

## Research Article

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# Ethnographic Ecclesiology and the Challenges of Scholarly Situatedness

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**Abstract:** This article reflects on the importance of being aware of one's own situatedness when carrying out empirical research. The unforeseen outcome of a project in which we studied converting refugees' encounter with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark provoked these reflections. The fieldwork was carried out in a particular congregation in Copenhagen that has attracted many asylum seekers, primarily of Muslim background. The empirical work revealed that the scholars, as participant observers, experienced the situation in the congregation quite differently than did the refugees. Initially, the scholars did not recognise conflicts and problems related to ethnicity, gender and class among the various groups of refugees. However, interviews based on the refugees' documentation of their experiences with and within the congregation allowed different perspectives to be articulated. On one hand, perceptual blind spots inspired reflection on the epistemological deficit that characterised the scholarly habitus. On the other, our theological training did enable us to understand the migrant converts' specific interpretation of the Christian Gospel. The article concludes that it is important to see informants as collaborators with regard to both scholarly reflexivity and the concrete outcome of research in a shared quest for ecclesiological knowledge.

**Keywords:** Practical theology, fieldwork, habitus, reflexivity, conversion, migration, ethnicity, locative/utopian religion, trauma theology

## Introduction

### Scholarly Reflexivity and Converting Refugees' Encounter with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark

“To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught. The relation with the Other, or conversation, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching. Teaching is not reducible to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain. In its non-violent transitivity the very epiphany of the face is produced.”<sup>1</sup>

1 Lévinas, *Totality*, 51.

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In a Danish context, the conversion of asylum seekers is a fraught topic. The public debate often links refugees' baptism with the aim of gaining an advantage in the application process for asylum and residency. However, our fieldwork has shown that the issue is more complex.<sup>2</sup> As we see it, the conversion of migrants is intimately related to their homelessness and their experiences of crises and trauma. Traditionally, this kind of experiences is claimed to be at the heart of Christian theology. Nevertheless, to those of us safely embedded in scholarly and even practical theology, the vulnerability of the process of becoming a Christian tends to be overlooked. It took an ethnographic study to get a hint of the complexity involved in the refugees' conversion processes. However, this is not an article on asylum seekers and their motivations for baptism. Instead, the article addresses the methodological difficulties that we, as scholars situated in the culture of the receiving country, encountered through our work. In addition, stimulated by the reflexivity that these difficulties demanded of us, the article also engages in a discussion about how the encounter with these other voices enriches our theology and, more importantly, challenges our approach to theology. Thus, method and reflexivity are in focus. However, since we anchor these methodological reflections in our encounter with the refugees' life-worlds, the abstraction of these thoughts from the description of our fieldwork experiences is not possible. Similarly, our argument in favour of conducting ecclesiology 'from' and 'with' the margins must also touch upon the way that the migrants' perspectives on the Christian faith can re-describe experiences of liminality, trauma and transformation and, thus, enrich the theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (ELCD).<sup>3</sup> Consequently, we consider our 'informants' in the field – the refugees as well as the ethnic Danes in the ELCD – as 'other-wise' dialogue partners in a shared quest for ecclesiological knowledge.

When we use the term 'other-wise', we do so in continuation of recent developments in biblical exegesis and homiletics. Within New Testament studies, an emphasis on studying the Bible in dialogue with 'real readers' has replaced the engagement – characteristic of narrative analysis – with the implicit reader. Gerald O. West's *Reading Other-wise: Socially Engaged Biblical Scholars Reading with their Local Communities* (2007) represents this development. Correspondingly, homileticians have begun to interact with actual listeners as co-authors in preaching, as analysed in John McClure's *Other-wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (2001).<sup>4</sup> At the root of these exegetical and homiletical turns, we find a recognition of the epistemological potential in Emmanuel Lévinas' philosophical engagement with the Other. Lévinas may even describe the encounter with the Other as an epiphany.<sup>5</sup> The Lévinasian analysis so strikingly captures the core of our understanding of what it means to conduct ethnographic ecclesiology with other-wise conversation partners that we found it fitting to open this article with his thoughts.

Lévinas contrasts totality and infinity as the 'same' and the 'other'. On the one hand, systematic, theoretical thinking is an important means of creating order and orientation in human life. On the other, it risks categorising differences as ultimately similar, which is highly problematic if taken as reality. However, the falseness of this totalising thinking tends to be disrupted in the encounter with the face of the human other.<sup>6</sup> Lévinas' description of how this encounter interrupts and supersedes our presuppositions and prior theories captures the experiences we gained through our participant observations and in our interviews with the refugees. Conversations with these other-wise people, whose theologies were shaped by living on the threshold between the Middle East and Northern Europe, taught us about the Christian church and theology in ways that transcended our systematic reasoning. However, the learning potential inherent in this encounter appeared to be two-sided since the people we studied in the field also reported new

<sup>2</sup> This article is based on the fieldwork *Consumed identities. Ritualized food and the Negotiation of National Identity in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark*, which is part of the research project *Reassembling Democracy. Ritual as Cultural Resource*. RE:DO is financed by the Norwegian Research Council.

<sup>3</sup> According to the Council on International Relations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark, the name of the church is officially abbreviated 'the ELCD' (<http://www.interchurch.dk/materialer/forkortelser/>). When referring to the denomination, we use this abbreviation. See also Svenningsen, 'Foreword', 7-11.

<sup>4</sup> Please note that we follow West and McClure in their typing of other-wise. Their use of the hyphen perfectly captures the double meaning of the term in the Anglophone language and tradition.

<sup>5</sup> Lévinas, *Totality*, 51, Lévinas, *Otherwise*, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Lévinas, *Totality*, 51, Lévinas, *Otherwise*, 5.

understandings due to their encounter with us. Thus, we also appeared as other-wise persons to them. The article explores the theological outcome of this mutual, other-wise encounter.

## Part One

### Article Content, Research Design, Historical Background

“... like other scientists (and other animals) the ethnographer struggles for knowledge with fallible instruments for knowing. His distinctive sources of information come equipped with distinctive biases, and his task is to design data collection strategies for superseding these biases, usually by finding additional sources with different biases ...”<sup>7</sup>

As ethnic Danes of middle-class origin who have grown up in a historically socially, culturally and religiously homogeneous society with a high degree of gender equality, we had to acknowledge that our personal situatedness as researchers prevented us from seeing subtle, but important aspects of the refugees’ everyday life. Initially, we paid no attention to problems related to class, ethnicity and gender at work in a migrant community foreign to our own culture. The tension between our observations and the interview persons’ own descriptions of the same situations reminded us of the unavoidable, but problematic, impact of scholars’ situatedness on theological interpretations. Consequently, it was imperative for us to turn the lens around and make ourselves the object of further study. In our original research design, we had not taken the effect of scholarly situatedness into account; however, our interviewees made us agonizingly aware of the need to include this meta-study in our work. In this article, we analyse our own cultural embedment in light of the methodological challenges that these conflicting observations and insights posed to us.

We have divided the article into three interrelated parts, each of which engages individually with the challenges of scholarly situatedness in relation to ethnographic ecclesiology. In Part One, we describe our project and research design. The primary object of our study was the encounter of converting refugees, primarily of Muslim background, with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark and its thoroughly embedded theology of place of which our study made us increasingly aware. We have therefore included a sketch of Danish ecclesial history and traditions. In accordance with recent understandings of the role of qualitative studies within humanities and the social sciences, our aim was not a representative survey mapping the converting refugees’ situation in detail.<sup>8</sup> Instead, our modest goal was to learn something about this encounter from intersubjective dialogues and interactions with people whose situatedness on the threshold between church and society, Christianity and Islam, the Middle East and Northern Europe gave them a different horizon of understanding. We aimed at a diagnosis that might nuance previous understandings, complicate the formulation of theological truth claims and inspire more work on the subject: the cultural encounter in the ELCD. As a consequence, we chose to engage one particular place, an ELCD congregation in the centre of Copenhagen, called the Apostles’ Church, in which approximately one-third of the congregation consists of Kurds, Iraqis and Iranians who have come to Denmark within the last few years or months.

We ourselves did not collect quantitative data as part of our study, but the Apostles’ Church seats approximately 230 people and is usually full on an ordinary Sunday morning. Over the past couple of years, the number of people attending the church has grown, and today approximately 70-80 migrants and 130-140 ethnic Danes participate in the Sunday worship. An anonymous survey of the international members of the congregation, conducted by the congregation of the Apostles’ Church itself, gave us more detailed data about the migrants: 48 people, of whom 41 were male and 7 female, filled in the questionnaire anonymously. Of the men, 32 were from Iran, as were the 7 women; 8 men came from Afghanistan, and 1 did

<sup>7</sup> LeVine, “Knowledge,” 180; Steward, *Ethnographer’s Method*, 28.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Alex Steward’s argument for replacing the quantitatively orientated criteria of validity, reliability and generalisability with veracity, objectivity and perspicacity in *The Ethnographer’s Method*, 14-15.

not answer.<sup>9</sup> However, as our fieldwork demonstrated, place of origin and ethnicity did not always cohere; both Kurds and Afghans were refugees from Iran.

As recommended in books on ethnographic methodology, we triangulated our research.<sup>10</sup> As we shall see, the triangulation increased the influence of other voices on our study and challenged our own perspectives. In fact, our fieldwork was more than triangulated, since we were three researchers collaborating on the project. As different people from different social, religious and scholarly backgrounds, we observed and reflected differently. The mothers among us identified with the mothers among the refugees while the former mechanic in our group spent time with the young men. We had not planned this, but for an encounter to develop, you must – also as a scholar – bring something to the conversation. In addition, our differences came into play when we discussed and analysed the data in the research group. Consequently, we became increasingly aware that our data were open to differing interpretations. We conclude the first part with a summary of the challenges that our scholarly background presented as well as the benefits that our training in academic theology gave us.

In Part Two, which constitutes the main body of the article, we aim at presenting a ‘thick’ – that is, a narratively detailed and analytically reflected – description of our field of study as recommended by the ethnographer Clifford Geertz in his seminal 1973 book *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Here we present excerpts from our data material: field notes from our participant observations, transcribed interviews and feedback seminar reports. The cases we describe and analyse display a series of latent conflicts between, on the one hand, the migrants’ embracing of the various theologies and practices related to this particular congregation and, on the other, the cultural habitus of the ethnic Danes who have defined the place until recently. The theoretical framework that we bring to the data analysis is the distinction between ‘locative’ and ‘utopian’ religions made by Chicago-based historian of religions, Jonathan Z. Smith. These analytical concepts helped us to understand why the Apostles’ Church – unlike most ELCD congregations – manages to include and nurture newcomers from radically different cultural backgrounds in its congregational life. Anticipating the results of our analysis, we can reveal that, above all, it is a shared vision of the utopian body of Christ that appears to hold together the very diverse groups of the congregation.

As mentioned above, our field study of the migrants’ encounter with the ELCD provoked reflection on our own situatedness as academically-educated theologians in the field. For the purpose of this meta-study, we also analyse excerpts from our interviews and participant observations with regard to our academic habitus and theological preconceptions. We draw attention to conflicts and problems related to ethnicity, social class and gender to which we as participant observers were blind. In this way, the article demonstrates how cultural situatedness may make the researcher biased, but also how a well-designed, triangulated, ethnographic approach to ecclesiology facilitates the scholarly reflexivity on these challenges. In this case, the scholar him- or herself becomes a kind of additional research project in which the agents in the field may reveal and describe the scholar’s biased perspectives. This role reversal implies that the informants become co-interpreters not only of the object of study, but also of the scholarly situatedness. In our case, the refugees contributed significantly to our processes of reflexivity.

Towards the end of the article, in Part Three, we will address the question of how theological knowledge can emerge from ethnographic fieldwork. Moreover, we discuss how this methodological approach influences the scholars’ process of reflexivity. In this meta-theoretical reflection on the challenges of scholarly situatedness, we bring in Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of habitus and reflexivity. Bourdieu’s concepts and thinking proved immensely helpful to our analysis of the difficulties and benefits of our scholarly situatedness. We have already mentioned our blind spots, but because of our sympathetic approach – and yet scholarly distance – to this particular field, we were also able to identify significant problems in the

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<sup>9</sup> The questionnaire was handed out at the Bible study class to the international members of the congregation after worship on Sunday May 11, 2014. Two volunteers in the congregation, Jonas Boendergaard and Lisa Noerrellykke Nissen – both academics skilled in humanities and social science, respectively – developed, conducted and analysed the survey. The questionnaire was translated into English and Farsi. The survey results have not been published, but were shared at a meeting for the leaders and volunteers at which we, too, presented our study.

<sup>10</sup> For the importance of triangulation of data in ethnographic research, see, e.g. Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography*, 69; Swinton, *Practical*, 50, 70f, 170, 178, 215f; and Steward, *Ethnographer’s Method*, 28.

congregation. Thus, with the help of Bourdieu's theories, we can address the intricate relationship between descriptive and normative tasks in theological research in a new way.

## Research Objective and Design

As already mentioned, the research objective that guided our qualitative study was the exploration of the encounter between refugees, primarily of Muslim background, and the ELCD. We were especially interested in their ideas about 'church'. This work led us to further explore how the migrants' so-called other-wise understandings of the church might challenge traditional Danish ecclesiologies that have been shaped by the specific historical and geographical contexts in which they developed. In order to analyse our subject in light of several perspectives, we triangulated the study through a combination of (i) participant observations, (ii) in-depth interviews with individual churchgoers among the group of refugees, and (iii) continuous feedback and response from the congregational leadership – that is, the two pastors and a group of church employees and lay volunteers.

We carried out our field study from March to September 2014. In this period, we regularly participated in worship services and joined the everyday activities at a nearby interreligious centre called 'The Meeting Place', which collaborates with the Apostles' Church. As sharing a meal is a basic act of ritual that establishes or breaks down hierarchies and boundaries, we decided to focus on the distribution of food – of all kinds – and the eating patterns in and around the congregation in the Apostles' Church. This included the provision of food, the preparation of meals, the distribution of invitations, participation in meals, as well as after-meal activities such as dishwashing and floor sweeping.

We used our initial participant observations and informal conversations as a basis for deciding whom to invite for longer interviews. Consequently, we interviewed 10 individuals from the group of asylum seekers and residents, selected on the criteria of diversity in terms of ethnicity, gender and relationship with the church. Again, we aimed for complexity, not for representativity. We wanted to talk with people whose perspective we considered important because of their specific history and identity. With regard to ethnic background, we interviewed Iranians, Afghans and Kurds. Concerning gender, we were keen to involve female interviewees, although males make up the vast majority of the refugee group. The few migrant women who attend the church play highly active roles as translators, readers and teachers in the church. However, activity was not a criterion for our selection; we also considered 'marginality' as a qualification for an interview. In the latter group, we found newly-converted Christians, but also migrants who formerly attended the church, but had – for various reasons – distanced themselves from the congregation.

In preparation for the interviews, we were – as already mentioned – acutely aware of the importance of perspective. Consequently, we discussed how we could let the informants' own experiences form the starting point for the interview rather than our scholarly perspective. One of the main challenges of interviewing this group was that they spoke Farsi and Kurdish but only limited Danish and/or English. Some were illiterate. In addition, their interviews during the asylum application process meant that their primary interview experience had been negative. To distribute the power between interviewer and interviewee more equally – and to compensate for linguistic challenges – we therefore provided each interviewee with a digital single-use camera and asked them to take a series of photographs that represented their lives in, and connected to, the Apostles' Church.

Originally, we planned to use mobile phones, as most of the refugees owned a smart phone (equipped with camera). However, the church pastors warned us of the latent dangers of taking photographs of converts of Middle Eastern descent. They made us aware of the harassment – and even prosecution – that sharing stories and pictures of converts through social media had caused to converts' families back in their home countries. Moreover, several of the refugees had not yet told their family and friends about their conversion. However, the digital single-use camera provided an easy solution to these problems, as we could extract the photographs from the camera only once. During the interviews, we uploaded the participant's photographs to our computer, where they became the starting point for a conversation about the refugee's encounter with this church in particular and the ELCD in general. However, if the pastors had not intervened, our

epistemologically-motivated and well-meaning initiative could have endangered people seriously. We conducted the interviews during the summer of 2014; they took approximately 1½-2 hours each.

## The Ecclesiological Traditions of the ELCD and the Apostles' Church

As of 1 January 2015, 78% of Denmark's population was a member of the ELCD. When looking at the membership from an ethnic perspective, we see that the percentage of ELCD membership is significantly lower among non-ethnic Danes than among ethnic Danes.<sup>11</sup> The encounter between various ethnic groups of different Christian churches has attracted particular interest in recent years since approximately half of the participants in Sunday services in the city of Copenhagen belong to migrant communities. Most of these migrants belong to denominations other than Lutheran, and they often have their own worship services in their respective native languages. Thus, the degree of encounter is mostly a matter of sharing the same church building while maintaining distinct worship services.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, it became of particular interest to study a congregation in which the encounter between migrants and ethnic Danes takes place within the framework of the ELCD. In order to provide a historical background for our analysis, some additional information on the ecclesial Danish context is given in the following.

Similar to the situation in other Northern European Protestant churches, the understanding of Christianity and church in the ELCD is closely tied to ethnic and national identity. However, it differs from the other Scandinavian countries, where church and state have become increasingly separated since 2000.<sup>13</sup> The ELCD has neither an independent church council nor a synod. Instead, the government of the ELCD is the responsibility of the politically-appointed Minister for Ecclesiastical Affairs. Moreover, the formal head of the church is the present king or queen, who, accordingly, must be a member of the ELCD. This strong interweaving of nationality and religion in the Danish context stems from a mix of theological, historical and political conditions, some of which are shared with other majority churches in Northern Europe.

Historically, the close bonds between faith and national identity are linked with the Protestant reformers' claim that Christianity is best embraced through one's native language. In addition, the relationship between state and church as expressed in the dictum *Cuius regio, eius religio* (*Whose realm, his religion*) in the Peace of Augsburg agreement of 1555 also promoted the forging of these bonds. The consequences of this epoch-making agreement were that the religion of the ruler of a particular geographical area became decisive for the formation of the national state and for the national identities of the inhabitants of that region. As described by sociologist of religion Peter Beyer, the development of nation-states and the majority churches in Protestant Europe have been intertwined to an extent that both the states and the majority churches tend to operate on a principle of integrity that involves both citizenship and membership of the national church.<sup>14</sup>

However, to understand the special characteristics of the ELCD, one must also take into consideration the specific political and cultural conditions in Denmark in the latter part of the 19th century. In 1864, the nation responded to territorial losses by uniting under a common set of Danish values. National identity was linked with the soil and the landscape, with the shared history, mythology and religion – and, above all, with the shared native language. This interweaving of national and religious identity was most clearly expressed in the thinking of the influential Danish theologian and pastor Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783-1872), who was also one of the founding fathers of the 1848 National Constitution. Grundtvig's dictum

<sup>11</sup> Lüchau, "Seks teser."

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.danskekirkestraad.dk/nyheder/nyhed/?tx\\_ttnews%5Bpointer%5D=2&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=29&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=203&cHash=07a5a711d712de6dad5f8f4ba2ac4010](http://www.danskekirkestraad.dk/nyheder/nyhed/?tx_ttnews%5Bpointer%5D=2&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=29&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=203&cHash=07a5a711d712de6dad5f8f4ba2ac4010). Accessed June 05, 2015. For readers of Scandinavian languages, additional information on the relations between migrant congregations and the ELCD as the majority church in Denmark can be found in Trolle, "Migrantkirker."

<sup>13</sup> In Sweden, state and church separated in 2000. Since 2012, Norway has moved in the same direction; however, complete separation has not yet been accomplished.

<sup>14</sup> Beyer, "Socially", 115.

“Menneske først, Kristen så” (*First human, then Christian*) expressed the identity of the revivalist movement that he inspired in the latter part of the 19th century. In this movement, which was especially influential among pastors, national and religious currents merged in a confirmation of Danish cultural identity.

However, other contemporary revivalist movements ran counter to the Grundtvigians. One of these new movements was the Home Mission Movement (*Kirkelig Forening for den Indre Mission*), inspired by spiritual awakenings outside Denmark, which included German pietism.<sup>15</sup> This movement was critical of the Grundtvigian promotion of national and cultural values. Instead, the followers of the Home Mission Movement emphasised the divide between those who had received an awakening and the ‘infidels’, who, in the heat of the debate, included the Grundtvigians. The movement preached the importance of abstaining from ‘worldly pleasures’ such as drinking and gambling, emphasising that the true identity of the Christian was the pilgrim travelling towards his or her heavenly destination. Thus, they were ‘foreigners’ in the world. However, the Home Mission Movement associations in Copenhagen adopted a more social and activist approach to the awakening. The Christian social movements in England inspired this development. In Copenhagen, the Mission’s eschatological outlook in preaching was accompanied by diaconal work among the lower social classes.

Around the turn of the 19th century, the population of Copenhagen skyrocketed as people moved from country to city to work in the new factories. The new working class populated the quarters that grew up outside the walls of the medieval city centre. At that time, only 20 church buildings existed in Copenhagen, which meant that one parish could have up to 70,000 inhabitants.<sup>16</sup> To cope with this situation, a group of people – primarily associated with the Home Mission Movement – founded the private Church Trust of Copenhagen (*Københavns Kirkefond*). During the following years, the Trust built around 50 churches in the new quarters and handed them over to the ELCD. The Apostles’ Church in Vesterbro – a new quarter west of the city – was among these.

In order to understand the version of Christianity preached and practised in the Apostles’ Church, one must know its history. Whereas the majority of congregations in the ELCD subscribe to the tradition of the Grundtvigian awakening, the Apostles’ Church belongs to the missional tradition with its stronger pietistic outlook, accent on social activism and the theological conviction of being a place that differs from the surrounding world. In addition, while the majority of ELCD congregations emphasise their national roots, the Apostles’ Church highlights the international orientation of Christianity. Jonathan Z. Smith’s concepts may summarise the difference. Whereas the majority of ELCD congregations tend to be ‘locative’ in outlook, the ecclesiology that characterises the Apostles’ Church reflects what we see as utopian, not only transcending ethnic boundaries but perhaps even depending on the crossing of boundaries.

Several factors place the converting migrants in the Apostles’ Church in liminal situations. First, most of the refugees have recently converted from Islam to Christianity or are in the process of becoming Christians. In addition, most have arrived in Denmark from the Middle East within the last few years – or even recent months – and are in the process of applying for asylum or permanent residence. As we shall see, it is the utopian understanding of the church as the body of Christ that resonates with the refugees’ experiences and faith. As the historical summary suggests, the intertwinement of language, citizenship and religion characteristic of the ELCD stands in striking contrast to the circumstances of the migrants, who have left their home countries and Middle Eastern cultural background and have chosen to convert from Islam to Christianity. Inevitably, this creates tension in the ELCD. We will return to this discussion in the concluding paragraph of Part Two.

<sup>15</sup> Lausten, “The History”, 17.

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.denstoredanske.dk/Samfund,\\_jura\\_og\\_politik/Jura/Kirkeret\\_og\\_kirkelig\\_forvaltning/Kirkefondet](http://www.denstoredanske.dk/Samfund,_jura_og_politik/Jura/Kirkeret_og_kirkelig_forvaltning/Kirkefondet). Accessed June 18, 2015.

## Scholarly Situatedness. Challenges and Benefits

When we began our fieldwork in the Apostles' Church, we expected the existence of an ethnic, Farsi-speaking community within the congregation to be an attraction for new migrants. Of course, the significance of shared language, culture and social situation among the refugees cannot be underestimated, but before we started our interviews, we did not recognise how weak and transient the relationships within the group of asylum seekers and residents were. Although some of the refugees had been affiliated with the congregation for more than a year, many had a history with the church that was even shorter than ours. In addition, their future was uncertain; maybe they would be back in Afghanistan before the autumn came. Unwittingly, we took their mutual friendliness for friendship.

In June 2014, when we began interviewing the refugees, we were looking forward to positive reports about the many meals that, in various forms, were served and shared by the congregation. We expected to hear that the meals were an important element in the bonding of the community and that the food made the church an attractive place for newcomers. Therefore, it came as a surprise that the meals were *also* situations in which conflicts of ethnic, social and gendered origin emerged. Although we, as part of our participant observations, joined what to us appeared to be well-organised meals with well-prepared food and a pleasant atmosphere, the interviews uncovered various underlying potentials for conflict. However, these tensions had escaped our notice. Was it because we, as participant observers, were, after all, outsiders to the community of refugees? Or had our lack of linguistic competences in Farsi/Kurdish cut us off from important information? Nevertheless, we think the explanation is more complicated.

As already mentioned, thought-provokingly blind spots characterised our observations; we cannot escape that fact. Still, tension also existed between the refugees' perceptible social behaviour and their own description of the social processes at work in their part of the congregation. To us the 'truth' about the refugees' life and conversion processes appeared to be hidden in this tension. As we shall see, their shared faith curbed the conflicts. Thus, neither participant observation alone nor isolated interviews would have afforded us access to this complex interaction between the refugees' social world and their private reflections. However, combining the two methods of gaining knowledge appeared to be an apt way of approaching the dynamics of social life and faith in their life-worlds. In addition, in order to understand this tension, we needed to decode the theology at work in the asylum-group's behaviour and reflections. Apparently, an approach using categories borrowed from the social sciences would have been inadequate to capture the processes at work in the individual person. To understand the refugees' life-world, we also had to take into account the images, biblical stories and rituals that form the core of the Christian faith and tradition. Thus, whereas certain aspects of our situatedness initially proved problematic – our blindness to various social group dynamics – our theological identity as a mix of exegetes and practical theologians – proved helpful when we were to interpret the tension. We were not completely blind, after all, and could see something.

In order to illuminate these two aspects of our engagement with the field – the problematic and the beneficial – we offer three examples of how the interviews exposed our scholarly biases and situatedness. The first case involves problems concerning class, the next case faces problems relating to ethnicity, and the third focuses on issues of gender. Next, to understand the tension between our immediate observations and our in-depth interviews, which we consider genuine, we will bring in one more case from our fieldwork that draws attention to the gospel at work in the refugees' everyday life.

Below we introduce Part Two with a quotation from Roger Sanjek's seminal 1990 article "The Secret Life of Fieldnotes", in which he quotes an informant's instruction to the anthropologist. The quotation is from the high era of classical anthropology in the 1950s. The informant makes the anthropologist aware of the quality of the information to be gained from simply hanging around and becoming absorbed in the informant's side of the world. Our work confirms the value of the advice.



## Part Two

# Scholarly Blindness and Biases. Cases from the Fieldwork in the Apostles' Church

“Go easy on that ‘who,’ ‘what,’ ‘why,’ ‘when,’ ‘where’ stuff, Bill. You ask those questions, and people will clam up on you. If people accept you, you can just hang around, and you’ll learn the answers in the long run without even having to ask the questions.”<sup>17</sup>

## Conflicts around the Dining Table

### First Case: Serving the Table. Class Conflicts and Food

After the Sunday service, the refugees from the Apostles' Church gather at the nearby Meeting Place for a Bible study class, whose theme often relates to the sermon of the day. The class usually begins with singing and reading and concludes with free prayer. Until recently, Danish members of the congregation with a degree in theology have conducted the classes. Consequently, translation into Farsi was needed. However, a male academic, educated in linguistics from Cambridge, who speaks Farsi and has experience from the immigrant reception centres in Greece, has taken over the catechesis from September 2014 onwards. Although most of the class participants are males of Iranian, Afghan and Kurdish origin, Iranian women conduct the liturgical elements of the classes. The women read from the Bible and lead the prayers. This is probably because many of the female refugees are educated whereas many of the males, especially the Afghans, are illiterate. After the class, the participants share the meal that an Afghan cook, occasionally assisted by an Iranian woman, has prepared during the service. The congregation pays the expenses, so the meal is free. As meals often involve 50-80 persons, organising them requires logistical and financial skills – as well as professional cooking experience. The Afghan cook, who was one of the first persons whom we interviewed, had these skills. As he spoke only Farsi, which we did not, a young Iranian woman from the congregation assisted us with the interview.<sup>18</sup>

### *The Afghan Cook's History*

The Afghan cook, who was probably around 50, told us that he grew up in Afghanistan, where he worked in a bakery in his adolescence. For reasons unknown to us, at the age of 13 he fled to Iran, where he lived illegally for 27 years. In Iran, he ended up running a small greengrocer's shop, where he also sold various kinds of prepared food, e.g. salads and sandwiches. The income from the shop was enough to raise a family. He has an Iranian wife and a grown-up son and daughter. The daughter still lives with the mother back in Iran, but the son has obtained a residence permit in Germany. Both male members of the family have converted to Christianity. His wife knows about and approves of their conversion, but the female members of the family have not changed their religion. He explains that the unbearable conditions, which illegal residents in Iran must tolerate, are the reason for his flight to Europe. If subjected to injustice or even violence, illegal residents have nowhere to take their complaints. Because the whole system benefits from this kind of quasi-official immigration system, he anticipates no changes that would improve his future situation.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Whyte 1955:303. Quoted in Sanjek, “The Secret Life”, 245.

<sup>18</sup> The Afghan cook allowed us to use his story in our research and publications. Apart from that, he has also given several personal interviews to newspapers and magazines. Thus, this account provides no information that he has not himself made public. Drawing public attention to their stories is important to many refugees: public attention may put pressure on the authorities. The authorities are aware that if the refugees fail to obtain a residence permit and are therefore returned to Afghanistan or Iran, their status as converts may be even worse than before they had migrated. In this case, the strategy worked: by summer 2015, immediately before the publication of this article, the Afghan cook received his residence permit.

The cook tells us that he experienced his conversion already in Iran. In fact, it was Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of Christ* (2004) that 'gospelled' him. Being 'gospelled' is the term asylum applicants often use for the person or event that attracted them to Christianity. After the film, he bought a cross in Dubai. As we listen to his story, we hear about the daily harassments and small-scale violence he suffered at the hands of Muslim officials that prompted his conversion. However, his conversion only worsened his situation since, as a convert, he was often subjected to even more violence. The flight from Iran took him to Greece and then via Norway to Denmark. In Norway, he spent a couple of years in a remote refugee camp. Here he began his career as a marathoner, because transport was often unavailable. Upon his arrival in Denmark, he was finally baptised – albeit not in the Apostles' Church – but in another ELCD church in Copenhagen. While we were conducting our interviews, the authorities closed his case. However, the Afghan cook has refused to sign a document stating his willingness to leave Denmark voluntarily, because this signature would definitively eliminate his chances of having his case reconsidered. In spite of his difficult situation, he appears calm, even serene, with regard to his situation and future. As he explained to us in the interview, "I have already put everything behind me and left my country and all my belongings. I feel I have already received my residence permit by the Gospel and by converting to Christianity and God the Almighty in heaven." We will return to his interpretation of his situation.

His incipient Christian faith has changed since he left Iran, because, on his way through Europe, he experienced a healing miracle. After several violent assaults provoked by his conversion, he became deaf in one ear. Later, at the Greek reception centre, assaults by the officials caused him to lose his hearing completely. When asked to hand over his personal belongings, he had tried to hide his mobile phone, but in vain, and the authorities had punished him for that. As he is illiterate, being deaf deprived him of his ability to communicate with his family back home. However, as he tells us, God heard his prayer and has now restored some hearing in both ears. Therefore, it seemed obvious that one of the photos that he shared with us during the interview was of his mobile phone. On the screen, we saw a picture of his son, which was taken in front of the Apostles' Church when his son once visited him here.

During the year that we conducted our fieldwork, the cook lived in the Apostles' Church. He had arranged his 'living room' around a mattress on the balcony next to the organ. In preparation for the interview, he had taken a series of photos of his 'room'. He moved into the church because of some quarrels at the asylum centre where the Danish Red Cross places rejected applicants. His conversion offended Muslim refugees, who expressed their point of view by grazing open the skin on his neck from one ear to the other with a knife.

The cook's story is typical for many uneducated, non-politically-organised asylum seekers who frequently have their applications for residence rejected by the authorities. Often, the circumstances around their flight are a mix of social, ethnic and religious issues, none of which appears serious enough for the authorities to grant the person a residence permit. Nevertheless, when a person suffers one kind of suppression after the other, his situation – because this person is usually male – ends up being weighty enough for him to embark on a risky journey that will separate him from his family, history and country. Often, the plan is that the family should follow once the male member – male head or son – of the family has settled in, but under safer conditions.

### ***Frustrations in the Kitchen. Rich Tables and Thrifty Meals***

During the interview, the cook explained that he was happy to serve the congregation and give it the benefit of his skills. He also expressed a certain pride in his ability to cook for so many people. However, sometimes he found the work in the kitchen frustrating. To him, his cooking was his gift to the church and its community – and, as such, his way of serving Christ. But, now and then, he felt that the participants in the meals did not interpret and recognise his efforts in this way. The cook described two kinds of lack of recognition that annoyed him in particular. The first came from the group of Afghan male adolescents. Occasionally, having prepared a meal for himself, he invited a couple of these young men, who also lived in the church, to share it. However, it left him angry when they just took his cooking for granted and did not even bother to wash their own dishes. Worse, however, was his experience of being belittled by Iranians at

The Meeting Place. Their failure to recognise his efforts transported him emotionally back to Iran, where he – as an illegal Afghan immigrant worker – also felt reduced to a non-person whose services the Iranians had taken for granted. From time to time, he also felt invisible in Denmark.

Recent research on meal culture may shed light on the cook's sentiments.<sup>19</sup> Scholars draw attention to the different types of meals that characterise the lives of modern families. They analyse the conflicts that arise around the table when the participants disagree about the character of a particular meal. On the one hand, we have 'rich tables', which are characterised by mutual agreement to spend generous amounts of time, effort and money on the meal. This kind of meal is a show of abundance. Consequently, the food is placed on the table in bowls and on dishes, and family members and guests are encouraged to help themselves and eat as much as they want. The meal is the cook's gift to the participants around the table, who are, for their part, expected to recognise the cook's culinary prowess and praise his delicious food. On the other hand, we have the 'thrifty meals'. Here the agreed principle is efficiency – that is, the collective saving of time, effort and money. Consequently, the serving is characterised by convenience and control. Often, the cook portions out the meal individually – sometimes directly from pots and pans in the kitchen. There must be enough for everyone (and maybe for tomorrow as well). In this case, the cook may still offer the meal as a gift, but the mandatory reciprocal recognition does not concern the quality of the food, but the time invested in preparing the meal. Consequently, the reciprocity should take the form of a willingness to help with the meal, e.g. laying the table or washing the dishes afterwards. Traditionally, only very close friends – so-called members of the family – are allowed to participate in this kind of meal. It is obvious that problems will arise around the table if one type of meal is mistaken for the other. If guests expect a 'rich table', but think the host is offering them a 'thrifty' one, the guests' sense of being appreciated may be disturbed. Or conversely: if the cook finds that he has made a 'rich' table, but receives no recognition for his efforts because the participants found the meal thrifty and ordinary, the cook may end up feeling humiliated. Again, if a cook expects his or her efforts to be repaid with help washing the dishes, but only receives praise for the food, the participants may appear lazy and ill-mannered to him or her.

The meal after the Sunday service and Bible class balances between these two kinds of meals. Although the Afghan cook does his best, he does not always get the kind of recognition he expects. To many of the participants, his meal is just a simple, 'thrifty meal'. Whereas some of the participants act accordingly and contribute to the efficiency of the meal by eagerly doing the dishes, sweeping the floor, etc., others take it for granted that they are to be serviced. The Afghan youths perceive the cook as a parental figure and, in his view, they behave like ill-mannered teenagers. Worse for him, however, is the attitude of the Iranians. The cook feels that the Iranians, who are themselves extremely proud of their cooking tradition, ignore his efforts and treat him as a low-class servant. Inevitably, this absence of reciprocity creates problems and destroys the bonding that usually takes place during a common meal. With regard to the latter case, the class differences represented around the tables – the well-educated Iranians *vis-à-vis* the unskilled Afghans – may generate sentiments that may eventually hamper the development of the community.

However, while we as participant scholars waited in the queue for our plate of simple, but – in our view – exotic and tasty food, we were unable to read the sentiments and stories that shaped the smiling and friendly cook's experience of the situation. We needed an interview.

## Second Case: Consumed Identities. Ethnic Flavours and Memories

The spicy curry from the Sunday meal and its staple accompaniments take us to the next area of unrecognised conflicts. Another interview made us aware of the ethnic tensions present around the dining table. These conflicts, too, went under our radar – and not ours alone. Neither the pastors from the Apostles' Church nor the social workers affiliated with The Meeting Place were aware of these tensions and of the role their personal presence played in the conflicts. The problem was that all of us – scholars, pastors and social workers – tended to lump everyone of Middle Eastern origin into one 'oriental' group. To us, curry and spicy food were just exotic dishes. It was the same with the languages. Tongues foreign to the European

<sup>19</sup> Cappellini and Parsons, "Sharing the Meal."

ear were – in spite of their differences – identified as Farsi. Consequently, the diverse groups of Iranians, Iraqis and Kurds were designated the “Farsi group”. However, our interviews revealed that the group of asylum seekers and residents also included refugees of more complex and often minority ethnicities such as Kurdish Iraqis and Iranians as well as Arab Iranians, groups whose mother tongue differed from Farsi and whose food habits varied from Iranian customs.

In general, most of the people we interviewed played a fairly central role in the congregation. However, since we found it important also to include the perspectives that less central people had on the happenings in and around the church, we asked a Kurdish man, who used to attend the activities at The Meeting Place but no longer visited it regularly, if he would be willing to do an interview. He had come to Denmark in the early 1990s as a refugee after heavy attack on the Kurds in northern Iraq. In response to the Kurds’ national uprising after the war between Iraq and Iran and the Persian Gulf War, Iraqi forces suppressed the rebels in a brutal campaign conducted by loyalist forces in the Iraqi Republican Guard. Several villages were obliterated, and thousands of Kurds died. In addition, millions were displaced by force and fled to Turkey or Iran. All this was part of his history.

### ***Rice versus Bread. The Symbolic Value of Staple Food***

When we asked the Kurdish man to describe the development that he had seen at The Meeting Place over the past 15 years, he asked us twice if we wanted an honest description. He then drew attention to two kinds of conflicts of which he was personally aware. The first concerned the food served at the common meals, the second the languages used in the congregation. Personally, he sensed that the Danish leaders tended to favour Iranians at the expense of Kurds and Afghans. He explained this situation by referring to the different national mentalities that, according to him, characterised the various ethnic groups. Maybe it was only natural that the Iranians received more attention because, as he pondered: “They are beautiful and extroverted.” In contrast, he described the Kurds, Afghans and Arabs as more introverted people: “The wars have made us and the Afghans tougher, more introverted. It would be against our nature to be like the Iranians.” One of the ways in which the leaders of The Meeting Place happened to favour the Iranians was by serving rice at all meals, but only rarely the bread that constitutes the Kurdish people’s staple food and is an essential part of their culture. When, as a young adult, he had fled with his mother and siblings into the mountains, the only food they took with them was flour: “With water, a fire and the precious flour, you can survive”, he explained. Consequently, in Kurdish culture, bread is a strong metaphor for life. The smell of bread being baked, the sound of fresh bread being broken, the taste of the crust – it all carried his history and brought it to life in his memory.<sup>20</sup> In addition, raised as a Christian, he pointed out that in the Bible, it is bread – not rice – that has this symbolic function. Still, in his opinion, bread should not replace rice at The Meeting Place, but he would welcome a choice.

As we began to attend the meals at The Meeting Place, we quickly became aware of the role that preparing and serving rice played for the meal. To be accepted as a good cook, a person had to be able to prepare the rice in the right way.<sup>21</sup> A fried rice-cake, which some migrants broke and shared among themselves, attracted our attention on several occasions. Later we found out how the cook made it. While the rice is still steaming, he pours olive oil into the pot with the result that the rice at the bottom fries into a crispy cake, which they call the ‘tadig’. We were well aware that not everyone participated in this ritual. Maybe the ‘cake’ was just too small for everyone to have a piece. Maybe some did not like this, indeed, greasy snack. Initially, we saw no pattern until we were personally invited to the ritual. One Sunday the cook placed a small piece of the ‘tadig’ on one of our plates. The field notes from the observations of that Sunday state: “I was emotionally moved. Today, I was included as a guest in their small ethnic meal within the larger meal. Without words they shared their history and culture with me.” As a kind of ethnic Eucharist, the sharing of the ‘tadig’ established a community within the community. A group of Iranians was ritually separated from the rest of the congregation. The ‘tadig’ confirmed their identity by activating their cultural

<sup>20</sup> See Fischler, “Food, Self and Identity.”

<sup>21</sup> See Beoku-Betts, “We Got Our Way of Cooking.”

memory through the senses: the taste, the smell and the crispy sensation. Correspondingly, the lack of bread prevented Kurds and others from a similar ritualistic sharing of their staple food.

### ***Service and Languages. Recognitions – and the Lack of It***

The other conflict that our Kurdish informant described related to the lack of awareness about the Kurdish language that he experienced among the leaders of the church and The Meeting Place. He explained that whenever migrants were invited to read, translate, etc. no one cared about the Kurds and their language. One emblematic example of this lack of recognition was the welcome poster that hung at The Meeting Place – and, somewhat ironically, also on the door to the office where we conducted our interviews. The poster welcomed the guests in a number of languages, but not in Kurdish. To him, this ignorance represented a misrecognition of Kurdish identity.

The quantitative survey of the migrant group referred to above confirmed the Kurdish man's description of lack of recognition of Kurdish identity in the Apostles' Church. One of the survey questions was: "What language do you speak?" The options were Danish, English, Farsi, and 'other'. Out of the 48 respondents, 9 answered 'Kurdish'. The people conducting the survey were surprised at how large a percentage of the group spoke Kurdish. However, our qualitative interview with the Kurdish man highlighted the importance of also using the Kurdish language in the congregation.

Since the interviewee knew the church pastors well, he was convinced that the misrecognition was by no way intentional. Personally, he had been in Denmark too long to care, but he knew it was paramount to other Kurds: "If they could just recognise us as Kurds, nothing else matters." This attitude often characterises migration cultures. The migrants compensate for the loss of their homeland by focusing on their shared language and ethnic food traditions. The sound of the language as well as the smell and taste of the food keeps the homeland alive in their minds and body. Consequently, with regard to these issues, migrants often appear more conservative than their fellow citizens in the homeland.<sup>22</sup>

Apparently, our predominantly mono-cultural Danish tradition had blinded us to the numerous differences within the group of refugees. We were aware neither of the different ethnic traditions of staples, nor of the differences in mother tongue. The whole group was reduced to rice-eaters and Farsi-speakers. Of course, different ethnic groups do not leave their regional conflicts behind in their respective homelands, but because of our ignorance – and also that of the leaders of the Apostles' Church and of The Meeting Place – the politico-cultural conflict between the Iranians and the Kurds was allowed to continue right before our eyes; however, without us seeing it. The conflict went on symbolically as the migrants used their respective groups' identity markers – language and food – in their struggle to gain the attention of the ethnic Danish community. Their aim was to gain recognition of their own culture and thus the power to define their part of the shared space.

### **Third Case: Ethnic Gender Trouble**

Having spent our lives in a Scandinavian welfare state, we overlooked yet another problem of which the refugees – or to be more precise, the female members among them – were extremely aware. Apparently, our own wealth clouded our ability to realise that a group of people in the congregation – the young Afghan male adolescents – were starving. In one of the most popular song of the national heritage of songs written by the Danish theologian mentioned in Part One, N.F.S. Grundtvig, Denmark is praised as a place "where few have too much, and even fewer too little" (1820). Hunger is a phenomenon alien to Denmark. Again, it was our open style of interviewing, in which we let the refugees' photos structure the interviews, that made us aware, first, of the problem itself and, subsequently, of our habitually restricted insight. In this case, gender was the issue.

As already mentioned, when choosing our interviewees, we focused on ethnicity, gender and age – and on their situation with regard to the process of applying for residence. We had asked the Iranian woman,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

who often cooked with the Afghan man mentioned above, if she also wanted to take some pictures for us and give an interview. Her case had been ongoing for more than seven years and, contrary to her co-cook, her legal situation often affected her mood seriously. Although initially accepting our invitation, after some difficult days, she handed her digital camera to a Kurdish woman, a middle-aged woman like herself.

### ***Male Hunger – and Female Awareness***

The Kurdish woman took photos from the celebration of St. John's Evening in the courtyard of the Apostles' Church. However, on the afternoon assigned for the interview, she just wanted to give the pictures to us. Getting a sudden headache, she did not feel comfortable enough for an interview, but when we transferred the pictures to our computer, a group of Farsi- and Kurdish-speaking women joined us at the pews to watch and comment on the photos. They happily identified people whom they knew from the Farsi-/Kurdish-speaking part of the congregation and identified members from the Danish part with whom they were especially affiliated. They then raised an issue we would never have associated with these pictures. If we, too, had attended the celebration of St. John, which we did not, the problem would probably not have attracted our attention either. Although the celebration included a barbeque, some of the people in the pictures left the party hungry. The salads and bread were free for everyone, but people had to bring their own food to put on the barbeque. The women remembered precisely what each person in the photographs had brought for the barbeque. Some brought chicken, while others could only afford some bread, some even nothing. In this unpredictable way, the cancelled interview turned into a very valuable conversation in the form of a group interview.

In one of our planned interviews, another mature woman of Iranian origin had also mentioned hunger. "The problem is," she told us, "that young male asylum seekers are not skilled in the cost-saving economy of poor people's kitchens. They do not know how to cook and, in addition, they just want to live like Danish adolescents. They, too, go to McDonald's, but if an asylum seeker buys a Big Mac, he won't have enough money for next day's breakfast and lunch." She concluded: "That is why food at the Apostles' Church must always be free." Also a third woman, a young Iranian, addressed hunger in our interview with her. She described how, because they were hungry, the Afghan adolescents often disturbed the cooks in the kitchen before the food was ready and also caused trouble in the queue for the meal. "They are too hungry to wait for the first serving and still too hungry to wait patiently for the second. So don't make the prayer before the meal too long," she suggested with a smile. Of course, we had realised that the Afghan adolescents flocked to the kitchen area, but had not paid any special attention to it. In a Danish context, the kitchen is the place where the family naturally gathers, so we had noticed nothing unusual about the adolescents' behaviour.

### ***Food and the Discourses of Dignity***

The Iranian woman who explained the temptations of McDonald's to us also drew attention to another problem related to food and money that she had experienced personally, but which initially also escaped our awareness. In our field notes, we wrote,

"MRL and I [GBH] arrived just in time to participate in the 18:00 meal at The Meeting Place. A group of Danes have volunteered for kitchen duty. The female leader of the place introduces the meal with a non-confessional prayer at the table. Afterwards we join the queue for the curry. Everybody pays for the food: 20 Danish kr. 'It is a question of dignity,' the leader of the place tells us afterwards."

We understood the leader's explanation about payment as a way to distinguish this place from poor peoples' soup kitchen. However, the Iranian woman had a very different experience of the leader's – indeed – good intention. In our interview with her, she explained:

"One of my worst experiences from The Meeting Place happened the first time I was to eat there. We all stood in line, and when it was time to get the food, I realized that we had to pay for it! I did not have any money with me and I had to borrow from the person next to me. I still feel embarrassed every time I see him! I think asking people to pay for food at

The Meeting Place sends the wrong signal. If I wanted to buy my own food, I would go to a store or restaurant. The meal we share as Christians should be more like a family occasion. You don't pay to eat with your family. I sometimes volunteer to cook myself, rather than have people pay."

The Iranian woman had drawn our attention to two issues. First, although the payment is small and symbolic from a Danish point of view, it may still exclude someone from joining the meal. Sometimes the asylum seekers do not have the money. The second problem concerned the interpretation of the payment. When the leader talked about dignity, the Iranian woman's concern was family ties, which she considers an important aspect of the meal. Dignity is an important aspect of human life and it is right to pay attention to it. However, we have to know how the meal participants perceive the payment. To this the Iranian woman, paying hindered something even more important to her – namely, the bonding of a new social network, which to her was a family in the making: "Of course, you do not ask your family to pay for the food!". To the Danes participating in the meal, their family was back home, but to this woman her family was here.

### **The Refugees' Gospel**

During our fieldwork in the Apostles' Church, members of the congregation as well as outsiders often asked us: Why is this particular congregation so attractive to refugees? Why do the asylum seekers use their sparse pocket money to travel from distant reception centres to a church in the middle of Copenhagen? Why not a local church near these centres? As mentioned earlier we had expected that the social life of the congregation would provide the explanation. To a certain degree it does, because the refugees tell newly arrived asylum seekers about the Apostles' Church. In the interviews, we heard about this word-of-mouth referral when the interviewees described how they had been 'gospelled'. In addition, the fact that in the Apostles' Church, the service is translated into Farsi – a language that many but not all refugees understand – also appears important. However, both these explanations are, after all, only elements of a more complex and, we believe, deeply religious explanation. The next case will throw light on the Christology and soteriology in the converting refugees' emerging Christian faith. As we shall see, the utopian element, which characterises the theology practised in the Apostles' Church, is able to meet and nurture that faith.

### ***Projections of Faith. Photography as a Way of Doing Theology***

The second person we interviewed was an Afghan man in his late twenties. Although he spoke some Danish, he brought a fellow countryman with him to assist him in the interview. It came as a surprise that he had chosen to take his interview photos at another church in the centre of Copenhagen rather than at the Apostles' Church. He had never visited the Church of the Trinity before, but some friends had told him it was an impressive and beautiful church. Helped by a friend, he had taken a series of symbolically loaded pictures of different parts of the church interior. In several of the photographs, he depicted himself interacting with the paintings, the altar, the interior architecture, etc.

The first picture he shared with us showed the vaulted ceiling of the church. Creatively, he turned the motif upside-down and explained how the church to him appeared "like a boat in which everybody is inside" and added that to him: "The meaning of Jesus is that in spite of our differences, there is room for everybody. Christianity is a religion of mercy." It turned out that he was unaware that the ship is an ancient symbol of the church and that the central space of the church is called the nave (in Danish simply: the 'ship'). Thus, his interpretation was intuitive. Another photo of the vaulted ceiling focused on its many small lights. He explained that the illumination of the room represented the light "that shall never be turned out" and continued: "but if people lose their faith, it means that the light will be turned down." He confirmed that he also lit candles in prayer for other people in the Apostles' Church. Likewise, he talked about the symbolic significance of the church porch. In Danish, this room is called the 'house of weapons', since in times past people would leave their arms here. He told about his own mental reaction to this place: "When I enter the church I try to put my thoughts of weapons away and to be peaceful."

Another series of photographs showed him sitting, first, on one side of the choir section, then on the other. In our conversation about the pictures, he compared the choir to a courtroom and saw the opposing sides as the defender's and the accuser's places, respectively: "We are all in a divine courtroom," he explained and continued: "yet Jesus himself was sacrificed as defenceless." Another series showed him in front of the altar. In the first picture, he faced the altar and in the next, he turned his back to it. In this way, he illustrated the liturgy through which the pastor participated in a conversation with God during the service. To him, the possibility of addressing God in such a direct and intimate way was a new experience. Imitating the pastor's gestures of prayer, he stretched out his arms to the sides, so that his body resembled the cross. Reflecting on the crucified Christ, he explained that to him, Christ was a witness of suffering. For the interview, he had brought with him a t-shirt that was stained with blood. We understood that the blood was his, but since the memories made him feel very uncomfortable, we did not press him for information about the specific situation that had led to the violence. A sudden headache struck him, and we had to end the interview.

During the interview, he also told us about his activities at The Meeting Place, where he often assisted the cook and helped do the dishes. It became clear that Jesus' sacrifice was an important element in his motivation to serve the community, because he "served Jesus who sacrificed himself for our sake."

The interview surprised us in several ways. First, it revealed that the informant's relationship with the church was not restricted to the parish that he attended for worship – in this case, the Apostles' Church. In addition, the physical church building only played a part insofar as it attracted symbolic interpretations. Although he used the architecture of the Church of the Trinity to symbolise his process of conversion and his faith, it was the biblical narratives and the Christian Gospel to which he related. His intuitive interpretation of the interior architecture indicated an existential and spiritual relation with the church as a phenomenon. To him, the church was Christ. Conversely, our surprise when faced with his photos from the Church of the Trinity revealed that our habitus and ideas about 'church' were much more geographical and physical than his, relating ultimately to a specific parish and its church building of bricks and mortar. In fact, several of our interviewees had taken pictures of people and places that we did not associate with the Apostles' Church, but which perfectly illustrated their way into Christianity.

### ***The Transforming Power of Witnessing***

The conversation with the Afghan man brightly illuminates a tendency that we found in all our interviews: the strong focus on Christ. This takes us straight to the second issue that startled us. When he started talking about the courtroom and Christ's suffering for our sake, our stock reaction was to expect a recital of the Apostolic Creed. However, his thoughts moved him in the opposite direction. Instead of speaking about Christ's vicarious punishment for our sins, he described Christ's suffering as a witness to all human suffering. When imitating the pastor's liturgy of prayer in the photos, he referred to Christ's crucifixion as mirroring his own beaten body. Moreover, in his theological reflections on the images, while we had expected references to God's forgiveness of our sins, he interpreted Christ's suffering as a call for the obligation of human beings to stop the violence by leaving their evil thoughts in the 'house of weapons'.

In many ways, the Afghan man's theological reflections resemble the turn that American Protestant theology, in particular, has taken since the 9/11 event in New York.<sup>23</sup> In the face of traumatised people, the strong focus on the sinner and forgiveness characteristic of Lutheran Protestantism did not make sense. Consequently, theologians had to ask themselves what the Christian Gospel had to offer the victims of other people's sin.<sup>24</sup> Constructive theology informed by trauma theory has pointed in the same direction that our informant developed in his intuitive interpretation of church architecture: namely, that hope – or ability to see the light – depends on someone's witnessing suffering in order that the world may know it and reject it.<sup>25</sup> In his interpretation, the crucified Christ does that. However, without faith, no witnessing, no light and no hope exist.

<sup>23</sup> See Jones, *Trauma and Grace* and Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*.

<sup>24</sup> Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 69-98.

<sup>25</sup> Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 151-165, Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 15-44.



It was Christ's testimony of suffering that explained the strong emphasis on serving Christ that we heard, more or less explicitly, in all of our interviews. As already mentioned, the serving of the community, whether the Danish or the Farsi-/Kurdish-speaking part, was mediated through Christ. It was Christ's suffering – not on behalf of sinful humanity, but as a witness of the suffering sin has wreaked on humanity – that made the rice-cooking, the dishwashing and the toilet-cleaning meaningful jobs. This probably also explained why assisting at the Eucharist became such an important goal for the converts. Those who had been baptised exercised the liturgical phrase “This is the body of Christ” intensively. However, this way of serving Christ was a new possibility that opened up as part of the congregation's response to our fieldwork.

In May, a month before we started our interviews, we presented our interpretation of the data findings collected during our initial participant observations to the Danish members of the congregation: the two pastors, leaders of the church council and the many volunteers. In return, we received their feedback on our work. Among the more problematic issues that we presented on this occasion was the relationship between host(s) and congregation guest(s). We drew attention to the fact that although hospitality creates a relationship between host and guest, hospitality without reciprocity generates debts, dependency and hierarchy. We only presented our observations and conversations with a couple of migrants, but left it to the congregation to decide whether to act on this – and, if so, how. And they did indeed decide to act. Already the following Sunday, two young Afghan men welcomed the guests to the church and distributed the flyers that would guide newcomers through the day's service. In the flyer, written in three languages – Danish, English and Farsi (but not Kurdish) – volunteers wishing to assist during the service (e.g. at the Lord's Table), were encouraged to put their names and phone numbers on a slip of paper. In response to our criticism, the church council has become extremely aware that the hosts at the Lord's Table represent the diversity of the congregation in the pews. The congregation applauded the new hosts at the table. As a young female Danish member of the congregation put it: “There is something very elementary and true in the way that A. [a young, male Afghan asylum seeker waiting for deportation] hosts the Eucharist. The word that accompanies the bread is simply: ‘Jesus!’ Well, that is what it is. I like it. No need to wrap it up in a lot of liturgy. I always try to get into the line that he serves.” A good host creates opportunities to become the guest him- or herself.

### ***The Kingdom of God. Locative, Utopic and Heterotopic Spaces***

As indicated earlier, the analytical distinction between ‘locative’ and ‘utopian’ religions introduced by the American scholar of the history of religions Jonathan Z. Smith proved immensely helpful to our understanding of the refugees' life-world.<sup>26</sup> Our analysis pertains to ‘ideal types’ of localised and utopian Christianity within the ELCD churches. We are well aware that, depending on their history and geography, some congregations mix the localised and utopian aspects of Christianity rather than adhering to the pure forms. However, operating with ‘analytical categories’ and ‘ideal types’ in the analysis allows us to spot current trends and suggest an answer for the questions raised in the beginning of this paragraph: Why is the congregation in the Apostles' Church so attractive to refugees? Why not a church near the reception centres?

Our meeting with the converting and converted migrants made us aware of how localised the Protestantism practised by most ELCD congregations has become. The ELCD is founded on geographically well-defined parishes, a basis that presupposes the stable, settled life of its members. Moreover, celebrating Christmas and Easter festivals, as well as occasions related to birth, youth, marriage and death in the lives of these established families, constitutes the backbone of most of the ELCD's congregational life and activities. Consequently, for most members, attending an ordinary Sunday church service without participating in a baptism or other special family occasion will be a rare occurrence.

<sup>26</sup> Smith develops these analytical categories in “The Wobbling Pivot” and “The Influence of Symbols on Social Change: A Place on Which to Stand” in *Map Is Not Territory*, 88-103 & 129-146 and in “II. On Comparison” and “V. On Comparing Settings” in *Drudgery Divine*, 36-53 & 116-143, respectively.

The Iranian woman who told us about the problem of hunger and how she perceived the congregation as her new family also explained why the traditional Danish practice of Christianity was insufficient for her as a convert. This woman had attended several churches in Denmark, and when we asked why she had chosen to stay in the Apostles' Church, she gave us the following analogy:

"I know that for many Danes it is fine to go to church once a week, listen for an hour and then go home. But that is not enough for me to live on [...] It is as if I have had my inner organs removed – my heart, my lungs, my blood – and now I need new organs and new blood in order to live. That is why I need substantial food – spiritual food."

In our interview with her, she described herself as a missionary. Her voluntary missionary work consisted of Bible studies with refugees at the reception centres. Her 'gospelling' was based on the sermon and teaching that she had herself received the previous Sunday. She described how her active engagement with the Gospel – reading it aloud in Farsi at the worship service and teaching it to other migrants – opened it up to her in new ways and helped her understand it at a deeper level than if she merely sat listening passively in the pews. The missionary work of this formerly Muslim woman had encouraged many newly arrived refugees to seek out the Apostles' Church.

As already mentioned in Part One, when compared to the majority tradition in the ELCD, the Apostles' Church is more *utopian* in outlook. Most of the ethnic Danish members of the Apostles' Church belong to the more Evangelical tradition within the ELCD, albeit in the urban version with a strong focus on social work. The congregation's many outreach projects meet the needs of the parish. However, the 'place' that ultimately defines the social space of the Apostles' Church is not its geographical situatedness in Vesterbro, but the Kingdom of God. When the Afghan cook spoke about the 'residence permit' that he had already received through his conversion and how, in spite of his difficult, transient situation, it made him feel at home, then his sense of the Gospel must be characterised as utopian. Like the apostle Paul in 1 Cor 9:24-27, he was literally running to win his prize. However, the strong emphasis on the spiritual *presence* of Christ in the life of the congregation offsets the absence of the Kingdom. Based on our interviews with the refugees, conversations with the pastors and our discursive analysis of sermons, psalms and the repertoire of worship songs, our characterisation of the Protestant paradigm of the Apostles' Church is *participation in Christ*.<sup>27</sup> The theological interpretation of the Christian Gospel expressed in the photographs taken by the Afghan man in the Church of the Trinity ties in with this paradigm. It is because of the individual believer's participation in Christ that Christ may serve as a witness of his or her personal sufferings.

In a fruitful way, Michel Foucault's ideas about the *heterotopic* space, as introduced in his early speech "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias" (1967), supplements Smith's categories by explaining how the utopian dimension in a group's world view can influence their present reality.<sup>28</sup> Foucault's description of the interaction between the *utopia* and the *heterotopia* perfectly captures the dynamic between the theological *utopia* – in this case, the Kingdom of God – and the Apostles' Church as a "real and effective" *heterotopic* space in the centre of Copenhagen. On the one hand, the Apostles' Church forms part of the institutionalised ELCD, yet it is – as a *heterotopic* space – transparent for the *utopia* that ultimately defines the place. As Foucault explains:

"There also exist, and this is probably true for all cultures and all civilizations, *real and effective spaces which are outlined in the very institution of society*, but which constitute a sort of counter arrangement, of effectively realized utopia, in which all the real arrangements, all the other real arrangements that can be found within society, are at one and the same time represented, challenged, and overturned: *a sort of place that lies outside all places and yet is actually localizable*. In contrast to the utopias, these places which are absolutely other with respect to all the arrangements that they reflect and of which they speak might be described as heterotopias."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> In Pauline studies, a long exegetical discussion exists about how to explain the apostle's theology to the Gentiles: *Justification by faith* as claimed by Luther and the Lutherans, or the mystical *participation in Christ* as suggested by Albert Schweitzer in his influential 1930 book *Die Mystik des Apostels Paulus*. Whereas the first paradigm characterises the Northern European Protestant tradition, the participation paradigm is stronger in the Reformed tradition, which for historical reasons also characterises the Anglophone Evangelical tradition.

<sup>28</sup> "Des espaces autres" performed in 1967 in *Cercle d'études architecturale*.

<sup>29</sup> Foucault, "Of Other Spaces", 3. Emphasis added.

On Sundays when the members of the congregation form long hymn-singing lines as they await the Eucharist, the Kingdom as an imagined, *utopic* space continuously comes into being and transforms the church into a *heterotopic* space which – as the body of Christ – transcends the institution of the ELCD. In the conclusion to Part Three, we will return to the Apostles' Church as a heterotopic space.

Thus, there appears to be a match between the tradition of Protestantism to which the Apostles' Church belongs and the refugees' spiritual needs. In addition, the Kingdom, which has not yet come, and the body of Christ, represented by the congregation, constitute a strong potential for criticism of the present. As was the case with the more locative, Grundtvigian tradition of the majority of ELCD churches, politics, identity and religion also converge in the utopian tradition, but now defined from another – absent, but imagined – place. As we saw in Part One, the various ecclesiological traditions within the ELCD arose as the Danish sense of national identity emerged in the late 19th century. However, the present dynamics of the globalisation, with Europe's involvement in conflicts beyond its borders and the influx of people into Europe from these conflict zones, have questioned the intimate link between nation, history, ethnicity and religion and reopened discussions about national identity. In this situation, the theology of the Home Mission Movement – albeit in its urban version – appears to be experiencing a renaissance. A hundred years ago, this theology was able to meet the material and spiritual demands of people moving from country to city; now it fulfils the needs of fugitives of war, violence and poverty.

## Part Three

### Fieldwork and the Production of Theological Knowledge. Towards the Utopia of Wholeness

“We must consider who we are and what we believe when we do fieldwork. Otherwise we might not see how we shape the story. Perhaps later, once we are involved in our next project, we will recognize gaps in our earlier analyses that resulted from our tightly held views. We do ourselves a favour if we reflect on these matters while we are in the field”.<sup>30</sup>

When we first left the library to embark on qualitative ethnographic studies, we were unaware that our fieldwork would make us ourselves the objects of research. Nor did we anticipate how difficult it would be for us to change the perspective and, metaphorically speaking, to turn the lens on ourselves. As ethnic Danish, middle-class, mid-life female scholars, mainstream members of the ELCD, we simply did not realise how profoundly we were shaped by our backgrounds and how much was inscribed in our spontaneous analyses, invisible to ourselves. It was only as the project progressed that we gradually became aware of how our cultural and scholarly habitus shaped and restricted what we were able to see. In other words, to shift our focus we needed to be displaced from our habitual interpretive frameworks, and that initiative could not come from ourselves. It was our encounters with living, vulnerable people – situated in fundamentally different circumstances from us – that sparked our displacement. Their implicit and explicit resistance to our pre-packaged categories repeatedly made us aware of our own cultural embedment in a very narrow, though highly privileged context.

In this final part of the article, we will share some more principled reflections on the ways that situatedness affects the production of theological knowledge. Inspired by the French sociologist and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu and the Filipino theologian Franklin D. Pilario, we will argue that field studies are necessary to counteract the cultural and intellectualist biases inherent in our habitus as theologians. In other words, we see fieldwork as a way to achieve a more self-reflexive and ‘modest’ role for academic theology in ecclesiology. This conviction places us on a par with current ecclesiological research trends that recommend the use of ethnographic approaches. However, if our academic situatedness shapes our knowledge about the church, we are prompted to reflect on what that means theologically. Furthermore, we must ask how we can develop research strategies that correspond to the ultimately utopian project of

<sup>30</sup> Kleinman and Copp, *Emotions*, 13.

wholeness: the *communio sanctorum* that is called into being by the Gospel. As scholars in a privileged position, we have an epistemological and moral obligation to involve other-wise perspectives when generating theological knowledge. Thus, conducting responsible ecclesiological research implies giving voice to the polyphony of the lived and living church.

### Embodied Inscriptions. The Scholarly Habitus

According to Pierre Bourdieu, the very act of knowing is deeply embodied and therefore closely tied to the habitual dispositions of the agents in a particular field.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, the production of knowledge depends fundamentally on the place in which it is generated, whether church, academy or some other social context. Moreover, various kinds of knowing, depending on the specific positions of different groups, exist within a particular field. By habitual dispositions, we mean the ways in which a social group's shared values work through individual group members. Thus, habitus functions as a kind of 'structuring structure': on the one hand, habitus denotes how the logic of the specific field forges human agency; on the other hand, it helps to preserve and maintain the economic, social and cultural values of the field.<sup>32</sup>

In its Western academic tradition, theology represents a field that has developed distinct intellectual traits. Among these important characteristics, we find the basic idea of conducting *systematic* theology. As the name of the discipline indicates, the goal of systematic theology is a unified, universally valid knowledge of God. Moreover, the symbolic capital of the academy is linked to the scholarly management of the discipline and its goal. To insiders, this 'structuring structure' is invisible; it becomes part of the scholarly habitus through the training in – or maybe we should say socialisation into – academic practices. Thus, it is inscribed in our bodies. Whereas scientific work in the Positivist tradition claimed to represent a glance from *nowhere*, theologians lay claim to represent no less than the perspective of God. However, the production of theological knowledge is still a situated practice bound to specific institutions and represents a partial, although privileged, understanding.

According to Bourdieu, it would be a mistake to believe that academic descriptions can grasp social life in all its complexity. On the contrary. Nevertheless, if we as theologians are to understand just a little of what is going on in the field that we want to study, we must break with the 'scholastic fallacy' inherent in our habitus.<sup>33</sup> Instead of taking our own cultural and theological norms and positions for universal truth, we must recognise how our own situatedness affects what we are able to see. As demonstrated in Part Two, we – as Danish, academic theologians – presupposed that the refugees in the Apostles' Church enacted the unspoken locative Christianity that characterises the ELCD. However, this misrecognition on our part blinded us to the differences in their world and world view. In order to 'see' the field, we needed a strategy that would bring our hidden biases and preconceptions to light and make us sensitive to the interpretations and practices that tend to escape our normative eye.

### Scholarly Modesty and the Imperative of Reflexivity

Strongly inspired by Bourdieu, Franklin D. Pilario has argued that in their theological work theologians must actively incorporate the insight that knowledge is always historically and socially situated. As theologians, we are always in danger of tending towards either intuitionism or theoreticism. Tending towards intuitionism means accepting the taken-for-granted theologies and the outlook of the religious communities studied as the basis for analysis. However, the opposite danger consists in tending towards theoreticism, which means taking the objectivist gaze of the academic theologian as the ultimate description of reality. To navigate these narrow waters, the scholar may be tempted to choose theory at the cost of practice or vice-versa. However, as an alternative to these two pitfalls, Pilario recommends the practice of scholarly reflexivity.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> For the argument developed here, see also Felner, "Breaking", 85ff.

<sup>32</sup> Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation*, 117.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 249f.

<sup>34</sup> Pilario, *Rough Grounds*, 449.

Instead of searching for abstract or universal validity – whether in the taken-for-granted presuppositions of the agents or in theoretical models – theology must acknowledge the fundamental situatedness of all kinds of knowledge that characterise the social realm:

“Scientific reflexivity emerges from the realization that all *theoria*, no matter how comprehensive, can never encompass the complexity of *praxis*. Or, if transposed to theology, our theological discourses can never fully account for the Real; the ‘constructed’, even as it is indispensable, always falls short of the ‘given’, of the ‘unexpected’”.<sup>35</sup>

Consequently, so Pilario argues, we need theological modesty. He envisages a willingness to make claims to less than universal truth and to incorporate insights from other situated practices in theological thinking. This resonates with insights from contemporary cultural studies; the impact of culture on any claim, thought or analysis is unavoidable. As opposed to the ideal of objectivity in research – which means that the researcher can detach him- or herself from the study – reflexivity implies the willingness to accept partiality as a fundamental condition of human knowledge. Accordingly, we must “recognize existing forms of partiality and advance by dialogue especially, beyond them, arriving at better, but still partial knowledges”.<sup>36</sup>

In order to practise theological reflexivity, Pilario proposes the development of a three-step programme that will ensure all voices have an equal opportunity to be heard. The first step requires attention to the way theological interpretations often reflect the theologian’s own economic, social and cultural background. This critical stance may be achieved by strengthening the dialogue among theological colleagues who represent a variety of social, ethnic, gender, etc. backgrounds. As a second step, the academic, theological field must be conscious of its stakes – that is, in the terminology of Bourdieu, the values that determine the field as a whole – by shedding light on the historical, economic and cultural conditions on which it is built. This can be done through critical intellectual interaction with academics from other fields, for instance philosophers, social scientists and cultural theorists. Finally, Pilario requires that theology recognise the overall insufficiency of the academic perspective when it comes to understanding the logics and practices of the field of study. To overcome their intellectual and scholarly bias, theologians must engage in dialogue with constructive and critical voices involved in the field, e.g. non-intellectuals, grassroots communities and politicians.<sup>37</sup> Thus, according to Pilario, a secondary meta-reflexive project, in which the scholar struggles to make her or his situatedness an object of critical scrutiny, must accompany any scholarly project.

However, as we too experienced in our fieldwork, a reflexive, scholarly praxis needs deliberate action. If we want a fuller and more balanced view of reality, we must actively push for strategies that will challenge our hidden presuppositions. In short, if we are to make ‘truthful’ interpretations of the messy realities of congregational life, we must increase our attention to embodied forms of knowledge that tend to escape our normative, theological awareness, because our training is *a priori* directed towards discursive phenomena at the expense of embodied practices.

With regard to our project in the Apostles’ Church, we only reached this conclusion retrospectively. When we triangulated our research design, we primarily thought of it as a way to gain a variety of entrances into the field of study. Thus, in the first place, the combination of methods was not designed to bring our own habitual dispositions into focus. It was only through the implicit and explicit resistance we met in our struggle to interpret our data that we became aware of how much our neatly pigeonholed theologies and cultural habitus restricted our awareness and biased our understanding. However, the combination of participant observation and photo-based interviews – which, after all, were not really interviews, but open conversations in which we let the ‘interviewee’ take the lead – opened our eyes. The refugees helped us see what we had failed to see previously and, in turn, helped us understand factors about which we had been totally ignorant: the role of ethnicity, gender and class in their everyday life in the congregation. Thus, in our research project, our interviewees became a kind of co-worker on the project. The production

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 526.

<sup>36</sup> Johnson, *Practice*, 52.

<sup>37</sup> Pilario, *Rough Grounds*, 457ff.; Felter, “Breaking”, 92f.

of knowledge had become a joint endeavour as the American theologian Mary McClintock Fulkerson has described it. So let us turn to her work and that of her colleagues, Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen.

### Redemptive Practices. Learning and Knowing as Joint Endeavour

Like Pilario, Mary McClintock Fulkerson argues that standard theological thinking needs to undergo a process of *decentering*. For her, this implies the initial, humble confession that all forms of human knowledge are *a priori* infused with the fallibility of experience.<sup>38</sup> To theologians trained in systematics, this claim may sound provocative, but, according to Fulkerson, this insight represents a redemptive unsettling of privileged positions in favour of a more equal distribution of power. No longer can anyone think of him- or herself as possessing *the* truth. Furthermore, decentering theological thinking can lead to new attentiveness to the production of knowledge as a joint endeavour.

Metaphorically speaking, as academically trained theologians we can no longer play the part of omniscient guides on the journey. Rather, we must assume a more participatory role as co-walkers on the same journey as the people we study, in an equal search for truth. Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen argue that on this journey, the ethnographic method provides a path *by which* truth emerges.<sup>39</sup> However, if we take ethnographic ecclesiology seriously, it also implies that we, as academic theologians, must give up our former privileges and submit to the vulnerability that comes with not knowing. Placing ourselves alongside the people we study, we are constantly challenged to decentre our thinking by putting aside our own assumptions and evaluations as we accept the position of the learner. In fact, this was what happened when the Afghan cook taught us about the ethnic and social status hierarchy at work in the group of refugees; when the Kurdish man drew attention to the misrecognition of Kurdish identity in the congregation; when we sat on the pews and the Kurdish women taught us about the Afghan adolescents' hunger, and when the Iranian woman explained the converts' spiritual hunger to us.

Looking back at our field study, we can see that the methodological insights we gained are in line with the central features of ethnographic research described by Scharen and Vigen: humility, reflexivity, collaboration and audacity.<sup>40</sup> As Fulkerson has also argued, the willingness to put all that we think we know aside in order to be able to receive other-wise knowledge presupposes scholarly *humility*. Moreover, we agree with both Scharen, Vigen and Pilario's arguments that this kind of radical openness is a genuinely theological concern since humility positively expresses the honouring of our fellow human beings as diverse members of the body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 12).<sup>41</sup>

As for the core value of *reflexivity*, we have already mentioned that we view this as a necessary implication of the call to break with our assumptions and preconceptions. Our own fieldwork demonstrated how the scholar's habitual dispositions, rather than self-critical reflexivity, tend to form the production of knowledge. Therefore, it is crucial to establish fora in which the research process and its results can be discussed with scholars of theology as well as of other fields. Theologically speaking, attending to reflexivity can be substantiated by reference to the radical Otherness of God, which prevents any attempt at idolatry by universalising specific human positions.

However, as our study showed, other-wise human beings involved in the field may also stimulate the process of reflexivity. The fruitful involvement of members of the congregation of the Apostles' Church in our research project appeared to be a break-in of radical Otherness. As we had not envisaged the *decentering* potential of these encounters, the insights that we gained seemed to be, theologically speaking, expressions of grace rather than the fruit of our efforts. This leads to the value of *collaboration*, which proved essential to our project. When we see the production of knowledge as a joint endeavour, the former objects of study become human subjects whose version of the story has the same right to be told as our own. Theologically speaking, the role of the academically trained theologian then becomes that of a participant witness

<sup>38</sup> Fulkerson, "Foreword", xiii.

<sup>39</sup> Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography*, 17.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

whose duty is to ensure we hear the other-wise voices. Referring to Deborah Gordon's work, Scharen and Vigen see the witnessing role as that of a storyteller, or even better, as the advocate who encourages the self-representation of the informant.<sup>42</sup> In both cases, the value of collaboration challenges the notion of authority, because it blurs the line between informant and author. As academic theologians, we neither possess the truth, nor are we the sole authors of the stories that we tell. However, as Scharen and Vigen also contend, this does not mean that the scholar can shake off his or her responsibility. Rather, respect for the informants' ownership of their personal stories underscores the scholar's responsibility to present the findings in a way in which the informant recognises him- or herself.

Finally, Scharen and Vigen encourage *audacity*. As a scholarly virtue, audacity implies the boldness to claim that ethnographic research reveals truth – albeit in a partial and preliminary manner.<sup>43</sup> This value of audacity springs from the humble, self-reflexive and collaborative work described above. When we combine these values in our theological research, we will hopefully be bold enough to challenge the monolithic image of the theological expert in the library in favour of a more participatory approach to conducting ecclesiology.

## Conclusion

### Ethnographic Ecclesiology and the Transformative Powers of Turning the Perspective

Our own experiences with fieldwork made it clear that the research process itself holds transformative powers, which may lead to changes in church practices as well as in theological research. Moreover, the fact that the research project in the Apostles' Church initiated changes in the congregation calls for reflection on the role of the researcher and the implications for the relations between descriptive and normative dimensions in practical theological studies. However, we see no contradiction here. It is not an either-or situation. The transformative power of research lies in the ability of the descriptive work to turn the perspective by giving voice to positions that are seldom heard in the ELCD – in this case, the refugees from the Apostles' Church. Attending to reflexivity means bringing multiple voices and perspectives together in order to learn what the church looks like from below or on the margin. Using a metaphor from our research design, this bringing together of perspectives can be seen as a kind of triangulation that leads to a more precise understanding of one's own position and perhaps greater modesty when evaluating others' standpoints. The dimension that practical theology can contribute is not some normative claims to complete empirical descriptions, but rather the will to recognise the importance of situatedness with regard to those studied as well as those who study. Theologically, we may substantiate this multi-perspective approach with reference to, again, the radical Otherness of God that forbids identification between particular human, even theological, positions and absolute truth – that is, the absolutising of the relative. Moreover, through attentiveness to other-wise voices, reflective theological practices can bring a utopian – even prophetic – dimension into the life of the church and thereby prevent it from becoming too locative.

In the Apostles' Church, the presence of the refugees reminded the whole congregation of Christianity's utopian character. At the beginning of September 2014 when we presented our reflections on our interviews with the refugees to the Danish members of the congregation, one of the pastors in the Apostles' Church invited the group to reflect on the value of the sheer presence of marginalised people in the church. Personally and theologically, the presence of the refugees reminded him that the more permanent members of the congregation – the ethnic Danish members – were also on a pilgrimage to a place that was not yet here. In all their vulnerability, the refugees were a reminder of the church's mission, safeguarding it against becoming too complacent in the service of a particular society. We may use Foucault's lecture to describe the pastor's position. The sheer presence of the refugees turned the

<sup>42</sup> Gordon, "Border", 383; Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography*, 23.

<sup>43</sup> Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography*, 25.

church into the heterotopic place that also characterised the pastor's understanding of the church's true identity.

Theologically, the utopian dimension of the church may also be expressed through the reality of the incarnation. The uncompromising involvement of God in concrete human existence prompts us to strive for wholeness and complexity in our description of the church. The conviction that the Spirit of God is already at work in the life of other people – especially those whose perception of the Gospel differs from ours – must form the basis of any communication of the Gospel. Consequently, unity does not presuppose identity. As the Apostle Paul's fine image of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12 reminds us, unity and difference are not at odds. Instead, the incarnation should be a constant reminder that the journey towards the utopia of wholeness must be based on a shared quest for learning and knowing.

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