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# Hope is Not Enough

Examining the Role of Spirituality in Encounters with Climate

Emotions: A Case-Study of Danish Green Churches

Degree of Master of Science (Two Years) in Human Ecology: Culture, Power and Sustainability  
30 ECTS

CPS: International Master's Programme in Human Ecology  
Human Ecology Division  
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Spring Term 2024

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| Title and Subtitle: | Hope is Not Enough<br>Examining the Role of Spirituality in Encounters with<br>Climate Emotions: A Case-Study of Danish Green<br>Churches |
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| Examination:        | Master's thesis (two years)   |

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| Term: | Spring Term 2024 |
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Abstract:

This research builds on the assertion that spirituality can be beneficial to human-wellbeing and in creating nature-connection. Applying that notion within the historical context of Christianity and its ties to the work-ethics of capitalism, the paper presents a case-study of the Threeclover Church, a Protestant Green Church in Denmark's capital region. The aim is to gain further understanding of how Green Churches can aid when confronting difficult climate-crisis emotions by fostering cultures of care. The research examines the practices of bringing climate conversations into the spiritual space at Threeclover Church, and how that interacts with an existing, dominant culture of uncare and climate-crisis denialism (CCD). Using theory on CCD and cultures of care/uncare, combined with the history of Christianity and the role of spirituality in environmental-mindsets, the field of Threeclover Green Church is examined. Through a collection of written sermons, ethnographic participatory observations of Masses, conversations with the congregation and the online presence of the church, a critical semiotic analysis of Threeclover is conducted, to give a holistic account of the church's activities as a Green Church, finding that the Christian values of church-members does affect their relation to nature both, through practices of gratefulness and through a sense of moral duty.

Key words: Protestantism, climate-crisis denial, cultures of care, spirituality, ecology

## Acknowledgements

I want to thank the leadership at the Threeclover Church for welcoming me into their space and for sharing their time, thoughts and insights with me. I extend special thanks to the priest and the Green Church council. I also want to thank the congregation at Threeclover for their curiosity and acceptance of my presence. Thank you to Annika Pissin for excellent and caring supervision, for the great constructive feedback and for all your time and flexibility. A huge thanks to the CPS program, especially to the people of my batch, who have been wonderful and inspiring company throughout this thesis process and our two years together. Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for their love and support throughout this project - it means everything to me.

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## List of Translations and Abbreviations

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| Folkekirken        | Danish Church  |
| Grøn Kirke         | Green Church, Green Churches   |
| Menighedsråd       | Parish Council<br>N.B.: The English term <i>Parish Council</i> covers two things in Danish: Menighedsråd, which is what this paper describes, and sogneråd, which is an old apparatus that would govern each district as defined by their nearest church. Sogneråd no longer exists in Denmark, and menighedsråd are solely concerned with running the churches. |
| Danske Kirkers Råd | Council of Danish Churches   |
| CCD                | Climate-Crisis Denialism   |
| FGO                | Folkekirkens Grønne Omstilling (The Green Transition of the Danish Church)   |
| KU                 | Københavns Universitet (University of Copenhagen)  |
| NGO                | Non-Governmental Organisation  |

# Religion and Climate-Emotions: An Introduction

Religion or spirituality touches our lives, whether or not we individually subscribe to any particular beliefs. Christianity has historically been a major influence in shaping different areas of Western societies, including knowledge- and value-production – e.g., work ethics (Worster, 1994, pp. 39-47; Svendsen, 2008). Religious practices have been as integrated with humanity as our relationship with nature has. Research indicates connections between spirituality and nature-connectedness (UNEP, 2019; UNEP, n.d.; Boersema et al., 2008; Gottlieb, 2006).

It is common to think of Denmark as a culturally secular society (Petersen, 2015; Jacobsen, 2016). However, the historical presence of Christianity – especially Protestantism – is still present in the mindsets and structures of Danish society (Ebdrup, 2012; Jacobsen, 2023; Lassen, 2016). Christianity's presence is in our language, actions and morals; in our understanding of the world (Sanders et al., 2018; Schlie & Weper, 2020). To talk about nature today, is inevitably to talk about the climate crisis. The climate crisis is perhaps the biggest global crisis of our time and thus affects all of us (Twumasi-Ankrah et al., 2023). The cultural core of human society can be described as a collection of religious, economic, political and social relationships closely concerned with exploiting resources in their surrounding environment and the natural resources deemed necessary for survival (Steiner, 2016, p. 21). An important part of tackling the climate crisis lies in our collective mindsets, overcoming climate-crisis denialism (CDD) and working to create cultures of care where collaboration on climate actions can take place (Twumasi-Ankrah et al., 2023, p. 884; Weintrobe, 2021).

Whereas previous reports on the topic of the Danish Church and sustainability have mainly focussed on the material dimension of the church, (Nielsen, 2016; Det Teologiske Fakultet, n.d.; Poulsen et al., n.d.), little attention has been afforded the NGO Green Church, which seeks to bring sustainability to the Danish Church (Storgaard Mikkelsen, 2020, p. 116). Nor has there been discussion of the church's

climate actions that the church itself has not led. Green Church has only existed since 2008, and a Green transition for the Danish Church has only had governmental funding since 2022 (Halsboe-Jørgensen, n.d.). Because of this, a deeper understanding of the environmental behaviour of the Danish Church has yet to be gained. This research examines the church as a spiritual actor in how it addresses the emotional dimensions of the climate crisis. I engage with the topic of Green Churches because I see them as an expression of the current state of religion, spirituality and environmentalism in Denmark. Green Church has potential, like all religious institutions, to be a powerful mobiliser in moving Danish society towards climate action (Fritz & El-Menouar, 2023, p. 83; Gottlieb, 2006, p. 12).

This research builds on the assertion that spirituality can aid individuals in addressing their ingrained CCD (Bellehumeur et al., 2022; van Schalkwyk, 2011; Twumasi-Ankrah et al., 2023). Through a case-study of Threeclover Church, I want to shed light on how Danish Green Churches confront and navigate climate-emotions, and whether or not that process creates a culture of care. If Green Churches function as a culture of care, they hold potential to influence Danish mindsets on a larger scale – they have government funding, possess a lot of land and interact with seventy percent of the Danish population at some point of their lives. Accordingly, exploring what role they can play in navigating the climate crisis we are facing becomes important. Therefore, within the larger context of a culture of uncare and implicatory CCD, I want to answer the following research question:

**How does Threeclover Green Church facilitate a culture of care with emphasis on climate-crisis-related emotions?**

Using theories on implicatory, socially-organised CCD, I assert how the Global North, and Denmark in particular, exists in a culture of uncare, and how cultivating a culture of care instead can help manage the difficulties that arise when we confront climate-emotions going forward in tackling climate-crisis issues. To gain a holistic



picture of how Threeclover functions as a Green Church, multimethod-data collection – written sermons, ethnographic fieldwork and online materials – is used to apply this theory to the case-study. The empirical material is thematically analysed using a critical-semiotic approach, which allows incorporation of the different types of data to be understood as a part of the entirety of Threeclover Church. Four main themes emerge from the empirical material: Continued CCD, culture of care, hope, and Christian values as they pertain to nature-connectedness.

## Denialism at Work: Theoretical Framework

The theory of this thesis builds upon established literature and concepts within the fields of environmental-sociology and psychology. Understanding human behaviour and social structures helps us grasp current CCD and the connection- and disconnection between humans and nature. I touch on the concepts of *implicatory CCD*, *socially-organised denial*, and *cultures of care- and uncare*. These concepts provide insight into how individuals connect and communicate about the climate crisis.

### Climate-Crisis Denialism

Kari Marie Norgaard (2011) discusses the state of CCD in Scandinavia. Norgaard does not mean overt *literal* denial of climate-science, but emotional dissociation and denial in the everyday lives of Scandinavian people, which she refers to as *implicatory denial* (Norgaard, 2011, pp. 10-11). Norgaard explains that having knowledge of what sustainable lifestyle changes look like does not always equal living accordingly. Actions and words/values do not match up when it comes to the climate crisis, even though we are all well-informed of the consequences we face. The information-deficit model, which assumes that better access to knowledge of a subject elicits more healthy and ethical actions, and which has traditionally been used when trying to promote environmental behaviours, does not hold true regarding the climate crisis (ibid, p. 2). Norgaard's research is specifically concerned with Scandinavia, and there have been social developments since her research was conducted. In Denmark, there has been an increasing desire to reconnect with nature in recent years (Winther, 2018).

The collective mindset of Exceptionalism is one of the root causes of the climate crisis (Weintrobe, 2021). Beliefs of entitlement and being able to circumvent morality when it benefits us, dominate this mindset (ibid, pp. 1-2). Exceptionalism is especially prevalent in neoliberal modern-day societies. Neoliberalism as a term covers an ideology, economic framework and mindset, and it most concisely describes our current global economic system (ibid, pp. 34-38)

Drawing on Robert J. Lifton (1961), who studies thought reform, Norgaard asserts that *cognitive dissonance* causes people to experience ‘*double realities*’ about the climate crisis (Norgaard, 2011, pp. 4-5). With double realities, there is readily available access to and acceptance of climate-science facts and widespread belief that these facts are reliable. However, people are able to reconcile not acting on this knowledge, to continue functioning in daily life of the *business-as-usual* society (ibid). Neoliberal interest in business-as-usual has resulted in an overvaluation of economic growth, at the cost of “human, material and legal obstacles” (Weintrobe, 2021, pp. 37-38). Since the 1980s, neoliberal lobbyism has worked to implement this mindset and ideology in politics and the media in a strong-armed effort to ensure that the business-as-usual did not change since lobbyists enjoyed privileges from it (ibid).

As defined by Joanna Macy and Molly Brown in *Coming Back to Life*, business-as-usual is the “assumption that there is little need to change the way we live” and that the challenges we face in economic and environmental areas are “just temporary difficulties from which we will surely recover, and even profit” (Macy & Brown, 2014, p. 39).

Neoliberal ideology has been implanted in society at a large scale. Furthermore, when tackling environmental issues, it has been the hegemonic force driving the conversation and, in turn, the action taken (or, rather, not taken) to combat the climate crisis. Not everyone who subscribes to business-as-usual-thinking is consciously aware of it and may not recognise how they comply with it, because of how overreaching and well-established a truth-regime neoliberalism is (Norgaard, 2011; Macy & Brown, 2014). This is not said to dismiss the potential for regulated technological aid in managing the climate crisis. Indeed, it increasingly seems to be a necessary tool in the kit for climate-adaptation (Williams, 2024; Buck, 2019). However, I focus my attention on the role Green Churches can play for people in managing climate-crisis emotions.

## Socially-Organised Denial

The denial that stems from trauma of the climate crisis is a subconsciously socially-organised, produced- and reproduced response – an individual needs such denial to function in society on a day-to-day basis (Weintrobe, 2021). The threat of acknowledging the climate crisis is that you (if you are living in an affluent society) will have to sacrifice some of your privileges, and that thought brings up intense fears (Weintrobe, 2021, pp. 196-197). Because the established neoliberal-capitalist system wields so much hegemonic power, it seems impossible that we can survive outside of it, as it would mean we would need to go without the technological advantages, comfort and over-consumerism we currently experience.

Norgaard states that it is even more difficult to consider the realities of the climate crisis *with* this knowledge because it causes emotions and reactions that go against established cultural norms (2011, p. 12). Awareness of the climate crisis is widespread, but the emotional reactions are being stopped within ourselves “in order to protect individual identity and sense of empowerment and to maintain culturally produced conceptions of reality” (ibid, p. 207). This inhibits our ability to act and do what we know to be morally right. In her case-study of the Norwegian town Bygdaby, Norgaard observed that “failure to comply with normal behaviour is grounds for suspicion of one’s character” (ibid, p. 27). Norgaard highlights the structure of socially-organised denial, which keeps information about the climate crisis emotionally separated from people’s everyday lives, making it distant and abstract, rather than tangible (ibid, pp. 60, 90-91).

## Implicatory Denial

Stanley Cohen (2001) categorises denial into *literal*, *interpretative* and *implicatory*. Norgaard identifies the type of CCD that occurs in everyday life as *implicatory denial*, denial, and avoidance of the emotional and psychological fallouts of our situation

(2011, pp. 10-11). Implicatory denial is a phenomenon that occurs in the case of business-as-usual mindsets - being confronted by our culpability in the climate crisis is to be confronted with information that causes unwanted and deeply challenging feelings, (e.g., panic, guilt, shame, hopelessness). To function throughout everyday life, these emotions are pushed away and can result in feeling apathetic towards the climate crisis (ibid, pp. 58-59).

Implicatory CCD can be seen as a coping mechanism for continuing to live the way we do in affluent societies. If we acknowledge the real consequences of our collective overuse and dependence on consumerism, we are faced with an intense *moral injury*. Moral injury occurs within us when we are aware that we have somehow violated our internal ethics (Weintrobe, 2020, p. 351).

Weintrobe argues that this happens with more frequency as the general public has become aware of the way humankind has participated in damaging nature (ibid). Weintrobe sees moral injury as a sign of mental health - a sign that our conscience is functioning (ibid, p. 352). She argues that by promoting a global culture of uncaring, neoliberalism aims to dismantle our internal sense of morality, so we are more willing to continue participating in maintaining business-as-usual – thus inflicting ourselves with more moral injuries (Weintrobe, 2021, p. 99). As we often make choices that do not align with our ethics, to function in everyday life, we justify the state of society or our lives. This happens through *thought-terminating cliches* that stop us from wrestling with how damaging our lifestyles are. Thought-terminating cliches, as coined by Robert J. Lifton, encapsulate phrases that are intended to compress complex ideas into reductive adages, so as to discourage further discussion of the topic (1961, p. 443). Such cliches are enforced by the agenda of neoliberalism, which enables and manipulates further participation in business-as-usual. To repair moral injury, we must deal with remorse, seek forgiveness and be able to face culpability, all within a historical context (Weintrobe, 2021, p. 242).

## Combatting Climate-Crisis Denial: Building Cultures of Care

Norgaard proposes that a key to overcoming the cognitive dissonance of double realities is having people engage actively with the climate topic, e.g. through political participation (2011, p. 228).

Narcissistic exceptionalism thrives within the neoliberal-capitalist framework of uncare (Weintrobe, 2021, p. 86). Weintrobe emphasises that there is not a care/uncare dichotomy, but that both are aspects of us and society, and that it should not be assumed that care will be the strongest force – it requires work (ibid, p. 13). She argues that unchecked narcissism is dangerous, and therefore, humanity's most important task is creating and maintaining a framework of care (ibid, pp. 86, 215).

This means challenging the pervasive idea of limitless economic growth and acknowledging its limitations (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2023; Weintrobe, 2021, p. 209). A culture of care requires a shift in perspective. We must transition to a caring framework, where we recognise our place within a larger ecosystem, consider our choices' impact on the planet and take responsibility for the collective good (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2023; Weintrobe, 2021, pp. 213-214). Cultures of care entail building connections through communication, understanding and fostering cooperation while dismantling division (Weintrobe, 2021, pp. 218, 225).

Building a sustainable future necessitates balancing hope and a realistic understanding of the challenges we face (ibid, p. 223). We need the determination that comes from a sense of entitlement to a healthy planet (ibid). This requires dismantling existing structures that perpetuate a lack of care and establishing frameworks that promote it (ibid, p. 225).

Another aspect of building a culture of care is found in what Macy & Johnstone term *active hope*. This is a practice where we become active participants in creating what we hope for (2012, p. 20). This practice works to enable our collective imagination of a better world (ibid, p. 21). There are three ways many of us are engaging with active hope: Taking action to slow damage to the earth, transforming

the foundations of our lives and shifting worldviews and values (Macy & Brown, 2014, p. 40). When practising active hope and building our ability to imagine, we foster our ability to act in a hopeful way (Macy & Johnstone, 2012, pp. 157-158). This research investigates what can be said about engaging with CCD from a spiritual perspective through participation in organised religion.

## The Situation in Denmark

This research applies the established theoretical framework of CCD to explore the interplay of climate change, emotions, and societal responses in Denmark, with an emphasis on the Danish Church. In Denmark, people do not face immediate or physical climate-trauma, like severe droughts, starvation or life-threatening natural disasters. However, as in all places on the planet, the climate crisis is felt in Denmark (Leitzell, 2021; Scharling et al., 2021). The climate-related challenges currently present in Denmark include a breakdown of the marine-environment, floodings and agriculturally detrimental heatwaves (Olesen, 2018; Justesen, 2024; Oldager, 2023). While most Danes acknowledge global warming and are concerned about it, they are also unclear on what action to take against it, if any (Lind et al., 2023). An implicatory type of denial creates separation from nature and furthers the idea that nature is to be exploited (Gliese, 2022; Mikkelsen, 2018; Nielsen, 2011). In addition to the constant and increasing flood of concerning climate news, this can be said to be a trauma for the entire population, which awakens feelings of guilt, shame, anxiety, grief, apathy and hopelessness (Weintrobe, 2021, pp. 236-39). The apathy and denial are not because of individual greed but because the information we receive is so overwhelming and frightening that it cannot be fully comprehended. Norgaard sees it as a “testament to the human capacity for empathy, compassion and underlying sense of moral imperative to respond even as we fail to do so” (Norgaard, 2011, p. 61). Denmark is also a place where a culture of care is being built in the public space (Weintrobe, 2021, pp. 217-219).

## The Ecology of Protestantism

The following chapter relies on research that covers the historical connection between Protestantism and nature perception – hereunder, its influence on capitalism - to contextualise the Danish Church in today’s society.

### Christianity and Nature-Relations

Christianity as a world religion has been extensively influential in shaping the world we inhabit. In the Middle Ages, the Christian (i.e. Catholic) view of nature was that humanity was fully a part of ‘the Creation’ (Loewen, 2021). During the Middle Ages, an influential figure in human nature-relatedness was Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179), a Catholic saint. She was instrumental in incorporating Green holism into the theology of her contemporary time. She talked about Greenness (Viriditas) in all levels of life - the mundane and the highly spiritual - as the force that connects the natural world to God (ibid, pp. 126-127). Hildegard spoke of the value of Greening both in the external and internal world of humans, terming the latter “mental Greenness” and “Greening of the mind” (ibid, p. 136). With Western imperialism, colonialism and Protestant construction of the Christian God, this idea has since been lost alongside the depreciation of the natural world (Oliver, 1992, p. 387).

In 1967, Lynn White Jr. published *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis*, establishing that “human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny-that is, by religion” (White, 1967, p. 1205). His theory was that modern-day science and technology-movements originate from and gained world-dominance in the Middle Ages (White, 1967, p. 1205).

In tandem with the agricultural-technological developments during the Mediaeval period, the nature-perception became that nature was something Man ruled over, which White claimed has been prevalent and is still the largely Christian-context we live within (ibid). The Christian creation myth sets a scene where the physical world is



made to serve Man, and where Man might be made from the earth but also in the image of God, distinct from the rest of The Creation (ibid).

Early Western studies of nature stem from religious motivation to better understand God, thus producing a tradition of science being something framed by religion (ibid, p. 1206). In tandem with academic developments, Christianity has shaped a historical context of promoting human disconnection from nature (Worster, 1994, p. 27). Donald Worster concludes that the relationship between ecology-science and Christian morality is quite complex. He argues that historically-established Christian norms and the development of Western social norms can be seen as rivals and allies (ibid, p. 28). In certain ways, it seems easy to assume that science tries to combat religious beliefs of how the world functions, and that they hold oppositional positions. However, Western science has historically been imbued with a profoundly Christian approach to nature (ibid).

During the 17th and 18th centuries, nature was seen as a divinely ordered machine (ibid, pp. 39-40). This machine existed for Man - to caretake and rule over (ibid, p. 44). Nature was positioned as a resource for human comfort, with God's blessing in making use of it. A counterpoint to this arose during the Romantic Era, where attempts to return to paganist (or Mediaeval) closeness to nature conflicted with Christian dogma, creating theological debate, as some saw this as heretical (ibid, p. 86).

Eventually, the Romantic idea of harmony with nature was globally discarded as paganist (Oliver, 1992, pp. 380-382). Disconnection between humans and nature was pervasive for many decades, shaping Protestantism, imperialism, and capitalism, during which nature was seen as malignant, to be feared, conquered and controlled (Worster, 1994, p. 126). Likewise, in the scientific sphere, nature came to be considered mainly from a positivist paradigm as objectively observable and separate from both humanity and religion (Oliver, 1992, p. 383).

Because of the historical connection between Christianity and academia, White puts the burden of guilt in the question of the climate crisis on Christianity (White, 1967, p. 1206). White also states that it is unlikely that more science and technology will be the

only things needed to bring us through the climate crisis, and that we need to “find a new religion or rethink our old one” (ibid). Hence, we will continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian tenet that nature exists to serve Man (ibid, p. 1207). The response to White came in alternative readings of Western history, claiming Christianity has only recently undergone this development or in pushing for a new theology of nature in Christianity (Oliver, 1992, p. 390; Klassen, 2018; p. 56; Jenkins, 2009, pp. 303-305). Despite eco-theological debate, a paradigmatic rethinking of Christianity as Green has yet to occur (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 1006; Fritz & El-Menouar, 2023, p. 102).

## Protestantism

The ecological awakening of ecumenical circles in the 1960s and onwards forced Protestant theologians to reconsider and re-engage with nature-relatedness, as the responsibility for the ecological damages that were being brought to attention was placed on Christianity because its doctrine tasked Man with controlling the Earth (Oliver, 1992, p. 390; Jochemsen, 2018, p. 39). Since then, there have been calls for rethinking the Christian approach to nature. This could include wholeness (holism), mutuality (reciprocity), responsivity (admiration of nature) and mystery (the spiritual aspect) (Oliver, 1992, pp. 391-396).

The work ethic that rose amongst Protestants is characterised by severe self-discipline and seeing work as a calling from God (Weber, 1905/2014, pp. 105-106). It is also characterised by promoting frugal, ascetic personal lifestyles while accumulating wealth and reinvesting it to create even more economic growth (Weber, 1905/2014, pp. 119). This type of accumulated wealth was packaged in the idea of Christian duty towards God, which allowed followers to distance themselves from allegations of greed or selfishness (ibid, p. 184). Therefore, it can be perceived as a predecessor to modern-day capitalism (Weber, 1905/2014).

The Reformation changed the perception of work from meaningless to meaningful (Svendsen, 2008, p. 13). Through the Middle Ages, the church condemned idleness and emphasised that work was a duty (ibid, p. 19). With the Reformation, the concepts of *callings* (or vocations) drastically developed and reframed the approach to work as positive. In Lutheranism, dedicating yourself to your work was the best way to serve God - thus bringing complete devotion into everyday life (ibid, pp. 19-20). Doing your job as well as you could became extremely important, carrying over into a non-religious work ethic that echoes in our time (Svendsen, 2008, pp. 20-22). Though the sense of religious obligation has largely disappeared, we still see “hardworking” as a positive personality trait (Svendsen, 2008, p. 25). In conjunction with Protestantism's focus on individualised faith, this has been seen as a catalyst for disconnection from nonhuman-nature (Klassen, 2018, pp. 56-57).

In academia, there has been a perceived incompatibility between the Christian concept of God and a positive conception of nature (Oliver, 1992, p. 387). Remembering the diversity that exists within Christianity is important so as not to paint the entirety of Protestantism with one brush. For example, religious anxiety and desire to be good can result in drivenness, which can be an important factor in maintaining hope (Stanworth, 2006, p. 299). Opposed to this notion, finding motivation through practices of thankfulness and reciprocity can be as effective and less stress-inducing (Macy & Johnstone, 2012, pp. 64-65). Furthermore, while there is a correlation between Protestantism and economic growth, there is also a correlation between Protestant heritage and contemporary thriving democracy, possibly owed to the egalitarianism of-Protestantism (Jochemsen, 2018, pp. 42-43). Protestant rhetoric has also been used when talking about environmental protection as stewardship of the earth and the responsibility held by humanity (ibid, p. 48). The concept of stewardship suggests an anthropocentric view, placing humans above nature (Twumasi-Ankrah et al., 2023, p. 883).

It must also be noted that while religious beliefs can impact nature-connection, relation to the environment is shaped by broader societal and historical factors that influence how ideas translate into actions (Stanworth, 2006, p. 318).

The Protestantism of Denmark differs from the branch that Weber studied. Danish Protestantism falls under Lutheranism, which Weber specifically states had a less obvious correlation with capitalism (Weber, 1905/2014, p. 109). The Romantic Era was an important chapter of Danish history. During this time, N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872) was influential in numerous fields, including theology, history and pedagogy (Andersen, 2005). His largest, lasting contribution to the Danish Church is the idea that every Parish should decide for themselves how to interpret Christian scripture (Overgaard, 2023). Ole Jensen's 1976 work *I Vækstens Vold* is an important contribution to Danish Christian-theological attempts at tackling the ecological awakening of the last century. Jensen, too, saw Christianity as having predominantly viewed nature through utilitarian lenses (1976, p. 22). He framed mindless development as destructive of diversity of cultures and called for new Christian-thinking that strives to be more holistic and caring for the "complete register" - meaning the entirety of the planet (ibid, pp. 9;12-18).

## Spirituality and Ecological Mindsets

Environmental-sociology and psychology emphasise the importance of mental health and nature-connectedness, highlighting the seriousness of climate anxiety, grief, and depression and the need for hope and compassion in addressing these challenges (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2023; Weintrobe, 2021; Norgaard, 2011; Hickman et al., 2021; Dodds, 2021). Religion is known to impact human well-being and perceptions of nature (Skirbekk et al., 2020; Ferguson & Tamburello, 2015; Ryff, 2021). Research indicates that while religion and environmentally oriented mindsets are in no way incompatible, neither are they a given, especially in Judeo-Christian traditions (Fritz & El-Menouar, 2023, p. 102). However, there is well-established research into the nature-

connectedness found in non-Western practices and traditions. For example, Buddhism directly correlates mindfulness and nature appreciation to psychological well-being (Teerapong et al., 2024, p. 50; Kaufman & Mock, 2014, p. 889). It might be assumed that similar results could occur within the Protestant community if nature-connectedness is regained there and that mitigating the impact of future climate disasters depends on that (Armstrong, 2022, p. 95).

Ecological-theology is valuable when it carries over into eco-spiritual practices (Skjoldager-Nielsen, 2021). Developing mindsets that encourage harmony between individuals, communities and the non-human world is something that spirituality can aid with (ibid, p. 118). It is known that practising gratitude to God is emotionally beneficial on an individual level (Watkins et al., 2023, p. 117; Corry et al., 2014, p. 103; Costigan et al., 2007, p. 44). Likewise, gratitude builds positive emotions in communities (Fredrickson, 2004; Rushdy, 2020), as it generates space for generosity and humility (Kavedžija, 2020, p. 221). These factors can facilitate pro-environmental behaviours and bridge the gap between environmental values and actions (Noortgaete, 2016).

As I am situated in Denmark, I focus on the spiritual tools, practices, and traditions of Lutheran-Protestantism that are commonly discussed and utilised in Denmark.

## Methods

The following section covers the methods used for this case-study, which include ethnographic participant observation, thematic content analysis for written sermons and the online presence of Threeclover Church.

### Church Selection

I contacted fourteen different Green Church-certified Parish Councils across the Øresund region of Denmark to ensure easy access during fieldwork. Churches' sustainability is verifiable on the website of registered Green Churches in Denmark.<sup>1</sup> I wanted to research a church that actively uses its spiritual position to accumulate knowledge and inspire climate action. This ruled out many of the churches I initially contacted, as being 'Green' was not an active part of their identity. The church I did select was well-suited as it has an active Green Council and a priest who is engaged with climate activism and global politics and who likes to incorporate aspects of nature-connection in his sermons, regardless of the general theme. I refer to this church with the pseudonym Threeclover Church.

### Case Study

While single case-studies are often criticised for their limited generalizability and potential researcher bias (Bryman, 2016, p. 399; Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 4), Bent Flyvbjerg offers a counterargument. He highlights how careful case selection can provide valuable insights to a larger field and that generalisation is an inherent part of knowledge accumulation (Flyvbjerg, 2006, pp. 9-10). Furthermore, explaining a specific case does not necessarily require reproducibility, as each context is unique (Fairclough et al., 2002, p. 5).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gronkirke.dk>

I utilised a pluralistic approach in gathering data and used multimethod in my single case-study of Threeclover Church, including participatory observations of Masses, written sermons, conversation with leadership and the online presence of the church - hereunder social media and their website. In qualitative data collection methods-triangulation can be used to collect empirical material in multiple ways (Patton, 1999, p. 1193; Fusch et al., 2018, pp. 22-23; Anguera et al., 2018, p. 2758). Triangulation can result in unexpected findings, which might not have been considered through a single-method approach, as the weakness of one method is often supported by the strength of another (Mathison, 1988, p. 14). This approach somewhat allowed me to counter the limitations of each individual method and provided me with a holistic understanding of the way Threeclover handles climate-emotions.

I did fieldwork in March 2024, and the time constraint was a limitation, as is common with access to the field in ethnography (Fetterman, 2010, p. 11). Spending more time with the church - for instance, extending fieldwork until June and attending their summer-school days - would have allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of activities that were specifically geared towards their Green Church identity - not just incorporating Green Church into their general activities. Furthermore, a broader timeframe could have allowed for multiple churches to be studied, which could be subject to future research. While Triangulation offers valuable insights, researcher bias persists (Mathison, 1988, pp. 14-15). Maintaining openness, transparency, and acknowledging potential contradictions helps mitigate this (Flyvbjerg, 2006, pp. 19-20). I have kept consciously aware of this throughout my research.

## Online Presence and Activity

Web-based data is distinct and often more visual, therefore offering a different insight into Threeclover's activities and how they reach out to the public (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008, p. 535; Bryman, 2016, p. 384). The online presence of Threeclover as a Green Church was minimal. On Instagram and Facebook, 21 posts were made in

March about each activity held by the church, receiving 10-30 likes and typically no comments.

## Mass Ethnographic Participatory Observations

Centring the population of a study provides insight into their unique knowledge of their own context, which can be achieved through ethnographic participatory observations (Fetterman, 2010; Bryman, 2016, p. 423;446).

I attended five Masses. Three were on Sunday mornings, one on a Friday morning and one Wednesday afternoon, as Easter fell at the end of March (see Appendix 1). Each Mass took about two hours – one and a half hours of Mass, followed by roughly 30 minutes of mingling. There was an average turn-up of 50-80 people. It was overwhelmingly a white population, which is perhaps noteworthy because it was in Copenhagen - one of Denmark's more ethnically diverse cities. I spoke only to Danish citizens, but tourists enter the buildings outside of the services. Before each Mass, we were handed the program, which contained a schedule, and which psalms would be song. I would participate fully in the Mass; sing psalms, recite the Creed and return wishes of blessings to fellow parishioners. I paid particular attention to the sermon, as this was where the opportunity to bring in the climate appears most apparent.

Mass is an open-for-all event that can also be emotional, important and sacred to the attendees. I did not record anything during my ethnographic observations there, and therefore, none of my in-depth conversations. I took detailed fieldnotes and followed up with informants, to ensure they felt recognised in the material. Even though obtaining ongoing informed consent from every church-goer was not possible, I discussed my research with the people I interacted with after Mass. Therefore, I have been especially careful to anonymise the church, using pseudonyms for both the church and its leadership. I was mindful of how I acted at the Masses and the mingling afterwards - I listened and tried not to lead conversations in any particular direction. I did not intentionally use these mingling situations to try and gain any particular data



but rather used it to make myself familiar to the congregation as well as I could manage in a relatively short period of time - to try and build as much trust as I could with this community (Huber & Imeri, 2021, p. 14). Therefore, it contributed as complementary data.

## Unstructured Leadership Interviews

I spoke in depth with Priest E.H., a Danish man in his sixties leading Threeclover Church since 2016, and two Parish Council members: Retired volunteer W.O. and A.G., choir member and Green Council leader in her fifties. W.O. and A.G. have both been on the Parish Council for four years. I obtained written and oral consent from E.H., W.O. and A.G., but I understand informed consent goes further than written consent (Huber & Imeri, 2021, p. 4). I went over when and where I would collect data, how I would treat it, and who would access it to gain approval for all my activities from the leadership I was in contact with. I have stayed in touch with the church since completing my fieldwork to continuously keep the leadership informed of my work and to give them longer than a month to make potential objections or withdraw anything (Huber & Imeri, 2021, pp. 3-6). The unstructured interviews with E.H. and A.G. were conducted in the church building. With W.O., it took place as I helped prepare for the next Bible-study session Threeclover would host. In all cases, audio recording was impractical because of the locations and activities, and would not have captured my full experience of the fieldwork (Hurst, 2023), but as with the Masses, I wrote fieldnotes.

## Written Sermons

During the beginning of my fieldwork, as I was having introductory conversations with E.H. on the Green Council, he shared with me three previous sermons he had given over the last couple of years (see Appendix 2). They were sermons E.H. felt were especially representative of how the Threeclover Church approached its role as a Green

Church pertaining to the spiritual and mental aspects of the climate crisis. Furthermore, they are a type of data I have not influenced the production of (Ingemann et al., 2018, pp. 71, 140). I rely on them to understand how the church sees its purpose (Fetterman, 2010, pp. 63-64). I use this document data as a resource to explore the way Threeclover communicates about the climate (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008, p. 112; Duedahl & Jacobsen, 2010). The sermons are helpful in understanding the discursive and semiotic features of the Threeclover Church, which is an integral part of recounting how a network communicates about a topic (Fairclough et al., 2002, p. 9).

## Data Interpretation

For data interpretation, I apply semiotic analysis from a critical realist position. This thesis is situated within the understanding that while there is no human/nature dichotomy, nature exists outside our own perception of it, and we interpret and understand it through our ability to interact with it (Benton & Craib, 2001, p. 58). As no social practice is reducible to only semiosis and discourse, it is important to approach it from a more holistic angle (Fairclough et al., 2002, p. 9). Within a critical semiotic analysis, one tries to account for discursive as well as extra-discursive domains (ibid, p. 1). Addressing semiotic processes without taking them out of their broader context allows for a nuanced thematic analysis, where tensions and contradictions on a topic can emerge and be comprehended by locating them within embodied practices, socially-organised groups and the material world (ibid, p. 2). A critical semiotic analysis of phenomena, such as Green Churches sees the phenomena as a collection of structures and power-relations that co-produce effects. It does so by identifying structures and what powers enable or limit them and then moving this analysis back to the concrete (the observable) events to look at the consequences of these powers (ibid, pp. 9-10). Thus, when looking at Threeclover, understanding the specifics of the case-study enlightens larger issues (ibid, p. 5). I looked at five elements of the field: Actors, language, texts, social relations and practical contexts. This

allowed for examining dialectical internal relations - the tensions and contradictions present at Threeclover and how they exist as a Green Church. The weight of each element varies from case to case, and with Threeclover, texts, actors and social relations were prominent (ibid, p. 8).

## Ethics and Positionality

I have reflected on my positionality throughout the collection of my data. I initially had a phone conversation followed by an in-person meeting at Threeclover to discuss my project and intentions so the local and immediate leadership would be aware of my presence and what I would be doing to participate. I clarified that consent could be revoked anytime and committed to regular discussions, especially with the priest and W.O. I extended the same offer of withdrawing statements and to read over my work to A.G., it was important to me to not merely look in at the church, but to experience it from the inside (Steiner, 2016).

As I am Danish and did fieldwork in Denmark, all my data was collected in Danish. I produced all translations used in this study - and with full knowledge from the Parish Council, with the open offer for them to make suggestions. Acknowledging my positions as natively Danish and white and my familiarity with the religious and social practices is important to how I was able to enter the field of Threeclover Church, as I already had a lived understanding of the culture. Of important note is also that I am not a member of the Danish Church but have been raised 'culturally-Christian', meaning in a society shaped by the values of the Danish Church and celebrating typical Christian holidays (Allingham, 2014). My background affected how I approached my fieldwork, as I would have faced more access-related obstacles in a different spiritual space.

## Green Church: Contextualisation of Threeclover Church

The Danish Bible was last translated in 2020 (previously, it was in 1991), where significant changes were made to wording regarding humanity's role as ruler over the Earth, instead phrasing it as Man being responsible for the Earth (Kaaber Pors et al., 2023, p. 26). Peter Fischer-Møller states that the common translation of the Christian ruler-mandate/stewardship has contributed to the instrumentalization of nature and that changing the wording is an important part of making reparations for that (ibid, p. 85). The hegemonic Christian denomination in Denmark has been Evangelical-Lutheran Protestantism since the 1500's (Hazen, 2022). Therefore, the Protestant Church's connection to Danish identity and the Danish state is well-established. In its current iteration, the Church is so involved with the state of Denmark that its English name is simply 'the Danish Church'. In Danish, it literally translates to 'the (Danish) People's Church', often simply called *folkekirken*. This iteration of the Church has existed since 1849, when it was founded with the first edition of the Danish constitution (ibid.). The connection between church and state goes as far as to maintain a church-tax that funds the Danish Church. If a Danish citizen is a church member, they pay this tax, although it should be noted that it is possible to opt out of it for non-members of the religion (Stenbæk, 2024). However, even non-members fund the Danish Church because it also receives subsidies from the state, taken from standard income taxes. It is the only religion in Denmark that has such a connection to the state (Krak, 2013). Currently more than seventy percent of the Danish population are members of the Church, though it is uncommon for Danes to actively attend church outside of holidays and personal milestones like baptisms, confirmations, weddings and funerals (Hazen, 2022).

The vast majority of Danish Christians actively believe in science - there is no widespread issue in reconciling science with faith, as it is accepted that 'God created natural laws' (Øhrstrøm, 2020; eib.org, 2021).

The Green Church initiative has been around as an NGO since 2008. Any Danish church can become Green by fulfilling a set of requirements presented in a checklist of

50 points (see Appendix 3). Often, they operate via a Green Council. Green Church is attached to Council of Danish Churches, the main organisational organ through which leaders and decision-makers of the churches communicate and have dialogues about Danish Protestantism (Danske Kirkers Råd, 2024). Between 2008 and 2022, certifying new Green Churches was a slow-going process, with little to no attention from Danish Churches. As recently as 2017, only 175 of Denmark's more than 2000 churches were considered 'Green' (Røndal, 2017; Hazen, 2022). By December 2023, the number was 370 (Grøn Kirke, 2024). In 2019, Denmark had a national election that was widely labelled a 'climate-election', as that was the number one issue voters cared about (information.dk, 2019; Øyen, n.d.; Storgaard Mikkelsen, 2020, p. 61). In light of this, the Minister of Culture and Church, Joy Mogensen, looked into how to include the church in the climate goals presented by the government at that time (Krak, 2020). In 2022, the Danish government began allotting public funds to finance the initiative Folkekirkens Grønne Omstilling (FGO). This compelled more churches to actively engage with sustainable practices and become aware of the notion of being a 'Green Church' (Folkekirkens Grønne Omstilling, n.d.). Since FGO began receiving a substantial amount of resources (among them access to GIS mapping services), it has incentivised churches to start making changes and taking steps towards becoming sustainable in tandem with Denmark's overarching carbon-emission goals for 2030 and 2050 (Halsboe-Jørgensen, n.d.).

The Danish Church is the biggest faith-society in Denmark and the third largest landowner (Christensen, 2020; Grue et al., 2021). It owns 11.000 hectares of land (7000 used for predominantly industrial agriculture), 4000 buildings and 2000 graveyards across the country (Krogsgaard, 2024; Morell, 2022). In a report from April 2024, FGO mapped out the CO2 emissions of the Church and attributed the majority to buildings and renovations. The ordering party of the report stated that they wish the report to spur the Danish Church into action (Poulsen et al., n.d.). The current strategy of the Green Church is to motivate and inspire climate responsibility and actions through theological

perspectives, and the 2026 goal is to reach 500 registered Green Churches (Grøn Kirke, 2024).

## Danish Debates on Christian Environmentalism

Within the Danish theological space are acknowledgements of other religions' environmental practices. For example, Notto R. Thelle suggests Danish Green Churches accredit and learn from Eastern spirituality regarding environmental thought (Kaaber Pors et al., 2023, pp. 73-74).

The degree to which the Danish Church ought to be involved in environmentalism and how such involvement should be implemented are topics of internal- and external discussions in the Danish Protestant community. In a 2018 article published in Danish-Christian media, the expressed opinion was: “If the church begins pointing to concrete political opinions, it stops being a church for everyone” (Thorsen, 2018). This article argues that Green Churches are inherently political and that they should not be because they should not, hold any official political opinions (ibid). In contrast - and since the national election and the FGO initiative - the 2023 book *Klima, Tro, Håb og Handling* presents a collection of the current spectrum of opinion from several Church members. “Tro, håb og kærlighed” - *faith, hope and love* (NIV, 2011, 1 Corinthians 13:13) is such an often-spoken phrase in the Danish Church that it is practically their slogan, with good reason, perhaps. In the global conversation on the climate crisis, the necessity and importance of hope is repeatedly brought up. Rebecca Solnit frames hope as “just recognising that the future is being decided to some extent in the present, and what we do matters because of that reality” (Levantesi, 2023). She emphasises the importance of understanding the past and that change is a constant in life if you want to nurture the imagining of a better future. Change can be experienced as a loss - but we are currently losing other things, like mental health, time off, and safe work conditions (ibid).

*Klima, Tro, Håb og Handling* presents different ways in which the Church can function as an actor in navigating the climate crisis. Mickey Gjerris says that while Christian theology indubitably has played a role in creating an anthropocentric nature-relation and therefore contributed to the climate crisis, one way for The Church to make repairs is to reinterpret Christianity as eco-centric and to offer solidarity and community (Kaaber Pors et al., 2023, pp. 25-29). Niels Henrik Gregersen states that religions often have a doctrine that condemns shortsightedness as selfishness, which can be helpful in relation to how to help people become more compassionate and understanding about the consequences it will take to adjust to and alleviate fall-out of the climate crisis (ibid, p. 53). Likewise, laziness, understood as inactivity, is condemned in Protestantism - this has, as expressed by Weber, resulted in hyper-productivity and ultimately has had influence on bringing about widespread capitalism. Peter Lodberg argues that the condemnation can also be used to motivate people to take action (ibid, p. 37). Addressing the climate crisis is challenging because it is not an economically rational choice. Nik Bredholt highlights how it is only a moral choice, which is where religion/Green Churches have a special power to contribute to the conversation (ibid, 123). Kirsten Kjærulff proposes that a return to the holy nature and Mediaeval thoughts on wholeness, like those of Hildegard von Bingen is what is needed (ibid, p. 133). Solveig Roepstorff states in relation to the Danish Church that action is woven together with hope and self-efficacy and resilience must be cultivated and nurtured (ibid, pp. 167-168). Peter Lodberg returns to Ole Jensen, saying that Christianity has to wrestle with the inherent traits that do not present resistance to technofetishism as it exists in the Western world, and that we must move beyond the terminology of “rulers” of the land (ibid, pp. 37-38).

In certain parts, the work ethic of Protestantism is present - there is a rhetoric about humans as sinners (ibid, p. 39), and a focus on individual responsibility and duty to work hard to help the Earth (ibid, p. 187). The moral injury of being a part of the climate crisis is Lutheran in the question of how the sinners fight sin, as being aware of our sins helps us not to judge others (ibid, p. 197). There is also discussion of bringing care

into Christian-theology as a core value and creating caring spaces, which is challenged by the fact the climate is still a controversial topic in the Danish Church - nevertheless, the church is obligated to involve itself with the dilemmas of the climate crisis, as a space where spiritual understanding of humanity's role in the state of the planet can be build (ibid, 191-192).



## Threeclover Church: Practising Green Protestantism

The following section outlines my findings from Threeclover Church, interspersed with analysis and discussion of how they relate to the concepts of implicatory, socially-organised denial and how Threeclover Church is building a culture of care. I also identify ways in which Threeclover relates to nature from its held set of Christian values.

The Threeclover Church is a big building - larger than most Danish Churches. The inside is decorated with wooden carvings and marble elements, and the ceiling is curved. There are carvings of figures on the altar, and along the pulpit, there are nature motifs. Threeclover became a Green Church in 2022 after their latest Parish Council election had brought on new members who were interested in environmentalism, which Threeclover now considers important to their identity. Although there had been staff members with an interest in sustainability prior to this, the church did not officially become a Green Church until 2022. During my introduction to Threeclover Church, I learned from W.O. how it has already concerned itself with environmentalism in order to be certified as a Green Church. Namely, sustainable practices have been implemented into their food-practices. They buy high-quality vegetarian meals, which also serve as an economically cheaper alternative. They buy organic when possible. Coffee (a Danish staple in practically any situation) is always organic and fairtrade now. They buy snacks in bulk to save on emissions in transport and shipping. A member of the Green Council is an architect and led some initiatives on what to do with the church's limited outdoor areas, like fostering a better environment for birds, plant growth on the vicarage buildings, using gravel on the graveyard that sustains insect life better - all this is work that requires bureaucracy, and which is in progress. Electricity supplies have been remodelled, and the church square has been declared a protected area (meaning cars, motorcycles, etc., cannot pass over it, and it cannot be altered in appearance). Their next practical steps as a Green Church are to further the ecology of their graveyard.

## Climate-Crisis Denialism

When looking at my data, some instances stood out as continued socially-organised, implicatory CCD from Threeclover.

A feature of the Masses was that there was candlelight at the ends of every pew as well as chandelier light and regular, electrical lighting, even on the days when the sunlight was streaming through the windows. This is something Threeclover opts to include for the atmosphere it brings, rather than what would be most sustainable, as explained to me by W.O. This highlights how seemingly minor decisions can collectively contribute to a broader pattern of CCD or inaction on climate change (Norgaard, 2011). By prioritising tradition and aesthetics over sustainability, Threeclover inadvertently reinforces a norm that can impede progress towards a sustainable future.

Consistently, donations were collected to refugees in Gaza and Ukraine and prayers were held for refugees across the world, world leaders and the Danish king. Donations were not going to environmental projects, but sometimes, the prayers would ask for guidance in living sustainably, consuming thoughtfully and keeping hope alive. These patterns of allocating of the funds from donations are indicative of a potential prioritisation of humanitarian concerns over environmental ones. This aligns with the concept of implicatory CCD, as a focus on immediate human suffering overshadows the longer-term, systemic global warming crisis (ibid). However, the inclusion of prayers for sustainable living shows awareness of environmental issues. This creates a complex situation where Threeclover simultaneously acknowledge the importance of environmental action while prioritising other forms of social justice.

E.H. is inclined to use his platform as a priest to discuss the role and responsibility of individuals as opposed to critiquing the structural makeup of Denmark or calling for changes to the institutional level of the Danish Church. During our conversations, he said:

The checklist [for being eligible to be a Green Church] can become about trivialities. Of course, there are certain obligations, but to what degree should the Church preach about individual responsibility versus structural change? I say: Emphasise the importance of one's own actions to the degree that it is possible.

In this quote, E.H. mentions that individual action looks different for everyone without accounting for how the idea of individual responsibility can result in internalising feelings of inadequacy, guilt and shame. These feelings can, in turn, further implicative CCD (Norgaard, 2011; Weintrobe, 2021). W.O. agrees that the Green Church checklist can become “a bother”, something that people are quick to go over to get “a Green check mark”, but puts this in context of wanting the Danish Church to cover both physical, mental and spiritual aspects of the climate crisis.

E.H. sees the church as one piece needed for solving the climate-crisis puzzle. He expressed: “KU deals with white imperialism, and they attach this guilt to innocents of today - [I think] this is secondary to the actual climate crisis.” He does not consider it the church's job to discuss its own history, and he does not think assigning blame specifically to the church of today is necessary. This shows hesitancy to confront the historical responsibility of the Christian Church’s part in the formation of the world system that exists today, and it can be seen as an expression of continuous CCD, possibly because of an unwillingness to tackle these particular criticisms and the emotions they awake (Norgaard, 2011; Weintrobe, 2021).

A.G. seems aware of how she experiences CCD, both within herself and in Danish society:

In Denmark, we are often culturally-Christian, even if we are unaware of it...that is where nature is cut-off from humanity...being cut-off, not feeling [we are] a part of nature is put deeply into us from a long history...This ‘it’s already too late’ mentality where people fly everywhere, feel that beef is a daily necessity and keep buying clothes all the time...I think it is really shameful; I actually think it’s very poor behaviour.

While being aware of existing nature-disconnection as a cause for environmentally damaging behaviour, A.G. is also angry and fed-up with the inaction she sees in Danish society and certain people in her life, who are perhaps experiencing a stronger type of implicatory denial of the climate crisis, where they via the thought-terminating cliché of ‘it’s already too late’ justify continued over-consumption (Lifton, 1961). At the same time, A.G. sees that there are still things Threeclover Church does that conflict with the most sustainable option available to them:

There are things we choose not to do. We don’t do livestreams of Mass, even if you could argue it would save people having to travel...we print things every week - there is something about reading on paper...The work in Green Church is also about checking that the things we have done, that the standards established are upheld. At some point we will have a ‘mission complete’ on physical things we can improve.

This can be seen as an example of A.G. experiencing a double reality (Norgaard, 2011). She knows and understands how her own community is still struggling with implicatory CCD and simultaneously harbours anger about how that happens in other places in society. She also ascribes to a set of morals that places a lot of responsibility on the individual, which can be seen to stem from Protestant moral teaching (Weber, 1905/2014). This focus on each individual may present a challenge when doing bridge-building work between the Threeclover Church and other parts of society as guilt and shame comes into the socially-organised denial in Denmark (Weintrobe, 2021).

E.H. shared in his sermon for the Harvest Mass of 2022:

...what we need more than anything is to develop our sense for beauty in the world...And the literature that can give us sensual beauty-experiences is, in reality, much more activating and ethically moving than the climate-novel that paints the world’s state of catastrophe and

reminds us what we need to do before it is too late. To sense the beauty of the world as the only necessity.

This quote illustrates a somewhat dismissive attitude towards having talks about the climate crisis in the church space, which is in conflict with the potential Threeclover has to become a space where difficult climate emotions, such as guilt and shame, could be brought out into the open. A corresponding pattern is observable in the sermon from February 2024, where E.H. quotes UN general secretary Antonio Guterres when he said: “And the clock is ticking. We are in the fight of our lives...We are on a highway to climate-hell with our foot still on the accelerator,” but leaves out that Guterres goes on to say, “And we are losing” (2022). E.H. concludes the same sermon with the following Bible verse:

Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (NIV, 2011, Deuteronomy 30:20).

This particular verse encourages people to remain hopeful and claims that God will reward them for their faithfulness by giving them plenty of years on the land. This can be seen as furthering the idea of human-led stewardship of the planet and that God intends for the planet to be ours, more so than for us to be a part of the Earth. This illustrates the part of Christianity that enables rationalising the exploitation of nature (White, 1967; Weber, 1905/2014).

At the Cantate Mass, E.H. said in his sermon:

True fasting... is to give of oneself to help one's neighbour...Fasting is devotion, is to take part in the life of this world and of your neighbour, it is not self-absorbed to optimise your own health and body.

According to E.H., fasting as a “self-improvement project” is not what God intends for us. Rather, it is about:

...being out in the world, in its suffering and misery...a part of something greater than ourselves...to give ourselves to the cosmos...Perhaps there is a sense of the great interconnectedness we have lost today...Helping those in need is often seen as an inconvenient obligation...to see it as a fulfilment of life, not just as a sour Christian duty, but as what all life is about, there are probably not many of us who do that.

This is a conflicting attitude viewed through the theoretical lens of CCD. On the one hand, the holistic idea of attempting a return to being more connected with ‘the cosmos’ is something that would help heal the nature-human disconnect that Danes experience (Worster, 1994; Macy & Johnstone, 2012; Macy & Brown, 2014). On the other hand, reinforcing the idea that you should find fulfilment in experiencing the suffering of the world and helping ‘those in need’ is something that can be difficult for people to genuinely achieve, without it preventing them from acting to protect the climate.

During post-Mass mingling, and as I talked to the parishioners who happened to be curious about me, when I explained my fieldwork, people would talk about 1.5C, which is a number that is not regarded as realistic anymore but is widely known as a global climate goal (McCulloch, 2024; Harvey, 2022; Bernard et al., 2023). While parishioners acknowledge the 1.5C target as a global goal, their dismissal of its feasibility can be interpreted as a form of implicatory CCD. By not recognising the 1.5C target as unrealistic, the parishioners may be subconsciously protecting themselves from the anxiety and despair associated with the climate crisis (Norgaard, 2011).

When thinking about the CCD at Threeclover, it is also important to turn attention to the absences and where there is not paid attention to nature (Hall, 1997). For Threeclover, I noticed that they only have one webpage about their Green Church membership and that social media was not utilised as a way to discuss the climate crisis.

I did not ask leadership about this, as it did not appear of import to them - possibly attributed to the fact that it is generally an older population who regularly attends church. The church-website page on Green Churches presents the general concept of Green Churches and then goes on to mention some of the specific physical projects Threeclover has going on. It features a picture of the parsonage when it previously had plants growing on it, and the text is in green. The church's monthly program (available online and in print) did not mention Green Church, although it had an advertisement for the summer-school of 2024, where the theme is humans and nature-connection – seemingly more in a cosmic sense, related to how science and Christianity are compatible. Their website provides information about their history as a Green Church and makes all sermons given in Threeclover publicly available to read.

Another point of absence is found in that E.H. does not directly mention Green Church to his congregation when preaching. He discusses human-nature relations in profound manners and at length, but he does not particularly promote the Green Church part of Threeclover. It is so under-discussed that A.G., who is the head of the Green Council, was unaware of Green Church as an NGO before becoming a member of the Parish Council herself.

The Threeclover Church seems to be in an active process of confronting their CCD. However, they also appear to hold on to certain doctrines that may prevent them from taking climate action and which may affect the way they work on creating a culture of care at their church.

## Culture of Care

Threeclover does much work to build and maintain a new culture of climate care within their church-community.

A.G. sees the potential for the

Green Church to be [an] activist [space] - it is a space for acting, but it does not stand alone in this work...There are many activist organisations that are as valuable. The Green Church is not something I particularly cared about. I want to act, and the people at the church are open to those talks, but it is not like we are the Greenest organisation around.

A.G. here is distinctly interested in the Threeclover Green Church because it functions as a space where she can soothe her climate-emotions of anger and upset. This indicates that the church currently provides a culture of care (Weintrobe, 2021). A.G. also mentioned that she sees the yearly Harvest Mass as a backdrop to climate-conversations and inspiration and that it will be where work continues as: “Even when the church reaches the finish line, it does not mean that the people coming here will also have done that in their own lives”. Here, A.G. shows interest in the role Threeclover can play as a spiritual space in bringing climate-consciousness to others, which is the most crucial role ecological theology can have (Skjoldager-Nielsen, 2021).

For W.O., “there are two streams of work for Green Church: Inner and outer”. With this, she means that there is internal work that Threeclover can do to change its own space, but there is also the dimension of reaching other people who attend church but may not have taken many steps towards leading sustainable lifestyles. W.O. told me that many of the physical checkpoints that Green Church encourages were already done at Threeclover Church and that they finally became Green because members of the Parish Council were “passionate about making that happen”. This shows the intention to create a culture of care at Threeclover Church. Their work on the Green Council suggests a deep-rooted commitment to the well-being of the planet.

## Gratitude

W.O. discussed previous work the Green Council had done on the topic of Green spirituality. The Threeclover Church had a summer-school programme in 2023 which focussed on closeness to nature and dealing with how to recreate humanity’s bond with



nature. This aligns with the idea of approaching ecological-Christianity in a communal way (Guess, 2020). W.O. emphasises that the purpose of the summer programme was not to “recruit” (or convert) anyone but rather to engage people in conversations, to create an exchange of knowledges, saying that “you can sow the seeds of sustainability” in others. This highlights the church’s role in fostering environmental consciousness within the community. This approach aligns with a culture of care that extends beyond the Mass.

W.O. also mentions the annual Harvest Mass as central to remembering to have gratitude towards nature and the farmers who provide us with nourishment, and which was in 2023, followed by a visit with an artist who was engaged with themes of nature-connection, religion and rooftop gardens in Copenhagen, which were planted on a building built to sell cars. “Nature is so wondrous - we have beauty right here in front of us. It can move us like art. Art and the Church can open us up to other things [like environmentalism] - which is needed in order to change society”, W.O. says, seeing this as one example of how to promote a more caring way of being in the world, which she believes is the mentality that is needed to bring about societal change. “Church is something we create together and give to each other”, she goes on. Focussing on gratefulness towards nature can create a collective feeling of well-being (Watkins, 2004). The connection between art, nature, and spirituality suggests a holistic approach to understanding the world. This perspective can inspire a deeper sense of connection and empathy, which are fundamental to a caring framework reminiscent of the Greening of Everything of Hildegard von Bingen (Loewen, 2021).

The Cantate Mass also had a theme of gratefulness. The prayer of that Mass touched on how humanity tends to maintain a steel-grip on whatever we have, and that Jesus can help with finding the courage to let go of this need for control over natural resources. The prayer expressed gratitude for “the light of spring, bread, open doors and inclusiveness.” Approaching the desire to return to the “sense of the great interconnectedness” through the Christian “stream of generosity that runs through everything”, as E.H. describes it, functions as an attempt to establish practices of

thankfulness and appreciation (Macy & Johnstone, 2012). In the Cantate Mass sermon, E.H. also says:

Everything is interconnected, we give, and we receive, we breathe in and breathe out...We are not across from/next to/in front of nature; we are *with* it and a part of it. Nature is not for us; it is meant to be shared. Sowing and harvesting blessings.

Here, the understanding that the planet functions via reciprocity furthers the notion of collective responsibility. A mindset of gratitude for nature's abundance is connected to careful stewardship (Eppinger, 2011). The interconnected perspective correlates with a culture of care that values all life, acknowledging humanity as a part of a larger ecosystem (Weintrobe, 2021).

E.H. calls the Harvest Mass of 2022:

...an occasion to say thanks. Not only for what we harvest...But for the...fundamental fact of there being humans around us, whose presence we cannot be without. We say thanks for friendship, helpfulness, courage to live and good moods...Thanks for everything we forget in everyday life and that we take for granted.

Here is a clear instruction to the congregation on how to actively practise gratefulness, and how to examine the everyday lives people are living. E.H.'s reflection on the Harvest Mass expands the concept of gratitude beyond material blessings. By emphasising the significance of human connection and everyday life, E.H. encourages a holistic approach to thankfulness. This aligns with the perspective that gratitude is more than an action; it's a disposition that fosters moral community, social bonds, and personal well-being (Rushdy, 2020, pp. 199-200). By broadening the scope of gratitude to encompass human relationships and everyday experiences, E.H. contributes to building a culture of care at Threeclover Church.

## Hope

Another aspect of how Threeclover works to build a culture of care is in their practices of hope.

By keeping people's attention and being this gathering point in society I think the church can make itself relevant in relation to the climate, more than on a spiritual level...Do I think God takes care of us? No, not at all. What can we expect of God? Nothing. We must save ourselves. Hope is not enough, there needs to be actions...I do think people are realising more of the seriousness of it all, and that what we are going to do is damage control most of all, A.G.

In the above quote, it becomes clear that A.G. does not have any spiritual hope or faith in being saved by a higher being, or in rewards of the afterlife. Nor does she think the Danish Church will have a big influence on the conversation in Denmark if it approaches the debate solely from a spiritual perspective. Her hope is grounded in practical steps and measurable outcomes rather than abstract promises of divine intervention. "If we plant trees, people coming to the church will see them", A.G. said, discussing how she hopes that the Green Church project will appear in the consciousness of the Threeclover congregation and how this could generate donations that would give them more resources. A.G.'s scepticism about the Danish Church's influence on the climate debate echoes criticisms of how Christianity has failed nature (White, 1967; Oliver, 1992) and that a paradigm shift is still needed (Fritz & Menouar, 2023; Gottlieb, 2006). Despite her pessimism about the role of religion in addressing climate change, A.G. does not abandon hope. Her focus on "damage control" shows her recognition of the gravity of the situation and her determination to mitigate its effects. The emphasis she puts on the Green Church NGO as a means to spread awareness highlights her belief in collective action, which is a cornerstone of cultures of care (Weintrobe, 2021). This is an example of active hope, as A.G. acknowledges

uncertainty and challenges while working towards solutions (Macy & Johnstone, 2012). W.O. expresses a similar idea of practising active hope, saying that “having faith can be about your faith in actually getting things done”.

At the Annunciation Mass, E.H. preached:

Conception and resurrection correspond to each other...There is life in darkness and in death. The grave is not a place of nothingness and death is like a womb pregnant with life...The Spirit is not something unearthly and airy that we should strive for. On the contrary, the Spirit must penetrate into this earthly life, and...make it alive and fruitful.

Noteworthy here is the idea of the Spirit seeping into worldly life. The climate was fairly absent as a topic (owing to time allotted for Baptism), but this frame of mind still managed to speak to the idea of keeping hope alive by looking for something divine in the world around us. The notion of life emerging from death carries a potent message of resilience and suggests a shift from a hierarchical understanding of the divine to a more interconnected and participatory one. This again reflects actively engaging with a hopeful mindset, through a theological lens that aids in this endeavour (Ferguson & Tamburello, 2015; Ryff, 2021). On Good Friday, E.H. said:

Jesus is a place for receiving pain and still finding life and resilience, a consistent hope. The message of Good Friday is not to repress pain, but to know there is something bigger to hold onto in this world: Love and hope. This hope is what we need to embrace. To be in the pain, to stand it and to maintain hope through it - this is the lesson to be learned from Good Friday.

With this, he expresses a want for a culture of care that can contain and embrace the pain people feel - also in relation to the climate-crisis - and that the church can work to inspire hope through that. Building such resilience and having hope is a tool for managing difficult climate-emotions in a healthy manner (Macy & Johnstone, 2012).

The 2023 Christmas Mass sermon focusses heavily on hope:

How can the story of Christmas keep bringing us hope, when the world around us is so dark? Because it is, we all feel that in our bodies. That we are heading towards a future we do not wish to experience. With a globe...on a collision-course with its cosmic and environmental balances. With a humanity that does not understand the necessity to turn around. With rulers who are preoccupied with other agendas, who do not dare to make crucial decisions...While every year we read reports about how we have passed new tipping points...Experts say that technological solutions will show up - but not in time, and not to solve everything. So, what is our hope?

The sense of powerlessness and frustration expressed at the situation and inaction are examples of the overwhelming emotions that people experience when confronted with the climate crisis (Weintrobe, 2020; Norgaard, 2011). However, E.H. goes on to propose solutions for how to handle these feelings of despair:

It is not only nature and environment that have tipping points, but also the social life. A “social tipping point” occurs when something we are currently refusing to do suddenly becomes obvious and we know there is no way around it...where new thoughts and new narratives can find a place in all of us and change not just the individual but our collective life.

Here is a reckoning between the Exceptionalism mindsets that currently prevail, and the potential for a social tipping point to push forward a hegemonic culture of care (Weintrobe, 2021). He continues to touch on how the church can help facilitate such a tipping point:

...some will say: “But who has ever seen such a mass-conversion take place? A social tipping point that fundamentally changed the world?” Here I return to the story of the little

child. A child came into the world and within 300 years the Christian church numbers more than 30 million.

The rapid growth of Christianity offers a potential counter-narrative to the socially-organised denial and scepticism about the genuine possibility of change. It suggests that significant societal shifts are possible, even in a relatively short timeframe.

...one almighty God who wants to share parts of life with us...the belief that life can change...This belief functions as an all-consuming social tipping point. Because, when hope that our world can be different has caught on and settled in us as trust and faith, you must say what you believe...a small, unassuming beginning can capture the hearts of people, in spite of world-powers, economic, national and populist interests, can settle in us as a new and hopeful narrative about our life. A faith in the possibility of change and that life on our planet will be able to be saved - in a collaboration between us and God.

E.H. highlights the value of collective action grounded in shared values, which resonates with the importance of building healthy communities (Weintrobe, 2021) while suggesting that religious faith can serve as a foundation for building a more just and sustainable future (Bellehumeur et al., 2022; Corry et al., 2014). The Christmas sermon captures the type of implicatory, socially-organised CCD, where hopelessness can be deeply demotivating (Norgaard, 2011; Weintrobe, 2021). Journeying towards hope and connection to nature, as E.H. describes, are essential elements for creating a culture of care to counteract this denialism (Weintrobe, 2021; Buzzell & Chalquist, 2023). Seeing the church as having a historical experience of a social tipping point is used to illustrate how it can be a leader of a similar collective awakening of shifting values on a larger scale in relation to the climate crisis. He draws parallels between the rapid early growth of Christianity and the movements fighting for the climate, again in accordance with Weintrobe's concepts of creating a strong collective to build resilience to the prevailing sense of hopelessness (2021). There is a strong emphasis on how hope

acts as a catalyst for systemic change and that finding faith in the capacity of humanity to carry out such change in relation to the climate crisis can be found in the story of Christmas. By framing environmental challenges as a shared human predicament rather than an isolated problem, E.H. offers an imagining of a future where care for the planet is deeply intertwined with our spiritual and ethical values.

## Christian-Nature Relations

In the February 2024 Sermon, E.H. calls the fast “a time for confrontation” and asks, “on what side will we fight?” He highlights the following Bible verse:

This day I call the Heavens and the Earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live, (Deuteronomy 30:19).

On this he reflects:

[Nature] is a love-gift that God gives his people...that they must guard, and which will only be a blessing if they adapt to and follow the divine but extremely surmountable rules of the land...These rules can be understood as a type of natural law with its own built-in consequences...The humanity that only wants for itself, that mistreats the gift will experience the negative consequences...The gift God has given us is a wonderful planet, with a diversity of life, that could in every way bless our lives. But when we neglect and abuse the gift it eventually becomes humanity’s curse and death.

E.H. shows how he is actively reframing Christian doctrine - an active effort and practice of reinterpreting and discarding the reading of it that encourages blind obedience and sees the land as a reward for said obedience. Instead, he frames it in a context that is relevant today, about living within planetary boundaries and how if we provide and care for our environment, it will continue to provide and care for us. This

shift towards an eco-centric perspective provides a theological foundation for building a culture of care that prioritises the holistic well-being of the planet (Eppinger, 2001; Weintrobe, 2021)

During our talks, E.H. expressed that the job of church employees is to “consider yourself in the world you live in - the ‘climate question’ is...the backdrop to everything. You should speak into that and into the time you live in”. He draws a comparison between the need for a paradigmatic shift in our approach to the climate crisis and the paradigmatic shift in belief that the spread of Christianity brought with it over a few centuries. “Hope can work as a tool for conversion [to the climate cause] via social contact. The only time a Mass-conversion like that has happened is in the early days of Christianity”, E.H. says. Thus, he presents hope as a strong point for the Christian church to be a source of inspiration and a catalyst for change (Macy & Brown, 2014). E.H.'s call for a paradigmatic shift within the church mirrors the argument for a new worldview that prioritises planetary boundaries. He adds:

The church [as an institution, ed.] has theological debates that go in both directions on how much we should talk about the climate. It is not an either/or - we are not playing against each other, that is just pointless. Climate stress is unavoidable, and we cannot wait until our other internal and political disagreements are solved - we need to have climate-solidarity...In the current translation of the Bible we no longer say that humans must ‘rule over’ the rest of the world, but that we must ‘care for’ or ‘be responsible for’ it. This is the duty of humans as the crown of the Creation, because we are able to self-reflect. We should care for nature as a shepherd would for their sheep.

E.H. argues for fostering a culture of care within the church and extending it outward, doing caretaking of the planet in its entirety. There can be a purpose for the church to work with the emotional aspects of a connection with nature and to do this through working towards climate-solidarity.

Returning to the Harvest Mass of 2022, E.H. tells a story of a man:



...the more he fought and engaged [with climate activism] the more he experienced how angry he became...he became tired. Then one day...he heard a sound...from a bird that was singing divinely. It sang hope into him and made him light-hearted and happy...This little songbird showed him the way out of angry condescending and resigned cynicism that had filled him, so that he, ignited by love for the beautiful earth, could continue his effort and fight to preserve it.

Here, E.H. lays out a narrative of the anger and disillusionment that engaging in climate actions can result in, which are common emotional responses and experiences of many who grapple with the overwhelming scale of the problem (Norgaard, 2011). We see an example of double realities, where we can be aware of the seriousness of the climate crisis but are simultaneously immersed in a business-as-usual lifestyle (Norgaard, 2011; Weintrobe, 2021). The exhaustion and disengagement can be understood as the results of experiencing cognitive dissonance (Weintrobe, 2020; Lifton, 1961). The encounter with nature - with the songbird - signals to the congregation that shifting away from the dominant neoliberal paradigm is possible, too. Moving from a mindset of Exceptionalism, where humans are seen as separate from and superior to nature, towards a culture of care can happen by recognising the intrinsic value of nature and experiencing a profound sense of belonging within it (Weintrobe, 2021). In the same sermon. E.H. says:

...we must relearn...Nature is no longer a hobby or something we can control and consume...nature is a body or consciousness that envelops us...We come to truly understand what we are a part of and what we must defend and fight for...some will say that “it’s all very well, this talk of nature - but the story in The Gospel...is about our relationship with Jesus, not nature.” However, we must believe that

Jesus as the risen and ascended also speaks to us...through everything that is.

Here is a call for a shift in nature perception, moving away from the anthropocentric view of nature as a resource to be controlled towards an understanding of nature as integral to human existence, aligning with the principles of cultures of care (Weintrobe, 2021; Buzzell & Chalquist, 2023). Framing the Christian doctrine as relevant to this shift shows how E.H. intends for Threeclover to be a space where spirituality generates nature-connection (Gottlieb, 2006).

At the Evening service, the psalm-singing was complimented by a recitation of a poem entitled “Don’t you see the Globe is in flames?” which E.H. commented on to convey that the darkness of the world is a historical constant, and that within the church, we can come to understand that darkness is also always-already a shared space. This is an expression of seeing the church as a space where a culture of care can grow, where the darker and difficult parts of life are not repressed but can be confronted and processed collectively (Weintrobe, 2021).

In the 2022 Harvest Mass, E.H. highlights reasons to celebrate the harvest, even in a city-church:

...to remind us that the harvest is never only ours. There must be something for all...The Harvest Mass reminds us that we live off God’s gifts...How do we as humans live in nature and with nature? Can we find new, non-consumerist but life-cultivating ways of being with nature and with each other? What is our role on this globe if diversity of life is threatened like never before?

E.H. positions humanity as caretakers of God's creation, rather than its owners, and promotes a moral duty to protect biodiversity and ensure the well-being of all creation, in a shift away from human stewardship as it is traditionally known (Eppinger, 2011). He continues to connect this mindset to Christian scripture:

This is a message traceable back to the Old Testament where we hear: 'Your vineyard you must not pluck clean and fallen grapes you must not pick up; leave those for the needy and the stranger.' Reframed to our times globalised food-economy - when we know the world is short on grain...it is also our responsibility through political decision-making processes...to contribute to making sure there is grain being transported to those countries where starvation and need is the biggest.

Here is a conversation-starter about humanity's role in how to care for the planet in the best, most compassionate manner, in a shared responsibility. E.H. calls for a shift from a culture of uncare, where resources are hoarded and the environment exploited, towards a culture of care, where resources are shared equitably, and the planet is nurtured. The Palm Sunday sermon read:

Christ dies for us, so that his love and devotion can flow into the world and into us and become a source of life...He is the grain of wheat that must be laid in the ground and die, in order for a multitude of new life to sprout forth...self-giving is the decisive and central thing that faith and Christianity is about...It is not fruitful to separate God and man from each other, with an untouchable God in heaven and man on earth...we are forever connected with God...there is even talk of a cosmic lawfulness that can be traced everywhere...To believe and to be a Christian is...to live one's life with consideration, with the conditions we have.

E.H. describes Jesus as the wheat grain - as the natural world, and as something that can therefore be understood in the natural world. This expresses a holistic approach to where God (and hope) can be found - E.H. does not see God as distant from us, but present on earth, *in* the earth. Having faith and believing in getting involved in doing something also requires a willingness to sacrifice something and make space for coming generations - this is especially true when faced with the climate crisis. It is an encouragement to live within our means, and it is saying that an approach to God,

where you see him as present ‘everywhere’, can create a more loving community and perhaps also foster nature-connectedness.

A.G. tells me: “I feel so upset about where we are with the climate...The feeling that you are doing something is relieving. It’s the only thing that helps. Maybe changing even one mind a little bit”. Working towards climate-improvement is the only thing that soothes the anxiety, grief, and anger that A.G. feels in her daily life. While the church does indeed function as a place that allows her to put her goals into practice, this perspective is also a remnant of Protestant work ethics, that dismiss pleasurable aspects of life and values productivity (Weber 1905/2014; Svendsen, 2008). So, even though she identifies as non-believing, certain Protestant values are ingrained in her.

“I have more of an ‘every-bit-counts’ mentality,” W.O. says. She considers it the responsibility of the Green Council to showcase environmental choices like “introducing meat-less dinners, making people experience that actually a vegetarian meal can be delicious” to the congregation. She considers “the appreciation of local nature...a strong Christian value about appreciating what you have”. These perspectives show how she considers the possibilities for Threeclover to inspire and lead people towards Greener lifestyles - it highlights the importance placed on changing the individual choices people make on their own - which connects with the individualist faith featured in Protestantism (Weber, 1905/2014; Worster, 1994).

E.H. told me he thinks the church-institution in its current iteration needs to

...rebuild our holism and to reinterpret the idea of the ‘church as a steward of the Project [of caring for the Creation]. We can maybe see this in the new 2020 Bible, which retranslates that humans should “rule over” to “care for” the land. Humans can be the ‘crown jewel of the Creation’, because we are able to be self-aware...we are shepherds, and the Earth is our sheep.

E.H. wants a unification between previous-modalities of a Christian-holistic relationship with nature while maintaining that human-stewardship is needed, because

we hold a special responsibility towards 'the Creation'. Here, he simultaneously moves towards a paradigm shift and upholds the traditional Protestant mindset of human disconnect from nature (Klassen, 2018; White, 1967). During the Good Friday sermon, E.H. said:

If one perceives church services as a sanctuary where peace is found amidst a chaotic and conflict-ridden world, Good Friday would not seem like the most obvious day to attend church. Here, we hear about misfortune, cynicism, falsehood, and condemnation...Good Friday is the reality we live in. It is global-politics and power games, lobbying and protectionism, it is us who are witnesses to it all and are part of it all at the same time. We who are at once the troubled and the complacent who nevertheless doze off in comfort...

Warning against succumbing to comfortability, as E.H. does here, is a classic Protestant idea - that comfortability is laziness, which is a sin, that result in complacency (Svendsen, 2008; Worster, 1994). In the same sermon, E.H. discusses how Christian faith can encompass fear, unhappiness and sorrow, and can sustain hope through those emotions:

...we must look evil in the eye, and we must, as compassionate creatures, feel the suffering...We must also see Jesus of Nazareth, who does not allow himself to be corrupted by pretence, falsehood, cynicism and lust for power. We must see in him, a different world from the one we know...In this way, there is still peace to be found in going to church on Good Friday. Not peace we find by repressing the evil and suffering that occurs. But peace in the fact that in this world there is...something deeper to hold on to.

This presents a Christian view, where Jesus is presented as a symbol of how a different world is possible. The focus on need for change could be applied to the climate crisis, and imparting a stewardship that cares for creation, which can be interpreted as

a bridge between traditional Christian-thinking and secular, activist talk of ecocentrism (Worster, 1994; Eppinger, 2011). Despite acknowledging the prevalence of evil and suffering, the Good Friday sermon ultimately offered a message of hope rooted in faith.

At Mass in February 2024, E.H. leads the following prayer:

Thanks for the...globe with its beauty and greatness... teeming with life...that with its...abundance of resources give us plenty to live off. Thanks for leaving us the responsibility for the created life.

This opening is an active practice of gratefulness, taking time to reflect on the planet, both regarding what it provides for us to survive, and for its emotional value to us, as something beautiful (Macy & Johnstone, 2012; Rushdy, 2020; Watkins et.al., 2023). It also touches on the duty of humanity as caretakers and frames it as a gift from God. It continues:

Help us and keep your faith in us, who have exploited earthly life. Teach us to renounce the privileges that are not in the best interest of the earth and future life. Help us to care for your creation in big and small ways. Give us courage and the ability to act and insist on the necessary, even when it is easiest to shut up.

Obligation and duty are prevalent themes here, as well as renunciation of the type of business-as-usual behaviour that characterises the mindset of implicative CCD (Weintrobe, 2021; Norgaard, 2011). The sentiment of the prayer is that a sense of moral duty, rooted in a connection to something larger than oneself, can provide the motivation to overcome the challenges of climate action. E.H. concludes it:

When the future worries us, let us trust that you as God of life will...give us the insight and willingness to sacrifice needed, so coming generations can also live on a planet bustling with life.

By wishing for balance between humility and generosity in being willing to sacrifice and agency to act, the prayer offers a hopeful vision for a more sustainable future, which might inspire the listener to engage with active hope (Macy & Brown, 2014). The prayer contains much of the complexity of Threeclover. It covers a desire to connect with nature, to value and protect it, while maintaining a belief in human-mandated stewardship. It proclaims we have an ‘abundance of resources’, while acknowledging human greed and consumerism – it showcases the intricacies of the emotional aspects of the climate crisis experienced at Threeclover.

### Summarising discussion:

Amongst the Threeclover congregation, there is a throughline theme of a sense of duty for humans to take stewardship of the planet and use it for good, to care for it and protect it in the midst of the climate crisis. This drive of moral obligation is, at Threeclover, paired with frequent practices of gratefulness and messages of how to maintain hope through challenging times. This sense of duty and obligation is a common denominator behind the motivation to take climate action for everyone I talked to about why they engaged with Green Church. This possibly stems from the historical roots of Protestant ethics and might retain Threeclover in a worldview that positions humans as separate from nature, as they are presented as stewards of it. While Threeclover clearly strives for humanity to take a caretaker role rather than rule over nature, it still keeps a degree of separation in place, and thus is still facing some aspects of socially-organised, implicative CCD. Threeclover is reluctant to put too much of an emphasis on systemic change. While the church recognises the need for a collective response – by joining the NGO Green Church - there seems to be a reluctance to engage in more radical critiques of societal structures and power dynamics. Threeclover could use its agency to put more pressure on addressing the systemic roots of the climate crisis. Threeclover also does not have any clear climate-projects on their agenda that the tiding-donations can go towards – that is a space where they could make further

progress on climate actions on a material level. Continued exploration of the intersection of faith and ecology is essential to building an enduring theological framework that functions to inspire and take climate action.

However, analysis shows that Threeclover Green Church does exist as a culture of care, placing value on practices of gratitude and positive motivation to engage with the climate whilst making a connection to a God-mandated responsibility to care for the planet. From my time in the field, it seems to be happening particularly through sermons given at Mass. The church also attempts to bring environmentally-friendly behaviour into the everyday lives of their congregation. The Green Council has taken physical steps like revising their food-consumption habits and bringing about more biodiversity to their grounds. Voices and actors engaged with the Threeclover Green Church to varying degrees express the belief that Christianity and the hegemony of the Protestant Church has played a part in the creation of the current climate crisis we are in. There is an ongoing discussion about what the solution to this is e.g. returning to early Christianity, looking to other faith-traditions or using the church as community without religious beliefs attached. Based on all this, it becomes clear that there is an emergence of a culture of care that positions Threeclover as a counterpoint to the existing socially-organised, implicatory CCD. Threeclover is working to create a space where people can gain a sense of belonging, can come for hope and to express concerns and vulnerabilities. Putting an emphasis on gratitude, interconnectedness and the spiritual aspect of life offers a framework for examining, understanding and coping with emotional difficulties posed by the climate-crisis.

Further research on this topic is needed, as there are numerous avenues to explore for a deeper understanding of the field. Studies comparing Green Church to other religious communities or longer-term fieldwork could be pursued. The question of sustainable mindsets within the Danish Church as an institution also requires further study, as does the question of what role Green Churches play on the structural level of said institution.



## Conclusion

The Threeclover Church engages and grapples with the question of human-nature connection and disconnection in several ways. Through its position as a Green Church, it actively reflects on and continuously addresses the view on nature that is prevalent in contemporary Danish society. Church leaders believe Threeclover should continuously incorporate discussions about nature and the climate crisis into church-conversations.

Threeclover provides a space where members can acknowledge, process and share climate-related emotions. The physical actions and practical steps Threeclover have taken to make their church more sustainable provides a tangibly felt difference that can alleviate challenging climate-emotions and create a sense of agency that counters climate-dread and hopelessness. The church's role in facilitating conversations about the climate crisis and fostering a sense of collective responsibility further contributes to a culture of care. Threeclover, by providing a supportive community and opportunities for action, helps to mitigate the psychological impacts of climate change and inspires hope for a more sustainable future. While Threeclover has a commitment to environmental sustainability, as seen by their practical work towards becoming Greener, the church also has some points of tension. The church's focus on individual responsibility, while well-intentioned, can inadvertently contribute to implicatory CCD, as it is a continuation of the dominant narrative of the climate crisis, that results in overwhelming feelings of self-condemnation for people.

This study contributes to a current understanding of the cultural dimensions of human-environment relations by examining the influence of Christian values and practices of environmental attitudes at Threeclover Church. The inclusion of individual and collective behaviours related to environmental sustainability contributes to understanding the human dimensions of ecological challenges. The holistic examination of how Threeclover fosters a culture of care shows the benefits and challenges of Danish Green Churches in managing climate-crisis-related emotions.

There is potential for the Danish Church to play a part in changing environmental norms in Danish society, and the ability to discuss climate-related emotions. The challenges church-members are encountering are challenges of broader societal structures. Thus, by addressing these issues head-on, with the strengths of the church's available resources, the church can play a significant role in facilitating a more sustainable and environmentally-conscious future.

Despite challenges, Threeclover Church makes strides towards cultivating a culture of care. Initiatives such as the summer-school program and the emphasis on gratitude and interconnectedness with nature are steps that actively combat the existing CCD of Danish society. The church's role in providing a safe space for individuals to process their emotions and engage in open dialogue about the climate crisis is also crucial. An important role of Threeclover is their ability to inspire hope when addressing the climate crisis. It offers a space where individuals can do something for the environment together. The church's emphasis on faith, resilience, and the transformative power of collective action offers a counterbalance to the prevailing sense of despair about the climate. By reimagining Christian doctrine in light of ecological challenges, Threeclover Church is exploring new avenues for addressing the climate crisis.

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## Appendix 1: List of Threeclover Church Fieldwork

| <b>Date</b>                          | <b>Church Activities</b>  |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| 01/03/2024<br>Midday to<br>afternoon | Introductory meeting between myself and Threeclover leadership.   |
| 10/03/2024<br>10.30-12.00            | Cantate Mass: Concert with choir. Theme of gratefulness. Cantate services are an embracing of classic Mass with a focus on song. High turnout.                |
| 17/03/2024<br>10.30-12.00            | The Annunciation: Celebrating the message Mary received from the angel Gabriel about the incarnation of Christ. Also had a Baptism and high turnout for that. |
| 24/03/2024<br>10.30-12.00            | Palm Sunday Mass. Church decorated with leaves.   |
| 27/03/2024<br>16.30-17.00            | 'Evening' service in the afternoon. Song and poetry reading.  |
| 29/03/2024<br>10.30-12.00            | Good Friday Mass. High turnout for the well-known Lutheran holiday.   |

## Appendix 2: List of Written Sermons by E.H.

|                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| September 2022        | Harvest Sermon.  |
| Christmas Eve<br>2023 | Hope in a dark world.<br>A Sermon about Tipping<br>Points. |
| February 2024         | Evening Service Sermon.                                    |

## Appendix 3: Green Church Requirements Checklist

Accessed at: <https://www.gronkirke.dk/bliv-groen-kirke/>

### **BECOME A GREEN CHURCH: CHECKLIST IN ORDER TO BECOME A MORE CLIMATE- & ECO-FRIENDLY CHURCH**

#### GOOD REASONS FOR BEING A GREEN CHURCH:

- Joy and respect for all of God's creation
- Care for the climate, environment and nature
- Global justice
- Protect natural resources – and save money at the same time

#### CHECKLIST IN ORDER TO BECOME A GREEN CHURCH

As a Green Church you are a part of a growing network of churches, cemeteries, religious organizations and schools assisting to administer God's creation with thankfulness, respect, and care. Additionally, increasing consideration for your consumption and decreasing strain on the environment can produce savings on both economy and resources.

#### HOW TO BECOME A GREEN CHURCH

Go through this list with the parish church council or a relevant group of church employees and/or volunteers. You can become a Green Church when you:

- 1) Fulfil at least 26 of the in total 50 requirements (there should be at least two fulfilled requirements in each category).
- 2) Have appointed a green committee, preferably composed of people from the parish council, church employees and users of the church, ideally with relevant expertise. One of the committee members must be appointed as the contact person to the secretariat of Green Church.

The churches in Denmark are very different, and none will probably find all the 50 points on the checklist relevant or possible to fulfill. But we hope the list will inspire and deliver relevant ideas for your future work.

## ENROLMENT

It is free to enroll in the network of Green Churches. When you have complied with the criteria listed above, attach your completed checklist in an email to [gronkirke@gronkirke.dk](mailto:gronkirke@gronkirke.dk). Also include a picture and a short text describing your work with sustainability (this will be used on our web page and on our social media channels) together with the name, email, and phone number for your appointed contact person. Subsequently you will be registered as a Green Church. We will register you on [www.gronkirke.dk](http://www.gronkirke.dk) and send you a Green Church poster. From then on, we will send a new poster every year in January via email. If you still comply with the necessary requirements to be a Green Church, you can print and put up the new poster. Feel free to contact us in order to fill in the check list. Should you need extra help in the process, the Green Church secretariat can assist you with help. It is also possible to book one of our volunteer consultants to advise on a particular subject.

## BECOME A PARTNER CHURCH

The Green Church Partnership Track is for those whose sustainability ambitions reach a little higher. As a Partner Church you will receive exclusive material every year for use in your church. Only the Partner Churches can access this material, which can include green sermon guidelines, climate talks or similar. In addition, you will be granted free access to all of our existing materials (print and digital) as well as two free tickets to the annual Green Church conference – all for only DKK 1000 a year. Read more about becoming a Partner Church on [www.gronkirke.dk/bliv-partnerskabskirke](http://www.gronkirke.dk/bliv-partnerskabskirke).

## WHEN YOU ARE A GREEN CHURCH

The Green Church newsletter gives inspiration and new ideas to work with as a Green Church. Sign up for the newsletter and follow us on our webpage [www.gronkirke.dk](http://www.gronkirke.dk), on Facebook and Instagram. If you have good stories or ideas from your work as a Green Church, we would very much like to hear about them.

Thank you for joining in!

With kind regards

Green Church

a part of The National Council of Churches in Denmark.

## THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

To be a Green Church affects the whole life of the church and involves the work to influence attitudes. The Church has a distinctive language and a special approach to nature and to the stewardship of creation with a focus on our shared responsibility on issues concerning climate, environment, sustainability, nature, and justice ('climate justice'). This involves cultivating a rejoicing, grateful and responsible attitude towards creation – viewing creation as a gift that the Church must steward in everything from ministry to education, social work, and mission.

1. We have a themed service annually committed to the stewardship of creation (which could be held outdoors).
2. We include the themes of creation, nature, climate and environmental issues and justice in the church service liturgy throughout the year where it is suitable (in e.g., sermons, hymns, prayers).
3. We celebrate and raise awareness of Creation tide each year. It can be celebrated, for example, as an outdoor church service in an ecumenical setting.
4. We include aspects of creation in our church education – for example in preparation for confirmation or baptism and in study groups.
5. We arrange or take part in events focused on creation, climate, environment, nature and/or justice such as theme nights, courses, conferences and excursions.
6. We raise money to support climate- and environmental projects in the poorest and most vulnerable countries and areas in the world.
7. We arrange events focused on reuse and recycling such as jumble sales and swop markets.
8. We cooperate with others, such as companies, municipal entities, associations, institutions, NGOs, other churches, and organizations on projects focused on climate, environment and related ministry/social work.
9. We direct attention to the connection between ministry/social work and nature, e. g. through hikes and pilgrimages, church services in nature, therapy gardens and similar.

## THE CHURCH'S COMMUNICATION

It is important that the work with being a Green Church is visible and deeply rooted in the daily life of the church. The work of being a Green Church is not only for those who are especially interested in the agenda but also for members of the church council, those employed in the church, the parishioners, and it would be best if all those who are a part of the church be included in the work. What happens in the church should inspire both the parishioners and the local community. This is why communication is important.

10. We direct attention to our certification as Green Church, e. g. by displaying the Green Church poster in a prominent location, writing about Green Church matters in our church's communication channels and/or using the Green Church logo on our social media, newsletter, web page or the like.

11. We share stories about creation, climate, environment, nature, and justice in our church newsletter, on our church web page or externally through the communication channels of others.

12. We cooperate with companies, municipal entities, associations, institutions, other churches and organizations to draw attention to the work of the Green Church – also through communication channels other than the ones belonging to our church

13. We have compiled a plan of action for our work as a Green Church and go through it at least once a year.

14. We deliberate and discuss matters of being a Green Church in parish council meetings, personnel meetings or volunteer meetings at least once a year.

## THE CHURCH'S PURCHASES

Being a Green Church involves taking concrete steps to reduce your church's carbon footprint. The church's purchasing of goods and services can have a great climate and environmental impact. Purchases include all the products and goods the church buys, including food, paper, flowers, computers, furniture, building materials etc. It is a good idea to check all the church's purchases for each area of work and consider if they can be made in a more climate and environmentally friendly way. Request products with a low impact on climate or environment, even if the companies in question don't immediately offer them. We advise you to consult with relevant local municipal or diocesan units. The Green Church secretariat will also be able to assist you with finding relevant local actors in this matter.

15. We limit the church's purchases and prioritize buying durable and/or secondhand items when possible.
16. We buy groceries with a low carbon footprint, which has the least detrimental effect on the environment. We prioritize buying plant-based, organic, Fairtrade and/or locally produced goods and seasonal food.
17. We buy environmentally labelled products for cleaning, maintenance and outdoor areas whenever possible.
18. We use environmentally certified organic and/or Fairtrade suppliers of goods and services whenever possible.
19. For bigger purchases we buy environmentally certified, recycled or upcycled products and materials.
20. For renovations and construction projects we use environmentally certified products, materials and services and consider the use of recycled materials.
21. We buy and use rechargeable batteries where we can.
22. We use flowers and bouquets with the least harmful effect on climate and environment, such as flowers and greenery from the churchyard, flowers grown locally, potted plants, environmentally certified plants, paper or LEGO flowers.

#### USE OF ENERGY IN THE CHURCH

The church's use of energy – especially heating – is often an expensive item on the budget. A lot of CO<sub>2</sub> and money can often be saved here. To save energy, an inspection of infrastructure used can be needed (heat sources, taps, windows etc.), but often a lot can be saved by being aware of consumption and other everyday habits. It is always a good idea to get professional help.

23. We have had an energy economic review of the church's buildings made (church, parish community center, rectory etc.), and follow the instructions as well as we can.
24. We check our meters for water, electricity, heating and gas at suitable intervals, e.g., once a month, and use the reading to set benchmarks to reduce consumption.
25. We give priority to the low use of energy and good fuel economy when buying, for example, freezers, washing-and washing up machines, pc's and machines for the cemetery.

26. We buy electricity from sustainable sources.
27. We use LED lights (both light bulbs and tubes).
28. We turn off the lights in rooms which are not in use and/or have installed (light) sensors and timers both indoors and outdoors.
29. We turn off computers and other office machines when they are not in use.
30. We use heating produced in the most environmentally and climate friendly way and connect an electronic control system if possible.
31. We lower the temperature in the church, parish hall/parish community center and in the office whenever feasible.
32. We have introduced systematic monitoring of humidity and de-humidifiers in the church building as well as other possible parish buildings to ensure a good indoor climate and avoid mold.
33. We limit water usage, e. g. by installing reduced-water use toilets or by filling up the dish washing machine before running it.
34. When letting or subletting facilities, we recommend the tenant to follow the guidelines above regarding electricity, water and heating.

#### THE CHURCH'S TRANSPORTATION AND OUTDOOR AREAS

The use of fuel for transportation in private cars, trucks and airplanes contributes significantly

to the global emission of CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere. Everyone can contribute to reducing this by choosing forms of transportation which put less strain on the climate and environment. Many churches have outdoor areas – both large and small – which can be used for green purposes. Not much space is needed to plant trees or fruit bushes, put up bird boxes or beehives, whether you have church land, a churchyard, rectory gardens or just a parking lot.

35. We ensure parking for bicycles near the church or the cemetery.
36. We use bicycles, buses, trains, and pool-drive to a larger degree.
37. We avoid air travel whenever possible and pay CO<sub>2</sub>-compensation when flying is needed.

38. We have purchased one or more bicycles for the church, for example carrier bicycles for local transport for church employees and volunteers.

39. We hold some of our meetings and courses online to reduce transportation.

40. We implement environmentally friendly and ecological activities and improvements in the outdoor areas of the church and cemetery, e.g., by going through the church's various machinery and the checklist for Green Churchyards.

41. We establish and provide habitats for wild animals and plants in the outdoor areas of the church.

42. We ensure an ecological and climate-friendly management of the church's agricultural land and woodland, prioritizing biodiversity, groundwater protection and reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

### WASTE IN THE CHURCH

Waste is today often a resource which can be used somewhere else. Cardboard, paper, glass, milk cartons and so forth can be used in church activities for children. Paper which is only printed on one side can be used as notepaper – and the waste that we don't recycle ourselves might be useful to others. It will often be advantageous to cooperate with other churches in your municipality to obtain offers for waste management.

43. We attempt to repair our things and hand over what we can't use for recycling.

44. We reduce and adjust our consumption to avoid wasting food, packaging etc.

45. We use proper tableware instead of disposable tableware whenever possible.

46. We print and copy on both sides of the sheet of paper, and we use leftover paper when possible.

47. We compost garden waste, either on our own land or on approved compost sites.

48. We sort household waste in its proper categories (such as food waste, cardboard, paper, glass, textiles, food and drink cartons, dangerous waste, and residual waste)

49. We deliver electronic waste to approved recipients or, where possible, to a recycling scheme.

50. We organize reuse and the collection of, for example, clothes, candle stumps, mobile phones, glasses etc.



### THE CHURCH'S OWN INITIATIVES

There can be many green initiatives which are not covered in the categories and points of this checklist. They count too! Add your own ideas and initiatives here: