of meaning and are open to multiple interpretations. Thus, disturbance can be seen as a way to acknowledge the fact that practices can not only be seen as sources in a positive sense but might also include more problematic aspects.

The third step, *expansion*, entails a move towards a more normative discussion, aiming to offer a better account of both practice and theory. Although normativity is already at work within *articulation* and *disturbance*, *extension* is more explicitly normative. Crucially, this explicit normative work does not abandon the earlier articulations and disturbances but builds upon them.<sup>30</sup> While the open and ambiguous character of practices necessitates an account of disturbance, it is also this aspect of practices which opens up for potential expansions. It is important, however, to note that the notion of expansion is not a one-way street. Better accounts of practices could be suggested with the use of theory, but theory could also be expanded with the help of practice.

<sup>26</sup> Timmermans and Tavory 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Schjetne et al. 2016, 30–32.

<sup>28</sup> Schjetne et al. 2016, 36.

<sup>29</sup> Schjetne et al. 2016, 36.

<sup>30</sup> Schjetne et al. 2016, 37.

In this chapter, I have outlined the main characteristics of a strong programme of practice and indicated their implications for theology and theopolitics. From a strong-programme perspective, accounts of concepts such as God, the incarnation, or the church should attend to the specific practices in which such understandings are acquired, shaped, and enacted. I have also described Theodore Schatzki's understanding of how practices are structured and his understandings of relationships as constituted by practices. I then described how these relationships could be perceived as theopolitical points of negotiations. Drawing on an account derived from empirical ethics, I have also described how the theopolitical character could be analysed through a process of articulation, disturbance and expansion. This last section could be seen as a bridge between my two theoretical chapters and my next chapter on methodology.



## 6. Methodological Considerations

### 6.1 Introduction

Having outlined my theoretical framework, I now turn to practical considerations. In this chapter, I explain how I understand the relationship between my theoretical framework and my choices of research design, analytical approach, and methods. I also present the sample congregations and the selection of informants and reflect on my role as a researcher and on ethical considerations.

### 6.2 A Theologically and Practice-Theoretically Informed Ethnographic Approach

As noticed, my aim in this thesis has been to hold together my choice of theoretical perspective, my theory and my use of methods. In chapter 5, I described how I intended to operationalise practice theory in my analysis, through a focus on relationships. Since these relationships at issue are constituted and shaped through materially and spatially mediated practices, they are best studied as part of those practices. For this reason, an ethnographic approach has been adopted. According to Atkinson et al., although ethnographic research should not be understood as a unified discipline, it nevertheless shares certain characteristics, most notably the use of participant observation as a method:

Notwithstanding such differences and tensions, the ethnographic traditions do share many common features... They are grounded in a commitment to the first-hand experience and exploration of a particular social or cultural setting on the basis of (though not exclusively by) participant observation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Atkinson et al. 2001, 4.

In my project, I have not limited my ethnographic approach to participant observation; rather, I have also employed methods such as shadowing and semi-structured qualitative interviews. The purpose has been to attend closely to how relationships within diaconal and liturgical practices are constituted.

### 6.3 A Single Case-Study Design

Case studies are well suited to ethnographically informed research. According to the sociologist Bent Flyvbjerg, case studies are crucial for researchers seeking to acquire in-depth knowledge of a social phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> Robert K. Yin argues that case studies are particularly well suited to the investigation of a phenomenon within its context:

...a case study investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident.<sup>3</sup>

This thesis is designed as a single-case study, drawing on a sample of two congregations. According to Flyvbjerg, contrary to commonly held assumptions, even a single case study has the potential to generate scientific knowledge through generalisation.<sup>4</sup> According to Swinton and Mowat, such generalisations are possible because research into specific contexts has the potential to resonate with those who may share similar experiences. They write:

While the findings of qualitative research studies may not be immediately transferable to other contexts, there is a sense in which qualitative research should resonate with the experiences of others in similar circumstances. This resonance should invoke a sense of identification with those who share something of the experience.<sup>5</sup>

#### 6.3.1 Sample Congregations

As a single-case study, this thesis draws on a sample of congregations selected on the basis of what Flyvbjerg terms information-oriented selection.<sup>6</sup> My

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<sup>2</sup> Flyvbjerg 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Yin 2014, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Flyvbjerg 2001, 73–77.

<sup>5</sup> Swinton and Mowat 2016, 45.

<sup>6</sup> Flyvbjerg, 2001. 79.

selection of these congregations is based on what they constitute a case of: a context in which diaconal and liturgical practices take place and in which the theopolitical character of the Church of Sweden may be discerned. In this project, I have chosen two congregations located in what are described as deprived areas, that is, contexts characterised by a high degree of socio-economic disadvantage. Congregations in such locations are, I would argue, more likely to encounter a range of socio-political issues than congregations in other settings. Moreover, both congregations are members of the network *Framtiden bor hos oss* (The Future Lives with Us). This network comprises congregations with a relatively low rate of membership in the Church of Sweden and a high degree of cultural and religious diversity. Accordingly, I did not choose these congregations because they are representative of congregations within the Church of Sweden, but because they are situated in contexts in which they are likely to encounter a wider range of political issues than what might have been the case in other contexts.

My decision to conduct a single-case study involving two congregations means that I do not undertake a comparative analysis of them. Instead, I deliberately selected two congregations that exhibit significant similarities, making them suitable for representing the same case. Moreover, my choice of these particular congregations was also shaped by practical considerations. As a father of two children, I did not wish to spend extended periods away from my family; I therefore selected congregations within a reasonable commuting distance of my home.

### 6.3.2 Deprived Areas

The term *deprived areas* are used by the Swedish Police to refer to geographically delimited areas characterised by a high degree of socio-economic vulnerability and criminal activity.<sup>7</sup> Both of my sample congregations include such

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<sup>7</sup> The full definition of a deprived area is: “An area of social vulnerability is characterised by low socioeconomic status and by the influence of criminal elements on the local community. The influence exercised by such actors manifests itself within the social context, through its effects on norms, values, and patterns of behaviour, rather than through any deliberate intention on the part of criminal actors to seize power over, or exert control of, the area. This becomes

areas; one of them also includes an area classified as a *particularly deprived area*. This designation indicates a higher level of criminal activity, where such activity contributes to the emergence of parallel structures in society, religious extremism, a reluctance to speak to the police or to act as a witness in court, and considerable difficulties for the police and other actors to operate.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, both areas have a demographic profile that differs markedly from the rest of the municipality in which they are located, particularly in terms of a high proportion of foreign-born residents.<sup>9</sup>

## 6.4 Diaconal and Liturgical Practices

Importantly, my unit of analysis does not consist of these congregations as wholes, but rather of the diaconal and liturgical practices within them. Hence, my interest is not the identity of these congregations in general, but their theopolitical character. Guiding my choice of focus on diaconal and liturgical practices has been the aim to find practices which might contribute with as rich material as possible.

Given my focus on theopolitics, diaconal practices was an obvious choice for a number of reasons. Diaconal practices, to start with, have a focus on social issues. Moreover, it is a kind of practices where the church is likely to interact

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apparent in the way residents and other local actors, whether consciously or unconsciously, adapt to the presence of criminal actors, for example through a culture of silence. Such influence may take the form of direct pressure, including threats and extortion, or indirect pressure, for instance through public acts of violence that risk harming third parties, the open sale of narcotics, or overt expressions of hostility towards public institutions and their representatives. As a consequence, residents experience a sense of insecurity, which in turn leads to a reduced willingness to report offences and to participate in legal proceedings. The situation is assessed as serious. Furthermore, systematic threats and acts of violence against witnesses, injured parties, and complainants may occur in the area. The situation also means that the police may find it difficult to carry out their duties there without adapting their working methods or equipment. Such developments have often occurred through a process of normalisation, with the result that both the police and local residents underestimate the extent of criminality in the area. The area is also characterised by the recruitment and socialisation of children and young people into organised crime.” Translated from Polismyndigheten 2025, 32.

<sup>8</sup> Polismyndigheten 2025, 32.

<sup>9</sup> Kaharevic 2025, 56.

with other actors in society. The focus on diaconal practices is also warranted by the fact that both congregations are located in deprived areas with a high degree of socio-economic challenges. Thus, I regarded diaconal practices a suitable focus for an inquiry into the theopolitical character of the Church of Sweden.

If diaconal practices seemed to be an obvious choice, given my theopolitical interest, in the Swedish context, liturgical practices are not. As noted, the two-kingdom doctrine implies a clear division between the spiritual and the worldly regiments. In this scheme, liturgical practices are located to the spiritual realm and, thus, excluded from political considerations and therefore not seen as politically significant. Thus, the inclusion of liturgical practices is warranted by the neglect of such practices in the Swedish context in relation to political considerations. Moreover, both diaconal and liturgical practices could be seen as central to the official self-definition of the Church of Sweden. The Church of Order of the Church of Sweden mentions four set of practices which it describes as foundational to the task of the local congregation: “The congregation’s fundamental vocation is to celebrate public worship, undertake teaching, and exercise the ministries of diakonia and mission.”<sup>10</sup> With my choice of diaconal and liturgical practices, thus, I have chosen two of these set of practices. It would of course be possible to include teaching and mission as well, but due to reasonable limitation, I settled on two of them.

Moreover, as I read other research on the Church of Sweden in similar areas, I observed how diaconal and liturgical practices were central to similar congregations.<sup>11</sup> This pre-understanding turned out to be true about my field-congregations as well. While the diaconal and liturgical practices were visited by a large number of people, other activities throughout the weeks were less well-attended.

While I had settled on a focus on liturgical and diaconal practices on beforehand, my sample of which practices to be studied was not. While an obvious choice of liturgical practice is the Sunday service, and even though my material consists of accounts from Sunday services, it was not the only liturgical practice

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<sup>10</sup> Church Order for the Church of Sweden 2022, 6. Chapter 1, section 2 (my translation).

<sup>11</sup> See Helgesson Kjellin 2016 and Holmberg 2019.

observed during my fieldwork. I did also, for instance, participate in morning prayers, lunch services and morning services as well. Given the overwhelming central aspect of the Sunday service in both congregations, I decided to focus on these.

When it comes to the diaconal practices, I started off asking my informants which practices they thought were suitable for me to participate in. As I started my fieldwork, I was also introduced by my informants to other diaconal practices. For instance, as I participated in the foodbank, Kevin, the diaconal worker responsible for the foodbank suggested that I should participate in the dinner fellowship as well. It turned out to be a good advice. In the second congregation, it turned out that the diaconal reception was the main diaconal practice taking place, which made it an obvious choice.

## 6.5 My Role as Researcher

Ethnographic research entails a rather complex relationship between the field of research and the researcher, in which the researcher, through participant observation, becomes part of the context under scrutiny. This relationship, and its potential complications, is often framed in terms of the insider–outsider relationship. According to DeWalt and DeWalt, the insider–outsider typology refers to the different modes of engagement that the researcher may adopt in relation to the field, ranging from pure observation to full participation, or, as they put it, “going native.” In relation to these two options, they argue in favour of a middle-of-the-road approach, in which neither extreme is desirable.<sup>12</sup> Hammersley and Atkinson frame this challenge for the researcher in terms of methodological dangers. Whereas the outsider risks missing important aspects of the field, the insider may end up compromising their critical perspective. They therefore argue that the researcher should adopt a simultaneous insider–outsider perspective.<sup>13</sup> With these considerations in mind, I now offer some reflections on my own relationship to the field.

For me, being an ordained priest within the Church of Sweden automatically positioned me as an insider in relation to the field. In terms of theological

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<sup>12</sup> DeWalt and DeWalt 2010, 28.

<sup>13</sup> Martyn and Atkinson 2011, 173–174.

knowledge of the Church of Sweden and its traditions and expressions, I was not only an insider but, to some extent, also an expert. In his research on leadership within congregations in the Church of Norway, Fredrik Saxegaard describes finding himself in a similar position. For him, the insider relationship, with its potential complications, was best managed through the use of theory, which, he argues, created a healthy distance. He writes:

In my experience, the best weapon against these demons is theory. I found CHAT to be a helpful tool that cultivated a necessary distance, and a fresh perspective, thus helping me remain attentive.<sup>14</sup>

Although I was not unaware of the potential risks, my experience of being an insider was rather different. For me, it functioned as a door-opener, giving me access to spaces to which I would never have been admitted as an outsider. This applied particularly to some of the diaconal practices, which operate under strict confidentiality. My position as an insider therefore enabled me to participate fully in the practices under study. At the same time, however, I encountered situations in the field in which this insider role required me to maintain not so much an outsider position as an insider position with an academic focus. During my fieldwork, I was contacted by the vicar and asked whether I could lead worship on a particular Sunday. I declined. For me, it would have been difficult to combine the role of academic researcher with that of leading the congregation's liturgical practices and, moreover, receiving financial compensation from the congregation under study. This should not be taken to mean that I am unaware of how my participation in the practices under study also shaped those practices. On another occasion, I was sitting in the pew, waiting for the service to begin – a service I intended to attend as a participant observer. Two minutes before it was due to start, the priest in charge approached me and asked whether I could assist in distributing the wine during the Eucharist. On this occasion, I accepted. More generally, during my fieldwork I sought to participate as fully as possible in the practices under study. I did, however, decline to take part in the planning of these practices. Thus, rather than treating my position as an insider as problematic, I have, albeit not unreflectively, regarded it as an asset. Moreover, the theological framework of this thesis may also be

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<sup>14</sup> Saxegaard 2017, 93.

understood as an act of self-reflexivity, insofar as I, as a researcher, am explicit about the theological premises through which I approach the field.

## 6.6 Approaching the Field

Before beginning my fieldwork, I devoted a considerable amount of time to anchoring my project, both within the ecclesial hierarchy and among my informants, namely the employed staff in the field congregations. A parish within the Church of Sweden is led by a vicar and may include several congregations. I began by contacting the vicar, presenting my project and explaining my intention to study practices within one of her congregations. Having received a positive response, I then proceeded to contact the priest in charge of the local congregation. Once again, I presented my project and asked whether I might visit a staff meeting in order to introduce it. When I met the employed staff, I presented the project and informed them that they were likely to be contacted individually, either so that I could participate in particular practices or to invite them to take part in an interview. I also emphasised that any participation on their part would be voluntary and that they were free to withdraw their consent at any time.<sup>15</sup>

In its anthropological sense, ethnographic research has often been associated with researchers spending extensive periods in the field, sometimes over several years.<sup>16</sup> My fieldwork was more limited and lasted for one year. During this period, I travelled to and from the field sites. My ethnographic approach could therefore be characterised as what Hubert Knoblauch calls focused ethnography.<sup>17</sup> During my fieldwork, I adopted an exploratory approach. For instance, I had not decided in advance which diaconal and liturgical practices to focus on. This exploratory approach also meant that I did not enter the field with a fully developed theory of what constitutes a diaconal practice; rather, I participated in the practices that my informants understood as diaconal.

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<sup>15</sup> This, and more written information about the project was given each informant before participation and I did also receive written consent from each participant.

<sup>16</sup> Knoblauch 2001, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Knoblauch 2001, 4–8.

## 6.7 Methods for Establishing an Ethnographic Material

During my fieldwork, I employed a number of methods in order to generate ethnographic material. These included participant observation, shadowing, and semi-structured qualitative interviews. In what follows, I outline how I used these methods and the role they played in my fieldwork.

### 6.7.1 Participant Observation

As noted above, participant observation is widely regarded as central to ethnographic research. Kathleen M. DeWalt and Billie R. DeWalt describe participant observation as:

...a method in which a researcher takes part in daily activities, rituals and interactions and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture.<sup>18</sup>

The focus of my participant observation was on diaconal and liturgical practices. This means that these practices constituted what Nicolini calls my central epistemic focus.<sup>19</sup> Nicolini suggests that making practices the central object of research entails “zooming in” on practices as they are performed. Accordingly, during my fieldwork I paid close attention to bodily actions and utterances; to what my informants sought to accomplish through these actions; to the use of material artefacts; and to the ways in which practices were spatially mediated.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout my fieldwork, the emphasis in some practices was clearly on observation. My participation in the diaconal reception, for instance, consisted primarily of observing the work carried out by the diaconal worker. By contrast, in the dinner fellowship my participation included cooking, greeting people, chatting with them during the meal, attending to noisy children, and joining in the singing. Had the member of staff responsible for the practice not introduced me to the group as a researcher, those attending would probably have assumed that I was one of the staff. I adopted a similar role during my

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<sup>18</sup> Dewalt and Dewalt 2011, 13.

<sup>19</sup> Nicolini 2013, 219.

<sup>20</sup> Nicolini 2013, 224.

participation in the food bank. In these practices, thus, the emphasis was more on participation than observation.

In liturgical practices, participant observation meant taking part in the Sunday services as any other congregant would: I sang the hymns, participated in the liturgy, and received the Eucharist along with everyone else. My participation in the choir rehearsal could be described in similar terms. Thus, as a participant observer, I assumed at different times the role of someone responsible for the practice, the role of a participant distinct from the employed staff responsible for it, and the role of a more detached observer. It is also important to note that various instances of participant observation provided opportunities for informal conversations with staff. I therefore always carried a field diary with me, in which I continually recorded observations and conversations I had had.

### **6.7.2 Shadowing**

Another method employed during my fieldwork was shadowing. Seonaidh McDonald describes shadowing as “a research technique which involves a researcher closely following a member of an organisation over an extended period of time.”<sup>21</sup> Shadowing, she argues, allows the researcher to gain first-hand experience of the practitioner’s everyday circumstances and does not depend on the respondent’s account in the way an interview does. It also enables the researcher to study behaviour and opinions simultaneously and in informal settings.<sup>22</sup> Thus, if participant observation involved “zooming in” on particular practices, shadowing could be seen as an exercise not only in “zooming in” on particular practices, but also in “zooming out” in order to discern the connections between different practices and contexts.<sup>23</sup> Thus, in each congregation I shadowed one of the diaconal workers for a working week. Whereas my participant observation focused on distinct practices, shadowing allowed me to perceive these practices as part of a sequence and in relation to other practices. This

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<sup>21</sup> McDonald 2018, 455.

<sup>22</sup> McDonald 2018, 457.

<sup>23</sup> Nicolini 2013, 221–224.

meant that I participated in staff meetings, planning meetings, time spent in the office, and various diaconal practices.

### 6.7.3 Semi-Structured Qualitative Research Interviews

The third method employed during my fieldwork was semi-structured qualitative interviews. Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann describe the semi-structured interview as “an interview with the aim of obtaining descriptions of the respondent’s lifeworld, with the purpose of interpreting the meaning of the described phenomenon.”<sup>24</sup> In general, such interviews adopt a phenomenological approach, in which the relevant “reality” is reality as perceived by the respondent.<sup>25</sup> Thus, they argue that the purpose of the interviews is to understand the meaning of central aspects of the respondent’s lifeworld.<sup>26</sup>

Interviews may be seen as an important complement to participant observation and shadowing. Whereas these other methods may be regarded as ways of studying practices as they unfold in their everyday settings, interviews allowed me to inquire into my informants’ understandings of these practices and of aspects germane to them. In keeping with my praxeological perspective, I aimed to relate the interviews to the practices under reflection. For instance, if an informant discussed how she perceived the role of the diaconal worker, I did not treat this as a free-floating opinion about diaconal work, but as an understanding constituted and shaped by the practices under discussion. Thus, my interviews concerned both more general understandings, for instance of the role of the church, and more specific understandings of and reflections on particular practices.

## 6.8 Analytical Approach – Techniques and Strategies

In a written academic text, one could easily gain the impression that data collection and analysis are neatly sequenced stages in the research process, following one another in turn. In reality, however, the analytical process runs much more in parallel with data collection. Thus, analysis does not begin only once

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<sup>24</sup> Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, 42.

<sup>26</sup> Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, 45.

all the data have been collected and transcribed. For the sake of clarity, however, I now turn to my analytical process in a separate section. I begin by describing my basic analytical approach before turning to my analytical technique and strategy. The basic analytical approach used in this thesis may be described as abductive. Timmermans and Tavory describe abductive analysis as

a qualitative data analysis approach aimed at generating creative and novel theoretical insights through a dialectic of cultivated theoretical sensitivity and methodological heuristics. Abductive analysis emphasises that rather than setting all preconceived theoretical ideas aside during the research project, researchers should enter the field with the deepest and broadest theoretical base possible and develop their theoretical repertoires throughout the research process.<sup>27</sup>

They describe abductive analysis as steering a course between deductive analysis, which begins with theory, and what they regard as a naïvely inductive approach, represented by grounded theory.<sup>28</sup> Whereas grounded theory proposes the exclusion of theory during the empirical phase of research, an abductive approach envisages a continuous movement between theory and empirically constituted material, thereby opening up new interpretations of a given phenomenon. In this movement between theory and data, the researcher is able to revisit the material and gain new insights – a process that may be described in terms of revisiting the data and defamiliarization.<sup>29</sup> According to Timmermans and Tavory, this does not mean that inductive analytical techniques such as coding are rendered obsolete; rather, they may be seen as an intrinsic part of the abductive process.<sup>30</sup>

In my project, this abductive approach is evident in the fact that my focus on how practices constitute and shape certain relationships emerged through a process in which I began with a strong programme of practice theory and Theodore Schatzki's understanding of the structure of practices. However, the focus on relationships emerged in response to my empirical findings and to the

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<sup>27</sup> Timmermans and Tavory 2012, 180.

<sup>28</sup> Timmermans and Tavory 2012, 169–170.

<sup>29</sup> Timmermans and Tavory 2012, 176–177.

<sup>30</sup> Timmermans and Tavory 2012, 176.

question of how these findings could best be understood in the light this relatively broad understanding of practices.

If abductive reasoning describes this thesis's analytical approach, my analytical technique has been coding. Victoria Elliott describes coding as a way of "...essentially indexing or mapping data, to provide an overview of disparate data that allows the researcher to make sense of them in relation to their research questions."<sup>31</sup> As a part of my analysis, I coded my material manually. A process in which I went through my transcribed interviews and field notes several times. My initial coding may be described as data-driven. By attending to aspects such as repetition, similarities, and differences – a process suggested by Ryan and Bernard – I identified a number of themes within my material.<sup>32</sup> Through the abductive process outlined above, my coding became more concept-driven. As noticed, a key concept here, was my focus on how relationships were constituted in the various practices. Thus, my analytical strategy may be described as thematic, with themes derived from both theory and my material.

## 6.9 Ethical Considerations

In terms of ethical considerations, there are some formal aspects worth noting. The project has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority. Moreover, all informants have been pseudonymised, and the field congregations are not identified by name. As noted above, my fieldwork was preceded by a rigorous process in which I anchored the project among my informants and ensured that they understood the nature of the project and of their participation in it.

Ethical considerations, however, do not concern only formal requirements, but also include relationships in the field. One potential area of tension identified by Reidun Tangen concerns the possible conflict between the pursuit of academic quality and relevance, on the one hand, and the risk that informants may feel hurt or misrepresented by the study, on the other.<sup>33</sup> As mentioned above, before beginning my fieldwork, I attended staff meetings in both field

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<sup>31</sup> Elliott 2018, 2851.

<sup>32</sup> Ryan and Bernard 2003, 89–93.

<sup>33</sup> Tangen 2014, 684.

congregations. During these meetings, I highlighted this particular risk and explained how the abductive process, with its element of defamiliarisation, was likely to create a sense of distance between my informants' own understanding of their work and the academic text.

During my fieldwork, I participated in situations of a rather sensitive nature, not least in the diaconal reception, where various people came to the church to ask for help. Even though these individuals were not the object of my research, they were nevertheless informed of my presence, and the fact that my focus was on the employed staff was made clear. None of those attending the diaconal reception, or any other practice, objected to my presence.

In this chapter, I have outlined my ethnographic approach and explained how I have designed the study as a single-case study involving congregations. I have also described my sample of congregations and informants, as well as the manner in which I conducted my fieldwork and the methods I employed. Moreover, the chapter has elaborated on my role as a researcher, my analytical approach, my analytical techniques, and my analytical strategy. I now turn to the second part of this thesis, which consists of the analytical chapters in which I follow the outlined steps of articulation, disturbance, and expansion.

## **Part II**

### **Articulations, Disturbance, Expansion**



## Introduction to Part II

As I began analysing my empirical material – comprising field notes from participant observation and shadowing, as well as transcribed interviews – I used coding as my analytical strategy. This coding was largely inductive, but due to the abductive process, became more concept driven. I soon identified three salient modes of action present in both diaconal and liturgical practices, namely the enactment of particular ways of seeing, listening, and sharing food. However given my relational understanding of the concept of theopolitics, I did not focus on these bodily actions as such but how these and other actions, together with the practices' spatial and material arrangements constituted certain relationships. Importantly, these relationships could be seen as constituted by the practices and are, thus, a part of the meshwork of practices and material arrangements which make up, what Schatzki calls, a site. As noticed in my earlier chapter, this web of relationships should also be seen as politically and theologically generative. Thus, the aim of the following chapters is to articulate how the theopolitical character of the Church of Sweden is negotiated and enacted in and through the relationships constituted in and through the diaconal and liturgical practices.



## 7. Theopolitical Relationships in the Diaconal Reception

### 7.1 Introduction

In both congregations where I conducted fieldwork, diaconal workers were frequently approached by people seeking help – either by phone or in person. One congregation had formalised this work by designating specific reception hours, referred to as the *diaconal reception*. Here, I will also include other, less structured encounters that function in a similar way – for instance, when someone knocks on the door or contacts a diaconal worker asking for help. Thus, the diaconal reception could be interpreted as a practice where the church relates to various people and where different kinds of relationships are constituted. In what follows, after a brief description of the practice, I will display how different relationships, which I call *theopolitical relationships* are constituted and enacted in and through the diaconal reception.

### 7.2 The Diaconal Reception as a Practice

To start with, it is important to notice how the materially arranged space contributes to the character of the practice. The diaconal reception takes place in large brick building on a height close to the shopping centre constituting the centre of the city district. This building contains a large church room as well as social spaces and the staffs' offices. When arriving at the diaconal reception, it is immediately evident that one is entering a church. Through the main entrance, one cannot help but notice the church room directly opposite, with its doors open. The closeness to the church room gives the diaconal reception the character of a church practice. Yet it is not here the diaconal reception takes

place. The space outside the church room has the character of a foyer. To the left there is a cloak room and next to the entrance to the church room there is a sofa, a sofa table and some chairs. In the diaconal reception this foyer assumes the character of a waiting room. As people enter the foyer, they are greeted by some volunteers who offer coffee and biscuits and ask the visitors to sit down and wait for their turn.<sup>1</sup>

The diaconal worker, wearing a green deacon shirt with a white collar, and I enter the foyer through a door in the cloak room marked: diaconate. As we enter the “waiting room,” she greets the people waiting and asks one of them to come with us. Leaving the church’s foyer, means that the church room is no longer visible. As we walk through the door with the sign, we enter a long and rather sterile corridor. The diaconal worker leads the way to her office. The room is dominated by a large desk with a computer. Next to the desk is a small round table with three chairs. Apart from some quotes with Christian content, nailed to the wall, and the titles of some of the books in a bookshelf, the room’s materiality offers little clues to where we are. The visitor is invited to sit down by the small table, and a conversation starts. As I participated in the diaconal reception, I noticed how these conversations typically started with the diaconal worker asking the other person what the person needed help with. As the conversation continued, the diaconal worker typically asked questions concerning the family situation, housing situation and economic situation. During these conversations, the deacon usually looked attentively at the person seeking help and repeatedly expressed words of empathy and understanding. This conversation was in many instances followed by the diaconal worker offering various kinds of support, for instance, food bags, clothes or help with various contacts with governmental agencies.<sup>2</sup>

Having outlined the typical flow of actions constituting the diaconal reception, it is now time to turn to the relationships established and enacted in the practice. These relationships concern various aspects of the relationship between the diaconal worker and the individual seeking help as well as to the welfare state and the church.

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<sup>1</sup> Field diary.

<sup>2</sup> Field diary.

### 7.3 The Helper-Client Relationship

The most obvious relationship constituted by the diaconal reception could be called the helper-client relationship. This might be seen as stating the obvious, but it is worth noting how the diaconal reception, both in terms of its spatial arrangement and content could be seen as a practice where the aim is to offer the people visiting the diaconal reception various kinds of support. Thus, the relationship constituted could be called the helper-client relationship, where the diaconal worker assumes the role of someone giving help and the person visiting the role of a client. In what follows, the aim is to display how this relationship is constituted by both actions such as listening and food-sharing as well as by the practice's spatial and material arrangements.

The helper-client relationship could be seen as spatially mediated. As noticed, the spatial arrangements of the diaconal reception transformed to church foyer into a space which resembles a waiting room in a public institution. The whole setup with the diaconal worker, as a doctor at a health clinic comes out from a secluded area, and welcomes, usually one person at a time into the secluded area exacerbate the impression that the person visiting is in need of something which the diaconal worker might supply. During my participation in the diaconal reception, I noticed how the help asked for often concerned financial assistance or support in communicating with public agencies. Some visitors could not afford to pay their rent, bills, or medication, or to provide for their families' basic needs.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, in the diaconal reception, different artefacts contributed to the constitution of the helper-client relationship. Not least in situations where the help the diaconal worker offered took the shape of material support. Thus, for instance, bags with groceries and second-hand clothes given to the person visiting, could be seen as material mediation of this relationship.

This helper-client relationship was also mediated and structured by the use of a written document stipulating the routines for the diaconal reception. This document made it clear which categories of people who should always receive help and which people the diaconal workers were supposed to be more

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<sup>3</sup> Field diary.

restrictive towards. The document, for instance, stipulated that all people who had experienced “unexpected hardships” could be supported with food, children’s clothes and help to pay medicines.<sup>4</sup> This category was also eligible to receive a gift card at the local supermarket. This, however, should only happen once. One category of people which the diaconal routines urged a more restrictive stance towards was undocumented immigrants. Especially those where there was little possibility to receive a permanent residence permit. This, one of the diaconal workers told me was because the diaconal workers did not want to uphold, what they called, “an impossible situation.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, the document with the guidelines could be seen as structuring the practice of the diaconal reception and the helper-client relationship as well.

Another item with a similar structuring function turned out to be a certain grey binder. The binder sat on a shelf against the wall behind the deacon’s desk, filled with documents. I soon learned that it contained information about visitors – their family situations and reasons for coming to the diaconal reception. During my field work, I noticed how the diaconal worker, on several occasions, asked visitors to return to the sofa in the foyer and wait. The deacon then consulted the binder to see whether the person had been there before, how they had previously described their situation, and what kind of help they had requested or received.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the grey binder not only contributes to the constitution of the helper-client relationship, but it also shapes the relationship.

Thus, the helper-client relationship should not be seen as an unconditional offer of help and support. In fact, the diaconal worker, at times did adopt a rather critical stance towards the person. They described the risk of being cheated as an ever-present reality. On one occasion, a person came to the reception asking for financial assistance. The diaconal worker, while listening attentively and maintaining eye contact, also asked – in a very respectful manner – the person to log in to his bank account in order to gain a clearer understanding of his financial situation. Sitting at the same table, I experienced this as a rather vulnerable moment for the person seeking help. At the end of the conversation,

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<sup>4</sup> Diaconal routines for the congregation.

<sup>5</sup> Field diary.

<sup>6</sup> Field diary.

the diaconal worker denied financial assistance, partly, as she later told me, because of some suspicious transactions visible on the account.<sup>7</sup>

## **7.4 Relationships to the Welfare State**

Closely related to the helper-client relationship are various constituted relationships to the welfare state. Relationships which can be characterised as intended relationships. Here it is instructive to recall how Theodore Schatzki describes intended relationships. He describes: “Two entities can be related by way of one of them performing actions toward or having thoughts, beliefs, intentions, and emotions about the other.”<sup>8</sup> In the diaconal reception, in particular, two such relationships emerge in relation to the welfare state. The first concerns the relationship between the church and the welfare state; the second between the person seeking help and the welfare state. Here, the diaconal worker again assumes the role of mediator, but this time between the individual and the welfare state.

### **7.4.1 The Relationships between the Church and the Welfare State**

As I participated in the diaconal reception, I observed a sense of frustration and unease among the diaconal workers connected to the giver-client relationship. This frustration could be interpreted as due to a perceived share of workload between the Church of Sweden and the welfare state. Thus, the diaconal workers’ frustration could be seen as stemming from the fact that people came to the church with problems they believed to be the responsibility of the welfare state.<sup>9</sup> This frustration was often captured in the recurring question: “Is this really our task?”<sup>10</sup> Thus, to cater for the basic needs was not perceived to be the responsibility of the church, but of the welfare state.

This could be illustrated with the following episode from my fieldwork. As I was shadowing Kevin, one of the diaconal workers, the phone rang. It was a pregnant woman who said she had no food and asked if she could get a bag of

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<sup>7</sup> Field diary.

<sup>8</sup> Schatzki 2002, 44.

<sup>9</sup> Field diary.

<sup>10</sup> Field diary.

groceries. Kevin promised to come. With a deep sigh, he left his office to prepare a food-bag. It was clear that he was frustrated. “Is this really the message we want to send as a church?”<sup>11</sup> he asked me. I asked what message he wanted to send. “That we don’t give emergency help” he answered directly. “We can add a golden edge to life, but never, ever replace social services.”<sup>12</sup>

Kevin, it turned out, was not alone in his frustration and the perceived relationship between the church and the welfare state. Through my fieldwork it became clear that several of the diaconal workers felt a deep aversion to handing out, for instance, food. Partly they considered it degrading for a person seeking help to receive aid in the form of food, and partly they believed that it was really the welfare state’s responsibility to ensure that all citizens had their basic needs met. This became particularly evident when, during my fieldwork, the Church of Sweden, together with other actors in the area, started an initiative called The Food Mission (*Matmissionen*) The work of the Food Mission consisted of a store that largely resembled a normal supermarket. The difference, however, was that the food sold had been donated to the Food Mission by other supermarkets because it was close to its best-before date. This meant that The Food Mission could offer food at heavily reduced prices. It also meant that instead of receiving a donated grocery bag, people could now themselves choose – at least among the food available – what food they wanted. It turned out, however, that the deacons were divided about the establishment of The Food Mission in the area. On the one hand, they were pleased that they themselves would now no longer have to hand out food but could refer those seeking help to The Food Mission store. On the other hand, they were clear that an initiative such as The Food Mission should not really be necessary because the welfare state ought to guarantee people’s subsistence.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Field diary.

<sup>12</sup> Field diary.

<sup>13</sup> Field diary.

### **7.4.2 The Diaconal Worker as Mediator between the Individual and the Welfare State**

In my material it is possible to discern another relationship involving the welfare state: The relationship between the individual seeking help and the welfare state and where the diaconal worker assumed the role as mediator. This intended relationship was constituted by the interaction between the individual seeking help and the diaconal worker. During my field work, I noticed how many of the people coming to the diaconal reception asked for help with relationships to various governmental agencies, for instance, the social services. This help could amount to making phone calls to different case officers, writing letters and helping people to understand certain communications from government agencies. As, Kate, one of the diaconal workers stated with sigh, “We have become a citizen office.”<sup>14</sup> Kevin, one of the diaconal workers describes how the church, in his opinion, has become a mediating actor between people with little knowledge of the Swedish society and the state:

I think everyone, regardless of culture, can understand what a church is. Eh... at the same time they do not understand the society that the church exists in and... that the church then becomes a... a cornerstone for society and for the conversation between individuals and society. And it reminds me perhaps of how it was in the past that the church had a very dominant place as a social actor and it was to the church that you went to find out what was happening in society and that that is perhaps a bit like that now, but rather for people who have come here than for people who have grown up in our society.<sup>15</sup>

Jenny, another of my informant is on to something similar. According to her, the Church of Sweden offers a way to approach the bureaucratic Swedish society in a safe way:

I would even say that in some ways there is a pretty strong connection to the established society... now I think a lot about new Swedes in particular. Maybe they have contact with healthcare but don't know what is being said and so on. And that makes you feel very insecure about that. But that people make certain contacts through the diaconate. But that then maybe in a place where you feel emotionally safe and where you also approach the established society in some way. Partly because you get help with things like health insurance or uh... well, all sorts of things like that, or healthcare matters or social

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<sup>14</sup> Field diary.

<sup>15</sup> Interview Kevin.

assignments. But also, the Church of Sweden is such, such an institution anyway with a lot of formality and so that you become a part of it in some way.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, according to Jenny, the diaconal reception could be seen as being a secure space where the individual, with the help of the diaconal worker could approach the established society.

### **7.5 The Diaconal Worker as Mediator of God's Presence**

It would be a mistake, however, to only describe the diaconal reception as a practice in terms of help offered and support received. According to my informants, there was more going on in diaconal reception than just philanthropy. In what follows, I will display how my informants regarded both themselves and the people visiting as mediators of God's presence.

In my material relating to the diaconal reception, there is no doubt that many of the diaconal workers are motivated by certain theological motifs. One deacon, for instance, described diaconal work as "social work commissioned by Christ."<sup>17</sup> Her colleague is into something similar as she describes how the reception of God's love, comes with a responsibility: "We have all received love from God and then we also have a responsibility to take care of one another."<sup>18</sup> God's love, however, is not only perceived as a source of inspiration, but also as something which the diaconal workers understood themselves as mediating to the people coming to the diaconal reception. They regarded themselves as *mediators* of God's love. One informant described: "Diaconal work is like... God's care and love through Jesus Christ I would say."<sup>19</sup> When asked if she saw herself as mediating this love and care she answers: "Yes, we are involved in and mediate. Absolutely."<sup>20</sup> Thus the person seeking help is understood to be the object of God's love and care and the diaconal worker as the mediator.

In my material, this mediation does not primarily come about through the concrete help offered, for instance through food bags given out. In fact, my

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<sup>16</sup> Interview Jenny.

<sup>17</sup> Interview Rachel.

<sup>18</sup> Interview Kate.

<sup>19</sup> Interview Rachel.

<sup>20</sup> Interview Rachel.

informants repeatedly tone down the importance of the help offered and emphasised how they often were not able to bring a solution to the problem presented. Katie, one of the diaconal workers states:

I think that you should be treated with respect and warmth, no matter what you bring, because it could be something you've been carrying around that you're ashamed of or that you've been holding on to for any length of time, and yet even if I can feel from the beginning that we can't solve this, you should still feel that this is landing somewhere with someone who accepts and listens and tries to start sorting it out in some way. Quite a bit, but often it's complex economic or social problems that aren't solved there and then. Especially not at a diaconal reception. But the important thing is that you should be able to feel, yes, some kind of warmth and respect and that it lands well. That you shouldn't feel ashamed. For that, no matter what it is, and that it is picked up on in some way. Then we don't always succeed in doing that, but that's the intention.<sup>21</sup>

In one way, Katie, in this passage confirms the basic structure of the diaconal reception as a place where people come in order to get help and support. At the same time, she emphasises the fact that the diaconal workers often cannot contribute to a solution. The focus is rather on the encounter itself. The mediation of God's love, thus, is not so much a matter of food bags or clothes given, as in an encounter with certain qualities. In my material, these encounters are characterised by certain bodily actions on behalf of the diaconal workers. These bodily actions amounted to a combination of attentive modes of gazing and listening in combination with asking questions. Through these bodily actions a certain space was created where the diaconal worker perceived themselves as mediating something of God's presence. The mediating aspect of these relationship is highlighted by how Rachel, one of the diaconal workers, describes the relationship to the people seeking help at the diaconal reception and her own role in terms of the liturgical practice of the *Kyrie*, the moment in the Sunday service where the congregation, through singing, asks God to have mercy. She describes: "I wish you should be able to come with it... as we do in the beginning of the church service."<sup>22</sup> When asked if she means the *kyrie* she responds:

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<sup>21</sup> Interview Kate.

<sup>22</sup> Interview Rachel.

Yes, in the kyrie, kind of. Because this is very much how I understand my role. To remain kind of. To be, to dare to remain and offer this moment and... to be met in a dignified and present way. Then, I cannot solve all that... and I guess I am not supposed to. All that they wish. Because there are situations that are impossible to solve, kind of.<sup>23</sup>

Rachel's account suggests that the relationship between a listening God and human beings implied in the liturgical Kyrie extends through time and space into the diaconal reception. Through the gaze and the listening, by being present in that very moment, the diaconal worker creates a space where the other person could express their situation as in a Kyrie, as directed towards God.

According to Catherine, another diaconal worker, this encounter could be seen as a way to imitate Christ. She states:

I have this mantra. I used to say: What would Jesus do? And I am thinking, what am I doing. For whom am I doing this? It is not for my sake. I have chosen to work in the church for a reason. With my faith as the core. We exist for all people. No matter what... I am quite fond of this material which Martin Lönnebo introduced: "See the human, a burning heart." I often think about that. Every week I see the human being. Here comes a human being in need and I see her. And we see each other at an eye-level. All other things are irrelevant. Here and now, this human being needs help... And I think, what would Jesus do? What did Jesus? That is my attitude. He saw the human being and the need. To me as a Christian, and a believer, this is very important."<sup>24</sup>

In this quote, it is obvious how Catherine sees her work as a way to imitate Christ. Importantly, even though she mentions the other's needs, the emphasis is not so much on the help she is providing but rather the way she approaches the other. According to her, this encounter is characterised by bodily actions, in this case a certain gaze. A gaze which implies an ambition to meet as equals, at an eye-level.

The notion of the diaconal workers as mediators of God's love and care could be seen as the constitution of a different kind of relationship, the relationship between the person visiting the diaconal reception and God, mediated by the encounter between the visitor and the diaconal worker. Thus, in this relationship, compared to the helper-client relationship, the role of the

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<sup>23</sup> Interview Rachel.

<sup>24</sup> Interview Catherine.

diaconal worker is changed from the one providing help, to someone who mediates God's presence.

An important question is whether it is only the role of the diaconal worker that is changing. What about the person visiting the diaconal reception, is he or she limited to the reception of God's love or is her assumed role also changing? According to Susan, one of the priests, the answer to this question should not be an unambiguous yes. The reason, it seems, is that the role of mediating God's presence is not restricted to the diaconal workers, but includes the person visiting the diaconal reception as well. Susan states:

It is about how we view a human being. It is about understanding that I am not here to make myself feel good... It is a diaconal approach. Every human being is created in the image of God. Every human being has an infinite value and that is why we have to be present and meet every person where that person is and not think that we now what the other person needs. It is a constant practice in listening and it takes a lot of our diaconal workers.<sup>25</sup>

To Susan, the notion of every person as created in the image of God seems to destabilise the relationship between giver and receiver and warrants a listening approach on behalf of the diaconal worker. Such an approach is visible in my material in the way the diaconal workers want to avoid reducing the person visiting to a problem to be solved. Rachel, one of the diaconal workers, emphasises how she takes pain to show interest and ask about more than just the issue presented by the person visiting.<sup>26</sup>

At times, the giver-receiver relationship is not only destabilised, but even disrupted. On one occasion, there was a lady coming to the diaconal reception asking for clothes to her children. As their conversation continued, I noticed a certain shift in terms of roles. As the diaconal worker asked questioned about the woman's family situation, she also invited her to ask questions in return. Learning that they both were parents the lady suddenly stood up as the diaconal worker and I remained seated and, in a very passionate way, started to teach the diaconal worker how to raise her children in a, according to her, proper

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<sup>25</sup> Interview Susan.

<sup>26</sup> Field diary.

Christian way.<sup>27</sup> The day after, when I met the diaconal worker, she mentioned the conversation and was clearly pleased about it. The reason, she told me, was that she experienced the conversation as an example of where a mutual relationship and been expressed.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the helper-client relationship established at the diaconal reception should be seen in a mutual critical relationship to an intended relationship where both the diaconal worker and the person visiting are seen as mediators of God's presence. Worth noticing is how the latter relationship is not constituted by a distinct practice, but rather as a possible fissure in the helper-client relationship. As noticed, the diaconal workers' attentive listening and gazing could be interpreted instrumentally, where they serve as tool for the diaconal workers to figure out what kind of help the visitor needs and is eligible to. As seen in the example of the visitor having to show his bank account, this attentive gaze could assume a rather critical and scrutinising mode. The same attentive gaze and listening could also be understood as mediating God's presence and constitute both the diaconal worker and the visitors as mediators of this presence.

In this chapter, I have outlined various relationships constituted through the diaconal reception. These relationships include a basic helper-client relationship, in which the person visiting the diaconal reception assumes the role of client and the diaconal worker that of helper. I have also noted that my material indicates a certain fissure within this helper-client relationship, in which the diaconal worker assumes the role of mediating God's presence – a role that is also attributed to the visitor, insofar as they are understood as created in the image of God. I have further shown how the diaconal reception constitutes a relationship between the church and the welfare state: a relationship in which my informants perceived a division of labour, with the welfare state understood as the primary provider of welfare and the Church of Sweden seen as a complement. Moreover, the diaconal reception also constitutes a relationship between the welfare state and the person visiting the diaconal reception, in which the diaconal worker again assumes the role of mediator.

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<sup>27</sup> Field diary.

<sup>28</sup> Field diary.

# 8. Theopolitical Relationships in Liturgical Practices

## 8.1 Introduction

During my fieldwork in two field-site congregations, I participated in a range of liturgical practices, many of which formed part of what is referred to as the Sunday service, which, from a praxeological perspective, may be understood as a bundle of practices. Given that, in both congregations, the Sunday service was immediately followed by coffee and biscuits, I have chosen to treat this practice together with the liturgical practices. It should be noted, however, that the material concerning the post-liturgical coffee derives primarily from one of my field-site congregations. This is because the coffee after the liturgy emerged as a significant practice for my informants in that congregation and came to play an important role in how they understood the role of the church.

In what follows, I begin with a description of the liturgical practices. Given the significance of the Eucharist in my material, my primary focus is on that particular practice. Accordingly, rather than describing every liturgical sequence in detail, I provide an overview of the flow of actions and of the material and spatial context. I then go on to show how certain bodily actions directed towards physical objects, both human and material, constitute particular relationships among the participants, between the participants and material objects, and between the participants and God. Moreover, I demonstrate how the Eucharist, as a practice, both constitutes relationships and may be understood as a renegotiation of social relationships. Lastly, I show how the coffee after the service constitutes certain intended relationships.

## 8.2 Liturgical Practices

In both congregations, the church interior was characterised by a rich materiality. To enter these spaces was to step into an environment saturated with references to the Christian tradition. For a researcher such as myself, equipped with socio-material theories, the experience could be overwhelming: it was difficult to know where to begin. From a praxeological perspective, the Sunday service, as a bundle of practices, stood in a reciprocal relationship with various material artefacts and arrangements. While the room and its materiality anchored worship in space and in material objects, the practices themselves structured and conferred significance upon various physical objects. For instance, the use of bread on a plate and wine in a chalice anchors the Eucharist in physical objects. It is virtually impossible to imagine a Eucharist without bread and wine. At the same time, it is the practice of the Eucharist that gives the bread and wine, and, for example, the chalice, a particular significance. A chalice on the altar signifies the Eucharist; a chalice in a museum signifies something quite different.

Moreover, the material arrangements of these church spaces structure the participants' bodies. The seating arrangement, for instance, orients the body and, not least, the gaze, by establishing a relationship to the room in terms of a clearly defined front and back and by directing attention towards the front. As I take my seat on a wooden pew, I notice how certain material artefacts draw the eye. On either side of the room stands a votive stand surrounded by icons. At the front are a large altar, a baptismal font, a pulpit, and an organ. Behind the altar, to the right of the altarpiece depicting Jesus surrounded by his disciples, stands another large votive stand. The other church space was organised in a similar manner, with material arrangements that likewise directed attention towards what was perceived as the front.<sup>1</sup>

As I participated in the liturgical practices, I began to discern a certain pattern in relation to the timing of people's arrival. In general, participants arrived after the service had begun, with attendance during the Eucharistic part of the service being considerably higher than at the start. As Justin, one of the priests,

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<sup>1</sup> Field diary.

puts it: “About half have arrived by 10 a.m., and then it fills up. Every time you look up, a few more have come.”<sup>2</sup>

Notably, the manner of entry appeared to correlate with ecclesial and cultural background. In both congregations, the great majority of those participating in the liturgy were accustomed to other ecclesial traditions. While some entered and took their seats immediately, many followed a different sequence. Likely reflecting backgrounds in other church traditions, most plausibly the Orthodox Church, their first action upon entering was to approach one of the icons surrounding a votive stand. They positioned themselves in front of the icon, looked at it, made the sign of the cross, sometimes bowed, and remained standing before the icon with their hands raised. Many then lit a candle and placed it in the votive stand before taking their seats. In the second congregation, I observed a similar pattern, this time in relation to a particular crucifix placed on a pillar near the entrance at the back of the room. Upon entering, many participants paused by the crucifix, looked at it, and touched their fingers to their lips and then to the crucifix.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, in both congregations, the majority of congregants had a background in ecclesial traditions other than the Church of Sweden. Apart from the observations already noted, this was also indicated by the way in which some of the women were dressed. Several had their heads covered during the service, and in one of the congregations I noticed that one woman wore a headscarf embroidered with an image and the name *Lourdes*, the well-known Catholic pilgrimage site in France.<sup>4</sup>

In both congregations, the liturgy opened with a procession moving from the back of the church towards the front, led by the cross-bearer, followed by individuals carrying large candles and a Bible, with the priest bringing up the rear. As the procession passed by, I observed that many members of the congregation, upon seeing the cross, bowed and made the sign of the cross.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Interview Justin.

<sup>3</sup> Field diary. My informants told me that this practice caused problems during the covid-pandemic. Due to the practice of touching, first the mouth and then the crucifix, the crucifix had to be temporarily removed due to health concerns.

<sup>4</sup> Field diary.

<sup>5</sup> Field diary.

One characteristic of the liturgical practices, apart from the Eucharistic part, was the relatively low level of participation among the congregants. Few sang along with the hymns or with the sung elements of the Kyrie and the Gloria. There was, however, considerably more activity around the crucifix at the back, the icons, and the votive stands, as congregants, both those who arrived late and others, continued to light candles, touch the crucifix, or pray before the icons. When it was time for the reading of the Gospel, however, a practice that took place in the middle of both churches, most people paid attention. The reading of the Gospel was preceded by a procession similar to that at the beginning of the service, though on this occasion it moved from the front to the centre of the room. As those carrying the cross, the candles, and the Bible passed by, many of the congregants bowed and made the sign of the cross. In both congregations, the Gospel was read in both Swedish and Arabic, with English also included in one of them.

As the Eucharistic celebration began, it was noteworthy how markedly the level of focus and participation increased. As noted above, participation at the start of the service was comparatively low: many, especially those from other ecclesial backgrounds, did not, for example, sing the hymns or liturgical songs. At times, they appeared almost uninterested and turned to one another to chat. When the Eucharist began, however, a clear shift occurred, as people became more actively engaged. As prescribed in the order of service, they stood for the opening of the Eucharistic Prayer. Remaining standing throughout the Eucharistic Prayer was not prescribed, yet most did so. They joined in the Lord's Prayer, some in their mother tongue, and bowed when the priest elevated the bread and the wine. At the exchange of Peace, almost everyone turned to a neighbour to offer a greeting. Finally, at the moment of food-sharing, a kind of liturgical bustle ensued as people moved to the front to receive the bread and the wine. People moved down the aisles, which soon became overcrowded. On several occasions, the wine was distributed by a member of the Arabic-speaking community who, in broken Swedish, said: "The body of Christ, given for you." Having received the bread and the wine, many of the congregants returned to a more relaxed relationship to what was taking place in the room. Some people

chatted, and the atmosphere in the room was rather messy.<sup>6</sup> After the Eucharist, the service concluded with a hymn in which, once again, few sang along. All stood, however, for the blessing and the conclusion of the service, making the sign of the cross and bowing to the cross as the service came to an end.

Having briefly outlined the liturgical practices, I now turn to an analysis of the various relationships constituted through these practices.

### **8.3 Relationships to Material Objects**

As I participated in the Sunday services, I noticed through the various practices a pattern of relating to physical objects, both material and human beings. Through certain bodily actions, the participants related to these physical objects as mediators of God's presence.

The significance of these arrangements is evident in how people within the church space relate to them, thus to the relationship they are a part of constituting. During the service, I noticed how participants related to these bodily artefacts bodily, not least through the gaze. In looking at an icon, a cross, or – at particular moments – fellow congregants, participants appear to relate to more than surface appearances. Through their engagement with these artefacts and human beings, they seem also to relate to what they understand them to signify: the presence of God.<sup>7</sup> As noticed, this way of relating was, not least, visible the way people entered the church.

Thus, in both congregations a specific relation obtains between the body, especially the gaze, and material arrangements. Crucially, the enacted gaze is not a mode of detached observation; it signifies involvement with the material to which it is directed. In these instances – the crucifix and the icon – looking is accompanied by specific bodily acts, which implies a relationship. It elicits gestures that I interpret as signs of reverence directed towards God. Thus, the interplay of this mode of gazing, bodily actions and material arrangements constitutes a certain relationship between both the individual and the material artefacts but also between the individual and God.

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<sup>6</sup>Field diary.

<sup>7</sup>Field diary.

## 8.4 Relationships to Human Beings

However, it is not, only material artefacts that, through the practice, acquire a particular quality; human beings do as well. Karen, one of my informants, reflects on the procession, and it is clear that this liturgical moment holds great significance for her. Strikingly, she does not focus on the material arrangements but on human relationships and persons. More specifically, she discerns something of God's presence in the congregants' gaze:

Entrance and exit. Yes... Partly because there is a very proud Martin walking and holding the cross, who has seen it as his task. Or just taken it, he hasn't got it, he has taken it. And then... the children are there and carry candles. And the looks of those sitting in the benches. Sometimes I don't go because sometimes I think it gets a bit too stilted that we should go there and feel important. Sometimes I get that feeling. Then I usually sneak around and sit down instead. But if I go, I see very eh... yes, but it sparkles in the eyes in some way. Now we are here. Now we are gathered. Now Jesus is here. So it shows in the eyes in some way. I am so taken by it. And people make the sign of the cross and they want to kiss something.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to note how bodily actions, materiality, and gaze operate together here. Karen describes how, through her own gaze, she discerns the presence of Christ in the congregants' gaze as the procession – led by the cross – passes by. Thus, the pattern of relating observed with respect to material objects appears to extend to human beings as well. This is corroborated by Roland, one of the priests, who reflects on presiding at the liturgy in a congregation marked by diverse ecclesial backgrounds. He notes that he has become more attentive to bodily expressions, a sensitivity he does not attribute to his Evangelical–Lutheran tradition but to practices observed among congregants from other church traditions. He himself has not remained unaffected. Although he finds it challenging that people bow to material artefacts and that he – so he perceives – as priest is placed on a pedestal, he describes a counter-practice intended to resist what he regards as akin to “magical thinking”; specifically, he has begun to bow to the congregation, precisely because of the context's diversity:

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<sup>8</sup> Interview Karen and Lizzy.

And then I don't know if you've thought about it, if you've been there. But I always bow to the congregation and thank them. They're just as important. At least as important as I am. And I think that bowing has a kind of, what should I call it, I don't really know, that I honour them, I think. You bow to someone you think is exalted in some way.<sup>9</sup>

When I imply this bowing seems similar to when some people bow to, what they perceive as, the body of Christ present in the sacraments, Roland replies:

Yes, the church is the body of Christ. And it is the temple. So that then you can bow. Yes, but it is a bit of an act. I have thought that for a physically formed Orthodox person, the body is important. So, I do things with the body without becoming Orthodox. So that... that is something that I started to do here. It is not something I have done before to bow to the church. So, then I was a bit affected then.<sup>10</sup>

Even though Roland presents his bow to the congregation as a protest against what he perceives as an overemphasis on the role of priests and the sacraments, his actions, nonetheless establish a relationship where the congregation is seen as a context in which God is present.

Thus, the Sunday service, understood as a bundle of practices, is characterised by patterns of relating which constitutes relationships between human beings, material arrangements and God. In what follows I first demonstrate the centrality of the Eucharist and its function as a bridge that binds people together; I then analyse how the Eucharist as a practice constitute and renegotiates social relationships.

## **8.5 The Eucharist as the Centre of the Service and the Church**

As I participated in the Sunday services in both field-congregations it was possible to observe how the Eucharist was regarded as the central practice within the Sunday service. This is indicated in my account of how people continued to arrive way after the service had started. The impression it gave was that the important thing to be a part of was the Eucharist. This importance of the

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<sup>9</sup> Interview Roland.

<sup>10</sup> Interview Roland.

Eucharist is also indicated by, as observed, the way the level of active participation rose considerably during the Eucharist.

My informants confirm the impression of the Eucharist as the centre of the service, not only for the congregants, but also for themselves. Several of them describe the Eucharist as the most significant liturgical moment. For some, the importance of the Eucharist has increased precisely because of how meaningful it is to the congregants. As Mary, one of the priests, explains:

Yes, and I, who actually like preaching, uh... maybe I've had to, not scale back on my ambitions, but then, uh... it doesn't matter that much, it feels like in this mass... what matters is the eucharist.<sup>11</sup>

Among my informants, some emphasise not only the importance of the Eucharist but also the Sunday service itself as central to their understanding of what it means to be the church. For Patrick, one of the priests, it is the Sunday service that both sustains the church and gives it its identity:

The difference between the Sunday service and a lot of the other things we do is that it is the Sunday service that gives us our identity, kind of. It carries our identity, and it gives us our identity kind of.<sup>12</sup>

When I ask him to elaborate further, he tells me:

That everything, somehow, and in many different ways, all the time lives and relates to the Sunday service. Somehow it is there. Even if you talk about something else, there is a poster on the wall saying Sunday 11 am. If it is anything which we should not stop doing or cancel or change to quick, it is the Sunday service. It has a place because... as some kind of centre... If we would stop with the Sunday and the service and everything, then we become something... something else.<sup>13</sup>

Kate, one of the diaconal workers, expresses a similar view. As noted above, she describes the function of the Sunday service as that of a compass – one that reorients participants and reminds them who they are:

Here we can renew our strength and get some fresh air and then go out into the week again. And we can lay off and we get to... well, hug each other, sort of. Like turning the

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<sup>11</sup> Interview Mary.

<sup>12</sup> Interview Patrick.

<sup>13</sup> Interview 2 Patrick.

compass right again if you've got lost during and then you get to remind yourself: How is it? Yes, God is with us... To the altar, lay it off, out into reality. You also get reminded: Why are we doing this, who am I, which people we meet and how am I.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, in this section I have shown the importance of the Eucharist to both congregants and informants. In the next section, I describe how the Eucharist constitutes relationships between people from different cultures.

## **8.6 The Eucharist and the Establishment of Relationships**

The Eucharist is, without exaggeration, an ecclesial practice that has been the object of extensive theological research. Across the history of theological inquiry, virtually every aspect of the Eucharist has been scrutinised, and divergent interpretations remain a source of division within the global church. I do not pursue these debates here. My focus is on the meanings ascribed to the Eucharist within the two field-site congregations and on what relationships the Eucharist constitutes. In what follows, I will show how the Eucharist both establishes social relationships and renegotiates them.

“Who else will be there?” – a question familiar to anyone who has ever been invited to dinner. The same question proves instructive when considering the Eucharist in my field-site congregations. Who is there? What strikes me most from my fieldwork in these congregations is the diversity of those gathered on Sunday mornings. In addition to the Swedish-speaking group, both congregations include a substantial Arabic-speaking community comprising people from various Orthodox and Roman Catholic backgrounds. Moreover, a staff member in one congregation noted the growing number of arrivals from East Africa. When my informants reflect on the diverse character of the congregations, they return to the Eucharist as a practice that brings people together that otherwise would not have that much in common. Susan, one of the priests, reflected on the ecumenical character of her congregation:

We have so many different faith traditions, different church traditions that find their way here. Because what do people do when they come as refugees or come to settle down or establish themselves? You come from a country where it is obvious that you have a relationship with your congregation, then you look for where the church is somewhere.

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<sup>14</sup> Interview Kate.

That's where the church is! You don't ask first and foremost what kind of church it is, but you come to the church and you want to celebrate a service. For me, it has to do with connection, totally. That is, you want to find a place where you can feel safe and that you recognize. If everything else has been turned upside down, you need something you recognize and it's not the Swedish language here that unites, but it's where the bread is broken and the candles are lit and this liturgical language when it works.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, Susan confirms my observation about the congregation's diversity. Crucially, she emphasises that it is not the Swedish language that unites those who come to her church, but the breaking of bread, the sharing of food in the Eucharist, and the lighting of candles. In Susan's words, in the absence of a common spoken language the liturgy itself becomes a language that unites people:

The liturgical language is truly a language that speaks beyond the verbal language boundaries or what to say. That you can understand... now we wish each other the peace of the Lord... everyone understands it even if you know that the person down there doesn't speak Swedish very well, but he understands exactly what is happening.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the liturgy in general – and the Eucharist in particular – may be understood as a bridge connecting people who might otherwise struggle to understand one another. Yet the Eucharist not only establishes social relationships; it also renegotiates them. In what follows, I show how the Eucharist can be seen to renegotiate social relationships.

## 8.7 The Eucharist as the Renegotiation of Social Relationships

In my material, there is among my informants a unanimous awareness of the diversity that characterises the congregations, both in cultural backgrounds and in socio-economic circumstances. At the same time, there is a recurring conviction that the Eucharist, as a practice, constitutes a renegotiation of these relationships. More specifically, according to my informants, Eucharist as a practice appears to renegotiate human hierarchies and inequalities. Rachel, one of the diaconal workers, articulates a point to which several informants return in different formulations:

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<sup>15</sup> Interview Susan.

<sup>16</sup> Interview Susan.

The feeling of that there and then, we are one in Christ. And, kind of... it is like nothing else matter. Like where we are, who we are or how we are. Or what status we have or how we... but there and then, it feels like we are completely equal. It is during that moment kind of. That's how it feels.<sup>17</sup>

Other informants describe the importance of the Eucharist in a similar way. Barbara, for instance, describes the Eucharist as, for her, the most important moment during the Sunday service:

Because there we are all on an equal footing. It does not matter what language I speak, for I understand the language of the Eucharist. And I also find it beautiful that it is not only white Swedes who stand and distribute the gifts... Everyone is welcome to participate. I think it is outstanding.<sup>18</sup>

During my fieldwork, as I participated in the Eucharistic celebration, I got a glimpse of what my informants tried to capture. In one congregation, there was an elderly woman who had apparent difficulty walking. On each occasion, however, different male congregants came up to this lady, reached out an arm and, with a firm grip, took hold of the other person's arm, the lady walked down the aisle to receive Communion.<sup>19</sup>

## **8.8 Diversity as an Epistemological Contribution**

So far, I have displayed how the Eucharist as a practice contributes to a renegotiation of social relationships. There is, however, an additional aspect worth noting. As mentioned earlier, the congregation displays a high degree of diversity, both in terms of ethnicity and socioeconomic situations. In my material, this diversity is not seen as negated by the Eucharist; rather, the presence of diversity itself contributes to the understanding of its renegotiations. Thus, the diverse nature of the congregation could be seen as an epistemological contribution.

Within liberation theology, it is argued that our epistemological starting points are not innocent but could be seen as either liberative or oppressive. It could either serve the cause of the oppressed or conceal the reality of poverty

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<sup>17</sup> Interview Rachel.

<sup>18</sup> Interview Barbara.

<sup>19</sup> Field diary.

and exploitation. Thus, theological knowledge is intimately linked to and obtained through participation in the struggle for liberation on behalf of the poor. Miguel A. De La Torre, in his account on liberation theology notes:

Whoever God is, God imparts and sustains life while opposing death. God is present (present) wherever lives are threatened with oppression. This God hears the cries of the enslaved Hebrews, physically enters history, and leads God's people to the Promised Land. Entering history and standing in solidarity with the oppressed means that God takes sides over and against the rich and powerful, not because the marginalized are somewhat holier, but because they are oppressed. God makes a preferential option for the poor and oppressed, over and against the pharaohs of this world.<sup>20</sup>

The liturgical practices studied within my project should, perhaps, not be seen as what liberation theologians describe as a struggle for liberation on behalf of the poor. It should be noticed, however, how the diverse character of the congregation contributes to the understanding of the practice among my informants. When Karen, one of the diaconal workers reflects on the Eucharist it becomes clear that, for her, celebrating Communion with people she has previously met at the diaconal reception is profoundly affecting, where the presence of these individuals appears to reshape both the celebration of the Eucharist itself and her relationship to them. She states: "And then I'm not the social worker who's supposed to help. Then we celebrate a service together. We're siblings."<sup>21</sup> According to Susan, one of the priests, it is precisely the congregation's diversity that contributes to the renegotiation of relationships. She does not claim that this feature of eucharistic theology is unique to her congregation; rather, she contends that the presence of people from different backgrounds intensifies certain dimensions of how these dynamics are perceived and enacted:

...there is something about these hierarchies, who is the biggest and the least that just kind of disappears. Everyone gets to stand in this big, big communion line regardless of who you are. Everyone is kind of in need of something. With outstretched hands, you get to receive God's grace and love... and I think it's noticeable because it's so clear that people have different backgrounds here. It's not this homogeneous environment, it's

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<sup>20</sup> De La Torre 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Interview Kate.

very heterogeneous. And then that theology will probably become... a lot of theology will just become clearer and stronger here.<sup>22</sup>

Crucially, this epistemological aspect of the diverse character of the congregations is not a matter of learning a theory, but is enacted through participation and bodily actions. When my informants speak about the importance of the Eucharist, they frequently refer to the Eucharist as a visible phenomenon where what they see plays a crucial role in how they perceive the practice. Mary, one of the priests, explains:

...you stand there and you see everyone... And I think, then I see, I see and the person standing next to me sees each and every... and even if they don't look you in the eye or something like that, that's when it becomes, like this: Body of Christ, given for you, as Martin Luther talks about. It feels more and more like that. But it's more of a selfish thought like this that I get to see them... but it's really nice. Then that person comes and then you maybe know a little bit... they have this problem or something like this and they... yeah...<sup>23</sup>

It is important to note the centrality of the gaze in Mary's account. For her, the conjunction of seeing people receive Communion and knowing something of the hardships they face shapes how she experiences the practice. Christine, another informant, recounts one of the most profound spiritual experiences of her life: receiving Communion from a person with cerebral palsy, seated in a motorised wheelchair, the chalice resting on the wheelchair's tray. In Christine's account, the gaze is crucial; the visual elements – the server's disability, the wheelchair, and the chalice on the tray – mediate the force of the experience.

In one congregation, I participated in a midday service held in conjunction with the diaconal reception. On this occasion, I accompanied the diaconal workers to the service. That week, a congregational choir contributed to the liturgy. The choir comprised a small ensemble and, to be honest, the musical execution was modest. After the service, however, the diaconal workers were tearful and appeared deeply moved. They explained that many choir members were well known to them, and that several had previously sought assistance at

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<sup>22</sup> Interview Susan.

<sup>23</sup> Interview Mary.

the diaconal reception. One diaconal worker noted that she had previously worked in a large cathedral where prominent choirs regularly performed. Yet she maintained that despite having listened to such choirs, she had not been moved in the way she was on this occasion. On her account, and as I interpret it, the experience concerned less what she heard than what she saw: the sight of individuals – whom she knew to be living with considerable difficulty – participating in the liturgy constituted a profoundly significant experience.<sup>24</sup>

This epistemological contribution marks a contrast to how the Eucharist is perceived in more typical Swedish Lutheran folk-church theology. Here the Eucharist is primarily seen as a means of God's grace to each individual participant.<sup>25</sup> Importantly, my informants emphasize other aspects of the Eucharist. The reason, it seems, is not because they appropriated a different theory of the Eucharist which they had found plausible. The reason is that they had celebrated the Eucharist in a more culturally and diverse context than what they are used to from other congregations. This contrast is noted by several of my informants.

Thus, the diverse nature of the congregations serves as an epistemological contribution in the liturgical practices which shape my informants' understanding of the Eucharist. My material suggests that the experience of participating in the Eucharist is deepened by an awareness of congregants' diversity and social vulnerability.

According to my informants, this account of how the Eucharist establishes and renegotiates social relationships should not be understood in overly romantic terms, as if the congregation were a place where people of diverse backgrounds simply coexist in harmony. Far from it. My informants repeatedly emphasize that the congregation's diversity also gives rise to various frictions. In the next section, I show how my material highlights tensions related to perceptions of gender roles, physical disability, language barriers, and LGBTQI+ issues. I also show how the coffee after the liturgy exemplifies the coexistence of this sacramental gaze with social frictions.

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<sup>24</sup> Field diary.

<sup>25</sup> Eckerdal 2012, 103.

## 8.9 Frictions

According to Susan, one of the frictions in the congregations concerns the role of women and especially the role of women in the Sunday service. This friction, Susan argues, is due to, what she calls, the orthodox imbalance in the congregation.<sup>26</sup> She describes:

...it's the men who are supposed to read the Gospel, it's the men who should stand at the altar, and the women don't want to because they menstruate, and... and then they say that this is an orthodox interpretation and understanding of what we can do together through baptism. But we don't share that view – we believe that men and women together represent the kingdom of God, and therefore we do things together, and that's something we cannot compromise on.<sup>27</sup>

The treatment of people with physical disabilities represents another point of friction. Justin, one of the priests, explains: “We have encountered cultural problems, such as being ignored or patted on the head simply because someone has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair – or because they are blind.”<sup>28</sup> It is worth noting, however, that during my fieldwork I also observed women of diverse ethnic backgrounds with physical disabilities actively participating in the Sunday service, for example by distributing bread and wine during communion.

Another recurring area of friction, to which almost all my informants return, is the language barrier. According to Jenny, a member of the kitchen staff, the difficulty is not merely one of mutual comprehension. The language barrier creates situations that engender a degree of insecurity, because one cannot be sure what is happening in the room:

there are actually large, quite dead areas where you don't know what's going on. I mean, I don't know what people are talking about. So that you can... there can be several things going on at the same time that you don't know about because you don't hear and understand... but now there are these dead spaces where you just go, “What was said here?” “They're laughing a lot” “Maybe someone is laughing at me now because I said this wrong or not” Or it's a completely different thing. You're kind of a little... unsure, yes

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<sup>26</sup> Interview Susan.

<sup>27</sup> Interview Susan.

<sup>28</sup> Interview Justin.

but... a kind of... and I don't mean a perceived uncertainty like "oh it doesn't feel safe" or something like that, but more, it becomes uncertain in like, yeah, what should you say, in the context when not everyone understands what you're saying and meaning and so on.<sup>29</sup>

LGBTQI+-related issues constitute another point of friction. Karen and Lizzy describe an occasion when they invited the local library to the fellowship dinner to read to the children. A librarian arrived and read a picture book about a family with two mothers. Karen and Lizzy regarded this positively, but one mother, who had an Orthodox background, became very upset.<sup>30</sup> Thus, this brief overview of different points of friction in the congregation shows how the relationships established in liturgical practices exist and are negotiated within a friction-filled context. In what follows, I highlight this double nature of food-sharing practices through an examination of food sharing after the liturgy and how this practice both constitutes a certain kind of relationship and maintains other patterns of relating.

### **8.10 The Post-Liturgical Coffee as a Practice**

In one of the congregations, the coffee after the Sunday service was served at the back of the church. Some people sat down by small tables while many remained standing. One aspect characterising the serving of coffee in this congregation was the segregated character of the fellowship. While the few congregants with Swedish background stood by themselves, many from the Arabic-speaking community sat together and spoke Arabic.

In the other field-congregation the post-liturgical coffee was served in a large hall a few doors next to the main church room. Notable is how most of the congregants quickly after the service moved to this room where the tables were already set. Given the rather small size of the room in relation to the large number of people, the room soon became rather noisy. Despite their very different spatial and material arrangements, the two congregations had one thing in common concerning the post-liturgical coffee: the fellowship was considerable segregated with Swedish-speaking congregants sitting at their own table, while

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<sup>29</sup> Interview Jenny.

<sup>30</sup> Interview Karen and Lizzy.

the, considerably larger, Arabic-speaking group, to a large extent sat by themselves.

### **8.10.1 Relationships between the Church and Human Diversity**

In both field-congregations, the Sunday service was directly followed by coffee and biscuits. A practice which, as will be displayed, constitute a certain understanding of what it means to be church. This understanding, at the same time, is clearly related to the diverse nature of the congregation, both in terms of ethnicity and socio-economic situations. Thus, at the post-liturgical coffee, a certain relationship between the church and human diversity is constituted.

### **8.10.2 Post-Liturgical Coffee and Segregated Relationships**

If the perceived understanding of the Eucharistic table was a renegotiation of social relationships, the coffee table constituted relationship which appeared more segregated. Participants with Swedish as their mother tongue sat together, while, for instance, Arabic-speaking participants sat separately. The segregation taking place at the coffee table was something which my informants were aware of. When they described the Eucharist as a renegotiation of social relationships, they did so fully conscious that the congregation remained segregated at the church coffee afterwards. They themselves identified language barriers as the principal cause, even while expressing a desire for things to be otherwise. It should be noted, however, that this desire did not always translate into action.<sup>31</sup>

At one service I attended, one of the congregation's choirs took part. While the congregation largely comprised people with migration backgrounds, the choir consisted almost entirely of Swedish-born members. At the coffee afterwards, I noticed several of the foreign-born participants sitting together at the far end of the church. The priest, however, stood some distance away and did not attempt to speak with them. When the choir members – who had changed in a nearby room – began to pass by on their way home, without staying for coffee, the priest made a point of greeting each of them personally. On other occasions, I observed priests and diaconal workers deliberately sitting with, and

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<sup>31</sup> Field diary.

speaking to, participants with a foreign background. It should also be noted that the priest who did not greet or speak with these participants was not one of the congregation's regular clergy.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, in my material, the coffee after the liturgy, contributes to the constitution of clearly segregated relationships – a fact my informants acknowledge. Yet segregation is not the whole picture. As I show in the next section, the post-service coffee could also be perceived as the formation of a different kind of relationships where the church is perceived as an oasis in relation to the participants' everyday struggles.

### 8.10.3 Post-Liturgical Coffee Ecclesiology and Human Vulnerability

Through participation in both diaconal and liturgical practices, I observed – as noted in the introduction to this section – the same individuals across different practices. These contexts elicited distinct moods and emphases. For example, the woman described above, during her visit to the diaconal reception, related to a profoundly difficult socio-economic situation; she was visibly distressed, her body language communicating despair and anxiety. By contrast, at the coffee table her demeanour was markedly different. Then, she had cried in despair over her situation. Now she was talking cheerfully with some friends and laughing.<sup>33</sup> This contrast which provides a lens on the practice will be elaborated on the next section. It turned out that my informants perceived the gathering on Sundays, both in the service and afterwards as space which they wanted to relate to the realities people in their district experienced.

Susan, one of the priests, tells me how she and the staff in the congregation wish Sundays to be experienced and understood. Their explicit ambition is that Sundays should be experienced as: “*a fragrance of God's kingdom.*”<sup>34</sup> She describes this scent of God's kingdom in terms of festivity and holiness. But she also relates this fragrance to the coffee after the service:

I assume that people can come from quite tough weeks and then it's like being met like... it's not always a question of: Have you got a job yet? How's it going with... Many people

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<sup>32</sup> Field diary.

<sup>33</sup> Field diary.

<sup>34</sup> Interview Susan.

here are met like something that needs to be fixed all the time, I think, like a project. And here you have to be met like a human being. How nice to see you again! Yes, but how wonderful! You talk a lot about the weather and the wind and the children as well, general human things. And we always try to make sure that it's well-decorated and festive and that there's a generous amount of coffee. A large, large part of our budget goes to food and coffee. But it's so that you don't have to experience that stress of not having enough here. So it's like simple, basic things like that. If you want to have another cup of coffee, it's there, you shouldn't have to be ashamed because you don't... With us, church coffee is free and I will stand by that as long as we have the budget for it. It shouldn't be a question of money that you can sit in peace and quiet and have coffee and such.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, according to Susan, the set tables and free coffee contribute to a particular relationship between the congregants' everyday lives and the church, in which the church is perceived as enacting a break from their everyday struggles. The church on Sundays, according to Susan, is meant to provide a break from a focus on problems to be solved. Jenny, one of the employees describes something similar. She tells me how the staff wanted the Sundays in church to be like an oasis and how the coffee after the service is an important part of that ambition:

One thing that we kind of decided was that we wanted the church... that is, that Sunday should actually be like the oasis and charging station that it can be. And then it was like we just, ok how are we going to do that? And then it was that it often became very stressful during the coffee. Because people... many people have to queue... and how do we get people to sit and take it easy and kind of be at a party or kind of be invited and feel safe, like and happy? And... so then we started setting the table every Sunday. So that everyone comes to a set table where it is set for them then. Then it is like cakes and coffee, and everything is prepared. And it has become much calmer and nicer. And it is such a thing that it can actually be like a little... It came from a desire that we wanted more of an oasis feeling. You go to church to kind of... have the energy to take on the next week in some way.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, both Susan and Jenny describe their desire for Sundays to be experienced as a respite from what characterises people's everyday lives. According to

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<sup>35</sup> Interview Susan.

<sup>36</sup> Interview Jenny.

Karen, one of the diaconal workers, this respite should include a break from being defined in terms of one's socio-economic situation:

I think we want to be a warm meeting place where you can... well, get to know... where you can become like, get to know others, you can get to know yourself and you can get to know God. Eh... to the extent you want and can. But also be some kind of, I would say a place of health, where people, where others see what is healthy in me. When I don't just have to be the one who has been evicted, or the one who has debts with the bailiff or the one who lost the children to the social services, but where you can see that which is just like anyone else... Where I don't just have to talk about all the misery I've been through.<sup>37</sup>

Taken together, what Karen, Susan and Jenny share a similar view of then role of the church in relation to human vulnerability and hardships. The church's role, so it seems, is not primarily to solve various problems but to offer a space of respite. Where the focus is not on the hardships people might face.

In this chapter, the ambition has been to hold together two different practices, which could be described in terms of two tables. The Eucharistic table and the coffee table at the post-liturgy coffee and the relationships the Eucharist and the post-liturgical coffee constitute. I have noted how the Eucharist takes place in a context marked by a certain pattern of relating where physical objects, both material and human beings are treated as mediators of God's presence.

Seen together these two tables and their practices could be seen as a theopolitical practices which constitutes a space of respite. In the words of my informants, the church could be described as an oasis: a space where individuals are perceived and encountered apart from markers such as ethnicity and socio-economic status, and where, as in the Eucharist, social relationships are renegotiated. I have also noticed how the diverse character of the congregation serves as an epistemological contribution which shapes an understanding of the Eucharist which differs from a traditional Lutheran understanding. In the next chapter, I will analyse the Foodbank.

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<sup>37</sup> Interview Karen.

# 9. Theopolitical Relationships at the Foodbank

## 9.1 Introduction

The congregation organises, what they call, a food bank every second Thursday. On each occasion, a set number of households receive support in terms of two bags with groceries, collected at the church's venue. According to a member of staff, households receiving assistance have not necessarily asked for help with food per se; rather, they may have approached the church for a variety of reasons. However, given the church's limited resources, many requests for assistance cannot be accommodated; in such cases, households are offered bags of groceries. Thus, the option to provide food as a form of assistance is due, more to the practical circumstances of the church, than to the specific needs of the people asking for help. When asked about the purpose of the foodbank Kevin, one of the diaconal worker answers:

I think the purpose is... partly for us who work, that it was a little easier administratively to refer and help people to a food bank. Because food is always a basic need to be solved and, well, we may not be able to help with bills and clothes and stuff, but we can at least offer food. So that you can get by for another week. It still gives a certain basic security and relief regardless of the situation. Because everyone gets hungry.<sup>1</sup>

## 9.2 The Foodbank as a Practice

The foodbank takes place at the church's venue in a city-district some kilometres away from the congregation's main church building and where the employees have their offices. The church's venue is located in a large building,

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<sup>1</sup> Interview Kevin.

similar to a shopping mall, which, apart from the church contains a gym, a small bakery, the office of the public housing company, The City Mission and the offices of a local project which is a partnership between different actors with the aim of assisting immigrants to access the labour market. The district centre is surrounded by a large open area and parking spaces as well as blocks of flats. The entrance to the church venue is through a separate door, marked by a large cross, located next to the main entrance to the building.

Entering the venue, visitors come into a large foyer. At the wall on the right-hand side is a large billboard where signs welcome visitors to the Church of Sweden. There are also photos of some of the church's employees with a text saying: "You could expect to meet some of these people here!" Next to a sign with information of a popular rosary called Pearls of Life is a drawing with a short greeting made by a visitor expressing its appreciation of the church. The text says: "Hello everyone in the Church of Sweden, you are very kind and I love you!" Thus, when entering the venue, it is hard to not notice that it belongs to the church. To the left of the foyer is a kitchen and a small chapel and to the right is a corridor. Straight ahead is a large assembly room with tables and a large stage at the far end. The venue does also include other social spaces. On the day of distribution, bags with groceries are prepared in the large assembly hall and placed at the stage at the far end of the room. There are also a number of cooler boxes placed on tables where frozen groceries, such as fish fingers, chicken sausages and dairy products are placed. Most of the food is supplied via intermediary agencies that aggregate donations from local retailers, and staff supplement these donations with purchased items.<sup>2</sup>

When members of the different households arrive, they are greeted in the large hallway where an employee has a binder with a list with all the names which are supposed to receive groceries this day. The people arriving present themselves and the employee ticks them off the list. Each household is then given a small piece of paper with a number and asked to sit down and wait for their turn. Each number corresponds to a specific name on the list. The reason for this procedure is a wish on behalf of the church to allow the different households to be as anonymous as possible. There is only one household allowed into

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<sup>2</sup> Field diary.

the assembly hall at a time, and they are escorted by another employee which then calls out, not the name, but the household number. There are then staff at the stage with the grocery bags who double checks the number to a list. If there are many children in the household they are offered, for instance, diapers. The staff, standing on the stage, hand out two bags of groceries containing, in general, some pasta or rice, lentils, bread, milk, fish fingers and chicken sausages.<sup>3</sup>

### **9.3 Relationships of Care and Support**

Having displayed the basic flow of actions in the foodbank as a practice, I now turn to an account of the different relationships constituted by the practice.

It is Wednesday afternoon, and I am about to participate in the food bank organised by one of the congregations. Today, I will join Catherine at the main entrance to greet those arriving. It is Catherine's task to welcome people and to check their names against a list of those scheduled to receive support on this occasion. Standing next to Catherine, I notice that she does far more than simply ticking off names on a list. It soon becomes clear that she knows most of the people by name. She smiles at them and catches their eyes. Sometimes she gives them a hug. I hear her asking questions about everything from a change of apartment to a hospitalised relative.<sup>4</sup>

The foodbank unfolds across two rooms, each enacting distinct modes of relating. The first – described in my account above – comprises the entrance and the foyer. Here bodily expressions such as smiles, eye contact and hugs are tied to the welcome at the door. Through modes of listening, gazing and her body language, Catherine signals interest and care. Listening to her conversations, I hear her tell a person with a hospitalised relative, “When I come back to the church, I will light a candle for him.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, this welcoming at the door constitutes a relationship of care between the diaconal worker and the person seeking help. It is worth noting, however, that the people visiting the food bank seem to know rather little about Catherine, and they do not ask her the same questions about her life as she asks them.

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<sup>3</sup> Field diary.

<sup>4</sup> Field diary.

<sup>5</sup> Field diary.

Thus, even though a relationship of care is constituted, it is not a mutual care but a care where it is clear who is the giver and the receiver.

### 9.3.1 Care and Support Questioned

The food bank's second room comprises the main hall. Here, the food sharing takes place through the distribution of bags with groceries. The mode of relating in this room stands in a sharp contrast to the way of relating enacted at the entrance. To begin with, very little listening occurs in the second room, largely because almost no conversations take place there at all. In the main hall, there are three bodily actions which stand out and contribute to the establishment of certain relationship. The first such action is the calling out of the visitor's personal number. As described, distribution is mediated by a queuing system in which each household is assigned a number, which the escorting employee calls out on entry into the hall. At times, these announcements are almost the only verbal actions, apart from brief greetings and occasional questions about the contents of the bags.<sup>6</sup> The use of a personal number provides the visitor a cloak of anonymity. This impersonal character, however, is open to divergent interpretations. According to my informants, it is supposed to be understood as an expression of care and a wish to protect the integrity of the visitors. At the same time, as will be discussed further on, the impersonal character of the visitor could also be interpreted as an expression of a rather apolitical stance on behalf of the church.

The second bodily action is the handing over of the food-bags. An action which gives the foodbank as a practice a clear characteristic and establishes a relationship between an obvious giver and receiver. This handing over of the food bags is accompanied by another significant bodily expression, namely a downward gaze. This gaze is spatially mediated by the stage at the far end of the hall, where the food bags are placed. As households step forward to receive their bags, this spatial arrangement positions the diaconal worker about 50cm above them, with the inevitable consequence of the diaconal workers looking down at them.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Field diary.

<sup>7</sup> Field diary.

However, the meaning of this down-looking gaze and what relationship it constitutes is not self-evident. To look down on people literally does not necessarily entail looking down on them in a denigrating sense. After all, the food bank, as a diaconal practice, is framed by general understandings of diaconal work that emphasis care and support. It is here, however, the foodbank's affective dimension should be taken into consideration. As noticed, according to Schatzki, practices have a teleoaffective structure which, among other things, mean that certain affections could be seen as belonging to a practice, affections which the participants in the practice are expected to internalise. In what follows, I will examine the affections expressed at the foodbank and consider whether they indicate a possible dissonance within the practice or if they should be seen as an integrated part of the practice.

### **9.3.2 The Affective Dimension of Relationships of Care and Support.**

Affections appear in material about the foodbank in three ways: first, as the emotions my informants attribute to the people visiting the food bank; second, as the affections my informants themselves express; and finally, as my own experienced affections as a researcher.

According to Catherine, one of the diaconal workers, many of the people visiting the foodbank feel ashamed of being there and feel that they have failed as parents by not being able to provide for their families. Kevin, another diaconal worker, explains that these feelings of shame are the very reason for the system with numbered notes, as it allows for a certain degree of anonymity. According to Kevin, these feelings are also why he avoids engaging in much conversation when handing over the food bags.<sup>8</sup> Thus, according to my informants. Thus, the affections ascribed by my informants to the people visiting the foodbank warrants an understanding of these material arrangements as expressions of care in a perceived shameful situation.

From my fieldwork, it is evident that it is not only the visitors who relate to the food bank emotionally, but also the employed staff. Before analysing their emotions involved in the foodbank it is worth noticing the affective dimension of other diaconal practices in this study. In the diaconal reception, for instance,

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<sup>8</sup> Field diary.

the diaconal workers cultivate a sense of empathy with those visiting Rachel, one of the diaconal workers, emphasises this dimension: "...but also this to think about: what is it like for this person, what is it like... And I think I always try to have that as the basic question within me: what is it like to be you?"<sup>9</sup> This sense of empathy is also visible in Catherine's way of greeting people at the door as they arrive to the foodbank, for instance, in her promise to light a candle for a diseased relative to one of the visitors.

While standing on the stage beside Kevin, one of the diaconal workers responsible for the food bank, as he handed out grocery bags, I found this empathy to be largely absent. Although I sensed the gravity of the practice, he appeared almost emotionally detached, spending the pauses between arrivals reclining on the stage and telling light-hearted jokes.<sup>10</sup> However, when I asked how he managed, emotionally, to meet people with seemingly unending needs, he replied quickly and bluntly: "You have to turn your feelings off."<sup>11</sup> Thus the apparent emotional detachment could be interpreted as a way to cope with a difficult situation.

That my informants perceived the practice as difficult to handle was indicated in numerous conversations with my informants, where it became clear that they felt a certain aversion to the provision of grocery bags, even though their reasons varied. One diaconal worker stated that she considered the distribution of such bags a humiliating practice for recipients. To another employee, the reason for her objection seemed to be an intended relationship between the Church of Sweden and the welfare state. According to her, it was questionable whether the Church of Sweden should be involved in social work at all. The reason, she stated, was the lack of real competence. Instead, she argued, the Church of Sweden should focus on pastoral counselling.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, the system of numbered notes turned out to be a source of strong emotion. One employee said the system recalled her childhood visits to her grandparents' farm in the countryside: where the number notes resembled

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<sup>9</sup> Interview Rachel.

<sup>10</sup> Field diary.

<sup>11</sup> Field diary.

<sup>12</sup> Field diary.

the ear tags placed on cattle.<sup>13</sup> Another employee, not working in the food bank but familiar with its procedures, commented with evident distaste: “It feels like a cattle market.”<sup>14</sup> These informants did not interpret the material arrangements as expressions of care or the protection of dignity; rather, they saw them as compromising it.

It is also worth noting how, to Kevin, for instance, the diaconal worker responsible for the foodbank, the practice of the foodbank seems to run counter to how he perceives diaconal work and what motivates him. When I ask Kevin what motivated him in his work, he replied: “*to see people develop.*”<sup>15</sup> Thus, the different affections expressed by the employed staff range from an aim to provide care and support and to protect the visitors’ integrity, to more hesitant or more bluntly negative emotions.

Before giving an account of my own experiences of the food bank, a brief reflexive note is warranted. I am aware that emotions are difficult to interpret and liable to mislead. It should be noted, as I took part in the work of the foodbank, I was not a distant observer on the sidelines; I participated fully in the practice. The grocery bags distributed passed through my hands, and the downward gaze from the stage was not only my informants’ but also my own. Thus, my affections should be seen as belonging to a researcher, with a certain distance to the performed practice, and at the same time to a participant.

Standing on that stage and handing out grocery bags, I experienced a clear unease – arising from, I interpret, the contrast between my own privileged life and the lives of those who came. I found myself asking, “Why are we standing on this stage?” In addition, I felt uneasy about the system of numbered notes. To me, the arrangement appeared less to protect visitors’ dignity than to compromise it. It felt as though, upon entering the main hall, the visitors were no longer persons with identities and names; they had become numbers.<sup>16</sup>

As noticed, another potential point of dissonance in the practice of the foodbank concerns certain general understandings structuring the diaconal

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<sup>13</sup> Field diary.

<sup>14</sup> Field diary.

<sup>15</sup> Interview 2 Kevin.

<sup>16</sup> Field diary.

practices which concerns the perceived workload between the church and the welfare state. Here it was questioned whether the Church of Sweden should be doing out this kind of social work at all. Moreover, my informants repeatedly returned to the phrase that the church could only add a golden edge to life and where the welfare state was perceived as having the main responsibility. The church could only add the little extra and should not strive to do more.

So far, my account indicates a certain dissonance between the practical proceedings of the practice and the general understandings structuring the practice. However, this is not the only way the affective dimension the foodbank as a practice could be interpreted. This affective dimension could also be seen as an integrated part of the foodbank as a practice. Paradoxically, the foodbank with its spatial and material arrangement could also be seen as revealing something profoundly true. While the stage could be interpreted as *creating* a certain distance between the giver and the receiver, it could also be seen as *revealing* something of the inequalities already existing. Similar to the liturgical practices, the presence of people with socioeconomic challenges could be seen as an epistemological aspect, revealing already existing inequalities. Inequalities which point towards the diaconal workers' privileged position compared to the visitors.

In this chapter, I have presented the foodbank as a practice and analysed it in terms of the relationships constituted by the practice. The basic relationship constituted could be seen as an instance of a helper – client relationship. In a fundamental sense, the drive of the practice consists of people with various needs coming to receive something, in this case, food. This helper–client relationship, however, is challenged by a material and spatial arrangement in which those distributing the food look down at the visitor – a gaze that is open to various interpretations. Through an analysis of the foodbanks affective dimensions I have indicated that the system with number notes and the down-looking gaze could be seen as constituting a dissonance within the foodbank as a practice. However, I have also pointed towards another possible interpretation where the feelings of discomfort are seen as integrated to the practice itself and are due to the fact that the practice reveals already existing inequalities.

As I participated in the food bank, I noticed that, at its conclusion, other members of the employed staff entered the church premises and made their

way into the small kitchen. I soon discovered that they were responsible for a practice that took place in the main hall, the very same room in which the food bank was held, and which they referred to as the dinner fellowship. The next chapter provides an analysis of this practice.



# **10. Theopolitical Relationships at the Dinner Fellowship**

## **10.1 Introduction**

A couple of hours after the foodbank, the dinner fellowship takes place. It is located in the same venue as the foodbank, but the stage is now hidden behind a curtain, and the food is not in paper bags, but served as a meal at set tables. The dinner fellowship invites families in the neighbourhood to, for a small amount of money, have a meal together. The background of the practice, my informants told me, was a fire which damaged the facilities of the nearby community youth centre. The church then offered its premises as a temporary location. When the youth centre returned to its own facilities, the congregation felt the need to consider how its space could be put to best use. A working group was appointed to consult other local stakeholders about perceived needs. Their findings were compiled into a report that identified, among other things, a need for a place where parents and children could spend time together. In response, the dinner fellowship was established.<sup>1</sup>

## **10.2 The Dinner Fellowship as a Practice**

The practice began at 5 p.m., but the staff arrived about an hour and a half earlier to prepare the food and set the tables. When families arrived, they were greeted at the entrance, and each household – regardless of size – paid SEK 30 for the meal. Families were then encouraged to sit together at the tables, and the food was served. After the meal, all participants gathered in a large circle for

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<sup>1</sup> Field diary.

some singing, followed by arts and crafts. At the end of the evening, everyone sat on the floor in a large circle while a large candle was passed around and whoever held the candle shared something they were grateful about.<sup>2</sup>

In what follows, the aim is to display how the dinner fellowship constituted and shaped various relationships. I will start with an account of how the purpose of the practice is framed and constituted in terms of transformed relationships, followed by a description of how the dinner fellowship constituted intended relationships to the church as well.

### 10.3 Towards Relationships of Mutual Trust

When my informants described the purpose of the dinner fellowship, they framed their answers in terms of relationships. More specifically, Karen, one of my informants and a member of staff responsible for the dinner fellowship, described its purpose as intended relationships based on trust rather than fear and suspicion:

It is also about getting people to stop being afraid of each other, or stop being suspicious and feel that they belong together. The children go to school together, but the parents do not have that relationship and if we can contribute with that, I would be very proud.<sup>3</sup>

Her colleague Lizzy describes something similar:

And I feel that this is something we do for the community, kind of. It is what I am most proud of ever in my working life. I think we have to work like this to get Sweden to work. Where we don't look at each other with fear and so. It is fantastic!<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the aim of the dinner fellowship could be described as intended relationships based on mutual trust. The term intended relationships describe the relationships which my informants hoped to forge through the dinner fellowship as a practice. For instance, the practice of eating together could be seen as contributing to intended relationships characterised by mutual trust. How then, are the relationships constituted?

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<sup>2</sup> Field diary.

<sup>3</sup> Interview Karen and Lizzy.

<sup>4</sup> Interview Karen and Lizzy.

## 10.4 Welcoming and Including

In my material, it is possible to discern an intended relationship expressed in my informants' emphasis on how they wanted everyone to feel welcomed, seen and included. One way to realise this was through a deliberate welcoming structure. One employee stood at the main entrance, greeting people as they arrived. Further into the foyer, another staff member was positioned to, again, greet people, and in the main hall, a third staff member welcomed everyone once more.<sup>5</sup> This welcoming structure, where everyone is supposed to be seen, could be framed in terms of bodily actions such as seeing and welcoming, but also in the sharing of food. When participants enter the main hall, the tables are already laid and the food is served. It is worth noting – however obvious – that the tables are arranged so people can see and hear one another. As is customary in Sweden, tables and chairs are set so that those at each table face one another during the meal. Thus, the material arrangements of the food sharing make it possible for everyone around the table to be seen and be listened to.<sup>6</sup>

After the meal, everyone gathers in a large circle – an arrangement of bodies that makes it possible for everyone to be both seen and included. Now a procedure followed where each person, in turn, said their name, followed by a bodily movement of their own choice. The others, notably, watched and listened to the person speaking, and then everyone repeated the name and the chosen movement. Through our voices and our bodies, we thus confirmed that we had seen and listened to the other.

As we continued to stand in the large circle, it was time for singing. Everyone joins hands, and together we sing:

You can hear what someone sees.  
 You can feel what someone hears.  
 You can reach out your hand to a friend.  
 And come closer to one another.

The song was repeated several times, and each time we sang the words “and come closer to one another,” everyone took a large step toward the centre of

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<sup>5</sup> Field diary.

<sup>6</sup> Field diary.

the circle. After a few repetitions, we all stood hand in hand, very close up to one another. The lyrics of the next song were:

Wow, you are you.  
 And wow, I am I.  
 Together, we have a good time!

As we sang, we were encouraged to move along with the music, point to and look at someone as we sang the word “you.” These songs, together with the accompanying movements, can be understood as the realisation of the aim for relationship marked by mutual trust. Through the interplay of bodily acts such as gazing, listening, bodily movement, lyrics, and touch, the participants are invited to relate to one another with trust.<sup>7</sup>

This formation of relationships is confirmed by Kate and Lizzy, who proudly told me about the growing number of Muslim participants at the dinner fellowship. From the beginning, the relationship between the Muslim participants and the rest of the group had been marked suspicion. Participants with a Muslim background did not want to sit at the same tables as the others. Now, however, they sit together, and the other week Kate and Lizzy told me, with some amusement, that participants from different religious traditions were discussing various ways of fasting.<sup>8</sup>

In this section, I have shown how relationships characterised by trust are constituted by the dinner fellowship as a practice. Where inclusive modes of gazing, listening, greeting and singing, together with food-sharing constituted these relationships. In what follows, the aim is to display how these relationships also relate to the intended relationship between the Church of Sweden and the society.

## 10.5 Relationships to the Wider Society

As I participated in the dinner fellowship, I was soon introduced to yet another grey binder. It contained completed questionnaires, fact sheets, and meeting notes. It turned out that the binder was the result of a period of intensive

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<sup>7</sup> Field diary.

<sup>8</sup> Interview Karen and Lizzy.

listening undertaken by the church, where the representatives from the Church of Sweden had listened to various actors in the local community. All these actors had been asked the same questions: *What kinds of activities are missing in the area? What is needed?* The result, of course, was not only the binder itself, but also the dinner fellowship.

These acts of listening – both to the local community and to one another at the dinner fellowship – were no coincidence. As it turned out, the employees responsible for the dinner fellowship connected this listening stance to a particular understanding of the gospel and to their perception of what it means to be the church in relation to the wider society. When asked what it means to be the church, Karen, one of the employees in charge of the dinner fellowship, referred to the parish’s motto:

We in the parish have “a good life” as a kind of motto. That it should be a good life for everyone, that’s what we’re doing. That’s how we live the gospel in a way. I think when we had a school visit for grade 2 yesterday... and there are Muslims, Syrians, Orthodox... And the fact that we’re talking with two Muslim girls who: “I haven’t dared to go into a church before because then I thought I would become a Christian and it could be a little dangerous.” But the fact that we get to meet in this and we’re not the ones who tell you that this is right. We get to meet and learn from each other. I also get to learn from an eight-year-old Muslim girl. And that is a good life.<sup>9</sup>

Here, the notion of the gospel is linked to an intended relationship between the church and society, in which the church is perceived to have a role in contributing to a good life for all. Significantly, when illustrating what this good life entails, Karen describes a situation of mutual listening and learning between representatives from the church and people of other faiths. Crucially this listening approach is something which characterises the dinner fellowship where the expressed aim is not a focus on the church’s employees and their contribution. With other words, the focus is not on the church providing help and support. When describing the dinner fellowship, my informants emphasised how they perceived their role as a facilitator, where the practice offered a space where families could gather and learn from one another. Thus, through these acts of

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<sup>9</sup> Interview Karen.

listening and learning, an intended relationship between what it means to be church in relation to the wider society is enacted.

Moreover, my informants frame this relationship in terms of a returning distinction between what they call the old and the new church. In their understanding, the old church, was characterised by an attitude where the church possessed all the right answers and where others were invited to come and learn from the church. The new church, on the contrary, was marked by an openness – a willingness to allow others to contribute, to learn, to collaborate with other actors, and to be the church where people are. Patrick, one of the priests, stated:

The old church is more of a church of activities. We are open when there is an activity, and we are the ones who are going to reach out to others and so on. And we are still, partly that kind of church. And at the same time, we think that we should be the new church that is more about us opening up spaces for people to contribute and be involved and think and do. That it is not us and them, as if we had a house kind of, to open to someone. And then there are many other things, which I call the new church, that is that we think more of ourselves as a force in society together with others and that we collaborate more than that we are going to reach out to them but that we are going to be more of a glue in the middle of it all.<sup>10</sup>

Lizzy, one of employees responsible for the dinner fellowship is on to something similar. Discussing the purpose of the dinner fellowship, she also mentioned what kind of church they want to be and, thus, created a link between the dinner fellowship and ecclesiology.

It would have been difficult to be a church in the opposite way. Which means, yes, but we are Christian members who knows what is right. And welcome to us. It would be the opposite somehow: Come to our service and drink our church coffee but we are nowhere else. So, it is kind of the opposite. We are where people are. I like that.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the intended relationship between the church and the wider society could be interpreted as a way of realising what my informants refer to as the “new church” – a form of listening that, by its very nature, creates relationships in which others can find a voice and contribute.

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<sup>10</sup> Interview Patrick.

<sup>11</sup> Interview Lizzy.

In this section, I have displayed how the dinner fellowship constitutes and enacts an intended relationship between the local church and the wider society. In what follows, I show how the listening exercise taking place within the dinner fellowship enacts a relationship in which people of other faiths are invited to contribute to a broadened understanding of the church.

## 10.6 Relationships to Religious Diversity

We all sit down in a large circle. A large candle is passed around, and whoever holds it is invited to share something for which they are grateful. The rest of us listen.<sup>12</sup>

As noticed, the dinner fellowship as a practice could be interpreted as the constitution of relationships between the Church of Sweden and the wider society. A relationship where a certain understanding of what it means to be church appears. This relationship is characterised by a listening stance on behalf of the church. In what follows, I will add another characteristic to this relationship. In the situation just described, this intended relationship between the church and society is marked by how the church assumes porous borders. It would be easy to interpret the situation just described as an exercise in gratitude – after all, that is what each participant is invited to express. At the same time, since only one person speaks at a time (apart from a few noisy children!), the situation could also be seen as an (for some, a much-needed) exercise in listening. However, the religious connotations associated with lighting candles, together with the staff's description of the practice as a “gloria round,” invite further reflection. In what follows, I will show how this “glory round” enacts a widened understanding of the church where the church not just listens to the other but invites people from different faith traditions to enact a certain understanding of what my informants call, “the community of faith.”

The staff responsible for the dinner fellowship described this listening as a “gloria round,” with the term gloria borrowed from a moment in the church's liturgy when the congregation stands and sings the Gloria, giving glory to God. The very term “gloria round” does, thus, carry clear religious connotations. Moreover, the lighting of a candle and the fact that we sat in a large circle

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<sup>12</sup> Field diary.

further resembled acts of Christian devotion. Apart from these elements, however, there were no explicit references to God or other indications of the “gloria round” as a religious practice.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the “gloria round” could be interpreted as an ecclesial practice, with clear references to the church’s liturgy, but in which the religious aspects are toned down and the practice is opened up for everyone to participate and to direct their gratitude towards an object of their own choosing.

This toning down of the explicit religious aspects resonates with how Karen, one of the staff responsible for the dinner fellowship reflected on, what she called, the “community of faith.” According to her, this community was sometimes evident, as in Sunday service, but less so during the week. Here it is worth noting that my informants, on the one hand, spoke about distinct faiths, while on the other hand they indicated a broader understanding of what this community of faith encompasses:

...my conviction is that we all have a faith in one way or another, but perhaps have not expressed it, talked about it or even taken it for granted. So my approach is still that I have to think that everyone is a believer in some way, everyone is curious about living and understanding love and life in some way. And in that meeting, I think there becomes a community of faith.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the “gloria round” enacted at the dinner fellowship could be interpreted as enacting an intended relationship in which those participating belong to the community of faith – an enactment of a broadened understanding of the church. In my material, this widened understanding of the community of faith relates to a tendency where religious differences are downplayed in favour of an emphasis on, what my informants describe, as a common humanity. On one occasion, Patrick, one of the priests in the congregation told me about the plans to change the venues where the dinner fellowship takes place. Rather than the church having its own dedicated space, this priest envisioned creating a community centre in which different local actors could participate. It is interesting to note that he envisioned the church’s small chapel being transformed into a more neutral religious room, one that would be open to adherents of different

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<sup>13</sup> Field diary.

<sup>14</sup> Interview Karen.

faiths. When presenting these plans to other stakeholders, he explained that every human being possesses an inner spiritual room.<sup>15</sup>

Taken together, these general understandings together with the proceedings of the practice itself could be interpreted as an enactment of a widened understanding of the church – one that, ultimately, encompasses all human beings and where religious differences are played down in favour of an understanding of a shared humanity.

In this chapter I have analysed the dinner fellowship as a practice where certain relationships are constituted. I have noted how the telos of the practice is expressed in terms of transformed relationships where the aim is that the participants should relate to each other with mutual trust. A telos expressed by certain bodily actions in greeting, eating and singing together. Thus, the theological significance of the dinner fellowship could be described in terms of a space marked by mutual trust. Moreover, I have also displayed how the dinner fellowship constitutes an intended relationship between the Church of Sweden and the wider society, where the church assumes a listening stance with porous borders.

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<sup>15</sup> Interview 2 Patrick.



## **II. Theopolitical Relationships at the Choir Rehearsal**

### **II.1 Introduction**

As a part of my fieldwork, I attended a choir rehearsal, taking place every Friday morning. The choir, however, was a part of a larger project. In what follows, I will give a background to the project and then proceed with an account of the choir rehearsal as a practice.

### **II.2 The Larger Project**

The congregation responsible for the choir is partly located in a deprived area, one characterised by significant socio-economic challenges. Peter, the initiator of the project, who worked for the public housing company, described the background to the project in terms of a combination of housing circumstances in which a large number of immigrants were in need of accommodation and a high number of vacant flats in the same area. The result was an area marked by a high degree of segregation. The project was therefore initiated with the aim of promoting integration and, according to Peter, supporting people into employment was regarded as a key objective:

No matter how you twist it, the quickest way to integration is to find a job. If you find job, you will quickly learn the Swedish language, and you can become the role model to your children that you need to be. So that is why we stick with being extremely clear that every moment we breath, every course we start should have the purpose of finding

employment. And throughout the years, there have been discussions: Could we just open up and let people come and do what they want to? No, we believe this is the way.<sup>1</sup>

The public housing company, was not the only founding member but started the project as a joint venture between the public housing company, the municipality, the public housing company, an adult education college (*folkhögskola*) and the Workers' Educational Association (ABF – *Arbetarnas Bildningsförbund*). Later the Church of Sweden and the City Mission came onboard.

According to Denise, a member of the project staff employed by the public housing company, the background to the church's involvement was the realisation that some participants experienced, what she called, "existential struggles" – issues which, given her own involvement in the Church of Sweden, she considered the Church of Sweden to be well placed to address.<sup>2</sup>

The project, which operates across two housing districts – both within the same parish – is organised around so-called study circles: small groups in which participants meet to learn together and from one another. The project is structured around three tracks. The green track is intended for those facing the greatest obstacles to employment and with limited Swedish-language proficiency. Within this track, study circles may include language cafés, cooking classes, or other activities designed to engage participants with wider society. The next track, the yellow track, is more explicitly oriented towards the labour market. Here, participants learn how to write a CV and about norms in Swedish workplaces. The blue track is intended for those who already have an education. Activities in this track include, for example, the verification and validation of prior qualifications, as well as a mentoring programme in which a person seeking employment is paired with a mentor from the same professional background. The aim is to help the jobseeker gain access to relevant contacts within their field.

At the time of my fieldwork, the Church of Sweden's involvement consisted of participation in the steering committee, as well as the provision of activities every Friday morning within the green track. Accordingly, my fieldwork

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<sup>1</sup> Interview Peter.

<sup>2</sup> Interview Denise.

focused in particular on the choir rehearsals, which I observed and participated in.

### **11.3 The Choir Rehearsal as a Practice**

The official purpose of the choir is to teach basic Swedish. Thus, the choir is primarily aimed at people with a migrant background and with little knowledge in Swedish.

The choir rehearsal take place in the same building as the dinner fellowship and the food bank; however, this activity is located in the project's venue, one floor above the church's own facilities. The project's premises are situated in a neighbourhood centre that resembles a small shopping mall. On entering, one arrives in a large room, with a glass wall facing the neighbourhood centre's inner courtyard. At the far end of the room are several offices. When the room is not used for choir rehearsals, it is typically arranged with tables and chairs in a classroom-like layout. A wall at one end of the room has openings on both sides leading to a small kitchen. Upon entering the premises, there is nothing to indicate that a church is involved. Before the choir rehearsal begins, the church musician arrives and rearranges the room. The tables are moved aside and the chairs set out in a semi-circle. The musician then takes out a portable piano from a storage room and places it in front of the chairs.<sup>3</sup>

The rehearsal starts with a warm-up in which the participants – most of whom have migrant backgrounds – imitate the church musician in various exercises involving the voice as well as the whole body. Many of the participants laugh as they are instructed to use their voices in particular ways. After the warm-up, the group begins rehearsing the songs, which are written in simple Swedish in order to support language development and cultural familiarisation. The conductor reads out one line at a time and the choir repeats it in unison. Key words are explained. A video projector is used to display the lyrics, accompanied by images. As we sing, I notice how participants laughs at the words more difficult to pronounce and they move their bodies to the music.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Field diary.

<sup>4</sup> Field diary.

Before providing an analysis of the relationships constituted in choir, it is important to note that from a praxeological perspective, the meaning of a choir rehearsal as a practice is not primarily discerned through an analysis of, for example, the song lyrics. Rather, the lyrics should be understood as a discursive act within the practice. The meaning of the choir rehearsal should therefore be seen primarily as performative – not that the lyrics are unimportant, but that the primary focus is not so much on the content of the lyrics as on what the practice does.<sup>5</sup> In this case, I am especially interested in the relationships that the choir rehearsal constitutes. In what follows, I show how these relationships amount to a particular relationship to Swedish society, as well as relationships between the Church of Sweden and other actors.

#### **ii.4 The Helper-Client Relationship**

The helper-client relationship was noted in the diaconal reception and denoted a situation where various people came to the church and asked for help and support. Given the character of the choir as language training, a similar relationship could be seen as constituted here as well. Where the choir leader assumes the role of a helper and the participants as clients. The resource which the choir leader has and which the participants want is language skills.

#### **ii.5 Relationships to the Swedish Society**

Another relationship constituted by the choir rehearsal is an intended relationship between the participants as immigrants and the perceived Swedish society. As will be discussed further below, within the framework of this specific project the Church of Sweden is not perceived as acting in its capacity as a church. The project, with its constituent member organisations, is not understood as an overlapping space, but rather as a space distinct from these organisations. Accordingly, the practice can be interpreted as being organised around the purpose of helping people to learn Swedish, interact with the wider society and, ultimately, gain employment and become integrated citizens.

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance Schatzki 2017, 127.

From this perspective, the choir rehearsal can be understood as both cultural integration and language training, as indicated by the character of the songs. Through the songs, participants learn how to pronounce particular words and understand their meaning, while also being directed towards certain features of Swedish culture and society, which they are invited to regard with positive affect. Recurring themes in these songs include the cherishing of the diverse character of Swedish society in terms of languages, cultures, and religions, as well as an emphasis on the uniqueness of each individual. One of the songs states:

In Sweden, there are many nations.  
 In Sweden, there are many religions.  
 In Sweden, there are many traditions.  
 And nine million!  
 The kids grow up in freedom if we give them love, games and music.<sup>6</sup>

This song celebrates the diverse character of Swedish society in terms of its nations, religions, and traditions. At the same time, the reference to “nine million” – the total population of Sweden at the time the song was written – emphasises each individual. Another song reinforces this notion:

The earth is filled with different people,  
 but there is only one of you and only one of me.  
 The earth is filled with different people  
 but there is not two of me and not two of you.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, through singing and through moving their bodies to the music, a relationship to Swedish society – indeed, a particular vision of Swedish society – is constituted and enacted. Within this relationship, the choir participants thus assume a particular identity: they are people assumed to need to learn Swedish, obtain employment, and become integrated into Swedish society.

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<sup>6</sup> Field diary.

<sup>7</sup> Field diary.

## **11.6 The Relationship between the Church and the Wider Society**

As a collaboration between the church and other actors, the choir rehearsal can be understood as constituting a relationship between the Church of Sweden and these other actors. In this sense, the project positions the Church of Sweden as a collaborative partner. The project can also be seen as enacting a particular understanding of the church. In what follows, I show how my informants perceived this relationship between the Church of Sweden and other actors, as well as how the role of the Church of Sweden was understood.

To begin with, it is worth noting that my informants perceived their cooperation with other actors as largely frictionless. At a fundamental level, Barbara, the priest responsible for the decision to involve the church in the project, argued that the Church of Sweden and these other actors “want the same thing.” – a phrase repeated by other informants. Indeed, one informant even stated that she found it easier to cooperate with non-religious actors than with other churches:

It is many times easier to cooperate with neutral actors such as the public housing company or the city mission than it is to cooperate ecumenically. In ecumenical work, you face other questions which we don't encounter here. Now we are just doing a good deed. We want everyone to integrate. Everyone wants people well. I don't mean that ecumenical work is against that. But here we meet on a rather neutral ground. I am not here as... I am not standing here preaching.<sup>8</sup>

Crucially, the project was not understood as an overlapping space in which the different member organisations contributed as distinct actors. Rather, it was understood as a distinct space, separate from these organisations. Accordingly, when the Church of Sweden participates in the project, they are not there as representatives of the church. Barbara states:

It was important to make clear that, when one is engaging via the project, it is not the Church of Sweden that is acting. Rather – whether in relation to the public housing company, or other partners – it is the project itself that carries out these activities, with us participating as one component within that arrangement. We then convene in a space

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<sup>8</sup> Interview Kerry-Anne.

that is, in a sense, separate from any single organisation: a distinct zone where we all meet.<sup>9</sup>

One aspect contributing to this distinctness is the choice of venue for the choir rehearsal. Kerry-Anne, the church musician who leads the choir, told me that the rehearsal used to take place in the church's premises on the floor below, but that some participants had felt uncomfortable being in the church's space:

We have chosen to locate the choir up here as well. Previously it was downstairs, directly beneath us, where the church premises are. Early on, however, that proved to be a barrier, because people did not want to go to the church – especially if they belonged to another religion, and so forth. In that respect, this has functioned as a kind of free space: people will still come here to receive support with job-seeking and other integration-related matters. In that sense, it has simply been a very effective platform.<sup>10</sup>

In keeping with the project being understood as a distinct space, my informants, when describing their participation in it, were hesitant to present themselves as representatives of the Church of Sweden. Instead, they described themselves as fellow human beings. Kerry-Anne, the church musician, states: “In some sense I am present here as the church – yet perhaps even more as a fellow human being; in a way, simply as a human being.”<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, the church was both expected to make and regarded itself as making a specific contribution to the project. As described, Denise, one of the project managers employed by the public housing company, explained that the reason she had asked the church to join the project was that she sensed there were existential issues they lacked the competence to address – competence she regarded the Church of Sweden as possessing. A competence she regarded the Church of Sweden to have.<sup>12</sup> Barbara, one of the priests describes the church's involvement:

They perceived our involvement as enriching... our participation was seen as important. This was because we brought something other than purely quantitative targets. When the public housing company themselves have to report, the questions tend to be framed

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<sup>9</sup> Interview Barbara.

<sup>10</sup> Interview Kerry-Anne.

<sup>11</sup> Interview Kerry Anne.

<sup>12</sup> Interview Denise.

in terms of measurable outputs – for example, how many people have entered employment. We, by contrast, contributed aims of a somewhat deeper kind.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, the contribution of the Church of Sweden was perceived to concern aspects beyond quantitative measurable targets.

### II.6.1 The Choir Rehearsal as a Social Respite

As described, the overarching purpose of the larger project is to help people to find employment, with Peter, the initiator of the project stating: “every moment we breath, every course we start should have the purpose of finding employment.”<sup>14</sup> At the same time, Kerry-Anne, the church musician describes the church’s contribution as both assisting with language training and integration, but also to offer a moment of respite. This respite, she describes, is in terms of a break from having to think about issues concerning applications for jobs, asylum and language training:

At times, I also think that this is one of our principal aims: integration and fellowship, and simply the opportunity to enjoy oneself. On a Friday morning – one morning a week – people can come here and have some light-hearted, even liberating, fun: a brief respite from all the paperwork, the applications, and the rejections. In a sense, that can be at least as important.<sup>15</sup>

This respite could be interpreted as being bodily enacted in the choir rehearsal through the laughter described and the ways in which participants move their bodies to the music, as well as through the choir leader’s deliberate conduct. Kerry-Anne, the church musician, describes how she intentionally seeks to create a space in which people can relax and laugh at themselves:

I think there are many conductors who could lead a choir with dignity and I am not one of them. The fact that I can do embarrassing things and embarrass myself makes it ok for others to the same. So we always start the choir practice laughing an “evil” laugh: *mohaha* to let go of tensions. That nothing is wrong and nothing is right. Come as you are, kind of. And I think that is quite redeeming.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Interview Barbara.

<sup>14</sup> Interview Peter.

<sup>15</sup> Interview Kerry-Anne.

<sup>16</sup> Interview Kerry-Anne.

Thus, through the singing and music and by the church musician making fun of herself and encourage other to relax, the choir rehearsal is constituted as a respite.

### **11.6.2 The Church and the Wider Society – A Theological Rationale for Collaboration.**

As my informants reflected on the church's involvement in society and its co-operation with other actors it soon became clear how such involvement was warranted by a certain understanding of the role of the church. As I interviewed Barbara, one of the priests who had been responsible for the decision to involve the congregation in the project, she motivated the church's participation in the project referring to the parish motto: "A good life for all." Theologically, Barbara argues, this vision had to do with the kingdom of God. A vision which, according to her could be translated to an ambition to create a better world, where the Church of Sweden could and should cooperate with other actors. She states:

When Jesus speaks – when he speaks of the Kingdom of God, of peace and tranquillity, of *shalom* – that is the idea we understand ourselves to be participating in as co-workers with God: receiving it and passing it on. In that sense, it constitutes a good life. Yet what a good life looks like can, of course, vary greatly. We see this as something we contribute, together with others – with all those constructive forces that also seek such a life. Those who share in this work do not, however, need to employ theological language for it; the point is that we do it together.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, according to Barbara, the church's involvement in the project is a way of working towards the realisation of the Kingdom of God, or, as she put it, towards a good life for all. In my material, this realisation of the Kingdom of God is understood as rooted in God and in what my informants call God's mission. Notably, this realisation is not framed in terms of belief, but rather in terms of pursuing a good and improved life for all. According to Susan, another priest, being the church in this kind of context requires a well-considered understanding of what Christian mission might entail. Mission in this context, she argues,

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<sup>17</sup> Interview Barbara.

is not about trying to convert people to Christianity, but rather a matter of cooperation:

In any case, it is perhaps not a matter of going out and trying to get everyone to convert. I think one needs a deep understanding that mission can, in my view, be about collaboration: working together with other organisations – Muslim associations and other actors – to do something good for all the people who live and reside here. In that sense, one is living out the Christian mission: acting, in practice, for one’s neighbour. If that were to lead someone to become interested in Jesus, or to want to come to church, then that is in God’s hands. But that is not the primary aim. The aim is to participate in God’s mission: to help make this, a better place for people, and to do so with integrity. That is, we do this because we are Christians – not because we have a murky motive, but because this is simply what one does.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, according to Susan, cooperating with other actors for the sake of a better society can be understood as participating in what God is doing – that is, in God’s mission. Importantly, throughout my fieldwork a number of informants returned to the phrase: “we want the same thing.”<sup>19</sup> With these words, they wanted to capture how they envisioned other actors and the church as having the same aim and purpose in terms of their social involvement.

In this chapter, I have outlined the Church of Sweden’s involvement in a local project in which the church contributes with running a choir with the purpose of learning Swedish. I have shown how the choir constitutes relationships such as the helper-client relationship, but also the church in relation to the wider society and as a social respite. Moreover, I have argued that the choir rehearsal can be understood as a practice centred on the purpose of enhancing integration and employment. Accordingly, the principal relationship constituted through this practice is between the participants and Swedish society.

As a collaboration with various other actors, the project constitutes a relationship between the Church of Sweden and these actors. Crucially, the project is understood as distinct in relation to the contributing member organisations. As noted, however, this does not mean that the church’s involvement lacks theological warrant. In my material, the choir rehearsal could be seen as constituting a certain understanding of what it means to be church.

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<sup>18</sup> Interview Susan.

<sup>19</sup> Field diary.

Cooperating with other actors in the pursuit of a better life for all is understood both as a way of participating in God's mission and as working towards the realisation of the Kingdom of God.



## 12. Disturbance

### 12.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapters, I have articulated how the theopolitical character of the Church of Sweden is negotiated and enacted through an analysis of the relationships constituted in liturgical and diaconal practices – relationships in which the Church of Sweden assumes various roles. If the purpose of articulation is to seek understanding and coherence in the empirical material, disturbance, as noted, means that these articulations are thrown off balance. It is a process in which contradictions and tensions are brought to the fore.<sup>1</sup>

In what follows, I will show how such disturbances are evident throughout the practices and the relationships they constitute. Particular attention will be given to the helper-client relationship, a relationship that runs the risk of reducing the political nature of both the church and the human person. I will also show how the dinner fellowship harbours a tension, in that the perceived community of faith enacted in the “gloria round” can be interpreted as a neglect of human diversity in favour of a perceived sameness. Moreover, I will note how the choir practice and the project of which it forms part run the risk of mirroring the tendency within liberal modern nation-states to exclude religious considerations from public deliberation. Lastly, I note a tension between the liturgical practices and the post-liturgical coffee: both constitute a renegotiation of human relationships, yet the fellowship at the post-liturgical coffee appear as segregated.

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<sup>1</sup> Schjetne et al. 2016, 36.

## 12.2 The Helper-Client Relationship

One relationship constituted primarily in the diaconal reception and the food bank is the helper-client relationship, in which the church assumes the role of provider of various forms of help and support. As noted, the diaconal workers describe this relationship in terms of seeking to facilitate an encounter with the other marked by certain qualities. However, certain aspects of the helper-client relationship appear to stand in tension with this aim.

### 12.2.1 The Institutional Character and Impersonal Relationships

One such feature concerns the institutional character of the church. As noted in my chapters on articulation, both the diaconal reception and the food bank are shaped by spatial and material arrangements that constitute this institutional character, with the spatial organisation of the diaconal reception making the practice resemble a public health clinic. This institutional character is further reinforced by the practice's routines: for example, people wait in the foyer to be received by the diaconal worker, and the grey binder described earlier is consulted in order to determine whether support should be provided. This has consequences for the relationships constituted, which tend to be impersonal, with the person approaching the church relating primarily to an institution rather than to another person. This impersonal quality is most clearly evident in the food bank, where interaction between the person seeking help and the diaconal workers distributing the grocery bags is minimal. Moreover, the system by which each visitor receives a note bearing a personal number further underscores this institutional and impersonal character. The desired encounter is also undermined by the way in which these institutional and impersonal characteristics entail an asymmetrical distribution of power. Within the helper-client relationship, it is clear who possesses power and resources and who does not. Thus, even though the diaconal workers express a desire to meet others at eye level – a formulation that suggests equality – the helper-client relationship appears fundamentally asymmetrical.

### 12.2.2 An Individual Focus

One important aspect of the helper-client relationship is its individualising tendency. Both the diaconal reception and the food bank are characterised by a focus on individuals who come to the church seeking help. This individualising tendency is further reinforced by the way in which my informants perceive the encounter with the other. Crucially, one of my informants frames these encounters in terms of “seeing the human,” a notion she associates with what it means to imitate Christ. Kevin, another diaconal worker, expressed a similar view, albeit without an explicit theological framework. He likewise understood the encounter with the visitor in terms of seeing the human being; for him, however, this appears to involve viewing the other apart from categories such as culture, ethnicity, gender, and religious belief. He states:

The more people in different situations, (we meet) regardless of ethnicity and gender and religious affiliation and so on, the more we become numb to caring about it and move more and more towards... yes, but the only thing that unites all those who come is that they are actually human beings and as soon as you have confirmed that, it goes off in all possible directions and they become individuals.<sup>2</sup>

To be sure, the diaconal workers clearly envisaged a multicultural context. At the same time, it is instructive to note that they sought to encounter people apart from categories such as culture, ethnicity, gender, and religious affiliation.

As in the diaconal reception, the relationships constituted in the food bank are characterised by an individualised logic. People visit the food bank either as individuals or as separate households. Moreover, the spatial arrangements – whereby only one person or household is permitted to enter the main hall at any one time – further reinforce this aspect. This individualised character is also evident in the numbered ticket system, in which each number corresponds to a specific individual.

Importantly, the issue I wish to highlight is not that the food bank and the diaconal reception focus on the individual as such. The problem is, first, that despite the ambition to “see the human,” the human being risks

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<sup>2</sup> Interview Kevin.

being reduced and severed from the relationships that are constitutive of both personhood and political life. Second, the challenges these individuals face are treated merely as a lack of resources rather than as a political problem. In what follows, I briefly elaborate on these two points.

In my account, to see the human being would necessarily mean seeing and approaching someone embedded in a web of relationships. It is these relationships that make human beings political animals and that may contribute both to human flourishing and to oppression and destructive ways of living. From this perspective, the individualised character of the relationships constituted through these practices may be understood not as a way of seeing the human being, but rather as a way of reducing the human being. On the one hand, the aim of encountering the other apart from categories such as religion, ethnicity, gender, and culture may appear laudable. On the other hand, it may be interpreted as stripping away some of the relationships that make us human. This is most evident in the food bank. In light of the foregoing account, the problem with the food bank is not primarily the perceived humiliation of having to collect bags of food. Rather, the problem is the nakedness of the person entering the room. Upon entering, that person is no longer a name – a marker of relationships – but a number, stripped of the relationships that make them who they are. Paradoxically, the focus on “seeing the human being” thus runs the risk of reducing that very human being.

As noted, the practices studied in this thesis take place in a context marked by social deprivation. Given the political nature of the human being, this social vulnerability may be understood not merely as a lack of resources, but as a problem arising from the web of relationships and practices in which a person is embedded – that is, as a political problem. Accordingly, stripping the human being of their defining relationships also risks neglecting the political dimensions of the problem they face. The forms of assistance offered by the church through the diaconal reception and the food bank thus appear to deny the political character not only of the human being, but also of the problem that led the person to approach the church for help.

### **12.2.3 The Relationship to the Welfare State**

In the helper–client relationship, the risk of reduction concerns not only those visiting the food bank or the diaconal reception, but also the church itself. This becomes particularly clear when considering another relationship closely connected to the helper–client relationship, namely that between the church and the welfare state. As noted, my informants perceived a certain division of labour between the two, in which the church assumed a complementary role. This made the diaconal workers hesitant to offer material support, since they regarded people’s basic sustenance as the responsibility of the welfare state. Accordingly, an important aspect of the help provided consisted in assisting people in their dealings with various state agencies, such as the social services.

Taken together with the other aspects of the helper–client relationship, the role constituted for the church may be described as limited to one of three functions: carrying out philanthropy, providing pastoral counselling, or mediating between the individual seeking help and the welfare state. Notably, in all three roles the political character of the church is largely circumscribed. Instead, the welfare state emerges as the principal political actor. The Church of Sweden therefore runs the risk of being reduced to a social lubricant, facilitating smooth interaction between the individual and the welfare state.

### **12.3 The Question of Distinctiveness**

In my material, a certain tension emerges within the Church of Sweden’s involvement in the job-creation project of which the choir forms part. As noted, my informants theologically justify the church’s participation in such projects. It is understood both as contributing to the realisation of the Kingdom of God and as an expression of Christian mission, in which the church, through cooperation with other actors, is perceived to participate in God’s mission. Thus, my informants interpret the church’s participation in distinctly theological terms. This distinctiveness, however, is largely absent from the actual practices that constitute the project. As noted in my chapters on articulation, the project is understood as a distinct space in relation to the organisations that contribute to it. In contributing to the

project, my informants refrain from presenting the Church of Sweden as the primary actor: it is not the Church of Sweden that acts, but the project. The potential tension, then, lies between the project as a distinct space and the loss of distinctiveness on the part of the church as a participant within it.

This tension is open to different interpretations. It is possible to argue that the project exemplifies what Bretherton would describe as the identification of goods in common between the church and other actors – an endeavour in which the church, according to Bretherton, identifies common, albeit not neutral, ground in relation to other actors. The project as a distinct space, and the loss of the church's distinctiveness, nevertheless invite a more critical interpretation. It is not within the scope of this thesis to discuss the place of religion within liberal democracy; rather, what I wish to highlight is Bretherton's observation that religion has been regarded as problematic within liberal democracy, and that religious convictions have often been confined to the private sphere.

As Bretherton notes, this does not mean that religious actors are excluded from public deliberation, but rather that, in general, they are required to translate their convictions into what John Rawls calls public reason. It is noteworthy that this translation is already performed by my informants when they articulate the pursuit of the kingdom of God in terms of a good life for all. Even so, the question is not so much whether the church must translate its convictions into public reason. Rather, the question is whether the project, in its distinctiveness, mirrors liberal democracy, where religious convictions are treated as private. My material contains certain indications of such an arrangement. For instance, two of my informants involved in the project describe their participation not in terms of representing the church, but in terms of being fellow human beings. Moreover, Kevin, another diaconal worker engaged in the project, states very clearly that, within the project, "we do not talk about religion." It is also worth noting that Peter, who is employed by the public housing company and is one of the founders of the project, describes in an interview how some Muslim women used the project's premises for prayer, only to be told that this was not permitted. There are thus indications that the project, in its distinctiveness from the other actors involved, mirrors the public space

envisaged within liberal democracy, in which religion is confined to the private sphere.<sup>12.4</sup> The church as facilitator and the possible neglect of diversity

## **12.4 The Community of Faith and the Question of Sameness**

Another tension is present within the practice of the dinner fellowship. As noted, the purpose of this practice may be described in terms of the formation of relationships based on mutual trust. In my earlier account, I noted that the practice was characterised by a listening approach on the part of the church, whereby it facilitates a space in which people from different traditions and religious affiliations can come together and learn from one another. This listening approach may be understood as a way of affirming the otherness of the other. My informants, for example, emphasise the importance of listening and regard listening and mutual learning as ways of living the gospel.

At the end of the dinner fellowship, however, the participants gather in a large circle for what my informants call a “gloria round,” a moment in which each participant is invited to share what he or she is grateful for. On the one hand, this practice underscores the importance of listening. On the other hand, my informants’ interpretation of it as constituting the community of faith suggests something else. As indicated, by this community of faith my informants seek to downplay differing religious convictions in favour of a perceived shared humanity. In this way, the otherness of the other runs the risk of being reduced to a perceived sameness. Paradoxically, the Church of Sweden may thus be seen to negate its own desire to listen to and learn from the other and instead to dominate the interpretation of the practice.

## **12.5 Practices of Renegotiation and the Segregation**

The ambiguous character of practices is also evident in the tension between the Eucharist and the post-liturgical coffee as practices in which relationships are renegotiated, while the fellowship gathered at the post-liturgical

coffee can nonetheless be characterised as deeply segregated. My analysis has shown how my informants are at pains to describe the equality enacted in the Eucharist. In a similar vein, they refer to the post-liturgical coffee as constituting the church as an oasis, a respite from being perceived as a problem to be solved. At the same time, however, as described above, the fellowship gathered for post-liturgical coffee appears segregated, with the Swedish-speaking community and the Arabic-speaking community sitting at separate tables.

In this chapter, I have pointed out how the diaconal and liturgical practices harbour certain tensions. I have shown how the helper–client relationship, despite my informants’ ambition to “see the human,” runs the risk of reducing both the human being and the role of the church. Moreover, I have shown how the church’s involvement in a project together with other actors runs the risk of mirroring the exclusion of religious considerations from public deliberation in the liberal modern nation-state. I have also noted how my informants’ perception of the community of faith runs the risk of reducing the otherness of the other to a perceived sameness. Lastly, I have indicated how the perceived equality enacted in the Eucharist is negated by the way in which the fellowship at the post-liturgical coffee appears segregated.

In the next chapter, I continue this analysis by turning to expansion, where I present the concept of iconic relationship as a way of deepening the understanding of the church’s theopolitical character as enacted and negotiated in these practices.

## 13. Expansion: The Iconic Relationship

### 13.1 Introduction

Having articulated how the *theopolitical* character of the Church of Sweden is negotiated in and through diaconal and liturgical practices and noted some areas of disturbance, it is now time for the third sequence of my analysis, expansion. Importantly, in relation to expansion, articulation and disturbance should not be seen as a ladder which could now be kicked away, quite the opposite. The aim in this chapter is to give an account which departs from my articulations and disturbance and which points towards a possible better account of these practices. Thus, this chapter on expansion should not be seen as a suggestion how to replace the existing practices with something else. It is rather an invitation to how, given what is already there, these practices might be perceived.

In this chapter, this expansion is brought about through the introduction of the concept of iconic relationships. A concept which will deepen the understanding of both the articulated theopolitical character and the more problematic aspects and contradictions described in my chapter on disturbance. In what follows, I will briefly introduce my understanding of this concept and then proceed to show how it might expand my account thus far.

### 13.2 The Iconic Relationship

In his book *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, Fiction*,<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, describes an iconic relationship in terms of how the icon invites the beholder into a dialogical relationship characterised by an excess of meaning. The icon, he argues, represents:

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<sup>1</sup> Williams 2008.

The presence of an otherness that is ultimately quite inaccessible to me and resistant to my control, the otherness that makes unceasing dialogue possible, is not a presence that simply denies my identity, a threat to my security and ontological stability, an enemy never to be overcome. It is an offer and an invitation: it is an otherness that seeks itself in me, and enables me to seek myself in it, not a diminution of my own solidity but the condition for it, because what is utterly without foundations is a selfhood cut off from dialogue, from the active presence of the other.<sup>2</sup>

Importantly, in Williams's account, the designation of an icon is not restricted to a religious artefact but extends to human beings as well. Thus, by the term iconic relationships, I denote relationships grounded in the inexhaustibility of the other, who's meaning always remains a mystery. To enter into an iconic relationship is, thus, to enter into a mutual dialogical relationship.

According to Williams, the theological basis for this iconic relationship is the Incarnation, in which, he argues, the primordial image, Christ, who possesses infinite abundance, becomes tangible and enters into historical limitation.<sup>3</sup> Crucially, this Christological basis does also open for the possibility of an icon to be desecrated. An icon, then, is something vulnerable, something which can be spit on and which can be broken. It shares the same vulnerability as Christ. Importantly, to Williams, even a desecrated icon, both in its material and human form remain an icon. The decisive factor, Williams argues, is whether one acknowledges one's life's iconic frame or not:

This means, as has been hinted, that the broken icon remains in some sense a true icon, deserving of veneration. The person whose world is shaped by what the icon embodies is one who is significantly vulnerable to the impact of that frame of reference, and ultimately to the single decisive presence that underlies it. To be visibly affected by that presence, even in minimal ways, is to share in the representation of the presence that underlies it.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, what this framework implies is the inexhaustible character of the meaning of the other. If, as Williams seems to imply, to be affected by this framework is to share in the presence that underlies it, then to enter into an

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<sup>2</sup> Williams 2008, 200–201.

<sup>3</sup> Williams 2008, 207.

<sup>4</sup> Williams 2008, 200–201.

iconic relationship implies an invitation to perceive that person in the light of God's presence within her.

Crucially, it is worth noting the way in which Williams connects his account of icons to questions of politics. The loss of such iconic relationships, he argues, gives rise to a world increasingly dominated by contractual relationships grounded in the logic of the market. In concluding his work on Dostoevsky, Williams notes that we increasingly live in a culture in which:

All particulars are leveled or assimilated to each other on the principle that everything has an exchange value that can be clearly determined. And the principle is applied equally to objects and to practices or skills: hence it becomes possible to quantify quite strictly the value of activities that were formerly regarded as given meaning by their intrinsic human worthwhileness, and surrounded accordingly by informal cultures and disciplines. The point at which the activity of nursing the sick can be expressed in terms of a producer supplying a customer is the point at which the culture of nursing the sick begins to disappear.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, what Williams describes is a world on the verge of losing its sense of the significance of iconic relationships. It is a world in which the sick person is reduced to a customer and the healthcare worker to a provider of a service.

### **13.3 The Iconic Relationship as Expansion**

If the iconic relationship means to open to the iconic frame of reference, to God's presence, and perceive relationships in light of this framework, where the meaning of the other remains a mystery, what, then, does it mean to understand the theopolitical character constituted in various relationships in the diaconal and liturgical practices as iconic? In what follows, I will elaborate on what this might entail as well as suggesting how my analysis, thus far, might contribute to the understanding of the iconic.

On a fundamental level, in light of this iconic relationship, the church's theopolitical character can be perceived as an ongoing struggle and negotiation on behalf of the church of what it means to apply this iconic framework to its various relationships. To name it a struggle imply two things,

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<sup>5</sup> Williams 2008, 230.

firstly that it is not a matter of either or and, secondly how my material display how the church both partly succeeds and partly fails in this struggle.

### **13.4 The Struggle for the Iconic**

In my analysis, I have shown how the various diaconal and liturgical practices studied in this thesis constitute various relationships. In some of these practices, it is rather easy to discern something of an iconic relationship. The perhaps clearest example is the Eucharist which, in a rather iconic way, destabilises and renegotiates human relationships. Moreover the way practices such as the post-liturgical coffee and the choir rehearsal can be perceived as an enactment of a social respite, of the church as an oasis, indicate an iconic relationship. At the same time, segregated character of the fellowship gathered for the post-liturgical coffee indicate how this iconic relationship is not a straightforward interpretation.

Moreover, the dinner fellowship can be interpreted as a struggle to re-shape relationships in the community, characterised by fear and suspicion into relationships with an iconic potential, into relationships based on mutual trust. What my analysis has shown is the importance of listening and attention for such relationships to be shaped. At the same time, as my account of disturbance displayed, the way my informants perceived the “gloria round” runs the risk of neglecting the otherness of the other in favour of a perceived sameness.

This struggle for the iconic is also visible in the diaconal reception. As noticed, one of the relationships constituted in that practice is the helper-client relationship. A relationship which indicates a vertical relation with an asymmetrical distribution of power. From an iconic perspective, the helper-client relationship runs the risk of diminishing the other to a problem to be solved. A tendency visible in my analysis in how one diaconal worker provided a bag of groceries to a pregnant lady. Moreover, the iconic relationship is difficult to discern in the practice of the foodbank where, as noticed, the person seeking help runs the risk of being stripped of all her defining relationships. At the same time, what my analysis suggests is how the diaconal worker, through an attentive listening, enacts, what can be

interpreted as, an iconic relationship. Through this attentive listening, both the diaconal workers and the person seeking help can be seen as mediators of God's presence. This, not least, is visible in the account of the lady teaching the diaconal worker about Christian parenting. In that instance, the attentive listening on behalf of the diaconal worker transformed the helper-client relationship into something very different. Moreover, the strong affections characterising the foodbank can, in the light of the iconic relationship, be interpreted as a sign of the application of an iconic framework. A framework which makes the staff responsible for the foodbank to experience a strong sense of discomfort.

Thus, what my account indicates is that the iconic relationship should not be seen as something static or a matter of either or, but, perhaps, as the latent potential in all these relationships. What my use of the concept of the iconic relationship reveals is how the iconic might be seen as a potential in all these relationships, but not in a straightforward way. These do also harbour the potential of neglecting and even hiding this iconic potential.

### **13.5 The Iconic and the Theopolitical**

What then, does the icon relationship contribute to the theopolitical? Throughout this thesis I have deployed the concept of the theopolitical. What this term has denoted is a way to perceive politics as derived from the situated character of human life. To be a human being implies being immersed in a meshwork of relationships Relationships which both mediates our relationship to God, but from which politics can be perceived to include the practices where this common life is forged, shaped and sustained. What the iconic contributes with can be seen as a theological qualification of these relationships. If theopolitics entail politics of a common life, the notion of iconic relations, makes this common life responsible to a wider horizon. It entails that the church's political relationships cannot be subsumed under a certain vision of the common good or political project but makes the cultivation of such relationships a goal in itself. This wider horizon, thus, entails that the standard against which the church's political relationships should be judged is not efficiency or progress but whether they display an iconic quality. Moreover, the notion of iconic relationship

highlights which actions that might be perceived as political and not. What this thesis indicates is how actions such as attentive listening can be perceived as deeply political insofar as it makes space for an iconic relationship where the mystery of the other is allowed to take place.

In relation to how the theopolitical character is enacted and negotiated in this thesis, it is worth noting that the notion of the iconic is not limited to relationships between human beings. Material objects and arrangements carry iconic potential as well. This is, not least, indicated in my chapter on liturgical practices, where I noticed how material objects were treated as mediators of God's presence. Overall, the relationship between the theopolitical and the iconic highlights the importance of material and spatial dimensions. As noted in my accounts of the foodbank and the diaconal reception, their material and spatial dimensions contribute to the constitution of asymmetrical relationships, a focus on the individual and the church's institutional character. Aspects which in my analysis appear as hiding the iconic potential. Thus, the notion of iconic relationships can be used to evaluate the material and spatial shape of a practice and is not limited to an analysis of how to approach other human beings.

## **Part III**

# **Conclusions and Discussion**



## **14. Conclusion: The Betrayal of Politics?**

### **14.1 Introduction**

The title of this thesis is formulated as a question: *The Betrayal of Politics?* At a time when religion and politics appear to be increasingly intertwined, and when voices are calling for the Church to become more political, are the churches examined in this study political? Do they meet the standard of what a political church ought to be? Or do the liturgical and diaconal practices analysed in this thesis constitute a betrayal of politics – a failure to be political? However, the question posed in the title should not necessarily be understood as concerning only the material analysed here, but also as being addressed to the reader. It acknowledges that the lenses through which we view the world shape what we are able to see. Thus, what we understand politics to be determines whether we judge a phenomenon to be political or not.

In this thesis, I have argued for an understanding of politics that departs from the fundamentally situated character of all human life. To be human is to be immersed in a meshwork of relationships – relationships on which we depend for our existence in the world. I have outlined a view of politics as denoting all those practices that forge, shape, and sustain this inherently shared life. Through this theopolitical understanding, I have sought to move beyond the dichotomies produced by the two-kingdom doctrine, which has effectively denied the Church political agency. Thus, from my theopolitical horizon, the question is not so much whether the Church is political, but rather how its politics is enacted. Guided by this theopolitical perspective, I have not examined the Church's political role in relation to statecraft or at the level of principle. Instead, I have approached the question through ethnographically informed fieldwork on diaconal and liturgical practices in two congregations of the Church of Sweden located in

deprived areas. Thus, the research question this thesis has sought to answer is:

How is the theopolitical character of the Church of Sweden enacted and negotiated in diaconal and liturgical practices in two congregations in deprived areas, and what insights does a theological analysis of these practices offer for a constructive understanding of the church's political identity and role?

To answer the research question and fulfil the aim of the study, I employed practice theory within an overarching ecclesiological framework. This enabled me not only to focus on practices, but also to analyse them in a structured manner. While my theopolitical perspective foregrounded relationships, practice theory provided me with the tools to analyse how these relationships were constituted through practices and through aspects of practice such as bodily actions, spatial and material arrangements, and various forms of understanding.

My analysis has followed a structure comprising three sequences: articulation, disturbance, and expansion. The chapters on articulation showed which relationships were constituted, while the next analytical step, disturbance, brought to light certain tensions and contradictions in the material. The third analytical sequence, expansion, offered an account which, building on the preceding articulation and disturbance, provided a deepened and expanded understanding of the Church's theopolitical character.

In what follows, I begin by drawing together the results from the chapters on articulation and disturbance, in which I describe how the theopolitical character of the Church of Sweden is enacted and negotiated. At a general level, these negotiations may be understood as taking place within the various practices. More specifically, my analysis treats the different relationships constituted and shaped by these practices – relationships through which particular roles are assumed – as theopolitical points of negotiation. This section thus serves both as a summary of the chapters on articulation and disturbance and as a further analytical step, placing these different relationships alongside one another in order to examine how they inform, challenge, and refract one another.

## 14.2 The Church as a Provider of Help and Support

A salient relationship emerging from my analysis is what I term the helper–client relationship, to which I return in my discussion of the disturbances. Within this relationship, the Church of Sweden assumes the role of provider of various forms of help and support. This role, and the corresponding relationship, is constituted through the practices of both the diaconal reception and the food bank, and corresponds to the role of recipient assumed by those who attend. My analysis indicates that this relationship, and the roles it entails, are both subject to criticism and open to negotiation.

Theologically, this relationship is negotiated through the ways in which my informants interpret the practice. In their understanding, what takes place in the diaconal reception is not merely a philanthropic endeavour, but also a mediation of God’s presence. The emphasis lies not so much on the help offered as on the encounter between the diaconal worker and the visitor. Within this encounter, the diaconal worker is understood to assume the role of mediating God’s love and presence, a role that, according to my informants, is also ascribed to the visitor. In my analysis, these theologically grounded relationships may be understood as constituting a fissure within the helper–client relationship, one that has the potential both to destabilise and, at times, to disrupt it.

The role of the Church of Sweden as a provider of help and support, and the relationships this entails, is also shaped by how my informants understand the relationship between the church and the welfare state, as well as that between the welfare state and the individual visitor. In my analysis, the relationship between the church and the welfare state is affectively indicated by the frustration the diaconal workers expressed regarding the provision of help. This frustration is open to different interpretations. For example, my informants described the provision of material assistance, not least food, as humiliating for the visitors. It was also seen as undermining what they understood diaconal work to be about: helping people to grow and develop. Crucially, this frustration also arose from two other perceived relationships, both connected to the welfare state: that between the Church of Sweden and the welfare state and, closely related to it, that

between the individual visitor and the welfare state. As regards the relationship between the church and the welfare state, my informants envisaged a certain division of labour in which primary responsibility for addressing social vulnerability rested with the welfare state, while the role of the church was understood as complementary. In relation to the relationship between the individual visitor and the welfare state, the Church of Sweden may be seen as assuming the role of mediator between the individual and the welfare state.

Thus, the role of the church as a provider of help and support, and the relationship this entails, may be understood as a point of theopolitical negotiation in which different relationships, roles, and understandings refract and inform one another. For example, the understanding of the diaconal worker and the person seeking help as mediators of God's presence may be read in relation to the perceived relationship between the church and the welfare state. This theologically grounded understanding may be seen as a way for my informants to make theological sense of a situation in which the role of providing help was perceived as problematic and in which responsibility for social welfare was understood to rest with the welfare state. The role of the church as a provider of help and support is also constituted and shaped by the food bank as a practice. As noted, this practice is marked by strong affective responses, both in relation to the provision of help and to its material and spatial arrangements. Compared with the diaconal reception, my informants struggle to make sense of the food bank as a practice. It is understood both as a humiliating practice for those seeking help and, moreover, as one that creates dissonance in relation to how my informants perceive the purpose of diaconal work, as well as the relationship between the church and the welfare state.

### **14.3 The Church as Facilitator**

Distinct from, and rather different in character from, the role of providing help and support, the Church of Sweden also assumes, in my analysis, the role of facilitator. This role is constituted through the practice of the dinner fellowship. Within the dinner fellowship, the church provides a space and a set of practices through which relationships based on trust, rather

than fear and suspicion, are constituted. In this way, the dinner fellowship constitutes the church as a facilitator. At the same time, my analysis shows how this role is negotiated in relation to a particular understanding of what it means to be church in relation to wider society. My informants describe this as a way of being “the new church”: a church characterised by a listening posture towards wider society in the pursuit of a good life for all, and one that is not perceived as possessing the right answers.

The role of facilitator is also negotiated and, as I will show, potentially challenged by the practice of the “gloria round.” The role of facilitator, characterised by a listening approach, may be interpreted as one through which the church facilitates a space in which people from different traditions and religious affiliations can come together, share a meal, and form relationships characterised by mutual trust. Thus, the listening approach may be interpreted as a way of affirming the otherness of the other. This is indicated by the way in which my informants emphasise the importance of learning from others. However, as noted in my analysis, the “gloria round” may also be interpreted as a practice that constitutes what my informants call the community of faith, in which explicit religious convictions are downplayed in favour of a focus on a perceived shared humanity. What is challenged here is not so much the role of the church as facilitator as the character of that role. While the listening approach may be interpreted as an affirmation of the otherness of the other, the “community of faith” may be interpreted as reducing this otherness to a form of sameness in which the emphasis is placed on a shared humanity. Thus, paradoxically, the Church of Sweden may in this way be seen to negate its own desire to listen to and learn from the other, and instead to dominate the interpretation of the space.

#### **14.4 The Renegotiation of Human Relationships**

A recurring feature of several of the practices studied is the enactment of renegotiated social relationships. This is evident in the dinner fellowship, with its focus on transforming relationships marked by fear and suspicion into forms of relating based on mutual trust. It is also evident in the liturgical practices, in which a particular way of relating to physical objects,

both material and human, is constituted, and in which these are understood as mediators of God's presence. In my analysis, the Eucharist emerges as a practice that establishes relationships and binds together people who might otherwise have rather little in common. In a context lacking a common language, the liturgy becomes a language understood by most participants. The Eucharist, however, is not merely seen as constituting relationships; it is also understood as renegotiating social relationships. My informants describe this in episodic terms, suggesting that, through participation in the Eucharist, socio-economic markers and hierarchies disappear. These renegotiations should therefore not be understood as the appropriation of theoretical knowledge, but rather as arising through participation in the Eucharist. They are also related to the diverse character of the congregation, where such diversity, in terms of both ethnicity and socio-economic situation, appears in my material as an epistemological aspect that shapes how the Eucharist is perceived.

In my analysis, I have sought to treat the liturgical practices and the post-liturgical coffee together. My analysis has shown that there is both continuity and discontinuity between these practices in terms of the relationships they constitute and renegotiate. In terms of discontinuity, the sense of equality characterising the relationships perceived in the Eucharist seems to disappear when the altar is replaced by a coffee table. Thus, as noted, the fellowship at the post-liturgical coffee is clearly segregated. At the same time, there is also a sense of continuity between the Eucharist and the post-liturgical coffee. This continuity concerns the same sense of equality constituted by the Eucharist, though here in relation to socio-economic circumstances. As noted, it is not that my informants deny the presence of such inequalities; nevertheless, they perceive the Eucharist as a practice that renegotiates these relationships into a perceived unity. In a similar vein, my informants understand the post-liturgical coffee as what might be called a respite from these conditions. They describe wanting the church to be an oasis in which people are not defined by their hardships and challenges.

## 14.5 The Church as Collaboration Partner

Lastly, in and through the choir rehearsal, relationships between the Church of Sweden and wider society are constituted, in which the church assumes the role of a collaborative partner in a project involving other actors. This role, and the relationships thereby constituted, may be understood as negotiated in relation to theological understandings of both the kingdom of God and Christian mission. In my material, the concept of the kingdom of God is linked to the pursuit of what my informants call a good life. The church has a theological language for this pursuit – the kingdom of God – while other actors, without sharing this theological understanding, are nevertheless understood to contribute to the same end. In relation to Christian mission, my informants emphasise that this is not a matter of conversion from one faith to another, but rather of cooperation. Through such cooperation with other actors, the church is understood to participate in what God is doing.

In my analysis, the project of which the choir forms part is understood not as a shared space to which the different member organisations contribute, but rather as a distinct space in relation to those actors. My informants maintain that it is not the Church of Sweden that acts within this project; rather, they participate as part of the project. They describe their involvement less in terms of representing the church than of being present as fellow human beings.

## 14.6 Points of Disturbances

As I have argued, practices should be understood as open-ended and ambiguous in character, one should expect them to display certain tensions and contradictions. Some of these aspects were already indicated in my chapters on articulation, but were highlighted and analysed more fully in my chapter on disturbances. The points of disturbance amount to a tendency to reduce the dynamic dimensions of the relationships and roles constituted. For instance, the church as a provider of care and support runs the risk of becoming an institution caught in a theopolitical limbo between the role of philanthropist and that of social lubricant in relation to the welfare state, while the person seeking help is consequently reduced to someone

lacking resources, rather than being understood as a person constituted by a multitude of relationships. Moreover, as noted, the church as facilitator emerges through a listening approach in which the church seeks to learn from the otherness of the other. However, the way my informants perceive a certain sameness, expressed in how they understand the community of faith, runs the risk of reducing this otherness. Similarly, while the church as a collaborative partner may be seen as contributing to a more complex social space in which various actors contribute from their particular horizons of understanding, the way my informants perceive themselves as fellow human beings runs the risk of diminishing this dynamic potential. Thus, whereas my chapters on articulation pointed towards an understanding of relationships as dynamic and open to renegotiation, my chapter on disturbances indicates a tendency to curtail this dynamic understanding of relationships.

### **14.7 The Iconic Church**

The second part of my research question concerns how a theological analysis of liturgical and diaconal practices can offer insights into a constructive understanding of the church's political identity and role. This part relates to my chapter on expansion, in which expansion is understood as a way of developing a fuller understanding of the church's theopolitical character. Crucially, as noted, this expansion is not independent of the articulations and disturbances, but builds on them. It therefore takes both aspects into account and offers a way of deepening their interpretation.

This expansion was facilitated by the use of the concept of iconic relationships as a way of expanding my analysis of the church's theopolitical character. An iconic relationship implies a relationship in which the meaning of the other is not determined in advance, but remains inexhaustible. It entails a perception of the other shaped by the iconic frame of reference, understood as the presence of God. This perspective enabled a theological understanding both of my articulations and of the more problematic aspects accounted for in my chapter on disturbance. Described in terms of iconic relations, the diaconal and liturgical practices can be understood as a struggle for the iconic, that is, a struggle to preserve the dynamic and

inexhaustible character of each relationship. From an iconic perspective, this struggle may be interpreted as the social outworking of the iconic framework. In other words, the iconic may be seen as the theologically motivated openness of each relationship to remain dynamic, changing, and full of surprises, and ultimately to mediate something of God's presence. Thus, the iconic is not a separate practice, but a potential within every practice.

In that sense, the church's eventual betrayal of politics may not occur when it fails to engage in public discussion or to communicate effectively with so-called politicians. Rather, the betrayal of politics occurs when the church loses the iconic frame of reference.



## **15. Discussion**

### **15.1 Introduction**

In what follows, I will point out some of the contributions of my thesis and discuss those contributions in relation to relevant research. Important to notice is that I have delimited my sampling of conversation partners to the Scandinavian context, where the Scandinavian Lutheran folk-churches share a history where they are, or have been, majority state churches. In what follows, I will start with a discussion of how my theopolitical perspective frames the discussion about the relationship between the church and politics. I will also elaborate on my choice of focusing on diaconal and liturgical practices. Moreover, I also discuss the possible merits of focusing on concrete practices in relation to the Church of Sweden in deprived areas.

### **15.2 Church and Politics beyond the Two-Kingdom Doctrine**

In this thesis, I have sought to frame the discussion about the relationship between the Church of Sweden and politics from a different perspective and framework than what the two-kingdom doctrine has to offer. Most importantly, while the two-kingdom doctrine's distinction between the spiritual and the temporal realm tends to locate politics in the temporal, my theopolitical perspective has sought to envision politics as not primarily statecraft, but the practices where a common life is formed and sustained. It is my contention that such a perspective allows me to analyse and discuss the church as a political actor in its own right and not only when and if the church interacts with so-called politicians.

One theologian who has discussed the two-kingdom doctrine in relation to both diaconal practices and the Scandinavian folk-churches, is Tron Fagermoen, associated professor of practical theology at MF, Oslo. In his article: “The Distinctiveness of Diaconia and the Post-Secular Condition: Gustaf Wingren Revisited” he notices some of the same critiques mentioned in this thesis about the two-kingdom doctrine and the loss of the theological importance of embodiment. Subsequently, he calls for a re-creation of the Christian faith in relation to diaconal practices.<sup>1</sup> He notices how, in relation to diaconal practices, the two-kingdom doctrine, with its emphasis on the distinction between the spiritual and the worldly realms, has placed diaconal practices, with its care of the body, within the worldly realm and thus as an expression of God’s general care and not as a distinct Christian practice. Following the Swedish theologian Gustaf Wingren, Fagermoen argues for an understanding of diaconal practice which he describes as non-oppositional distinctiveness. With this term he denotes Wingren’s attempt to root diaconal practices in the gospel and thus in the spiritual realm. Diaconal practices, Fagermoen argues, should be seen as an integrated part of the recapitulation of the whole creation which the gospel implies.

Fagermoen, thus, seeks to destabilise the distinction between the spiritual and the worldly realms. At the same time, since he understands the two-kingdom doctrine to harbour important theological resources he does not want to abandon it altogether. What the two-kingdom doctrine contributes with, he argues, is the non-oppositional character of the distinctiveness of diaconal practices.<sup>2</sup> Even though diaconal practices derive from the gospel, they should nevertheless be related to God’s creative work through the law within all of creation. Thus, the gospel and the law should not be seen in binary terms but always related to each other. Fagermoen writes:

These concerns result in a dialectic approach to the relation between the universal and the particular, earthly and spiritual government, meaning that the particularity

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<sup>1</sup> Fagermoen 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Fagermoen 2018, 127.

of the gospel and the universality of the law are seen to be reciprocally defined with respect to each other.<sup>3</sup>

What such an approach allows, Fagermoen argues, is a way to view diaconal practices as distinct, without denying God's work throughout all of creation and, not least, through the welfare state. Curiously, throughout his article, Fagermoen discusses the distinctiveness of diaconal practices, but not the distinctiveness of the church.

A move towards the church, however, is visible in another article: *Diaconia Beyond Borders Welfare State, Church, and Migrants with Limited Welfare Rights*.<sup>4</sup> In the article he argues that the presence of migrants with limited welfare rights within the Nordic countries, poses a challenge to both the Nordic welfare state as well as to the Nordic folk-churches.<sup>5</sup> In dialogue with William Cavanaugh and Gustaf Wingren, he proposes an approach where, in his opinion, the critique of the welfare state, posed by Cavanaugh, is taken into account but where Cavanaugh's dismissal of the state is not seen as a necessary consequence. In Fagermoen's account, Cavanaugh's critique of the welfare state leads to what he describes as "...a chauvinistic view of the pilgrim church's ability to care for the migrants in precarious situations."<sup>6</sup> According to Fagermoen, Cavanaugh's lack of critical reflection of the church results in an undifferentiated critique of the state and a romanticised understanding of the church. The problem, Fagermoen argues, is that the relationship between the church and the state is envisioned in oppositional terms, which excludes a more positive appropriation of the role of the welfare state.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, Fagermoen describes an approach advocated by Gustaf Wingren. What Wingren brings to the table, he argues, is a more positive understanding of the role of the welfare state and how God is active through both the church and the welfare state. Fagermoen writes:

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<sup>3</sup> Fagermoen 2018, 122.

<sup>4</sup> Fagermoen 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Fagermoen 2023, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Fagermoen 2023, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Fagermoen 2023, 9–10.

What distinguishes Wingren from Cavanaugh is that the interpretation of state and church/diaconia is articulated within a framework that affirms God's creative activity through all sorts of people and institutions independent of faith or church context, while still maintaining that diaconia represents an essential aspect of being church. This paves the way for a dialectical and more differentiated interpretation of church, diaconia, and welfare state than the one we saw in Cavanaugh.<sup>8</sup>

As in the earlier article, Fagermoen argues for a positive understanding of the two-kingdom doctrine where the distinctiveness of the church should not be seen in opposition to the state.<sup>9</sup> Even though he envisions the church as a distinct space of justice, this, Fagermoen argues, does not imply a negation of God's work throughout all of creation.<sup>10</sup>

The concerns of my project overlap with some important aspects of Fagermoen's account. One such aspect concerns the need to move beyond the binary relationship depicted by the two-kingdom doctrine. In what follows, I will discuss Fagermoen's approach in relation my results in terms of both theory and practice.

Throughout this thesis I have suggested an approach to the political character of the church which seeks to move beyond the distinctions suggested by the two-kingdom doctrine. This approach, I have argued, has allowed me to discuss the church as a political actor, where the church, through its practices, contributes to a common life. As described in chapter 4, within the body politic different actors with universal horizons create various forms of friend-enemy distinctions. Distinctions which should not be seen as ontological, but which contributes to a complex social space where a common life is forged despite divergent visions of the common good. While this approach does not preclude God's presence outside the church, it nevertheless opens for multiple visions of the common good, where the church is regarded as one such voice among many and where all political arrangements, seen in an eschatological perspective, are seen as provisional. As noted, the task of the church is to witness to God's new creation which includes a continuous work of discernment on behalf of

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<sup>8</sup> Fagermoen 2023, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Fagermoen 2023, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Fagermoen 2023, 17.

the church in relation to other actors and God's presence within and outside the church.

Thus, I would suggest, what my account indicates is that it is possible to grant the church the distinctiveness Fagermoen calls for, while at the same time not exclude the positive contribution from other actors without clinging on to a revised version of the two-kingdom doctrine. Moreover, as I will display in what follows, in light of my research, Fagermoen's notion of the church in terms of non-oppositional distinctiveness tend to both neglect certain aspects as well as shaping the discussion in a, I would argue, unfortunate way.

To start with, Fagermoen's choice of remaining with a revised two-kingdom doctrine tend to neglect theology's dramatic character in favour of a more epic approach. This could be seen in a number of ways. Firstly, the epic character is indicated by the way the relationship between the church and the state, in his account, appear as the primary relationship. While in my approach, the question of which relationships which should be seen as significance remain an empirical question. Thus, the use of the two-kingdom doctrine runs the risk of flattening out the social space and, thus, make it less complex.

Moreover, the character of the relationship between the church and the state seems in Fagermoen's account to be decided on a principal level. As noted, one aim of Fagermoen's notion of the non-oppositional distinctiveness of the church is to work out an understanding of the relationship between the church and the state which does not preclude a theologically positive account of the role of the state. However, seen in relation to my ethnographically informed approach, such an account runs the risk of imposing a more epic view than suggested in my theoretical framework. In contrast, my ethnographical approach preserves theology's dramatic character where the question of opposition or non-opposition remain an empirical question. In my thesis, the relationships between the church and any other actor are seen as constituted, not by principals, but by concrete practices. Thus, whereas Fagermoen warns against an a priori negative perception of the welfare state, his account tends to do the opposite.

As this thesis has shown, the relationship between the church and the welfare state is indeed significant and could be seen as shaping the character

of the church's diaconal practices. Given this, it does, on one sense, make sense to, as Fagermoen does, describe the church as non-oppositional distinctiveness. However, the lack of any empirical considerations together with Fagermoen's choice of making William Cavanaugh, one of the fiercest critics of the nation state, his dialogue partner, shapes his discussion in an, in my opinion, unfortunate way. Considering William Cavanaugh's upfront theological attack on the modern nation state, Fagermoen appears in pain to reserve a more positive theological account of the nation state and the welfare state. In other words, in Fagermoen's account, the problem appears to be the church's distinctiveness in relation to the state and the oppositional character of this relationship. While Fagermoen's account might be well-placed in relation to a theologian as William Cavanaugh, his defence of the welfare state appears, in light of my ethnographically informed account, as somewhat misplaced theological effort. What my account suggests is that while the relationship between the church and the welfare state is indeed significant, there are no indications of any opposition between the church and the welfare state. Instead, a positive perception of the welfare state appears among my informants as a non-issue. What my analysis indicate is that what my informants do struggle with is rather the distinctiveness of the church in relation to the welfare state. This is most notable the way my informants indicate a perceive workload between the church and the welfare state. What my account implies is that rather than envisioning an oppositional relationship between the church and the welfare state, my informants' positive perception of the welfare state makes them question whether the church should provide material help at all. Instead of enacting an oppositional distinctiveness, the church, at times, appear as a social lubricant in the relationship between the individual and the welfare state.

Lastly, as pointed out, Fagermoen wants to destabilise the relationship between the temporal and the spiritual regiments implied by the two-kingdom doctrine. This, he argues, is done by locating diaconal practices in the spiritual realm, making diaconal practices a distinct Christian practice. Interestingly, as he moves into a critical dialogue with William Cavanaugh, a scholar who repeatedly returns to the political role of the Eucharist, one might have expected a theological account where liturgical practices, in a

similar move as diaconal, are located within the political sphere. Such an account, however, is lacking in Fagermoen's account. What we get, instead, is a sharp criticism of Cavanaugh's emphasis on the Eucharist, where Fagermoen charges Cavanaugh with presenting a romantic view of the Eucharist. Thus, despite Fagermoen's stated attempt to destabilise the relationship between the two regiments, his account of the church as a point of recapitulation lacks any references to the church's liturgical practices.

### **15.3 Theopolitics from Diaconal and Liturgical Practices**

In this thesis, my unit of analysis has been diaconal and liturgical practices and how the theopolitical character of the Church of Sweden is negotiated and enacted in and through such practices. Moreover, my sample of informants have been employed staff in the congregations studied. In what follows, the aim is to discuss my choice of unit of analysis in relation to the work of the Norwegian theologian Gyrid Gunnes and her thesis: "Towards a diaconia of displacements: An empirical theological inquiry."<sup>11</sup> As noticed in chapter 2, in her work she focuses on the theology that emerges in encounters between religious practices and people experiencing social disadvantage. Her study is of particular interest given her empirical approach where she analysis the work of the Church City Mission of Trondheim carried out in relation to the Church of Our Lady. In her thesis, she describes the transformation of a traditional ecclesial space into a space welcoming the homeless, beggars and people with drug addiction. It is the encounter between these people and religious practices which Gunnes describes as displacement. In these encounters, she argues, the Church of Our Lady emerges as a place where spatial, liturgical, facultative, material and epistemological justice take place.

Spatial justice, she argues, has to do with people who are normally excluded from ecclesial spaces are allowed to find a place. This is wrought about through, what she calls practices of radical inclusion, but also through a rearrangement of the church room. She notices how the centre of the room is relocated. Away from the high altar and the pulpit to the

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<sup>11</sup> Gunnes 2020.

cafe-area, and the importance given to the lightening of candles on a cobblestone altar on the floor in the middle of the church. She also mentions the rather low number of employed staff, a fact which, she argues, renegotiates power and agency.<sup>12</sup> With liturgical justice, Gunnes denotes how the Church of our Lady incorporates certain liturgical elements into their weekly services to accommodate for the people present.<sup>13</sup> What Gunnes calls facultative justice describes how the people visiting the Church of our Lady are allowed to contribute in various ways.<sup>14</sup> By material justice, Gunnes refers to how the Church of our Lady distributes both material help, such as food and clothes, but also how to apply for a job or contact government agencies.<sup>15</sup> Finally, by epistemological justice, Gunnes denotes how the vulnerability of the people present serves as an “...epistemological resource for reimagining and rediscovering the radicalism of the message of the gospel.”<sup>16</sup>

Gunnes’s study is highly relevant to my thesis, not only because it focuses on the Church’s interaction with people living in different forms of vulnerability, but also because it approaches this through an ethnographic study of diaconal and liturgical practices. In other words, there are clear points of convergence between her study and my thesis, but also clear divergences.

On a fundamental level, one such divergence concerns the heart of Gunnes’s approach, namely the use of the concept displacement. A term which denotes how a room, artefacts and practices are used in partly new ways. As Gunnes argues, displacement in her thesis denotes how a church with its rituals, spatial arrangements and artefacts are used in an unconventional way to provide justice.<sup>17</sup> According to Gunnes, these practices of displacement have the potential of bringing a social and cultural replacement of the individual:

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<sup>12</sup> Gunnes 2020, 66–68.

<sup>13</sup> Gunnes 2020, 68.

<sup>14</sup> Gunnes 2020, 69.

<sup>15</sup> Gunnes 2020, 71–72.

<sup>16</sup> Gunnes 2020, 74.

<sup>17</sup> Gunnes 2020, 4–5.

Displacements contain the potential not only for surprise and bewilderment due to the hermeneutical rupture that occurs, but also the social replacement of the individual. A culturally sensitive performative diaconia may potentially facilitate rehearsals of the cultural and social replacement of the marginalized persons.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, at the core of Gunnes thesis, lies this notion of the practices of displacements taking place at the Church of our Lady and its possibilities for marginalised people. Her work focuses on the unconventional use of a church room, liturgies and artefacts.

Crucially, my thesis adopts a rather different approach. While the context of Gunnes thesis is the highly unconventional use of a traditional church space, the congregations studied in my thesis are considerably more conventional. While the context of my congregations, deprived areas, and the diverse nature of the worshipping community is not typical of a Church of Sweden, the liturgical practices, for instance, are very typical, conventional Church of Sweden practices following the officially recognised liturgical handbook. Moreover, while the diaconal practices take place in a rather extreme socio-economic context, some of the diaconal practices, for instance the diaconal reception can hardly be termed a practice of displacement. Diaconal practices such as the foodbank, the dinner fellowship and the choir rehearsal might not be seen as typical diaconal practices within the Church of Sweden, but compared to the practices studied in Gunnes work, they can hardly be characterised as deliberate practices of displacement.

Thus, my work and Gunnes work could be seen as examples of two different approaches described by Pete Ward in relation to theologians turning towards the concrete realities of the church. As noticed in chapter 2, on the one hand, Ward argues, are those who turn to the empirical for political reasons: their turn to the empirical is driven by the conviction that attending to previously silenced and marginalised voices can be theologically generative. On the other hand, Ward argues, there are those whose turn to the concrete realities of the church is rooted in the conviction that, as he puts it, “revelation and scripture point towards divine agency in the Church and

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<sup>18</sup> Gunnes 2020, 75.

the wider society.” While the work of Gunnes exemplifies the former approach, my work could be seen as an example of the latter.

A crucial question, then, is whether the justice and social replacement Gunnes looks for demands the practices of displacements? If that is the case, the practices described in this thesis has little to offer. However, while Gunnes’s emphasis on displacement could be seen as a rightful critique of some of the more institutional aspects of the church, visible in my material, it is interesting to notice how, to use Gunnes’s own terms, the potential for social replacement is far from absent in the diaconal and liturgical analysed in this thesis. For instance, as described, the attentive listening on behalf of the diaconal worker within the diaconal reception has the potential to destabilise and even create a rupture in the more conventional helper-client relationship. Moreover, the notion of the church as a respite, described by my informants in relation to the post-liturgical coffee could also be seen as a rehearsal of social replacements. The perhaps clearest example of social replacement in my thesis concerns the practice of the Eucharist. As described, in these practices various relationships are renegotiated, and the Eucharist appears as the enactment of a radical equality. However, as noticed, this is also a practice where the diverse nature of the worshipping community serves as an epistemological contribution. A notion which comes close to Gunnes’s notion of epistemological justice. Thus, in my thesis, the diverse nature of the worshipping community serves a similar role as Gunnes’s practices of displacement. An important difference, of course, is that while the liturgical practices described by Gunnes display a certain degree of unconventionality, the liturgical practices in my thesis could be characterised as considerably more conventional.

Thus, I would argue that the social replacements and justice described in Gunnes’s thesis, is not restricted to the unconventional use of practices of displacements. What my thesis has displayed is how rather conventional practices have political significance. On a more critical note, it is worth noting how in Gunnes’s thesis, the positive depiction of the unconventional practices of displacement depends on a corresponding negative perception of more conventional practices. Conventional practices which are depicted

as excluding marginalised people.<sup>19</sup> While Gunnes's thesis provide a rich ethnographically established material of the Church of our Lady, we get very little information of these other congregations.

## **15.4 Relations between the Church and the Wider Society**

Given my focus on the theopolitical character of the Church of Sweden the relationship between the church and the wider society is of importance. In my thesis, these relationships are not a matter of theory but are constituted through practices. This approach can be contrasted with the work of the Swedish theologian Andreas Holmberg and his thesis *Kyrka i Nytt landskap: En studie av levd ecclesiologi i Svenska kyrkan*. (Church in a new landscape: A study of lived ecclesiology within the Church of Sweden). His work has affinities with my thesis, not only through his use of an ethnographical approach, but also because he focuses on the Church of Sweden in a similar context. In what follows, I will discuss my project in relation to Holmberg's in terms of both method and content.

Crucially, there are important overlaps of interest between my project and the Holmberg's. His emphasis, for instance, on what he calls, lived ecclesiology, ecclesiology expressed, forged and shaped in local congregations<sup>20</sup> has clear affinities with my emphasis on the church's practices as theologically and politically significant. Thus, both Holmberg's thesis and my work have the ambition to reflect ecclesiological about the concrete expressions of the local congregation. Importantly, Holmberg's account suggests that. what he calls, lived ecclesiology, is not only expressed discursively, but through socio-material aspects such as, practices, actions, artefacts and spatiality.<sup>21</sup> Given this ambition, it is interesting to notice how Holmberg's account is dominated by discursive considerations gathered from interviews and focus-group interviews. His account, thus, is largely focused on how his informants perceive and describe the church. This is, I would argue, an

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<sup>19</sup> Gunnes 2020, 66–67.

<sup>20</sup> Holmberg 2019, 26.

<sup>21</sup> Holmberg 2019, 26.

important point of divergence between my work and Holmberg's. While I, in line with my practice-theoretical approach, have strived to hold understandings and practices together, in Holmberg's account, the understandings expressed by his informants are to a large extent treated separate from their formative practices. This absence of analysis of concrete practices has consequences for how Holmberg describes the relationship between the congregations in his study and the wider society. There are particularly three aspects of Holmberg's account which I would like to discuss and where Holmberg's lack of analysis of concrete practices come to the fore.

Firstly, this lack results in a rather static account of the church's interaction with other actors where Holmberg notes how cooperation between the church and other actors is perceived as essential to the church.<sup>22</sup> What my work suggests is that framing the church's interactions with the wider society in terms of concrete practices might provide a more nuanced discussion where the complexities of this relationship are taken into account.

Moreover, Holmberg frames the church's approach to the wider society in terms of de Certau's distinction between tactics and strategy.<sup>23</sup> Strategy, according to Holmberg, denotes an approach where the subject is clearly delimited and acts from a position which she is in control of.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, a tactic approach implies a lack of power and an absence of a space which the subject controls. It means to act in a space where one is not in control.<sup>25</sup> While Holmberg acknowledges the institutional aspects of the Church of Sweden, traits which indicates an inclination towards a more strategic approach<sup>26</sup>, he nevertheless discerns a transition towards a more tactical approach. A move he describes in terms of a shift from self-sufficiency towards dependency and from control to trust.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Holmberg aim seems to be to capture the complexity in this shift. However, his lack of attention

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<sup>22</sup> Holmberg 2019, 236–237.

<sup>23</sup> Since the focus here is on Holmberg's thesis in relation to my work, I will follow his description of tactic and strategy.

<sup>24</sup> Holmberg 2019, 330.

<sup>25</sup> Holmberg 2019, 331.

<sup>26</sup> Holmberg 2019, 330–331.

<sup>27</sup> Holmberg 2019, 317–318.

to concrete practices make this transition to appear rather one-sided. As my thesis has shown, however, the relationship between the church and the wider context tends to be one with a high degree of complexity. For instance, the diaconal reception accounted for in this thesis could be described as enacting a tactical and a strategical approach at the same time. Where the attentive listening carries a tactical potential, other aspects, such as the spatial arrangements and the fact that people come to the church in order to receive help and support, point towards a more strategic approach.

It is also worth noticing how Holmberg translates de Certau's notion of tactics into, what he calls, relationships based on trust. This thesis' dramatic understanding of theology, however, warrants the question whether something is vital is lost in this translation. A tactical approach, with its focus on the ad-hoc character of the church's relationship to other actors, has clear similarities with a dramatic understanding of theology. However, in the translation of the tactic into relations based on trust, something of this runs the risk of being lost. While the tactic approach calls for discernment, relationship based on trust seem to have already decided on a more positive evaluation. Thus, relationship based on trust runs the same risk as I have pointed out in my material, namely, opting for an a priori positive stance towards other actors. What is potentially lost is the eschatological tension described in my theopolitical perspective. A tension which calls for a constant act of discernment on behalf of the church on what to embrace and what to reject.

## **15.5 Theopolitics as an Ecclesiological Concept in Deprived Areas**

In this thesis, I have focused on liturgical and diaconal practices in two congregations located in, what the Swedish police call, deprived areas. Through analysis of diaconal and liturgical practices, I have sought to analyse how *the* theopolitical character of the Church of Sweden is enacted and negotiated. One contribution of this thesis is how I throughout my study treat theopolitics as an ecclesiological concept. As something which describes what it means to be church. While this aspect of ecclesiology is far from new, especially not within the stream of theologians associated

with theological ethics, it is less common in the Scandinavian context. In the Swedish context, there are particularly two scholarly works which focus on the Church of Sweden in a similar context. The already mentioned work by Andreas Holmberg and Kristina Helgesson Kjellin's work: "En bra plats att vara på" (A good place to be at) where she, in her anthropological study, focuses on congregations within the network *Framtiden bor hos oss* (The Future Lives with Us).<sup>28</sup> As noted, both Holmberg's and my project focus on ecclesiological issues concerning the Church of Sweden and we both focuses on congregations in similar locations.

Even though Helgesson Kjellin's study is within the field of anthropology and Holmberg's within theology, they share a similar focus. Both of their work focuses on the multicultural character of the congregations studied and the identity of the Church of Sweden in such multicultural and multireligious context. Given that these congregations are not only in a context marked by cultural and religious diversity, they are also located in areas marked by severe socio-economic challenges, the lack of explicit political considerations is worth noting. From my theopolitical perspective, political relationships should indeed be taken into account when considering the identity of the Church of Sweden.

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<sup>28</sup> Helgesson Kjellin 2016.

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# Index of Modern Authors

- Afdal, Geir 28, 66  
Ammerman, Nancy Tatom 26  
Appelfeldt, Joel 27  
Asserhed, Björn 27  
Atkinson, Paul 71, 76
- Bernard, H. Russell 83  
Brinkmann, Svend 81  
Bretherton, Luke 27, 31, 35–36, 45, 51–57, 59, 158  
Brodd, Sven-Erik 27, 38  
Buch-Hansen, Gitte 32  
Bäckström, Anders 24
- Davie, Grace 24  
De La Torre, Miguel A. 112  
DeWalt, Billie R. 76, 79  
DeWalt, Kathleen M. 76, 79
- Edgardh, Ninna 24, 27, 33–34, 49  
Elliott, Victoria 83
- Fagermoen, Tron 32, 180–185  
Flyvbjerg, Bent 72  
Frostin, Per 20, 48
- Grenholm, Carl-Henric 46–49  
Gunnes, Gyrid 24–25, 29–30, 185–189
- Hagman, Patrik 47  
Halldorf, Joel 19  
Hammersley, Martyn 76  
Hawksley, Theodora L. 26–27, 37, 40–41, 43, 50  
Healy, Nicholas M. 37–43
- Helgesson Kjellin, Kristina 30, 75, 192  
Holmberg, Andreas 30–31, 75, 189–192
- Ideström, Jonas 24, 27, 39
- Jeppson Grassman, Eva 24  
Johansen, Kirstine Helboe 28  
Johnsen, Elisabeth Tveito 28
- Kaharevic, Ahmed 74  
Kaufman, Tone Stangeland 25, 27  
Knoblauch, Hubert 78  
Kvale, Steinar 81
- Ledstam, Maria 66–67  
Linde, Stig 24  
Lockneus, Elin 27, 29  
Lorensen, Marlene Ringgaard 32
- Mannerfelt, Frida 27, 29  
McDonald, Seonaidh 80  
Miller-McLemore, Bonnie J. 25
- Nicolini, Davide 28, 60–63, 79–80  
Nordstokke, Kjell 47
- Pettersson, Per 24  
Petersen Serup, Laura Bjørg 31  
Pickstock, Catherine 36
- Ryan, Gery W. 83
- Saxegaard, Fredrik 28, 77  
Scharen, Christian B. 27

- Schatzki, Theodore R. 28, 59–60, 62–  
66, 69, 82, 87, 93, 125, 144  
Schjetne, Espen 67–68, 153  
Schmidt, Ulla 28, 61  
Sigurdson, Ola 37, 41–43, 49–50  
Swinton, John 36, 72
- Tangen, Reidun 83  
Tavory, Iddo 68, 82  
Timmermans, Stefan 68, 82
- Tveitereid, Knut 27
- Wågsås Afdal, Hilde  
Ward, Pete 27, 29–30, 36, 187  
Watkins, Clare 36–37, 43–44  
Williams, Rowan 42, 161–163  
Wyller, Trygve 31
- Yin, Robert K. 72

# Index of Subjects

- abductive approach 21, 68, 82
  - abductive analysis 82
  - analytical approach 22, 71, 81–84
  - analytical strategy 83–84, 87
- articulation 22, 48, 66–69, 84–85,
  - 153–154, 157, 161, 170, 175–176
  - articulation, disturbance, and expansion 84
  - disturbance 22, 66–69, 84–85, 153–154, 156, 158, 160–161, 164, 170–171, 175–176
  - expansion 22, 66–69, 84–85, 160–164, 166, 170, 176
- body of Christ 32, 37–39, 42–44, 104, 107, 113
  - social body 26, 37
- body politic 52–55, 182
  - common life 45, 51–55, 165, 179, 182
  - common world 54
  - politics of common life 55
  - statecraft 45, 51–52, 55, 169, 179
- care 31, 33, 52, 95–96, 98, 123–125, 127, 129, 163, 175, 180–181
  - care and support 123–125, 127, 129, 175
  - help and support 92, 97, 144, 154, 171–172, 191
  - provider of care 175
  - provider of help 171–172
- case study 72–73, 84
  - field congregations 78, 107, 117
  - research design 71
  - single-case study 72–73, 84
- Church of Sweden 19–21, 23–25, 27, 30–31, 34, 45, 48, 50, 65, 73, 75–78, 87, 93–96, 100, 103, 122, 126, 128, 134–135, 137, 139, 142, 144, 146–150, 153, 157–159, 169–173, 175, 179, 185, 187, 189–192
  - church and politics 34, 45–47, 49–51, 179, 181, 183
  - church and society 29, 31, 33, 135, 137
  - complement to the state 24
  - political actor 30, 47, 157, 179, 182
  - political identity 21, 170, 176
  - political role 21, 41, 55–56, 169, 184
  - political subject 19, 51, 55
  - role of the church 23–25, 33, 55–56, 81, 101, 120, 146, 149, 160, 171–173
  - welfare state 24–25, 93–95, 100, 126, 128, 157, 171–172, 175, 181–184
- client 91–93, 98, 100, 128, 144, 150, 153–155, 157, 160, 164–165, 171, 188
  - helper–client relationship 91–93, 98, 100, 144, 150, 153–155, 157, 164–165, 171, 188
  - individual focus 155
  - institutional character 49, 154, 166
- collaboration 31, 146, 149–150, 175
  - collaboration partner 175
- concrete ecclesiologies 23, 26–27, 34, 38, 50–51
  - concrete church 26, 42
  - ecclesiological reflection 21
  - lived ecclesiology 189
- deprived areas 20–21, 30, 73, 75, 170, 187, 191

- human vulnerability 118, 120
- diaconal practices 32–34, 74–77, 81, 125, 153, 169, 176, 180–181, 184, 187, 191
- diaconal reception 76, 79, 84, 89–100, 112–114, 118, 125, 144, 154–157, 164, 166, 171, 187–188, 191
- diaconal worker 19, 65, 76, 79–81, 89–100, 108, 110, 112–114, 117, 120–121, 123–128, 154–155, 157–158, 164–165, 171–172, 188
- diaconia 25, 29, 32, 180, 182, 185, 187
- foodbank 76, 120–128, 131, 164–166, 187
- difference 30–31, 59, 71, 83, 94, 108, 138–139, 188
- otherness 54, 159–160, 162, 164, 173, 176
- segregation 4–5, 14, 118, 141, 159
- diversity 73, 106, 109–114, 117, 137, 139, 153, 174, 192
- human diversity 117, 153
- relationships to religious diversity 137, 139
- ecclesiology 23, 25–28, 30, 33–34, 37–38, 40, 67, 118, 136, 189, 191
- ecclesiological concept 23, 37, 191
- ecclesiological framework 170
- ecclesiological starting points 34–38, 40, 42–45, 57
- practical theology 25, 27–28, 32, 34, 180
- theological self-understanding 23
- embodiment 40–41, 49–50, 180
- bodily actions 64–65, 79, 87, 97–98, 101, 105–106, 113, 124, 133, 139, 170
- materiality 60–61, 65, 90, 102, 106
- spatial arrangements 91, 172, 186, 191
- emic concept 21, 37, 51
- etic concept 21, 36–37, 44, 57
- empirical turn 23, 25–29, 31, 33–34
- ethnographic approach 29, 35, 67, 71–72, 78, 84
- ethnographic fieldwork 66
- ethnographic material 79
- ethnography 27, 37, 40–43
- ethical considerations 71, 83
- methodological considerations 35, 71–72, 74, 76, 78, 80, 82, 84
- Eucharist 32, 61, 77, 80, 101–102, 104, 107–114, 117, 120, 159–160, 164, 174, 184–185, 188
- material objects 102, 105, 166
- service 19–20, 24, 75–77, 80, 94–95, 97, 101–105, 107–108, 110–113, 115–120, 136, 138, 157, 163, 186
- fieldwork 66, 76–81, 83–84, 89, 94, 101, 109, 111, 115, 125, 141–142, 150, 169
- informants 19, 24, 64, 76, 78–79, 81, 83–84, 96–97, 100–101, 103, 106, 108–111, 113–115, 117–118, 124–128, 131–133, 135–138, 146, 149, 157–160, 164, 171–176, 184, 188–190
- interviews 31, 72, 79, 81, 83, 87, 189
- participant observation 71, 79–80
- qualitative interviews 72, 79
- shadowing 72, 79–81, 87, 93
- frictions 114–115
- negotiation 40, 65–66, 69, 101, 110–112, 117, 153, 159, 170, 173–174, 176
- practices of renegotiation 159
- renegotiation of social relationships 101, 110, 117
- general understandings 63–64, 81, 125, 127–128, 139
- practical understandings 63
- teleoaffective structure 63, 65
- God's presence 43, 96–97, 99–100, 105–106, 120, 163, 165–166, 171–172, 174, 177, 182–183
- mediator of God's presence 96–97, 99
- iconic church 176–177

- iconic frame of reference 163, 176–177
- iconic relationship 160–166, 176
- inclusion 75, 185
- dinner fellowship 76, 79, 129, 131–132, 134–139, 143, 153, 159, 164, 172–173, 187
- post-liturgical coffee 101, 116–118, 120, 153, 159–160, 164, 174, 188
  
- liturgical practices 12–13, 15, 20–22, 27, 29, 33, 65–66, 72–75, 77–78, 80, 87, 101–106, 108, 110, 112, 114, 116, 118, 120, 128, 153, 161, 163, 166, 170, 174, 176, 184–188, 191
- public worship 75
- local congregation 24, 31, 75, 78, 189
- folk church 23, 32, 41, 114, 179–181
  
- material arrangements 65, 87, 91, 102, 105–107, 116, 125, 133, 154, 170
- material objects 102, 105, 166
- spatial arrangements 91, 172, 186, 191
- mediator 93, 95–100, 105, 120, 166, 172, 174
- facilitator 135, 159, 172–173, 176
- meshwork of relationships 52, 57, 59, 64, 165, 169
- relationships 35, 50, 52, 57, 59, 64–66, 69, 71–72, 82–83, 87, 89–90, 92–96, 98, 100–102, 104–112, 114, 116–118, 120–129, 131–132, 134–139, 141–142, 144–146, 148, 150, 153–156, 159, 161–166, 169–176, 183, 188–189, 191–192
- relationships to human beings 106
- relationships to material objects 105
- relationships to the welfare state 93, 95
  
- operationalisation of practice theory 12, 64–65
- practice theory 20–21, 23, 28–29, 31, 33–36, 59–62, 64–66, 68, 71, 82, 170
- site ontology 62
- strong programme of practice 59–66, 82
  
- political theology 28, 31, 51, 56–57
- political agency 169
- political liberation 20
- politics 19–21, 29, 31, 34–35, 37, 45–59, 64, 66, 74, 87, 163, 165, 169–170, 172, 174, 176–177, 179, 181, 183, 185, 187, 191
- theological analysis 21, 24, 170
- theological horizon 21
- theopolitical character 20–22, 45, 50, 58, 65–67, 69, 73, 75, 87, 160–161, 163, 166, 170, 176, 185, 189, 191
- theopolitical relationships 89–90, 92, 94, 96, 98, 100–102, 104, 106, 108, 110, 112, 114, 116, 118, 120–122, 124, 126, 128, 131–132, 134, 136, 138, 141–142, 144, 146, 148, 150
- theopolitics 20–21, 29, 35, 37, 45–46, 48, 50–52, 54–59, 64, 66, 74, 87, 165, 185, 187, 191
  
- two-kingdom doctrine 15, 32, 45–51, 55, 75, 169, 179–183
- critique of the two-kingdom doctrine 48
- law and gospel 46
- Lutheran tradition 46–47, 106



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