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Pathfinding amid climate catastrophe

Faith-based activists in South Africa and Sweden

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Abstract
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Despite a strong scientific consensus on the need for systemic change to secure a liveable future, political inaction hampers effective responses, creating uncertainty about how to navigate the climate catastrophe. This study explores how climate activists in South Africa and Sweden, rooted in their religious faith, navigate the climate catastrophe by advocating political action and engaging in various forms of activism. Based on interviews with faith-based climate activists in South Africa and Sweden, this research highlights the role of theological reflection and practices in shaping and sustaining climate action in diverse socio-cultural contexts.

The findings show that what initiates this activism is experience-based climate knowledge, such as direct observation of environmental impacts or understanding through popular science and training. Nevertheless, a sense of spiritual relatedness to and reliance on God, others, nature, and self serves as the primary compass guiding their ongoing journey. Among the South African activists, this relational spirituality also includes a connection to ancestors, and is characterised by collective spirituality, contrasting with the more individual spiritual experiences of Swedish activists. In both contexts, activists' relational spirituality is more influential in their activism than specific theological beliefs. However, climate activism can serve as a space for reinterpretation of theological concepts. Moreover, climate activism in both contexts could be understood as a manifestation of holistic theologies, in which transcendent realities and worldly matters are inseparable. This reflects more of an orthopraxy (correct action) than orthodox belief, emphasising action-based knowing of the divine.

This study suggests that religious faith can foster climate resilience, evidenced in the South African material, in which reliance on God provides stability beyond individual comfort, empowering the development of climate-resilient communities. In the Swedish context, faith serves as a catalyst for creativity, fostering innovative pathways towards sustainability, focusing on reduced fossil fuel emissions and a reorientation towards spiritual interconnectedness and an exploration of beyond material values.

Although the theological teachings of religious institutions at national and international levels generally align with activists' holistic theologies, the activists' theologies create intradenominational tensions locally and limit climate commitment in local faith communities.

Keywords: Faith-based activism, Climate activists, Climate crisis, Environment, Religion, Theology, Spirituality, Climate resilience, Sustainability transformation, South Africa, Sweden

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To the pathfinders of yesterday, today, and tomorrow – whose protests and faith blaze new paths through a disruptive landscape.

Contents

Preface

I once received a card from a colleague who was leaving our team in the Church of Sweden that worked with issues of international development. The card featured a red cottage with white corners, depicting an idyllic Swedish summer scene, with children playing in the yard and adults sipping coffee in the sun. However, the text below read: "The idyll was a chimaera; there was a civil war going on in Nigeria". I still remember the card because it captures something essential about the injustices of this world, and the text could equally have been: "The idyll is a chimaera; there is a climate catastrophe going on". Being aware that vulnerable communities are already suffering the severe consequences of the climate crisis, and that the catastrophe threatens a livable future, is a core motivation for writing this thesis.

The card, however, also illustrates another critical incentive for doing this research. It evokes memories of my childhood in the 1980s, growing up in welfare and safety in Sweden, spending summers with my grandparents in a cottage resembling the one in the picture. My grandmother Svea used to play anti-apartheid songs on a cassette player – music brought from South Africa to Sweden by my relatives in the song group Fjedur. The songs illustrated both the protest against the devastating situation during the apartheid regime and faith as a source of strength and hope, such as:

> They tore down our homes. We were driven out of town to regions without rain. The children are murdered by starvation. We are whipped by hunger. Men go down into the mine. Go down into humiliation. In darkness is our life. […] It doesn't matter to us if you imprison us; we are free men, carried by hope. […] We are marching in the light of God.[1]

Although my grandmother died when I was only five years old, I believe she instilled in me an awareness of people in less fortunate circumstances who are fighting for their lives and rights. But above all, it made me aware that there

[1] The group published several booklets and music cassettes titled *South African Songs of Protest and Praise*. This is my English translation of some lines from three songs, based on the Swedish versions.

are individuals who, driven and strengthened by their faith, stand up together as a community for justice and dignity.

When I began my PhD studies in 2020, in the context of the ongoing climate catastrophe, I wanted to explore, through an academic lens, the role that faith plays in shaping the motivations and strategies of contemporary climate activists. This investigation is driven by the conviction that faith can serve as a vital resource for individuals and communities amid an increasingly unpredictable, rapidly evolving, and disruptive world.

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to all who supported me during the writing of this thesis. First, my thanks to the activists who generously shared their insights and experiences in interviews; without you, this study would not have been possible. I hope that I have depicted your commitment and faith respectfully. Thank you for your contribution to advancing academic understanding of faith-based climate activism. I hope too that this research broadens awareness among a wider audience, including religious institutions and those who may dismiss climate activism as a threat to democracy – a concerning worldwide trend.

I am also grateful to those who helped to identify interviewees in South Africa and Sweden, and to the organisational representatives who facilitated access and participant observations. Your generosity and support have been invaluable.

Next, I sincerely thank my supervisors, Kajsa Ahlstrand, Professor of World Christianity and Interreligious Studies, and Katarina Westerlund, Professor of Practical Theology. Your expertise, insights, and perspectives have been vital to this work. Kajsa, I am grateful for your constant availability, encouragement, and creative input, which greatly enriched my analysis. Katarina, I value your structured feedback and sharp eye for coherence, which significantly enhanced my presentation and analysis.

I sincerely thank my colleagues at the Higher Seminar of Global Christianity and the History of Religion in the Faculty of Theology at Uppsala University for their valuable feedback and stimulating discussions of my drafts over the years. I would especially like to thank Hans Engdahl, Ove Gustafsson, and Anders Göranzon for their insightful commentary on the South African context, and Anders Wejryd and Henrik Rosén for their contributions on climate change and church engagement. I am also grateful to Anita Suneson, Beth

Elness-Hanson, and Brian Palmer for their insightful feedback and support. I also appreciate the support and encouragement from other colleagues at the Faculty of Theology throughout this research.

My gratitude extends to Ninna Edgardh and Michael Nausner, who have both provided valuable feedback that has been essential in enhancing my theological analysis. I also deeply appreciate Kristina Helgesson Kjellin for her critique of my final seminar manuscript, which significantly improved my presentation and analysis.

In the context of South African academia, I am especially grateful to Professor Ignatius Swart and Professor Ernst Conradie for their valuable knowledge and for inviting me to present and discuss my findings at the University of the Western Cape and the South African–German Research Hub on Religion and Sustainability (SARGaS).

In the Nordic academic context, I am especially grateful to colleagues in the Nordic Network for Climate and Religion, particularly Marion Grau and Thomas Arentzen. Marion proposed the creation of the network, and, together with Thomas, we launched and coordinated the network. I also thank the editors of our upcoming anthology and others who helped to organise the network gatherings: Lovisa Mienna Sjöberg, Michael Nausner, and Petra Carlsson. As a PhD student, this platform was vital for exploring the intersections of religion and the climate crisis, but also essential on a personal level, alleviating feelings of isolation and existential stress caused by doing research on a catastrophe.

The lunch seminar series EXIST – Existential, Environmental, and Humanities Seminar, which I created and organised with Martha Middlemiss Lé Mon, the Centre for Multidisciplinary Research on Religion and Society (CRS), and Daniel Mossberg from the Centre for Environment and Development Studies (CEMUS) – broadened my understanding of environmental humanities. Thank you for a fruitful collaboration and for providing these opportunities.

Furthermore, I am grateful to Nathan och Anna Söderbloms stiftelse, Lunds Missionssällskap, Stiftelsen SKM's fond för missionsforskning, and Anna Maria Lundins stipendienämnd, for granting me financial support.

Getting through this long journey of writing my thesis would not have been possible without the support of friends and family. I sincerely thank you for

your unwavering support and patience. I want to express my special gratitude to Japé Mokgethi-Heath for guiding me further into the South African context over the years. I am also profoundly grateful to Karin Åkerlund and Emma Gustafsson for providing a space to discuss the climate crisis and faith beyond the academic realm. I also want especially to thank Sofia Svarfvar, whose dual role as friend and professional has been invaluable, given our shared connection to South Africa and trust in faith as a catalyst for change. I also deeply appreciate Anne-Charlotte Ek for her guidance, support, and insightful feedback on my drafts. Having someone who willingly walks alongside you in this academic journey is impossible to express in words. Similarly, I am grateful to Paul Mokgethi-Heath, who joined my fieldwork in South Africa as a friend and research assistant. Thank you for your support and insights, and for welcoming me into your family, to whom I am also deeply grateful – not least to Theresa Mokgethi, who gave me a home full of love and prayers in Soweto.

I am deeply grateful to my parents Åsa and Gunnar Oreland, who, together with my grandmother, have demonstrated the importance of faith and faith actors as vital contributors to building society. Thank you!

Last but not least, my two children and husband, thank you for grounding me in love. Elsa, thank you for showing me the world of a young climate activist and that our contribution to making this world better can evolve and take various forms throughout our lives. Johannes, thank you for your generosity, daily caring comments, and practical support by cooking delicious meals during stressful times. Finally, Mattias, you've been by my side with love and support, reminding me to relax and enjoy life. I don't know how I would have managed without you. I feel blessed.

Sofia Oreland, Uppsala, November 2025

Abbreviations

COP	Conferences of the Parties
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
SAFCEI	Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
WCC	World Council of Churches

1. Introduction

> Any activist faith is very important because it's what carries you through the tough times. And makes you believe that you're gonna come right eventually, if you do your part, then… You know God will surely do God's part.
>
> *Betty, South Africa.*

> We can no longer believe in any human-made paths, but must face the fact... We must surrender. … When it is not passable straight ahead, then it is passable up and down, so, like, we change ... orientation. [It's] a journey of faith.[2]
>
> *Thomas, Sweden*.

Navigating the complex and disruptive climate landscape, marked by extreme weather events such as wildfires, floods, droughts, and heatwaves, is difficult for people worldwide. This is especially true for vulnerable populations who are hit the hardest, underscoring the urgent need for prompt and effective action.[3] These problems can seem overwhelming, creating uncertainty about how to navigate them, particularly as political delays and systemic economic and social barriers slow effective climate responses. This study explores how faith-based climate activists such as Betty and Thomas, who are rooted in and strengthened by their religious faith, are pathfinding amid this climate catastrophe.

Faith-based climate activists are actively seeking paths forward by advocating political action and engaging in various forms of activism. By focusing on faith-based climate activists, this research strives to deepen our understanding of faith-driven environmental efforts. Ultimately, it explores how religious faith could shape and sustain climate action in different socio-cultural contexts.

[2] "Vi kan inte tro på några människofabricerade vägar längre, utan måste inse faktum … Vi måste kapitulera. … När det inte är framkomligt rakt fram, då är det framkomligt upp och ner, alltså liksom vi byter … orientering. [Det är] en trosresa."
[3] World Meteorological Organization, *State of the Climate 2024*; Lee and Romero, *Summary for Policymakers*, 5.

The urgency of immediate climate responses is underscored by the rapidly diminishing prospects of restricting the global temperature rise to below 1.5 °C, as stipulated in the Paris Agreement. In 2023, greenhouse gas emissions reached unprecedented levels, with both 2023 and 2024 marking the hottest years on record, surpassing the critical 1.5 °C threshold. Such trends not only significantly increase the risk of catastrophic climate scenarios, but also threaten the viability of a liveable future.[4]

Science-based navigation systems are available. Although they do not offer complete solutions, they can provide crucial guidance. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), as a leading United Nations body, synthesises global climate science to inform policymakers about the current state and to recommend strategies for mitigation and adaptation.[5] The 2023 IPCC reports emphasise that:

> Rapid and far-reaching transitions across all sectors and systems are necessary to achieve deep and sustained emissions reductions and secure a liveable and sustainable future for all.[6]

Despite the overwhelming scientific consensus underscoring the urgent need for profound paradigm shifts to address the climate crisis effectively, the implementation of timely and comprehensive measures remains critically insufficient. This implementation gap has attracted increased scholarly and policy attention, prompting exploration of aspects beyond purely scientific considerations. Attention has shifted toward understanding how world views, value systems, and norms shape the formulation and implementation of political, economic, and social strategies. Recognising the influence of these cultural

[4] The climate crisis is intricately linked to numerous other crises. I acknowledge that we are facing a global polycrisis, which is described as "the causal entanglement of crises in multiple global systems in ways that significantly degrade humanity's prospects". Therefore, we cannot address a crisis in isolation. Nevertheless, the focus of this study is the climate crisis, as it plays a crucial role in shaping faith-based activism in various contexts. However, what will be especially evident in the South African context is that activists are also well aware of the interconnections between different crises. Lawrence et al., "Global Polycrisis"; United Nations Climate Change, "The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC): The Paris Agreement"; World Meteorological Organization, *State of the Climate 2024*.

[5] IPCC, "IPCC — Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change." IPCC uses the following definitions. Mitigation: "A human intervention to reduce emissions or enhance the sinks of greenhouse gases." Adaptation: "In human systems, the process of adjustment to actual or expected climate and its effects, in order to moderate harm or exploit beneficial opportunities. In natural systems, the process of adjustment to actual climate and its effects; human intervention may facilitate adjustment to expected climate and its effects." The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), "Glossary — Global Warming of 1.5 ºC."

[6] Lee and Romero, Summary for Policymakers, 24.

and normative factors is crucial, given their capacity either to hinder or to facilitate transformative climate actions.[7]

Although some may perceive religion as an obstacle to climate initiatives, emerging research in multiple disciplines demonstrates its significant and constructive role in societal transformation. Religion's influence transcends mere mitigation efforts, encompassing the development of resilience and adaptive capacities in communities. Previous scholarly research has shown how religion shapes world views, values, and normative frameworks, while also mobilising institutional and economic resources and advocating urgent political responses to the climate crisis at local, national, and international levels. Furthermore, religious communities are increasingly recognised as crucial sources of social capital, facilitating networks of connection that could be instrumental in advancing effective climate action.[8]

Faith-based climate activists are notable in faith communities for addressing the challenges of a rapidly changing climate through active practical engagement. Rooted in their faith, their approach includes diverse strategies such as individual and congregational initiatives, as well as advocacy and campaigning aimed at influencing political and economic systems for urgent policy change. They also explore profound existential questions, engage in theological reflection on humanity's place, purpose, and responsibility in the world, and search for strategies to navigate an increasingly unpredictable environment. This demonstrates the interconnectedness between personal reflections and concrete climate practices. By focusing on faith-based climate activists, this study offers an analysis of how personal faith interacts with the structural challenges of the climate catastrophe, with the intention to contribute to clarifying the role of religion in shaping climate responses and navigating diverse climate landscapes.

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[7] This has been emphasised in IPCC reports, which highlight the integration of cultural values, norms, indigenous knowledge, world views, belief systems, and local knowledge alongside scientific knowledge as a means to promote climate-resilient development. Lee and Romero, *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report*, 62, 96, 102; as well as among scholars in diverse fields. For example, Rockström, *Jorden*, 257–63; Fazey et al., 'Transformation in a Changing Climate'; O'Brien, 'Is the 1.5°C Target Possible?'; Patterson et al., 'Exploring the Governance and Politics of Transformations towards Sustainability'.

[8] The role of religion and spirituality in supporting the protection and conservation of nature has been highlighted through the establishment of the Faith for Earth Coalition, hosted by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). UN Environment Programme (UNEP), "Faith for Earth Coalition"; as well as among scholars, for example: Jenkins et al., "Religion and Climate Change"; Globus Veldman et al., *How the World's Religions Are Responding to Climate Change*; Gerten and Bergmann, *Religion in Environmental and Climate Change*; Öhlmann and Swart, "Religion and Environment."

I use the metaphor "pathfinding" to illustrate the faith-based activists' active navigation of the complexities of the climate catastrophe. This metaphor frames questions such as: What landmarks do they recognise along their journey? How do they check their bearing and use situational awareness to avoid disorientation? Do they forge new, unconventional paths in a largely uncharted landscape? Or do they discover hidden or already existing paths to tread? Where are these paths leading? And critically, what role does their religious faith play in shaping their pathfinding process and their response to the climate emergency?

In this investigation of the role of religious faith in climate activists' pathfinding, particular attention is given to the activists' theological reflection and practices. Using a theological lens in analysis, I focus on the activists' diverse understandings of transcendent realities and examine how these perceptions are manifested in their pathfinding strategies amid the climate catastrophe. The analysis considers both spoken and practised aspects of theology, especially the activists' personal reflections and experiences. Thus, the focus is placed on contextual, experience-based, and practised theologies that manifest through words and concrete actions. An integrative approach that considers both personal individual faith and the structural challenges of climate change could deepen our insight into how theological perceptions and practices shape daily climate responses in different cultural, contextual, and climate landscape settings.

This analysis posits that faith-based activism serves as a contextually grounded response to the emerging challenges of the climate crisis. While the climate emergency is inherently global, its manifestations are highly variable in different socio-cultural and geographic contexts, requiring diverse strategies for effective navigation. These strategies are often informed and shaped by local religious discourses and practices alongside cultural and social frameworks. To examine critically the processes of contextually specific climate action, this study compares faith-based climate activism in two distinct settings: South Africa and Sweden.

By engaging with resources from these diverse contexts, the intention of this study is to illuminate how different climate landscapes and religious contexts influence the contextual, experience-based, and practised theologies manifested in activism. The variations in the impact of climate change in the two contexts are influenced by distinct economic and social conditions, while the religious frameworks in each context also differ markedly. Nevertheless,

commonalities in their approaches to climate activism suggest underlying shared motivations and strategies, thereby enriching the overall analysis.

This multi-sited approach addresses a significant gap in the literature, as empirical investigations into climate activism in the Global South are notably underrepresented in scholarly research. Empirical theological analyses of climate activism in diverse contexts are particularly rare. Addressing this gap would be vital to developing a more comprehensive understanding of faith-driven responses to the climate crisis. It would also clarify how various theological perspectives and expressions are manifested in activism, thereby enriching academic discussions with deeper insights into the role of theology in climate action.

Finally, the selection of South Africa and Sweden as research contexts is underpinned by practical reasons. My familiarity with South Africa, stemming from prior engagement with faith-based organisations there, gives me insight into its religious and social context. This previous experience made the collection of material more convenient, offering advantages over a completely unfamiliar setting. Nonetheless, my comprehensive understanding of the Swedish context, where I was raised and still reside, provides a more profound foundation for analysis, which is elaborated upon in the section addressing ethical considerations and my role as a researcher. In addition, the prevalence of English-language climate activism in South Africa facilitates access to a wide range of sources, including social media, websites, and religious institutions, thereby simplifying the process of collecting material.

Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this study is to describe the characteristics of faith-based climate activists' pathfinding process amid the climate catastrophe and to construct the theological themes embedded in that process. The research is guided by the following questions:

- How do faith-based climate activists motivate and conduct their activism?
- What resources can be found in faith-based activism, and what established resources are being used?
- Which theologies can be found in faith-based activism?

This study conceptualises the process by which faith-based activists navigate the climate catastrophe as a form of pathfinding. It critically analyses these activists' diverse understandings of transcendent realities, examining how they are manifested in their pathfinding, thus exploring their theological reflections and practices. In addition, the study systematically analyses the empirical material in order to identify and construct overarching theological themes.

To fulfil the aim of this research, an empirical and contextual approach has been deliberately prioritised. This approach is well-established in the field of World Christianity, the academic discipline of this study, which mainly emphasises religious practices and expressions in regions often identified as the Global South. However, I have intentionally incorporated material from both the Global South and the Global North, adopting a multi-sited methodology. This strategic choice aims to diversify and enrich the analysis, thereby facilitating a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

The study is primarily based on interviews with faith-based climate activists in South Africa and Sweden, along with observations that provide insights into their experiences and lives in these contexts.

To examine critically the interplay between personal faith and the systemic challenges posed by the climate crisis, I have intentionally sought out activists whose pragmatic approaches extend beyond private actions to encompass public strategies aimed at making an impact on political policies and measures. Furthermore, I have focused on activists who are capable of thoughtfully reflecting upon and articulating the relationship between their climate activism and their religious faith, thereby providing rich material for my theological analysis of environmental engagement.

The findings from this investigation aim to advance the understanding of the role that theologies play in navigating the complexities of the escalating climate catastrophe. These insights are intended to contribute to academic and practical discussions on the role of religion in climate response, as well as to the broader field of environmental humanities. The study also explores the potential of religion and theology as constructive resources in addressing the ongoing climate catastrophe.

The two contexts – South Africa and Sweden

Researching the contextual, experience-based, and practised theologies of faith-based climate activists highlights the significance of contextual factors. Specifically, I focus on the climate-change-related and religious dimensions in the South African and Swedish contexts. For the activists, these aspects are deeply intertwined, and although the two settings show both differences and similarities, analysing material from both provides a valuable opportunity for nuanced analysis.

I begin by outlining the key characteristics of what I frame as the climate landscape in the two contexts, then proceed to describe the religious contexts.

Climate landscape of South Africa

The climate crisis in South Africa has a more profound influence on the daily lives of its population than in Sweden, a distinction that will be further evidenced by the empirical data presented in this study. The country faces a range of acute climate-related phenomena, including extreme weather events such as floods, droughts, and heat waves, as well as long-term environmental changes such as water scarcity, rising temperatures, and rising sea levels, all of which have a negative impact on both the nation and its inhabitants.[9]

In the South African context, climate change has significantly increased the frequency of extremely hot days and multi-year droughts, exemplified by the water-shortage crisis in Cape Town between 2016 and 2018. During this period, the drought precipitated widespread public panic, as residents, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, were permitted to access only 25 litres of water per day from communal points – an amount markedly below necessary levels. This critical situation prompted intense debates about "Day Zero", the projected day when municipal water sources would be depleted entirely.[10] There has also been a notable decline in rainfall, coupled with marine heat waves along the coastline – phenomena that accelerate ocean warming, exacerbate freshwater shortages, and, consequently, undermine economic stability.[11]

In addition, there has been a rise in the number and intensity of extreme rainfall events, exemplified by the floods in Durban in 2022, which killed

[9] The World Bank Group, Country Development Report, South Africa.
[10] Brühl and Visser, "The Cape Town Drought."
[11] Ziervogel et al., "Climate Change in South Africa."

hundreds of people and forced thousands to leave their homes. Water supplies and electricity were damaged, worsening the situation. The floods in Durban illustrate how altered weather patterns, coupled with vulnerable communities, result in a significant lack of resilience amid climate change. Poor infrastructure, inadequate housing in townships, and informal settlements contribute to this vulnerability.[12]

The activists interviewed in South Africa navigate this complex climate landscape. As demonstrated in the empirical chapters, some activists have endured more severe impacts because they live in or have familial ties to highly vulnerable communities. Conversely, others have been less affected personally, benefiting from greater economic stability and residence in less exposed areas. Nonetheless, regardless of their socioeconomic standing, all activists confront ongoing climate-related problems such as water scarcity and flooding, which disrupt their daily lives to varying degrees. This highlights the widespread and inescapable nature of the impact of climate change on different social strata in South Africa.

Climate change's disproportionately effect on vulnerable communities in South Africa undermines long-term development goals.[13] Low-income households are especially exposed to extreme weather events and long-term environmental changes. Despite post-apartheid efforts, inequality remains a significant problem; the labour market continues to be segmented by ethnicity and gender, contributing to high levels of income and wealth disparity. Unemployment is notably high, particularly among youth at around 45%, with 60% of the unemployed residing in townships. Consequently, these low-income groups face shortages of water, food security issues, and adverse health outcomes. Addressing these entrenched inequalities and prioritising the needs of vulnerable communities would be crucial steps towards achieving both development and climate targets.[14]

South Africa's economy is notably one of the most carbon- and energy-intensive in the G20, mainly because of its heavy reliance on coal.[15] The country's coal power infrastructure, which is among the most polluting in the world, is adversely affecting public health by elevating morbidity rates and causing up

[12] Galvin and Bond, "Weathering the Climate Crisis in Flood-Prone Durban - Tough Lessons from the 'Rain Bomb.'"
[13] The World Bank Group, *Country Development Report, South Africa*, 1.
[14] The World Bank Group, Country Development Report, South Africa, 1.
[15] The World Bank Group, Country Development Report, South Africa, 10.

to 2,700 premature deaths annually.[16] This dysfunctional energy sector has also precipitated persistent load shedding since 2007, despite a recent decline in frequency, which continues to disrupt daily life with multiple power outages.[17]

The high carbon intensity results in higher carbon emissions per capita, measured at about 6.9 tonnes from fossil fuels and industry in 2024, and a total CO2 emission of 5.1 tonnes when accounting for trade-adjusted consumption.[18] Notably, while South Africa has established national strategies and passed the Climate Change Act in July 2024, institutional responses lag behind, and climate literacy among the populace is very low, with less than half of residents (41%) aware of climate change.[19] This disparity between policy intentions and public awareness underscores the need for urgent, robust, and well-implemented measures to address the country's environmental problems and to advance its climate resilience.

Research reports indicate that in 2018 there were no targeted policies or practices aimed at restricting civil society organisations from promoting civic activism in South Africa.[20] Recent reports, however, highlight a changing context. The CIVIC report states that South Africa has moved from a category with relatively open civic space, in which individuals and civil society could freely exercise their rights to association, peaceful assembly, and expression, towards a more restricted environment.[21] From the year 2021 the country has been classified as "obstructed" by CIVIC, meaning that civic space is restricted by authorities, both legally and practically, which restricts full enjoyment of fundamental rights. Although organisations can still hold peaceful assemblies, they are vulnerable to the use of frequent excessive force by law enforcement.[22]

[16] Denoon-Stevens and du Toit, "The Health Impacts of Coal Mining and Coal-Based Energy," 104.
[17] Load shedding is a strategic intervention designed to mitigate the risk of power grid overload by temporarily discontinuing electricity supply to specific regions in a cyclical rotation of planned outages. "Country Climate and Development Report, South Africa," 4. Search Data Center, "What Is Load Shedding?"; BBC.Com, "South Africa Load-Shedding."
[18] Ritchie et al., "CO_2 and Greenhouse Gas Emissions."
[19] Ziervogel et al., "Climate Change in South Africa," 1.
[20] Smidt, Shrinking Civic Space in Africa: When Governments Crack Down on Civil Society, 2.
[21] The CIVICUS Monitor is described as a collaborative research initiative that assembles civil society experts and organisations globally. CIVICUS Monitor, "Research Partners."
[22] CIVICUS Monitor, People Power Under Attack 2021; CIVICUS Monitor, People Power Under Attack 2024.

Globally, environmental activists frequently face forms of severe repression such as defamation, criminalisation, and even assassination. Although these forms of repression are most prevalent in regions such as Asia and Latin America, South Africa is also affected.[23] A prominent example is that of Nonhle Mbuthuma, founder of the Amadiba Crisis Committee, who advocates for the amaMpondo community in their resistance to Shell's seismic surveying practices in the ecologically sensitive coastal region of Maputaland-Pondoland. Mbuthuma endures death threats, violence, criminal charges, and ongoing harassment, illustrating the peril faced by activists in these contexts.[24] While the interviewees in this study did not report experiencing such extreme forms of repression at the time of the interviews, some have faced prosecution for their (nonviolent) civil disobedience activism, highlighting the persistent risks involved.

Climate landscape of Sweden

The negative impact of the climate crisis in Sweden is comparatively less severe than that observed in South Africa, which could be attributed to Sweden's more equitable socio-economic structure, comprehensive welfare system, and well-developed infrastructure and housing. In Sweden, the rate of temperature increase is about twice that of the global average, attributable to the more rapid warming observed near the polar regions.[25] This climatic change has led to an increase in annual precipitation, a rise in sea levels, and a reduction in the duration of snowfall seasons. In addition, there has been a marked increase in extreme temperature events.[26] Occasionally, heavy rains and the rapid melting of snow have resulted in floods and landslides, causing damage to properties, railway infrastructure, and sewage systems.[27] Flooded roads and infrastructure failures, such as road collapses, have also been reported.[28] The country is also experiencing heat waves and sporadic wildfires.[29] These phenomena occasionally affect residents; however, they rarely have a direct impact on their daily lives.

[23] Global Witness, Missing Voices, Global Witness Land and Environmental Defenders; Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (SSNC), Environmental Defenders Under Attack – The Threats Facing People Who Protect Nature.
[24] Robinson, "Environmental Defenders Risk Their Lives Globally."
[25] SMHI, "Sveriges Klimat"; Naturskyddsföreningen, "Miljön i Siffror."
[26] Naturvårdsverket, "Klimatförändringarna påverkar möjligheterna att nå miljö- och samhällsmål."
[27] Alestig, "Skyfallen är en tickande svensk klimatbomb."
[28] Krisinformation, "Landslide on the E6 at Stenungsund."
[29] SMHI, "Brandrisker Idag Och i Framtiden"; Folkhälsomyndigheten, "Värmeböljor största klimathotet mot människors hälsa."

In Sweden, certain groups are identified as particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, yet the interviewed activists did not report experiencing these specific negative effects first-hand. Vulnerable populations such as the elderly, individuals with chronic health conditions, including heart ailments, and persons with disabilities are especially susceptible to the increasing frequency and intensity of heatwaves in the region.[30] In addition, the indigenous Sámi community faces significant threats; the unpredictable snow patterns and rapidly shifting temperatures critically undermine their traditional reindeer-herding practices. Moreover, the growing demand for minerals, wind energy development, and forestry activities exerts additional pressure on reindeer herders, thereby jeopardising their cultural heritage, language, and social cohesion.[31]

Nations' CO_2 emissions are quantifiable through multiple methods, each providing distinct insights into emissions' climate impact. Measuring consumption-based emissions is particularly significant, as this method adjusts for trade flows by deducting exported emissions and incorporating imported emissions, thus offering a more comprehensive view of a nation's carbon footprint caused by consumption. For example, Sweden's per capita consumption-based emissions stand at 5.6 tonnes – a level that is higher than that of South Africa – highlighting its overall responsibility for emissions generated both domestically and abroad. In addition, when considering emissions from fossil fuels and industrial activities, Sweden's per capita figure for 2023 was 3.5 tonnes, revealing low emissions in the industrial and energy sectors in comparison with South Africa.[32]

Public perception and societal engagement are critical components of effective climate action. Since 2002, the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency has systematically monitored public opinion through recurring surveys.[33] The 2024 data revealed that an overwhelming 93% of Swedes believe that climate change will either definitely or possibly have an impact on the country in the future, indicating a significantly higher level of awareness than that in South Africa.[34] Moreover, 86% recognise the importance of taking tangible measures to address climate issues. Notably, 42% of respondents

[30] Folkhälsomyndigheten, "Värmeböljor största klimathotet mot människors hälsa."
[31] Naturvårdsverket, "Klimatförändringarna påverkar möjligheterna att nå miljö- och samhällsmål"; Jaakkola et al., "The Holistic Effects of Climate Change on the Culture, Well-Being, and Health of the Saami, the Only Indigenous People in the European Union."
[32] Ritchie et al., "CO_2 and Greenhouse Gas Emissions."
[33] The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency is responsible for environmental issues in the country, and carries out assignments on behalf of the Swedish government.
[34] Naturvårdsverket, Allmänheten om klimatet 2024, 10.

envisage an improved quality of life in a fully climate-adapted society, reflecting a burgeoning societal consensus on the benefits of climate resilience.[35]

In 2017, Sweden implemented a comprehensive climate policy framework with the objective of achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2045 at the latest. Nevertheless, recent years have witnessed a strategic pivot in the nation's approach. There has been a notable increase in subsidies for fossil fuel emissions alongside a decrease in support of renewable energy initiatives, thereby jeopardising the attainment of these ambitious targets.[36] Consequently, institutional responses in practice have lagged behind articulated policy goals.

Recent developments throughout Europe reveal an expansion of restrictions on lawful environmental protests, which pose a significant threat to fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, assembly, and association – rights protected under international law. The Special Rapporteur for European Parties of the Aarhus Convention has issued a report critically examining this trend. Notably, the report condemns the Swedish prime minister's characterisation of climate activists as threats to democracy, arguing that such labels, alongside measures of penalisation and harassment, undermine democratic processes.[37] Furthermore, the report highlights that climate activists in Sweden who are engaged in (nonviolent) civil disobedience today face the peril of persecution under anti-sabotage legislation, despite existing legal protections for speech and protest rights.[38] This scenario exemplifies a shrinking of civic space for climate activism in the Swedish context. My study incorporates testimonies from individuals who have been prosecuted for their activism, underscoring the tangible impacts of these policies. However, none of the activists in my study report experiencing acts of repression such as ongoing harassment, violence, or threats.[39]

Religious context of South Africa

The religious context of contemporary South Africa is deeply rooted in its colonial and missionary history, yet it reaches beyond these origins. The Khoisan people, indigenous to the region for thousands of years, predate the arrival

[35] Naturvårdsverket, Allmänheten om klimatet 2024, 36.
[36] Naturskyddsföreningen, "Sveriges Klimatpolitik Går Åt Fel Håll."
[37] Forst, State Repression of Environmental Protest and Civil Disobedience.
[38] Sverige Radio, "Klimataktivisterna som blev sabotörer - Konflikt."
[39] This phenomenon, however, is evident in the Swedish context, as demonstrated by death threats against individuals in the indigenous Sámi community, as well as harassment and the killing of their reindeer, stemming from their active advocacy for protecting their rights against the negative impacts of mining and wind energy projects. Huuva and Wallin, *Hatbrott mot samer*.

of other ethnic groups.[40] Throughout history, explorers from various parts of the world have come to South Africa, with European presence and land occupation intensifying from the 17th century onwards. This period marked the forced displacement and subjugation of the Khoisan, often reducing them to slavery or servitude.[41] The era also saw the institutionalisation of white dominance and the systemic oppression of black populations, which reached a tragic climax with the implementation of apartheid as a state policy by the National Party in 1948. These historical trajectories have profoundly shaped the religious and social fabric of modern South Africa, underscoring the enduring racial segregation.[42]

During the colonial era, religion was closely intertwined with ethnicity, with Christian churches predominantly serving settler populations. The 20th century marked a significant shift as Christian mission agencies began active engagement in the region, profoundly influencing religious dynamics. The relationship between churches, denominations, and ethnic identity became a crucial aspect of societal organisation throughout this period.[43]

The apartheid regime intensified and reinforced religious classifications based on ethnic divisions that had their origins in the colonial era.[44] The history of apartheid is intrinsically intertwined with faith and political structures; for instance, the Dutch Reformed Church provided theological justification for apartheid policies, whereas numerous mainline churches, including the Anglican, Methodist, and Catholic churches, publicly condemned apartheid. The segregation of faith communities along ethnic lines, established during apartheid, continues to manifest in contemporary South Africa.[45] This historical trajectory highlights the complex interplay between religious institutions and ethnic stratification, which has significantly shaped the religious context of the country.

When the new Constitution was enacted in 1996 following the abolition of the apartheid regime, it explicitly recognised freedom of religion as a fundamental human right, thereby establishing a legal foundation for religious liberties in

[40] Boezak, "The Cultural Heritage of South Africa's Khoisan," 253.
[41] Boezak, "The Cultural Heritage of South Africa's Khoisan," 252.
[42] Davenport and Saunders, South Africa, 52; Göranzon, The Prophetic Voice of the South African Council of Churches after 1990.
[43] Göranzon, The Prophetic Voice of the South African Council of Churches after 1990.
[44] Settler, "Religious Complexity in Postcolonial South Africa."
[45] McEwen and Steyn, "Politics of Faith."

South Africa.[46] Consequently, any form of discrimination based on religion, belief system, or customary practices is constitutionally prohibited. Empirical research characterises the relationship between the South African government and religious organisations as "separation with interaction", a nuanced form of secularism that not only ensures state neutrality but also fosters constructive engagement with religious entities. This approach cultivates an environment that is conducive to dialogue and cooperation within the democratic framework. A salient illustration of this interaction is the establishment of the National Religious Leaders Forum (NRLF) by President Nelson Mandela in 1994; it was designed as a national interreligious body to facilitate collaboration with the African National Congress (ANC) government on issues pertinent to the nation's post-apartheid reconstruction.[47] In addition, the role of religion, particularly Christianity, in political processes such as the implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission exemplifies the state's recognition of religion as a vital agent in fostering national healing. Although these engagements underscore the constructive potential of religious participation in state affairs, they have not been without controversy, raising questions about the boundaries and implications of religious influence in a democratic society.[48]

According to South Africa's official 2022 census, 84.5% of respondents identified as Christian, while 7.8% adhered to traditional African religions. In addition, 2.9% reported having no religious affiliation, 1.6% identified as Muslim, 1.1% practised Hinduism, and 0.1% followed Judaism. Compared with the 2001 census, there has been a modest increase in Christian affiliation and a more significant rise in traditional African religions.[49]

In South Africa, 55% of individuals self-report attending a religious service weekly.[50] However, despite being known as a highly religious people, South Africa is experiencing a decline in religious affiliation. According to the Pew Research Center, a larger number of the population identifies as religiously unaffiliated than in the official 2022 census, namely 11% of the population. There are also those who are leaving their religion. For instance, among adults raised as Christians in South Africa, 8% now consider themselves

[46] South African Government, "Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 - Chapter 2: Bill of Rights."
[47] Today, this council is called the National Interfaith Council of South Africa (NICSA). Mutelo, "The Nature of Relations Between Religion and State."
[48] Shore, "Christianity and South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission."
[49] Statistics South Africa, Census, 2022: Cultural Dynamics in South Africa, 27.
[50] Pew Research Center, The Age Gap in Religion Around the World.

unaffiliated.[51] Nevertheless, Christianity is the predominant religion, and the proportion of individuals without religious affiliation, although increasing, remains relatively small.

Previous research indicates that, since the establishment of democracy in South Africa, there has been notable progress in the government, the judicial system, and faith-based organisations towards better inclusion and acknowledgement of indigenous religiosity. This trend has been met with heightened interest in indigenous religious practices. Nevertheless, researchers stress the necessity of critically examining how indigenous religion is categorised in traditional world religion classifications that stem from colonial history, especially in South Africa's postcolonial context.[52]

It is important to recognise that ongoing scholarly debates critically examine the legacy of missions and colonialism, which historically suppressed African traditional religious practices. This suppression has contributed to a significant loss of indigenous religious traditions and facilitated the imposition of western Christianity in South Africa. Consequently, some scholars advocate for the indigenisation of Christian churches through the integration of local philosophies, customs, traditions, and beliefs. Conversely, others contend that such processes have already been substantially realised.[53]

A central tenet of traditional African spiritualities and religious practices throughout history exemplifies the embodiment of ubuntu principles, which are foundational to understanding African world views. The term ubuntu is frequently translated as "I am because we are", underscoring the profound interconnectedness and interdependence of individuals in their communities.[54] This philosophical stance posits that an individual's identity and sense of self are intricately linked to their relational ties and their contributions to the collective well-being. Numerous African spiritual traditions emphasise the unity of all life forms, and advocate maintaining harmony both in human communities and with the natural environment. Rituals, ceremonies, and communal prayers are integral practices that reinforce social cohesion, express collective gratitude, and solicit blessings for communal health and prosperity.[55] This

[51] Pew Research Center, Around the World, Many People Are Leaving Their Childhood Religions, 27.
[52] Settler, "Religious Complexity in Postcolonial South Africa," 13.
[53] Masoga and Nicolaides, "Christianity and Indigenisation in Africa."
[54] Ajitoni, "Ubuntu and the Philosophy of Community in African Thought: An Exploration of Collective Identity and Social Harmony."
[55] Masango, "African Spirituality That Shapes the Concept of Ubuntu."

concept fosters a collective sense of self that is commonly contrasted with Western individualism.[56]

Religious context of Sweden

By the mid-1500s, Sweden had become a Lutheran nation. It was not until 1951 that laws allowed citizens to leave the Church of Sweden without joining another denomination. The church served as the state church until 2000, and is now officially non-state, though it still aims to serve all residents and is considered a folk church.[57] Consequently, Sweden has remained predominantly religiously homogeneous, dominated by the Church of Sweden (Lutheran).

During the 19th century, Swedish society transitioned from a household-based to an individual-centric social structure. Key movements, such as the temperance, workers', and revivalist movements, addressed social inequalities and contributed to Sweden's democratisation. The 1930 marked a pivotal moment, as the collaboration between the workers' movement and social democrats established the foundations of the modern welfare state in which the individual's rights were to be protected.[58]

Contemporary Swedish society is characterised by a paradoxical blend of individualism and trust in a strong state manifested in the welfare system. This can be traced back to Lutheranism, which historically emphasised individual autonomy in relation to God and trust in a benevolent God. Over time, this individual autonomy and divine authority were secularised and reinterpreted as civic responsibility, and allowed the state to be perceived as a benevolent entity embodying the common good, yet independent of God, thereby fostering a societal environment in which individual liberty and state authority coexist.[59]

The strong emphasis on individual liberty in contemporary Swedish society is mirrored in data from the World Values Survey (WVS) global cultural map, which indicates that Sweden exhibits the highest levels of individualistic values globally. These values prioritise aspects such as self-expression,

[56] Ajitoni, "Ubuntu and the Philosophy of Community in African Thought: An Exploration of Collective Identity and Social Harmony."
[57] Svenska Kyrkan, *Ändrade relationer mellan Svenska kyrkan och staten*; Bäckström et al., *Religiös förändring i norra Europa*, 41.
[58] Claesson, "Att Lösa Klimatproblem Med Luther Eller Calvin," 192.
[59] Claesson, "Att Lösa Klimatproblem Med Luther Eller Calvin," 188–90.

subjective well-being, quality of life, and autonomy. Furthermore, Sweden ranks exceptionally high on the survey's measure of what is framed as "secular-rational values".[60]

Another characteristic of Swedish society is what termed a form of "pragmatic secularism", which implies that religion has been neither actively endorsed nor explicitly suppressed, thereby maintaining a nuanced position in the socio-political landscape. This could be understood having its roots in the close collaboration between the Church of Sweden and the state alongside the stability of the Swedish political culture throughout the 20th century, characterised by the lack of revolutionary upheavals.[61] This has also made religion less visible in daily life and in public spaces. However, religion is visible in contemporary Swedish society as a result of increased religious pluralism; it is commonly referred to as a post-secular society (although this is widely debated).[62] However, faith-based organisations are still not inherently integral components of civil society. Historically, the predominant church was closely intertwined with the state, exemplified during the industrialisation period, when it supplied services that were considered an integral part of the welfare state.[63] Consequently, faith-based organisations do not occupy as prominent or natural a role in civil society in this context as they do in other European countries.[64]

Today, Sweden is regarded as a country with a high level of religious freedom.[65] The country has also become more religiously pluralist, largely as a result of migration. However, the Church of Sweden still accounts for about half of the population, with about 5.5 million members.[66] In contrast, other faiths have significantly smaller numbers of adherents: Islam has around 155,000; Orthodox and Eastern churches 140,000; the Catholic Church 115,000; the free church denominations together about 320,000; Buddhists number around 9,000; and Jews comprise about 8,000.[67]

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[60] The World Values Survey Site WVS, "Findings and Insights."
[61] Leis-Peters et al., "Religiösa Organisationer Och Civilsamhället," 112; Bäckström, "Religion Mellan Det Privata Och Det Offentliga - Om Religion Och Välfärd," 31–33.
[62] Leis-Peters et al., "Religiösa Organisationer Och Civilsamhället."
[63] Bäckström et al., Religiös förändring i norra Europa, 29.
[64] Leis-Peters et al., "Religiösa Organisationer Och Civilsamhället," 108.
[65] Regulations and laws do not necessarily align with societal norms and attitudes. Surveys indicate that people living in Sweden, for example, are more positive towards Christianity and Buddhism than towards with Islam. Willander and Stockman, *Ett Mångreligiöst Sverige i Förändring*, 13; Willander, *Sveriges religiösa landskap*, 17.
[66] Svenska kyrkan statistik, "Svenska kyrkan i siffror."
[67] Willander, *Sveriges religiösa landskap*, 35. These numbers differ from those identified in surveys of self-reported religious affiliations. For example, surveys indicate much larger numbers of

As can be seen, there is still an imbalance between denominations in the Swedish context according to the number of members.[68] However, a large number of members in the Church of Sweden does not necessarily mean a high level of religiosity. Compared with other countries, even those in Europe, which is generally more secularised than other parts of the world, Sweden is regarded as a highly secularised country – because, for example, it scores high on secular values.[69] Yet secularisation is a widely debated term and a complex phenomenon. There is a paradox in Sweden, in that the number of church members is much higher than the number of individuals who self-report as religious.[70] This has been described as "belonging without believing".[71] For example, seven out of ten never attend a religious service, and up to 60% report that they never pray to God.[72]

Another characteristic of Swedish society is the large number of unaffiliated people. According to numbers from the Pew Research Center, 52% of all adults in Sweden identify as unaffiliated.[73] Yet other studies also indicate that people in Sweden do believe in "something", but that they are distancing themselves from what religious institutions frame as "faith", thus mirroring the so-called subjective turn in faith.[74] An example of this is that nature in the Swedish context serves as an existential resource that competes with religious institutions. For example, nature is reported to create a connection with one's inner self, security, reduced anxiety, and a sense of meaningfulness.[75]

Buddhists and Jews, smaller numbers of Orthodox and Pentecostal believers, and a slightly larger number of Muslims. See, for example: Willander and Stockman, *Ett Mångreligiöst Sverige i Förändring*. The number of Muslims in Sweden varies significantly according to different statistics, which range from 80,000 to as many as 800,000. This variation depends on which factors are measured, such as mosque attendance over the past year, membership in a Muslim community, or the inclusion of individuals with Muslim cultural or family backgrounds. For further discussion and numbers, see: Thurfjell and Willander, *Postmuslimer: Om Sekularitet i Ett Mångreligiöst Sverige*; Novus - Kunskap och undersökningar, "Demografi, religion och språkkunskap."

[68] It is to be noted that the Swedish authorities, in contrast to those in South Africa, are restrictive in registering the religious affiliations of their citizens. Sweden's census does not address religious questions, making it difficult to present an accurate and up-to-date representation of religious affiliation in Sweden. The statistics referred to here are from the Swedish Agency for Support for Faith Communities' statistics for 2016. They show official members and registered participants, not the number of self-reported religious affiliations. Nordin, "Secularization, Religious Plurality and Position: Local Inter-Religious Cooperation in Contemporary Sweden."

[69] The World Values Survey Site WVS, "Findings and Insights"; Willander and Stockman, *Ett Mångreligiöst Sverige i Förändring*, 13.

[70] Thurfjell, *Det Gudlösa Folket*, 22.

[71] Kasselstrand, "Nonbelievers in the Church."

[72] Willander, Sveriges religiösa landskap, 85.

[73] Pew Research Center, Around the World, Many People Are Leaving Their Childhood Religions, 32.

[74] Thurfjell, *Det Gudlösa Folket*, 35.

[75] Thurfjell and Remmel, "'The Forest Is My Church,'" 218.

Finally, although contemporary Sweden is generally regarded as a country with a high level of religious freedom, there is an ongoing imperative to acknowledge and address the colonial abuses inflicted upon Sweden's indigenous Sámi population, which includes religious oppression. Historically, institutions such as the Church of Sweden – formerly the state church – participated actively in these injustices, which included the suppression of Sámi language, religion, and cultural practices. The formal process of reconciliation initiated in the 1990s represented a significant step; however, it has faced criticism for having insufficient Sámi participation and limited reparative measures.[76]

Changing political landscape

Finally, I wish to highlight that the political landscape worldwide has experienced rapid and significant transformations during the period of my study. When I started the research project in 2020, the influence of Greta Thunberg, a renowned Swedish youth climate activist who began her activism in 2018, was substantial. Her impact was widely recognised in academic circles, with scholars analysing the so-called "Greta Thunberg effect" to demonstrate her influence on public engagement in collective climate action.[77] However, in recent years, the political landscape has shifted significantly, with populist regimes gaining prominence worldwide and adopting increasingly authoritarian stances. Notably, the rise of far-right populist governments has been linked to negative implications for climate discourse and policy, as evidenced by research in a range of disciplines.[78] Climate issues have thus become more politicised, potentially affecting religious actors' willingness to participate.

In addition, the emergence of conflicts, not least the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Israel's war in Gaza, has redirected Europe's and other nations' focus towards military defence, thereby diminishing the urgency attributed to the climate crisis and shifting attention to issues of war.[79] Furthermore, worldwide reactionary political forces driven by populism try to push back civil society, thereby contracting the space available for climate activism.[80] For

[76] Lekvall, "Repairing 'Historical' Wrongs." In 2021 and 2022, the Church of Sweden publicly apologised to the Sámi people. Church of Sweden, "Ursäkten till det samiska folket."
[77] See, for example: Sabherwal et al., "The Greta Thunberg Effect."
[78] For a comprehensive list, refer to: Political Ecologies of the Far Right Network, "Bibliography, Academic Resources Far Right and the Environment."
[79] The wars also exert harmful effects on the environment, thereby exacerbating the consequences of climate change. See, for example: Hasnain, "Israel Palestine Conflict and Its Impact on Climate Change in the Middle East"; Yutilova et al., "Russia–Ukraine War Impacts on Environment."
[80] See, for example: Strachwitz and Toepler, "Contested Civic Spaces in Liberal Democracies."

example, recent legislative developments throughout Europe have imposed new restrictions on lawful environmental protests, as elaborated in the Introduction to this dissertation.

To conclude, while the ongoing climate crisis is characterised by rapid evolution, so too the conditions for climate activism are undergoing radical changes. The global political landscape is experiencing swift and unpredictable transformations, further complicating cohesive efforts to address these crises. Given this dynamic context, replicating a similar study today would likely produce different findings.

Previous research

I situate my research in a broader scholarly context that encompasses both theoretical and empirical studies in the fields of religion and environmental challenges. This includes prior research on faith-based activism and theological investigations into religious actors' responses to climate issues. While my interpretation is primarily grounded in this body of literature, explicit references are intentionally limited to maintain focus on my original analysis.

Theological literature on environmental challenges

The corpus of theological literature represents the most extensive segment in the academic discourse on religion and environmental challenges such as the climate crisis. While my investigation deliberately encompasses activists in a spectrum of faith traditions, it is notable that Christian adherents are the predominant group. In addition, in the South African context, it is commonplace for interviewees affiliated with non-Christian faiths to reference a Christian framework, underscoring the pervasive influence of Christian theological perspectives. My familiarity with Christian theology enhances my capacity to conduct a detailed and nuanced theological analysis of these viewpoints. Although integrating diverse theological paradigms could have enriched the interpretive depth of the study even more, such an approach would have exceeded the scope of the current research. Therefore, this overview centres principally on the Christian theological literature, which provides the primary lens for this analysis.

The origins of Christian theology emphasising care for creation can be traced to the early Christian era, with expressions of environmental concern manifested in various historical contexts, such as the reflections of mediaeval

mystics.[81] Nonetheless, the field experienced a significant expansion during the 1960s, largely influenced by critiques from scholars such as Lynn White, who highlighted Christianity's potential contribution to the underlying causes of the global environmental crises.[82] Subsequent research efforts primarily sought to engage with or address these critical perspectives, fostering a more nuanced discourse in the field.[83]

The escalating climate crisis, caused by human activities, has led to increased theological discussions that focus not only on general environmental problems but also specifically on the climate crisis. Contemporary Christian eco-theology, which is centred on the climate crisis, is notably heterogeneous, encompassing a variety of contextual and disciplinary perspectives, including environmental ethics, systematic theology, biblical studies, and the sociology of religion.[84] A comprehensive volume that adopts an otherwise comparatively rare *global* perspective is the *T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Theology and Climate Change* (2019). This work facilitates a cross-cultural discourse on the theological dilemmas arising from climate change.[85] Moreover, significant contributions extend beyond Christianity, exemplified by works such as *African Perspectives on Religion and Climate Change*. These volumes not only broaden the scope of climate theology, but also critically examine how diverse religious traditions shape the world view and behavioural responses of their adherents, thereby underscoring the multifaceted nature and societal relevance of religious engagement with climate issues. Furthermore, the introduction to the volume *African Perspectives on Religion and Climate Change* by Ezra Citando, a Zimbabwean theologian specialising in the history and phenomenology of religion, has significantly enriched my analysis of the South African material owing to its elucidation of Southern African cultural resources in faith-based environmentalism.[86]

An overarching objective of Christian eco-theology can be articulated in several ways. While some scholars emphasise that Christian eco-theology serves as a reinterpretation of traditional Christian doctrines, I align myself with the

[81] See, for example, Sigurd Bergmann's work on the early Church Cappadocian theologian Gregory of Nazianzus. Bergmann, *Creation Set Free.*
[82] White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis."
[83] For a comprehensive and interdisciplinary analysis of White's arguments, along with a critical reflection on the evolving scholarly discourse on the interplay between religion, culture, and the environmental crisis, please refer to: LeVasseur and Peterson, *Religion and Ecological Crisis*.
[84] For a thorough overview of academic scholarship on the connection between religion and climate in various scholarly discourses, refer to Jenkins et al., "Religion and Climate Change."
[85] Koster and Conradie, T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Theology and Climate Change.
[86] Chitando et al., African Perspectives on Religion and Climate Change.

perspective proposed by South African theologian Ernst Conradie. He advocates a dual approach: first, to reinterpret Christian theology in the context of Christianity itself; and second, to explore how Christian theology could actively contribute to society's response to environmental degradation. This involves participating in an ecological transformation of economic systems and cultural consumption patterns.[87] Although my study encompasses faith traditions beyond Christianity, and initially aimed to explore primarily the role of theology in activism, such as political advocacy and campaigning efforts, my final findings and analysis are closely aligned with Conradie's dual approach and his constructive theological perspective. This approach also resonates well with the perspectives of the theologians discussed in the final chapter of this thesis, such as Jürgen Moltmann, Catherine Keller, and Sallie McFague, as well as Ernst Conradie in the South African context and Petra Carlsson Redell in the Swedish context.[88] Likewise, scholars who have inspired the overarching framework of this study from various angles have highlighted the significant constructive contribution of religion and theology in addressing contemporary environmental problems.[89]

The role of theology in addressing environmental crises has become an increasingly vital discussion in academic circles. This enquiry has also been integrated into an interdisciplinary approach and into the broader field of environmental humanities, underscoring the significance of theological perspectives in shaping responses to climate challenges. Notably, the volume *Religion in Environmental and Climate Change, Suffering, Values, Lifestyles*, published in 2012 and edited by Dieter Gerten and Sigurd Bergmann, exemplifies this integration.[90] Similarly, the volume *Religion in the Anthropocene* from the year 2017 and edited by Celia E. Deane-Drummond, Sigurd Bergmann, and Markus Vogt, emphasises the critical contribution of theology to understanding and tackling environmental issues.[91]

[87] Conradie et al., *Christian Faith and the Earth*, 2; Conradie, "Contemporary Challenges to Christian Ecotheology," 107.
[88] See, for example, these scholarly publications: Moltmann, *God in Creation*; Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth*, 91; McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 29; Conradie et al., *Christian Faith and the Earth*; Redell, *Gråstensteologi*.
[89] See, for example, these scholarly publications, highlighting perspectives from the Nordic and Southern African contexts: Aarflot and Grau, *Tidsskrift for Feministisk Teologi, St Sunniva, Tema Klima*; Bergmann et al., *Religion, Materialism and Ecology*; Öhlmann and Swart, "Religion and Environment."
[90] Gerten and Bergmann, Religion in Environmental and Climate Change.
[91] Deane-Drummond et al., Religion in the Anthropocene.

Empirical research on religious actors' climate responses

Although religious groups have been involved in tackling the climate crisis for decades, empirical research on faith-based climate activism is still in its early stages. Studies examining the role of theology in this activism are even rarer and more recent. This stands in contrast to the substantial theological literature on climate and environmental issues, as presented above. In what follows, I present empirical research on the responses of religious actors to the climate crisis that are relevant to my study, with a particular focus on faith-based climate activism and highlighting those who apply a theological perspective to their empirical material.

The bulk of empirical studies on religion and climate have examined the connection between people's religious faith and their attitudes to climate change. Quantitative surveys have been a central methodological approach, and the surveys have mainly been conducted in the United States, with a focus on American evangelicals. The question of whether religious commitments are the key motivation for climate engagement or whether religious beliefs are part of a broader identity in which secular and religious ideas are combined has been at the centre of the scholarly discussion on religion and climate change. Although many hypotheses have been proposed, it has been difficult to establish clear links between theological positions and public attitudes on climate change. [92]

In the field of empirical social scientific research, there is a notable and increasing focus on understanding how religious actors respond practically to the climate crisis. Furthermore, it is essential to study the climate and religion in specific contexts, given the diverse roles that religion plays in different societies. In this field, the book by Veldman et al., *How the World's Religions Are Responding to Climate Change* (2014) can be regarded as a landmark volume, as it was, to the bets of my knowledge, the first attempt to sketch an overview of religious actors' responses to the climate crises in different contexts around the world, including both their oral responses and their responses in practice. Further, the volume contributed with empirical materials from the Global South, which, in general, have been studied to a much lesser extent than the Global North. Using a comparative approach, the research indicates that religious actors' actual accomplishments have been modest and that, in general, they are more successful on a local level in supporting communities

[92] Jenkins et al., "Religion and Climate Change," 88; Globus Veldman et al., *How the World's Religions Are Responding to Climate Change*, 9; Bomberg and Hague, "Faith-Based Climate Action in Christian Congregations," 1.

in poor countries to adapt to a new climate, and in greening local churches and influencing people to change lifestyle patterns in more affluent societies.[93] It is my understanding that this area has been more extensively researched, particularly in studies examining behavioural changes and the influence of moral and ethical beliefs rooted in religious faiths. In contrast, research on climate responses initiated by socially progressive religious actors with the intention to influence politics has received comparatively less scholarly attention.[94]

However, a body of scholarship is dedicated to thoroughly analysing the role of religion in political discourse and its consequential influence on climate change politics. Notably, this scholarship extends to the international arena, exemplified by studies of religious actors' advocacy within frameworks such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).[95] These investigations underscore the need for further scholarly enquiry into how religious perspectives shape public debate and influence policy responses to climate change.

Furthermore, additional research from a more theological standpoint examines the official statements issued by religious actors at both national and international levels. For instance, Ernst Conradie's analysis of ecumenical climate statements illuminates the inherent tension between striving for a universal voice and the recognition that theological expressions are invariably rooted in specific contexts and locations.[96] Although my study explores the practised theologies of activists, these types of examination emphasise the complexity of religious engagement with climate issues, and highlight the need for a deeper understanding of religious actors' efforts to have an impact on national and global environmental policies.

The engagement of theology in the political and social spheres is a well-established area of scholarly enquiry, and has been extensively examined through disciplines such as political theology, liberation theology, feminist theology, and public theology.[97] The potential of theology as a vital resource during crises, such as the current climate emergency, has also garnered scholarly

[93] Globus Veldman et al., How the World's Religions Are Responding to Climate Change, 300.
[94] This is emphasised, for example, in the following scholarly publications: Braunstein et al., "Religion and Progressive Politics in the United States"; Williams, "What Progressive Efforts Tell Us about Faith and Politics."
[95] See for example, Glaab, "A Climate for Justice?"; Berry, "Transnational Religious Advocacy Networks in Latin America and Beyond."
[96] Conradie, "Climate Change and the Common Good."
[97] The relationship between feminist theology and ecology has also been highlighted by, for example, the theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether. Ruether, *Religious Ecofeminism*.

attention in these disciplines. The article *Responsible Public Theology on Climate Change Devastations*, published in 2023 by Jonas Sello Thinane et al., exemplifies this discourse. It emphasises the pressing need for a responsible public theology that addresses climate change, contextualised in the catastrophic flooding in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa in 2022.[98] Although their methodology is not empirical or qualitative, as in the present study, the authors nonetheless highlight the critical importance of public theological responses to the urgent and context-specific challenges posed by climate catastrophe. This is similarly done in the volume *Religion and Ecology in the Public Sphere*, published in 2011 and edited by Celia Deane-Drummond and Heinrich Bedford-Stromm. This work critically underscores public theology as an essential resource for addressing and mitigating ecological challenges, thereby emphasising theology's vital role in contemporary environmental discourse.[99]

Faith-based activism – empirical studies of relevance

Some researchers examine faith-based climate activism without an in-depth theological focus; yet their findings are of interest to my study. One prominent example is the research of Elizabeth Bomberg and Alice Hague, who explore the spiritual resources in faith-based activism in Scotland within the framework of Christian faith-based and congregational efforts.[100] Using social movement theory, particularly resource mobilisation theory, in their studies of religious actors, they emphasise that such theories often ignore the religious dimensions and consequently overlook faith-based resources for environmentalism. Bomberg and Hague identify *spiritual resources* as key cultural assets, such as spiritual beliefs, symbols, and identities, that facilitate collective action. They define these as "the collection of spiritual beliefs, symbols and identities that facilitate collective action on specific issues", including shared values (e.g., respect for creation, community care), narratives (e.g., hope, intergenerational themes), and symbols/practices rooted in tradition.[101] Although they do not analyse these resources with a theological approach, their findings reveal significant links to theological discourse.[102] In addition, although my focus is not on organisational resources for mobilisation, but on individual faith-based climate activists' theologies, their study has inspired me to

[98] Thinane et al., "Responsible Public Theology on Climate Change Devastations."
[99] Deane-Drummond et al., Religion and Ecology in the Public Sphere.
[100] Bomberg and Hague, "Faith-Based Climate Action in Christian Congregations."
[101] Bomberg and Hague, "Faith-Based Climate Action in Christian Congregations," 583.
[102] In Alice Hague's thesis, Faithful Advocates: Faith Communities and Environmental Activism in Scotland, she explores the reasons behind faith communities' engagement in environmental activism within Scottish congregations. She identifies both practical and theological motivations that drive this environmental engagement. Hague, "Faithful Advocates: Faith Communities and Environmental Activism in Scotland."

investigate the resources used by activists and the resources emerging from their activism – an overall theme that constitutes the core of Chapter 5. In addition, they elucidated the research gap in cross-national comparisons and studies that encompass various faith traditions, to which my research project seeks to respond.

In the Swedish context, Henrik Ohlson's empirical studies of the Nature Connection Movement provide valuable insights. While his research does not focus on activists with a self-identified religious affiliation, unlike those in my study, his findings, which indicate the occurrence of spiritual experiences during activism, resonate with my own.[103] I explore these parallels in detail in Chapter 5.

A relevant volume for my research is *How 'green' can religions be? Tensions about religious environmentalism,* published in 2022 and edited by Jens Koehrsen, Julia Blanc, and Fabian Huber.[104] This work scrutinises the obstacles to the greening efforts in religious communities, emphasising the internal tensions that characterise religious environmentalism – a theme that also emerges prominently in my own findings. The study most closely aligned with my research is the empirical investigation by Chaves Monnot of Swiss congregational environmentalism. Monnot's analysis delineates intradenominational tensions, and specifically the difficulties faced by individuals who strive to advance environmental commitments in their religious congregations, and highlighting the organisational barriers that hinder such efforts. While my focus is on individual faith-based activists rather than on organisational structures, my findings similarly uncover tensions related to religious institutions. Monnot's emphasis on organisational obstacles thus provides valuable insights for interpreting my results, with which I engage critically in Chapter 5.

One scholar who has studied climate activism with a similar bottom-up and empirical approach to this study is Maria Nita. Her empirical study centres on Christian and Muslim climate activists in Britain. She analyses how the faith activists involved in the Climate Movement and the Transition Towns Movement in Britain view their activism as a practice of their religious faith. She finds that the activists she has studied are primarily motivated by their religious faith in their climate activism. Although she doesn't analyse the activists' practices through a theological lens, as is done in this study, she focuses on the negotiation of the activists' faith identities; and her study gives

[103] Ohlsson, "Nature Connection as Spirituality, Wellbeing Practice, and Subjective Activism."
[104] Koehrsen et al., "How 'Green' Can Religions Be?"

examples of how the activists practise their faith in their activism. She identifies and analyses the activists' use of religious language, rituals, prayers, and services, and argues that the activists contribute to the traditional religion's ability to frame environmental concerns in familiar terms and contribute to the articulation of a new green religion.[105] As is discussed in Chapter 5, her findings on lifestyle adjustments and the development of new values among faith-based activists align with my findings.

Theological empirical studies

Some emerging studies have laid a foundation for this area of enquiry by using empirical and qualitative methods to explore faith-based environmental activism and its theological aspects in specific contexts. For instance, Pauliina Kainulainen has analysed the theological arguments used by the church-affiliated opposition movement against uranium mining in Finland.[106] She highlights the interaction between actors using geology and theology as arguments in the debate. She argues for an ecological public theology that could integrate these diverse perspectives so that theology could offer a holistic cosmology emphasising the sacredness of nature, in contrast to the western mechanistic cosmology that privileges the natural sciences over other views of reality.[107] Similarly, Annalet van Schalkwyk has investigated the insights of the amaDiba people of Xolobeni and their opposition to mining, suggesting that these insights could enrich and expand Christian theologies in the South African context.[108] In the Norwegian context, Tom Sverre Bredal-Tomren and Benedikte Cecilie Renberg, based on an analysis of official statements and legal documents, have studied the bishops and priests of the Church of Norway and their role in the debate and in the Sámi fight over wind turbines in the Fosen, a traditional Sámi grazing area. Their case study examines the clergy's practical involvement and their theological and ethical arguments.[109]

Another compelling illustration of empirical research on faith-based environmental activism is the study conducted by Jeane C. Peracullo and Rosa Bella M. Quindoza, which investigates collaborative efforts between faith-based

[105] Her study was later presented to its full extent in the book: Nita, *Praying and Campaigning with Environmental Christians*.
[106] Kainulainen, "Geology vs. Theology? Uranium Prosepcting and Theological Arguments in Northern Carelia 2006-2009."
[107] Kainulainen, "Geology vs. Theology? Uranium Prosepcting and Theological Arguments in Northern Carelia 2006-2009," 118.
[108] Van Schalkwyk, "Living in the Land: An Oiko-Theological Response to the Amadiba Crisis Committee of Xolobeni's Struggle for Ubuntu, Land and Ecology."
[109] Bredal-Tomren and Renberg, "The Church of Norway and the Sami Fight against Wind Turbines: A Case Study."

groups and Filipino Catholic organisations in addressing the harmful environmental effects of mining activities. The findings demonstrate that such initiatives foster a re-conceptualisation of ecological stewardship, one that transcends anthropocentric paradigms to embrace an eco-centric perspective, thereby expanding the scope of ecological care to encompass the entire ecological community.[110] Furthermore, their research exemplifies a broader shift in the discipline of practical theology, highlighting an emerging scholarly interest in integrating ecological concerns into theological analysis. This trend is exemplified by seminal works such as *Practical Theology Amid Environmental Crises,* published in 2023 and edited by Pamela R. McCarroll and Hye-Ran Kim-Cragg.[111] My own study resonates with this evolving emphasis on contextual and situated approaches to theology, underscoring the importance of lived experience and practical engagement within the discipline.

Given that this is a relatively small yet rapidly evolving field, I do not assert that these studies constitute a comprehensive mapping of empirical theological research on faith-based activism. Nevertheless, these examples reflect key aspects of my own research. While my study is situated in the discipline of world Christianity, this review elucidates the broad scope to which my research is related: public theology, intercultural theology, and practical theology. The public theological approach I have highlighted, which aims to influence public debate through theology, is exemplified in my material, in which activists endeavour to shape climate policy and political discourse, rather like the efforts of the activists studied by Kainulainen, Bredal-Tomren, and Renberg. Furthermore, the approach of integrating diverse faith traditions, as emphasised by Van Schalkwyk, constitutes a fundamental strategy in my study. The field of practical theology is also exemplified in the works of Bredal-Tomren, Renberg, Peracullo, and Quindoza, who investigate Christian congregational engagement in environmental initiatives, but also include broader activist movement efforts. This intersection of individual activists and their local faith communities is also mirrored in my study. The highlighted studies, moreover, affirm the importance of empirical theological research in both the Global South and the Global North.

While previous studies provide valuable insights through empirical and theological approaches, their scope is limited and, although the activists studied advocate for environmental issues, they do not specifically address the climate

[110] Peracullo and Quindoza, "The Environmental Activism of a Filipino Catholic Faith Community."
[111] McCarroll and Kim-Cragg, Practical Theology Amid Environmental Crises.

crisis. Therefore, this study does not draw directly on these prior investigations in the analysis, but is rooted in similar established frameworks such as public theology, intercultural theology, and practical theology to explore faith-based activism in the context of the climate crisis.

A recent study, published in 2025, has coincided with the culmination of my research, and provides a relevant perspective that closely aligns with the focus of my investigation. Conducted in the British context by Finlay Malcolm and Peter Scott, their research endeavours to clarify the predominant Christian eco-theological beliefs among Christian climate activists. Using a multi-faceted methodological framework that includes questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and participant observation, their study benefits from a larger and more diverse sample size than the other theological empirical studies mentioned above. Their work aligns with my study's scope by examining theological beliefs among faith-based climate activists who are engaged in political advocacy at multiple levels – individual, congregational, and group – particularly in faith-based organisations, dioceses, and faith-led action groups. Unlike other studies highlighted here, Malcolm and Scott emphasise activism that is directly linked to the climate crisis. While their primary aim is to identify the dominant Christian eco-theological concepts in faith-based climate activism and to compare them with mainstream Christian theology, several of their findings resonate with those of this study. These parallels, but also the differences, are examined in Chapter 6. When I move to the second level of my theological analysis in that chapter, I construct the most significant theological themes in my empirical material. I also reference established academic theologians briefly but not in any depth, as I want to keep the empirical material as the main focus.

This study aligns with earlier theological empirical research by systematically examining faith-based activism and theological responses to the environmental crises, emphasising their potential to transcend a solely scientific framework and to enrich the theological discourse. It underscores the essential role of theology in confronting the climate emergency and advocating contextually nuanced, locally tailored strategies. By prioritising lived experience and active practical engagement, this study aims to demonstrate how theological responses could be effectively shaped by and responsive to diverse environmental challenges, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of faith-based activism in the context of global environmental crises.

Conclusions

This review of prior research underscores the importance of theological enquiry in addressing pressing contemporary environmental crises. It also highlights the need for further empirical theological studies that focus on faith-based activism. Moreover, it reveals a notable research gap concerning cross-national comparisons and the inclusion of diverse faith traditions. Responding to this gap, the present study adopts a multi-sited methodology that integrates material from both South Africa and Sweden. Although the analysis is informed predominantly by Christian theological perspectives, it also thoughtfully incorporates actors from various faith traditions in different contextual settings, including multi-faith environments, thereby expanding the analytical scope. Furthermore, in constructing theological themes from the empirical material, I approach the material as a cohesive theological corpus, despite the plurality of faiths represented. This multi-faith approach enhances the depth and complexity of the theological insights generated, offering a more comprehensive understanding of faith-based climate activism.

Outline

Chapter 1, the current chapter, introduces the scope of the study: faith-based climate activism aimed at influencing climate policy and measures, examined from a theological perspective. It presents the study's purpose and research questions. It also presents an overview of the two contextual settings under investigation, South Africa and Sweden, emphasising key contextual factors. Specifically, the chapter provides a brief description of the climatic landscapes of both regions and outlines their respective religious contexts.

Chapter 2 explores the theoretical foundations, concepts, and methods used in this study. The chapter begins with an elaboration of the metaphor of path-finding, exploring its relevance and application throughout the thesis. This is followed by an examination of theology as an analytical lens, which includes an overview of the "theology of four voices" framework and its application in the research. It then discusses the use of the concepts of religion and spirituality, followed by an outline of the necessary terminological clarifications. Next, the chapter provides an outline of the methods used, reflects on the researcher's role, and considers the ethical issues that are pertinent to the research process. The chapter concludes with a discussion of methodological choices and the study's limitations.

Chapters 3 and 4 offer an empirical investigation into faith-based climate activism, with a focus on how the activism is motivated and conducted. Chapter

3 examines material from South Africa, while Chapter 4 analyses material from Sweden. The findings are derived from interviews complemented by insights gained through participant observation in the field. The discussion highlights dominant trends while also acknowledging the complexities and variations in the material. In both chapters, a theological lens for analysis is used, aimed at exploring how faith-based activists demonstrate their perception of the transcendent through words and actions.

Chapter 5, building on the findings from the preceding empirical chapters, begins with an overview of the characteristics of faith-based climate activist practices in the two studied contexts. This overview provides a foundation for the subsequent analysis, which identifies and critically discusses both emerging and established resources used in faith-based climate activism in these contexts. In this chapter, the analysis progresses through a parallel examination of the empirical data collected from South Africa and Sweden. By comparing these two distinct contexts, the analysis gains depth through the identification of similarities and differences. The analysis is also strengthened by engaging with and critically discussing relevant research from diverse disciplines. The investigation of resources is conducted by continuing to use a theological lens for the analysis, including establishing and critically evaluating key concepts derived from the empirical material.

Building on the findings from the previous chapters, Chapter 6 aims to synthesise the analysis by explicitly addressing the overarching purpose of the study: to describe the characteristics of faith-based climate activists' pathfinding process amid the climate catastrophe, and to construct the theological themes embedded in that process. The characteristics of this process are explored through a reassessment of the research questions and by applying the pathfinding metaphor. Furthermore, the chapter critically examines the interactions among various theological voices in the activists' pathfinding process, including an assessment of the applicability of the "four voices of theology" framework in this specific research context. The next section provides an in-depth theological analysis, made by constructing key dominant theological themes in the activists' pathfinding amid the climate catastrophe. This analysis aims to deepen the understanding of the role of theologies in the response to the climate catastrophe at a more general level.

Finally, to provide a broader picture of my research findings, I conclude with an epilogue that offers an overall analysis of faith-based climate activism as a potential revival movement.

2. Theory, concepts, and methods in use

This study conceptualises faith-based activists as pathfinders in the context of the ongoing climate catastrophe. Its overall purpose is to describe the characteristics of faith-based climate activists' pathfinding process amid the climate catastrophe, and to construct the theological themes embedded in that process. This involves paying special attention to the role of religious faith, and particularly to theology, in shaping and manifesting this journey. Accordingly, this chapter demonstrates my application of pathfinding as a metaphor, while also clarifying my understanding of theology and its role as an analytical lens throughout the analysis, including the use of the "four voices of theology" framework. Given the central importance of religion and spirituality to this study, the chapter discusses and clarifies the use of these terms, as well as additional relevant terminology.

This chapter also describes the methods used, outlines my role as the researcher, addresses ethical considerations, and, finally, discusses methodological choices and the study's limitations.

Pathfinding

As the thesis introduction states, in a changing climate it is important to find new pathways to address and prevent further escalation of the climate catastrophe. Traditional scientific methods emphasise systemic change but struggle to inspire it, so other forms of knowledge are crucial. Throughout my research process, I come to see faith-based climate activists as pathfinders, from whom we can gain insights into navigating the climate landscape.[112] Therefore, by examining what I have come to understand as the "paths" found, explored, and developed by faith-based activists in their navigation, I argue that we can acquire experienced, practical, and contextual knowledge that extends beyond

[112] The "pathfinding" metaphor emerged through my participant observation of the Swedish Pilgrim's Walk for the Future. I discovered that pilgrims relied heavily on local guides, known as Stigfinnare, meaning "pathfinders", who had intimate knowledge of the terrain. These guides played a crucial role in assisting pilgrims to navigate the landscape, emphasising the significance of localised expertise in guiding journeys.

scientific understanding. Such knowledge can contribute to a deeper comprehension of the role of religion in guiding efforts to address the climate crisis.

In Lakoff and Johnson's seminal work on metaphors in everyday language, they highlight that metaphors are essential tools that enable people to understand an intangible world and less concrete experiences by mapping them on to a more tangible, structured, and familiar one. It offers a structure that literal language lacks, allowing new interpretations of our experience. A metaphor emphasises specific aspects while downplaying others. By highlighting and organising certain parts of our experience, metaphors can help us to understand them better and guide our future actions.[113]

Although my use of the pathfinding metaphor comes from an everyday expression I encountered during the pilgrimage, my application of it in academic writing differs from everyday uses. Therefore, my metaphor usage in writing is different from that analysed by Lakoff and Johnson; however, I still find their insights into everyday speech metaphors valuable. Similar to the function of metaphor in everyday language, I use pathfinding as a metaphor to bring together complex material, including intangible worlds, making the phenomena being studied easier to grasp by making them more tangible and structured. Furthermore, while downplaying some aspects, I emphasise others, such as the role of religious faith. As Lakoff and Johnson argue, using a metaphor also encourages interpretations beyond literal language. This makes metaphors well-suited for a theology study. Theology itself often relies on metaphors to make intangible experiences, such as encountering a transcendent reality, more tangible by using metaphorical language.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the term "pathfinding" as both a noun and an adjective, originating from "pathfinder", which refers to "one that discovers a way", especially "one that explores untraversed regions to mark out a new route".[114] In this thesis, I use the term "pathfinding" to represent the navigation process undertaken by faith-based climate activists as pathfinders as they venture into untraversed regions to establish new routes. By examining what I frame as the pathfinding efforts of faith-based climate activists, I gain valuable insights from their experiences of navigating the climate catastrophe in their specific contexts. A brief introduction to the current climate landscapes they are navigating in the respective contexts of South Africa and Sweden is given in Chapter 1. The climate crisis, however,

[113] Lakoff and Johnson, "Conceptual Metaphor in Everyday Language."
[114] Merriam-Webster.Com, "Definition of PATHFINDING."

is also evolving rapidly; therefore, I interpret "untraversed regions" as the climate landscape, a swiftly changing, uncertain, and partly unknown landscape that these activists navigate.

In addition, I consider the "untraversed regions" to encompass areas of knowledge that extend beyond conventional scientific perspectives on the world and the climate crisis. To these activists, being faith-based, their faith serves as a source of knowledge that guides their pathfinding. Thus, they are using knowledge related to a transcendent reality. The activists navigate the climate catastrophe by engaging in climate activism: they "walk the climate landscape" and gain experienced, practised, and contextual knowledge, in which their religious faith plays a vital role.

The term "pathfinding" has previously appeared in academic research related to spirituality, mainly referring to individuals' spiritual pursuits as a form of spiritual self-agency outside institutionalised religion. In these findings, interconnectivity between the self and spiritual realities has been central.[115] In my study, as is shown in the sections that follow, spirituality is understood more broadly and my research interest is in the juxtaposition of faith and climate activism. Consequently, the pathfinding I seek to outline includes not only the relationship with a spiritual reality but also with worldly matters, specifically the climate catastrophe. However, as may be seen throughout the thesis, the pathfinding of faith-based activists, similarly to that of previous research on spiritual pathfinding, takes place to varying degrees outside institutionalised religion, and the activists experience tensions in relation to their religious institutions during their pathfinding of the climate landscape.

To conclude, I use the metaphor of pathfinding to illustrate that I study faith-based activism as:

- A contextually rooted process of navigation in a rapidly changing climate landscape.
- Knowledge gained from the experience and practice of navigating the climate catastrophe.
- A navigation that is guided, at least partly, by religious faith – by perspectives that include transcendent realities, thus reaching beyond science and the tangible.

Consequently, I regard the activists as pathfinders navigating the ongoing climate catastrophe. In my role as a researcher, I am responsible for delineating

[115] Linders, "Spiritual Pathfinding."

the framework within which I interpret their climate activism as a process of pathfinding.

I outline answers to rhetorical questions arising from the metaphor, such as: What landmarks do they spot? How do they check their bearing and use their situational awareness? How do they avoid being disoriented? Do they trail-blaze in a pathless landscape, or do they find hidden or unconventional paths that we are unaware of? Where are they heading? And above all, what role does their religious faith play in this process of pathfinding?

This pathfinding process is to be analysed as a spiritual one, and examined through a theological analytical lens. My application of the concepts of religion and spirituality, along with theology as my analytical lens, are elaborated on in the sections that follow, accompanied by terminological clarifications.

Theological lens in analysis

In my analysis, I use what I term a theological lens to explore my empirical material. This lens is based on my interpretation of theology as various understandings of transcendent realities. In addition, it is built on concrete theoretical tools, including the "four voices of theology" framework, complemented by core theological questions related to activists' perceptions of the transcendent. The theological questions initially guiding this enquiry are: Who is God? Who are we as humans? What is nature? This theological lens thereby facilitates an exploration of the activists' various understandings of transcendent realities, as they are manifested through both words and actions in their activist practices.

I conduct my analysis on two levels. First, I use the theological lens to explore how faith-based climate activists demonstrate their perceptions of the transcendent. The theological questions concerning God, humans, and nature implicitly guide my analysis. This approach aims to elucidate the diverse theological understandings demonstrated in climate commitment. I argue that theology is expressed through both words and concrete actions.

Second, building on the initial analytical level, and to address the overall purpose of this study, I construct key theological themes that are pivotal in the faith-based activists' pathfinding processes amid the climate catastrophe. This thematic construction is grounded in the fundamental theological questions about God, humans, and nature. These questions are explored in greater depth

on this second level of analysis, specifically in Chapter 6, where their implications are explicitly elucidated and discussed. Furthermore, this construction process is conducted in dialogue with academic theologians to deepen the analysis even more.

It should be noted that my conception of theology as various understandings of transcendent realities that can be manifested in both words and actions did not necessarily align with the interviewees' use of the term "theology" in the interviews. Some participants used the term mainly to refer to specific genres of normative religious texts that have influenced or challenged them, such as "eco-theologies", "liberation theology", or descriptions of an "oppressive theology" in their faith tradition. Others used "theology" to describe academic disciplines, such as "eco-feminist theology" or "contextual theology", that have served as sources of inspiration. Exploring how the interviewees explicitly use and interpret these various forms of normative and academic theology is a component of this research. Nonetheless, the central aim remains to investigate how activists express theology both verbally and through their actions. To this end, a comprehensive theoretical framework is required, one that conceptualises theology as a phenomenon broader than "God talk". In this context, the "four voices of theology" framework offers valuable analytical insight, and has informed the interpretation of the material, enabling a nuanced exploration of these diverse expressions.

The "four voices of theology" framework

The "four voices of theology" framework originates from an action research initiative conducted in England that emphasises the understanding of practitioners' theologies.[116] This approach aligns closely with my research, emphasising theology as practice. Activists express their theologies through physical actions that are deeply embedded in specific social and cultural contexts and shaped by their experiences. Such actions and articulated beliefs can be critically analysed as forms of contextualised theology. This approach is crucial for my study of faith-based activism in South Africa and Sweden. Furthermore, this multi-dimensional interpretation of theology, understood as expressed in diverse voices, reflects my interpretation of theology as various understandings of the transcendent realities that can be expressed both verbally and through actions.

[116] Watkins, "Theology in Four Voices," 9.

The four voices of theology framework was developed through empirical research on theology to discern various layers of theology rather than to provide a mere description of theology.[117] I use the framework with caution. I do not use it as a deductive model to apply to the empirical material;[118] instead, I use the framework as a tool to identify, sort, and describe different theological voices in the material and how they converse with each other, and not as a tool to describe the content of different theologies. However, in the process of identifying, sorting, and describing different theological voices, theological themes in the material began to emerge.

The main idea in this framework is that theology features four different voices.[119] The four voices of theology framework is presented below, along with slight adjustments I have made to align it with my study.

- *The espoused voice*: the theology expressed by the activists in their articulation of their beliefs.
- *The operant voice:* the activists' theologies expressed in their climate actions (in public arenas). Since the majority of my empirical

[117] Originally, the four voices model was developed in the Theological Action Research approach to empirical theological research (more specifically by the Action Research Church and Society team (ARCS). Cameron, *Talking about God in Practice*, 54; Watkins, "Theology in Four Voices," 41.

[118] Andrew Dunlop discovered, while mapping how different researchers used the model of the four voices, that there was no consensus among the original team who developed the framework about its application in writing. Some researchers used the framework to structure their entire analysis and presentation of empirical findings, while others considered it merely as a reference point without explicitly mentioning the different voices in their text. For instance, Clare Watkins did not categorise her writing according to the voices; instead, she used the approach as a tool to reveal "the hidden infrastructure that 'disclosed theology'" Furthermore, she critiques the notion that the approach should be treated as a deductive model applied to empirical material. Watkins emphasises the importance of not interpreting the diagram too rigidly, noting that the relationship between the four voices is much more complex than it may initially appear. My practical application of the model is described in detail in the section Abductive thematic analysis" in this chapter. Watkins, "Theology in Four Voices," 40; Dunlop, "Using the 'Four Voices of Theology' in Group Theological Reflection," 296.

[119] Originally, the voices were described as follows by the research team that first developed the four voices, based on their research: *The espoused voice* is described as "the theology embedded within a group's articulation of its beliefs". *The operant voice* is described as "the theology embedded within the actual practices of a group". *The normative voice* is "what the practising group names as its theological authority – an authority which may even stand to correct, as well as inform, operant and espoused theologies". Examples of the normative voice mentioned are the theology of scriptures, official church teachings, creeds, and prayers and liturgy. Finally, *the formal voice* is "the theology of the academy, of the 'professional' theologian", but it is also formulated in dialogue with other academic disciplines such as philosophy and history. The formal voice might be heard in the espoused voices, but can also play a critical role in the conversation to challenge or develop the other theological voices. Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice*, 54–55.

material is based on interviews, the discernment of the operant voice in this study has been made primarily through the participants' descriptions of what they do.
- *The normative voice:* religious authorities, texts, traditions, and religious official teachings to which the activists refer as their theological authority.
- *The formal voice*: academic theology and insights gained from other academic disciplines referred to by the activists.

A basic understanding of the four voices is to see them as interdependent; the voices cannot be regarded as separate. There is an ongoing conversation between the four voices, and they never exist separately. Thus, Clare Watkins, who developed the framework with her research team and who is the one who has presented the most extensive writing about the four voices so far, has added the heading "A conversation of disclosure" in a revised version of the model to highlight that the conversation is always multi-voiced.[120] This also became evident in the reading of my material. Watkins argues that it is not the content of the separate voices that is of interest to the researcher, but the conversation between the voices, and that it is in these conversations that disclosures can occur, serving as "communal shared learning points". She also highlights that the conversation between the theological voices can be of different characters: it can be "more or less dissonant, or harmonious".[121] Exploring the dialogue between the theological voices in the material has become vital in my study, not least because it reveals tensions between the voices, which voices dominate, and which ones are seldom referred to by the activists. It is also in these tensions in the dialogue between the theological voices that the contours of the theologies of the activists become clearest.

All theories and theoretical tools have their limitations. The four voices of theology framework was developed in a different context and using different research methods from those used in my study. Originally, this framework focused on Christianity, and aimed to shed light on "human actions as loci of the Spirit".[122] In contrast, my study takes a broader approach; it includes traditions beyond Christianity, and features interviews with activists who are engaged in various settings, including multi-faith settings. Therefore, the

[120] Watkins, "Theology in Four Voices."
[121] Watkins, "Theology in Four Voices," 46.
[122] Crucial for their research team was the belief in "human actions as loci of the Spirit and the call to discern that activity of God within them". Watkins, "Theology in Four Voices," 40.

theology in my study encompasses not only Christian theology but also the theologies of various faith traditions.

The location of the faith-based activists' practised theologies extends beyond the confines of Christian institutions and organisations, in which the framework was initially developed. My study encompasses practices manifested in public arenas where they engage in climate actions to influence climate politics. Furthermore, unlike the original setting of the framework, which was developed through an action research project involving group discussions and interactions with the researcher, my study relies primarily on interviews supplemented by participant observations. In addition, I apply the four voices of theology to material collected from two different contexts: Sweden and South Africa. Consequently, my analysis is multi-sited, and relates to two diverse cultural and religious settings.

I have found that certain perspectives in my empirical material cannot be fully understood using the four voices of theology, nor can this framework address all my research questions. Therefore, during my research process I have made slight adjustments to the framework to suit the analysis of my material better.

To conclude, my analysis uses the four voices of theology framework to identify, sort, and describe diverse theological voices that are present in the empirical material, and to explore the interactions and dialogues among them. I analyse their activism as both espoused and operant theological voices, thus involving theologies that are demonstrated through both words and actions. But the framework also facilitates an analysis of how activists reference and incorporate normative and formal theological voices within their activism. A key strength of using the four voices framework is its capacity to illuminate aspects beyond its immediate structure that nonetheless significantly influence faith-based activism. Consequently, this approach not only guides the analytical process but also inspires further emergent insights.

When identifying, sorting, and describing diverse theological voices, the activists' "responses" to fundamental theological questions begin to emerge – questions such as Who is God? Who are we as humans? What is nature? Their responses serve as foundational elements for developing the key theological themes discussed in Chapter 6. In this chapter, I advance to the second level of my theological analysis, critically examining these questions in dialogue with scholarly theological discourse to strengthen and deepen my analysis.

Religion and spirituality – central concepts

I have adopted an open and reflective approach to key terms throughout the research process, developing and refining them through dialogue with the empirical material. This method could be described as heuristic, derived from the Greek word *heuriskein*, meaning to find or discover.[123] Using the heuristic approach enabled me to be receptive to the different terminology used by individual interviewees in diverse contexts, and their diverse understandings of such central concepts became a crucial aspect of my findings.[124] Using a heuristic approach means that I did not have predefined definitions for concepts such as religion, faith, and spirituality when conducting interviews. While I used terms such as faith and religion during the interviews, I did not give specific definitions to the interviewees. Instead, I used them to encourage the interviewees to share their thoughts on various issues. The interviewees also introduced the term "spiritual", which I hadn't mentioned. I aimed to maintain an open attitude, but interacting with the South African interviewees reminded me that my preconceptions from the Swedish context influenced my understanding of these terms. This further highlighted the need to clarify how I used these central concepts in my writing.

It is essential to reflect more deeply, particularly on the concepts of religion and spirituality, as they are integral to my study and have been thoroughly discussed and debated in academia (and elsewhere).[125] The heuristic approach might be most important here. I used the terms "religion" and "faith" without giving specific definitions in my interviews in order to prompt the interviewees to reflect more deeply on related matters. In a specific interview I conducted in South Africa, one participant described his faith as "spiritual" but not "religious". To this person, "religion" was associated more with

[123] Merriam-Webster.Com, "Definition of HEURISTIC."

[124] My open and reflective approach to key terms, as well as the insights gained from varied uses of key terms in different contexts, aligns with the exploratory methodology and findings outlined by Martha Middlemiss Lé Mon in a comparative European study. The researchers observed that the central key terms for their research carried diverse connotations and meanings in different contexts. However, the lack of universally accepted understandings proved to be a valuable opportunity. It enabled an in-depth investigation of the varied interpretations of fundamental concepts, which emerged as crucial to that study's findings. These key concepts were closely connected to both cultural and practical dimensions in each specific setting. Such insights would have been unlikely to be discovered through research limited to a single cultural context. Middlemiss Lé Mon, "The Benefits and Problems of Linguistic Diversity in a Comparative European Project."

[125] This divide has been discussed in a range of academic fields such as sociology, philosophy, and psychology, including the role of religion and spirituality in practical fields such as health care. See, for example: Fuller and Parsons, "Spiritual but Not Religious"; Ammerman, "Spiritual But Not Religious?"; Simmons, "Religious, but Not Spiritual"; Miller and Thoresen, "Spirituality, Religion, and Health."

institutionalised religion than with what he viewed as his spiritual experiences, which he described as more personal and detached from any religious institution. I observed that this separation of religion and spirituality also appeared implicitly in other interviews I conducted in South Africa. I realised that a similar distinction also appeared more generally in the Swedish material, although it was not as significant or explicit as one might have expected owing to the secularisation of public discourse in the Swedish context, with a general decline in religious language and a distancing from institutional religion.

The distinction between "spiritual" and "religious" noted in my research illustrates a growing trend, as evidenced by surveys such as those from the Pew Research Center.[126] This difference has been extensively examined in scholarly debates, particularly by Heelas and Woodhead, who argue that spirituality, centred on personal experiences, has been increasing at the expense of institutional and dogmatic religion. Building on the observation of a subjective turn in modern and post-modern societies, they suggest that spirituality may eventually surpass religion as a developmental trajectory.[127]

However, my findings, in contrast to those of Heelas and Woodhead, resonate with the views of the second wave of scholars studying religion and spirituality, who assert that the boundary between the two is not clearly defined, nor that spirituality will necessarily overshadow religion.[128] Moreover, as Philip Sheldrake emphasises, all spiritualities are connected to various belief systems, whether explicit or implicit, and are shaped by factors such as childhood experiences, cultural and social influences, and religious traditions.[129] This also reflects the focus of my study on individual faith-based activists who are, to various degrees, closely connected with religious institutions and, to some degree, express their spirituality within the framework of institutionalised

[126] However, the study of the Pew Research Center is limited to research in the American context: Pew Research Center, *Spirituality among Americans*.
[127] Heelas and Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, 3–10.
[128] See, for example, Ammerman, "Spiritual But Not Religious?"; Kaufman, "A New-Old Spirituality." Notably, in the domain of environmental studies, alternative perspectives on these concepts have been articulated. For instance, Bron Taylor's research on environmental movements, many of which deliberately distance themselves from religious frameworks, identifies phenomena analogous to spiritual experiences that are traditionally associated with religious spiritualities. Taylor posits that these experiences could be conceptualised as a form of "dark green religion", characterised by a profound sense of meaning and the perception of nature as a transformative force. Taylor, "Religion and Environmental Behaviour (Part Two): Dark-Green Nature Spiritualities and the Fate of the Earth."
[129] Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 204.

religion. Thus, I understand their spirituality as a dimension of their religion, and vice versa.[130]

To guide my analysis, however, I have decided to maintain a distinction between the concepts, based on my empirical material and on observations by Heelas and Woodhead. Definitions of religion are typically broader, focusing on collective, organisational, and institutional aspects, while spirituality is viewed from an individual and subjective standpoint. Thus, when I refer to religion, I mean the institutional aspect, specifically describing its institutionalised form. (This distinction is particularly useful for illustrating the tensions that faith-based activists often feel in relation to the religious institutions with which they are generally associated.) On the other hand, the concept of spirituality is used, at least initially, in relation to individual experiences of transcendent realities.

Given that this study focuses on faith-based climate activism, I find common ground with those who assert that spirituality extends beyond merely a transcendent reality or personal introspection. It also encompasses embodied experiences, and has the potential to challenge destructive aspects of human life and society. This perspective is particularly evident in liberationist spiritualities, such as feminist spiritualities, which emphasise active engagement and social transformation.[131]

Drawing on my understanding of spirituality outlined above, and inspired by Eva Hellman's heuristic understanding of religion, I use the expression "spiritual experiences" to describe experiences that have the following characteristics:[132]

- Experiences with a transcendent reality as a point of reference, either explicitly or implicitly expressed by the interviewees, but not necessarily contrasted with other forms of experience.

- Experiences that seem meaningful, valuable, and true for the interviewee, and have influenced their climate activism in one way or another.

- Experiences that profoundly shape the interviewees' understanding of the world and themselves, and how the world should be organised or

[130] This aligns with, for example, the approach used in empirical research conducted by Graff-Kallevåg and Kaufman, *Byggekloss-spiritualitet*, 31.
[131] Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 188–90.
[132] Hellman, *Vad Är Religion?*

managed. Therefore, these experiences are not merely otherworldly, but carry significant political and real-life implications.

While rooted in Christianity, the term "spirituality" has been adopted by various religious traditions and embraced by non-religious spiritual perspectives.[133] In this discussion, however, I regard spirituality as tied to religion, but beyond any specific faith tradition, enabling me to examine the concept in broader terms without associating it with a particular belief system. This approach allows me to view my empirical material as a unified whole.

Terminological clarifications

My heuristic approach to central key terms and concepts, described above, is also applied in developing the usage of the following terms.

Climate activist – I have used this term since the beginning of my research process. Some interviewees fully embraced the term "activist", while others hesitated to be associated with it due to its confrontational connotations and others because they did not live up to their idea of what an activist should be. However, I decided to continue using the word activist as a term in my analysis of the material, as I find it suitable to stress the primary criteria for selection, namely, interviewees who aim to influence climate politics. Thus, underlining the protest dimension of their commitment.

My entry point was to identify activists who focus on the climate crisis. However, after encountering the activists in South Africa, I realised I was influenced by the Swedish climate activism discourse in which the climate crisis in activism communication is put forward as the main topic. In South Africa, the activists' agenda and communication were broader, and the word environment was more commonly used. However, I have decided throughout the research process to use the term "climate activist" to reflect the continued significance of the climate crisis as the top priority for those interviewed, but occasionally used the term "environment" to acknowledge, in particular, the South African interviewees' broader approach to the climate crisis. To conclude, my usage of the term climate activist is that of a person who, through public actions, tries to influence climate politics on national or international levels but who can also engage in environmental work more broadly.

[133] Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 2–7.

Faith, faith-based activist, and faith community – In this thesis, the term "faith" is used, reflecting common everyday language, thereby being used in a more informal manner compared to "spirituality", "religion", and "theology". When I refer to faith, I am indicating belief and trust in God (irrespective of religious tradition), which may also encompass belief in religious doctrines, but not necessarily so.[134] My utilisation of the term is more closely aligned with the personal and individual facets of religion rather than those structured within the framework of a religious institution.

When I categorise the interviewees as faith-based climate activists, I adopt a similar understanding of faith, suggesting that their faith is a core part of their activism. This was also my initial interpretation of the term faith-based climate activist; I found that the phrase accurately describes those I encountered.

Faith is also used in relation to faith communities. This denotes a loosely organised assembly of individuals whom the activist considers as their local faith community; it can also represent the local congregations of a religious institution.

God, transcendent reality, divine – My empirical material encompasses various faith traditions. All the Swedish activists adhere to Christianity, which also constitutes the majority of the South African material. Nonetheless, activists who affiliate with Islam, indigenous beliefs, and interfaith traditions are also represented in the South African material. I recognise the particular difficulties in categorising indigenous religious beliefs according to traditional world religion classifications that originated during the colonisation period.[135] Nevertheless, I have opted to focus on my empirical material and use a heuristic approach. While various terms to describe a transcendent reality appear in the South African context, such as "life-giving force", the term most frequently used is "God", even among indigenous and interfaith activists. Therefore, I have primarily chosen to use the term "God", occasionally mentioning the divine or a transcendent reality to indicate the variation in the material and/or to underscore that a transcendent reality outside a monotheistic faith tradition is being referenced in that specific situation. In the South African material, there are also recurring references by the interviewees to ancestors, whom they understand still to be present as part of a transcendent reality.[136]

[134] Partly inspired by: Merriam-Webster.Com, "Definition of FAITH."
[135] Masoga and Nicolaides, "Christianity and Indigenisation in Africa."
[136] This understanding stems from the idea of interaction between the worlds of the living and of the dead. Notably, the interaction with ancestors begins prior to their physical death; certain

Notably, the expression "spiritual experiences", as previously discussed in detail, refers to the activists' perceived experiences of a transcendent reality. In the final chapter of my thesis, as I undertake a more detailed theological analysis, I have deliberately chosen to interpret these reported spiritual experiences as interactions with what I term "God".

Climate crisis, emergency, and catastrophe – The most frequently used terms by the interviewees were "climate change" and "climate crisis"; however, the use of "climate emergency" has become increasingly prevalent in both public and scientific discourse, with the intent of emphasising the urgency of the situation.[137] Thus, in my analytical vocabulary, I use the terms "climate crisis" and "climate emergency" to emphasise the urgency of the situation. In addition, I decided to use the expression "climate catastrophe" to underline even more the great damage and suffering that are caused.[138] This aligns with expressions used by the United Nations Secretary General António Guterres such as "code red for humanity" and "climate breakdown".[139]

Nature – The most frequently used term by interviewees to describe the natural world is "nature". For these individuals, "nature" generally connotes that humans are inherently part of nature, albeit to varying degrees remaining distinct from nature. There is an ongoing scholarly debate on how to describe nature that aims to challenge anthropocentric understandings of the world and to question the hierarchy of worth assigned to humans versus the natural world. This is done by language experimentation, using terms such as "other-than-human", "more-than-human", and "non-human" to rethink human relationality and to acknowledge, for example, the active roles of non-human actors in shaping

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elders in the villages, on reaching the peak of their life stages, can be recognised as living ancestors. These individuals assume roles as spiritual advisers to younger generations, sharing their spiritual insights and gifts while still alive. Following their death, they continue to serve as intercessors from the world of the dead, as they are now even closer to God. Thus, interacting with ancestors should not be understood as contradictory to simultaneously adhering to Christianity. On the contrary, communicating with ancestors can serve as a way to relate to God. Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge that the transition to ancestral status is not universal; not all individuals become ancestors in the afterlife. Masango, "African Spirituality That Shapes the Concept of Ubuntu."

[137] This aligns with, for example, *The Guardian*, which in 2019 announced their decision to replace the term "climate change" with "climate emergency", "crisis", or "breakdown". Furthermore, the *Associated Press Stylebook* revised its guidelines in 2020 to include "climate crisis" and "emergency" as optional alternatives to "climate change". *The Guardian*, "Guardian Style Guide"; Carrington, "Why the Guardian Is Changing the Language It Uses about the Environment."

[138] Oxford Reference, "Catastrophe."

[139] UN Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG), "Climate Change Is 'Code Red for Humanity'"; United Nations: Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, "Climate Breakdown Has Begun with Hottest Summer on Record."

landscapes and communities.[140] Throughout this thesis, however, I have decided to use the term "nature" consistently with the terminology used by the interviewees. This choice underscores that linguistic exploration is not a primary focus of their activism. Note, however, that my use of the term "nature" is not intended to imply that the activists perceive humans as distinct from, or inherently superior to, ecosystems or transcendent realities.[141] The perceptions of human–nature relationality are explored further in Chapter 6.

Methods

The sections that follow outline the methods used in this study. Adopting a qualitative approach, the research centres on semi-structured interviews as the primary method for collecting material. To enrich the contextual comprehension of faith-based climate activism in the two focal settings, and to deepen the analysis of the interview material, I have incorporated participant observations as a complementary method. Furthermore, to deepen my contextual understanding and to identify pertinent opportunities for both observations and interviews, I have mapped social media platforms, organisational websites, and relevant written materials.

In addition, I critically reflect on my role as a researcher, address ethical considerations that are integral to the study, and discuss valuable lessons learnt, while also outlining potential avenues for future scholarly enquiry.

Multi-sited approach

In this study, I use a multi-sited approach to analyse contextual, experience-based, and practised theologies drawn from two distinct contexts. This methodological approach involves collecting material from interconnected localities within a broader structural system, in which the researcher traces individuals, relationships, and connections across spatial boundaries.[142]

Multi-sited research is traditionally rooted in ethnographic methodology. As George E. Marcus articulated it when he first drew up the guidelines for multi-

[140] See, for example: Price and Chao, "Multispecies, More-Than-Human, Nonhuman, Other-Than-Human"; Nausner, "Eco-Justice as Mutual Participation? Towards a Theological Vision of the Mutual In-Dwelling of All Creation."
[141] For a discussion on Christian perspectives regarding land and human relationships with nature, please refer to the following article, of which I am one of the authors. Blanc et al., "Land as God's Common Good."
[142] Jokela-Pansini, "Multi-sited Research Methodology," 517.

sited ethnography, it "constructs the lifeworlds of variously situated subjects and ethnographically constructs aspects of the system itself through the associations and connections among sites".[143] Although multiple approaches to multi-sited research exist, a central objective remains: to generate a comprehensive understanding of a social phenomenon through the comparative analysis of multiple sites.[144]

While traditional ethnographic methods mainly use participant observation, my approach primarily uses interviews as its empirical basis. "Multisitedness" in my research is defined by two geographically distinct localities, which are interconnected through the shared axis of the climate crisis and the framework of faith-based climate activism – a space for my enquiry that I have intentionally constructed and delineated.[145]

A multi-sited approach was strategically used to encompass a wide array of perspectives on contextual, experience-based, and practised theologies. This method effectively expanded the analytical scope and facilitated a more comprehensive understanding. Specifically, I concentrated on the diverse climate landscapes and religious contexts, while also identifying and analysing commonalities such as activists' approaches to climate activism.

Furthermore, this approach significantly enhanced my self-reflection on the researcher's positionality. The shifting contexts challenged my insider-outsider roles, particularly when transitioning from the Swedish to the South African context, as discussed further under "My role as a researcher". For instance, engaging with the South African environment necessitated an expanded understanding of core concepts, including climate activism and the climate crisis. In addition, encountering the South African context compelled me to incorporate and engage with a variety of faith traditions, thereby enriching and broadening the theological analysis.

Social media, webpages, and other written materials

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the field of faith-based climate commitment, I began my research by constructing a simple overview map of religious institutions and networks actively involved in environmental advocacy in Sweden and in South Africa. This mapping was exclusively based on data available from organisational websites and social media platforms.

[143] Marcus, "Ethnography in/of the World System," 96.
[144] Falzon, *Multi-Sited Ethnography*, 1–2.
[145] Falzon, *Multi-Sited Ethnography*, 10–12.

However, throughout my research process, I was also advised by persons I encountered to engage with specific organisations, which influenced my ongoing mapping of social media, webpages, and written material. I began this mapping process in 2021, and have continued to expand it ever since. In addition, to contextualise the faith-based climate efforts in the broader climate movement, I tracked and followed climate organisations and movements in South Africa, Sweden, and internationally via social media. This included initiatives such as Fridays For Future and Extinction Rebellion in multiple countries.

This mapping process was explicitly aimed at enhancing my understanding of the climate commitments of faith-based organisations, and specifically those engaged in faith-based climate initiatives that include strategies for influencing climate policy and politics.[146] Concurrently, this approach deliberately excluded religious organisations and networks that concentrate exclusively on greening projects or awareness campaigns. To stay updated on the activities of the identified religious organisations and networks, I engaged with their content on social media platforms, primarily Facebook and Instagram, where these organisations were most active at the time. Moreover, I subscribed to their electronic newsletters whenever available to ensure continuous access to information.

My review of webpages and social media should not be classified as digital ethnography, as it did not involve the systematic observation and analysis of human interactions and cultural practices in digital spaces. Instead, the material sourced from organisational websites and social media was treated as textual data, serving as contextual background to inform my broader qualitative research, which used other methods as outlined in later sections of this chapter.[147]

While I regarded this material as a corpus of texts providing a brief overview of the field of research, it was excluded from my abductive thematic analysis. I did not use data harvesting techniques, as the objective was not to produce an exhaustive mapping of the field. Rather, the goal was to enhance my understanding of organisational contexts by constructing an overview map of

[146] I am aware of the ongoing scholarly discourse about methodological approaches to qualitative research in digital environments; see, for example: Nascimento et al., "An Integrative Review on Online Ethnography Methods."
[147] Andreotta et al., "Analyzing Social Media Data"; Nascimento et al., "An Integrative Review on Online Ethnography Methods."

religious institutions and networks and of the broader climate movement actively engaged in environmental advocacy in Sweden and in South Africa.

This mapping process also served as a foundational step in identifying potential opportunities for participant observation, an aspect I examine further, and to establish personal contacts with several organisations. These interactions facilitated supplementary interviews with key organisational figures, thereby enabling a deeper understanding of their work in the realm of faith-based environmental initiatives.

Finally, the mapping process also aimed to identify the main interviewees in both countries, a topic I revisit later in this chapter. After our interviews, several interviewees invited me to connect with them via social media – invitations I accepted. Because of confidentiality considerations, these social media connections have not been incorporated into the empirical material. Furthermore, I examined a range of supplementary sources, including blog posts, academic papers, books, and booklets authored by the interviewees, to enrich my understanding of their perspectives and contextual backgrounds. Consistent with confidentiality constraints, these sources are not explicitly cited in the main text. However, I reference social media, organisational websites, and written materials produced by organisations in which the interviewees are actively engaged. These sources are included in the bibliography.

Participant observations

The reflection of faith-based climate activists on their activism is fundamental to this study. Consequently, the interview material constitutes the primary data source. Nonetheless, participant observations play a crucial supplementary role. They significantly deepened my understanding of the diverse faith-based activism contexts, facilitated an in-depth comprehension of the activists' environments (which was particularly valuable to me in the South African context), assisted in the identification of interviewees, and occasionally enabled direct observation of the interviewees' activism practices. Moreover, these participant observations have allowed me to refine the interview questions and have enriched my analytical process. They have also served as an interpretive framework, enabling the identification of emergent themes that are critical in each specific context. The sections that follow outline how, when, and where I conducted participant observations.

This study was partly conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a slight delay in participant observations in South Africa. In addition, a

pilgrimage, representing my longest participant observation in the Swedish context, was significantly altered because of restrictions related to the pandemic, mainly by reducing the core participant group to fewer than ten individuals. Nevertheless, these factors are unlikely to have had a major impact on the study's overall results.

In my role as a participant observer, I aimed to maximise the quality of the material collection by adopting a position that would yield the most insightful information.[148] This generally involved immersing myself fully in the activities of the observed environment while avoiding any direct impact on the social situations. I also consistently tried to maintain transparency about my research objectives.[149] To facilitate this, I identified myself as a researcher and clarified the purpose of my engagement whenever circumstances allowed. Nonetheless, certain contextual factors constrained these disclosures – for example, at a large mining conference in South Africa, where the high attendance restricted opportunities for direct identification. In such situations, I introduced my role during private conversations. Similarly, during online gatherings with numerous participants and no formal introductions, I chose not to interrupt discussions to self-identify, recognising the importance of preserving the natural dynamics of interaction. This approach ensured the collection of material while respecting the varying contexts.

Practical considerations inevitably shaped the nature of my participation; engaging in extended participant observation over several days facilitated a deeper, more immersive understanding than brief encounters at shorter events. The incorporation of online events was particularly crucial during the pandemic, providing valuable contextual insights, although they could not substitute for embodied, in-person experiences.

My participant observations were conducted on multiple occasions in Sweden, in both online and in-person settings, from June 2021 to March 2023. In South Africa, I engaged in various events during my fieldwork periods in May 2022 and February 2023. In addition, I conducted online observations from Sweden and during my stay in South Africa. The final observation was completed in March 2023.

During participant observations, the research questions underpinning the study guided my focus. I aimed to observe climate activism practices while

[148] Fangen, *Deltagande Observation*, 140.
[149] Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, 152; Fangen, *Deltagande Observation*, 139–54.

also attentively listening to activists and examining their self-expression. To develop a comprehensive understanding of the activists' actions, I used an open-ended and exploratory approach during these observations. Consequently, I used broad guiding questions: What is happening? Who participates and why? What do they do, and how? What do they say, and how?[150]

My most significant participation as a participant observer was during The Pilgrim's Walk for Future in Sweden, a climate pilgrimage from Sweden to the United Nations climate negotiations COP 26 in Glasgow, Scotland. The pilgrimage was organised by the Church of Sweden in collaboration with various faith-based and secular organisations.[151] I took part for six days in August 2021, engaging actively by walking, sharing meals, and overnight stays with other participants. This event offered a unique opportunity to participate directly in climate activism alongside some individuals I subsequently interviewed. Throughout the pilgrimage, I participated fully in all activities alongside the other participants. I also conducted several informal, non-recorded interviews during the event. Owing to its substantial influence on the collected material, this event is examined in greater detail in the results and analysis chapters.

In Sweden, I participated in and observed a range of environmental activities, including local climate strikes in the interviewees' hometowns and larger global protests that drew thousands. These strikes were organised by the Fridays For Future network, with some interviewees being actively involved. In addition, I attended a gathering hosted by the Church of Sweden Youth, where participants shared experiences from COP 26 in Glasgow. I also engaged in several public Zoom meetings organised by various secular and faith-based networks, which aimed to raise awareness of specific initiatives, plan strategic activities, and mobilise participants for further engagement. One notable Zoom meeting was organised by a Christian Extinction Rebellion group in Great Britain, which several Swedish interviewees regularly attend.

In South Africa, I carried out three extended participant observations, each lasting several days. I gained access and received invitations to all the occasions for participant observation, as well as several shorter events, through my contacts with the Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI), although they were not necessarily the organisers of all the events.

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[150] Fangen, *Deltagande Observation*, 34.

[151] "COP" stands for "Conferences of the Parties" – the primary decision-making body of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Once a year it brings together the countries that have agreed to participate in and be legally bound by the UNFCCC.

Two of the extended participant observations included a three-day training session in Johannesburg and a four-day session in Gqeberha (formerly Port Elizabeth), both in 2022. These observations served as learning opportunities for non-governmental organisation (NGO) personnel and local community leaders, including some faith-based leaders. The discussions centred on various contemporary challenges facing South African society, occasionally including those arising from the climate crisis. The training sessions were designed to equip participants with relevant skills and knowledge to address these challenges. This included providing tools for local environmental advocacy and support for groups particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. In contrast to the pilgrimage, two of these participant observations in South Africa did not focus primarily on climate action initiatives directed at political leaders, nor was faith a predominant topic in the discussions. Nonetheless, faith was occasionally emphasised, with faith actors recognised as influential participants in civil society and advocacy networks.

The third extended participant observation was a civil society conference in Cape Town, the Alternative Mining Indaba, which took place over three days in May 2023. This last event was organised by and for civil society, including faith-based organisations, and focused on the consequences of mining. During the Alternative Mining Indaba, all participants were also invited to join a climate strike.

During these longer events, I did not identify interviewees, as the participants did not clearly meet the study's selection criteria (see the section headed "Purposive sampling" below). However, the observations significantly enhanced my understanding of the contextual issues and themes surrounding the climate emergency, as well as its links to various societal problems in the South African context. I also conducted shorter participant observations in South Africa, such as visiting a community care project, attending a public gathering in a church where current political challenges were discussed, and participating in two online sessions aimed at inspiring and training activists in specific aspects of their climate activism, such as drafting submissions on climate policies or deepening knowledge of the country's energy security strategy. In addition, I attended a graduation ceremony for a training programme for faith leaders that focused on building resilience against crises ranging from terrorism to climate emergencies.

In conclusion, my participant observations have played a vital role in validating the analysis of the interview material. I systematically took notes either during the observations or immediately afterwards, depending on the

circumstances. Even while note-taking, initial insights arose that informed the development and refinement of my research questions, and these were recorded along with methodological reflections and notes on my direct observations.[152] I also documented my personal reactions and emotional responses to the observed settings, treating these reflections as valuable empirical material. As I transitioned to the material analysis phase, I reviewed and highlighted recurring themes and significant events in my notes, thereby deepening my contextual understanding and strengthening the rigour of my interpretation.

Interviewing

My research examines how faith-based activists navigate the complex climate landscape by integrating faith and activist practices. These practices are integral to understanding their motivations and actions. Central to this enquiry are the activists' own articulations and reflections on the relationship between their faith and their activism. To explore these perspectives systematically, I have chosen to use semi-structured interviews as my primary method for collecting material, allowing me to gather rich, personal insights into their experiences and the ways in which their faith informs and is demonstrated in their climate activism.

Interviews with ten faith-based climate activists took place in Sweden between August 2021 and February 2022, and with eleven activists in South Africa from May 2022 to March 2023. Each interview typically lasted around one hour, though some were slightly shorter and others extended up to one and a half hours. Occasionally, I conducted follow-up interviews with certain individuals to discuss additional activism activities they had engaged in since our initial conversation. Overall, I conducted twenty-four semi-structured interviews with activists, and I determined that I had reached a point of saturation in the material.

For practical reasons such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the distance between my location and that of the participants, ten of the interviews were conducted via Zoom. However, conducting interviews in person made interaction easier and helped to create a relaxed and trusting environment. Meeting the interviewees face-to-face allowed me to perceive their emotional expressions better, which I understood as signs that certain topics were particularly important to them. For example, I could recognise expressions of frustration or grief.

[152] Fangen, *Deltagande Observation*, 91–103; Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, 158.

In the Swedish context, I conducted most of the interviews while walking with the interviewees in the towns where they lived. I secured the recorder to my arm to minimise distractions for both of us. I developed this method after participant observation at The Pilgrim's Walk for Future (previously mentioned), where I identified some of my Swedish interviewees. I discovered that walking side by side, without direct eye contact, created a relaxed atmosphere that encouraged the interviewees to open up and share their personal thoughts on the subject of enquiry.

In the South African context, I conducted most interviews at public cafés with the recorder placed on the table. Although walking interviews had proven effective, I was uncomfortable about suggesting them in urban and busy areas where the interviews took place. These interviews occurred in the cities where the interviewees resided at the time. Occasionally, I had the opportunity to meet interviewees in their homes, workplaces, or faith communities, which enriched the interviews, as I was able to see them in their context.

Purposive sampling

This study specifically focuses on interviewees who explicitly link their climate activism with their religious faith. I deliberately selected individuals who clearly demonstrate a strong and articulate connection between their religion and their activism, ensuring the depth and relevance of the material collected rather than aiming for representativity across variables such as denomination, religion, ethnicity, gender, class, or education level. Nor have I deliberately sought interviewees based on their strong or weak ties to religious institutions.

I have chosen to use the purposive sampling method because it has proven effective, particularly when seeking a small number of individuals with specific knowledge or experience.[153] This approach depends on the researcher's judgement, guided by the research purpose and questions. As a result, I have deliberately selected interviewees who have thoughtfully considered these issues.

For purposive sampling, I established two criteria for selecting interviewees: one related to religious faith and the other to public climate activism. First, I sought activists who could thoughtfully reflect on and articulate the connection between their climate activism and their religious faith. Second, the interviewees must have publicly taken a political stance advocating action to

[153] Palinkas et al., "Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research"; Etikan, "Comparison of Convenience Sampling and Purposive Sampling."

address the climate crisis. This means that they had actively participated in efforts to influence climate politics or policymaking at local, national, or international levels. Examples include participating in or organising climate strikes, writing opinion articles, running petitions, engaging in lobbying activities such as regular meetings with politicians, or submitting written feedback on climate policy issues.

To facilitate my participant recruitment process, I used two distinct approaches to identify suitable interviewees.[154] The first targeted activists affiliated with religious institutions or formal faith-based networks engaged in climate advocacy and campaigning. I hypothesised that individuals active in these structured settings might personally integrate their climate activism with their religious faith. Moreover, I believed that gatekeepers in these organisations could help to identify individuals who have critically reflected on the intersection of faith and environmental activism. This approach enabled me to select interviewees through an organisational and institutional lens of faith-based climate engagement.

The second approach for identifying interviewees emphasised reaching out to informal faith networks and secular climate movement circles, thus broadening my search beyond gatekeepers in religious institutions, formal faith-based organisations, and networks. To identify these individuals effectively, it was important that they were recognised in their circles for their faith-based climate activism; otherwise, locating them would have been difficult.

By using the two distinct approaches, I aimed to include a diverse range of perspectives. My hypothesis was that activists with close ties to religious organisations might hold different views on institutionalised religious environmentalism than those who are loosely or not affiliated with such institutions and their climate initiatives.

In the Swedish context, I initially used my first approach to the purposive sampling method, targeting interviewees through religious institutions and formal faith-based networks. Through my preliminary mapping of these institutions and networks engaged in faith-based climate advocacy and campaigning, along with my prior understanding of the faith-based climate activism field in Sweden, I identified the Uniting Church in Sweden (Equmeniakyrkan) and the Church of Sweden, including its youth network for faith-based activism, Agera ("to act"), as fitting criteria for this study. During this mapping

[154] Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, 58–59.

process, I discovered The Pilgrim's Walk for Future, a climate pilgrimage organised by the Church of Sweden in collaboration with various faith-based and secular organisations. This event integrated political climate advocacy with spiritual elements, which aligned perfectly with the focus of my research. Participation in the pilgrimage enabled me to identify four of my ten interviewees in Sweden, and I also connected with a fifth interviewee through one of the religious institutional networks, whom I later discovered had participated in the pilgrimage. (During the pilgrimage and other participant observations, I found out that the Church of Sweden and the Uniting Church in Sweden were also the two denominations most often represented when I met grassroots activists during participant observations.)

The remaining Swedish interviewees were identified through my secondary approach, which involved exploring informal faith networks and secular climate movement circles rather than formal religious institutions. The goal was to find individuals who were well-known in their communities for their faith-based climate activism. I contacted potential interviewees encountered during the research, such as via websites and social media or during participant observations, and also leveraged informal networks. Furthermore, I asked interviewees to recommend others who met the specified criteria. Ultimately, only one interviewee was identified in the secular climate movement, with the other four recruited from informal faith-based networks.

I initially presumed that establishing connections with faith-based climate activists in South Africa would be more straightforward than in Sweden, owing to a higher proportion of individuals identifying as religious. Consequently, I believed that I could rely more heavily on my second approach to identification in the South African context than I could in Sweden. Thus, I anticipated that identifying interviewees outside religious institutional networks by reaching out to secular climate movement organisations in South Africa would be more feasible. Nonetheless, I quickly encountered greater difficulties than I had anticipated. I attempted to engage with prominent climate advocacy groups such as Fridays For Future (FFF) and Extinction Rebellion (XR) in South Africa, as they are prominent and akin to their counterparts in Sweden, in which some of my interviewees are active. I considered interviewing activists involved in similar networks and organisations to enrich my study. However, I was unable to establish contact with FFF in South Africa or to verify its current activity in the country.

I contacted Extinction Rebellion in South Africa and identified a participant through them. By then, I was focusing primarily on Christian climate activism.

However, during the interview, I discovered that the participant was Muslim. This was my first interview in South Africa, and as the research progressed, I decided to broaden my scope to encompass other religions beyond Christianity. This decision was influenced by several individuals I met through participant observations, including both secular and faith-based organisations, as well as academics and personal contacts, who recommended engaging with SAFCEI, a well-known multi-faith environmental organisation. Recognising that SAFCEI's work aligns closely with the study's criteria by integrating religious faith with climate advocacy, it was a logical step to include multiple faiths in my research.

As a result, using SAFCEI and similar formal faith-based networks and religious institutions was the most effective strategy for identifying interviewees in the South African context. This approach yielded the highest number of participants, with eight interviewees sourced through these channels. In addition to SAFCEI, these were the Green Anglicans and Lutherans, whom I had identified earlier through my initial mapping and previous professional engagements (discussed further under "Ethical considerations" and "The researcher's role"). Conversely, the alternative approach of targeting individuals and grassroots movements, both faith-based and secular, resulted in a comparatively modest yield of three interviewees.

Characteristics of interviewees

This study did not prioritise representativeness across variables such as denomination, religion, ethnicity, gender, class, or education level, nor did it intentionally select interviewees based on their affiliation with or ties to religious institutions. Nonetheless, following the identification of interviewees through the two approaches outlined above, a diverse sample was obtained that encompassed a range of characteristics. The next section delineates these characteristics, which are considered relevant for contextual understanding. However, they are not considered critical for the analysis conducted in this study, which means that I do not base my analysis on these characteristics.[155]

Since representativity was not crucial to my study, I did not ask interviewees about their ages; however, I estimate that they ranged from 25 to 70 years old. Most were between 40 and 70. In Sweden, there were seven women and three men, while in South Africa, there were seven women and four men. Both groups were educated, and I believe that the vast majority held academic degrees. I got the impression that most of the interviewees lived in relatively

[155] A list of interviewees is provided in Appendix 1.

economically stable circumstances. However, some came from more economically vulnerable backgrounds. Most individuals resided in urban settings. Therefore, they could be loosely categorised as the urban middle class, rather than being on the fringes of society and most vulnerable to the effects of the climate crisis.

All the selected participants were affiliated with a religious faith and denomination. However, since I was not aiming to select participants from a specific religious denomination nor seeking a broad spectrum of faith traditions, I did not enquire about their denominational affiliations before or during the interviews. Nevertheless, I occasionally mention their denominational backgrounds in the analysis, as this may indicate which denominations are more prominent in climate activism, the strength of each participant's connection to their faith organisation, and how it might influence their theology.

In Sweden, all the interviewees identified as Christians and specified their denominations during the discussions. Two denominations were represented: most belonged to the Church of Sweden, while a few were members of the Uniting Church (Equmeniakyrkan). As previously outlined, the Church of Sweden is the country's largest church, with about half the population being members. This is a Lutheran folk church and a member of the Porvoo communion.[156] Equmeniakyrkan is a relatively small, new denomination that has arisen from the collaboration of various Christian traditions, including Congregationalists, Baptists, and Methodists, making it mainline Protestant.

In South Africa, most of the interviewees identified as Christians, with affiliations including Anglican, Unitarian, Lutheran, and Catholic. One participant did not specify their denominational affiliation. Several were involved in interfaith settings or ecumenical collaborations. One individual described their faith as interfaith. In addition, two respondents identified as Muslims. There were also two interviewees from the Khoisan indigenous group. Of these, one distanced themselves from a Christian background, while the other referenced Christian faith and narratives.

[156] The concept of a folk church in the Nordic context is defined by a historically close collaboration between the state and the church, with parishes delineated geographically. In addition, the Church of Sweden's role as a folk church was integrated into the Swedish welfare model, with a responsibility for all living in Sweden. Although there was a constitutional change in the year 2000 that designated the state church as an independent folk church, the Church of Sweden continues to occupy a prominent and self-evident role in society. Edgardh and Pettersson, "The Church of Sweden: A Church for All, Especially the Most Vulnerable," 41, 50.

I observed that most of the interviewees held positions in their religious denominational institutions or faith-based organisations. The participants ranged from prominent figures with official roles at the national level to less visible individuals who were actively involved at the grassroots level but who often served as leading figures for environmental commitment in their local communities.

Most of the Swedish interviewees had a clear and outspoken position, serving as laypersons, volunteers, or employees at the local level, with some also involved at the national level in their church. The majority were active only locally. In the Swedish group, clergy were also well-represented, but not necessarily currently working as clergy, for reasons such as retirement or having taken on other roles.

Similarly, the majority of the South African group had a close connection with religious institutions; however, their roles were in faith-based organisations or church-related bodies. The positions varied: some were laypersons or volunteers at local levels, while others held senior roles nationally, either as employees or as volunteers. Unlike the Swedish group, the clergy were not well-represented in the South African group, although academically trained theologians were more prevalent.

As I sought out activists who thoughtfully considered the connection between their activism and their religious faith, it might not be surprising that some participants had formal academic theological backgrounds or were ordained as clergy. However, this meant that some of them held official positions that allowed them to contribute to the development of normative theologies in their religious institutions, as well as to the articulation of formal theological discourse in academic settings. In the light of the four voices of theology framework, described in the theory section, this means there were interviewees who also represented the formal and normative theological voices. However, in this study, I have decided to treat all interview material equally, representing only the individual activists. At the beginning of each interview, I clearly communicated to the participants that my goal was to learn about their personal stories and reflections. I did not differentiate between interviewees based on their roles in their religious or academic institutions. Consequently, I have not analysed the interviews in relation to their positions in religious institutions, but have focused on their personal reflections; I also do not consider the interview material as representative of normative or formal theological voices.

Some interviewees have also published theological texts, both formal and normative, in academic settings or in their religious institutions or faith organisations, such as articles, books, blogs, and booklets. However, this study focuses on the theologies in practice within climate activism while maintaining the anonymity of the interviewees. Therefore, I do not consider their written materials as empirical material.

The interviewees participated in various forms of activism, but, given the selection criteria (outlined above), a minimum requirement was for them to engage in activities aimed at publicly advocating political climate measures. This criterion produced a diverse range of empirical material, including activism from individuals involved in (nonviolent) civil disobedience and risking prosecution, to those engaged in less risky activities such as striking or lobbying.[157] The time dedicated to activism varied, from those with full-time jobs to individuals who participated in activism during their spare time, whether weekly, less frequently, or more intensively for a certain period. The empirical chapter provides more detailed descriptions of their activist activities.

Semi-structured interviews

The metaphor of the interviewer as a travelling companion who works with the interviewee to develop the content aligns well with my understanding of the interview method. The interview situation as a social practice provides a context for knowledge production.[158]

Since my aim was to identify interviewees' experiences related to their faith-based activism, I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews, as that method aims to uncover the interviewees' descriptions of their "lifeworld" and to interpret their insights.[159] The concept of "lifeworld" refers to people's intersubjective understanding of meaningful phenomena in their lives. Thus, it was not only their subjective experiences that were of interest, but also how these experiences have developed through interactions with others and in their specific contexts.[160]

Based on my research questions, I developed four main themes to guide my semi-structured interviews:

[157] Refer to the section headed "Ethical considerations" in this chapter, as well as to Chapter 1, particularly the sections on climate landscapes, for more information on the risks faced by climate activists.
[158] Kvale and Brinkmann, *Den kvalitativa forskningsintervjun*, 72.
[159] Kvale and Brinkmann, *Den kvalitativa forskningsintervjun*, 19.
[160] Brinkmann, *Qualitative Interviewing*, 22–23.

- The activists' descriptions of their practices.

- Their motivations and how their activism related to their faith.

- How their activism was connected to religious institutions and faith communities.

- Their visions for the future and the potential role of religion in fostering positive development.[161]

Some interviewees asked to see the interview guide in advance; however, this was generally not offered or requested. However, I always provided information about the theme and purpose of the interview beforehand.

In both contexts, informed consent was obtained from the participants in the interviews. This is detailed in the section headed "Ethical considerations".

For the sake of transparency, Chapter 4 (the empirical chapter that presents the Swedish material) includes the original Swedish versions of the interviews in footnotes.

Supplementary interviews

During my participant observations, I engaged in numerous informal interviews with faith-based climate activists, members of the broader climate movement, some of whom did not identify as faith-based, and individuals affiliated with various religious and environmental organisations. These interactions were not strictly planned or recorded, allowing me to gather insights as opportunities arose. The primary objective of these informal interviews was to enhance my understanding of faith-based climate activism, the interviewees' contexts, and the organisational efforts in the climate advocacy sphere. In some cases, these conversations help me to identify individuals for subsequent formal interviews.[162] Consequently, participant observation and informal interviews functioned as methods both to gain insight and to recruit interviewees.

[161] I did not formulate specific questions beforehand; instead, I relied on the four overarching themes to guide the interview process. This approach proved especially beneficial during walking interviews in the Swedish context, as it facilitated more open conversation without the need for a written script. Nevertheless, the four themes generated follow-up questions that served as a loose interview guide, which is provided in Appendix 2 Interview guide.

[162] In these cases, I consistently asked for permission during the formal interviews to use insights shared in the informal discussions. Everyone agreed.

On some occasions, I conducted interviews with key representatives in various organisations to gain insights into their climate initiatives and organisational structures. These interviews also explored questions that arose from my analysis of interviews with faith-based climate activists. Participants were identified through gatekeepers in faith-based organisations or by consulting their websites. Unlike the interviews with faith-based climate activists, I did not follow the four themes in my interview guide for these sessions, nor did I use a fixed set of questions. Instead, I focused on questions related to the organisations' climate activities. No audio recordings or verbatim transcripts were created; I relied on brief notes taken during the discussions.

My role as a researcher

In exploring the experiences of climate activists, it is essential to acknowledge how my own background and perspectives influence my understanding. The debate about the researcher's role as an insider or an outsider in qualitative research is particularly relevant here.

As an insider, I bring multiple identities to the table: an activist, a person of faith, and a practitioner. These roles fostered connections with the study's participants through shared community affiliations, organisational ties, common values, cultural understandings, denominational backgrounds, and a world view rooted in transcendent beliefs. Throughout the research process, my insider status proved advantageous, encouraging participants to discuss their activism and faith openly. Although I approached the interviewees in my capacity as a researcher, some interviewees recognised my identity as a Lutheran priest and my previous involvement in climate issues. However, in these cases, I maintained a professional boundary by not emphasising these roles. Interestingly, when these roles became apparent, they did not hinder the discussions; rather, they appeared to deepen the conversation, enriching the material collected and providing valuable insight into the complex interplay between faith and activism.

At the same time, I am an outsider, as a researcher engaging with activists, as a person of Protestant-Christian faith interacting with individuals from other religious traditions and denominations, and as a woman interacting with men. In addition, I navigate the dynamics of being a representative from the Global North, engaging with individuals from the Global South, and a white person encountering individuals of different ethnic backgrounds. The latter was also explicitly highlighted by one interviewee in South Africa, where people are still often separated along ethnic lines.

During my fieldwork in South Africa, I received invaluable support from my friend and local contact, Paul Mokgethi-Heath. Although he did not directly participate in material collection, his support in logistics, covering transportation, accommodation, and networking, was crucial. More importantly, he played a key role in bridging the South–North divide by connecting me with individuals from a wide range of ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds, thereby enabling access to diverse local contexts that significantly enriched my understanding of the broader environment and enhanced my analysis.[163] His insights into activism, particularly concerning the rights of those who are living with HIV and the issue of LGBTQI rights, coupled with our discussions on cultural differences rooted in his South African heritage and current life in Sweden, deepened my analytical perspective even more.

During my fieldwork, residing with Paul's family in Soweto and spending a short time with his extended family in Yzerfontein significantly strengthened the depth of my interviews and participant observations. Initially, I underestimated the profound impact this experience would have on my research. The experience appeared to encourage more open sharing from the interviewees once I mentioned having friends and family in South Africa. Furthermore, referencing insights from local issues such as load shedding, water scarcity, and violence caused by criminalisation helped to establish trust and rapport, creating a more conducive interview environment than if I had stayed only in air-conditioned hotels with reliable access to water and electricity, along with security measures such as guards and gates to shield me from street crime.

I resonate with those who argue that framing the relationship between insider and outsider as a binary framework oversimplifies as a conceptualisation of ethical and methodological considerations. Throughout the research process, I have been both an insider and an outsider in various respects. Throughout the various stages of the research process, I transitioned between different positions and aimed to use multiple perspectives constructively, being aware of both the benefits and the difficulties associated with both insider and outsider roles, and of different degrees of insiderness/outsiderness. I have also striven to be aware of and reflexive about the power relations that occurred and the implications they have on "co-constructing" situated knowledge.[164] However,

[163] I am aware that the role of research assistants in academic studies is an ongoing subject of debate, especially regarding issues of inequality and the often unclear transparency about their actual contributions. In addition, the term covers diverse groups with varying levels of involvement in the research process. Therefore, I am committed to transparency about Paul Mokgethi-Heath's contributions to this research. Eriksson Baaz and Utas, "Exploring the Backstage."
[164] Dhillon and Thomas, "Ethics of Engagement and Insider-Outsider Perspectives," 444.

I align myself with Dhillon and Thomas, who question whether there is in fact a given hierarchical distinction between insiders and outsiders. For instance, I share their research experience: the interviewer sometimes follows the interviewee, who takes the lead and ultimately has the dominant voice in the data production and interpretation.[165] In a similar way, Paul, who assisted me in South Africa, and I changed roles as we alternated between being insiders and outsiders in various situations.

My different roles, however, require further reflection on the issue of normativity. As a researcher, I must recognise that my role extends beyond merely describing theology; I am actively involved in creating theological knowledge by reinterpreting and reshaping the theology present in my research. This aligns with the concept of "normativity from within", as discussed by Ideström and Stangeland-Kaufman.[166] Thus, interpreting and constructing various theological voices in the interview material, particularly those from the Christian tradition, may be easier for me as a scholar trained primarily in Christian theology than in interviews with activists from other faith traditions.

Furthermore, I must be cautious not to let my own "insider" theological perspectives, shaped by my faith and my role as a Lutheran priest, bias my interpretation of the collected material. There is a risk of unintentionally adopting a normative theological stance myself. I need to remain aware of my Christian Protestant background, which influences my analysis of materials from diverse faith traditions. It is essential to reflect constantly on how this perspective might affect my theological conclusions throughout the research process. This potential pitfall is also significant, given my role, as I am well-acquainted with climate activism from within, having engaged with the climate issue for half my life.

Believing oneself to be an insider can also lead to potential pitfalls. I recognised this during my engagement with climate activism in South Africa. My prior understanding of climate activism was predominantly shaped by perspectives from Sweden and the Global North, gained through my previous professional experience with a religious organisation dedicated to climate advocacy in Sweden. For instance, the conceptualisations of activism and the climate emergency in South Africa are broader than those in the Swedish context. Consequently, engaging with the South African context required an expanded understanding of both climate issues and activism. (This is elaborated

[165] Dhillon and Thomas, "Ethics of Engagement and Insider-Outsider Perspectives," 444.
[166] Ideström and Stangeland Kaufman, "The Researcher as Gamemaker - Response".

on later in the last section of this chapter, "Methodological choices and limitations of the study".) Therefore, maintaining self-reflexivity regarding my role in the research process is essential.

On the other hand, I acknowledge that I am an outsider, thus exposing myself to the risk of what Stangeland Kaufman has characterised as "normativity-from-the-outside".[167] My identity as an academic theologian trained primarily in Sweden, with a shorter period of theological study in Tanzania, has undeniably influenced my epistemology, and is used as a hermeneutical tool in my research process. It is crucial to ensure that my own or others' academic theologies do not serve as a standard, uncritically evaluating theologies practised in the field, especially to prevent measuring theologies in the Global South by paradigms from the Global North. For this reason, I have deliberately been cautious about how I discuss the empirical material with academic theologians, as made clear in Chapter 6. To mitigate the risk of judging the activists' practised theologies against academically produced theologies, I have placed the empirical material at the forefront of my analysis, emphasising the lived and enacted theologies of activism practitioners. (A more detailed discussion of the ethical implications of my research is offered later in this chapter.)

Abductive thematic analysis

Up to this point, I have described and reflected on the material. It is now imperative to examine how I engaged in interpreting and analysing this material. As Alvesson and Sköldberg assert, using an abductive approach is prevalent in empirical research. This methodology affords researchers the flexibility to explore their field without being excessively anchored to pre-existing theories. Concurrently, theoretical frameworks serve as essential support during analysis. An abductive approach has informed the methodology of this study; this means that I shifted back and forth between the empirical material and theoretical perspectives. Crucially, I did not predetermine the theories to be applied. Instead, my initial process was dynamically guided by the research questions, which were shaped by my prior theoretical insights.[168] Only after collecting my empirical material did I begin exploring relevant theoretical tools for analysis.

In my analysis of the collected interview material, I used a thematic analysis approach. A theme is understood as a fundamental element related to the

[167] Kaufman, "From the Outside, Within, or In Between?"; Ideström and Stangeland Kaufman, "The Researcher as Gamemaker – Response."
[168] Kvale and Brinkmann, *Den Kvalitativa Forskningsintervjun*, 239.

research questions, representing a pattern of responses or meanings in the empirical material.[169] I examined the material through my theological lens, with the aim of identifying diverse understandings of transcendent reality, hence exploring the theologies manifested by the interviewees through their words and actions. This theological lens, including the four voices of theology framework and the central theological questions regarding God, humans and nature, alongside my research questions, guided the thematic analysis. Thus, it was actively used during the thematising stage of my research. Consequently, my methodological approach is an abductive thematic analysis.[170]

In addition to the theological lens, my conceptual understanding of key concepts such as religion and spirituality informed and shaped my analytical process. These theoretical constructs and tools were subjected to continuous refinement throughout the research, exemplifying an abductive methodology. The development of the four voices of theology framework, in conjunction with these conceptual insights, was instrumental in guiding the abductive thematic analysis of the empirical data. This analytical process helped me detect emerging themes in the material.

I consider the themes I have derived from the empirical material to be expressions of my epistemological understanding rather than mere "discoveries" of themes.[171] Therefore, although I describe the processes of detecting emerging themes, it is crucial to acknowledge that the development of these themes was a dynamic engagement in dialogue with the research questions, the interviewees, the contextual factors, my theoretical concepts, and my role as a researcher.[172]

The planning of my study has already significantly shaped my analysis process. I established the study's purpose and decided on the interview method, who to interview, which contexts to consider, developing interview questions and more. This planning was influenced by my position in the Swedish context, particularly evident in my initial focus solely on climate activism and my definition of a faith-based activist.[173] During the research process, especially during my experiences in South Africa, I had to refine my understanding and continually evolve my research questions. Furthermore, I needed to decide

[169] Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," 82.
[170] Thompson, "A Guide to Abductive Thematic Analysis."
[171] Braun et al., "'A Starting Point for Your Journey, Not a Map.'"
[172] Additional discussions on this subject can be found in the section titled My Role as a Researcher.
[173] Discussed further in the section on "My role as a researcher" in Chapter 1.

which of my initial understandings and limitations to retain for creating manageable material. The expansion of my previous understandings, the revision of theoretical concepts, and the choices made regarding delimitations were crucial to my research results and the development of themes, demonstrating my abductive approach.

My analysis of the empirical material began during the interviews and was further developed while transcribing the recorded conversations into written text. I deliberately chose to transcribe the interviews personally, as I considered this process to be an essential part of analysing the material.

Following that, I explored the material to create initial codes, marking them by hand in the printed interviews with different colours and symbols that I developed to illustrate the codes. By code, I mean "building blocks for themes, (larger) patterns of meaning, underpinned by a central organising concept – a shared core idea".[174]

The codes were then grouped into themes, which represent something fundamental to the research questions in the empirical material and reveal a pattern of response or meaning. I then created handwritten thematic mind maps, identifying potential themes and subthemes based on my coding. The process of identifying and refining themes was first carried out in one context at a time, Sweden and South Africa. I carefully reviewed the themes, taking into account any data that contradicted them. I revisited the data to recode certain sections, including elements I had previously overlooked and excluding those that did not contribute to the analysis in relation to the research questions.

I then began to compare the identified themes from the two studied contexts more actively, which was particularly important in the subsequent step of defining and naming the themes. The refinement of these themes, along with the dialogue between the material from both contexts, continued during the writing of the empirical chapters and the final analytical chapter. As I started to develop arguments based on the empirical material, I regularly revisited the data to validate or refine my interpretations. This entire process served as a way to theorise the material.[175]

[174] Clarke and Braun, "Thematic Analysis," 297.
[175] Rennstam and Wästerfors, *Från Stoff till Studie*.

The analysis of the empirical material is conducted on two levels, as previously outlined in the section on Theological Lens in Analysis. Firstly, I used my theological lens, including the four voices of theology framework and key theological questions, as well as my interpretation of theology as various understandings of transcendent realities. The four voices of theology framework was particularly helpful in identifying, sorting, and describing different theological voices in the material, as well as understanding how they interact. My understanding of theology as perceptions of transcendent reality, along with the theological questions I considered, facilitated my grasp of the theological content. Through this process, themes began to emerge that responded to the theological questions, thereby illuminating the activists' perceptions of transcendent reality.

The theological lens, moreover, enabled me to identify latent themes, meaning developing themes not only from the explicit but also from the implicit. In this process, the four voices of theology framework was valuable for its broad perspective on theology, which went beyond the general understanding of the interviewees. This allowed me to identify emerging themes beyond the immediate statements regarding a transcendent reality made by the interviewees. Abductive research aims to identify the most logical explanations for phenomena by using theoretical frameworks flexibly. This approach allows researchers to adapt their frameworks and tools, recognising that empirical data may not always align perfectly with existing theories but can instead contribute to their development.[176] By using an abductive approach, I was able to explore and develop themes that were not fully explained by the initial theoretical concepts. Thus, through the analysis, I was able to refine my theological lens in dialogue with the empirical material. This process led to the emergence of new theological questions, the refinement of key concepts, and the development of the four voices of theology framework.

Towards the conclusion of my analytical process, and while continuing to use an abductive thematic approach, I progressed to the second level of theological analysis (in accordance with the delineation in the section above Theological Lens in Analysis). At this level of analysis, I constructed key theological themes. I transitioned from utilising the four voices of theology framework to building upon my first-level theological analysis of the material. The central theological questions about God, human and nature assumed a more prominent role, thereby facilitating a more in-depth theological enquiry, which was also conducted in dialogue with academic theologians.

[176] Thompson, "A Guide to Abductive Thematic Analysis."

Finally, it is important to clarify the role of the pathfinding metaphor in this study. The metaphor was used primarily as a tool to illustrate, facilitate communication of, and summarise the findings derived from my abductive thematic analysis. The metaphor was not an analytical tool used during the thematic analysis process itself.

Ethical considerations

I adhered strictly to the research ethics guidelines established by the Swedish Research Council, ensuring compliance with international standards for ethical research conduct.[177] The following discussion highlights three key aspects of research ethics that are vital throughout the study: informed consent, confidentiality, and the potential adverse effects on interviewees due to the publication of findings.

Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees; verbally secured in South Africa to accommodate local norms, and in written form in Sweden to align with institutional requirements. The informed consent included information about the study's purpose, how I planned to use the interview material, how the material would be published, and that the interviewees could withdraw at any time. I also informed the interviewees that I would give them pseudonyms to protect their privacy. In addition, I secured ethical approval from the relevant Swedish authorities prior to conducting interviews in Sweden. The study also meets the formal criteria for research involving the collection of personal data as per the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).[178]

According to the ethical principle of beneficence, potential risks to participants should be minimised.[179] In this study, the primary risks to interviewees involve the potential publication of findings containing sensitive topics, such as their involvement in climate activism, which may be considered a sensitive issue in the studied contexts. In addition, there is a potential risk related to publicly criticising their religious institutions. To address these concerns, I have implemented measures aimed at ensuring the secure dissemination of the findings and safeguarding the privacy of the activists.

[177] Swedish Research Council, *Good Research Practice 2024*.
[178] Official Journal of the European Union, *Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of The European Parliament and the Council - General Data Protection Regulation*.
[179] Swedish Research Council, *Good Research Practice 2024*; Kvale and Brinkmann, *Den Kvalitativa Forskningsintervjun*, 110.

Moreover, in Sweden, religious affiliation is classified as sensitive information under the ethical clearance guidelines, underscoring the importance of strict confidentiality and ethical standards in handling participant data. While the interviewees openly and publicly criticise environmental policies in their activist roles, their often similarly harsh critiques of their religious institutions and faith communities may not be something they feel comfortable expressing publicly. However, regarding religious belonging, both Swedish and South African interviewees are openly transparent about their religious affiliations.

The threats faced by environmental defenders are a significant global issue. However, South Africa and Sweden are not the regions most affected by these challenges.[180] The activists participating in this study are all publicly advocating for environmental causes, so their involvement in this study does not alter their circumstances.

The interviewees' willingness to participate and share their perspectives on both their environmental and religious commitments indicates they view their involvement positively. For example, interviewees expressed pride in being chosen, gratitude for the opportunity to reflect on their faith and activism, and many wished me as a researcher success with this study, as they found it essential. They also expressed hope that the resulting book would reach a wide audience.

To prevent any potential negative consequences for the interviewees related to these sensitive issues and to adhere to Swedish research ethics, I have implemented measures to protect their privacy. I used pseudonyms and removed any direct quotes or specific details that could identify them, such as their roles in their organisations. Instead, I provided this information in general background descriptions of the participants to preserve their anonymity. It is worth noting that some South African interviewees preferred their real names to be published, but I clarified that I would use pseudonyms for all.

For the same reasons, in the cases where I have read interviewees' written and published materials such as blog posts, books, social media posts, or academic papers, I have not quoted or explicitly referenced them in my text. Similarly, I have not explicitly used material from informal interviews during participant

[180] The interviewees participating in this study did not report experiencing repression such as threats, violence, or harassment. However, some individuals who participated in acts of civil disobedience have faced persecution. For further discussion, refer to Chapter 1, specifically the section headed "The two contexts – South Africa and Sweden".

observations, except on a few occasions, and when I have done so, I have asked for consent afterwards.

I have taken measures to minimise risks for interviewees while maintaining an appropriate balance. In accordance with the Swedish Research Council's ethical research guidelines, it is vital to balance the pursuit of knowledge with potential risks. Therefore, presenting results transparently and accurately, while respecting confidentiality, is crucial.[181]

Methodological choices and limitations of the study

Before concluding the methodological section, I would like to discuss the methodological choices and the study's limitations.

This research investigates how faith-based activists navigate the climate landscape through climate activism rooted in their religious faith. I focus on the interviewees' articulation of their experiences and reflections with the aim of understanding how their faith shapes and manifests in their activism. Thus, I focus on their descriptions of their "lifeworld", as previously highlighted, to interpret their insights. Therefore, I have chosen interviewing as my primary method of gathering material.

Since understanding the activists' pathfinding process is central to this study, their actions are crucial. I primarily analyse their climate practices through interviewees' descriptions and reflections, noting that self-reports may not fully reflect actual behaviours and could be idealised.[182] Nonetheless, the focus is on exploring their thoughts on how their climate actions relate to their faith, not on evaluating their actions.

My participant observations deepened my understanding of the interviewees' actions, offering insights into their practices, contexts, and experiences. Although observing interviewees "in action" would have been ideal, practical constraints in the South African context, such as the activists' involvement in lobbying activities, my limited time in the country, the Covid pandemic, and late notice of events, hampered these efforts. Conversely, improved

[181] Swedish Research Council, *Good Research Practice 2024*, 84–90.
[182] Studies suggest that self-reported pro-environmental behaviours may not accurately represent individuals' actual actions. Consequently, researchers should exercise caution when assessing environmental behaviours solely based on self-report measures. This is demonstrated by, for example, Chao and Lam, "Measuring Responsible Environmental Behaviour."

opportunities in Sweden allowed me to attend events like weekly climate strikes, which many participants regularly engaged in.

Another topic I want to briefly discuss is the study's criteria for selecting interviewees. The study's interviewee selection criteria aimed to create focused, cohesive material suited for a multi-sited approach. I targeted individuals advocating for national climate policy change who consider their faith and activism interconnected. This perspective aligned with my research goals. However, throughout my investigation, I have recognised that my criteria were heavily influenced by my insider perspective, which is rooted in my background with faith-based organisations in Sweden and Europe, emphasising political protest activism. Notably, my emphasis on activists engaged predominantly in political protest actions targeting policymakers at national and international levels reflects a particular conceptualisation of activism, shaped by my Swedish and European perspective. Interestingly, my analysis revealed that other dimensions of activism, such as lifestyle choices and community or environmental care projects, proved to be especially rich sites for analysis.

While my current criteria for selecting interviewees primarily captured urban middle-class populations, adopting a more inclusive approach could have involved engaging activists who, in rural areas, are advocating for their local communities facing threats related to environmental exploitation. These activists often operate at the community level, defending their own populations. For instance, during participant observations in South Africa, I encountered activists confronting adverse effects caused by multinational mining corporations, with their activism directed against these entities. Had I used a more inclusive selection framework from the outset, I could have accessed a wider range of activist experiences, thereby enriching the overall depth and scope of the study.

3. Faith-Based Activism in South Africa

This chapter aims to address the first research question of the study: focusing here on how faith-based climate activists in South Africa motivate and conduct their activism. The chapter is structured into thematic sections presented in a chronological sequence, thereby elucidating the progression from the initial catalysts of the interviewees' activism to their manifested efforts and finally to where they are heading with their activism.

Furthermore, this chapter investigates the research question about the theologies found in faith-based activism in South Africa. Building on my theoretical framework, I use theology as an analytical lens at the first level of analysis to explore how faith-based climate activists manifest their perceptions of the transcendent through words and actions. To accomplish this, I use the four voices of theology framework, explained earlier in detail in my theory, to identify, sort, and describe different theological voices in the material. During this process, the diverse theological understandings of the interviewees begin to emerge. However, a more comprehensive theological analysis, explicitly addressing key theological questions such as conceptions of God, humanity, and nature, is conducted at the second level of analysis, which is discussed in Chapter 6.

Transformative encounters initiate activism

> [I] watched *The Inconvenient Truth*. […] that was a wake-up call for me, like this thing is real. Once you know, you can't un-know it. […] I think at that point I realise I can't look my kids or my grandkids in the eye. (Linda)

Encountering knowledge about climate change is transformative for the South African interviewees, as it deepens their understanding of the seriousness of the climate crisis. This newfound awareness either sparks their climate and environmental activism or prompts them to intensify their existing efforts. A prime example, illustrated by the quote above, is the interviewee I call Linda, who describes a pivotal moment in her life after watching the film *An*

Inconvenient Truth, aimed at raising awareness about the climate crisis.[183] Already deeply involved in HIV prevention and campaigning in South Africa, she learnt from someone nearby that a crisis even more severe than HIV was on the horizon, which motivated her to watch the film. Linda refers to this experience as a "conversion or kairos moment", terms commonly used in religious contexts to describe significant spiritual experiences. However, neither Linda nor the other interviewees typically frame these transformative encounters as spiritual in nature. However, the settings where they learn about the climate crisis often include faith events or training programmes organised by faith-based institutions, such as SAFCEI, where several interviewees are actively engaged. This type of training could be seen as a "point of no return", as expressed by the interviewee Musa. In addition to training programmes and scientific films aimed at a wider audience, academic studies in the natural sciences are also occasionally cited as sources of knowledge about the climate crisis.

Encountering individuals or groups of people can also be transformative – for example, engaging with indigenous groups.[184] Interviewees stress that learning from these groups, especially the knowledge they have gained from living closely with and relying on nature, has been crucial. As a result, this climate knowledge is not acquired through scientific means but rather through the lived experiences of others. This, too, can spark a commitment to climate action, as Dumisani states: "From a personal perspective, that's how I started, and after that, I never looked back".

Meeting other climate activists can also be transformative, as others' willingness to commit can deepen the understanding of the seriousness of the climate crisis. This is exemplified by Amir, who observed another activist participating in civil disobedience, after which he felt inspired to step up his climate activism. He describes it as follows:

> For me, the first reason I decided to get arrested was because I saw someone being beaten up by the police for a protest in London. I just; shit, I'm just sitting outside a building with my little placard. I need to be doing more.

[183] *An Inconvenient Truth* is an American documentary, produced in 2006, about former Vice President of the United States Al Gore's campaign to raise awareness about global warming.
[184] The interviewees generally did not specify a particular group of indigenous people; however, some mentioned the amaDiba people of Xolobeni and the Khoisan. Interviewees who identify as Khoisan themselves highlighted this as crucial to their identity, considering it inherently spiritual and deeply connected to their environmental commitment. How this influences their activism is discussed more in the section "Rooted in history" below.

As a result, he decided to sign up for and later organise similar civil disobedience actions.

Although transformative encounters with climate knowledge are generally not characterised as spiritual experiences in the South African material, Dina's encounter with an indigenous group's lived climate knowledge has spiritual dimensions that she considers essential to her becoming a climate and environmental activist. She especially highlights their recognition of land as "holy" as a transformative element for her. She elaborates:

> [I] came to understand their sacred connection with the land. Not only [do they] live from the land, but sustain themselves from the land. But also the sacred connection with the land. […] this was such a deep emotion in their religious world view, and it started to change me.

For Dina, this transformative encounter became a spiritual experience that she explicitly describes as having influenced her theological understanding. She mentions, for example, a broader comprehension of Christ as "the cosmic Christ" and Christ as "the first ancestor". Furthermore, these encounters have sparked her commitment to climate activism. Although the other interviewees do not typically reflect theologically on these transformative encounters, they play a key role in igniting their activism.

In conclusion, these encounters serve as essential turning points in the interviewees' engagement with activism, either igniting their commitment to climate advocacy and campaigning or significantly strengthening it. These encounters are transformative, as the interviewees describe a distinct "before" and "after": prior to these encounters they lacked awareness of the urgency of the climate crisis, whereas afterwards they developed a profound understanding of and a personal connection to its severity. Thus, I contend that these encounters have provided the interviewees with what I term experience-based climate knowledge. This deepened understanding of the climate crisis extends beyond what I refer to as science-based climate knowledge. Nonetheless, this experience-based knowledge may have scientific sources when acquired from sources such as films and training sessions. These transformative events are not typically described as spiritual experiences.

Context-driven activism

This section explores the factors that motivate the South African interviewees to maintain their commitment to activism after transformative experiences, as previously discussed. A central theme is their deep connection and sense of affinity with their local environment, with past and present experiences in this context fuelling their ongoing activism. Therefore, I argue that their activism is context-driven. Compared with their accounts of initial transformative events, theological reflection and spirituality now play a more significant role.

It is worth noting that the South African interviewees also highlight motivations beyond the immediate local context, reflecting instead broader spiritual paradigms. For example, Sthembiso sees his activism as a "calling from God", and Amir describes his motivation as a "higher calling", despite not using traditional religious language. However, these motivating factors do not emerge as a similarly significant theme as those linked to the context.

Rooted in history

> I'm a genocide survivor; I mean, climate change [she makes a shh-sound], global pandemic… What are you gonna do? [laughs]. I know it sounds a bit weird. You know what you're gonna do. We got rid of apartheid. Maybe what's different about South Africa is people have… because we already won these battles… and so for us, this [climate crisis] is just the next step. (Betty)

The South African interviewees emphasise past struggles in their community and in the country's history as key inspirations for tackling the climate crisis. As a result, historical events in their context drive their activism. Some interviewees argue that history shows that victories are possible despite obstacles, as exemplified by Betty's quote, which has fostered what she calls a "can-do kind of culture" among South Africans. Others highlight past hardships and activism as motivations that encourage them to continue their fight.

Challenges and oppressions throughout history, such as colonialism, apartheid, the HIV pandemic, and modernisation, are frequently referenced in the South African material. However, the two main themes in these historical references are the struggle of indigenous groups and the fight against apartheid. These themes often overlap. Individuals such as Fatima and Betty from the indigenous Khoisan group describe how their people inspire their climate activism. Other interviewees also acknowledge indigenous knowledge, recognising it as a valuable source of climate knowledge gained through experience.

The interviewees' reflections on historical periods of struggle are full of references to religious faith. Thus, the historical struggles drive not only their climate actions, which I frame as operant theological voices, but also influence their theological reflections, which I frame as espoused theological voices. This also underlines the importance of historical events as inspiring the interviewees' climate activism, as being faith-based.

I return to the interview with Betty to illustrate this. She describes herself as a "third-generation genocide survivor […] [as] the Germans came and killed between 60-80%" of her mother's people. She refers to what is known as the Herero and Nama genocide, also called the Namibian genocide, when German colonisers killed tens of thousands of Herero and Nama people early in the early 20th century, beginning in 1904. Survivors of the massacre were compelled to retreat into the desert, and later were subjected to confinement in concentration camps.[185] To my surprise, she continued:

> I always say that it was there in the desert that we found God in a new way. […] Who was with us when, the fact that 20% actually survived? Who brought us through that? … It's from those survivors that I'm descended. So like I said, it makes it hard to not believe in God because God was there, right there at that moment.

For Betty, the survival of at least 20% of her people fosters a sense of trust in God's protection, which motivates her commitment to environmental issues today. Furthermore, God's presence in the past leads to confidence in God's intervention in current environmental efforts.

The historical struggles shape the faith of the group with which the interviewees affiliate themselves, and thus influence both espoused and operant theological voices. This could also be described as the history shaping the core of the spiritual identities of the interviewees, not just as individuals but as members of a group. The contextual affinity and the historical struggles consequently contribute to what I refer to as the interviewees' *collective spiritual identities,* which are vital to their environmental activism. Fatima's reflections also illustrate this:

> [Y]ou can't as an indigenous person [separate] … environment from your spirituality, from your traditions, it's like all in one situation. […] Our entire

[185] In 2021, the two countries issued a Joint Declaration sub-titled "United in Remembrance of Our Colonial Past, United in Our Will to Reconcile, United in Our Vision of the Future". However, asymmetric power relations in the negotiations have been problematised; see, for example, Melber, "Germany and Namibia"; BBC.Com, "Germany Officially Recognises Colonial-Era Namibia Genocide."

> spiritual identity has been taken over by the westernised world. We lost our connection to our land. […] We are extinct of who we are and our spirituality, how we came for the environment and things like that. My purpose basically in life, almost like I'm starting awakening of people. […] People don't give the same kind of respect for the environment, for our animals, for our water, for our oxygen, in the same way as my ancestors would have or the way I'm taught to. So that is basically my purpose.

Fatima has recently, as a grown-up, started to explore her Khoi identity, and she views her current grassroots environmental activism as a continuation of her people's historical struggle. She sees it as a fight for her people's spiritual identity, in which living in respect for the environment is essential.[186]

In the same way, Betty argues that this identity creates a "very particular spiritual geography", which I understand helps them to navigate today's climate catastrophe. She also argues, referring to Wangari Maathai, that the colonisers and the missionaries "taught us to no longer hold the trees sacred, which she describes as an "enormous spiritual crisis".[187] Therefore, standing up for their people, history, and rights is not just a political stance; it is a fight for what I term collective spiritual identities that are intertwined with the natural world.[188]

The second theme of historical references as a source of inspiration for climate and environmental activism found in the South African material is the historical anti-apartheid struggle, already briefly touched on in the stories of Betty and Fatima. Here, the role of faith leaders during the struggle against apartheid is central. Such leaders include theologians referred to by Sthembiso as "liberation theologians", who are said to have paved the way for activism that combines faith and political engagement in South Africa. Regardless of the interviewees' faith tradition, the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu is emphasised. Other key figures in the anti-apartheid movement, such as Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo, are also mentioned.

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[186] This is similar to what indigenous groups are advocating for worldwide, as well as in South Africa. See, for example, a well-known and rather recent protest: Mongabay Environmental News, "Indigenous Communities in South Africa Sue, Protest off-Shore Oil and Gas Exploration"; UN Environment Programme (UNEP), "How Indigenous Knowledge Can Help Prevent Environmental Crises."

[187] Wangari Maathai is a Kenyan social, environmental, and political activist, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. The Green Belt Movement, "Wangari Maathai | The Green Belt Movement."

[188] The Khoisan in South Africa are also still fighting for full recognition of their rights and land. Many, similarly to Fatima, struggle to rediscover and reclaim the indigenous identity of the family, as the indigenous groups in South Africa were removed from public references and were forced to identify with other groups during the apartheid era. See, for example, The Indigenous Peoples of and Africa Co-ordinating Committee (IPacc), "Who Are the Indigenous People of Southern Africa?"

One aspect of the religious leaders' inspirational role is their collaboration across the boundaries of faith traditions. Sharon, who engages through inter-faith networks, particularly stresses this. She argues the faith leaders who were involved in the historic anti-apartheid fight paved the way for an important understanding that still holds true in South Africa: faith expressed through action for the betterment of society, and this can be made in cooperation across boundaries of faith traditions. She says that it all started in the back of a police van during the anti-apartheid struggle:

> I think it's essential to combine, and I think we are very lucky in a way in our history in South Africa because interfaith started in Cape Town in the back of a police van. So people of different faiths found themselves, or ministers of different faiths, found themselves in the same police van on their way to prison […] arrested for their activism in trying to bring about social justice. So in a way, your faith, in the South African psyche, your faith is wasted if you don't use it for social justice and for good.

Thus, she argues that the history of the anti-apartheid struggle is the root of the interfaith cooperation in environmental activism in South Africa today, in which she is actively involved.

There is also an example of how the role of faith leaders during the time of apartheid is portrayed negatively. Musa views the anti-apartheid fight with a critical gaze, yet draws inspiration from historical events as warning examples that drive him to act differently. Musa argues that Muslim leaders did not commit to the anti-apartheid fight. He says:

> During apartheid struggles, I can tell you most of the imams, the clergy, stayed away from politics. They separated themselves. It is not correct. When you see, you know there was an injustice […] In our faith, in all faiths, if some injustice is practised against you, you may speak. So this leadership is supposed to speak out.

He also compares the situation to today's, arguing that Muslim leaders are still not willing to speak out on societal problems. He insists that they are not taking environmental crises seriously, and do not engage. Sometimes, he even meets resistance to his environmental projects from local Muslim leaders.

Another way in which the anti-apartheid struggle could serve as a source of inspiration for climate activism is found in Amir's narrative. As previously mentioned, witnessing someone risk their safety for the climate had a deep impact on him, motivating him to engage in disruptive actions such as hunger strikes and civil disobedience, despite the risk of arrest. But he also draws

inspiration from the sacrifices made during the anti-apartheid movement, viewing sacrifice as a defining aspect of that struggle:

> [M]ost of them had to do with, like, killings. So you had the Sharpeville massacre, where people were burning pass books. You had a youth day protest where children left school and got shot by the police, and those images went around the world. And all of a sudden, people get outraged. Whereas that outrage doesn't really translate when you just speak it in a message. […] people have to see that kind of sacrifice.

Drawing on historical events and their impact on the global community's readiness to protest against the South African apartheid regime, Amir concludes that sacrifice is a key component of activism that can lead to real change.

He finds support for his thesis in recent environmental activism events in South Africa, in which individuals who have what he refers to as "skin in the game" tend to be more effective. He illustrates this point with examples of people in rural areas whose livelihoods are threatened, driving them to become intensely engaged in successful activism.

The larger historical struggles involving entire groups or the nation as a whole are not the only sources of inspiration for South African activists. Personal experiences and the "minor" contexts of the interviewees' histories also play a significant role in their activism. Childhood and upbringing emerge as recurring themes in the material. For instance, having been taught by a parent to care for nature, or having been influenced by parents who were activists engaged in other issues, such as fighting against apartheid or advocating equal rights for women, manifests in the environmental activism of some interviewees.

As we have seen, parents' influence on activism is not always tied to religious faith, while for others, the connection between upbringing, faith, and climate activism is clear. Dina, who explicitly relates her upbringing to her theology in her theological reflections, describes, for example, how her missionary parents taught her to be a servant, which is how she now describes her faith-based activism. Similarly, Dumisani, who talks about a ruler he owned when he was fifteen years old, with a Bible verse reading: "Treat others as you'd like them to treat you or as you like to be treated", argues: "That's what drives me to what I do because I only try to live what my faith tells me to do".

Furthermore, South African interviewees often express openness to other faith traditions; this can also have roots in their childhood experiences, as is the

case with Musa. A Christian teacher bought him, a Muslim, a pair of glasses as she understood that his family could not afford them. This experience – not to mention how the glasses made it possible for him to succeed in school – was a positive experience that he still sees as the root cause of his current involvement in multi-faith activism.

To conclude, because of the interviewees' strong connection and affinity with their context, the historical struggles in it serve as vital sources of inspiration for their climate and environmental activism. I contend that these contextual historical struggles not only inspire but also empower the interviewees, who perceive themselves as inheritors of a long tradition of individuals confronting injustices and crises throughout history.

A central theme in this narrative of historical struggles is the spirituality of those who fought these battles. This encompasses the spirituality of their communities, faith leaders, and key adults in their upbringing, shaping what I refer to as the collective spiritual identities of the South African interviewees. When highlighting normative theological voices as sources of inspiration, it is primarily the practices, or occasionally the absence of practices, of faith leaders and other figures, rather than formal doctrines or official religious teachings, that are influential. Therefore, through an analysis of the interviewees' words and actions from a theological perspective, I contend that the historical struggles and difficulties faced by activists in this context inform both their operant and their espoused theological voices, thereby shaping their activism.

Facing the climate crisis

> [W]e live in a situation where climate change is a reality, it's a matter of survival. The fact that I'm still here today means I'm a survivor. […] The fact that I'm still alive today could be possibly because I was not in [my hometown during the flooding]. (Sthembiso)

My focus shifts now to how the present-day situation in South Africa influences the interviewees' activism. They describe the climate crisis as a pressing, life-and-death issue, as highlighted in Sthembiso's quote. This crisis is not an abstract concept or something occurring far away; it has tangible effects on their lives. They confront problems such as droughts, water shortages, floods, and heat waves, all of which have a significant impact on the country. During my interviews, conducted from May 2022 to February 2023, South Africa experienced severe flooding in the northeastern region while

simultaneously grappling with intense drought and water shortages in the southern regions.[189]

Sthembiso describes himself as a climate survivor because his hometown was one of the areas that suffered severely from flooding. His family, relatives, and friends faced devastating consequences. The community at large experienced multiple deaths, the loss of homes, and limited access to clean water. He shared that he could have easily been among those who were lost in the floods.

The interviewees do not typically describe themselves as suffering from the climate crisis in the same way that Sthembiso does. They also do not usually identify the consequences of the climate crisis as transformative events or specific turning points that initiated their activism, as discussed in the section headed "Transformative encounters initiate activism". However, they consistently highlight the consequences of the climate crisis and related environmental problems in their context, which often emerge as implicit drivers of their activism.

Although other groups in the country, such as those who rely on farming for their livelihoods and economically disadvantaged communities, are more vulnerable to the impacts of the climate crisis, South Africa as a whole is at the forefront of this crisis. This is evident from the interviewees' comments about the need for churches to install water tanks to combat water scarcity, the increasing difficulty in growing crops, the heavy rains and flooding that have disastrous outcomes, and the ongoing escalation of these problems. They also highlight the threats posed by transnational corporations, such as seismic blasting in the oceans and the exploration of land and coastal areas.

[189] This is also noticeable to a brief visitor such as me, as a researcher. For instance, the information panels displayed by the Water and Sanitation Department caught my eye immediately on landing at Cape Town airport: they stated, "Climate change is here – use water sparingly." I observed similar panels at a university campus in Cape Town. In addition, I experienced water shortages in Mandela Bay while participating in a climate change training for NGO and church workers in the area during May 2021. The participants shared insights into the severe effects of water scarcity and altered weather patterns, particularly on those in rural areas who rely on agriculture. Furthermore, economically disadvantaged individuals who depend on water delivery to townships face significant hardships. Living under such difficult conditions, they noted, places immense pressure on adults, and can lead to problems such as alcohol abuse, domestic violence, and divorce. The NGO and church workers also described their own struggles, such as having gone without tap water for up to a year.

In addition to the climate crisis, the interviewees raise other environmental concerns, including waste disposal and the ongoing energy crisis in the country. They present the climate crisis as intertwined with various societal problems the country faces. Occasionally, they also address the impact not only on humans but also on nature, emphasising the importance of protecting other species affected by climate change. Regardless of whether they have personally faced threats to their lives or describe themselves as suffering from the climate crisis, the deep affinity with their context makes the resultant climate consequences and related environmental difficulties a central driving force behind their activism.

Facing the consequences of the climate crisis involves more than just dealing with its immediate effects; it also entails confronting the negative impact on the local environment resulting from fossil fuel production. South Africa is a significant producer of coal and oil, which contribute to the country's economy. For instance, Betty mentions Sasol, the leading petrochemical manufacturer in South Africa that refines coal into oil. While it was said to be the second-largest emitter of greenhouse gases in South Africa in the year 2024, what Betty emphasises is the adverse effects on the people living and working in the surrounding areas, stating:[190]

> [P]eople started to die. … got lung diseases, and they [ask]: "Why are we getting sick, why are my children dying?"

The climate crisis has serious implications not only for the environment but also for the workers in the fossil fuel industry and the health and well-being of those living nearby. Although Betty does not explicitly state that these issues fuel her dedication to environmental challenges, she does suggest that the circumstances of Sasol have inspired the development of a robust environmental movement both in the region and across the country.

Another local environmental issue highlighted by the South African interviewees, as previously mentioned, is the dumping of rubbish in rivers. Grace, for example, refers to a girl drowning in her community in a river that had flooded because of heavy rains and the dumping of rubbish in the river. This tragic incident deeply affected Grace, and strengthened her resolve to tackle local environmental problems, such as waste dumping.

[190] Nel et al., "Sasolburg."

The climate crisis poses a significant threat to nature, which in turn endangers people's lives and livelihoods. However, South African materials also highlight references to nature as a source of strength during times of climate crisis. Both implicit and explicit references to nature as a context for what I describe as spiritual experiences are found in the South African material. These spiritual experiences enhance and deepen people's commitment to the environment. This is exemplified by Linda's quote, in which she reflects on her dedication to environmental issues:

> I get my strength from nature, from being out in nature; it restores your soul. When you look at the mountain, you're like, the [crisis] is bigger than us. The mountain is still going to be here.

Nature is described elsewhere as a place where individuals can communicate with the creator, and there are interviewees who consider mountains to be holy places. The extent to which nature is revealed as an essential theme in the South African empirical material can be further illustrated by Linda's theological reflections. She talks about the two books of God, and differentiates between two distinct revelations, namely, "the written scripture" and "natural revelation", which she refers to as the "second book of God". She believes that God is present both in the written word and in creation.

In conclusion, the climate crisis and the consequences of other environmental issues in the interviewees' context inspire their commitment to activism. Although they are not typically among the most vulnerable groups, their experiences with the effects of the climate crisis give them critical experience-based climate knowledge. This knowledge fosters a profound perception of the crisis as a life-and-death matter. Issues such as waste dumping, energy shortages, and the impacts of fossil fuel production strengthen their dedication even more. These context-linked experiences are not seen as transformative encounters, as previously discussed, but rather as ongoing, implicit motivators that sustain their commitment. Therefore, their strong ties and affinity with their context are crucial to their activism, not only as mentioned in earlier sections, about how they draw on past events in their lives and the history of their society and people, but also by referencing the current contextual situation as a driving force in their activism. Therefore, I contend that what strengthens and drives the South African interviewees in their activism is their contextual experiences and their affinity with their context, rooted in both the past and their present situation. Finally, while nature faces serious threats, it also offers these South African interviewees a source of strength, providing them with spiritual experiences that reinforce their commitment to activism.

Activism that bridges diverse factors

A deeper analysis of the practices exhibited by South African interviewees, interpreted here as expressions of operant theological voices, uncovers a shared characteristic in their activism: it serves to bridge diverse factors. This observation is explored in subsequent sections; however, I first provide a brief overview of the nature of their practices.

The South African interviewees use a diverse range of practices in their activism. They engage in lobbying efforts and participate in public protests, which include campaigning and disruptive acts of civil disobedience aimed at politicians, policymakers, the general public, and larger corporations or banks. In addition, they reach out to their religious institutions and faith communities through campaigns and awareness-raising activities, such as workshops and training programmes. They provide local faith communities with worship materials and lead worship services that incorporate environmental themes. Instances of indigenous rituals, such as welcoming to and blessing of the land, are also integrated into their environmental activism. Furthermore, they initiate and facilitate community and environmental care projects. That their activism bridges diverse factors is reflected in these various practices.

South African faith-based climate and environmental activism occurs either within or outside their religious institutions or networks. When it takes place outside these institutions or networks, activists either participate in the broader climate movement, which has no religious affiliation, or create their own initiatives. Some individuals work specifically on climate and environmental issues in various capacities, which may be in a religious institution, a faith network, or secular organisations. Others operate at different levels in their religious institutions and networks, from local to global, such as in the Lutheran or Anglican churches, along with global ecumenical bodies such as the World Council of Churches (WCC). In addition, some engage fully outside these frameworks, participating in secular networks such as Extinction Rebellion, where they take part in civil disobedience actions. SAFCEI is recognised as a faith institution; however, it is worth noting that it was established outside traditional religious structures as a multi-faith platform for environmental work, reaching both faith communities and political arenas, among others.

As is presented in what follows, just as the South African interviewees' activism derives strength and motivation from their specific context, their display of activism that connects diverse factors is a direct result of being deeply connected with and rooted in their context.

Addressing multiple societal problems

> It's a huge challenge. But of course, it is also very easy. It's just to get people to listen and to actually really understand. […] So in a way, people think, no, actually, let's fight unemployment first; that's the most important. No, you know what, let's fight corruption first, […] we must get our defence force right. […] so defend our democracy … [T]hese ecojustice issues need attention: waste, water, [electricity] … they don't always see them as social justice, so you have to find language that fits it together, so it's a little bit like a Rubik's cube. You know you got to find what fits… […] not everyone sees the connection. (Sharon)

The South African context challenges the activists to address multiple societal crises alongside the climate crisis. As Sharon puts it in the above quote, it is "a Rubik's cube" of different problems that need to be communicated about and tackled in an integrated way. While some of the interviewees, like Sharon, argue that it is rather easy to connect the climate crisis with other societal problems, others have the opposite opinion.

The problems in their contexts that the interviewees mention are extensive, including injustice, inequality, drug abuse, homelessness, poverty, mining issues, gender-based violence, general violence, corruption, water and electricity shortages, unemployment, threats to democracy, waste management problems, crime, illegal dumping, hunger, rising food prices, droughts, flooding, and plastic pollution. Among these, the issue most strongly emphasised by the South African interviewees – and directly linked to the climate crisis – is food insecurity (which appears clearly in the activists' future visions, elaborated on later).

A poignant example in the South African material of how various societal problems, faith, and the climate crisis are integrated is the SAFCEI training programme for faith leaders titled "Safer and Healthier Places of Worship". This course is described as "a proactive, collaborative, resilience-building project aimed at keeping our faith communities safer and healthier".[191] SAFCEI invited me to observe the graduation ceremony for the participants completing that programme. South African interviewees were actively involved.

Initially, as an outsider I found it difficult to see the connection between this programme and the climate crisis. However, during the ceremony, I realised that the health and safety of faith communities are threatened not only by terrorism and criminal activities but also by extreme weather events driven by

[191] Flyer outlining the programme I received at the ceremony.

urgent climate change. The programme aimed to equip faith leaders and their communities with knowledge about reducing risks and the capacity to build resilience against urgent crises caused by climate change, violence, terror, and other emergencies. The goal was to create safer and healthier places for worship. The training included practical skills, such as how to respond to a terror attack during worship, extinguish fires, provide first aid, and assess the security of their places of worship.

The course was created through collaborative efforts in different fields, demonstrating how various societal problems, including the climate crisis, could be addressed together while also emphasising the role of faith actors. The programme was organised in collaboration between SAFCEI, as a faith-based environmental institute, the City of Cape Town's Disaster Risk Management Centre, the South African Police Service (SAPS) Explosives Unit, and the SAPS Hawks' Crimes Against the State unit (which investigates organised crime, corruption, and economic crime). People from different faith traditions participated. The initiative clearly reflects the dominant theme in South African operant theological voices, highlighting how climate practices are integrated with other societal problems and with faith perspectives, as manifested in a focus on worship and faith leaders.

The interviewees raised two main reasons, both grounded in the many societal crises in their contexts, for an integrated approach to activism. First, they argue that the climate crisis is fundamentally intertwined with other crises. Second, they believe that an integrated approach that links the climate crisis with broader societal issues is essential for mobilising people to prioritise climate action, despite the existence of other pressing issues.

I start with the first theme – the climate crisis being intertwined with other challenges. The following quote by Betty can illustrate this understanding:

> Whether you're talking land, whether you're talking water, whether you're talking energy, it would always bring me back: that's climate change.

The interviewees emphasise that tackling climate change requires an understanding of the interconnected nature of the problems. They assert that the climate crisis is not solely an environmental issue but also one of justice, encompassing both what they highlight in the interviews as eco-justice and gender justice. For instance, one interviewee shares her experience of spending two years advocating the inclusion of the term "gender" in the national climate change response policy. The interviewees also emphasise the injustices

between the Global North and the Global South, as well as the disparities between rural and urban areas in South Africa.

In particular, the contextual inequalities compel them to adopt a more integrated approach to their activism. These inequalities exacerbate the negative impacts of the climate crisis, disproportionately affecting vulnerable communities. In post-apartheid South Africa, inequalities continue to be a significant problem, especially along ethnic lines, as outlined in the contextual descriptions in Chapter 1. The labour market continues to be divided by both ethnicity and gender. In addition, South Africa is grappling with some of the highest income inequalities in the world, which are accompanied by stark wealth disparities.[192]

The interviews conducted with South African participants reveal that, although they may not explicitly or specifically reference ethnic injustice, it is implicit; and the overarching theme of justice is prominent, not least in how they express their activism in practice. Their practices indicate their understanding that tackling the climate crisis requires a broader perspective, one that considers the various societal problems faced in the South African context. Consequently, their integrated approach underscores the necessity of focusing on justice as a critical component in the fight against climate change.

Their focus on justice as a core element of their integrated approach is implicitly grounded in their religious faith. While their espoused theological reflections on this topic are not expressed in any depth, they occasionally mention justice, as illustrated by the quote of Dumisani:

> This is a concern to me: why would other people benefit, and their benefit makes other people suffer? And from a faith perspective and also being a Christian, I feel there is a greater injustice that people are suffering, and our governments should be able to speak out. And even push for all the agreements that people make at the COPs to be followed.

Although the connection between justice and faith is mentioned briefly, this quote demonstrates that justice can be seen as a fundamental moral imperative that is rooted in faith.

[192] A deeper analysis is to be found, for example, in Development Southern Africa and its special issue on inequality. Francis and Webster, "Inequality in South Africa"; World Bank, *Overcoming Poverty and Inequality in South Africa*; Von Fintel and Orthofer, "Wealth Inequality and Financial Inclusion."

The second reason for adopting an integrated approach that links the climate crisis to other societal problems, as highlighted in the South African material, is the necessity of mobilising people to prioritise climate action, even in the face of other pressing issues. Many of the South African interviewees are involved in campaigning and in facilitating training sessions and workshops for faith communities. In this work, they argue that it is essential to adopt an integrated approach that connects various societal problems with climate crisis issues. The following quote can illustrate this, in which Linda highlights the difficulties of mobilising parishes for the climate issue in a context where people still struggle to find their daily bread.

> It's the challenge of the church saying: "Yes, I know it's bad, but people are hungry now". I think we are always trying to make the links with what it's going to be: the impact of hunger, food prices, droughts, etc.

By connecting climate communication with everyday challenges, the goal is to rally support for broader climate initiatives that include both mitigation strategies, which involves behavioural changes to reduce carbon emissions, and adaptation strategies, which addresses the impacts of the climate crisis. This encompasses actions such as changing energy consumption habits and implementing measures to reduce the negative impacts of the climate crisis. Examples include installing water tanks on the rooftops of churches or planting trees to help mitigate heat. As previously mentioned, they also combine efforts to reduce the risks of potential violence with strategies aimed at lowering the risks of climate-related disasters.

Regardless of their efforts to adopt an integrated approach to mobilising and raising awareness in local faith communities, they report encountering resistance. Criticism is also directed primarily at local congregations and faith leaders for not addressing climate and environmental crises. As previously mentioned, the South African interviewees engage with environmental issues both from within and outside their religious institutions. Regardless of whether the interviewee holds a formal position on a national level in a religious institution or is a grassroots leader, there is a dominant tendency in the material that they do not present themselves as representatives of their religious institutions, and few label themselves "faith leaders". When they criticise their religious institutions for not doing enough on environmental and climate issues, they primarily direct their gaze at those whom they call faith leaders. These are the leaders of local communities – primarily pastors, imams, and others. Therefore, my use of the term "faith leaders" reflects their own terminology.

While they are critical of their faith leaders, they also understand the reasons for their lack of action. As previously discussed, the interviewees are well aware that these leaders face many urgent difficulties in the community. As Grace puts it, "You can't blame them", or, in Sharon's words:

> I think that environmental issues are very much in the back seat. They do take a back seat. When you sit down and you really explain to faith leaders, then they get excited. But they have other issues to deal with.

What is said could engage the faith leaders mentioned here by Sharon is to give them training. This, however, can be a slow and somewhat difficult process, as they are said to lack awareness of the climate crisis, or the vocabulary for it. Linda also highlights the complexity of the climate crisis. She understands that it can be difficult to make the connection between, for example, the floods in KwaZulu-Natal (which were happening at the time of the interview) and the use of coal. Thus, she argues that mobilising for and engaging in environmental activism, such as picking up litter, or saving water, is easier. According to her, when she facilitates workshops in Christian parishes, it is much more difficult to indicate what kind of action the participants could take to address the climate crisis because, as she says, it appears "quite technical". She argues that it is generally easier for people to adapt to a changing climate than to understand the root causes of climate change. Linda elaborates:

> [W]e're getting that we have … to put … water tanks in our churches, and we need to stop wasting water because it's going to be a drought. But in terms of the root causes of climate change, I think it is more difficult.

However, when the faith leaders of local communities are exposed to extreme weather events and given the tools to understand the connection to the climate crisis, the interviewees argue that this could initiate faith leaders' climate commitment. Grace's explanation illustrates this:

> The only time it will become an issue is when there are hard rains, people's houses are flooded, and you need to get that relief. But I would also say they are trying their very best.

Once again, the tone is critical, yet understanding of the local faith leaders' lack of climate action.

In conclusion, this section underscores how South African interviewees bridge diverse factors in their activism by associating the climate crisis with other societal problems, and simultaneously highlights faith as a crucial element. Although in their espoused theological voices the interviewees do not

extensively articulate how they bridge diverse factors in their activism, this is reflected clearly in their operant theological voices, not least in their aim to equip faith leaders with resources to address the climate crisis and societal problems. Such practices intertwine the climate crisis and societal problems, and incorporate faith as an essential dimension. I argue that this is one way in which they manifest what I refer to as "holistic theologies".

Just as their motivations for activism are deeply embedded in the local context, the context influences their environmental practices. They identify two primary reasons for integrating climate concerns with social problems: first, systemic inequalities in their environment reveal the interconnectedness of ecological and social issues; and second, linking climate action with social problems makes it easier to mobilise faith leaders and communities. Although they critique faith leaders for their apparent lack of engagement, they acknowledge that the numerous societal problems that local faith communities face impede their ability to prioritise climate issues.

Community and environmental care

Another prominent and tangible way in which the South African interviewees connect environmental crises with broader social and contextual issues, while also including faith as a vital element, is through their environmental and community care projects. These initiatives, such as food gardening, cleanup efforts, and tree planting, highlight a form of activism that complements their work in political advocacy, campaigning, and raising awareness.

This community engagement stems from the various societal problems they encounter in their context. Consequently, participating in community and environmental projects allows them to address these problems in practice. It is in these initiatives that their espoused theological reflections become particularly explicit and well-articulated. In addition, normative theological voices, such as religious texts, occasionally serve as practical tools in these environmental practices.

Different interviewees participate in creating food gardens in various roles, including initiators, supporters, project leaders, and farmers. Some interviewees' projects are affiliated with faith-based organisations, while others have launched their own projects. Their objectives are diverse; many aim to enhance food security, which is highlighted as the most urgent climate-related problem in the South African context. They also aim to create recreational spaces in both urban and rural areas for economically disadvantaged and

vulnerable populations, and to promote ecological farming practices that are rooted in indigenous knowledge. These food gardens are also a vital part of the climate adaptation strategy to confront the difficulties posed by unpredictable and extreme weather conditions, such as heavy rains and droughts.

Food gardens are often initiated as community-based projects to support marginalised groups, such as those experiencing poverty, homelessness, and gender-based violence, and those living with HIV. The interviewees also report that the demand for food gardens increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly among groups in South African society facing economic pressure.

A notable example of a food garden illustrating the display of activism that connects diverse factors is Dina's establishment of several garden projects aimed at assisting people on the margins of society. Dina is one of the interviewees who provides a poignant theological perspective on her project and who elaborates extensively in her espoused theology on the role of faith in the food garden initiative. The project originated from a Bible study group for homeless individuals, and is deeply rooted in faith. The community garden project she started was based on a study of 1 Corinthians 16, which discusses the resurrection of the body. Thus, a normative theological text was used as a practical tool for reflection both on the participants' lives and future and on their relationship to nature. The essence of the project lies in the collective biblical interpretations shared among a group of individuals facing different vulnerabilities.

My understanding of her work is that she integrates action with a clear, holistic approach, addressing both the larger community's difficulties and environmental issues while simultaneously incorporating faith and theological reflections into practical environmental and societal activities. Faith is central to her practices and theological articulation. Dina refers to her community work as *diakonia*, stating, "Diakonia [...] really means that faith is action; for me, that is the basis of it".

Organising cleanup projects, recycling initiatives, and managing waste are other important aspects of the South African activists' environmental engagement, which serves as a community and environmental care initiative. These projects address the contextual environmental problems of garbage dumping and waste management, and illustrate an integrated and holistic approach to activism.

These efforts are often organised by the faith organisations to which the activists belong, or by the activists themselves on a voluntary basis, but their religious faith initially inspires them. Musa is one of the South African interviewees who is actively involved in organising cleanups. He starts by contacting the local imam to inform him about the event. Then he and his friends go into the community to clean up plastics and other waste. Musa's motivation for this community project stems from his religious faith, which he supports with an Islamic saying. He elaborates on this point:

> There is a saying in Arabic that says: Cleanness is half of your religion. […] It's the root of speaking to God while you are filthy, it doesn't feel right. […] There is a saying in Islam: the entire world is a praying place, a mosque. I can pray here. If there is praying time, say a quarter past, and I tell you, can I have a five-minute break? I can pray there. […] That keeps the indication that the entire world needs to be clean.

Thus, in his espoused theology, he draws on normative theological voices to support his clean-up initiatives. Understanding that his projects are deeply rooted in his faith tradition makes the resistance he faces even more difficult. Musa's cleaning projects are one example from South Africa, where interviewees comment that they encounter pushback from their faith communities. As Musa explains, he frequently encounters "a lot of resistance". He makes it a point to notify the local imam before he heads into the area for a clean-up. While some imams welcome his efforts, others become upset and have even chased him away. When Musa reflects on the reasons behind this resistance, he believes it stems from theological issues.

> If I go to a place where there is an imam, a mosque close by, I do a cleanup, an environmental cleanup. He thinks badly of me. […] He feels ashamed. […] He doesn't see the environment as part of religion. I think that is something you must figure out in [our town], that many clergy, many people of faith, they don't see the environment as part of their lectures or their teaching.

Musa argues that imams do not view environmental care as part of their religion. Thus, Musa's dealing with garbage in the name of their faith appears to them, according to him, strange and even shameful. Like other South African interviewees, he believes that there are strong teachings in his faith tradition that promote environmental care. Therefore, he does not criticise the normative theological voices that stem from the Islamic tradition, but rather the local faith leaders' lack of knowledge and commitment to these teachings. Musa points to a lack of education, stating that imams are not sufficiently educated to address what he refers to as "the holistic challenges of the community". Thus, he sees the issue as stemming from faith leaders' theological

(mis)interpretations and their failure to adopt a holistic approach, rather than from the theological foundations of the faith tradition itself.

Another environmental community project mentioned among the interviewees is tree planting. The aim of tree planting is similar to the food garden adaptation – for example, to create shade and cooler areas as the temperature rises because of the climate crisis; however, planting trees is also a mitigation strategy, as it reduces carbon emissions. In addition, these tree planting projects are intertwined with faith traditions, which contributes even more to awareness-raising.

Tree planting has begun to be integrated into the Christian confirmation tradition in the Anglican Church in South Africa, where each confirmand plants a tree in the village and it is blessed by a bishop.[193] Thus, environmental care has become integrated into the normative theology and practices of Linda's faith tradition. She also describes how her church has revised the priestly vows to integrate care for the environment. She says:

> When a priest is now licensed into a new church, they have to say they have to care for their flock, their people, but they also have to care for the environment, so we sort of greened the canon. So that is also helping to change the DNA of the church.

Thus, environmental and community care is occasionally said to be rooted in the theologies of the interviewees' faith traditions, both in their normative theological voices and in how they are practised. Activists sometimes express their commitment to the environment by influencing the practices and normative theological voices of their faith traditions, as seen in the case of Linda, while others, such as Dina, choose to develop projects outside of their religious institutions.

In conclusion, community and environmental care projects are a significant aspect of climate and environmental activism among the South African interviewees. These local initiatives, emerging from societal problems in their communities, exemplify how activists bridge diverse factors in their efforts. Specifically, three types of project are common: food gardens, clean-up campaigns, and tree-planting activities. While addressing environmental issues related to societal vulnerabilities and injustices, these projects also focus on adapting to the impacts of climate change, such as food security and temperature mitigation, and at times, aim to reduce fossil fuel emissions.

[193] Further details are provided in, for example: Ncumisa, *Plant a Confirmation Tree Continues*.

Furthermore, these initiatives reflect the incorporation of faith as a meaningful resource. Normative texts and faith-based networks are used to organise and sustain efforts. Moreover, the interviewees' espoused theological voices reveal that they perceive these projects as faith-based. However, there are critiques of faith leaders' lack of environmental engagement. Overall, the operant theological voices manifested in these projects could be characterised as what I have previously referred to as holistic theologies.

Connecting the local with the global

> [I] shared with the UN special rapporteur on human rights and climate change. (Sthembiso)

Another notable aspect of activism that connects diverse factors, exhibited by the South African interviewees, is their ability to connect the local and global levels through the networks of their faith traditions. Their climate activism spans local, regional, national, and global levels. They also emphasise the importance of integrating these levels in their lobbying, campaigning, and awareness-raising efforts.

Whether they are employees or volunteers, individuals can serve as formal representatives of faith networks, religious institutions, or political administrations. However, as previously mentioned, they seldom identify as faith leaders in local faith communities. In their various roles, they can connect on different levels through their international, pan-African, national, and local networks. These networks may include faith-based organisations such as the WCC and SAFCEI, or they might involve specific religious denominations, such as the Anglican Church or the Lutheran World Federation. For others, the networks include secular climate movement organisations such as Extinction Rebellion or various NGOs and political institutions.

As a result, interviewees in various roles in these networks have the opportunity to meet with climate and environmental policymakers at multiple levels, including representatives from the United Nations (as highlighted in the quote above by Sthembiso) and participants in international climate negotiations, such as COP meetings under the UNFCCC. They deeply appreciate these opportunities to share the stories of those affected by climate change with international political leaders, and view this engagement as an essential aspect of their activism.

During COP17 in Durban, South Africa, Dumisani had the opportunity to meet an ambassador involved with the COP presidency. He views this experience as a highlight of his climate activism, as it allowed him to engage directly with the presidency and to share stories about the severe impacts of droughts and floods in the southern African region. This meeting was part of a broader international mobilisation campaign among faith-based organisations, known as the We Have Faith Campaign – Act Now for Climate Justice.[194]

Another example can be found in Sthembiso's narrative, in which he highlights how the global structure of his church, along with other ecumenical networks, has supported his climate advocacy efforts at various levels: local, national, and international. He recalls an occasion when he had the opportunity to speak with the UN rapporteur on climate change and human rights in Geneva.[195] Like the other South African interviewees with access to international networks, Sthembiso expresses gratitude for this chance to share the experiences of those suffering from the consequences of the climate crisis with influential leaders. In addition, he emphasises the benefits of faith-based international communication networks, which allow him to convey international climate science to local communities during training sessions in parishes across South Africa. This demonstrates that the connection between the global and the local can work in both directions. Furthermore, a dominant theme in the South African interviewees' advocacy work is the call for increased international funding dedicated to loss and damage. This funding aims to cover the costs caused by the negative impacts of the climate crisis, which persist despite ongoing mitigation and adaptation strategies.[196]

The advocacy work of the South African interviewees is rarely reflected in their espoused theological voices; however, faith serves as a significant underlying resource through the faith-based networks they use to navigate the climate catastrophe. I argue that their international lobbying efforts are a way for them to manifest their operant theological voices. One individual who does provide insights into his political advocacy work and its relation to his faith is Sthembiso:

[194] Norwegian Church Aid, *We Have Faith: Act Now for Climate Justice.*
[195] United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR), "Special Rapporteur on Climate Change."
[196] See further, for example: UN Environment Programme (UNEP), "About Loss and Damage - UN Environment Programme."

> What gives me hope is basically the opportunity to do something. If I still have the opportunity to talk about climate change or call for climate change, that brings me hope, that ability.

The opportunity to advocate strong climate-related political measures gives him hope. Elsewhere he also describes his activism as a divine calling. Thus, he is explicit about his climate advocacy being an act of faith.

Indigenous global communities are also recognised as international networks from which interviewees can gain valuable support. For instance, Fatima has established connections with indigenous groups, particularly women, around the world through her involvement in local interfaith initiatives. She regularly meets with them online, which has strengthened her both personally and in her advocacy for the environment. Through these connections, she has discovered that these women share similar stories of oppression and spirituality to her own. As a result, this global network has become a vital support structure that has bolstered her environmental advocacy in South Africa.

In conclusion, the South African interviewees demonstrate their ability to bridge diverse contexts by linking local and global levels through using global networks associated with their faith traditions and through secular networks to engage in climate activism. In this context, lobbying could be interpreted as an expression of operant theological voices, even though it is not typically reflected in the interviewees' espoused theological voices. The interviewees value the global faith networks provided by their religious institutions, viewing them as tangible resources for their activism. The connection between local and global levels exemplifies a key aspect of South African activists' holistic theologies.

Collaborating across boundaries of faith traditions

> It's about accepting that there is truth in all these places. Even though their different perspectives may differ, we all have a common purpose. And our biggest common purpose is of course this planet that we all share. (Sharon)

The South African interviewees' integrated action is manifested not only in their reaching from the local to the global and vice versa; their activism also bridges different faith traditions. This is revealed in their actions on grassroots, regional, and national levels through the multi-faith organisation SAFCEI, in which several of the interviewees engage. Working together for the same goal, rather than focusing on theological differences, is at the centre. This can be illustrated by Sharon's reflection above: an inter-faith approach is at centre of

her activism. By focusing on joint actions, differences in theologies are put aside. Sharon elaborates on the topic:

> …to a large extent, I've actually stopped really worrying about what people believe. In fact, I've often said to people I don't care what you believe as much as what you do with it. So if your spirituality or religion gives you certain values to live by, I want to see how you express that in your life.

The collaboration between different faith traditions can be demonstrated in various ways. Interviewees have shared their experiences of participating in or organising meetings with local authorities and provincial municipalities to advocate for environmental issues. At the local level, these issues may not always be framed as a result of the climate crisis. For instance, as previously touched upon, a tragic incident occurred when heavy rains and dumping caused a local river to flood, which resulted in a child drowning. This prompted an advocacy action organised by SAFCEI in which Grace, one of the interviewees, participated. During the meeting with local authorities, faith leaders highlighted the urgent need to address the problem of garbage dumping in the river, as it had directly contributed to the tragic death of the child.

Other collaborative actions by various faith traditions mentioned in the South African material include meditative walks, in which participants from different religions come together to reconnect with nature. In addition, there are vigils, there is participation in public demonstrations, and training workshops are facilitated. Under the umbrella of SAFCEI, interviewees also participate in briefings on climate policies, such as the National Climate Bill, as well as other lobbying meetings at both international and national levels. They also engage in religious rituals, such as indigenous welcome ceremonies and blessings of the land at various official environmental gatherings. The previously mentioned training programme for creating healthier and safer places for worship is another notable example.

The richness of other faith traditions' normative theological voices on environmental issues is also highlighted. An example is given by Dumisani, who is deeply engaged in interfaith environmental work. He argues that sacred texts in different faith traditions emphasise respect for humans and for nature. Dumisani meets resistance from those who, he says, misinterpret these sacred texts:

> Yes, there is resistance because some people are misinterpreting the sacred text of their different faiths. And want to dominate others […] All about the misinterpretation of the texts that guide them. But when you read those texts deeper,

> there is always a point where the respect for other human beings […] in there and respect of nature is found in there.

Drawing on and emphasising the strengths of other faith traditions and cooperating in climate action at all levels and with different means is a dominant theme in the South African material.

To conclude, collaborating across different faith traditions exemplifies how activism in South Africa bridges diverse factors – in this case, actors from various faith traditions. This collaboration connects faith traditions through practical efforts rather than emphasising normative theological differences. This illustrates that the shared practices and, therefore, the operant theological voices, are at the centre of their theologies. However, some argue that all faith traditions possess normative theological texts that inspire and legitimise their commitments to environmental issues. Collaborating across faith boundaries is another characteristic of what I refer to as the holistic theologies of the South African interviewees.

Searching for holistic faith communities

As discussed in previous sections, the South African interviewees' bridging of diverse factors in their activism is evident in both their operant and their espoused theological voices. We have also observed how this approach can create tensions with their local faith communities, where they frequently face resistance and a lack of engagement. In the next section, we examine the consequences of these tensions, specifically the interviewees' desire for new and more holistic faith communities. However, to set the context for understanding this process, we begin by examining how the activists' climate practices have further shaped their espoused theological voices, making them even more holistic.

A broader understanding of God as the creator, along with a wider comprehension of Christ and Christian doctrines on salvation, is one of the ways in which climate activism has influenced the espoused theological voices of the South African interviewees. Linda's reflection demonstrates this change, as she notes that her view of salvation has become more holistic after engaging with climate issues. She explains:

> I don't know so much about other faiths, but in Christianity, we very much have gone for individual conversion. So it's about me and my God. […] I was probably more of that, you know, converted and care for your neighbour, but I didn't really understand the salvation of the whole Earth. […]

> [H]ow do we understand salvation in terms of salvation of the whole Earth? 'Cause Jesus came and John 3:16 says: 'For God so loved the world', and the Greek got sort of the cosmos, so if God really loves the cosmos, then […why not] to be caring for the whole cosmos.

Both the understanding of God as the creator and the doctrine of salvation have expanded. Linda concludes that if the translation of the Biblical text suggests that God created not only the world but the entire cosmos, then salvation must also encompass the cosmos. As a result, her commitment to environmental issues could be said to be rooted in her broader theological perspectives. Like other South African interviewees, she notes that this expansion of her theological understanding has been a transformative process, driven by her commitment to environmental issues.

Another example of this in the South African material is found in Dina's theological reflections. She reports that her environmental activism has broadened her understanding of Christ; she now uses the comprehensive term "the cosmic Christ". During her activism, she has encountered indigenous theology, both practised and expressed in words, which has deepened her understanding of how the cosmic Christ is described in what she labels "African theology". Dina elaborates:

> [I] come to understand even more about how the cosmic Christ is described in African theology. I speak about Christ as the first ancestor. Ancestor of all living beings, not only the ancestor of only the people but ancestor of everything that lives.

Thus, for Dina, Christ is now not only "the cosmic Christ" but also the first ancestor. Dina has also been influenced by formal theological voices, such as eco-feminist theologian Anne Primavesi. This has influenced her environmental engagement further, and she has developed what she calls "creation theology" and "creation spirituality". Thus, Dina exemplifies how encounters with the practised theologies of others can serve as a sort of normative theological voice that inspires the activists, alongside being inspired by formal theological voices. These sources of inspiration can expand and transform the interviewees' espoused theological voices into holistic forms.

The South African material indicates that climate and environmental activism can broaden theological perspectives, and make them more open to other faith traditions beyond one's own. This is evident in the multi-faith efforts of the South African interviewees, who have engaged with various religious traditions and gained insight from them. For instance, Dumisani explains that,

through reading the normative theological texts of other faith traditions, he has come to realise that "they all have something to say about nature". Conversely, the material also shows that individuals who already possess a deep understanding of different faith traditions and holistic views of the divine are motivated to participate in multi-faith environmental work.

The interviewees' theological understandings have been broadened not only by environmental practices and formal and normative theological voices, but also by what I refer to as spiritual experiences. For example, Sharon recounts an experience she shared with others during an interfaith tree-planting event. She describes it:

> I realised, not too long ago, actually how sacred the actual soil is, and it is almost as if God would to be manifest […] itself as the soil, because it is so life-giving. It's what holds us and supports us in every way. So, I had a bit of an epiphany one day when I was doing a tree-planting project with some faith leaders. And we were all just suddenly so in love with the soil because that was the expression of God for all of us.

Spiritual experiences during climate activism events, such as this tree-planting event, are not commonly reported in the South African material. However, it occurs here, and is also said to have deepened Sharon's understanding of what she sometimes calls the "universal life force" and, other times, "God". Interestingly, the event is described as a spiritual experience made jointly with the other participants and not exclusively by herself.

The interviewees' holistic theologies, developed through environmental and climate activism, along with the normative and formal theological voices and spiritual experiences that have inspired these theologies, contrast sharply with the normative theological voices encountered in the local faith communities of the interviewees. It is here that we find the most profound criticism raised by the interviewees regarding their local congregation of their religious institutions. It is as if the development of holistic theologies creates tensions in relation to the institutionalised faith communities.

This tension becomes clear in what appears to be a dominant theme in the South African material: that normative theologies in these communities are depicted as polarising celestial and earthly matters. This type of theology is even explicitly identified as one of the reasons why they have left their former Christian communities. Busi, for example, argues that preachers in her former charismatic Christian community focused upon "heaven and things" and "be saved and don't worry about this". A similar example is that of Fatima, who

has also left her former Christian community because of its theological understandings:

> It's more about the self and the self going to heaven. At one way directed. It excludes other elements that are important, and one element is the environment.

This separation between earthly and celestial matters excludes climate and environmental crises from being considered important to theology. Salvation is limited to the salvation of the individual, rather than of the entire world or cosmos, as reflected in the theologies developed by the interviewees.

There are also examples of the interviewees explicitly criticising practices at the congregational level. Fatima, for example, whose indigenous identity and knowledge she is now exploring, includes a growing criticism of the practices of the Christian churches. She argues:

> Now, the church is one of the biggest exploiters and the cause of why South Africa is in this current situation. Because if you look back in history, the church, as for spiritual institutions, has the most shares in land and property because they have taken land away from the people. But they are not advocating… it's almost there is a gap between the environment and God. It's not seen… people don't interpret it as one. He cannot be a God without his creation.

Here, not only is there a lack of holistic, normative theological voices, expressed in words and action, but concrete wrongdoings are also placed at the forefront of the criticism. However, this could also be understood to have root causes in the theologies of the Christian churches. Betty, in her criticism of the lack of a holistic theology of Christianity, refers back to history and argues that this kind of spirituality, holding nature as sacred, was destroyed by colonialism and mission schools:

> [T]hey taught us to no longer hold the trees sacred. And so we were self-started cutting […] enormous spiritual crisis that Africans are ongoing to learn [to] clearcut a forest.

Thus, the South African interviewees express negative emotions and describe experiences of resistance because of the normative theological voices encountered in the local congregations of their religious institutions, which they regard as their faith communities. But they are also alienated by the wrongdoings of their religious institutions or – as previously discussed – by the lack of climate commitment, not least at the local congregational level.

They report feeling unsupported by their faith communities. Despite the difficulty of confronting this absence of holistic theologies, many ultimately found that leaving their former faith communities was a liberating decision. Dina's explanation serves as a compelling illustration of this experience:

> When I started to become interested in ecological theology, it was also a struggle to liberate myself from the suppressing aspects of the tradition that I came from. […] Women are suppressed, but also where we believe in the doctrine of original sin […] I came to understand […] how oppressive this is and how it… cause and totally cut out that sense of creativity inside…

The process of leaving the oppressive environment that Dina experienced was described as a literal struggle for survival. Her account also illustrates that the lack of a holistic theology, as mentioned by the interviewees, includes more aspects than just environmental concerns. For instance, Dina highlights gender as a key aspect. In examining the South African material, it becomes evident that the interviewees are searching for faith communities where not only a concern for the environment is included, but also where their spiritual expressions, gender identities, indigenous identities, personalities, and physical bodies can all be integrated into a holistic theological framework.

However, identifying new faith communities in which the interviewees can practice their holistic theologies, both in words and actions, is a difficult process. Many of the interviewees are involved with SAFCEI, which provides a valuable space for them to engage in climate and environmental activism. This involvement allows their holistic theologies to thrive in an activist context. However, it does not seem to satisfy their desire for a local faith community where they can feel theologically at home and express their beliefs both verbally and through their actions.

There are, however, interviewees who have managed in their search for a new faith community. The one who is most satisfied by far is Fatima, who seems to be the only one who has fully found what she was looking for. She has left her former Christian community and is now exploring her indigenous identity and spirituality, and seems satisfied to have found an identity and place where environment and faith are regarded in a holistic way:

> [T]he true spirituality of the indigenous people is that we can't separate ourselves from our creator, from our environment, or from the land; in our tradition, it's all in one.

The material does not indicate whether she has found a concrete local community. However, she has mentioned that she has discovered a space where

her spirituality can thrive, along with meaningful connections in international indigenous networks.

Others who have left their former Christian communities express varying levels of satisfaction, but not as high as Fatima's. For example, Dina has joined a loosely organised community that combines Christian mysticism with elements of Hinduism, Zen, and indigenous spirituality. Similarly, Sharon has found her place in an interfaith community. However, both women report a fluctuating sense of belonging in their respective faith communities. Despite finding these new communities, they, like other interviewees – whether they have embraced new faith communities or remained in their former ones – often experience feelings of loneliness.

Dina, for instance, says, "Oh gosh. I feel lonely every day". Sharon adds, "I do feel lonely. I really do…". Although their fellow activists provide some sense of community, it does not fully replace their longing for a faith community that offers a holistic theology where they can truly feel at home. Alternatively, as Busi concludes, she does not have to feel as homeless in her faith community as she partly does, because her true faith community is not on Earth. She says:

> I know my community is in the spiritual world, and I engage with them, and then I feel a sense of, now, I'm home.

Some South African interviewees who began their commitment to environmental causes outside of a faith community have not felt the need to seek out new faith communities. In addition, there are individuals involved in environmental and climate activism in faith communities who do not experience feelings of loneliness or any need to search for new faith communities. There are also interviewees who hold formal positions in religious institutions in which they contribute formally to shaping the institution's theology. For example, they produce materials for worship, such as prayers, liturgy, and sermon inspiration, thereby occasionally serving as normative theological voices in their religious institutions.

Feelings of being lonely can also occur among those who are active in secular climate movement organisations. This is the case for Amir, who feels lonely when engaging in disruptive civil disobedience actions.

To conclude, South African interviewees report tensions in relation to their local faith communities. I contend that these tensions are rooted in what I term

the interviewees' holistic theologies, manifested in both their operant and their espoused theological voices. These theologies are demonstrated through activism that encompasses diverse issues, including societal problems, the bridging of local and international levels, and interactions among different faith traditions, while also incorporating faith into their activism both as a dimension and as a tangible resource, such as normative texts and institutional networks.

Furthermore, their activism practices, analysed as operant theological voices, have broadened their understanding of theological concepts such as Christ, God, and salvation. Encounters with normative and formal theological voices, alongside spiritual experiences during activism, have facilitated this development. In contrast, their interactions with normative theological voices in local faith communities often create tensions, prompting many to seek alternative communities that are better aligned with their holistic theologies. Some have successfully transitioned to new communities; others, however, continue to feel out of place and experience feelings of loneliness. Conversely, some interviewees find their holistic theologies adequately expressed in their existing communities.

Securing the future and fundamental rights

> A future vision for me is that a child in a rural area can study and have the same opportunities as a child studying in the city. I mean, a child in the city can sit with air-conditioning and study, but a child in a rural area must maybe in the future study in temperatures of 35-40 degrees. A future vision for me is that we take care of the brains of children. (Sthembiso)

The introductory quote is from Sthembiso, who highlights the importance of securing children's future possibilities to study, even when the temperature rises. The vision shows an awareness of the contextual injustices between rural and urban areas, as well as between children of different ethnicities, and that these injustices will increase further in the future because of the climate crisis. He says that his vision is inspired by a professor's lecture he once heard, but it is also possible that it resonates with his childhood and that he might be able to identify with these children.

The visions of the South African interviewees focus on securing the future, especially the rights of vulnerable communities. While their visions resemble those of secular climate movement organisations, they specifically emphasise

the role of religious institutions and faith communities and of spirituality in creating a sustainable future. The sections that follow outline these visions.

Sthembiso's vision for the future emphasises the right to education as essential, while other South African interviewees highlight different aspects of fundamental rights that reflect the various difficulties they face in their specific contexts. The rights of marginalised communities and the elimination of ethnic and gender injustices have played a crucial role in rebuilding the country since the fall of apartheid, and these issues continue to pose significant challenges. Therefore, it is not surprising that the interviewees' visions for the future incorporate these concerns. Although they do not explicitly mention the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations member states in 2015, their suggestions are related to its goals in some way.[197] The 2030 Agenda is rooted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in other international treaties.[198]

The future visions expressed by the interviewees in South Africa address several issues that reflect the country's current problems. At the time of the interviews, many South Africans struggled with energy security owing to frequent load shedding, which led the interviewees to envision decentralised energy grid structures.[199] In addition, the high unemployment rate, especially among the youth, has motivated climate activists to envision new opportunities for decent jobs through the transition from coal to renewable energy sources.[200] They argue that this transition could also allow individuals to benefit financially from renewable energy. In their visions, both mitigation and adaptation efforts are closely intertwined. The problems they envision being met in the future are many – or, as Grace expresses it in a more explicitly faith-related version: "It's a huge list I'm gonna give God one day".

Although the list of concrete problems they envision being met is long, the underlying and dominant theme is that of survival, thus literally securing the future for humanity. Back to Sthembiso again:

[197] Their future visions relate to goals such as: no poverty, zero hunger, quality education, gender equality, clean water, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, and climate action.
[198] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "The 17 Goals, Sustainable Development."
[199] For further academic analysis of the consequences of load shedding in South Africa, see, for example: Walsh et al., "Estimating the Economic Cost of Load Shedding in South Africa"; Inglesi-Lotz, "Load Shedding in South Africa."
[200] Also highlighted in research, see, for example: Cock, "Resistance to Coal Inequalities and the Possibilities of a Just Transition in South Africa."

> There is hope that things will really change, and there is hope that people will survive.

While not everyone believes that it is possible to secure the future, it remains a goal for which all the interviewees are striving. Therefore, it is not surprising that food security is a top priority for the South African participants. Amir's vision serves as a notable example. At the time of the interview, he was working in regenerative agriculture in Africa, and he clearly sees food security as essential for the future, envisioning "Africa's agriculture being climate resilient".

The interviewees who emphasise food security in their future visions demonstrate a clear understanding of the need to adapt to climate change, as food production is already significantly affected by it. They draw on both climate science and experience-based climate knowledge from the South African context. Their future visions also intertwine adaptation with mitigation measures to reduce carbon emissions. Amir illustrates this broader perspective, arguing that food security could also involve creating jobs and lowering emissions. Like other interviewees, he highlights the importance of local food sovereignty, advocating practices such as growing one's own food, decentralising food production, and shortening food supply chains. Similarly, other interviewees suggest securing food security in urban areas by establishing city gardens, which at the same time provide green areas that are crucial for decreasing the negative impact of heatwaves.

This approach is reflected in the practical climate initiatives of other interviewees, such as their food garden projects, which aim to support and empower vulnerable communities, enabling them to take control of their own food security. In addition, these projects integrate various aspects of sustainability. For these interviewees, achieving food security could also mean producing eco-friendly, healthy, and sustainable food while ensuring that biodiversity is not harmed. Thus, although the overarching goal is securing the future of humanity, there are explicit voices advocating the survival of all species. Dumisani, for instance, argues that "[W]e should be able to create conditions for other creations to live".

In conclusion, activists' future visions are shaped by contextual problems and the need to adapt to climate change. Their understanding of urgent circumstances, rooted in contextual knowledge, underscores the importance of securing the future, particularly in relation to food security, as reflected in their climate and environmental practices. They also emphasise other fundamental rights such as education, and address injustices related to gender and ethnicity,

shaped by the context's challenges. Their visions encompass both adaptation and mitigation strategies, motivated by both experience-based and science-based climate knowledge. While the primary focus is on human survival, some perspectives highlight the importance of protecting all species.

Hope in God's and human action

> There is someone more powerful than the president here. … And make you believe that you're gonna come right eventually, if you do your part, then… You know God will surely do God's part. (Betty)

To achieve the goal of securing the future and fundamental rights, the South African interviewees find hope in both God's and human action, as demonstrated by Betty's quote above. She is among those who offer extensive theological reflections on God's actions. Reflecting on her people's history and the perceived divine intervention that saved at least 20% of her community from genocide (previously referred to), she anticipates that God will intervene again. She describes a recent event in which a plan was announced to establish a nuclear power station on the east coast of South Africa, which threatened to destroy what she describes as "one of the world's most beautiful beaches", known for its waves that attract surfers internationally. Some surfers who previously enjoyed the waves in this area decided to support environmental activists financially in their efforts to protect the beach. Their support ultimately led to the successful prevention of the nuclear station being established. For Betty, this outcome was a clear sign that divine intervention, as well as the intervention of the ancestors, is still at work. As she expresses it:

> God and the ancestors just come through for you quite coincidentally […] If you do not see God …funding…

Betty continues to argue, laughing, that there must be "someone more powerful than the president here". Consequently, past instances of God's intervention, as well as recent interventions in climate campaigning efforts, inspire hope that such intervention could occur again in the future.

Normative theological voices also support trust in God's intervention. For example, when Musa references the narrative of Moses crossing the Red Sea, he emphasises how God parted the waters to rescue Moses and his people from their pursuers. Musa concludes that God can intervene in unexpected ways to provide help, ultimately asserting that "[t]he result is in the hands of God. It

cannot be in our hands". Therefore, trust in divine action can empower individuals, as outcomes are determined not by humans but by God.

The South African interviewees describe finding hope for the future not only in God's intervention but also in human actions inspired by faith. For them, their capacity to act instils hope, as if hope becomes tangible when manifested in climate action. Remaining engaged in this movement signifies holding onto hope. This is illustrated in Sthembiso's description of his climate advocacy work:

> I'm at the point where I think if I would lose hope at this point it would mean that everything that I've tried before would be in vain. The more I stay into climate activism the more I know how possible it is to achieve climate justice.

Throughout the South African material, it becomes clear that hope for the future can be rooted in past events, not only in divine intervention but also in human actions. For instance, Dumisani describes how his earlier "small successes" in climate action give him hope. He elaborates on this point by describing when he contributed to the education of small-scale farmers to adapt to a changed climate:

> When people begin to talk and act according to some of the teachings that we share with them, for instance, the issue of growing crops in a manner that is sensitive to biodiversity. I think that has given me hope, we can do it. … The hope is there because now more and more people are beginning to realise…

When Dumisani reflects on his hopes for the future, he recalls that this successful adaptation to an already changing climate became a reality, securing food security for a vulnerable community. Similarly, Linda draws on the positive experiences she had in her previous advocacy and campaigning related to HIV as a hopeful example. Linda elaborates on this connection:

> You know just dripping, dripping, dripping, it's not a fast thing, and then after a while you look around and you're, like, ok, there's a difference in the church. You don't even notice it, and then overnight you're, like, people are talking differently about HIV-positive people, and there's kind of an expectation that [the] church should be doing something.

This illustrates that previous successful climate efforts, such as training programmes for adaptation or awareness-raising in churches, provide hope for the future, as they show that taking action can lead to positive change. Thus, one could say that operant theological voices in the past influence their future visions.

Faith reaching beyond science

In contrast to how human, God's, and ancestors' interventions, alongside normative theological voices, bring hope for the future, science-based climate knowledge presents a more alarming view of potential disasters. The following discussion explores the differing roles of science and faith in the South African material.

Surprisingly, although all the interviewees are deeply engaged in addressing the climate crisis, some South African participants believe that there is no future for humanity because of the severe consequences of this crisis. For instance, Amir argues strongly, "There's absolutely no hope!" He bases his conviction on his academic knowledge of the climate crisis and his professional experience in agriculture and rural development across the African continent. From his perspective, he believes that the world will struggle to cope with the climate emergency, especially in achieving food security for Africa. From that perspective, Amir's answer is:

> There's absolutely no hope! Like, a large part of my research is to look at the effects of climate change on agriculture in Africa. It is just devastating. […] So I have absolutely no hope.

However, Amir's perspective on hope is complex, resembling that of other interviewees who believe that humanity will not prevail. He appears to have different outlooks on the future, depending on his current role or perspective: they shift between an academic and a faith perspective. Shortly after stating that there is no hope, he adds:

> I see hope. I see it in activist groupings. If I look back in history, I take the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. The majority of the real … came from a faith background. Just from my background, you had the Muslim community who rose up against the apartheid… organised on faith backgrounds. Made strong solidarity links to Christian groupings. I mean, you look at Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela or Tambo, as all of these people had strong Christian backgrounds. So there is this sort of divine nature to motivating people to act. … I think that's a strong point of faith that I have.

In this passage, Amir's voice reflects a faith-based perspective. Like other interviewees mentioned earlier, he draws on the nation's history, particularly the anti-apartheid movement, and highlights influential faith-based activists. These figures and their actions serve as sources of hope for the future. Similar to other interviewees, he intertwines connections between past, present, and future. While Amir does not necessarily imply direct divine intervention as

previously discussed, there is a sense of divine motivation that encourages people of faith to act for a better future.

Amir's seemingly contradictory perspectives on the future illustrate that science and faith often serve very different purposes for the interviewees. Yet, their handling of the negative futures depicted by science varies in the material. Amir's viewpoint is particularly notable because his bleak outlook invokes deep despair, a sentiment not reflected elsewhere in the South African accounts. He describes it as "this black hole of despair" – feelings he tries to overcome through action. In contrast, Sharon, another interviewee who shares a negative view of the future and believes that humanity will not endure, maintains a more optimistic emotional tone. This distinction appears to stem from Sharon's hope, which is detached from the current world, focusing instead on "the eternal progression of the soul". This does not negate the importance of action; as she says: "So my soul will keep learning and growing and whatever it wants to do after the transition".

Another example of the distinct yet complementary roles of science and faith in the South African material can be seen in Sthembiso's argumentation. He posits that we should recognise science as a truthful entity and that we might reach a critical threshold by 2030. But, he adds:

> So what faith does is, when science says that, we say… that's true, and we appreciate that information, and then we would at the same time say: but there is hope. There is hope that things will really change and there is hope that people will survive. Because we are generally created to be hopeful for the future and to do everything with hope. […] Even if I know that the world is coming to an end tomorrow, I will continue to plant an apple tree. That's just being hopeful of the future.

Thus, even with the understanding that circumstances could worsen, individuals of faith are said to be inherently hopeful. Sthembiso implicitly references his Lutheran faith tradition here; the idea of planting an apple tree, regardless of one's knowledge of the world's fate, echoes the narrative found in Martin Luther's writings. Similar to the experiences of all the South African interviewees, questions about the future revolve around survival, but reliance on God, supported by normative theological voices, could offer hope regardless of the negative scientific predictions. This is also suggested to be the role of faith actors in relation to the wider climate movement and society at large: to bring hope that there will be a future. Back again to Sthembiso:

> [Faith] brings hope. Once people say, "No, there will be a disaster. Oh no, things will be destroyed!", people will be devastated. Then faith says: But be hopeful that something very hopeful can happen. […] That hope, that's faith. That's what we say as faith people: Don't lose hope!

Thus, as observed, faith is described as a source of hope for the future, complementing and contrasting with scientific perspectives. Furthermore, the interviewees emphasise that spirituality offers advantages that transcend what science can provide. In particular, indigenous spirituality is emphasised, illustrated in Betty's words: "To reintroduce the connection between us and the ecology that made us". This reflects their previously discussed bridging of diverse factors in activism, and reappears here in their future visions. The interviewees stress that indigenous spirituality, with its holistic approach, has the potential to enhance or broaden scientific understanding and so contribute to creating a sustainable future by fostering a close and respectful human–nature relationship.

An additional element of faith highlighted in the South African materials that could aid in the future development is the concept of a faith language, which the interviewees characterise by its ability to go beyond scientific discourse. This language, rooted in faith, can act as a catalyst for transformation, bringing lasting changes to the behaviour that leads to reduced fossil fuel emissions. Dumisani refers to faith as a "moral mirror", suggesting that, when individuals reflect on their actions in the light of their religious faith, they may reconsider their behaviour and become more compassionate towards what they perceive as creation. Linda similarly highlights that this language goes beyond simple "head knowledge", and truly connects with people's hearts, transforming their values and morals. She states: "If you change my faith, my spiritual DNA becomes part of who I am". The transformative language of faith is also found in normative theological voices in sacred texts, as stated by the interviewees. For instance, the biblical creation story is said to foster compassion for and stewardship of all creation, countering selfishness and a sense of domination. Nevertheless, according to the interviewees, many faith communities may need to reinterpret these texts to achieve this transformative perspective.

The interviewees also emphasise that faith language can bring about transformation in other ways – for example, by sharing the experiences of those in the global faith community who are affected by the climate crisis. Being part of the same faith community can foster a sense of belonging that encourages people to be receptive to these shared stories.

Examining how the South African interviewees discuss the varying roles of science and faith reveals a crucial dimension of their future visions. They formulate these visions not only in the light of the unique problems faced in South Africa, its historical events, and their religious faith, but also from a perspective closely connected to religious institutions. Therefore, institutionalised religion and its organisations are presented as vital resources for creating a sustainable future. For instance, the recognition of faith language as a means of transformation is intertwined with their positive experiences of religious institutions, including the extensive reach of these religious networks. As Linda points out, there lies an opportunity, in her words, to "mobilise a giant" for the necessary behavioural changes. However, the religious institutions are also stressed in the area of adaptation. Back to Linda again:

> I say the whole reach. If you think about how you get environmental issues out to a little village in South Sudan, or in the middle of a refugee camp. The faith communities are there. So you can work with the pastors and the imams. You can actually reach people that maybe NGOs or governments can't reach with this.

Specifically, individuals with strong ties to religious institutional networks that connect the global and the local levels are encouraged by their beneficial experiences of climate activism in religious organisations. They view these organisations as vital resources for future initiatives. They argue that this global framework allows faith actors to inspire both adaptation, which addresses the impacts of the climate crisis, and mitigation, which involves behavioural changes to reduce carbon emissions.

Faith communities are a significant theme when the interviewees envision South Africa's future. On one hand, while they criticise their local faith communities in particular owing to their personal struggles to find environments in which their holistic theologies could thrive, they also highlight the importance of these communities in shaping the future. Specifically, they are highlighted for their potential to serve as crucial spaces for initiating change, fostering community connections, and providing resilience during difficult times. Even Amir, who is not frequently engaged in any faith community, underscores the important role that faith actors play in building strong communities. He states:

> [I] can't think of anything really that has that power to unite people to community than religion does. … if you wanna envision a future for Africa that is resilient and prosperous and lively, then you know it is really based on community and community unity.

In addition, while the South African interviewees express some criticism of their faith leaders, they recognise their potential as unique and powerful figures. They argue that faith leaders, particularly bishops and youth, have the ability to inspire and motivate behavioural change. Faith leaders are seen as capable of encouraging people to act, and individuals of faith are perceived as willing to engage in climate action, viewing it as a calling from God.

In conclusion, the interviewees rely on both divine and human actions to secure the future and safeguard fundamental rights. Their theological voices reveal past divine interventions and sacred texts as reasons for hope. Human agency, such as campaigns and awareness efforts, also plays a crucial role. As seen throughout the South African material, history – here, particularly faith-based events – plays a vital role, linking past, present, and future in a continuous line.

The hope derived from faith contrasts with climate science's negative predictions, highlighting faith and science as complementary yet essential sources of the interviewees' future vision. Faith fosters enduring hope and a respectful relationship with nature. Faith's language influences moral values, with normative theological texts guiding the necessary transformation.

Despite their criticism of local faith communities for their inaction, the interviewees still see them as vital for future development, capable of connecting global and local efforts. Religious groups are valued for their outreach, community-building, behavioural change, and support for resilience during crises, with faith leaders playing a significant role in shaping the future.

Pathfinding amid climate catastrophe in South Africa

This examination of faith-based activism in South Africa, as operant and espoused theological voices, delineates key characteristics of what I conceptualise as the activists' pathfinding process amid the climate catastrophe. The metaphor of "pathfinding" is used to illustrate that I understand faith-based activism as a contextually situated process of navigating a rapidly changing, uncertain climate landscape, and that this process of navigation generates knowledge through experience and practice. In what follows, I use the metaphor to communicate and summarise the findings derived from my analysis of the role of religious faith in climate activism in South Africa, with a particular focus on the activists' theological reflection and practices. Guided by the rhetorical

questions associated with the metaphor of pathfinding, I now draw conclusions from the presentation of the South African empirical material.

Examining the South African interviewees' situational awareness reveals a characteristic feature of their pathfinding process: affinity with their context, which means they have a strong connection to and draw inspiration and strength from their context, while also being highly aware and engaged in tackling the numerous problems it faces. This deep connection with their context functions as a form of situational awareness that, I argue, most significantly influences the activists' pathfinding through the climate catastrophe, including the paths they select, the landmarks they notice, how they check their bearings, and the direction in which they are heading.

The interviewees' connections to their context make drawing inspiration from past struggles throughout their country's and people's history essential to their situational awareness, and therefore to their pathfinding process. Their analysis of the current situation, the climate crisis, is informed by past events in history. The past appears to have equipped them with knowledge about crises, thereby preparing them for new ones, which I argue could be understood as a form of resilience. Using the pathfinding metaphor, this could be understood as their not needing to pioneer new paths in the climate landscape; there are already those who have trodden those paths before them, creating routes that they can follow when heading towards the future. In the South African climate landscape, the faith-based activists find paths that are already available, stretching from the past into the future. The South African activists can also leverage the organisational structures of their religious institutions, which serve as established paths ready for use. Likewise, collaborating across faith traditions is a path that has been paved by those who have come before and that is supported by the organisational frameworks of existing faith-based organisations.

In their pathfinding, the activists also encounter new challenges that no one before them has faced: the consequences of the climate crisis. Here, they rely on climate knowledge as a landmark to guide them in their navigation. Their understanding of the climate crisis is primarily based on what I have framed as experience-based climate knowledge, meaning that the knowledge has evolved into experiences that reach deeper than mere intellectual understanding. This kind of knowledge can facilitate a transformative process with a distinct before-and-after phase, moving from limited or no awareness of the severity of the climate crisis to a crucial moment that sparks their activism. Typically, these transformative experiences are not linked to spirituality, apart

from those arising from personal encounters with the lived climate experiences of indigenous groups. Other sources of experience-based climate knowledge include learning from scientific films that are aimed at a wider audience, meeting committed activists, and participating in training programmes. However, climate knowledge obtained from academic studies can also serve as landmarks for the activists.

Those in the past who have been driven by faith to pursue justice and to defend the land's sanctity have not only created paths to use, as previously mentioned, but have also influenced the activists' spirituality, which I refer to as the collective spiritual identities of the South African activists. I argue that these collective spiritual identities function as a profound compass for the activists' navigation amid the climate catastrophe.

These collective spiritual identities are not primarily a spirituality of individual activists, but their spirituality as members of a group. This can be the spirituality of their people, as with indigenous activists, for whom the interviewees describe spirituality as inseparable from their identity. However, it can also be a spirituality influenced by other faith leaders throughout history, such as anti-apartheid leaders or key adults involved in the activists' upbringing, which, I argue – similarly to that of indigenous activists – shapes a profound spiritual identity characterised as collective. These faith practitioners of the past, who have faced other crises in history, serve as a kind of normative theological voice that inspires and empowers activists to adhere to collective spiritual identities. However, it also moves beyond mere inspiration and empowerment; it appears as a spiritual experience of being interconnected with those in the past. I understand this as an example of the South African interviewees' strong affinity with their context, which extends through time. For some interviewees, those with an indigenous identity or inspired by indigenous spirituality, there is even an experience of being interconnected with ancestors, who are still with them in the present. Thus, these collective spiritual identities are characterised by an interconnectedness throughout history. Particularly for indigenous interviewees, this spirituality is also typically characterised by a profound interconnectedness to the land and to nature.

This type of collective spiritual identity differs from that outlined in the theory section, as it does not have the individual's spiritual experience at the centre. This means that the individual activists' spiritual experiences are not at the forefront of the South African pathfinding process, but rather their affinity with their context. Yet, similar to the outline of spiritual experiences in the theory section, this spirituality has a transcendent point of reference; it appears

meaningful, valuable, and true; and it significantly influences the interviewees' understanding of themselves and the world and of how it should be organised or managed. Analysing their espoused theological voices reveals that the impact of spiritual experiences on the activists' self-understanding mainly involves perceiving themselves as part of a community and as connected to a long line of others from the past who have also been motivated by their faith to pursue justice and conserve nature. Therefore, this spirituality is characterised by a concern for the environment as a core element, alongside a commitment to justice and advocacy for vulnerable communities. It also inspires activists to engage in their local context and environment – for example, through community and environmental projects. Thus, their interconnectedness with others extends not only to those in the past but also to their local communities. Moreover, it is linked to the interviewees' respective religious traditions. Yet, theological differences are not important; instead, collaboration across faith boundaries for the well-being of society is common. In addition, the collective spiritual identities can reinforce hope that is based on God's intervention in history as a reliable resource for the future. Similarly, human actions in the past can serve as a basis for hope in the future. These collective spiritual identities serve as a compass that activists use to find their direction when navigating the challenging climate landscape.

The South African activists' pathfinding process is guided not only by the compass of collective spiritual identities and the landmarks of climate knowledge, but also by their situational awareness of local circumstances, including significant issues such as food security and justice. Their activism involves navigating a complex landscape that extends beyond climate issues alone. Understanding and addressing the climate challenges alongside other pressing issues reflects a pragmatic approach that is essential for navigating this multifaceted landscape. It also serves as a vital strategy to inspire others to participate in climate action. This approach also influences the direction in which they are heading. The goal of their activism is to secure the future and to ensure fundamental human rights, in particular for vulnerable communities that have already been hit the worst by the consequences of the climate crisis.

Analysing their espoused theological voices reveals that their pathfinding process involves revising their theological understandings. For instance, engaging in climate activism and in dialogue with normative theological texts has broadened their understanding of theological concepts such as salvation, which now includes not only humans but the entire cosmos. And spiritual experiences have led them to perceive God as the soil, and encounters with

indigenous spirituality during activism have led activists to redefine their perception of Christ as the cosmic Christ and as the first ancestor.

Having identified, sorted, and described different theological voices in the South African material through the application of the four voices of theology framework, I have posited that the espoused and operant theological voices in the material can be characterised as holistic. These holistic theologies are expressed through activism that tackles various societal issues, connecting local and global levels, collaborating between different faith traditions, while also integrating faith as both a dimension and a practical resource. This incorporation is evident not only in their espoused theological voices, which reveal that they view their activism as faith-based, understanding it as a response to a divine calling, encountering God during activism, and linking justice issues to faith, among other aspects; the incorporation of faith also becomes evident in their operant theological voices, which involve tangible faith resources such as normative texts as tools in practical community and environmental projects, leveraging organisational structures of faith-based organisations for lobbying and awareness-raising, aiming to mobilise faith leaders to engage with environmental and climate issues, and using contemplative practices, such as meditative walks and welcoming of the land rituals, in their activism. These holistic theologies create tensions, especially with local faith communities and leaders whom activists see as not sufficiently committed to addressing the climate crisis, and therefore not linking their theologies to the challenges created by the climate crisis. On a personal level, several South African activists in their pathfinding process try to identify holistic faith communities where their holistic theologies can thrive.

To conclude, the analysis indicates that responses to the theological questions outlined in the section "Theological lens in analysis" in Chapter 2, such as "Who is God? Who are we as humans? What is nature?", are not central to the interviewees' pathfinding process. Instead, theological questions such as how we are related to God, others, and nature through time and whom to trust in times of crisis have a greater influence on the pathfinding processes of South African activists than specific conceptualisations of God, humans, and nature.

Moreover, it is notable that theological understandings of God, humans, and nature are not static; rather, they can develop dynamically throughout their activism as activists re-evaluate and re-interpret foundational theological concepts and their understandings of them. However, embedded in their collective spiritual identities is a profound understanding of interconnectedness with God, nature, and ancestors, a fundamental interconnectedness that guides their

process of pathfinding. Historical struggles against apartheid and colonialism serve as a source of hope for the future, reinforcing the belief that divine intervention in human affairs will recur. Moreover, the legacy of collective human action in combating injustice at various points in South Africa's history sustains hope that such actions could once again influence the future and safeguard fundamental rights. Consequently, responses to the questions of how we are related and whom to trust are deeply rooted in history. This perspective also indicates that how to live as a person of faith is more about living in community in South African pathfinding than personal expressions of faith.

In addition, the motivation to confront the climate crisis does not originate mainly from religious faith, but is primarily driven by the tangible and severe consequences of the climate crisis.

4. Faith-based climate activism in Sweden

This chapter addresses the study's initial research question by examining how faith-based climate activists in Sweden motivate and conduct their activism. The structure of this chapter parallels that of the previous, organised into thematic sections in chronological order. It traces the progression from the initial catalysts of activism to current efforts and future directions.

This chapter also explores the research question about theologies in faith-based activism in Sweden. I continue to use my theological lens for analysis at this first level to explore how faith-based climate activists reveal their perceptions of the transcendent through words and actions. I continue to use the four voices of theology framework to identify, sort, and describe different theological voices in the material. During this process, the interviewees' diverse theological understandings of God, humans, and nature begin to emerge. A more in-depth theological analysis, proceeding to the second level of analysis, is conducted in Chapter 6.

From anxiety to activism

> [I] got horrible climate anxiety, and the whole world was about to fall apart; this is… we are on our way towards a catastrophe, and it hit me in some way. And, in this process, I was trying… what do I do now? (Ove)

The statement from the grassroots activist I refer to as Ove highlights an important theme in the Swedish empirical material: climate activism initiated by climate anxiety.[201] According to the Swedish interviewees, their climate activism began or intensified when they encountered information that enhanced their understanding of the severity of the climate crisis. Among the Swedish interviewees, it was primarily when this new-found or deepened

[201] Other activists express similar sentiments, stating, "[I] suffer quite a bit from climate anxiety", "One becomes overwhelmed by the situation", "I was quite shaken after learning more about the issue", and "a sting of immense fear". One interviewee, visibly upset that people were not taking the crisis seriously enough, described the situation in almost tearful tones, stating that it risks "endangering one's own offspring". Interviews with Vera, Karin, Maria, and Camilla.

understanding of climate issues triggered varying levels of climate anxiety that it spurred their activism.

I frame climate anxiety as a range of dark emotions caused by the perceived threat of climate change, which can include feelings of anxiety, worry, stress, fear, depression, anger, and more. It's important to note that I regard climate anxiety as a healthy and normal reaction to the consequences of the climate crisis. [202]

Ove's journey from anxiety to activism illustrates how the Swedish interviewees transformed their concerns into action. After his "awakening", he began to change his lifestyle, such as switching to low-energy lightbulbs in his home. However, he soon realised that these individual changes were not enough to alleviate his climate anxiety. As he put it, he began to "search for my flock". After three years of searching, he eventually found a group of individuals in his hometown who strike every Friday under the banner of Fridays For Future, and he joined them. Ove shares that his anxiety diminished when he experienced the feeling of "[I] am not alone anymore". This sense of discovering a community where he could share his anxiety and engage in collective action is what he describes as a significant reduction in his anxiety. These experiences resonate with those of other Swedish interviewees as well.

For Ove, it all began when he read a book that presents what I term science-based climate knowledge to a broad audience. Other interviewees have also gained an understanding of climate issues from books, others from television documentaries or from training in the climate movement. What stands out among the Swedish interviewees is that their sources of climate knowledge are rarely academic. Instead, they often rely on information gained from outside academia and from personal encounters. This primarily involves interactions with various climate activists, including younger activists in the secular

[202] The relationship between climate anxiety and climate activism is supported by academic research, particularly in psychosocial and sociological studies. These sources have influenced my understanding and usage of the term "climate anxiety". Since this study is grounded in the context of global Christianity and uses a theological framework, I focus on analysing how faith-based activism interacts with anxiety from a theological perspective, rather than exploring the emotions in depth. It should be noted that Panu Pihkala has authored an article aimed at equipping pastoral-care practitioners with resources to address eco-anxiety. Pihkala, "Eco-Anxiety and Pastoral Care." However, research in theological contexts on climate anxiety remains scarce. Discussions on different definitions of the term climate anxiety and its relationship to climate activism can be found in Pihkala, "Anxiety and the Ecological Crisis"; Ojala et al., "Anxiety, Worry, and Grief in a Time of Environmental and Climate Crisis"; Ogunbode et al., "Climate Anxiety, Wellbeing and pro-Environmental Action."

climate movement and faith-based activists. These encounters are believed to have enriched their understanding and, in turn, strengthened their commitment to address the climate crisis. Although they have not necessarily met the world-famous Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, she is cited as a source of inspiration by some of the interviewees.

There are also examples in the material that highlight transformative encounters with individuals from the Global South. These encounters have also deepened the interviewees' understanding of the seriousness of the climate crisis and evoked strong emotions such as anxiety. One example is Vera, who lived for a few months in a rural area of an economically disadvantaged African country. Vera is involved now in youth activism in her church, and elaborates on how these experiences have had an impact on her perspective:

> It was devastating to see people living in the climate crisis. To see them not having food on the table the next month due to drought. […] I suffer pretty much from climate anxiety … it is very heavy.

Furthermore, the contrast with the consumerism and superabundance she experiences in her home country, Sweden, worsens her heavy emotions. Similarly to other interviewees, the emotions she experiences contribute to driving her commitment to the climate cause.

Another closely related emotion stemming from a deeper understanding of the seriousness of the climate crisis is anger. While the interviewees rarely reflect on their climate emotions from a theological perspective, one of them, Jenny, does so. Her interactions with individuals from the Global South have deepened her understanding of the severe impact of the climate crisis on them, which has ignited feelings of anger within her. She believes that God dwells in her, and she links her own emotions to what she perceives as God's holy anger and passion for justice. As a result, both her own anger and God's are integrated into her motivation for activism. This serves as an example of how being open to one's emotions can also be a way to what Jenny in her espoused theological voice describes as "being open to what God wants to do in the world", and that the activism can be regarded as "actively taking action together" with the divine.[203]

Taking action is the most visible consequence of, or way to handle, the climate anxiety in the material, which is not unique to faith actors. However, as seen in Jenny's example, the climate actions being taken could be seen as a practice

[203] "vara öppen för vad Gud vill göra i världen", "aktivt handlar tillsammans".

of faith or, as I choose to frame it, a demonstration of the interviewees' operant theological voices. In addition, trust in the divine seems comforting, as is analysed further in the next section, as do faith practices such as prayers and other contemplative practices, which, to the interviewees, are also a way to take climate action. Furthermore, in addition to activist communities, faith communities are also presented as sources of comfort or potential comfort in times of climate crisis. Faith is portrayed as something that contrasts with the dark emotions of climate anxiety. For example, descriptions of being a faith-based activist are driven by joy and hope rather than by grief and anger.

In conclusion, the Swedish interviewees' awareness of the severity of the climate crisis has motivated them to become climate activists or to deepen their involvement, especially when experiencing climate anxiety. Their sources of knowledge are science-based information aimed at a broader audience, such as documentaries, books, films, and training, as well as personal interactions with activists or individuals in the Global South who are affected by the crisis. When climate knowledge becomes personally resonant, transforming into what I call experience-based climate knowledge, it often triggers anxiety, which then spurs the Swedish interviewees into activism. Therefore, it is not their religious faith that initiates their activism, but the anxiety caused by the climate crisis. Faith could, however, be seen as contrasting with anxiety'; ultimately, though, activism is regarded as the primary way to alleviate anxiety.

Strengthened by spiritual interconnectedness

> It is a spiritual experience, to experience oneself as part of a community that does not end with me, and not exactly with the people I am with, but has its foundation in God, who is the innermost of everything. It is a mystical experience, I think. (Karin)[204]

The spiritual experience of what I frame as spiritual interconnectedness is a significant theme in the Swedish material; here, Karin shares her experience during The Pilgrim's Walk for Future. Several interviewees participated in this pilgrimage, which journeyed from Sweden to COP 26, the UN climate negotiations in Glasgow in 2021.[205] This pilgrimage combined contemplative

[204] "Det är en andlig erfarenhet att erfara sig själv som del av ett sammanhang som inte är slut med mig, och inte precis med de människor jag är tillsammans med utan faktiskt har sin grund i Gud som är det innersta av allt. Det är en mystik erfarenhet, tror jag."

[205] The Pilgrim's Walk for Future was initiated in 2021, stretching from Vadstena in Sweden to Glasgow in Scotland, where COP 26, the UN climate negotiations, took place that year. In addition

practices with political protest. The contemplative practices undertaken during the pilgrimage included walking in silence, daily prayers, celebrating Mass, and reflecting on a book specifically written for the occasion. The protest actions included campaign activities such as strikes and petitions, and the entire pilgrimage was regarded as an act of political protest.

The Swedish interviewees primarily report spiritual experiences arising from climate activism events, especially during The Pilgrim's Walk for Future or during acts of civil disobedience. While anxiety caused by climate knowledge sparks their activism, these spiritual experiences, along with the insights they provide, strengthen and drive the ongoing commitment of the interviewees. I characterise these experiences as spiritual experiences, regardless of whether the participants view them as such. As outlined in Chapter 2, I use the term "spiritual experiences" for experiences that reference the transcendent and that have significance and authenticity for the interviewee. They are not confined to other-worldly matters; rather, they offer insights that shape their perspectives on how society should be organised, subsequently having an impact on their activism. Here I term these insights "spiritual insights".

The reported spiritual experiences of interconnectedness can be categorised into three different and often overlapping aspects: relation to God, to nature, and to other humans. These experiences can manifest in various ways, such as feeling a sense of interconnectedness with nature, or with fellow activists during climate action events, or with people encountered along the pilgrimage. This interconnectedness stems from the experience and understanding of God's presence in both humans and nature. As some of them put it: "God in everything", "God's presence in everything", and "God exists in all of us".[206]

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to the longer pilgrimage, shorter ones were organised, largely because of COVID pandemic restrictions that limited large gatherings. (These shorter pilgrimages have continued beyond 2021 and into 2025. People are also invited to create their own shorter Pilgrim's Walk for Future.) For this study, some participants were selected from those involved in the original longer pilgrimage, although they may not have travelled the entire distance but joined for a shorter duration. Other Swedish interviewees did not take part in the Pilgrim's Walk for Future, but were engaged in different settings elsewhere in Sweden. The Pilgrim's Walk for Future was arranged by the dioceses of Linköping, Växjö and Lund, as part of the Church of Sweden's Climate Roadmap. The coordinators of the pilgrimage were based at Vadstena Pilgrimscentrum in the diocese of Linköping. The pilgrimage was arranged in cooperation with other church-related organisations, such as a youth organisation, associations for voluntary adult education, and publishers, as well as secular environmental organisations. The following actors were collaborating: Act Church of Sweden, Fridays for Future Sweden, Pilgrimage in Sweden, Church of Sweden Youth, Swedish Society for Nature and Conservation, Christian Council of Sweden, Naturkartan.se, Sensus Studieförbund, Bilda, Grön Kyrka, God Jord, Världsnaturfonden WWF, Verbum, Phosworks, and Votum. Pilgrim's Walk for Future, "Pilgrim's Walk for Future."

[206] Interviews with Karin, Camilla, and Jenny.

The significance of nature as a setting for spiritual encounters and its impact on activists can be illustrated through the example of Nils. He recounts walking along a beautiful path during The Pilgrim's Walk for Future and passing by some old trees, which he felt "received the voice of God".[207] Nils describes how this experience profoundly influenced him:

> [I]t became so apparent to me that our lives were so short. It sounds obvious, but it was such an enormously powerful experience. … I was reminded of the necessity of humility if we are to save the planet.[208]

This example also illustrates that *spiritual experiences* often seem to create insights, which I refer to as *spiritual insights*, meaning an insight the interviewees receive through a spiritual experience that deepens and guides their climate commitment and, thus, their navigation in the climate catastrophe landscape. The spiritual insights are not necessarily new to the interviewees, but they are reinforced through spiritual experiences gained during climate activism. The above example led the activist to a deepened insight into humility as a crucial approach to saving the world's future.

A more dominant theme in the material is the spiritual insight of dependence. This insight follows the spiritual experience of being interconnected with others, nature, and God. This can be seen, for example, in Jenny's experience of dependence on nature during the pilgrimage:

> [O]ne gets closer and feels more that this is what we are dependent on. Yes, it is the earth, the light, the ground, and the rains that are what actually uphold our lives. I could feel that. It became a more lived reality that we belong to nature and depend on it. [209]

The interviewees' experiences of interconnectedness and dependence are not merely abstract ideas; instead, they are recognised as significant and authentic aspects of their lived experiences that shape their operant and espoused theological voices. This realisation seems to provide them with a sense of liberation, as they find strength in relying on God. Although they do not explicitly discuss trusting in divine intervention about the climate crisis, their espoused theological reflections on spiritual experiences and insights suggest a deep

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[207] "de fick gudsröst".

[208] "[D]et blev så uppenbart för mig hur vi är så kortlivade. Det låter självklart, men för mig var det en sån där enormt stark upplevelse. … Jag blev påmind om den ödmjukhet som måste till för att vi ska kunna rädda planeten."

[209] "[M]an kommer närmare och känner in mer att det är det här vi är beroende av. Ja, det är ju jorden, ljuset och marken och regnet, det är ju det som upprätthåller våra liv liksom. Ja så kunde jag känna. Det blev mer levande verklighet att vi tillhör naturen och är beroende av den."

trust in God's presence and God's willingness to engage in a relationship with them. As a result, reliance on God emerges as a central theme in the Swedish interview material, serving as a foundational aspect of their climate activism.

The interviewees' reliance on God also seems to help to alleviate their climate anxiety and to provide comfort during stressful activist situations. This is particularly evident among those who actively engage in civil disobedience. Camilla describes her experiences:

> I am totally dependent on God, and that is freedom; I can just let go of control, or I have to… It is difficult and humiliating, but it is probably good. [210]

When faced with the challenges and stress of being confronted by the police, detained, or prosecuted for activism, surrendering to God seems extra crucial and liberating. In addition, personal vulnerabilities such as health conditions and/or difficulties in personal life can deepen this experience and insight into a total dependence on God even more.

While a strong tendency in the material is for spiritual experiences to be reported as happening at activism events, some interviewees also highlight spiritual experiences in other contexts that still strengthen and drive their activism. For instance, Vera describes feeling God's presence most profoundly when she shared her daily life with individuals suffering the severe consequences of the climate crisis in the Global South. These encounters not only provided her with insights into the gravity of the climate emergency, but also created an experience of what she describes as God's presence amid the crisis. This sense of presence offers her something to cling to during difficult times and feelings of climate anxiety.

As has been shown, various spiritual experiences illustrate the activists' depicted interconnectedness with God, with other humans, and with nature. These experiences often lead to spiritual insights for the interviewees. However, they are not limited to personal relevance. Interviewees emphasise the importance of these insights on a systemic level, particularly for addressing environmental crises. As we explore later, these spiritual experiences and insights serve as valuable resources in shaping activism and formulating the necessary steps to create a sustainable future.

[210] "Jag är totalt beroende av Gud, och det är en frihet, jag kan bara släppa kontrollen, det måste jag göra… Det är jättesvårt och förödmjukande, men säkert bra."

Occasionally, interviewees make explicit, though often loose, references to religious teachings or texts, which I frame as normative theological voices, when reflecting on their spiritual experiences and insights. These references serve as a resource for deepening their understanding of their spiritual experiences and situating themselves and those experiences in the Christian tradition. For instance, Camilla reflects on her dependence on God in the light of the foundational Christian teaching on the fall of humanity, which describes how humans failed by breaking their original relationship with God:

> That we shouldn't be dependent on God, that's the whole fall of humanity, that we don't belong and should take care of ourselves.[211]

Thus, her spiritual experience attests to what she understands as humanity's original relationship with and dependence on God. In the same vein, Nils elaborates on spiritual experiences in the light of Christian teachings:

> [I] argue that there is in the Christian faith at least a possibility to realise that I am totally dependent, totally limited as a human through my senses and my tiny brain and so on. Because even if we are created in God's image, we are limited.[212]

His reflections illustrate how normative conceptualisations of God and humans deepen and underscore his spiritual experiences during the pilgrimage and deepen his spiritual insights, such as his understanding of dependence.

Biblical stories are also explicitly referenced in the interviewees' espoused theological voices. For instance, Karin, who, like Nils, is a trained theologian, uses the narrative of Jesus' disciples to interpret her spiritual experiences and her insights into dependence on God. Her example emphasises that dependence on and surrender to the divine do not imply passivity. On the contrary, they are portrayed as liberating experiences that inspire and strengthen activism. Throughout the interview, Karin repeatedly underscores her relationship with Jesus. To her, The Pilgrim's Walk for Future produced an experience of walking with Jesus similar to that of the disciples back then, who also left everything behind. She comments:

> I think what we did when we were walking, more like anything I'd done before in my life, this simple act of just leaving everything behind and "follow me".

[211] "Att vi inte skulle vara beroende av Gud, det är ju hela syndafallet, att vi inte hör till och ska klara oss själva egentligen."
[212] "[J]ag menar att det I den kristna tron finns det i alla fall en möjlighet att inse att jag är totalt beroende, totalt begränsad som människa genom mina sinnen och min lilla hjärna och sånt där. Därför att vi, även om vi är skapade till Guds avbilder så är vi begränsade."

> It kind of grabbed me. That somehow it was do-able. I thought I got some kind of taste of what it might have been like then.[213]

The biblical narrative is used here not only to deepen the interviewee's analysis and understanding of spiritual experiences and insights. The biblical narrative also creates what I have previously labelled "interconnectedness"; however, here it is not limited to relationships with nature, others, and God, but is also linked to their faith tradition and its people – here, Jesus' disciples. The concept of dependence, as seen also in other examples above, encompasses here a surrender to God, made possible by a perceived interconnectedness to God, which is also characterised as a personal relationship with Jesus.

In the Swedish material, spiritual experiences take centre stage, while normative theological voices play a secondary role. However, these normative theological voices are valuable tools for reflecting on spiritual experiences and insights. Formal theological voices (academic theologies) can also aid the interviewees in interpreting these experiences. One significant source of inspiration is the German theologian Dorothee Sölle. Her teachings were referenced in the book *Pilgrim's Walk for Future: En resa mot klimaträttvisa och mot hjärtats grund* by Annika Spalde, which was created for and used during The Pilgrim's Walk for Future. Interviewees in this context specifically reference Sölle's writings and the *Pilgrim's Walk for Future* book while reflecting on their spiritual experiences of dependence and reliance – for example, when Karin, Jenny, and Kristina use expressions such as "wonderment", "letting go", "reliance", "trust", and "resistance". Thus, this book emphasises the spiritual experiences and insights gained during the pilgrimage, highlighting their relevance and significance in the context of the climate crisis. Consequently, it serves as a framework for interpreting the interviewees' spiritual experiences and insights, thereby enhancing their commitment to activism.

In conclusion, a defining characteristic of the spiritual experiences and subsequent spiritual insights in the Swedish material is the perception of interconnectedness with God, nature, and others. Such experiences strengthen and drive the interviewees' climate activism. While these spiritual experiences are deeply personal and tied to individual practices, the interviewees' espoused theological voices suggest that they cultivate a profound sense of belonging in a larger, interconnected whole, which is essential for sustaining their activist engagement. The spiritual insights gained from these experiences,

[213] "Jag tycker det vi gjorde när vi vandrade, liknade mer än nåt annat jag gjort tidigare i mitt liv, detta enkla att bara lämna allt och 'följ mig'. Det grep liksom tag i mig, att det på nåt sätt var görbart. Jag tänkte att jag fick någon slags smak av vad det kan ha varit då."

especially those emphasising dependence, reliance, and surrender to God, are not seen as leading to passivity but as empowering for activism. Moreover, this sense of interconnectedness extends to figures in the religious tradition, such as feeling interconnected with the disciples of Jesus. Repeatedly, nature and activism-related contexts emerge as fertile grounds for these spiritual experiences and insights.

Living an authentic Christian life

> [W]e associate with God in the activist group or on the pilgrimage for the climate… God walks with us. It is not as if you associate with God in peace and then you go out in the world as if God is not there. Sometimes, I think it sounds like that when people talk about this. (Jenny)[214]

After examining what initiates and drives the Swedish interviewees' activism, I now explore how they enact it. The above quote demonstrates that, for these activists, spiritual life and climate practices are inseparable; climate activism is viewed as a way of living an authentic Christian faith. This understanding is evident throughout the material, not only in their espoused theological voices but also in their operant theological voices. It is especially noticeable in how they combine protest actions with contemplative practices. This can be observed, for example, in prayers during protests such as civil disobedience, as well as in their theological reflections on how they see contemplative practices such as pilgrimages, celebrating Mass, and prayers as part of their Christian commitment to climate and environmental issues.

The combination of protest actions and contemplative practices, which I refer to as *ContemplActions,* is most clearly demonstrated by the materials collected from The Pilgrim's Walk for Future. The organisers, with the Church of Sweden as the leading entity, articulated the event as "a walk for protest and inner pilgrimage", emphasising its dual purpose of political protest and spiritual reflection, and framing it as a source of hope for the future.[215] This unique blend is what the interviewees found especially appealing about the pilgrimage, as evidenced by a quote from Nils, one of the participants:

> [T]he beauty is the combination; that this is both a pilgrimage and a political action, that is what made me sign up. I thought it was incredibly clever. […]

[214] "[V]i umgås med Gud i aktionsgruppen eller på pilgrimsvandring för klimatet. Gud går med oss. Det är ju inte så att man umgås med Gud i stillhet och sen går man ut i världen som att Gud inte är där. Ibland tycker jag det låter som det när folk pratar om det här."
[215] Pilgrim's Walk for Future, "Pilgrim's Walk for Future - Nyhetsbrev nr 1."

> [S]uddenly you start to reclaim an old tradition in all religions to walk where something special is happening, something holy, or what to say, that is happening, and this political marching is also a tradition that many times has appeared separately. I think it is, in that way, a fantastic picture of what, to me, is a living faith, actually.[216]

By combining contemplation with political protest actions, the pilgrimage offered a way for the interviewees to practise what they see as an authentic Christian life. It acted as a "context where you can put these pieces together" (Kristina), which Nils described as holy.

The campaigning practices targeted political leaders and took various forms. The most prominent aspect of the campaign was the march to the United Nations climate negotiations in Glasgow. This event aimed to persuade international leaders to take action to prevent the worsening of the climate crisis. The campaigning approach was also evident through a petition, for which participants collected signatures along the way, serving as a tangible campaign tool during the pilgrimage. On reaching Glasgow, they delivered the petition to the praesidium of the COP 26. Another campaign tool was a message relay aimed at reminding those who participated and those they encountered along the way about the purpose of the pilgrimage. They also occasionally joined Fridays For Future demonstrators when the pilgrimage route and schedule allowed – for example, in Malmö and in Hamburg. But most often they organised their own Friday climate strikes as part of their pilgrimage.[217]

The message relay was periodically read along the route, particularly in Sweden. The petition was formulated by the Act Church of Sweden and deliberately aligned with the demands of the global youth movement Fridays For Future.[218] In the first newsletter sent by the organisers during the participant recruitment process and the formation of the movement, the demands were outlined as follows:

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[216] "[S]könheten är att det var både en pilgrimsvandring och en politisk auktion; det var det som fick mig att anmäla mig. Jag tyckte det var så otroligt smart. […] [P]lötsligt reclaimar man en gammal tradition i alla religioner att gå där det är något speciellt, något heligt, eller vad man ska säga, som händer, och det här politiska marscherandet som också är en tradition, som många gånger har skett separat. Jag tycker det på så sätt är en fantastisk bild av vad, för mig, levande tro är egentligen."

[217] Email correspondence with Annika Spalde, the pilgrimage leader, dated July 2, 2025.

[218] The Church of Sweden was one of the organisers of The Pilgrim's Walk for Future. Act Church of Sweden is described by the organisation as "the branch for international mission and diaconia of the Church of Sweden and thus constitutes its international aid and development work. Act Church of Sweden is a faith-based development and aid actor and an integral part of the Church of Sweden". Act Church of Sweden, "Act Church of Sweden."

> [T]o keep global temperature increase below 1.5 °C, adhere to the Paris Agreement, ensure climate justice, and listen to the best joint science currently available. [219]

The group emphasised strict political demands that align with current international climate science. However, during my observations at the pilgrimage, I was surprised to find that these political demands were less visible than I had anticipated. Throughout the week during which I participated, the message relay was neither read out loud in public nor mentioned by the participants. I learnt about it later from a social media post by the organisers, which indicated that the message relay had been read out loud at the beginning of the pilgrimage, a part I did not attend. In addition, the group only collected signatures for the petition once during my observations, while briefly stopping in a church to learn about its history.

I conclude that the pilgrimage itself, with its goal of reaching the UN climate negotiations, was the primary means of political advocacy. The organisers successfully garnered some media attention in Sweden, aiming to raise awareness about the climate crisis and the negotiations while supporting political protest.[220]

The contemplative practices during the pilgrimage included walking in silence, daily prayers, celebrating Mass, and reflecting on the book specifically written for the occasion, as previously highlighted. These practices focused on the participants themselves rather than on political leaders. The organisers described these practices as "an inner pilgrimage in our own lives".[221] This specifically sought to offer participants the chance for active reflection on their lives and lifestyle choices, aimed at contributing to "climate justice and sustainability". The organisers also communicated this to inspire hope for the future.[222]

The contemplative practices were more frequent when the group was in Sweden, but they became less regular when they joined pilgrims from Germany and the Netherlands on their way to Glasgow. Some Swedish interviewees

[219] "[A]tt hålla den globala temperaturökningen under 1,5 °C, följa Parisavtalet, säkerställ klimaträttvisa och lyssna på den bästa förenade vetenskapen som för närvarande finns" Pilgrim's Walk for Future, "Pilgrim's Walk for Future - Nyhetsbrev nr 1."
[220] See, for example: Sveriges Radio, "Pilgrimsvandring för klimatet - Studio Ett"; SVT Nyheter, "Pilgrimsvandring för klimatet passerar länet – på väg till Glasgow"; Sveriges Radio, "Det behövs en profetisk röst om vi ska fatta allvaret - Människor och tro."
[221] Pilgrim's Walk for Future, "Pilgrim's Walk for Future."
[222] Pilgrim's Walk for Future, "Pilgrim's Walk for Future - Nyhetsbrev nr 1."

noted this during their interviews, emphasising how much they had valued the contemplative practices performed earlier in the pilgrimage. However, the contemplative practices are not seen as contrasting with the campaigning activities with their political demands; instead, they are viewed as inseparable components of living a Christian life.

A closer examination of the interviewees' espoused theological voices reveals, furthermore, the central role that personal relationships with and experiences of the divine play in their climate activism. The interviewees, Karin, Nils, and Jenny, are all, to varying degrees, trained theologians who have reflected deeply on their activism as an expression of their Christian faith. Their theological reflections underline that climate activism is not viewed as an ancillary aspect of their faith but is, in fact, at the core of their Christian lives.

While "God" is the most commonly used term for the divine, references to Jesus are also prevalent, with occasional mentions of the Holy Spirit. Karin, who describes having a close relationship with Jesus throughout her life, explicitly views her activism as a calling. She articulates her desire to "express faith in the resurrection", explaining that her religiously rooted hope in Jesus' resurrection motivates her to take action and to find meaning in striving "to live according to the Gospel".[223] At times, she has faced criticism for discussing climate issues instead of focusing on Jesus, which upsets her.

> [F]aith in Jesus is sort of that little rock outcrop I stand. […] don't step on that; that is important to me.[224]

Likewise, Nils emphasises his connection to Jesus in his climate activism. When asked what motivates him to remain engaged, Nils responds:

> I have to because I am who I am […], but I can't blame Jesus for everything, but I believe that it is part of Jesus' way, in a way.[225]

Therefore, Nils considers his activism a way to follow what he describes as "Jesus' way". In addition, like Karin, he refers to the Gospel when describing his calling as "the evangelical way of life". He contends that it involves both spirituality and activism, as for him these are intertwined. He explains:

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[223] "gestalta tron på uppståndelsen". "att leva i enlighet med Evangeliet".
[224] "[J]esustron är liksom det där lilla klipputsprånget där jag står. […] trampa inte på det, det är det viktiga för mig."
[225] "Jag måste för jag är den jag är […], men jag kan inte beskylla Jesus för allting, men jag tror att det ingår i Jesus-vägen på nåt sätt."

> [I]nstead of getting into this inner life, which is also wonderful and needed, you can decide to follow Jesus, which could be to enter a way of life based on the care of the planet, of creation, of everything living, ourselves. Then, it becomes open for everyone who follows that road to express themselves.[226]

Jenny, for her part, argues that taking action for a better world means cooperating with the Holy Spirit in bringing life to creation and opposing destructive forces.

The theological reflections of Karin, Nils, and Jenny on their climate practices emphasise the significance of personal relationships with various aspects of the divine in their climate activism. This relationship not only strengthens and drives their activism, as previously elaborated on, but also lies at the heart of their theological reflections on climate activism.

When interviewees reflect on their climate practices and stress them as being at the core of their faith, they often reference normative theological voices such as "the Gospel", "the Evangelium", or the teachings about Jesus' resurrection. Occasionally, they also mention specific normative theological texts, though often in an implicit manner. To illustrate this, I use examples from Vera. She emphasises that "We humans are caretakers of the garden", which implicitly references Genesis 2:15 and normative teachings on this theme, in which God entrusts humans with the responsibility of caring for the Garden of Eden, thereby presenting this as a divinely appointed task to engage with the environment.[227]

Moreover, she recounts an emotional experience at the UN climate negotiations in Glasgow. When she was questioning what these political negotiations meant, which appeared rather technical, and whether the activists' contributions could actually make a difference, she saw a fellow climate activist holding a sign that read, "This is love". Overcome with emotion, she began to cry when she saw the sign, as it reminded her of the core of her faith: "Faith, hope, and love", implicitly referencing 1 Corinthians 13:13.[228] In my view, this serves as another illustration of how the Swedish activists view their climate activism as a way to express their Christian faith; the political campaigning

[226] "[I]stället för att hamna i det där inre, som också är underbart och behövs, så kan man tänka sig att följa Jesus, som skulle kunna vara att gå in i en livsform som bygger på en omsorg om planeten, om skapelsen, om alltings levande levande, oss själva. Då blir det öppet för var och en som följer den vägen hur de ska gestalta sig själva."
[227] "Vi människor blir *caretakers* av trädgården".
[228] "Tro, hopp och kärlek".

and the activists' presence at the UN climate negotiations become an expression of what Vera describes with the biblical terms of faith, hope, and love.

I conclude that the Swedish interviewees perceive their activism as a way of living an authentic Christian life, exemplified through their blending of contemplative and protest practices, which I have termed ContemplActions. This is most evident in The Pilgrim's Walk for Future, but also among interviewees who did not participate in the pilgrimage, whose espoused theological voices hold that this combination of contemplation and protest embodies the essence of their faith, even describing it as holy. Their interpretations highlight activism as a manifestation of faith in Jesus' resurrection and as a way of authentic Christian living. The use of normative theological voices, such as the Gospel or Evangelium, to describe their activism further underscores this perspective. Analysing their activism as operant and espoused theological voices reveals what I refer to as holistic theologies, in which activism embodies an authentic Christian life, integrating protest and contemplation, conceptualised as ContemplActions, and reconciling the boundaries between transcendent realities and worldly matters.

Disconnect and reconnect

> You bear witness to something different. (Karin)[229]

The Swedish interviewees align themselves with current climate research, which indicates that significant societal transformation aimed at reducing a reliance on fossil fuels is essential to prevent escalating climate disasters. Consequently, they openly critique the social norms that shape their society. Through various forms of climate activism, including protests, campaigns, nonviolent civil disobedience, and through lifestyle modifications, they advocate these changes. As a result, their climate activism includes both protest activities and lifestyle adjustments. Using the four voices of theology framework, both elements could be interpreted as expressions of the interviewees' operant theological voices.

When examining the Swedish interviewees' focus on lifestyle more deeply, a central theme emerges: the process of disconnecting from a consumer-driven, individualistic, and carbon-dependent society and reconnecting with their understanding of divine presence, thereby striving to embody an authentic Christian life.

[229] "Man bär vittne om någonting annat".

The degree to which the interviewees explicitly criticise the current society from which they strive to disconnect themselves varies. The criticism ranges, as in the case of Nils, from labelling the current culture as "neo-vulgar-liberalism-globalisation-capitalism", described as "Anti-Christ", to a less explicit and harsh but still strong criticism.[230] Regardless of how strong their criticism is, their way to change the culture does not take on a revolutionary character, but rather proposes to reconsider values and to change practices. For example, Nils, who labels the current culture Anti-Christ, is arguing for new approaches to life inspired by Christian mysticism, such as "non-doing" and slowness, in contrast to a society where speed is something that is prioritised and highly valued. Another example is Ove, for whom growing a large amount of his own food has become an essential part of his lifestyle change, integrated into his overall activism that also includes regular protest actions.

Lifestyle changes such as choosing vegetarian or vegan food, growing their own food, selecting fossil-fuel-free or low-carbon transportation modes, buying second-hand items, and switching energy sources in their homes could furthermore be seen as the interviewees' efforts to demonstrate their trustworthiness. It appeared unthinkable to criticise consumerist society without at least attempting to change one's own lifestyle. Hence, lifestyle alterations can be seen as a way of empowering themselves to contribute to the societal change they believe is urgently needed, rather than merely urging political leaders to take responsibility. The following quote by Jenny illustrates this:

> The word "protest", I am not very fond of it. ... if you interpret the word and the phenomenon, there is a lot to tell someone else to do things differently. Rather than directly on your own trying to change what you think is wrong.[231]

This does not imply that their lifestyle focus opposes their protest practices; rather, these activities are viewed as complementary; but the quote above underscores the dignity of the lifestyle aspect of their activism. Together, protest actions and lifestyle alteration shape the Swedish interviewees' activism, reflecting what they perceive as a commitment to live an authentic Christian life.

The focus on lifestyle could be understood as personal and individualistic and as an act of self-reflection and identity formation in the context of the climate crisis. However, it is important to note that the interviewees perceived the

[230] "nyvulgär-liberalism-globaliserings-kapitalism".
[231] "Ordet protest, jag är inte så förtjust i det. … om man tolkar ordet och fenomenet så är det mycket att säga till någon annan att göra på ett annat sätt. Snarare än att själv direkt försöka förändra det man tycker är fel."

individual's well-being as interconnected with the well-being of society and of the planet. In addition, the distinction between political protest and reflection on lifestyle was not always clear; the lifestyle focus could also be viewed as part of their political protest. They not only emphasised political actions for societal change, but also explored and demonstrate alternative ways of living that potentially influence others, their community, and ultimately larger society. In this sense, adopting a particular lifestyle is also a political act, suggesting that the interviewees see the personal aspects of life as inherently political.

The shift towards lifestyles that signify a deliberate disconnection from mainstream society is frequently coupled with contemplative practice. These aim to reconnect with transcendent realities. Such practices are conceptualised as integral components of a sustainable lifestyle, a trend observed among all the Swedish interviewees. Contemplative practices geared to reconnect with God include traditional forms, such as prayer, pilgrimage, meditation, and Bible reading, and contemporary adaptations. For instance, some individuals who did not participate in The Pilgrim's Walk for Future organised pilgrimages as a form of contemplative practice and online gatherings in which participants start with meditation and prayers and then talk together about the climate crisis. In addition, practices that interviewees characterise as contemplative, despite not being rooted in established Christian traditions, demonstrate the broad applicability of reconnecting practices within lifestyle frameworks. Magdalena's depiction of winter swimming as a form of worship exemplifies this intersection, illustrating a dual purpose of disengagement from consumerist influences and fostering a reconnection with nature and with God. These observations highlight the recurring theme of disconnection and reconnection that underpins the lifestyle practices of the Swedish interviewees, as an integration of transcendent realities and worldly matters.

It is crucial to highlight that, although the focus on lifestyle is viewed as a way to contribute to necessary societal change, the interviewees are not merely protesting against something. Their faith practices also help them to explore positive alternatives. This view was evident in a public speech delivered by one of the participants in The Pilgrim's Walk for Future during a church event that I observed while participating in the pilgrimage. The participant described the pilgrimage and the commitment to climate action as a way of saying "yes" to something, rather than simply saying "no".

Similarly, this is reflected in the expression of climate activism, manifested as an authentic Christian life, as a way to "bear witness to something else".[232] Karin, who participated in The Pilgrim's Walk for Future, elaborates:

> My latest analysis is that we stopped being pilgrims. Because I'm trying to understand what it was that I was involved in when I was walking. And the alienation I felt when I came home. Pilgrim means stranger, there's a point in that. You're like a stranger in the current culture. You bear witness to something different, something bigger, and therefore don't feel completely at home in what is mainstream or prevailing. And I remember, when I grew up, I grew up in a church and there were a lot of these so-called homeland songs that were about heaven, or we sang "Soon and very soon we are going to see the King". Jesus is going to come back and then there was a lot of that that wasn't healthy. But then it quieted down. Well, not everywhere, I'd say. But I think we stopped being pilgrims. That too many of the church's representatives and members instead became very settled in the prevailing culture, and then it rubbed off more and more. "Why should I long, or why should I sing these songs?"[233]

The quote highlights the theme of disconnecting and reconnecting as also being evident in the interviewees' espoused theological voices. The interviewee quoted above describes a significant disconnect from mainstream culture during her childhood and youth, a theme that later faded in the normative theology of her church. Now, she is working to reclaim a version of that earlier theology, applying it to the climate crisis and contemporary culture. She integrates these ideas into her espoused theology to advocate cultural criticism and to explore new lifestyles through the lens of her Christian faith. It illustrates how the Swedish interviewees, in their espoused theological voices, put forward faith as a resource for disconnecting from current society and also as a resource for reconnecting to a transcendent reality and living a Christian life, which includes exploring more sustainable ways of living.

To the interviewees who took part in The Pilgrim's Walk for Future, this event, despite also presenting hardships, offered a liberating chance to step

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[232] "bära vittne om någonting annat."

[233] "Min senaste analys är att vi slutade vara pilgrimer. För jag försöker förstå vad det var jag var med om när jag vandrade. Och det främlingskap jag kände när jag kom hem. Pilgrim betyder främling, det finns en poäng i det. Man är liksom en främling i den rådande kulturen. Man bär vittne om någonting annat, något större och blir därför inte helt hemma i det som är mainstrem eller rådande. Och jag minns ju att när jag växte upp, jag är uppvuxen i en kyrka och då fanns ju mycket av det här man kallade hemslandssånger som handlade om himlen, eller vi sjöng 'Soon and very soon we are going to see the King'. Jesus ska komma tillbaka och sen så fanns det ju en hel del i det som inte var sunt. Men sen tystnade det. Ja inte överallt ska jag säga. Men jag tror att vi slutade vara pilgrimer. Att för många av kyrkans företrädare och medlemmar istället blev väldigt bofasta i den rådande kulturen och då skavde det mer och mer. 'Varför ska jag längta bort, eller varför ska jag sjunga det här sångerna?'"

away from their daily routines and from a society that often centres on consumerism, speed, and individualism, according to the interviewees. This disconnection from society offered a tangible opportunity to consider ways to lower their carbon emissions, aligning with their daily life efforts and the efforts of other interviewees in this study. For instance, only vegan or vegetarian meals were served throughout the pilgrimage. The theme of walking, rather than relying on fossil fuel transportation, emerged frequently in interviews, serving as a transformative experience that heightened awareness of how speed defines their society. Moreover, through my participant observation, I noted that discussions of daily lifestyle choices frequently occurred among the participants.

Disconnecting from society during The Pilgrim's Walk for Future also created space for deeper reflection on lifestyle choices beyond mere reductions in fossil fuel emissions, which aligned with the interviewees' willingness to disconnect and reconnect. This was also the intention with the setup of The Pilgrim's Walk for Future, as it highlighted the participants' lifestyle changes and their reflections on living sustainably in a holistic way, which, as previously mentioned, the organisers described as "an inner pilgrimage in our own lives".[234] In addition, the book produced for and used during the pilgrimage promoted the exploration of new lifestyles and the contemplative practices it used, which aimed to deepen the reflection upon lifestyle.[235]

Using contemplative practices enabled the pilgrimage participants to reconnect with what they perceive as God and to explore how to live an authentic Christian life. Through active reconnection, the interviewees reported having spiritual experiences. As previously mentioned, a common spiritual experience among the participants was a sense of interconnectedness with God, others, and nature. Therefore, active reconnection fostered the experience of spiritual interconnectedness and a deeper spiritual insight into dependence. The pilgrimage's location in nature encouraged powerful spiritual experiences of interconnectedness with and reliance on the environment.

It became increasingly evident through my participant observation that, for the pilgrimage participants and for other individuals I encountered, the spiritual experiences of interconnectedness and the subsequent insights of dependence became deeply intertwined with other lived experiences such as embracing a

[234] "en inre pilgrimsresa i våra egna liv"; Pilgrim's Walk for Future, "Pilgrim's Walk for Future - Nyhetsbrev nr 1."
[235] Spalde, *Pilgrim's walk for future*.

slower pace of life, perceiving time differently, reducing consumption, and fostering a heightened sense of community. These lived experiences during the activism practices contribute to the exploration of new lifestyles in which concrete carbon emission reduction and spirituality are intertwined, and both are seen as a way to live an authentic Christian life. Thus, the contemplative practices, previously highlighted as strengthening and driving the interviewees' activism, also contribute to exploring new ways of living.

Even though the combination of lifestyle and protest dimensions was at the core of The Pilgrim's Walk for Future, during my observations I found that discussions about changing personal lifestyles were more prominent than the political protest dimension in campaigning practices. For instance, the organisers facilitated activities such as introducing participants to organic farming and encouraging reflection on lifestyle choices via social media discussion groups. These findings suggest that the emphasis on lifestyle and personal reconnecting was more visible than the protest dimension, which involved addressing political leaders. This focus on individual lifestyle changes offers a more tangible approach than symbolic protests aimed at influencing climate policies. Nonetheless, it is plausible that the protest aspect gained increased attention during the Glasgow conference and the UN climate negotiations.

Another illustrative example of the theme of disconnecting and reconnecting in the Swedish material, although not manifested during activism, is Vera's experience of sharing daily life with people and being dependent on nature in a rural village in an African country. She says:

> It was the first time I lived a life without the materialistic buzz. […] so fragile and stripped down that other values can find space.[236]

She describes a stark contrast between these experiences and what she encountered on her return to Sweden at Christmas time, marked by rampant consumerism and lavish dinner tables. In addition, she notes that her relationship with God was strengthened and deepened during her time in the African country. This illustrates her experience as a process of disconnecting from the mainstream consumeristic and individualistic society while reconnecting with alternative values and with God. Interestingly, she observes that this experience was similar to what she felt during her participation in The Pilgrim's Walk for Future, which she also attended.

[236] "Det var första gången jag levde utan det materialistiska surret. […] så sårbart och nedskalat att andra värden som kan få rum."

Temporary communities, such as Vera's experience of living among people in a rural village in an African country and of the community of pilgrims participating in The Pilgrim's Walk for Future, or other pilgrimages that interviewees have organised or participated in elsewhere, are reported as essential for individuals in their aim to what I describe as disconnecting and reconnecting. However, these communities are temporary, and few participants report having found other faith-based communities where they can continue exploring alternative lifestyles.

Moreover, while changing lifestyles could be seen as a way to instigate societal change, the Swedish interviewees' activism is not practised as part of community building aimed at societal change. Instead, their lifestyle changes commonly appear to focus more on identity formation in response to the climate crisis, personal empowerment during difficult times, and establishing a sense of trustworthiness. However, the interviewees emphasise that it is crucial to find a community where lifestyle changes and other climate activism practices can be enacted. Jenny, for example, describes this:

> [W]hether [there will be strong political decisions in Glasgow], we need to change our lives… and it's hard, and that's why we need to support each other, and walking is a really good way to support each other, because it builds community.[237]

They argue that transformation should be pursued on an individual level, but that it is is more effectively achieved in a community, which is essential for transforming society. In this regard, the practices of the Swedish interviewees resemble those promoted by the transition movement.[238] For the interviewees, temporary faith communities and their spirituality act as important resources in this transformation process, particularly on a personal level.

The Swedish materials also indicate an effort to create opportunities for others to join a process of disconnection and reconnection. This is achieved through activities such as running workshops, giving lectures, and organising pilgrimages. In addition, acts of civil disobedience are described as a way to encourage others to reflect on mainstream society, thereby fostering a space for reflection that aligns with the concept of disconnecting and reconnecting.

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[237] "[O]avsett [om det blir starka politiska beslut i Glasgow] så behöver vi ställa om våra liv … och det är svårt, och därför behöver vi stötta varandra, och vandringar är ett väldigt bra sätt att stötta varandra, för det bygger gemenskap."
[238] See, for example: Transition Network International, "About - Transition Network."

In conclusion, analysing the focus on lifestyle as an aspect of activism among the Swedish interviewees reveals a key theme: a disconnection from a consumerist, individualist, and carbon-dependent society, and a desire to reconnect with a transcendent reality. Contemplative practices serve as tools for the reconnection. This theme further emphasises activism as a way of living an authentic Christian life, as perceived by the Swedish interviewees. Exploring new lifestyles includes re-evaluating core values and faith foundations, alongside actively reducing carbon emissions. Thus, the lifestyle integrates a transcendent reality with tangible lifestyle changes. This aligns with their ContemplActions, positioning lifestyle as another facet of their holistic theologies that challenge a separation of transcendent realities and worldly matters. While the interviewees underscore that community plays a significant role in lifestyle changes, it is primarily approached as a personal responsibility linked to identity formation amid the climate crisis, rather than as a community-building project. However, the interviewees perceive their lifestyle alterations as aimed at the well-being of society and the planet. Overall, the recurring themes of disconnect and reconnect are prominent in both their operant and their espoused theological voices, emphasising lifestyle change. The lifestyle focus thus reflects an effort to align espoused and operant theologies, both characterised as holistic.

Countering the separation between the taught and the lived

> [O]n a very high level […] some bishops have good thoughts and so…but how will it trickle down…how will everything be soaked by this…? (Thomas)[239]

The Swedish material reveals words of appreciation for some church leaders at regional and national levels, including bishops, and especially for the then-current Archbishop of the Church of Sweden, Antje Jackelén. Her efforts to engage publicly with climate issues have been particularly recognised. A normative theological text that the interviewees mentioned with appreciation is the Church of Sweden Bishops' letter on climate.[240] Thus, the normative theological voice put forth by their institutional churches is acknowledged. However, the criticism is that these normative theological voices do not, as Thomas puts it, "trickle down" in the church structure.

[239] "[P]å väldigt hög nivå […] någon biskop som har bra tankar och så där…men hur ska det sippra ner…hur ska hela alltet bli fuktat av det här…?"
[240] Church of Sweden, "A Bishops' Letter About the Climate."

This perceived disconnect between normative theological texts, such as the bishops' letter promoted by the religious institution, the interviewees' observation of a deficiency in normative theological voices, and the lack of practical application in local contexts generates considerable frustration. This sentiment can be summarised by Magdalena's phrase: "We don't live as we teach". This stands in stark contrast to how the interviewees perceive their climate activism as a way to live an authentic Christian life, in which spiritual life and climate practices are intertwined. Thus, in both actions and words, they firmly counter what they see as their institutionalised churches' separation of the taught and the lived.

While the Swedish interviewees typically appreciate the normative theological texts and the commitment of certain bishops to climate issues, others criticise the bishops for not being, as Jenny puts it, "willing to change their lives". This contrasts with the "eco-bishops" found in other European countries, who are seen as more actively engaged. The criticism also extends beyond a perceived lack of action according to what is taught; there are also concerns about perceived concrete wrongdoings by their churches. An example of this is the criticism directed at the Church of Sweden's forest management practices, which interviewees argue are not sustainable. Maria's arguments illustrate this:

> [T]he official documents and Antje Jackelén's statements and so on are good. But it is worse in practical terms with the forests, for example. Much, much worse. Because it is such a very concrete issue that we can do something about. […] [T]here are extreme discrepancies between different administrations in the church. That you have purely financial administrations that are just doing that, and then purely theological ones, and that they do not cooperate with each other.[241]

The gap between the theology taught by the institution and its actual practices has come under criticism once again. This gap is particularly evident, according to the interviewees, in the difference between the church's theological teachings and its economic interests. Biblical texts are occasionally cited to highlight this discrepancy, such as Camilla citing the verse stating, "The Earth is the Lord's", which emphasises divine ownership and suggests that humans are merely guests on Earth. This particular Bible passage is also referenced by

[241] "[D]et är bra med de officiella dokumenten och Antje Jackeléns uttalanden och så där. Men det är ju sämre rent praktiskt med skogen till exempel. Mycket mycket sämre. För det är en sån väldigt konkret fråga som vi kan göra något åt. […] [D]et finns en extrem diskrepans mellan olika förvaltingar i kyrkan. Att man har rent ekonomiska förvaltningar som bara håller på med det och så sen rent teologiska, och att de inte samarbetar med varandra."

the Church of Sweden's bishops in their statement addressed to the COP26, the UN climate negotiations held in Glasgow.[242] However, to the interviewee, the church is not living up to its teachings. Thus, for her, this biblical verse is cited to underline that the church is not living according to biblical teachings, which indicate that the Earth belongs to God and should not be exploited by humans.

Although criticism is aimed at national and regional levels, the harshest criticism is typically directed at the local congregational level. Here, the criticism not only concerns a failure to live in accordance with the religious teachings found in the normative theological texts produced at regional and national levels, but also addresses a perceived restricting of normative theological voices so that they deal merely with other-worldly matters, detached from real-life implications and worldly challenges. This can be demonstrated through Magdalena's reasoning:

> We [the church] can't just kind of get into some kind of holiness, we have to move, we have to do it, and we have to react when [climate crisis] happens. There's no excuse to assert things when people are suffering and say: 'No, you're wrong'. Then you have to change your theology.[243]

The understanding of climate activism as a way to live an authentic Christian life, in which they understand climate practices as a manifestation of their faith, brings to light the tensions that individuals experience in relation to their religious institutions and faith communities. Magdalena criticises her church for clinging to "some kind of holiness" that is reduced to spiritual matters that are detached from the world. This perspective, according to her, results in overlooking the external realities of the world, particularly people's suffering caused by the consequences of the climate crisis. The expression "holiness" in the quote represents what the interviewees regard as the institutionalised church's interpretation of "holy". This contrasts with that of the interviewees, as previously shown, who see the merging of spirituality and climate practices as holy.

The Pilgrim's Walk for Future provided a rare opportunity to express Christian faith in this way, and to live out fully what the activists perceive as an authentic Christian life. However, it remained primarily a one-time event rather than establishing a local faith community in which participants could fully

[242] Church of Sweden, Statement from the Bishops of the Church of Sweden.
[243] "Vi [kyrkan] kan inte bara liksom gott in oss i någon slags helighet, vi måste röra oss, vi måste göra det liksom, och vi måste reagera när [klimatkrisen] händer. Det finns inte någon ursäkt att hävda saker när människor lider och säga: 'Nej du är fel ute'. Då måste man förändra sin teologi."

live their Christian lives.[244] On returning home, the interviewees found it difficult to maintain their climate commitments in their local churches. The fact that the pilgrimage was not explicitly associated in the interviews with a church, the Church of Sweden, which was the leading organiser, highlights that the event was viewed as an exception and that it did not fulfil their desire for a faith community that aligned with their espoused and operant theological voices. Moreover, the material indicates that those who did not attend the pilgrimage express harsher criticisms than those who did participate. This may suggest that those who attended were influenced by their positive experience of a church-related space in which they could genuinely express their Christian lives.

The interviewees indicate that, by separating the theology imparted by the religious institution from its actual practices, the church is neglecting the climate emergency – a concern they view as the ultimate concern in our time: the climate crisis. Ove's remarks exemplify the depth of this critique. His voice trembles as he describes this separation. When I inquire about what upsets him, he replies, "That we [the church] turn away from what is our true task".[245] That true task could be said to describe the whole purpose of the church, its mission, meaning what the church is sent to do, even expressed in the theological words of Nils as the "manifestation of the body of Christ"[246] – an expression commonly used to describe the church as it is manifested on Earth. Instead, those interviewed suggest that the church places a higher value on saving souls than on addressing the pressing issue of the climate crisis and saving lives, including the preservation of the whole creation.

A significant part of the criticism points out that separating what is taught from what is lived limits the meaning of "holiness" to the church's domain or physical spaces. As Thomas suggests, this implies that faith should only be expressed "in the church pew".[247] This critique can be quite severe, especially when compared with urgent climate issues like climate refugees, vanishing Pacific islands, water shortages, and melting glaciers. Interviewees contend that their churches seem to disregard these critical global problems, as congregants pray inside the church on Sundays without translating their faith into action during the rest of the week. For example, Thomas and Camilla find it odd that church activities are similar to other social gatherings, and believe

[244] Refer to footnote number 205.
[245] "Att man [kyrkan] vänder sig bort från det som är vårt egentliga uppdrag."
[246] "gestaltande av Kristi kropp".
[247] "på kyrkbänken".

that church-goers should actively participate in climate movements such as Fridays For Future.

Another instance of severe criticism about viewing the church domain as the exclusive space for faith expression is reflected in Camilla's remark:

> How can the church look away and be in denial? Yes, we sit a bit on our pew in the church and pray a small prayer that the politicians should do something about this. What is that other than to declare oneself incapacitated? Are we still captured in some sort of authoritarianism, or that we should project on to the cosy pastor who is supposed to know everything? Or that we don't have the capacity ourselves? Or is it the alcoholic culture to pity myself so that I cannot hold a [strike] sign on Fridays? It is so shameful, everything, that I cannot grasp...[248]

Thus, Camilla even accuses the church of alcoholism and being addicted to consumerism, just like anyone else. Her quote illustrates the harsh criticism, as well as the many expressions of frustration and sadness, found in the Swedish material.

Despite their stern criticism, the Swedish interviewees show a strong connection to their church, evident in their frequent use of "we". This criticism targets a nebulous concept referred to as "the church", with which they identify and feel a profound sense of belonging. As a result, this criticism takes on a self-critical nature, likely contributing to intense feelings of disappointment in their own churches.

The interviewees focus their criticism primarily on local religious institutions, their faith communities, and their leaders. This sentiment comes from individuals, regardless of their formal or informal leadership status in these congregations. Interestingly, having a formal role that bestows power over the congregation's life and priorities does not always result in a more favourable perspective. For example, a Lutheran priest stands out among the interviewees as one of the most vocal critics of the church.

[248] "Hur kan kyrkan titta bort och frånsäga sig? Ja vi sitter lite i vår kyrkbänk och ber en liten bön om att politikerna ska göra något åt det här. Vad är det annat än att omyndigförklara sig själv? Är vi kvar i någon slags överhetstänkande, eller att vi ska projicera på att goa pastorn ska kunna allting? Eller att vi inte har kapacitet själva? Eller är det alkoholistkulturen att det är så synd om mig att jag inte kan hålla en [strejk] skylt på fredagar? Det är så skamligt alltihop så jag fattar inte det…"

Interviewees also argue that, by distancing normative and practised theologies from real-world challenges, churches are forgoing a crucial opportunity to confront the existential aspects of the climate crisis. As stated by Karin:

> [C]risis asks such sharp questions about what it means to be human, the human place on Earth, and what is human responsibility and guilt? But also about the end. Is this all? Or does humanity have such a clear end, and how do you live with it if so? And that is something where I think the church has, perhaps has had, more of a language than what is used now.[249]

According to the Swedish interviewees, addressing existential dimensions is essential to make the church relevant in contemporary society, extending even to the secular people of Sweden. They also emphasise a desire for the church to discuss openly the losses caused by the climate crisis and to acknowledge the grief that individuals are experiencing.

The interviewees indicate that the churches' separation of teaching and practice leads to resistance against their own efforts to live what they view as an authentic Christian life. A story from the interviewee Ove illustrates this situation. He shares that some debaters criticised the church with which he is affiliated for launching a Lenten climate fasting campaign, which made a clear connection between faith and climate action. This campaign offered resources for reflection and action during the Christian Lenten season. Ove holds a deep appreciation for this initiative at the national level, and stands against the debaters' critique. He begins by quoting their remarks:

> "[T]his is not something we should do, we should do faith, we should not lose Jesus."
>
> This whole discussion exists in the church, and personally, I just get so tired. […] I find it so incredibly narrow, limited […] The church, certain parts of the church, look mostly inward at their own navel.[250]

The quote indicates his criticism of debaters who isolate faith in Jesus from climate activism, suggesting that these attitudes exist in other areas of his church as well. In his opposing arguments, he highlights his understanding of Christian faith, using creation care as a theological point to support his stance:

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[249] "[K]risen ställer så skarpa frågor om vad det innebär att vara människa, människans plats på jorden, och vad är människans ansvar och skuld? Men också om slutet. Är det här allt? Eller har mänskligheten ett så tydligt slut, och hur lever man med det i så fall? Och det är ju någonting där jag tycker att kyrkan har, kanske har haft, mer ett språk än vad som används nu."

[250] "'[D]det här ska vi inte hålla på med, vi ska hålla på med tro, vi ska inte tappa bort Jesus.' Hela den här diskussionen finns ju i kyrkan, och personligen blir jag bara trött. […] Jag tycker det är så fruktansvärt snävt, inskränkt […] Kyrkan, vissa delar av kyrkan, tittar mest inåt sin egen navel."

> Speaking from a faith perspective, my interpretation is that we have been given a completely different mission than to keep doing this navel-gazing. We are meant to care for the creation we are a part of. … that's the core of faith".[251]

Similarly, Camilla, who feels God's presence and support in her civil disobedience actions, expresses sadness when she reads a text by another Christian person. This man is involved in a Christian environmental network in Sweden that, at that time, did not use activism as a method, and, according to Camilla, he:

> …wrote something about how activists should be challenged to receive the Holy Spirit. It feels so presumptuous. What is that… does he think we shouldn't be driven by the Holy Spirit?[252]

The examples illustrate the resistance that Swedish interviewees encounter from other Christians. This conflict results in feelings of being outsiders in their own faith community, as their commitment to climate action, viewed as a way to live authentically as Christians, is called into question. In addition, this issue becomes deeply personal, as their individual relationship with the divine is also questioned.

In conclusion, Swedish interviewees express frustration over what they perceive as a gap between theological teachings on the climate crisis and the limited practical application. While they value the normative texts produced by their religious institutions, they are disappointed that these teachings are not applied in practice in their local faith communities. This reflects what is perceived as normative theological voices in local faith communities that emphasise otherworldly concerns at the expense of the climate crisis, contrary to the holistic theologies of the interviewees. Events such as The Pilgrim's Walk for the Future have offered temporary opportunities for expressions that aligned with the interviewees' holistic theologies. Yet, the participants struggle to find space in their local faith communities to maintain climate commitments on returning home. Some also criticise their churches for concrete wrongdoings, such as poor forest management. Despite these critiques, they retain a strong sense of belonging to their churches.

[251] "Om man talar utifrån tron, så är min tolkning att vi har fått ett helt annat uppdrag än att hålla på med detta navelskåderi. Vi är satta att ha omsorg om den skapelse vi är en del av. … det är trons kärna."
[252] "…skrev något om att aktivister skulle utmanas och ta mot helig ande. Det känns så förmätet. Vad är det…tror han att vi inte skulle vara drivna av den helige Ande?"

Manifesting Christian faith outside the realm of the church

The perceived institutional resistance and limited capacity for implementing climate practices in church settings significantly constrict activists' ability to articulate and embody their Christian faith through environmental commitment at the local faith community level. This structural constraint prevents them from expressing their operant theological voice through climate actions in their congregations, which leads them to explore alternative avenues for climate activism. Consequently, a considerable portion of their activism takes place outside the formal religious institutional frameworks, often in secular climate organisations such as Fridays For Future and Extinction Rebellion. Thus, despite their strong affiliation with their religious institutions, their climate activism manifests mainly outside the institutional boundaries of the church.

As previously mentioned, The Pilgrim's Walk for Future is an exception, but it was mainly a one-off event for the interviewees who took part in this study. Some interviewees also hold formal roles in their churches, giving them a duty to address climate issues in their congregations; however, they often also seek community with activists in secular climate movements. Engaging in activism outside their churches can increase the distance these individuals feel from their congregations, leading to frustration, sadness, and a sense of isolation about their climate commitments. There are also voices urging church leaders to offer support and blessings for their climate efforts.

Acting outside the church's institutional and formal sphere does not necessarily arise from feelings of marginalisation or a lack of space for activism in the church; it can also be a deliberate choice. However, interviewees still express a desire for encouragement and support from the church for their external climate activism. They also wish for the church to collaborate with them and extend its efforts beyond its own boundaries, working alongside secular organisations on climate issues.

Contrasting their experiences with church criticism, interviewees feel welcome in secular climate movements, which can be illustrated by Karin's experience at a climate strike, where her priestly collar was met with enthusiasm: "Now the church is coming!"[253] Karin notes that activists were previously unaware of the church's involvement in climate issues, and she embraces her role as a representative of the church, eager to increase its visibility in climate efforts.

[253] "Nu kommer kyrkan!"

To the interviewees, it is not only about being more positively supported in secular climate movement networks than in their churches; they also view the secular climate movement as a space that aligns with their spirituality. This is exemplified by my conversation with Thomas:

> Me: "You described how your spirituality was actually better met in the climate movement than in the church".
>
> Thomas: "Yes, because you take action. You have a picture, a vision, a longing, an expression of what is right and wrong, and then you take action and it is [done] accordingly".[254]

The place where climate action can be taken appears to be where the interviewees' spirituality can fully flourish. Similarly, Ove argues for his faith and relationship with God: "Get more space [at climate strikes] than at the church pew".[255] He contrasts what he experiences during worship with his experiences at climate strikes:

> In the church pew it can, not always, but sometimes, tend to be "Now we lock ourselves in here so we don't have to see the misery".[256]

Consequently, in Sweden, interviewees look for spaces to express their operant theological voices and to live authentic Christian lives that integrate faith and climate activism. They often find these communities outside their churches. Although the interviewees value the community in secular climate movement organisations, it does not always satisfy their desire for a faith community. When they cannot find this in their congregations, connecting with other people of faith involved in climate issues is viewed as positive and uplifting. For instance, Thomas shares that he greatly valued meeting fellow Christian activists at an Extinction Rebellion demonstration, and invited them to pray briefly at a nearby church. This meeting held significant meaning for him, since they could connect through what he calls the language of faith. He elaborates:

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[254] Jag: "Du beskrev att din andlighet möttes upp bättre i klimatrörelsen än i kyrkan egentligen." Thomas: "Ja, för där går man till handling. Man har en bild, en vision, en längtan, ett uttryck av vad som är rätt och fel, och sen går man till handling, och så överensstämmer det."

[255] "Får mer utrymme [på klimatstrejker] än på kyrkbänken".

[256] "På kyrkbänken kan det, men inte alltid, men ibland, tendera att vara 'Nu stänger vi in oss här så vi slipper se eländet'."

> I have searched for that connection strongly. I think something is missing when I only meet activists. … I want to continue to talk, but it stops because you don't have the language.[257]

Therefore, the community and other activists of faith are valued. However, during the interviews and during participant observations in Sweden, no formal gatherings had been established. Some interviewees also attempted to create an interfaith network, but were unsuccessful for reasons that remain unclear to me.[258]

The desire to connect with fellow faith-based activists drives the interviewees to look beyond Sweden. Several of the Swedish participants engage with the Christian Climate Action group in the UK, where they regularly take part in Zoom prayers that involve prayers, Bible reflections, and discussions about their climate activism experiences, including civil disobedience. These online gatherings appear to align more closely with the interviewees' espoused and operant theological voices, thereby providing a supportive environment where they feel at home. For the same reasons, the Swedish interviewees often explore the teachings of American Franciscan Richard Rohr, founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation in the US.[259] Here too, Swedish activists value the combination of contemplation and action for a better world.

One interviewee from Sweden notes a significant exception, stating that she can fully express her activism through her church. Actively engaged with the Church of Sweden Youth network Agera, she has reached out and advocated for climate efforts at various levels of the church and climate policymaking, from local to regional, national, and international. In addition, she has advocated for the Church of Sweden's bishops to support an ecocide law.[260] She champions what she regards as her church's robust potential for climate action, and has personally experienced and valued this involvement. She asserts, "It is thanks to the church that my commitment exists and has flourished".[261]

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[257] "Jag har sökt den kopplingen så starkt. Jag tycker det saknas någonting när jag bara möter aktivister. … Jag vill prata vidare, men det tar stopp för man har inte språket."

[258] It is worth noting that, although none of the Swedish interviewees at the time of the interviews were involved in interreligious climate initiatives, such initiatives do exist within the Swedish context. In a forthcoming article titled: "'We wanted to show that faith and religion are a resource in society' - Interreligious climate initiatives in Sweden", I present a minor study of this topic in the Swedish context, based on a review of web pages and social media. The article is currently under review for publication in the anthology *Decolonizing Climate and Religion in the Nordics*. The publication is edited by Marion Grau, Michael Nausner, and Lovisa Mienna Sjöberg.

[259] The Center for Action and Contemplation, "About The Center for Action and Contemplation."

[260] Further details about the Faith for Ecocide Law initiative can be found here: Faith for Ecocide Law, "Faith for Ecocide Law."

[261] "Det är tack vare kyrkan som mitt engagemang finns och har blommat."

This case highlights the frustration that others face because of limited options for activism in their churches, contrasting with Vera's experience of having a supportive space for activism through her church's youth network.

I conclude that the perceived resistance and lack of space for climate practices in their churches lead Swedish interviewees to seek activism outside the institutional church, in secular networks such as Fridays For Future and Extinction Rebellion. They find a stronger sense of community in secular activism, and see it as better aligned with their way of expressing faith. Consequently, their operant theological voices are often expressed outside their churches. Here is where they can live out their authentic Christian lives. However, this can also create feelings of isolation from their congregations, prompting calls for support from church leaders. While secular spaces are welcoming, they do not fully satisfy the desire for a faith-based community, leading them to seek faith communities that align with their holistic theologies, often found online outside Sweden. An exception to the general experience is a Swedish interviewee involved with the Church of Sweden Youth network Agera, who successfully channels her activism through her church.

Reorienting through faith in practice

[Y]ou see a glimpse of that story that you long for. (Karin)[262]

After examining the main characteristics of the Swedish interviewees' climate practice, I now explore the direction in which these activists are steering their efforts by investigating their visions for the future. Interestingly, the most striking aspect of the Swedish material is not the content of the visions themselves but rather the process by which they were developed.

The Swedish interviewees are literally discovering the goal they pursue while walking the paths. As the reader might note, The Pilgrim's Walk for Future emerges again as a significant experience for these activists. This can be illustrated by the quote above and by the following reflections of Karin, who participated in the pilgrimage. She explicitly presents the pilgrimage as an occasion when she got a glimpse of a possible future, and reflects on this in her espoused theology. She illustrates the experience by referencing a normative theological text, a biblical story mentioned in all the synoptic gospels.[263] The

[262] "[M]an ser en glimt av den där berättelsen som man längtar efter."
[263] Matt. 17:1–9; Mark 9:2–13; Luke 9:28–36.

biblical story is about when Jesus takes three disciples up a mountain, and he is described as being transformed into a heavenly appearance. Consequently, the occasion is usually referred to in the Christian context as Jesus' transfiguration, since he revealed his divinity to the disciples, thus bridging the transcendent and the worldly. The mountain has been referred to as the Mount of Transfiguration throughout the history of Christianity.[264] Furthermore, Jesus is pictured conversing with the prophets Moses and Elijah in this heavenly state. One of the disciples offers to build shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah on the mountain. However, the story says that Jesus does not take up the offer to stay; instead, he and the disciples descend the mountain. Karin refers to this story as follows:

> You can't build your hut up there, you can't stay... Maybe that's the case, but you shouldn't forget that you were there... I think you see a glimpse of that story that you long for, and that it is... That it is possible and that it is real, that humans are something more than what we are here, and that God cares for all of creation.[265]

Her description emphasises that the pilgrimage offers an experience of "the story you long for". This is typical in the Swedish material: the interviewees discover and explore future visions during climate activism, in particular during The Pilgrim's Walk for Future. Thus, they incorporate their experiences during their activism, including spiritual ones, when envisioning the future. Using the terminology of the four voices of theology, it is evident that their operant theological voices and spiritual experiences shape their visions for the future, which are commonly expressed in their espoused theological voices, as illustrated by the example of Karin.

Karin's vision also illustrates a typical theme in the Swedish future visions, namely reorientation, here manifested in the reflection on humanity's potential to move beyond our current state, as being "something more".[266] Just as Jesus demonstrated the connection between transcendent reality and the worldly on the mountain, this vision focuses on humanity's potential to rise above our present limitations. This includes recognising humans' spiritual existence, as well as the capacity to move beyond being mere consumers who depend on fossil fuels and as creators and creatures of cultures dominated by

[264] For an in-depth examination of the historical and contextual origins of the narrative, please consult, for example: Sybrowsky, "The Mount of Transfiguration."
[265] "Man kan inte bygga sin hydda däruppe, man kan inte vara kvar… Kanske är så, men man ska inte glömma att man var där… Jag tänker att man ser en glimt av den där berättelsen som man längtar efter, och att den är… Att det är möjligt och att det är verkligt, att människor är något mer än det vi är här och att Gud har omsorg om hela skapelsen."
[266] "något mer".

individualism and materialism. This aligns with the visions of the future described in the Swedish material.

Importantly, the Swedish material also presents visions of a fossil-fuel-free society, and offers concrete ideas for achieving this goal. Initially, the interviewees seemed to have a clearer vision of how to transform society for a fossil-fuel-free future. They have drawn on sources of climate knowledge and made suggestions that any secular climate movement organisation could make. For instance, they have recommended a reformed economic system and the electrification of transportation, advocating less travel and increased bicycle use. In addition, they have proposed changes in food production, such as developing local farming communities in urban areas to minimise transportation distances and to strengthen local communities. They have also suggested modifications in food consumption, promoting a vegetarian or vegan diet. Furthermore, they have recommended alterations in heating and housing, along with a general reduction in consumption, in their visions for the future. It should be noted that the fossil-fuel-free society they envision is described in positive terms, such as having more time for relationships, creativity, spending time in nature, and having a calmer life in general.

However, drawing on their experiences of disconnecting and reconnecting, they envision concrete lifestyle changes intertwined with a deeper existential transformation and a shift in values. They see these different aspects as interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Nils describes the phenomenon as "an inner conversion process supported by an outer conversion process".[267]

The theme of reorientation found in the Swedish material could be understood as a direct outcome of the practices of disconnecting from society and reconnecting with the transcendent. Their practices help them to find paths forwards for reorientation. The theme of reorientation can also be found among interviewees who did not participate in the pilgrimage; one is most poignantly formulated by Thomas, who argues that the world has come to the "end of the road".[268] And by referring to the needed change of direction, to head upwards and downwards instead of straight ahead, Thomas implicitly argues that faith is a resource for exploring new paths:

[267] "en inre omvändelseporcess som får hjälp av den yttre omvändelseprocessen."
[268] "vägs ände"

> We can no longer believe in any human-made paths, but must face the fact... We must surrender. … When it is not passable straight ahead, then it is passable up and down, so, like, we change ... orientation. [It's] a journey of faith.[269]

Therefore, shifting direction away from the current consumerist culture means living one's life guided by God rather than "forwards", which I interpret in the context of the interview as being part of society's exploitation of nature. It is through this change of direction that their visions for the future are explored and developed, including the discovery of new answers to fundamental existential questions. This is described by Jenny as exploring:

> ...what kind of people we want to be, what is truly human, what is good (...) I want to strive for and connect this with the [concrete] transition.[270]

Here, the question of what it means to be human recurs, as is also highlighted in Karin's quote above. Karin's perspective on being human in the context of the current climate crisis suggests that we are more than just physical beings who live in a consumer-driven society, which aligns with the overarching themes in the Swedish material. The interviewees argue that we must reconsider fundamental questions about what it means to be human, the kind of humans we aspire to be, and what constitutes goodness, in order to enable humanity to reorient itself towards a sustainable future.

Inspired by David Attenborough's teachings on rewilding, which emphasise the need for humans to retreat and allow nature to reclaim its space, Jenny argues that this could serve as a fitting parallel for humanity. She suggests that we should "humanising ourselves".[271] In this context, faith in practice is emphasised as a valuable resource. However, the quest for new insights is seen as more important than seeking concrete, definitive answers. In essence, the journey itself is deemed more crucial than a specific fixed goal.

The participants are not only addressing what it means to be human in today's world: they are also exploring answers to the question of what constitutes goodness. They are searching for values that could serve as the foundation for future sustainable societies. The Swedish interviewees frequently reference their experiences in activism, particularly The Pilgrim's Walk for Future,

[269] "Vi kan inte tro på några människofabricerade vägar längre, utan måste inse faktum … Vi måste kapitulera. … När det inte är framkomligt rakt fram, då är det framkomligt upp och ner, alltså liksom vi byter … orientering. [Det är] en trosresa."
[270] "…vilka människor vi vill vara, vad är sant mänskligt, vad är gott (...) jag vill sträva efter och koppla ihop detta med [den faktiska] omställningen."
[271] "förmänskliga oss själva."

which Kristina describes as a space for "discovering new values".[272] Although the foundational value often cited as the goal of their activism is climate justice, it is not explicitly framed in the interviews as a key element in building the future. Instead, they emphasise values that have emerged from their personal experiences during climate activism as essential for creating a sustainable future.

The values often highlighted in the Swedish material, as previously mentioned, include simplicity, slowness, community, and sharing. For instance, the experience of living more simply and at a slower pace during a pilgrimage, carrying only what you need in a backpack, consuming less, and walking, is described as liberating. This experience stands in stark contrast to the consumer-driven, materialistic, and accelerating culture that the interviewees critique. As a result, the importance of simplicity and slowness is emphasised as a fundamental aspect of building future societies. In addition, participating in the pilgrimage provides individuals with the opportunity to engage in community living, where they share meals, difficulties, and goals with one another. Consequently, the value of sharing is underscored as essential for the future.

The values highlighted in the interviews arise primarily from the experiences of the interviewees. However, some interviewees also explicitly mention being inspired by normative theological voices. One such interviewee, Kristina, while discussing important values, specifically references the book created for and used during The Pilgrim's Walk for Future. She talks about the seven keywords that summarise the central values of the pilgrim tradition, which were originally formulated by a Lutheran priest in the 1990s. These keywords have since been used as tools for reflection during pilgrimages in Sweden. These keywords have been developed in the book designed for The Pilgrim's Walk for Future, with the aim of incorporating concepts that are important for an ecological world view. These include, for example, "simplicity and responsibility", "slowness and sustainability", "serenity and trust", "sharing and inclusion".[273] When Kristina explains the values she considers essential for future development, she draws explicitly not only from her lived experiences during the pilgrimage but also from these keywords. This can also be seen among other Swedish interviewees who participated in the pilgrimage, although in a more implicit way.

[272] "upptäcka andra värden."
[273] Spalde, *Pilgrim's walk for future*, 22–23.

Although the interviewees draw heavily on their personal experiences when discussing the overall visions they aim to promote through their activism, their visions extend beyond just personal pursuits. They integrate both individual and societal levels, often emphasising the individual's capacity to foster social change. This reorientation involves redefining what it means to be human and what is considered good, as well as exploring new values. Vera illustrates this by stating that the definition of "welfare" must be re-examined, which would entail critiquing economic growth and considering alternative values. Vera argues that this re-examination:

> …redefines what prosperity is, thus reconsiders the concept of welfare and finds other values that are important. [...] that you find community, and good health, and that you are out in nature and that you do whatever it may be that is not connected to growth. So it's about growth criticism.[274]

In conclusion, the most striking aspect of the Swedish material is the process of developing visions rather than the visions themselves, the emphasis on the importance of lived experiences, including spiritual ones, not least those encountered during The Pilgrim's Walk for Future. These experiences shape interviewees' ideas for future societies, often discovered during the walking and then integrated into their spiritual insights. Using the four voices of theology framework, it is evident that their operant theological voices, along with spiritual experiences, influence their visions. Thus, their espoused theological voices formulated in their future visions are developed while expressing their operant theological voices.

A central theme in their future visions is reorientation: recognising a transcendent reality and the human potential to transcend consumerism and individualism. Initially, interviewees envisioned a transformation towards a fossil-fuel-free society and concrete actions that align with what I frame as science-based climate knowledge, also promoted by secular climate movement organisations. However, the disconnection and reconnection process, including spiritual experiences and insights, leads to lifestyle changes and a shift in values, prompting a redefinition of what it means to be human, grounded in a reorientation towards God. Values such as simplicity, slowness, community, and sharing emerge, often influenced by personal and spiritual experiences, alongside normative theological voices. Their activism ultimately fosters

[274] "…omdefinerar vad välstånd är, alltså omprövar välfärdsbegreppet och hittar andra värden som är viktiga. [...] att man hittar gemenskap, och god hälsa, och att man är ute i naturen och att man vad det nu kan vara som inte är kopplat till tillväxt. Så det handlar om tillväxtkritik."

individual and societal change, redefining concepts of humanity and concepts of good living.

Reliance on God

Trust in Christ. (Nils)[275]

The Swedish material indicates that the reorientation process is fundamentally based on reliance on God. As previously mentioned, Swedish interviewees described having spiritual experiences during their climate activism, in which they felt a deep interconnection with God, others, and nature. These spiritual experiences have resulted in what I term spiritual insights, highlighting the sense of interconnectedness. Consequently, this has also fostered understandings of dependence, reliance, and the need to surrender to God. These elements are integrated into the interviewees' visions for the future. They contend that relying on, and even surrendering to, God is crucial for building future societies. This viewpoint suggests that humans cannot hold fixed ideas about the future. Rather, they express through their espoused theological voices that leaning on the relationship with the divine is necessary. This represents what Thomas describes as "faith in its true sense, not just a collection of living rules, but a relationship with God".[276]

Living in relationship with God makes up the foundation of the interviewees' reliance. Then, as Karin expresses it, you can "cultivate your trust" and be open to where God may lead you.[277] This relationship with God can involve aspects of surrender, a process described as not necessarily easy, but as connected to the narrative of the cross. Thomas mentions that we need to "capitulate", which means letting go of "human-made roads" and instead trusting in God. Meanwhile, Nils emphasises that reliance on Christ is essential, likening it to daring to be naked in relation to life:

> …trust in Christ […] For me, it has meant a lot to connect this to the cross of Jesus, to dare to be in life in an almost naked way, without preconceived ideas about how I should behave or what I should do.[278]

[275] "Tilliten till Kristus".
[276] "Tro i sin egentliga bemärkelse, inte en massa levnadsregler, utan gudsrelation …".
[277] "odla sin tillit".
[278] "…tilliten till Kristus […] För mig har det betytt mycket att koppla det här till Jesu kors, att våga vara i livet på ett nästan naket sätt, utan förutfattade meningar om hur jag ska bete mig eller hur jag ska göra."

While it might seem that relying on God could lead to passivity, this reliance is actually emphasised as the foundation for an active reorientation process. In this process, building the future involves what Karin describes as gradually discovering the reign of the divine, which is understood also to be present in humans.[279]

Reliance on the divine is presented as a unique contribution of faith in building the future, bringing something beyond mere climate science. Maria's espoused theological reflections illustrate this point well:

> [I] don't have all the answers; for me, it's important to live with that. And that, yes, science is a lot about having a lot of answers, and that's... that's why it's so important that a movement that I'm part of is also spiritual. Not just scientific.[280]

The interviewees argue that not having all the answers for building a sustainable future, while relying on a transcendent power beyond oneself, feels liberating. This perspective contrasts with relying solely on science. However, faith is not described as opposed to science; rather, it is presented as a way to deepen our understanding of scientific knowledge. This belief can lead to a reorientation that extends beyond purely scientific answers in determining how to build a sustainable future. Nils expresses this in the following way:

> Faith encourages us to take what comes to us through science and decompose it. In a way, through faith... that we take it in and decompose it and bring it to life in some way.[281]

To the Swedish interviewees, reliance on the divine does not necessarily mean trust in a direct divine intervention in the catastrophic climate situation, even though voices are raised in favour of this as well, such as in the following reflection by Maria, based on normative theological voices:

> [The] prophets that [Jesus] lived with, or the stories he lived with and the whole of Jewish history are partly about God intervening, and that we need to take responsibility for one another, our world, and our societies. [282]

[279] Informal interview with Karin, participant observation, 17 August 2021.
[280] "[J]ag inte har alla svar, för mig är det viktig att leva med det. Och det, ja det vetenskapen handlar ju mycket i det att man har mycket svar, och det är…därför det är så viktigt att en rörelse som jag är med i också är andlig. Inte bara vetenskaplig."
[281] "Trons roll är att liksom våga ta till oss det som kommer till oss genom vetenskapen och kompostera det. På nåt sätt i tro…vi tar det till oss och komposterar och gör det till liv på nåt sätt."
[282] "[P]rofeterna som [Jesus] levde med, eller de berättelser han levde med och hela den judiska historien handlar ju om dels om att Gud griper in, och att vi behöver ta ansvar för varandra, vår värld och våra samhällen."

When there are explicit statements of trust in divine direct intervention, as in the example above, it is not presented as conflicting with or as a replacement for human actions. Primarily, however, the reliance on the divine is more implicit in the material, expressed as a sense of relief that the future is in the hands of a divine power who has a plan not necessarily revealed to the activists. This reliance is also represented as hope that God has a plan, as expressed by Vera:

> Hope to me personally is that there is always a plan, … that I am never alone, so it is something strengthening.[283]

However, a concrete divine plan does not generally seem to be necessary or even longed for; it is, above all, the reliance on the divine based on a personal relationship that brings hope. As Karin expresses it: "[I] must base my hope in a relationship with God". [284]

When the interviewees elaborate on hope and visualise the future, biblical narratives, particularly the account of Jesus's death and resurrection, become essential resources. These narratives are explicitly described as "keys for interpretation" (Magdalena) and the "ultimate hope narrative" (Ove).[285] Ove argues that it is:

> …stories that change people. The Bible is actually stories that create change. […] These stories carry people, can give people hope, fighting spirit, commitment, it is in these stories.[286]

Religious narratives serve as essential resources for building the future, but rather than providing concrete plans to follow, they bring something essential, namely hope. To illustrate how these narratives can be a source of strength in times of climate crisis, we could consider Karin's narrative. For her, the concept of resurrection embodies "the promise that makes [her] not give up".[287] This statement reflects her personal understanding of Christian hope. She interprets the Easter narrative in a deeply personal way, imagining herself at the foot of the cross alongside the women who accompanied Jesus during his

[283] "Hoppet för mig personligen är att det alltid finns en plan, … att jag är aldrig ensam, så det är något stärkande."
[284] "[J]ag måste grunda mitt hopp i en gudsrelation."
[285] "tolkningsnycklar" (Magdalena); "den ultimate hopp-berättelsen" (Ove).
[286] "…berättelser som förändrar människor. Bibeln är ju egentligen berättelser som förändrar. […] De här berättelserna bär människor, kan ge människor hopp, kamplust, engagemang, det finns i de här berättelserna."
[287] "löftet som gör att [hon] inte ger upp."

crucifixion, sharing in their grief. The following morning, these women made their way to the tomb; Karin elaborates:

> [The women] who go to the grave in the morning, there and do… you don't give up. You stay there until the last. And it is the love and the relationship that keep them there.[288]

For the Swedish interviewees, hope is described as perseverance and reliance on the divine. They tend to emphasise this aspect of hope more when reflecting on the future, rather than proposing specific solutions or plans. However, this does not mean that they dismiss the idea of concrete visions. As Ove puts it:

> [W]e stand in the square with our signs saying "no". But we need to articulate where we are heading because that's the only way to get people on the road.[289]

Thus, the Swedish interviewees do propose practical changes to lifestyles and systems, as well as a shift in values and existential perspectives on life. However, their espoused theological voices reveal that the spiritual experiences gained through climate activism, along with a reliance on the divine and a sense of hope, play a more significant role and appear to hold greater importance for them.

Hope is not something placed in a distant future, but is something that makes the interviewees active and engaged in climate activism. Or, as Thomas describes this when he refers to Jesus' cross, suffering, and resurrection, he warns of the risk that we might be "running into some Christian idea of some beyond-realm".[290] Hope in the resurrection, in contrast, is present in the interviewees' everyday lives and climate activism. To be a climate activist can even be explicitly described as follows:

> The hope makes me active. I find it meaningful to think that I want to live according to the gospel. That I want to manifest faith in the resurrection. (Karin)[291]

Jesus is at the centre of the resurrection narrative, as highlighted by the Swedish interviewees. However, there are voices among the interviewees who

[288] "[Kvinnorna] går till graven morgonen där och gör…man ger inte upp. Man står kvar in i det sista. Och det är ju kärleken och relationen som håller dem kvar."
[289] "[V]i står på torget med våra skyltar som säger 'nej'. Men vi behöver formulera var vi är på väg för det är enda sättet att få med människor på vägen."
[290] "springer in i någon kristen idé om något bortom-rike."
[291] "Hoppet gör mig aktiv. Jag finner det är meningsfullt att tänka att jag vill leva i enlighet med evangeliet. Att jag vill gestalta tron på uppståndelsen."

argue, such as Magdalena, that the narrative of resurrection "does not necessarily have to be owned by the church, it still exists" (Magdalena).[292] She hints that it could bring hope and life beyond the institutionalised church. Similarly, Karin stresses that "the whole creation is a resurrection story, not least in our part of the world".[293] There, Karin directs our attention to the different seasons of the year in which winter, with its cold temperatures and darkness, symbolises death, whereas the seasons when light and warmth return symbolise the resurrection.

Finally, hope is also repeatedly highlighted as a calling for people of religious faith, as shown, for example, in a quote by Maria:

> [F]or me, it feels very important to contribute with hope as a religious person. Even though it is very dark and looks very difficult. I think it is our task.[294]

It should be noted that this calling to hope, by Maria, is not regarded as exclusive to Christians: it applies to individuals of any religious faith.

In conclusion, this section demonstrates that reliance on God is a fundamental basis for the reorientation process among the Swedish interviewees. The relationship these individuals maintain with God, along with the spiritual experiences and insights they have obtained through their engagement in climate activism, strengthens this reliance. Although the Swedish interviewees incorporate concrete lifestyle changes into their visions of the future, there is a pronounced emphasis on the spiritual and existential aspects of life, highlighting a trust in God that transcends reliance on scientific methods alone to construct a fossil-fuel-free society. Analysing their espoused theological voices, it becomes evident that hope, trust, and surrender to God are deeply interconnected facets of their reliance on the divine. Such reliance enables reorientation even in the absence of definitive guidelines for the future, as it is conceptualised as being in God's hands. Furthermore, faith-based hope is not directed towards a distant or otherworldly future, but instead is concretely oriented towards addressing the climate crisis. Religious narratives, particularly the resurrection of Christ, serve as significant sources of hope. This hope is rooted in the tangible world, is expressed through climate activism, and facilitates individual reorientation to foster broader societal change.

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[292] "det behöver inte vara kyrkan som behöver äga det, det finns ändå."
[293] "hela skapelsen är ju en uppståndelseberättelse, inte minst i vår del av världen."
[294] "[F]ör mig känns det väldigt viktigt att bidra med hopp som religiös människa. Även fast det är väldigt mörkt och ser väldigt svårt ut. Jag tycker det är vår uppgift."

Holistic (faith) communities

If reliance on God is the foundation for the reorientation process, then communities are emphasised as essential for facilitating this process. Therefore, a dominant theme in the Swedish material is that building a sustainable future requires the establishment of what, drawing on the interviewees' operant and espoused theological voices, I frame as holistic communities.

These holistic communities could serve as spaces for a joint exploration of new values and reflection on existential questions, such as what it means to be human in these challenging times. Magdalena, for example, expresses this as follows:

> [What] it means to be human, how to handle these important things that are about life, democracy, human rights, equality, those values, they need to be shaped, take up space, be practised. Now, when we are in a stage where much is changing, that we are forced in to in some way. Transformation, new ways to be society. … to find each other in this moment. To be able to meet.[295]

Some interviewees argue that communities can exist in a secular form, using tools for reorientation that do not rely solely on religion, such as art, music, poetry, film, and meditation. Others contend that such communities could transcend religious boundaries, forming interfaith groups. For instance, Maria emphasises collaboration between diverse religious affiliations or traditions. She asserts that all religions, irrespective of their specific beliefs, foster traditions, practices, and communities rooted in solidarity, love, peace, and justice, thus being equipped to address difficult issues such as "grief, loss, hope, and desperation" in our times.[296]

However, it is mainly Christian faith communities that the interviewees emphasise as essential for the necessary reorientation to build a sustainable future, reflecting their own process of reconnecting with God. Therefore, they envision communities rooted in God, as can be illustrated by Karin's statement:

> ...has its source in a loving creator and life-giver, and sustainer, and that one gets a direction in one's life and meaning [by] keeping that commitment to

[295] "[Vad] det är att vara människa, hur det är att klara av såna här viktiga saker som handlar om livet, demokrati, mänskliga rättigheter, jämställdhet, såna värden, de behöver få gestaltas, ta plats, praktiseras. Nu när vi är i ett läge där mycket förändras, som vi tvingas in i på nåt sätt. Omställning, nytt sätt att vara samhälle på. … att hitta varandra i det läget. Att kunna mötas."
[296] "sorg, förlust, hopp och desperation."

> one's fellow human being and one's relationship with God and spirituality. It never ends well when we divide it completely.[297]

The Christian communities envisioned by the Swedish interviewees embody a holistic approach that integrates transcendent realities with engagement in worldly crises. This reflects their holistic theologies, which is why I characterise these communities as holistic. Furthermore, their imagined communities exemplify the theme of disconnect and reconnect, evident in their focus on altered lifestyles. Thus, they draw on their positive experiences of withdrawing from mainstream society and reconnecting with God during their activism. The Swedish interviewees assert that fostering this disconnect–reconnect process requires support from a community.

They argue that strong communities for sharing and joint reflection are easily formed in churches, which could play a significant role in the churches' ability to help build future societies. Karin's reflections illustrate this point as she argues that the church:

> …has a tradition and an experience of sound communities, of doing things for others, of understanding that happiness does not lie in building one's own but in sharing with others. We have it, we could share it much more freely.[298]

They envision their churches as vibrant communities where the process of reorientation can take place. Nonetheless, they notice that the institutional church largely overlooks this potential and fails to actualise it. To illustrate better the vision of these holistic communities shared by the Swedish interviewees, we consider Nils' detailed descriptions as he reflects theologically on the subject.

Nils draws from his experiences on The Pilgrim's Walk for Future. He also presents concepts of a faith-based community aimed at reorienting, inspired by his interactions with a faith group encountered in a congregation they visited during the pilgrimage. This community lived in the same building where the regular congregation held worship services. They engaged in communal prayers and shared meals, aiming to live sustainably and holistically. Their approach included not just spiritual elements but also various aspects of

[297] "…har sin källa i en kärleksfull skapare och livgivare, och upprätthållare, och att man får en riktning i sitt liv och mening [genom] att hålla det där med engagemanget för medmänniskan och gudsrelationen och andligheten. Det blir aldrig bra när vi delar på det helt."
[298] "…har en tradition och en erfarenhet av goda gemenskaper, av att göra saker för andra, att förstå att lyckan inte ligger i att bygga sitt eget utan att dela med andra. Vi har ju det, vi skulle kunna dela det mycket mer frimodigt."

sustainability, such as eco-friendly living. For Nils, this represented a more developed form of community, echoing the insights he gained from his pilgrimage. He visualises how Christian congregations could function similarly in the future. He imagines that they could:

> …be beacons of hope […] [That] remind us about our dependence on social relations, contacts with nature and contacts with the universe and God in some way. That we are reminded of the existential in a far more concrete way than we possibly have before. And really dare to take the threat seriously. Climate threat or any threat that it may be.[299]

In this vision, he imagines communities that facilitate both disconnection and reconnection, encouraging others to embark on similarly transformative journeys. Consequently, these communities become "beacons of hope" for a reorientation process. Through a lifestyle rooted in prayer and humility, they create what he refers to as "an opening, that we turn to God, something that is greater than us".[300]

His comprehensive vision for congregations reflects the concept of holistic, faith communities as venues for reorientation that is highlighted in the Swedish material. These holistic communities prioritise the blend of spirituality and practical transformation. In addition, normative theological voices can support the development of the interviewees' perspectives on holistic communities. In Nils' case, he draws on Christian mysticism and thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben, also referencing a biblical example to emphasise that these communities can radiate the "fragrance of Christ".[301] This parallels how the Swedish material portrays these communities as being implicitly but firmly rooted in Christ while adopting an inclusive and open stance towards the secular and other faith traditions. Some interviewees envision these communities as influenced by elements of monastic life and mysticism, as illustrated by Nils' case.

In conclusion, the Swedish interviewees envision holistic communities as effective settings for fostering a reorientation towards sustainability. This includes reevaluating values, adopting environmentally friendly lifestyles, redefining human identity, and reconnecting with God, mirroring their process of

[299] "…vara härdar av hopp […] [Som] påminner oss om vårt beroende av sociala kontakter, kontakter med naturen och kontakter med universum och Gud på något sätt. Att vi påminner om det existentiella på ett mycket mer konkret sätt än vi har gjort kanske tidigare. Och verkligen vågar ta hotet på allvar. Klimathotet eller vilket hot det nu kan vara."
[300] "en öppning att vi vänder oss till Gud, någonting som är större än oss."
[301] "Kristus-doften."

disconnecting and reconnecting through lifestyle change as one form of their activism. Drawing on personal experiences, they imagine faith communities in which sustainable practices are integrated with transcendent realities. These envisioned communities reflect their holistic theologies discussed earlier, emphasising that transcendent realities are not opposed to addressing worldly challenges such as the climate crisis, but that, on the contrary, they are intertwined. This integration is evident in both the espoused and the operant theological voices. They also incorporate normative theological voices to enhance their envisioned communities.

Pathfinding amid climate catastrophe in Sweden

This examination of faith-based activism in Sweden as operant and espoused theological voices delineates key characteristics of what I conceptualise as the activists' pathfinding process amid the climate catastrophe. The metaphor of pathfinding is used to illustrate that I view faith-based activism as a navigation shaped by the context, generating knowledge through experience and practice. In what follows, I use the metaphor to communicate and summarise the findings derived from my analysis of the role of religious faith in climate activism in Sweden, with a particular focus on the activists' theological reflection and practices. Guided by the rhetorical questions associated with the metaphor of pathfinding, I now draw conclusions from the presentation of the Swedish empirical material.

The Swedish interviewees' pathfinding process is guided by their situational awareness, which is characterised by distancing themselves from mainstream society. This society is blamed for being the root cause of the climate catastrophe; thus, the activists aim to explore alternative ways of living and building sustainable societies. Because of this situational awareness, their activism is focused entirely on advocating reduced fossil fuel emissions and mitigating them. This situational awareness significantly influences their pathfinding process amid the climate catastrophe, including the paths they select, the landmarks they spot, how they check their bearings, and the direction in which they are heading.

The Swedish interviewees' situational awareness and their wish to disconnect themselves from mainstream society open up the possibility of reconnecting with God and living what they perceive as an authentic Christian life, which to them means engaging in climate activism. Their climate activism aims both to advocate the reduction of fossil fuel emissions through political protest and

to incorporate lifestyle changes as a key part of their activism. They use normative theological voices, such as the concepts of Gospel or Evangelium, to emphasise that the paths they choose should be understood as ways to live an authentic Christian life.

As the Swedish interviewees aim to distance themselves from mainstream society, and the climate catastrophe being a new landscape to navigate, they have few existing paths to tread; instead, they need to blaze trails in a rather pathless landscape. However, to some degree they can draw on contemplative practices from their faith traditions, such as pilgrimage, prayer, and worship. Still, these practices serve as meaningful paths in the climate landscape only when they are expressed in a setting that also stresses the urgency of the climate crisis. This was the case of The Pilgrim's Walk for Future, of which one of their religious institutions was the main organiser. This (at least temporarily) existing path included what I have framed as ContemplActions, in which contemplative practices were combined with protest actions – in this case, campaigning for the UN climate negotiations to make strong statements. However, generally, their religious institutions do not provide paths for navigating the climate catastrophe that align with the interviewees' holistic theologies. ContemplActions as a path in the climate landscape can occasionally also be created by activists themselves, such as when combining prayers and civil disobedience. Yet, the most common paths for the Swedish activists to follow are those created by secular climate movement organisations, as they provide space for climate activism. Here, the interviewees express their operant theological voices. However, these paths lack the dimension of faith that is so essential for the faith-based activists; consequently, they still search for faith communities where their holistic theologies can flourish.

In their pathfinding process through often pathless landscapes, the activists depend on landmarks. The primary landmark is climate knowledge, which has touched the interviewees on a personal level, transforming science-based climate knowledge into what I have termed experience-based climate knowledge. The main sources of climate knowledge among the Swedish interviewees include popular scientific sources such as television documentaries, books, educational courses, or personal encounters with individuals in the Global South who are suffering severely the consequences of the climate crisis. It is particularly when climate knowledge triggers climate anxiety that the activists begin or deepen their climate commitment.

The compass used for pathfinding is the interviewees' spiritual experiences and subsequent spiritual insights. These involve a feeling of being

interconnected with others, nature, God, and a larger whole. These spiritual experiences and insights often occur in nature, and include the belief that God resides in it. Experiences of interconnectedness lead to further insights into dependence, reliance, and a need to surrender to God. However, these spiritual experiences and insights do not pacify the activists; instead, they strengthen their activism.

These spiritual experiences correspond with what I outlined in Chapter 2, as they reference the transcendent, which can be heard in the activists' espoused theological voices. Moreover, the interviewees regard these experiences as meaningful, valuable, and true, and they influence their activism, as seen in the operant and espoused theological voices. For example, their climate practices aim to reconnect with a transcendent reality, and their espoused theological voices include references to experiencing being interconnected with God, nature, and others. In addition, these spiritual experiences significantly shape the activists' understanding of the world and of themselves, as well as their view of how the world should be organised. This is particularly evident in the interviewees' future visions, in which reconnecting to and being interconnected with God is presented as essential in the reorientation process they propose as a way to address the climate crisis. Typically, in the Swedish material, although their spiritual experiences are connected to their faith traditions, as shown in their espoused theological voices, they are reported to have occurred outside their religious institutions and regular faith communities. Most often, these experiences are said to take place outdoors, in nature.

Normative theological voices, such as biblical narratives, are used to interpret their spiritual experiences and to ground them in their Christian theological tradition. These narratives can also create a sense of interconnectedness with figures in the religious tradition, such as Jesus' disciples.

As the Swedish activists' pathfinding process is guided by their situational awareness of seeing mainstream society as a root cause of the climate catastrophe, this also influences their direction. Their activism focuses on exploring alternative lifestyles and advocating for fossil-fuel-free societies. Thus, it is the reorientation of societies and lifestyles that is central to their navigation. The Swedish interviewees' future visions are explored and developed through their climate activism and, in this process, spiritual experiences and insights play a key role. Thus, faith is understood and experienced as a vital resource for formulating one's direction. Alongside concrete lifestyle changes aimed at reducing one's fossil fuel emissions, the reorientation can also involve a shift in values, redefining what it means to be human, and reconnecting with God,

especially by recognising and experiencing one's interconnectedness with and, consequently, dependence on God, others, and nature. Faith communities are considered potentially vital spaces for this reorientation process. I have framed these as holistic faith communities. However, the Swedish interviewees also highlight secular communities as potential places for reorientation. On a personal level, the interviewees are seeking faith communities where this reorientation could occur.

The Swedish interviewees' perceptions of a transcendent reality are revised during their activism, not least through spiritual experiences and insights gained while disconnecting from mainstream society and reconnecting with God, others, and nature. These spiritual experiences have been shown to have broadened their theological understanding of human identity, emphasising humanity's dependence on God, others, and nature. That their theological understandings have changed, during and as a consequence of their activism, becomes particularly evident in their future visions. These are explored during their activism and, thus, they influence their espoused theological voices on the necessity of reconnecting to God in a reorientation process.

Having identified, sorted, and described different theological voices in the Swedish empirical material, using the four voices of theology framework, I have argued that the espoused and operant theological voices in the material could be characterised as holistic. As is elaborated in the chapters that follow, these holistic theologies take a different shape from those found in the South African material.

The characteristics of the Swedish interviewees' holistic theologies are that they dissolve the boundaries between transcendent realities and worldly matters, as manifested in their operant and espoused theologies, which are most evident in their operant theological voices, when expressed as ContemplActions, a combination of contemplative and political protest actions. But this dissolving is also seen in how their lifestyle focus includes both transcendent dimensions and practical lifestyle changes. The holistic theologies are also revealed in their espoused theological voices, in which, I argue, climate activism is seen as a way of living an authentic Christian life.

The interviewees' holistic theologies create tensions in relation to their religious institutions, particularly at the local congregation level. The interviewees see a tension between the normative theological voices taught at national and regional levels, which emphasise the importance of faith-based climate action, and the perceived lack of such commitment in local faith communities.

The lack of space to express holistic theologies in the local faith communities prompts the interviewees to express their operant theological voices outside the realm of their churches, in secular climate movement organisations.

This analysis demonstrates that theological understandings of God, humans, or nature do not predominantly inform the activists' pathfinding processes. Instead, their theological understandings appear to evolve dynamically in response to their climate commitments and activism practices, particularly in shaping their self-perceptions in relation to God, other humans, and nature. Notably, their spiritual experiences, often occurring during activism and in nature, prompt ongoing revisions and reinterpretations of these relational dynamics, underscoring humans' spiritual relationality and dependence on God, others, and nature. Consequently, an examination of the key theological questions outlined in Chapter 2 reveals that the primary theological concerns are not centred on specific *concepts* of God, humans, and nature. Rather, they focus on how we are *related to* God, one another, and nature, and how to coexist. Furthermore, both their espoused and their operant theological voices respond to fundamental questions about how we should live in this world, seeing activism as a way to live an authentic Christian life.

The reasons highlighted by the interviewees for addressing the climate crisis are rooted primarily in experience-based climate knowledge rather than in religious faith. However, when reflecting on hope for the future, trust in God surpasses a reliance on scientific understanding, facilitating a reorientation of ways of living, despite the lack of definitive solutions for a sustainable future. Consequently, the theological question of whom to trust in times of crisis have a great influence on their pathfinding process.

A more in-depth analysis of the theologies is presented in Chapter 6, where I also advance to the second level of theological analysis by constructing the dominant theological themes that emerge in the activists' process of pathfinding.

5. Resources in faith-based climate activism

This chapter aims to address the research question of which resources could be found in faith-based activism and which established resources are being used. Building on the analysis conducted in the preceding two chapters, this chapter advances the discussion by parallel analysis of the material collected from South Africa and Sweden, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding. By exploring similarities and differences between these two distinct contexts, the chapter aims to deepen the analysis, highlighting the varying significance of these resources and their potential to engender transformative change and climate action beyond purely scientific frameworks, as introduced in the initial chapter. To enhance analytical depth, the findings are discussed alongside relevant studies in multiple disciplines, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the diverse contextual characterisations of faith-based climate activism and situating the findings within a broader academic discourse.

The chapter examines resources related to history, community, and context, organisations, and the individual. It is organised as follows: it begins with an exploration of history, community and context as resources for faith-based climate activism, particularly evident in the South African material. It then assesses organisational resources, focusing on those that are accessible or lacking in specific contexts. Finally, it considers resources related to the inner transformation of the individual, most prominent in the Swedish material.

The examination of resources requires a critical assessment and the establishment of central concepts in relation to the two distinct contexts that have emerged from my empirical investigation. This assessment deals with *holistic theologies*, *spiritual experiences and insights, collective spiritual identities,* and *ContemplActions*. I also introduce the term *relational spirituality* as an overarching concept that unites the collective spiritual identities that I have identified in the South African context with the more individually oriented spiritual experiences and insights that predominate in the Swedish context. Moreover, I introduce a concept I term *beyond material values*.

In the empirical Chapters 3 and 4 I have used my theological lens for analysis, including my understanding of theology as various understandings of transcendent realities, implicitly using the theological questions about God, humans, and nature, and using the four voices of theology framework.[302] In this chapter, I continue to use my theological lens of analysis to establish and critically evaluate the six concepts derived from my empirical material, thereby identifying resources in faith-based activism. The concepts are *holistic theologies, relational spirituality, spiritual experiences and insights, collective spiritual identities, ContemplActions,* and *beyond material values*.

Characteristics of faith-based climate activism practices

Before examining the resources in faith-based activism, it would be crucial to emphasise the unique traits of activism practices in the two contexts analysed in the earlier chapters. Grasping these characteristics would be essential, because they affect the resources that are used and developed in faith-based climate activism in these contexts. The various characteristics of faith-based activism practices in the two contexts are illustrated in the figures below.

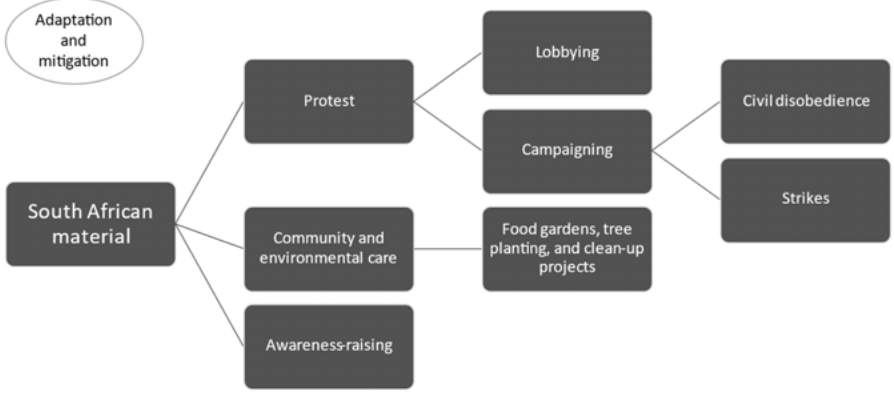

Figure 1: Characteristics of faith-based activism practices in the South African material.

[302] The four voices are operant, espoused, normative, and formal voices. Given that academic theology, represented as formal theological voices, generally does not influence resources in faith-based activism, this theological voice is not explicitly addressed in this chapter.

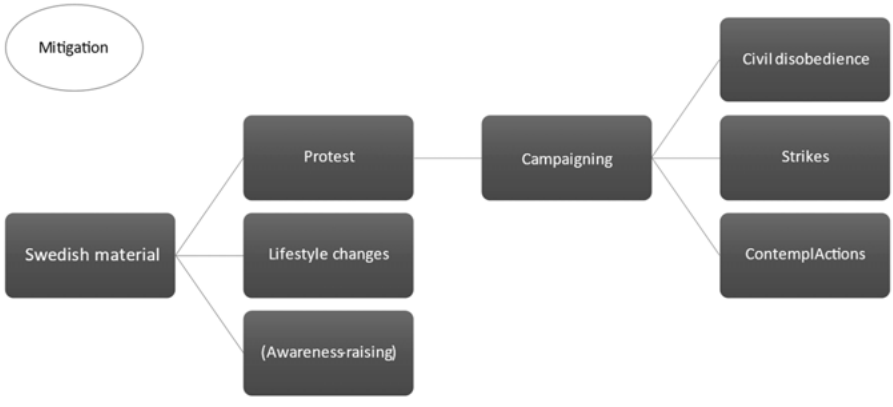

Figure 2: Characteristics of faith-based activism practices in the Swedish material.

In the South African material, the operant theological voices are distinguished by protest actions aimed at politicians and policymakers on one side, and community and environmental care initiatives focused on local communities on the other. The protest actions encompass lobbying efforts targeting politicians and policymakers at local, regional, national, and international levels, as well as campaign activities aimed both at the general public and at politicians and policymakers. The community and environmental initiatives comprise food gardens, tree planting, and clean-up projects.

In comparison, the operant theological voices in the Swedish material emphasise protest actions as well, but they also focus on lifestyle adjustments, including both mitigating fossil fuel emissions and changes in values and in personal and spiritual reflection. Whereas the protest practices in the South African material include both lobbying and campaigning, the Swedish material mainly involves campaigning. Campaign activities in both contexts include strikes and acts of civil disobedience. In the Swedish context, campaign activities also include the characteristic *ContemplActions*, in which protest actions, typically expressed as campaign practices, are combined with contemplative practices. Furthermore, interviewees in both settings conduct awareness-raising efforts directed towards faith communities and the general public, such as running workshops and writing blogs and other texts. However, this practice is more dominant in the South Africa material owing to the activists' closer partnerships with religious institutions as employees or volunteers.

I further conclude that the disparate impacts of the climate crisis in the two distinct contexts, articulated in the section headed "The two contexts – South Africa and Sweden" in Chapter 1, significantly influence the expressed modes of activism. Recognising and understanding these contextual differences would therefore be crucial in accurately interpreting the resources and priorities highlighted in the empirical material, and in comprehending the broader implications of activist strategies in varying climate landscapes. These differing strategies are illustrated in the diagrams by circles representing mitigation and adaptation, serving as visual depictions. The analysis of the material reveals that these contextual disparities shape both the operant and the espoused theological voices. Specifically, South African activists use a dual focus, addressing both the mitigation of fossil fuel emissions and adaptation to the rapidly evolving climate landscape. The impacts of the climate crisis are increasingly apparent, posing significant threats to the fundamental rights and livelihoods of people in South Africa. The activists there incorporate these perspectives in their advocacy efforts, exemplified by initiatives designed to assist vulnerable communities in adapting to climate change, while simultaneously advocating reduced fossil fuel emissions. In contrast, Swedish activists predominantly focus on mitigation strategies aimed at decreasing fossil fuel emissions, reflecting the prevailing public discourse, which, at the time of conducting my interviews, did not emphasise adaptation. Furthermore, the need for adaptation is perceived as less urgent in Swedish society, which could be attributed to its relatively stable and socio-economically equitable structure.

Highlighting both the similarities and the differences between the practices in the two contexts means identifying diverse examples of operant theological voices in faith-based climate activism. These varied practices also shape the activists' espoused theological voices. The South African material shows a greater emphasis on collective, community, and organisational elements, whereas the Swedish material reflects a faith-based activism that is more adept at fostering spiritual and personal transformation. The analysis below of resources used in and generated by faith-based activism further highlights the differences in the characteristics of activism in the two contexts. This includes examining the effects of diverse climate landscapes, as well as cultural and religious settings.

As highlighted in the section headed "Purpose and research questions" in Chapter 1, I intentionally sought out activists whose pragmatic approaches extend beyond private actions to encompass public strategies aimed at influencing political policies and measures. This is part of a critical examination of the interplay between personal faith and the systemic challenges posed by the

climate crisis. Thus, the research has focused primarily on faith-based activists who publicly advocate immediate, necessary political interventions. However, I can conclude that the faith-based climate activism in the two contexts extends beyond efforts aimed solely at influencing politics and policy; it encompasses a broader range of practices. Analysing the core characteristics of these activism efforts revealed that these additional practices significantly inform and reshape our understanding of faith-based climate engagement. Consequently, a more complex, diverse, and holistic depiction of faith-based climate activism has emerged, which is particularly evident in the analysis of the resources used and generated in this activism.

History, community, and context as resources

History, community, and context serve as vital resources in faith-based climate and environmental activism in South Africa. This becomes evident in their espoused theological voices in which they describe what I frame as *collective spiritual identities*, which in turn strengthen and sustain their activism, providing enduring resilience. But it is also evident in their operant theological voices, which emphasise caring for their communities and environment, prioritising justice, and empowering marginalised groups. Moreover, their references to normative theological voices also show that history, community, and context serve as essential resources in their activism.

I begin with a comprehensive analysis of what I characterise as the collective spiritual identities of South African activists, which are fundamentally shaped by their deep-rooted connections to their historical, social, cultural, and environmental context. The collective spiritual identities evident in the South African material are characterised by a deep sense of belonging to specific communities or groups, such as long-standing faith-based activist traditions, the indigenous Khoisan, or familial and local communities. Those in the past and those in one's community play a crucial role in shaping collective spiritual identities. Furthermore, activists who own indigenous identities often articulate their spirituality as deeply rooted, embodying a spiritual relationship with the land that fundamentally motivates their participation in environmental and climate activism. This sense of interconnectedness with the land is also evident in the South African material among activists belonging to other faith traditions.

These identities also reflect a sense of interconnectedness with a transcendent reality that transcends temporal boundaries. They embody a profound spiritual

connection with ancestors and past generations. Such intergenerational interconnectedness is especially salient among indigenous activists, with a particular reverence for the ancestors who are believed to be present now. However, this belief in this ongoing ancestral presence provides a potent source of inspiration that extends beyond Khoisan activists to other activists as well. Thus, this theme of time-transcendent spiritual interconnectedness is pervasive in the South African material, regardless of specific group affiliation, emphasising a collective understanding of identity rooted in history, community, and context. To conclude, the spirituality of South African activists is primarily anchored in their affiliation with established groups, rather than arising from personal momentary and localised spiritual experiences. Nonetheless, it could also be understood as ongoing spiritual experiences that involve notions of being related to the divine, community, and nature, both in the past and extending into the future.

The activists' references to normative theological voices underscore the significance of historical, communal, and contextual resources in their activism. Key figures in these communities, including indigenous elders, faith leaders, anti-apartheid activists, and ancestors, serve as authoritative normative voices that uphold and influence the activists' collective spiritual identities. Such figures exemplify a tradition of faith expressed through tangible actions that promote social justice, notably resistance to colonialism, apartheid, and violations of indigenous rights concerning land, spirituality, and cultural integrity. Importantly, these leaders frequently demonstrate cross-religious collaboration, embodying a shared commitment to justice and social cohesion. Moreover, interviewees emphasise the pivotal role of family members and educators in fostering an understanding of community interconnectedness and environmental stewardship. These normative theological voices, whether situated in formal religious institutions or beyond, are essential sources of inspiration, and are fundamental to the development of collective spiritual identities. While figures such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu embody formal religious authority, it is often the non-institutional voices – those of parents, community elders, and ancestors – that exert a more profound influence on activists' spiritual identities. Consequently, South African activists tend to draw on a shared, culturally embedded narrative of faith-driven social justice that critically shapes their collective spiritual identities.

By emphasising the role of historical figures and collective memory, particularly those associated with divine intervention during pivotal struggles such as resistance to colonisation and apartheid, the identities not only bolster current activism but also create hope in divine intervention in the future. Such a

theological understanding provides a solid basis for resilience among the South African activists in tackling the crisis situation.

Ubuntu and ukama shaping collective spiritual identities

This form of collective spiritual identity could be understood as being shaped by cultural frameworks; notably, although not explicitly mentioned by the activists themselves, it closely aligns with the concept of ubuntu.[303] Ubuntu has been emphasised as an essential resource in the context of the global climate crisis by the Zimbabwean professor of history and phenomenology of religion, Ezra Chitando, among others. In the introduction to *African Perspectives on Religion and Climate Change*, Chitando asserts that ubuntu and indigenous knowledge are fundamental to formulating effective responses to climate change across the continent.[304] Ubuntu, an African concept that underscores community and interconnectedness, is succinctly captured by John Mbiti's aphorism, "I am because we are".[305] However, during a visit to Soweto, I encountered elderly women who remarked that "ubuntu is dead" during a meeting to which they had invited me to discuss the intersection of the climate crisis and religion. These women perceived that solidarity in their community was more prominent during the struggle against apartheid, but that it had declined since then; they attributed this to the disruptive effects of modernity on social bonds. While respecting their viewpoint, my observations suggest that South African activists maintain a strong affinity for and interconnectedness with their communities that is associated with the concept of ubuntu, which is manifested in what I term collective spiritual identities.[306]

The alignment between my South African material and the concept of ubuntu extends beyond mere community and human interconnectedness. While South African activists primarily focus on addressing social issues, such as promoting community solidarity, their initiatives inherently reflect a broader understanding of interdependence that includes the natural environment and transcendent realities. This perspective aligns with the African ontological

[303] During a participant observation at a climate strike in South Africa, I observed an activist who was not among my interviewees holding a placard displaying the word "ubuntu". I interpreted this as the activist using ubuntu to emphasise a contrast with the factors that contribute negatively to the climate crisis. This suggests that ubuntu can be explicitly used as a symbol in climate activism in the South African context, which emphasises that it does not necessarily have to be limited to academic discourse, but could be referenced in practical climate responses.
[304] Chitando et al., *African Perspectives on Religion and Climate Change*.
[305] Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 338.
[306] Etieyibo, "Ubuntu and the Environment," 636.

framework of ubuntu, which encompasses not only human beings and the divine but also spirits such as ancestors, animals, and inanimate objects.

While some scholars have critiqued ubuntu as predominantly anthropocentric, nuanced analyses, such as that by Chitando, emphasise that ubuntu intrinsically encompasses all facets of nature, thereby offering a compelling philosophical resource for contemporary environmental problems. He contends that ubuntu constitutes a fundamental dimension of indigenous knowledge systems, serving as a longstanding resource "since time immemorial" for environmental care.[307] He underscores that African spirituality perceives all creation as sacred, fostering a profound reverence for nature. Importantly, references to indigenous knowledge, which is deeply intertwined with spiritual practices, are prominent throughout the South African material. This emphasis is not limited to those with indigenous identities, but is also prevalent among the other interviewees; however, the indigenous interviewees frequently highlight these concepts as a critical counter-narrative to colonial and Christian missionary ideologies that historically legitimised environmental exploitation.

Others, such as Aïda C. Terblanché-Greeff, who conduct research on social transformation in South Africa, align themselves with Chitando in arguing that ubuntu serves as a resource for climate response. However, Terblanché-Greeff has expanded this conceptual framework by incorporating the notion of ukama, which is described as an extension of ubuntu. She posits that, while ubuntu emphasises the fundamental aspect of humanness, ukama embodies the interconnectedness that permeates the cosmos. According to her perspective, the formation of a genuine person necessitates a relationship with both nature and the cosmos, highlighting the broader significance of interconnectedness in shaping personal and social identity.[308]

Given the references in the South African material to solidarity and interdependence beyond humanity, enduring through time and encompassing the natural environment and transcendent realities, perspectives derived from ukama can be identified as a cultural and contextual resource influencing their collective spiritual identities and activism. Consequently, the South African activists' strong ties to their history, community, and social and environmental context, for which ubuntu and ukama serve as vital resources, are shaping their responses to climate challenges.

[307] Chitando et al., African Perspectives on Religion and Climate Change, 7.
[308] Terblanché-Greeff, "Ubuntu and Environmental Ethics: The West Can Learn from Africa When Faced with Climate Change."

Community and environmental care

The affinity with history, community, and context as a resource is evident, moreover, in the manifestation of operant theological voices that emphasise justice and the nurturing of local communities, especially those in the South African context who are vulnerable. This concern for justice, community, and environmental care is demonstrated in strategic activism efforts such as lobbying, campaigning, and raising awareness, as well as in community-based and environmental initiatives at the grassroots level.

Aligning with the concepts of ubuntu and ukama, the activists' community and environmental care projects, including eco-friendly farming practices, urban clean-up campaigns, and tree-planting activities, could be understood as serving a dual purpose: they support vulnerable populations while embodying principles of ecological interconnectedness. They can be understood, furthermore, as a manifestation of their *holistic theologies*, as they intertwine worldly matters with transcendent realities, such as spiritual interconnectedness and also use tangible faith resources in the projects, such as normative theological texts.

These projects also exemplify another characteristic of the South African activists' holistic theologies: they simultaneously address immediate climate issues and broader social and economic problems in their communities. For instance, the discussion of job opportunities as a potential benefit of greening the energy sector highlights a pragmatic approach to mitigating high unemployment rates. Similarly, training programmes for faith leaders on disaster and crisis preparedness encompass both the risks associated with climate-induced disasters and those stemming from criminality, violence, or terrorism. Such manifestations of holistic theology and the activists' steadfast commitment to their local contexts are deeply rooted in their social, cultural, environmental, and spiritual affinities. This integrated approach contributes to the development of climate-resilient communities, demonstrating a comprehensive understanding of interconnected problems and fostering sustainable resilience.

Community and environmental care initiatives serve, moreover, as vital platforms for the exploration and application of indigenous knowledge, especially in the context of environmental care, where spirituality is integral. The interviewees emphasise that a profound connection to nature and spirituality is intrinsically linked to the indigenous knowledge underpinning these projects. In addition, indigenous knowledge is increasingly recognised as a valuable asset

in various dimensions of environmental and climate activism, including advocacy, awareness-raising, and campaigning. This is a topic I revisit later.

Lifestyle adjustments as cultural expression

In contrast to the South African context, where history, community, and local context serve as vital resources for activism, Swedish activism appears to operate under different conditions. Specifically, Swedish activists tend to withdraw from mainstream society, perceiving it as overly consumeristic, individualistic, and reliant on fossil fuels – factors they seek to reject. This withdrawal may implicitly explain the absence of a reliance on contextual historical narratives, as the development of Swedish society has contributed to the climate crisis through fossil fuel emissions. The Swedish activists' operant theological voices predominantly emphasise mitigation strategies. These strategies aim to influence policymakers and political leaders to implement urgent environmental measures, while also reflecting on and adjusting one's own lifestyle towards greater sustainability.

That Swedish faith-based climate activism emphasises individual lifestyle changes alongside political protest actions could be considered in a broader European cultural framework. Studies suggest that over half of the population in a number of Western European nations base their consumer decisions on political, ethical, or environmental factors.[309] This suggests that such lifestyle choices extend beyond just environmental activists. A closer examination of climate activists' focus on lifestyle reveals a trend in Europe where lifestyle changes, previously considered separate from political protest, are now intertwined with political action among youth climate activists.[310] This aligns with my findings: the Swedish activists' lifestyle practices are seen as integral to their broader political activism, in which personal responsibility and a demand for political accountability are interlinked. However, a distinctive aspect of the Swedish material is that lifestyle changes include spiritual self-reflection and spiritual experiences, which are integrated with tangible lifestyle modifications aimed at reducing fossil fuel emissions.

The emphasis of Swedish activists on the individual's lifestyle modifications and self-reflection could be interpreted within the broader cultural emphasis on individualism that is characteristic of Swedish society. The interviewees' operant and espoused theological voices suggest that their activism responds

[309] De Moor and Balsiger, "Political Consumerism in Northwestern Europe."
[310] Zamponi et al., "(Water) Bottles and (Street) Barricades."

to the fundamental question: "Who am I, and what is my responsibility as a Christian in times of climate crisis?" Although similar self-reflection among activists has been documented in scholarship in the South African context, it focuses primarily on identity formation related to race, gender, and class during the societal transition to democracy following the fall of apartheid.[311] The type of self-reflection observed among Swedish activists concerning the climate crisis appears to be absent in the South African material. I conclude that the lifestyle and self-reflection focuses that characterise Swedish activism are rooted in cultural and contextual origins. However, these sources are not explicitly articulated by the activists as resources for their activism, which contrasts with the South African material, in which history, context, and community are prominent themes and fundamental resources.

Organisational resources

Although this study primarily examines the individual practitioners' contextual, experience-based, and practised theologies, the analysis reveals critical interactions between activists and organisational structures.[312] It demonstrates how organisational resources facilitate faith-based climate action and how access to these resources fundamentally influences both the operant and the espoused theological voices expressed in activism. Access to organisational resources among activists is especially strong in the South African context. Furthermore, the material indicates that access to these resources depends on individuals' formal positions in their religious institutions, but also on networks such as SAFCEI. Significant barriers that are identified are the limited access to local organisational resources, alongside theological constraints, which substantially impede faith-based climate activism in both studied contexts. Consequently, this research underscores that, alongside diverse religious settings and climate change crises, organisational resources – and their absence – are pivotal in shaping faith-based activism and the theologies expressed in it.

Religious organisational structures provide the South African activists with critical platforms for lobbying, campaigning, and awareness-raising in multiple levels of governance and society. These structures, spanning local, national, and international arenas, facilitate vital connections between South

[311] Kelly, "Constructing Activist Identities in Post-Apartheid South Africa."
[312] The relationship between the individual and the structure should be understood as a bidirectional interaction, in which the structure influences the individual's capacity to act, while, conversely, individuals also shape and modify the structures through their use of them and their engagement. Leis-Peters et al., "Religiösa Organisationer Och Civilsamhället," 23.

African activists and key stakeholders, including political leaders, policymakers, religious leaders, and faith communities. Such organisational structures enable the South African activists to connect different levels; they can bring climate knowledge from the international sphere down to local faith communities, while the lived experiences of vulnerable populations affected by climate change can be communicated to national and international decision-makers. Moreover, these organisational structures provide the opportunity for cross-faith collaborations, which enhance activism in diverse religious contexts.

There is a substantial correlation between holding formal positions in religious organisations and access to organisational resources. Evidence from the Swedish material underscores this association, as individuals there generally experience limited access to faith-based organisational resources compared with their South African counterparts. This disparity could be largely attributed to the general absence of formal positions among the Swedish interviewees, whereas such positions are more prevalent among the South African interviewees. Although similar roles exist in Swedish religious institutions, the interviewees do not generally occupy positions comparable with those of the South African activists. This discrepancy underscores the importance of formal positions in religious institutional structures in facilitating access to such resources.

The South African material indicates, however, that this is not the sole factor influencing access to organisational resources. One reason that South African activists are able to leverage religious organisational resources effectively, in addition to occupying formal positions, is the existence of SAFCEI. An examination of the operant theological voices among faith-based activists shows that SAFCEI has successfully created platforms that are accessible even to those without formal organisational roles, thereby encouraging broader participation in environmental advocacy at local, national, and international levels. While my South African material reveals similar efforts among the Anglican and Lutheran churches, as well as in Extinction Rebellion, all of which provide comparable organisational resources for climate and environmental activism, SAFCEI appears to excel in enhancing the capacity of activists who lack formal positions in religious institutions. In addition, SAFCEI provides a platform for activism that promotes collaboration among diverse faith traditions. SAFCEI diverges significantly from traditional religious institutions by functioning as a faith-based organisation that operates outside conventional religious structures. Its primary purpose of environmental advocacy or campaigning positions it as a facilitator of enhanced networking opportunities and

platforms for faith-based environmental and climate activism, potentially surpassing the capacities of conventional faith communities or religious organisations.

Access to organisational resources significantly influences both the espoused and the operant theological voices of South African activists, thereby shaping what I conceptualised and previously mentioned as holistic theologies. Specifically, these organisational resources facilitate several context-specific features of holistic theologies in the South African context, such as bridging local and global levels in climate initiatives and promoting interdisciplinary collaboration among diverse faith traditions.

Nonetheless, my analysis demonstrates that these holistic theologies are not merely contingent upon access to specific organisational structures; rather, they transcend such structures, being evident throughout the South African material regardless of individual activists' access to specific organisational resources. In particular, contextual elements such as the multi-religious environment and the climate crisis landscape, as outlined in Chapter 1, play a pivotal role. These contexts, for example, require that climate issues be integrated with broader social and environmental problems – a key characteristic that distinctly defines South African holistic theologies.

Furthermore, as is elucidated later in the tensions that these theologies generate in relation to their local faith communities, it becomes apparent that these religious expressions are deeply internalised by the activists, reflecting their personal convictions and intentions independent of organisational influence. Here, the fundamental principle underlying both South African and Swedish holistic theologies – the theological imperative to recognise the inseparable and equally significant nature of transcendent reality and worldly matters – comes to the fore. Moreover, these theologies incorporate faith not only as a transcendent dimension but also as a practical tool embedded in their activism. This significantly emphasises the central theological imperative that drives their activism, rendering activism an inevitable outcome of their holistic theologies.

While Swedish activists generally lack access to the organisational resources available to their South African counterparts, they do have access to a singular platform that allows them to manifest fully their operant and espoused theological voices: The Pilgrim's Walk for the Future. However, for most activists, this platform functions predominantly as a one-time event rather than as a sustained organisational resource that offers ongoing opportunities for faith-

based activism.[313] This platform, akin to the SAFCEI network that supports South African activists, significantly influences the holistic theologies of Swedish activists. A defining trait of the Swedish holistic theologies is the integration of campaigning practices that are aimed at influencing political leaders and contemplative practices that are focused on spiritual self-reflection. Given their combination of contemplative practices (outlined in Chapter 2) and political protest actions, I term these combined practices ContemplActions. This integration is most clearly illustrated by The Pilgrim's Walk for Future pilgrimage, in which several Swedish interviewees took part. In this event, the traditional practice of pilgrimage was combined with a political demonstration aimed at addressing leaders during the United Nations climate negotiations (COP26) held in Glasgow, Scotland, in 2021. Furthermore, this integrative approach extends to their focus on lifestyle changes, which encompasses both transcendent realities and practical modifications. However, such patterns are consistently observed in the Swedish material, irrespective of involvement in initiatives such as The Pilgrim's Walk for the Future. This consistency underscores the notion that their holistic theologies are not dependent on, yet to some extent are influenced by, organisational resources.

Among the organisational platforms discussed in the Swedish materials, only Agera, managed by the Church of Sweden Youth, appears to provide more sustained organisational resources, thereby creating a more stable and comprehensive platform for Swedish interviewees than do other faith-based avenues. Access to this platform, however, is not a distinct theme in my material, and therefore it cannot be said to influence the holistic theologies of the Swedish activists.

The scarcity of dedicated and stable platforms for faith-based activism in the Swedish context has led to the predominance of secular organisations, such as Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion, as the primary avenues for climate activism. The material provides evidence that these serve as avenues for expressing operant theological voices publicly through strikes or acts of civil disobedience, particularly at the local levels.[314] However, their reliance on secular platforms is not attributable solely to the shortage of faith-based avenues for climate activism. It could also be understood within the broader Swedish context of secularisation, which, as discussed in more detail in Chapter 1,

[313] Refer to footnote 205.
[314] Occasionally, Swedish activists also participate in disruptive actions abroad through involvement in Extinction Rebellion, enabling them to access arenas beyond Sweden.

constrains the influence of faith-based groups in civil society compared with that in the South African context.[315]

Organisational tensions and shortage of local platforms

The shared theological imperative inherent in the activists' holistic theologies underscores a critical characteristic observed in both examined contexts: their holistic theologies frequently engender tensions with established religious institutional structures. My study reveals that activists often encounter resistance, particularly in their local faith communities. This phenomenon corroborates prior scholarly assertions of "intradenominational tensions" in a specific religious denomination or group, which pose significant obstacles to the greening of religious traditions. While prior research has identified barriers such as the bureaucracy of religious organisations, my study reveals intradenominational tensions that have theological roots.[316] Specifically, the activists report encountering theological resistance to theologies, and a lack of theologies, that integrate transcendent reality and worldly matters. Thus, the organisational space to manifest such holistic theologies at the local congregational level remains limited, highlighting a dissonance between the activists' theological convictions and their organisational contexts.

Notably, the tensions observed in my empirical material mainly relate to the activists' own religious denominations' organisations, rather than to interfaith relations, denominational conflicts, or their relationship with society at large. Conversely, cross-faith collaboration and collaboration with secular movement organisations are reported as both positive and essential to the activists in my study.[317]

While SAFCEI is acknowledged for supplying organisational resources at international, national, and local levels, it nonetheless falls short of satisfying South African activists' aspirations for a localised faith community that would permit them to express their holistic theologies comprehensively. Similarly, in the Swedish context, despite the provisions offered by initiatives such as The Pilgrim's Walk for the Future and the Church of Sweden Youth's network, Agera, which facilitate various forms of holistic theological

[315] See the section headed "The two contexts – South Africa and Sweden" in Chapter 1.
[316] Monnot, "The Slow Greening of Established Churches in Switzerland: Tensions Between Local Parishes and Church Head Organizations."
[317] This contrasts with the tensions highlighted in the anthology Religious Environmental Activism, which, in addition to intradenominational tensions, also identify three other arenas of tension: interdenominational, interreligious, and religious-societal tensions: Köhrsen et al., *Religious Environmental Activism*.

expressions, these platforms do not adequately address activists' fundamental need for a local faith community. Although these platforms offer organisational resources and allow for holistic theologies to be expressed, they fall short, either because they are temporary, like The Pilgrim's Walk for the Future, or because, in the eyes of the activists, they do not truly represent a local faith community. The expressed desire pertains to communities that facilitate the active manifestation of what I have framed as holistic theologies in traditional faith congregations, such as Christian or Muslim communities. Consequently, both settings reveal an aspirational desire for localised, holistic theological communities, in the sense of providing a space to manifest holistic theologies. This desire is evident among individuals occupying positions in religious institutions that provide them access to organisational resources, as previously highlighted, as well as among those who do not have such access.

The issue extends beyond the mere lack of space and local resistance to holistic theologies in faith communities. According to the activists, there is an additional lack of normative theological voices that resonate with the activists' own theological perspective. This disconnection leaves activists feeling unsupported and unheard. Furthermore, particularly in the Swedish context, a significant gap exists, according to the activists, between the normative theological expressions articulated in official documents and statements at the national level and the manifestation of these expressions at the local level. While such official voices are valued on the national stage, activists contend that these perspectives are notably absent in local contexts, thereby highlighting a critical disconnection between policy and practice.

Another prominent theme, especially in the Swedish material, pertains to the perceived organisational constraints related to climate commitment. I contend that these constraints are linked to the lack of access to available organisational resources in the institutions with which the Swedish activists are affiliated. A significant aspect of this critique involves the activists' critical assessments of their religious institutions and faith communities, particularly in the Swedish context, for their perceived insufficient response to the climate emergency. This critique appears especially striking, given the substantial efforts of these religious organisations to engage with climate issues in recent decades. For example, the Church of Sweden has demonstrated a proactive stance, most recently in 2019 with the adoption of the Climate Roadmap, which sets specific impact goals: to achieve climate neutrality by 2030, to foster a value shift centred on spiritual and existential dimensions of the crisis, and to

increase aid to the most vulnerable populations affected by climate change.[318] Similarly, the Uniting Church in Sweden (Equmeniakyrkan) has articulated its commitment to climate action, notably declaring a climate emergency in 2021 and outlining strategic roadmaps to bolster its efforts.[319] Both churches, moreover, base their climate commitments on foundational theological principles and are members of the WCC, an organisation that declared a climate emergency in 2019 and that has played a pivotal role in the development of eco-theology. This commitment was first concretely exemplified in 1983 with the launch of the ecological programme known as Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC).[320]

In the light of this context, I argue that the intense criticism that Swedish activists direct at their religious institutions and faith communities could be attributed, at least in part, to the shortage of local platforms on which they could live out their holistic theologies. But also, given the relative distance of these activists from their religious institutions, at least when it comes to formal positions in climate work, compared with their South African counterparts, there is a possibility that their understanding of the churches' climate commitments is incomplete or is influenced by their positions in their organisations. Nonetheless, it is equally plausible that such criticism stems from a perception that, despite documented commitments, the visibility and perceived effectiveness of these efforts remain inadequate, and that they are perceived as not effectively implemented at the local levels in their institutions, thus prompting a sense of frustration among activists.

The level of criticism directed at their organisations seems significantly higher in the Swedish context than in South Africa. The South African activists adopt a more conciliatory stance towards their faith communities, which could be attributed to the multifaceted problems that these communities face. This attitude is supported further by the organisational access that South African activists have, as well as the fact that they shape their own local initiatives, such as environmental and community care projects, often regardless of organisational resources. Conversely, Swedish activists rely mainly on their religious institutions to allocate space for and openness to faith-based climate activism.

[318] Church of Sweden, Church of Sweden's Climate Roadmap.
[319] A declaration of climate emergency signifies an urgent situation resulting from climate change, emphasising its devastating impact on humanity. Although it lacks a formal standard, it recognises that existing actions are inadequate and commits to prioritising initiatives aimed at addressing climate change. Equmeniakyrkan, "Klimatnödläge."
[320] Monnot, "The Slow Greening of Established Churches in Switzerland: Tensions Between Local Parishes and Church Head Organizations," 68.

This divergence underscores differing contextual approaches to faith-based climate activism, highlighting the importance of organisational resources in shaping activists' manifestation of theologies.

Resources for inner (and outer) transformation

The Swedish activists mainly adopt a stance of social withdrawal, emphasising self-reflection and individual lifestyle modifications as integral components of their activism. This tactic diverges significantly from the approaches observed in South African activism. The Swedish activists deliberately disconnect from society, which they critique as marked by materialism, individualism, and carbon dependence. This withdrawal not only facilitates introspection but also fosters a spiritual reconnection with God, others, and nature, thereby contributing to what I refer to as spiritual insights, such as dependence on God, others, and nature. Centred on faith as a foundational element, this process allows activists to cultivate a lifestyle that synergises spiritual reconnection with tangible actions aimed at mitigating fossil fuel emissions, thus offering a nuanced approach to environmental activism rooted in personal transformation and spiritual anchoring.

This emphasis on lifestyle and self-reflection, including the exploration of new values, largely aligns with the concept of inner–outer transformation discussed in current scholarship, in which the inner dimensions, which comprise mindsets, values, beliefs, world views, and cognitive, emotional, and relational skills, interact dynamically with outer structures, including socio-economic systems, governance, technology, and economic structures.[321] However, adopting a theological perspective, I expand the traditional conceptualisation of inner transformation by integrating spirituality as a core element, thereby enhancing the understanding of how inner transformation could serve as a catalyst for broader social and structural transformations.

A significant theme in the Swedish materials is the frequent occurrence of spiritual experiences during activism, which contribute substantially to what could be described as a transformation of mindsets, values, beliefs, world views, and relational skills, thus underscoring the role of spiritual dimensions in facilitating what could be framed as inner transformation. I contend that faith-based climate activism, especially in the Swedish context, functions as a crucial arena for inner transformation that integrates *spiritual experiences and*

[321] Wamsler et al., "Enabling New Mindsets and Transformative Skills for Negotiating and Activating Climate Action," 227; Ives et al., "IMAGINE Sustainability," 2778.

insights. This could be partly attributed to the distinctive nature of Swedish activism, characterised by a disconnect from society and a reconnection to the spiritual. Such activities foster an environment that is conducive to reconnecting with transcendent realities and changing values. This underscores the integral role of spiritual experiences in understanding forms of activism that incorporate inner transformation.

A significant consequence of the Swedish activists' spiritual experiences and insights is that they contribute substantially to the exploration and development of new values, which in turn influence the activists' lifestyle choices and ways of living. I refer to these new values as *beyond material values*.[322] During activism, these Swedish activists navigate and co-construct values that transcend material concerns, integrating spiritual experiences, insights, and values associated with their religious faith. These include a greater allocation of time, slowing down life's pace, living more simply by reducing consumption, and perceiving oneself as being deeply related to God, others, and nature. Such developments suggest that activism serves not only as a form of political engagement but also as a catalyst for significant shifts in values, embodying a shift towards a spiritually rooted, relational dimension of existence.

The analysis of the Swedish material also demonstrates that the inner transformation undertaken by activists is not limited to the inner dimension; on the contrary, they are also oriented towards changing outer societal structures. A close examination of both the operant and the espoused theological voices among Swedish activists reveals parallels with Henrik Ohlsson's conceptualisation of subjective activism, which he characterises as a form of engagement that functions predominantly on a personal, internal level, influencing the individual's inner experience.[323] Nevertheless, he maintains that, despite its inward focus, subjective activism inherently aspires to bring about societal change, albeit through more indirect mechanisms than does objective activism. This delineation aligns with the Swedish activists' emphasis on lifestyle

[322] These findings align with those of Maria Nita, who conducted research in the United Kingdom on faith-based climate activism. She argues that the Green Christian environmental movement in the UK, as part of a larger green movement, contributes to examining post-material values. I concur with her viewpoint that lifestyle practices contribute to post-material values, transcending individualism. Nevertheless, I prefer to label these as beyond material values instead of post-material values. The phrase "post-material" suggests a linear timeline, indicating that material values are newly discovered and created. In contrast, I suggest that the values explored and developed by faith-based climate activists in Sweden reconnect with enduring religious values that have remained relevant, regardless of the eras of industrialisation or post-industrialisation. Nita, *Praying and Campaigning with Environmental Christians*, 242.
[323] Ohlsson, "Nature Connection as Spirituality, Wellbeing Practice, and Subjective Activism," 156.

alterations and self-reflection, which, despite their emphasis on individual agency, ultimately aim to contribute to societal transformation.

The most compelling evidence for the integration of inner and outer transformation among Swedish activists is found in The Pilgrim's Walk for the Future as a profound manifestation of ContemplActions. This event showcases the integration of contemplative practices, such as pilgrimages, prayer, silent walking, spiritual self-reflection, and worship, with political protest and activism. While the pilgrimage, which involved a significant long-distance walk from Sweden to Scotland, served as a potent form of protest and political expression, the contemplative practices used did not primarily target political leaders. Instead, they functioned as resources for personal and spiritual development, facilitating a sustainable lifestyle grounded in the transformation of the individual. While previous research has established that contemplative practices serve as examples of activities that are capable of fostering inner transformative capacities, my work broadens this view by incorporating ContemplActions that combine contemplation with political protest.[324] This synthesis highlights the argument that Swedish activists' approaches embody a form of activism that includes inner transformation, integrates spiritual dimensions, and is aimed at fostering broader societal transformation.

The self-reflection and lifestyle practices, alongside the ContemplActions, exhibited by Swedish activists could be interpreted as practiced expressions of their holistic theologies. These practices function as manifestations of the theological imperative that is inherent in these theologies, emphasising the fundamental inseparability of transcendent reality and worldly matters. Analysing their espoused theological voices reveals a deeply rooted conviction that engaging in such practices is essential for living an authentic Christian life. Consequently, this conviction underpins their unwavering commitment to the integrated pursuit of faith and activism, suggesting that activism that is rooted in inner transformation and is aimed at societal change in the Swedish context has a substantive theological basis.

[324] Practices observed in the South African material share similarities with the Swedish ContemplActions. However, such practices are less prevalent, and manifest differently in South Africa. Furthermore, they cannot be described as resources for personal and spiritual development. Instead, they are mainly used to promote environmental awareness and community spiritual reflection, and are seldom combined with direct political protest. Examples include tree-planting as part of Christian confirmation, integrating climate demonstrations into church services, indigenous blessing rituals at public events, or using communal biblical reading to initiate community projects, such as food gardens.

In addition, my research demonstrates faith-based activism, in which the boundaries between spirituality and organised religion are not sharply delineated. This contrasts with Ohlson's empirical studies of what he categorises as a "nature connection movement", in which he identifies subjective activism that emphasises spiritual experiences as somewhat opposed to institutional and dogmatic religious structures.[325] In the faith-based activism examined in my study, spiritual experiences, although playing a more dominant role than the institutional and dogmatic elements, are not positioned by the activists as being in opposition to religious institutional frameworks. For instance, participants draw on religious traditions such as contemplative practices and pilgrimage, exemplified by The Pilgrim's Walk for the Future, which was organised by a religious institution, and use normative theological voices to interpret and contextualise their spiritual experiences.

Reconnecting to the relational

The spiritual experiences expressed in the espoused theological voices of the Swedish activists are often characterised by a profound sense of inter-connectedness with God, other humans, and nature. This transforms the activists' understanding of themselves as part of a larger whole. Furthermore, as previously highlighted, these spiritual experiences engender spiritual insights, with the realisation of dependence on these relationships emerging as the most salient among them. Consequently, these spiritual experiences and subsequent insights help to reshape their self-perception in relation to the divine, humans, and nature. This could be understood as the development of one's relational competencies in relation to self, others, and the natural environment, as emphasised in the concept of inner–outer transformation as a fundamental component of inner transformation, such as reshaping values, mindsets, and world views.[326] However, my research shows that spiritual experiences and insights not only enhance but are also critical in developing such relational competence; furthermore, these capacities can be explored and developed during faith-based activism.

The Pilgrim's Walk for the Future emerges in Swedish activism as a distinctive space that offers participants the opportunity to withdraw from society, thus creating an explorative space for activating inner transformation outside mainstream society. This detachment creates an environment that is conducive

[325] Ohlsson, "Nature Connection as Spirituality, Wellbeing Practice, and Subjective Activism," 156.
[326] Ives et al., "IMAGINE Sustainability," 2779.

both to critical self-reflection on one's relationship with the climate crisis and individual responsibility, and to profound spiritual self-reflection. The participants describe spiritual experiences and insights during their engagement, which are particularly facilitated by contemplative practices embedded in their ContemplActions, which in turn are intentionally designed to promote spiritual reconnection. Importantly, this phenomenon of spiritual experiences during activism is not confined to these specific practices. Instead, it is also commonly observed among activists engaged in civil disobedience, both in Sweden and in South Africa. Such spiritual experiences are not exclusive to faith-based organisational contexts; rather, they also occur in secular activist endeavours, indicating a broader, intrinsic relationship between activist engagement and spirituality.

Furthermore, there is an observed trend of societal withdrawal and spiritual reconnection among Swedish activists, regardless of their participation in The Pilgrim's Walk for the Future; it is exemplified in various practices, such as organising and participating in other pilgrimages and contemplative practices, exploring alternative lifestyles, and swimming in winter. These activities appear to function as alternative modalities for spiritual reconnection beyond organised activism. Notably, similar to The Pilgrim's Walk for the Future, these practices occur outdoors, underscoring the integral role of nature as a vital space for fostering profound spiritual experiences. Such experiences are instrumental in enhancing the activists' reconnection with God, humans, and nature.[327]

This pattern of societal withdrawal is not observed in the South African material. Although meditative walks in nature, resembling The Pilgrim's Walk for the Future, are briefly mentioned by one of the South African interviewees, they are emphasised as collective spiritual experiences involving diverse faiths, rather than personal self-reflection and individual spiritual experiences. This reflects the differing characteristics of spirituality in the two contexts. However, it also illustrates a similarity: nature as a space for spiritual experiences.

[327] Personal experiences of interconnectedness with nature that are regarded as spiritual experiences are not new empirical findings in research. The concept of spiritual encounters in nature can, for example, be found in Ohlson's findings. In Sweden, this theme is particularly pertinent, given the context of rising secularism. Nonetheless, studies exploring nature as a source of inspiration for environmental and climate activism are less frequent, as highlighted in Ohlsson's research. Ohlsson, "Facing Nature"; Ohlsson, "Nature Connection as Spirituality, Wellbeing Practice, and Subjective Activism."

The Swedish activists describe spiritual experiences that are predominantly characterised as individual, momentary, and situated in specific settings. While South African activists also report similar experiences, they do not predominate to the same extent as in the Swedish context. Instead, South African activists tend to describe a form of spirituality that is deeply rooted in history, community, and context that transcends singular moments, thereby emphasising what I have termed (and previously mentioned as) collective spiritual identities. Nonetheless, an analysis of how these activists articulate and reflect on their spiritual experiences reveals a remarkable similarity between the two contexts, despite evident differences.

Notably, in both settings, the relationship to the divine or transcendent extends beyond individualistic notions of salvation or the individual's connection; this holds true even in the Swedish context, where subjective experiences are prominent. Instead, these reported spiritual experiences, in both contexts, consistently highlight a profound sense of interconnectedness and dependence on God, others, and nature. Such relational orientations serve to reinforce the activists' commitments to social and environmental engagement, illustrating that spirituality functions as a driving force that transcends individualism and fosters broader communal and ecological responsibilities.

The spiritual experiences reported by the activists and their evoked deep sense of interconnectedness in both contexts could be understood as forms of *relational spirituality*. This concept is derived from Cathrine A. Faver's research on women's spirituality in activism during the 1990s in the United States, in which she illustrates that these activists' spiritual practices are fundamentally relational. According to Faver, this evidence lends empirical support to Carol Ochs's theoretical proposition that the fundamental purpose of religion is to cultivate an awareness of the interconnectedness of all existence, with spirituality defined as "the process of coming into relationship with reality".[328] Faver's findings further suggest that such a connection to reality entails a profound bond with the divine or transcendent, as well as with other individuals and the natural world. This aligns with my observations of the activists in my study.

Faver also shows that activists engage in spiritual practices that serve to reaffirm the fundamental interconnectedness of all beings. This thematic focus is particularly salient in the context of my Swedish research material, where contemplative practices are used to reinforce individuals' sense of relatedness.

[328] Faver, "To Run and Not Be Weary," 65.

Notably, ContemplActions are used both as a way to reconnect individuals with transcendent realities and as acts of political protest. Similarly, such practices are observable in the South African context; however, the activism in this setting is distinguished by a less pronounced emphasis on reconnection to relational aspects. This difference could be attributed to the pre-existing spiritual relatedness that is inherent in collective spiritual identities in South Africa, thereby underscoring divergent approaches in distinct socio-cultural contexts.

The spiritual experiences observed in both contexts align on the one hand with the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 2. The interviewees' espoused theological voices indicate that these spiritual experiences are interpreted as meaningful, valuable, and authentic, and serve as fundamental reference points in their activism. Moreover, these experiences significantly inform their understanding of the world, their sense of self, and their perspectives on societal organisation, thereby having tangible real-life implications. Moreover, they are not contrasted with other forms of experience, the details of which are revisited later; on the contrary, they are regarded as equally important.

On the other hand, drawing on the South African material, the spiritual experiences in that context surpass the description in my theory. The South African activists' relational dynamic extends beyond individual experiences, reaching beyond temporal boundaries between past, present, and future by encompassing an ongoing spiritual engagement with historical figures and ancestors who are perceived to maintain a persistent spiritual interconnectedness. In addition, this collective spiritual relatedness appears to be embedded in their collective spiritual identities, leading to a reliance on communal rather than individual spiritual experiences. Unlike the Swedish context, South African activism generally does not aim to create space for reconnection to spiritual relatedness, as their spirituality already links individuals to transcendent realities in that context. In addition, South African spiritual experiences are not typically presented as catalysts for inner transformation, as seen in the Swedish context.

Integration and enhancement of knowledge

A key finding in my study is that climate activism serves as a platform to integrate and enhance knowledge. Faith-based activism, as presented in my empirical material, facilitates an integration of what I refer to as science-based and experience-based climate knowledge with spiritual experiences and insights and collective spiritual identities. It also functions as a platform to develop sustainable lifestyles, beyond material values, and to develop visions for future societies. An analysis of the interviewees' operant and espoused

theological voices, alongside their references to normative theological voices, reveals the multifaceted epistemological approaches used in their activism. Such findings corroborate recent scholarship that emphasises the need to synthesise diverse knowledge systems in order to enhance the efficacy of inner-outer transformational efforts.[329] Consequently, this study substantiates the argument that integrating multiple forms of knowledge – here, adding spirituality as a source of knowledge – would be critical for effective activism that is aimed at societal transformation.

The activists leverage climate knowledge derived from both experience-based and science-based sources. "Science-based climate knowledge" refers primarily to insights obtained from academic research, such as IPCC reports, which serve as foundational references for climate policy and also inform climate movements, including groups rooted in faith-based perspectives.[330] The concrete climate policy recommendations and responses advocated by the activists in both contexts align with what the IPCC emphasises as essential. Therefore, my research indicates that, although these reports are not directly cited, they serve as an indirect source of knowledge for the activists. The activists more often refer explicitly to knowledge from popular science literature, films, lessons learnt from other activists, and climate training programmes facilitated by various organisations, including faith-based groups. I consider this body of knowledge to be grounded mainly in the IPCC findings and in other internationally recognised climate research. However, its impact on activism is often secondary to the influence of personal, transformative experiences, which I categorise as experience-based climate knowledge. Although such knowledge may originate from the sources mentioned above, it becomes truly transformative when it develops into a personal experience that resonates more deeply than does conventional science-based information.

In the South African context, this experience-based climate knowledge is also often contextual, emerging from direct observations of the profound distress faced by populations affected by climate-related phenomena such as heatwaves, droughts, food insecurity, flooding, loss of life and property, and limited access to clean water. For example, interactions with indigenous communities and rural populations whose livelihoods depend heavily on agriculture highlight the critical need for immediate and targeted intervention. Similarly, in the Swedish context, experience-based climate knowledge often stems from

[329] Ives et al., "IMAGINE Sustainability," 2782.
[330] IPCC is a leading United Nations body, synthesises global climate science to inform policymakers about the current state and to recommend strategies for mitigation and adaptation. IPCC, "IPCC — Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change."

engagement with vulnerable communities, although such interactions typically occur outside Sweden's national borders, such as when activists encounter individuals from African nations who share their lived experiences. In Sweden, experience-based climate knowledge tends to manifest predominantly as climate anxiety, a phenomenon that is notably less prominent in the South African discourse.

The integration and enhancement of diverse types of knowledge in the Swedish material becomes particularly evident in The Pilgrim's Walk for the Future. Analysing the theological voices, both espoused and operant, in the material reveals that this event serves as a forum where climate knowledge and spiritual experiences and spiritual insights are integrated, thereby contributing to the development of beyond material values and the adoption of sustainable lifestyles. Thus, this pilgrimage platform facilitated the advancement of activists' knowledge systems that contribute to their inner transformation aimed at outer societal change.

The Pilgrim's Walk for the Future also functioned as a critical space in which to articulate and refine visions for a sustainable future society. This process could be interpreted as a reorientation driven by faith in practice, in which contemplative practices, self-reflection, spiritual experiences, and spiritual insights, complemented by climate knowledge, contributed to the constructive envisioning of sustainable futures. Moreover, normative theological voices, including biblical texts and pilgrimage literature, served as vital interpretative tools that deepened reflections on the activists' roles and responsibilities amid the climate crisis, anchoring these reflections in theological frameworks. These voices also functioned to legitimise spiritual experiences within the faith tradition, thereby inspiring and legitimising their visions for the future. Consequently, the pilgrimage, with its focus on inner transformation aimed at the outer, emerged as an integrative platform, helping to synthesise diverse knowledge sources and expanding existing understanding. This integrative and transformative process exemplifies the practical results of manifesting operant theological voices in the context of climate action, underscoring the formative role of spiritual practice in shaping visions for the future.

In the South African material, the processes of integrating and enhancing knowledge systems differ significantly from those in Sweden. Climate activism does not function as a platform for such integration. Instead, activists draw on diverse sources of knowledge that are already embedded in their collective spiritual identities. These identities are rooted in contextual understandings that explicitly incorporate indigenous epistemologies and recognise

individuals' interconnectedness in their communities – principles that could be understood as grounded in the philosophical frameworks of ubuntu and ukama.[331] Such collective spiritual identities and locally derived knowledge are shaping, for example, future imagination. However, in the South African context, these future visualisations are not linked to inner transformation but instead are significantly shaped by contextually tied resources.

To conclude, the faith-based activism depicted here combines climate knowledge with insights derived from spirituality, alongside various espoused, operant, and normative theological voices in their vision for the future. Although these perspectives do not claim that religious faith is the sole "solution" to the climate crisis, they are vital for fostering sustainable communities, and play a significant role in shaping the activists' imagining of future sustainable societies. Therefore, activists in both contexts draw on knowledge from sources that scientific orthodoxy typically does not validate; nonetheless, these sources greatly enhance their understanding and enrich both their climate activism and their vision for sustainable societies, which in the Swedish context are intricately tied to an inner transformation process.

Conclusions

The two contexts demonstrate varying strengths in their resource types. The South African material is particularly strong on resources tied to history, community and context, and organisation, while the resources found in the Swedish material are tied to the inner transformation of the individual, yet aimed at the outer transformation of society.

History, community, and cultural contexts are integral resources in South African faith-based climate and environmental activism. These elements fundamentally shape their collective spiritual identities, which significantly reinforce and propel their activism on climate and environmental issues. Furthermore, the strong interconnectedness with past figures and events of divine

[331] Although there are occasional references to indigenous knowledge in the Swedish material, it does not constitute an essential element of their activism. To exemplify, one Swedish activist briefly mentions indigenous knowledge as an essential resource in environmental care, but does not specifically refer to knowledge from the Sámi people of the Sápmi region, which encompasses parts of northern Sweden and bordering countries. Instead, the activist references indigenous knowledge in a broader sense, and it is not elaborated on. Sámi knowledge was also highlighted at an online presentation during The Pilgrim's Walk for the Future, but I could not see that this knowledge was specifically integrated into the activism during my participant observation during the pilgrimage.

intervention reinforces hope for the future, expecting divine intervention once more. This provides a solid foundation for resilience in the face of the crisis. These identities are influenced not only by normative theological voices expressed through the practices of leaders who have historically confronted crises, but also by culturally rooted concepts such as ubuntu and ukama, which emphasise relatedness. In addition, these identities are reinforced through engagement with local communities. Community and environmental care initiatives undertaken by South African activists focus on vulnerable populations at the local level, explicitly aiming to secure fundamental rights. These efforts reflect their holistic theologies being put into practice, which intertwine the climate crisis with other socio-environmental concerns in their context, incorporating transcendent reality, including notions of spiritual interconnectedness and the use of tangible faith-based resources, such as normative theological texts.

South African activists, moreover, benefit from organisational resources that facilitate a bridging between national and international levels and collaboration between faith traditions. These circumstances, in addition to the historic, community, and cultural contexts, shape the characterisation of the South African activists' holistic theologies. Generally, Swedish activists lack access to organisational resources such as those that are readily available to their South African counterparts; for them, faith-based platforms for activism are more temporary. This could partially explain why Swedish activists are more critical of their religious organisations' climate engagement.

Swedish faith-based activism showcases resources centred on individual and inner transformation. This transformation is characterised by a deliberate disconnection from contemporary society, fostering personal self-reflection and a reorientation towards sustainable living. This process helps to develop what I term beyond material values, surpassing materialism and individualism, promoting practices such as slowing down and reducing consumption, and fostering a spiritual relationship with God, others, and nature. These alterations aim to influence societal transformation, either directly or indirectly. In contrast to the holistic theologies that are characteristic of the South African material, the holistic theologies of Swedish activists exhibit a narrower focus, primarily emphasising the integration of transcendent reality with worldly matters. This approach is most notably exemplified through their ContemplActions, which synthesise protest strategies with contemplative practices.

What unites the holistic theologies in the two contexts is a theological imperative to connect transcendent reality with worldly matters. Moreover, these

theologies, because of this imperative, are reported to encounter resistance in existing local faith communities.

What unites the spirituality in the two contexts is that the spiritual experiences and subsequent insights found in the Swedish material show a significant alignment with the foundational aspect of the South African activists' collective spiritual identities: the core notion of relatedness and dependence. By using the concept of relational spirituality, I characterise this as a form of spirituality that is rooted in relatedness to God, others, and nature. While in the South African context this relatedness is characterised by a broader community and temporal framework, transcending the predominantly individual, temporally immediate, and localised spiritual experiences observed among Swedish activists, it also extends across historical timelines, linking the past and future in a continuum of collective spirituality.

Another compelling similarity is that activists in both contexts integrate diverse knowledge sources, especially science-based and experience-based climate knowledge, spiritual experiences, insights, identities, and indigenous epistemologies. It emphasises how faith-based activism creates a platform to integrate these varied understandings. This fosters knowledge that extends beyond the sources that scientific orthodoxy typically validate. This analysis of resources used and emerging in faith-based climate activism elucidates resources attributed to the collective, organisational, and individual levels, which are profoundly interconnected with relational spirituality in diverse cultural contexts.

6. Pathfinding amid climate catastrophe

Building on the findings presented in the previous chapters, this chapter aims to synthesise the analysis by explicitly addressing the overall purpose of the study: to describe the characteristics of faith-based climate activists' pathfinding process amid the climate catastrophe, and to construct the theological themes embedded in this process.

In the first section of this chapter, I describe the characteristics of the activists' pathfinding process by revisiting and addressing the research questions: How do faith-based climate activists motivate and conduct their activism? What resources can be found in faith-based activism, and what established resources are being used? Which theologies can be found in faith-based climate activism? In this analysis, I use the pathfinding metaphor. Then I examine the interactions between the various theological voices in the activists' pathfinding process, including a critical assessment of the applicability of the four voices of theology framework in this specific research context.

In the next section, I construct central theological themes by synthesising insights from the earlier chapters; here, I explicitly emphasise key theological questions articulated in my theory about God, humanity, and nature. Thus, I proceed to the second level of my theological analysis, focusing on the dominant themes in the activists' pathfinding process amid the climate catastrophe. The aim is to deepen the understanding of the role of theologies in the response to the climate catastrophe at a more general level.

Finally, to provide a broader picture of my research findings and of the societal potential of faith-based activism, I conclude with an epilogue that offers an overall analysis of faith-based climate activism as a potential revival movement.

I acknowledge that some repetition from earlier chapters is unavoidable, given that this chapter functions as a comprehensive conclusion.

The pathfinding process

Building on my analysis of the empirical material from South Africa and Sweden, this section aims to synthesise the key characteristics of faith-based climate activism as a pathfinding process amid the climate catastrophe. By highlighting both similarities and differences between these contexts, the diverse manifestations of pathfinding efforts among faith-based climate activists are presented. This approach intends to enhance scholarly understanding of how religious faith and contextual, experience-based, and practised theologies contribute to climate resilience and response strategies. Furthermore, it underscores religion and theology as constructive and vital resources for navigating the climate catastrophe.

This presentation begins by examining the core characteristics of the pathfinding process that apply in both contexts – specifically, those that are observable in varying cultural, religious, and climatic landscapes, underscoring their fundamental significance.

My research indicates that faith-based climate activism is driven not primarily by religious doctrines or faith per se, but by the concrete realities of the climate crisis. This motivation stems largely from experience-based climate knowledge, obtained through direct interactions with those affected by climate change, either in the activists' own communities or in external contexts, as well as through scientific documentaries, literature aimed at the general public, or training programmes. This supersedes spiritual and theological motivations as the primary catalyst for activism. It is this form of experience-based climate knowledge that actively prompts individuals to engage in climate activism in the ongoing climate crisis landscape. In the Swedish context, this process is initiated particularly when such knowledge evokes feelings of climate anxiety. Consequently, climate knowledge functions as a navigational framework, akin to landmarks, that guides activists in both the studied contexts on their pathfinding journey. It reveals that the response to the first research question, about the motivation for faith-based climate activism, is not rooted in theological or faith-based perspectives but, rather, directly in the realities of the climate crisis itself.

Although climate knowledge serves as a catalyst for activism and often elevates engagement to a more profound level, it is the activists' religious faith that fundamentally sustains and drives their efforts. A predominant and unifying theological understanding among faith-based climate activists in diverse contexts emphasises relationality as the central principle. These relationships

encompass not only the individual's spiritual interconnectedness with God, other humans, nature, and the self, as in the Swedish material; as shown in the South African material, they extend beyond the boundaries of time, encompassing ancestors from the past and those still present, reaching into the future and beyond the individual's spiritual relationships, including the relationality of the community as a whole. This study conceptualises this relationality as *relational spirituality*, as outlined in Chapter 5. The expressions of this relationality vary between the studied contexts, appearing as individual *spiritual experiences and insights* in Sweden and as *collective spiritual identities* in South Africa. Nonetheless, the centrality of the relational remains consistent in both contexts, uniting faith-based climate activism regardless of differences in faith traditions and cultural boundaries; this underscores that the activists' spiritual relationships and interconnectedness form the core of their activism. Relational spirituality reflects a shared understanding of humans as inherently related and dependent on their relational networks. Faith-based climate and environmental activism could be interpreted as a conscious acknowledgement of this intrinsic relationality.

These findings indicate that the guiding force behind the pathfinding process is less about specific theological understandings of God, humanity, or nature, and more about recognising one's interconnectedness with God, others, nature, and self – relationships that transcend time. Consequently, the fundamental theological questions outlined in Chapter 2, such as "Who is God?", "Who are we as humans?", and "What is nature?", do not primarily shape the pathfinding process. Instead, the critical element is how activists understand and acknowledge their relatedness and dependence, which functions as the spiritual compass that informs their navigation of the complex and rapidly evolving climate landscape.

Notably, the insight of one's relatedness appears to be more profoundly transformative among Swedish activists, suggesting a potential cultural or contextual influence. Conversely, in South Africa, relatedness is rooted more deeply in cultural traditions. Nonetheless, a salient characteristic in both contexts is the recognition that climate activism can serve as a sacred space for divine encounters. Activism thus provides a meaningful setting for deepening spiritual relatedness. Furthermore, this relationality can be deliberately cultivated through contemplative practices aimed at reconnecting with God. These practices can be integrated with protest actions, which I have referred to as *ContemplActions*, which are designed to facilitate both political protest and an experience of divine relatedness. This approach underscores the dual nature of climate activism as both political and spiritual, thereby exemplifying one form

of faith-based climate activism. Such framing directly addresses the research question about how faith-based climate activism is conducted.

Another significant insight from this study is that climate activism in both contexts serves as a space for theological reinterpretation and revision. This suggests that fixed responses to key theological questions about God, humans, and nature are not essential in the pathfinding process, but, rather, that they involve changing theological understandings. Typically, activists' theological expressions demonstrate a gradual transformation from anthropocentric towards eco-centric paradigms. For instance, spiritual encounters are shown to have expanded conceptualisations of human identity, emphasising humanity's dependence on the natural world, and including not only humans but the entire cosmos in beliefs about salvation. This is a process of theological reinterpretation and revision that is rooted in spiritual experiences and insights gained through activism. Notably, Khoisan activists exhibit pre-existing eco-centric theological perspectives. While normative theological voices often occupy a subordinate role in faith-based climate activism, their function remains vital in interpreting and contextualising spiritual experiences within faith traditions, such as through biblical narratives, and in reshaping core theological concepts, including their understanding of God. Crucially, normative theological voices tend to reinforce and amplify eco-centric viewpoints, thus serving as a theological source that supports the development of activists' ecological theologies.

A distinctive feature of faith-based climate activism, which unites diverse initiatives in both studied contexts and extends beyond different faith traditions, is its manifestation as a form of *holistic theology*, as outlined in Chapter 5. While the specific expressions of holistic theologies in the two contexts exhibit certain differences, the core element they share is crucial: an enduring theological imperative that opposes any dichotomy between transcendent reality and worldly matters. This imperative can align with teachings articulated at regional, national, and international levels in the religious institutions to which the activists belong. However, my research suggests that, at the local level, faith communities could maintain a separation between these spheres, thereby posing significant obstacles for activists who are striving to integrate transcendent and worldly realities. Furthermore, the development of increasingly eco-centric theological perspectives among activists, shaped by their engagement in activism, serves to accentuate their divergence from their local faith communities, highlighting a complex interplay between local faith practices and broader eco-theological paradigms.

This analysis reveals that a significant factor shaping climate activism in both contexts is the perceived inability of local faith communities to serve as venues for expressing holistic theologies. This creates a striking and shared longing among activists in diverse contexts, whether they are pastors in Sweden or grassroots Muslim advocates in South Africa. This underscores a common challenge: a yearning for faith-based spaces where their holistic theologies could be fully articulated and enacted. The persistent absence of space or resistance in these local faith communities compels activists to seek alternative platforms, such as broader faith-based networks or secular environmental movement organisations, to pursue their climate commitments. This escape from traditional local faith communities not only highlights a critical structural obstacle but also indicates a broader dynamic, such that faith-based environmental activism is mainly situated outside traditional institutional religious boundaries. This contributes to the response to the research question about how activism is conducted. I argue that this situation has theological roots, given that activists often struggle to manifest their holistic theologies fully in their local faith communities, and face resistance. However, the underlying reasons are multifaceted, and could also be understood as context-dependent, as I explore in the sections below.

Context-specific characteristics

The discussion has thus far demonstrated the core characteristics of the pathfinding process that are common in varying contexts. Building on this foundation, I now examine the distinguishing factors that set these contexts apart, thereby enriching our comprehensive understanding of pathfinding amid the climate catastrophe.

My analysis highlights the crucial role that contrasting climate landscapes play in shaping the form that faith-based climate activism takes. Thus, the response to the research question about how faith-based activism is conducted is heavily influenced by contextual differences. As mentioned in Chapter 1, South Africa faces more severe impacts from the climate crisis than does Sweden, which can disrupt everyday life. The socio-economic context of South Africa, characterised by significant inequality and economic instability, intensifies these problems, as societal injustices and economic disparities affect its people deeply. Furthermore, this situation worsens when authorities' adaptation efforts fall behind, leaving vulnerable communities to bear the brunt of climate impacts. (In contrast, although Swedish authorities also delay implementing adaptation measures, their communities are comparatively less vulnerable than those in South Africa.) The findings of this study show how South

African activists operate in this complex and multi-layered environment, involving both mitigation initiatives and targeted actions to help vulnerable populations to adapt to a rapidly changing climate. These efforts are connected to broader social issues, reflecting a complex landscape. In contrast, Swedish activists focus mainly on mitigation strategies that are aimed at reducing fossil fuel emissions through protests and lifestyle changes; they do not incorporating adaptation strategies at all into their activism. This difference in climate landscapes leads to distinct activist strategies in the two contexts. The activists' different awareness of their respective environments could be depicted as their situational awareness when navigating their climate landscapes.

Another critical factor influencing the activists' pathfinding process is the significant impact of cultural and religious contexts. These contexts substantially shape distinct navigation processes, particularly the contrast between individualism and collectivism. This contrast is most evident in what I define as the activists' relational spirituality. While this concept serves as a unifying framework in both contexts, previously highlighted as a shared understanding of humans as relational and interdependent, it also manifests differently in each context. In Sweden, greater emphasis is placed on individual, momentary, and localised spiritual experiences and insights, reflecting a more individualistic cultural orientation. Conversely, in South Africa, the focus is on collective spiritual identities, which are deeply rooted in community values and historical consciousness. These collective spiritual identities express a spiritual interconnectedness that extends from the past into the future, encompassing ancestors, both historical and those perceived as still present, as well as the community and the land. Therefore, the collective spiritual identities in South Africa are characterised by their transcendence of time and their collective understanding – features that are absent among Swedish activists. Recognising these nuanced differences underscores the importance of contextual sensitivity when examining the pathfinding process.

The activists' perspectives are deeply rooted in their specific socio-cultural and religious contexts, shaping their understanding of climate issues and response strategies. In Sweden, activists deliberately distance themselves from mainstream society, which they perceive as a primary driver of the climate crisis through consumerism, individualism, and reliance on fossil fuels. Their activism seeks to challenge and find alternatives to this societal model. Conversely, South African activists tend to engage actively with their society, drawing on shared historical experiences and cultural resources that could be associated with concepts of ubuntu and ukama. This highlights how South African activists leverage culturally embedded resources in their climate

response. Consequently, this informs my response to the research question about the resources used. Unlike their Swedish counterparts, they do not distance themselves from their history; rather, they see it as integral to addressing climate justice. For Swedish activists, historical consciousness could be understood as implicitly linked to the overuse of fossil fuels, motivating a distancing stance. This divergence in contextual awareness informs their respective approaches: South African activism emphasises both adaptation and mitigation to ensure human rights and community resilience, whereas Swedish activism predominantly centres on mitigation strategies. These differences highlight how local socio-cultural and religious influences, and diverse climate landscapes, fundamentally shape climate activism, and emphasise that the theologies found can vary because of context, such as the response to how we should live.

These contextual differences give rise to two distinct characteristics of the pathfinding process in South Africa and in Sweden: resilience in South Africa and reorientation in Sweden, which I contend are their primary strengths. I now elaborate on these points briefly, and return to these themes with a more in-depth theological analysis in the section "Theological themes in pathfinding amid the climate catastrophe".

In the South African context, I argue that activists' collective spiritual identities are deeply rooted in their history, community, and concepts such as ubuntu and ukama. These identities are shaped by shared historical consciousness and trust in divine intervention, grounded in the belief that God's aid has been present in critical moments. This resilience supports activists in navigating the uncertainties of a rapidly changing climate and in developing projects for climate-resilient communities. They rely not only on God's intervention, but also on effective human actions, inspired by prominent theological figures who emphasise faith and divine aid in crises. Such figures serve as normative theological voices, reinforcing the faith-centred approach to addressing ecological and social injustices. Moreover, it is typically the case that South African activists hold formal positions in their religious institutions and networks, evidenced in Chapter 5 as a resource in their activism, which gives them significantly greater access to policymakers than their Swedish counterparts enjoy, and enabling them to conduct lobbying as one form of their activism. Consequently, South African activists leverage their contextually embedded resources, which include theological understandings and collective spiritual identities, positional, organisational, and religious institutional resources, as resources in building climate resilience. In comparison

with Swedish activists, they can tread pathways created by others in the past in their efforts for the future.

In contrast, the primary strength of the Swedish activists' pathfinding process lies in their reorientation through faith-centred practices. This could be conceptualised as a resource facilitating inner transformation, which is directed toward the goal of fostering a more sustainable society. Here, faith functions as a pivotal element, extending the reorientation process beyond mere behavioural adjustments towards sustainability. It serves as a vital resource for the redefinition of core values, including what it means to be human, and fosters a reconnection with God. In the context of climate mitigation, faith in practice emerges as a vital resource, particularly exemplified through ContemplActions, which facilitate a deliberate disconnection from mainstream society and a reconnection to God. Therefore, climate activism acts as a catalyst for a profound reorientation initiated by climate-induced anxiety and actualised through spiritual experiences and insights commonly gained during activism.

While faith functions as a resource for inner transformation and reorientation, the Swedish context is characterised by a significant burden that is placed on the individual, who lacks clear pathways from the past to follow. This requires a form of pathfinding that is heavily influenced by the need to forge new routes in a landscape that, compared with the South African context, appears to have fewer or hardly any established paths. Unlike their South African counterparts, Swedish individuals lack key historical figures and community-based narratives or cultures that could serve as sources of strength. Instead, they tend to distance themselves from mainstream society, actively seeking to pioneer new pathways in their response to the climate crisis. Nevertheless, they use their spirituality, marked by personal spiritual experiences and insights, as a navigational compass. These insights are then interpreted through normative theological voices, such as biblical texts, anchoring their journey in something beyond themselves. Compared with South African activists, Swedish activists are forced to a greater extent to explore the responses to the theological questions of how we should live and relate in times of crisis, highlighting a divergence in their access to existing pathways in the climate landscape.

This analysis reveals that the manifestation of activism is profoundly influenced by contextual factors such as culture, religion, and climate landscape, alongside the activists' institutional positions. These factors also critically influence both the modes of engagement and where the activism is manifested. For instance, South African activists often use holistic theologies that incorporate a diverse array of societal and environmental concerns, including the

climate crisis, through collaboration between multiple faith traditions and connecting local with international levels. Such integrative approaches are facilitated by the pluralistic religious context of South Africa, alongside the activists' positions in religious institutions and access to interfaith platforms for environmental advocacy. Conversely, Swedish activism tends to be characterised by individual lifestyle adjustments and protest actions that are guided primarily by spiritual experiences and insights, often operating within secular frameworks and organisations. The more secular context of Sweden, as discussed in Chapter 1, limits the influence of faith-based groups in civil society, thereby contributing to shaping the nature of faith-based activism, which is more commonly conducted in secular environmental organisations. Consequently, faith-based climate activism outside religious institutions in Sweden originates from contextual realities that are unique to this setting. These distinctions emphasise the crucial importance of considering cultural and institutional contexts when analysing the strategies and platforms of faith-based activism. They also highlight that what were previously identified as the theological roots for the positioning of faith-based climate activism outside traditional local faith communities could also be understood as reflecting contextual cultural, religious, and organisational differences between the two studied settings.

My study highlights a critical contextual divergence in the strategic orientations of the activists' pathfinding process. Specifically, it underscores how the varying climate landscapes and the religious and cultural frameworks fundamentally shape the goals of these activists' pathfinding endeavours. In the South African context, activists demonstrate a nuanced situational awareness that extends beyond a mere analysis of the climate crisis; they intricately link environmental crises with broader societal issues and include faith-based considerations. Consequently, their trajectory is oriented to fostering a future society that upholds fundamental human rights, with particular emphasis on food security and justice. Conversely, their Swedish counterparts pursue a vision of societal reorientation towards environmental sustainability that includes a reorientation towards God. These contrasting approaches not only reflect divergent regional priorities but also exemplify the complex interplay between local contextual factors and global environmental discourses, thereby emphasising the importance of a contextual approach when studying faith-based climate activism.

In conclusion, the responses to the research questions – namely, how faith-based climate activists motivate and conduct their activism, the resources found in their activism, their use of established resources, and the theologies found in faith-based climate activism – serve to elucidate the overall purpose: to describe the characteristics of faith-based climate activists' pathfinding process amid the climate catastrophe. The analysis reveals that South African activists, owing to their historical, contextual, and communal resources, are positioned to explore responses to these theological questions with greater reliance on existing frameworks than are their Swedish counterparts, who appear to navigate a less charted and pathless landscape. Therefore, I conclude that the pathfinding of faith-based climate activists is not a single, uniform process, but consists rather of multiple processes that comprise diverse and contextually influenced navigation strategies.

My findings, moreover, underscore that the theological responses manifested by these activists in words and actions are not guided by doctrinal answers about God, humanity and nature, but are characterised by ongoing development and contextual responsiveness, and are oriented towards other theological questions such as: "How should we relate?" "How should we live?" and "Whom can we trust in times of crisis?" Neither formal nor normative theological voices can be understood as fixed guides for navigation. And the espoused and operant theological voices are shaped and reshaped through the activists' lived experiences and actions amid the shifting climate landscape. This fluidity underscores that climate activism offers a vital space for contextual theological expression and development during times of climate crisis, regardless of faith tradition or whether it is conducted within or outside religious institutional frameworks. Recognising this, we could view faith-based climate activism not merely as acts of climate advocacy but as faith-based pathfinding that contributes to the development of a theological response to the climate crisis situation.

Finally, the findings show that activists' pathfinding processes substantially transcend traditional scientific boundaries by incorporating knowledge derived from spiritual experiences, insights, and identities. This integrative approach plays a crucial role in fostering a reorientation towards a sustainable future, fostering climate resilience, and empowering activists to find hope and the freedom to undertake decisive actions amid despair. Their pathfinding also involves exploring alternative pathways outside of religious institutional frameworks. These activists develop contextually grounded practices and local strategies, often operating independently of institutional support, and demonstrate theologies, both in words and actions, that transcend institutional

doctrines. Such efforts reinforce a profound and tangible commitment to climate action. This multifaceted approach highlights the depth and complexity of faith-based climate activists' pathfinding, underscoring its potential to inspire transformative actions and to explore paths beyond traditional religious institutional frameworks and boundaries of science.

Interplay of theological voices

Building on the process of pathfinding outlined in the previous section, this section provides an in-depth analysis of the interplay among the diverse theological voices embedded within the four voices of theology framework. It critically evaluates the ways in which these voices shape and influence the activists' navigation of the climate crisis. Furthermore, this examination advances the theoretical understanding of the four voices framework by highlighting its limitations and avenues for contributions. Such insights significantly enhance the understanding of the framework's relevance and strength in the broader context of empirical theological research on faith-based commitment for societal change.

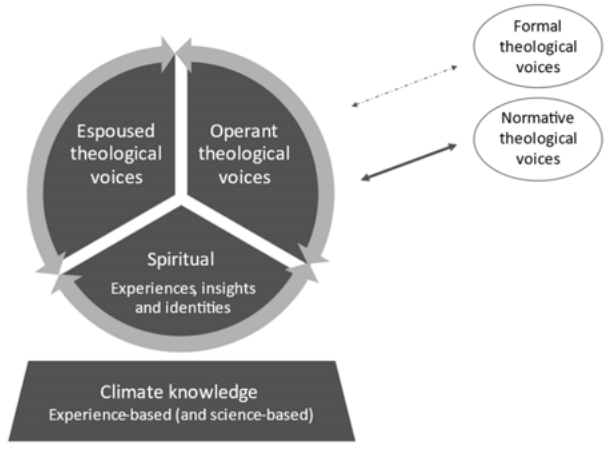

Figure 3: Interplay among diverse theological voices and other key factors in the pathfinding process.

As shown throughout the thesis, studying faith-based activism from a theological perspective naturally places operant theological voices at the centre of the enquiry, since it is the practices of the activists that interest me, along with their reflections on these practices. Therefore, the espoused theological voices are equally important for this analysis. What becomes clear in the material is

that the operant and espoused theological voices interact most closely, while the other two voices, the normative and formal theological voices, adopt a more subordinate role. Instead of the latter voices, alongside the operant and espoused theological voices the activists' pathfinding process is profoundly influenced by their *spiritual experiences and insights* and *collective spiritual identities*. Notably, the Swedish material reveals that *spiritual experiences and insights* can occur during activism, suggesting that such spiritual experiences could be linked to the expression of operant theological voices. This phenomenon is also occasionally reflected in the South African material; however, in this context, *collective spiritual identities* play a more prominent role than individual spiritual experiences. Here, spirituality relates primarily to membership of a community or group rather than to personal spiritual experiences. Nonetheless, this could be interpreted as an ongoing spiritual engagement characterised by relationality to God, community, and nature.

Despite the differing manifestations of spirituality between the two contexts, both the spiritual experiences and insights, which are most prominent in the Swedish material, and the collective spiritual identities, which are most evident in the South African material, exert a substantial influence on the activists' pathfinding processes. These elements actively engage with both their espoused and their operant theological voices. Specifically, the triad consisting of spiritual experiences, insights, and collective spiritual identities, in conjunction with the operant and espoused theological voices, is mainly at play in the activists' pathfinding processes amid the climate catastrophe. This conceptualisation is visually represented in Figure 3 above, where the circle is divided into three interconnected sections. This deviates significantly from the original four voices of theology framework, which emphasises that the four distinct voices – normative, formal, espoused, and operant – interact in shaping practitioners' theologies.

It is evident that climate knowledge serves as the foundation of their pathfinding process, functioning as the primary catalyst for their climate activism, as shown by the square at the bottom of the figure. Significantly, what I have identified as experience-based climate knowledge plays a crucial role, often acting as the initial trigger or intensifier of activism. These activists do not deny climate science; rather, they rely heavily on it. Nonetheless, their reliance on scientific knowledge is mediated mainly through popular science communication channels. Most compellingly, it is when climate knowledge (whether derived from popular science, personal encounters with those suffering severe impacts of climate change, or other activists) becomes personally

transformative and effectively catalyses activist engagement. Therefore, I posit that the primary source of climate knowledge for these activists is experience-based.

The analysis reveals that personal experiences play a crucial role in shaping the activists' pathfinding process, both experience-based climate knowledge and the activists' spiritual experiences, insights, and collective spiritual identities. In contrast, normative theological voices tend to occupy a more subordinate position in this process. When these voices are present, they typically serve as interpretive frameworks for spiritual experiences through sacred texts, or they anchor spiritual experiences and insights within established religious traditions. These voices contribute to the formation of activists' espoused theological voices, such as conceptualisations of the divine and of salvation. While the influence of normative theological voices is more indirect than spiritual experiences, they may implicitly shape spiritual experiences by offering linguistic and interpretive tools. This, in turn, helps activists to contextualise and integrate their spiritual experiences within their faith traditions, thereby enhancing the interpretive coherence and theological understanding of these experiences. Formal theological voices occupy an even more subordinate position relative to normative voices; nonetheless, these theological expressions can still contribute to the expansion of activists' espoused theological voices, including the development and broadening of core theological concepts.

In addition, normative theological voices serve as important benchmarks or sources of theologies from which the activists aim to distance themselves, allowing them to refine and express their own theological positions. These voices typically include theologies propagated by individuals or religious institutions that are subject to the activists' critique. Consequently, normative theological voices can have a double function: while they can be strategically used as resources during the pathfinding process, they also delineate boundaries that activists seek to avoid. This avoidance, whether conscious or unconscious, contributes to some extent to shaping the direction of their navigation. Ultimately, formal theological voices in both contexts play a very subordinate role, yet, when referred to, they are said to contribute to widening the activists' espoused theological voices. It is also important to note that some of the interviewees play a role in shaping normative and formal theological perspectives by holding formal positions in religious institutions or academia. To emphasise this point, I have included bi-directional arrows in Figure 3 linking the normative and formal theological voices to the central circle (which includes the espoused and operant theological voices, as well as spiritual experiences,

insights, and identities), although these materials are not included in this study, as noted in Chapter 2, section "Social media, webpages, and other written materials".

A critical reflection on the four voices of theology framework

Examining this pathfinding process through the lens of the four voices of theology framework has provided significant insights, particularly in clarifying the pivotal roles of both espoused and operant theological voices. Recognising practitioners as bearers of theology, which thus gives them theological authority, aligns with the original conception of the four voices framework, as established by its creators. However, my analysis extends the framework's application beyond its initial Christian-centric scope, embracing a broader spectrum of religious practices. Consequently, this approach not only underscores the "theological wisdom of practice" among Christian practitioners, as Helen Cameron expresses it when outlining the framework, but also illuminates similar theological expressions in Islamic and indigenous faith traditions, thereby demonstrating the framework's broader epistemological and cross-religious relevance.[332] Consequently, I find the framework to be academically valuable in my study, even though its broader theological scope extends beyond Christianity.

The framework has also enhanced my understanding of the subordinate role played by normative theological voices in faith-based climate activism. This recognition underscores that the relative ease of interfaith collaboration in this domain has theological explanations, alongside relevant contextual and historical factors. Furthermore, the activists' holistic theologies, emphasising the inseparable nature of transcendent reality and worldly matters and placing the climate crisis at the centre of their theological practices, unite diverse theological perspectives and strengthen collective actions.

The framework also convincingly demonstrates its utility in highlighting tensions between diverse theological voices in religious contexts. Notably, it exposes a disconnect between the espoused and operant theological voices of activists and the normative theological voice expressed by their religious institutions, particularly at the local level. Specifically, the findings reveal that, while the normative theological voice at the national institutional level is generally highly appreciated, activists often perceive a significant gap and criticise the lack of practical implications in their local faith communities.

[332] Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice*, 49.

Moreover, activists rarely encounter normative theological voices that actively support climate action in their local faith communities. Thus, the framework demonstrates a high degree of applicability to issues that are intrinsically linked to religious institutions, thereby emphasising its broader significance for understanding the complex dynamics of individuals' interactions with their religious institutions, even in the context of faith-based climate activism. However, the extent to which this is achievable depends on the activists involved in this study maintaining relatively strong ties to their respective religious institutions, even though in practice their activism manifests both within and beyond these institutional boundaries.

The limitations of the framework have also become apparent. The application of this framework to diverse faith traditions and in a dual-sited study has revealed that normative theological voices extend beyond the traditionally recognised sources, such as scripture, official religious teachings, creeds, and prayers – elements originally outlined in the four voices of theology framework.[333] Normative theological voices can also be embodied by influential historical figures who are deeply rooted in local cultural and social frameworks. They are endowed with authority, and serve as sources of inspiration as they, akin to the activists, intertwine faith and action in pursuit of justice causes. This expanded understanding underscores the need for a more comprehensive approach to identifying normative theological voices, one that recognises the influence of both doctrinal texts and lived, action-oriented faith expressions. This comparison furthermore underscores the diversity of normative theological voices, and highlights how their function is heavily influenced by specific contextual circumstances.

Moreover, my study demonstrates that the origins of normative theological voices can extend beyond the immediate confines of a practitioner's own faith tradition. The frequent referencing of these voices in different faith contexts underscores the inherently fluid and multi-faith nature of theological authority. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that there is a discernible variation in the material concerning whether these normative theological voices are embedded in or outside the practitioner's cultural milieu. References to other normative theological voices than the Bible, which is the most commonly cited normative text, reveal a diversity in the material. The South African material reveals that such voices are often deeply embedded in their specific cultural and historical milieus, which reinforces their contextualised authority. Conversely,

[333] See further details in the section headed "Theological lens in analysis" in Chapter 2, especially refer to footnote 119.

the Swedish material reveals a tendency to derive normative theological authority predominantly from voices situated outside their immediate cultural environment, highlighting a different modality of authority construction that emphasises external sources. This comparative analysis underscores the complex and multifaceted nature of normative theological voices and their contextual underpinnings.

While lived practices are indeed foundational to the original formulation of the four voices of theology framework, the present investigation also emphasises the crucial role of experiences. Specifically, it highlights both the experience-based climate knowledge about the severe consequences of the climate crisis and the significance of spiritual experiences, insights, and collective spiritual identities. The analysis of the empirical material indicates that experiences exert a more profound influence than normative and formal theological voices in shaping activists' pathfinding. Consequently, extending this theological framework beyond institutionalised religious settings to faith-based climate activism amid a global crisis underscores the essential importance of contextual and experience-based knowledge, and emphasises the integration of transcendent and worldly concerns in theological pathfinding amid the climate catastrophe.

Theological themes in pathfinding

Synthesising insights from previous chapters, I now advance to the second level of my theological analysis. This aims to construct the most significant theological themes in the activists' pathfinding processes. The goal is to deepen understanding of the role that theologies play in efforts to address the climate catastrophe.

I construct themes by being grounded in a more in-depth analysis of the theological questions outlined in Chapter 2: "Who is God?", "Who are we as humans?", "What is nature?" Specifically, within the foundational theme of "relate", which underpins the subsequent themes, I critically examine the core concepts of God, alongside understandings of humanity and nature and the perceived interrelations among God, humans, and nature. Nevertheless, as demonstrated in the preceding chapters, additional theological questions have emerged as being more prominent in the activists' pathfinding: "How should we relate?", "How should we live?", and "Whom can we trust during times of crisis?" These are elucidated in this construction of theological themes. Engaging deeply with these questions, I aim to demonstrate the role of theologies

in pathfinding through the climate catastrophe on a general level. However, these themes are not merely abstract ideas: I draw on the contextual, experience-based, and practised theologies of the activists, and what I regard as their implicit responses to these theological questions – answers that I have already begun to identify in the empirical chapters.

While developing the theological themes, I realised that I could build partly on and develop themes from the empirical chapters, such as "reconnect to the relational" and "reorient through faith in practice". The four themes I constructed are: *relate, react, reorient,* and *rely.* In the process of constructing these theological themes, I discovered that they all began with the prefix "re-". This pattern was unintentional, but proved useful, prompting me to keep these terms throughout. At the heart of faith-based activism lie operant theological voices, which means that I decided to construct the theological themes around action-oriented verbs that signify that the theologies are actively practised. In addition, it shows that these theological themes arise from a pathfinding process amid the climate catastrophe. Thus, the themes are written as verbs aimed at encapsulating the dominant theological themes that are evident in my analysis.

To some extent, I relate my work to that of established academic theologians who are renowned for their reflection on the role of theology in times of climate and environmental crises.[334] I do so, in particular, when this enables me to explore when the contextual, experience-based, and practised theologies of activists could deepen or challenge the theologies of trained academic theologians, as well as where there are alignments. It is essential to note, however, that some of the faith-based activists I interviewed are also trained academic theologians, and that some of the academic theologians I referenced are also activists.[335] Therefore, the boundary between academia and local pathfinding is not as clear-cut as it might appear; instead, the demarcation I make is analytical. Nonetheless, the goal here is to strengthen the analysis of the empirical material. However, I do not intend to use these academic theologies as a benchmark for assessing the theologies of the pathfinders; rather, I aim to

[334] The academic theologians I reference are rooted in the field of Christianity. This is a deliberate choice, as most of the interviewees adhere to Christianity, and those in the South African context who affiliate with other faith traditions also engage with concepts from the Christian tradition. This academic field is also the one with which I am most familiar, allowing me to deepen the theological analysis of these perspectives. However, I recognise that analysing the material from other theological viewpoints could also have been fruitful, although this was not undertaken in this study.

[335] My use of the term "activist" is discussed in the section on "Terminological clarifications" in Chapter 2.

deepen the understanding of the role of, and central themes in, contextual, experience-based, and practised theologies amid the climate catastrophe.[336] Thus, the references to academic theologies are made with a light touch.

Relate – relationality between God, human, nature, and self, transcending time and the individual

The most significant theological theme that could be constructed from the studied faith-based climate activism is *relate*. This theme suggests that all entities are interconnected through a spiritual relatedness, shaping perceptions of who God and humans are, as well as views of nature and self. However, as is shown below, the material has a variety of understandings of God, humans, nature, and self, that exist alongside one another. These do not define faith-based climate activism, but the God–humans–nature–self relationality does. The central theological question is about how we should relate. Faith-based climate activism could be seen as a practice of intentionally recognising the importance of this relationality.

What I frame here as a theological theme, *relate*, corresponds with the relationality affirmed by numerous established academic theologians as fundamental in addressing environmental and climate crises. Notably, Jürgen Moltmann, a German theologian, articulates the concept of a community of creation; Cathrine Keller, an American theologian, develops the notion of "human self-organisation in mindful interdependence with the biosphere"; and Sallie McFague, a Canadian theologian, underscores the importance of human interrelationship and interdependence with all other life-forms. Similar perspectives are present among theology academics in both Sweden and South Africa. In the Swedish academic context, this theme is prevalent, exemplified by Petra Carlsson's work, which advances the idea of theological environmental activism conceived as relational activism. In South Africa, Ernst Conradie emphasises the significance of holism and ecological community, positioning these concepts at the core of South African cosmologies.[337]

While the theme of spiritual relatedness is prevalent in academic eco-theology, my conceptualisation of the theological theme *relate* emphasises relatedness as contextually bound experience. In addition, while prior empirical research on environmental activism has documented similar experiences of

[336] See further discussion under "My role as a researcher" in Chapter 2.
[337] Moltmann, *God in Creation*; Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth*, 91; McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 29; Redell, *Gråstensteologi*, 122; Conradie, "Reconstructing an Ecological Cosmology," 227.

relatedness, my study offers novel insights by analysing activists who self-report as religious, and by analysing their faith-based activism through a theological lens.[338]

My construction of the theological theme *relate* derives from the practices of climate activists as they navigate the climate catastrophe, underscoring the critical role of the experience-based in faith-based activists' theologies. Therefore, I start with a comprehensive exploration of the foundational aspects of this theological theme, namely the concept of relational spirituality, with particular emphasis on the various types of relationship it encompasses. Thus, I build on my analysis in Chapter 5, where this concept is first introduced, and provide a more in-depth theological analysis of the concept here. Given the centrality of the theological theme *relate*, which serves as the basis for subsequent theological themes, my focus also includes an in-depth analysis of the core theological questions about the conceptualisation of God, humans, nature, and the self within this framework.

Relational spirituality

Examining the roots of this theological theme, relational spirituality, reveals that relating extends beyond a simple intellectual or scientific understanding of humanity's relationship with nature and with one another, as it underscores everything's relatedness to God, and derives from the spiritual experiences of this relatedness. Therefore, this theological theme could be said to focus on the relationships between God, humans, and nature, making faith more than a private matter and highlighting the climate crisis as particularly relevant to those of faith. However, as shown in Chapter 5 and explained further here, the nature of relational spirituality is different in the two studied contexts. In Sweden, personal spiritual experiences and insights shape what I frame as their relational spirituality. In contrast, in South Africa, relational spirituality is mainly shaped by strong contextual ties and collective identities. These collective spiritual identities are rooted in community, history, and existing group memberships, where being connected to others is a fundamental aspect of one's spiritual identity. Consequently, the theological theme *relate* encompasses various aspects, drawing on different contexts and, as is seen in what follows, involving slightly different relationships. Yet, what characterises the

[338] Environmental activists without religious affiliations often report feelings of belonging and connection to the Earth, similar to spiritual experiences, as noted by Bron Taylor. In contrast, the activists interviewed in this study all identify with a religious tradition, and I interpret their experiences as spiritual in accordance with what I outline in the section "Religion and spirituality – central concepts" in Chapter 2. Taylor, "Religion and Environmental Behaviour (Part Two): Dark-Green Nature Spiritualities and the Fate of the Earth."

activists' climate activism in both contexts is their acknowledgement of this relatedness, and there are also conscious efforts to connect or reconnect with it. Thus, it is not about forming relationships, but recognising that we are already interconnected.

As relational spirituality in the Swedish context derives from individual spiritual experiences and subsequent insights, these experiences could be understood as an individual's awareness of their interconnectedness with a larger whole, beyond oneself.[339] Investigation of the Swedish material reveals that this relationality encompasses dimensions relating to God, other humans, and nature. However, the Swedish material indicates that the relation to the self also occupies a central position. This is particularly evident in cases where personal lifestyle modification is integrated into theological praxis, involving not only concrete lifestyle changes but also personal reflection on one's way of living, what it means to be human, and the individual's attempt to reconnect actively with God through contemplative practices. Furthermore, personal spiritual experiences serve as catalysts for lifestyle changes, shaping the individual's relationship with God. Implicitly, this points to a process of reconnecting spirituality with the self. Consequently, the emergent theological theme from the Swedish material encompasses not only God–humans–nature relationships but also the relation to the self. [340]

The relatedness to future generations could have been a central theme, given the climate crisis as an escalating issue that activists try to address not only for themselves, others, and nature, but also for coming generations. However, the relational spirituality manifested in the Swedish material does not emphasise spiritual relatedness to coming generations.[341]

[339] This kind of spiritual insight into one's relatedness aligns in particular with the German theologian Dorothee Sölle (1929-2003), who describes it as: "What really happens in mystical union is not a new vision of God but a different relationship to the world". Her theological perspective, which has both mysticism and resistance as integral elements, aligns with the Swedish material, in which contemplation and action are intrinsically interconnected. Notably, Sölle's writings represent one of the few formal and normative theological frameworks explicitly referenced by Swedish activists. Furthermore, her work served as a significant source of inspiration for the publication created for and collectively read during The Pilgrim's Walk for the Future. Sölle, *The Silent Cry, Mysticism and Resistance*, 293.

[340] This aligns with the fourfold relationality that is proposed by Jeanrond, "Human Hope and the Reign of God."

[341] Although grandchildren are briefly mentioned by one Swedish activist as a reason for her climate activism, it does not appear to be a spiritual relatedness in the same way as those characterised as spiritual experiences, as outlined in Chapter 2.

Examining the relationships in relational spirituality seen in the South African material shows that these relationships differ slightly from those in the Swedish context, as the former are shaped primarily by strong contextual ties and identities. Thus, the relational spirituality in the South African context is characterised by what I have termed collective spiritual identities. These are rooted in community, history, and existing group memberships, where being connected to God, others, and nature is a fundamental aspect of one's existing spiritual identity. Therefore, the spirituality of South African activists is primarily grounded in their membership of established groups rather than personal spiritual experiences or insights, illustrating cultural concepts such as ubuntu, ukama, and indigenous knowledge systems, elaborated on in Chapter 5. However, the collective spiritual identities could still be seen as a spiritual experience of connection to God, community, and nature, similar to the Swedish activists' spiritual experience, yet with a more ongoing nature and not primarily stemming from personal, momentary, and localised spiritual experiences such as those of the Swedish activists.

In addition, interconnectedness with ancestors (both past and present) and the land is included, which is particularly prominent among indigenous activists and those influenced by indigenous spirituality. Consequently, the relationships in South African relational spirituality extend from the past into the future, with strong bonds to ancestors, history, previous struggles, and community taking centre stage. Relatedness to the future primarily manifests as a bridge that extends from the past into the future, implying that one sees oneself as an ancestor of future generations.[342]

Constructing the theological theme *relate* by integrating an analysis that builds on both the Swedish and the South African empirical material significantly enriches its scope, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of relational dynamics. While core relationships with God, other humans, and nature are universally applicable whatever the context, the South African activists' relational framework exemplifies a profound shift towards communal spiritual experiences, emphasising collective over individual engagement. This approach captures spiritual experiences that go beyond the individual, emphasising a form of spirituality that is not confined to personal experiences. Moreover, it extends across temporal boundaries, linking past, present, and future

[342] This aligns with the perspectives articulated by Steve Edwards, a professor at the University of Zululand in South Africa. He emphasises the interconnectedness in Southern African viewpoints, especially those rooted in indigenous knowledge systems, in which ancestors are traditionally regarded as custodians of the well-being of future generations. Edwards, "Some Southern African Views on Interconnectedness with Special Reference to Indigenous Knowledge."

through ongoing spiritual connections with historical figures and ancestors who are believed to sustain a continuum of spiritual interconnectedness. Therefore, the development of the theological theme *relate*, supported by empirical material from both contexts, highlights an extensive network of relationships – God, human, nature, and self – that transcends individual experiences and temporal boundaries, thereby providing a broader framework for relational spirituality, understood through a multi-sited study.

Conceptualisations of humanity and self

I now examine perceptions of humanity and self within the framework of the theological theme *relate*. Here, I emphasise that humanity's true identity is fundamentally rooted in relationships with God, other humans, nature, and self – relationships that transcend both individual experiences and temporal boundaries. This also demonstrates that humans depend on these connections, and indicates a dependence on those in the past and those from the past who are still present. This perspective on what it means to be human stands in stark opposition to an individualistic and consumer-oriented society. It rejects the notion that humans are isolated beings who can thrive on their own, separate from community and the interconnected web of life. Instead, it stresses that human life is to be lived in relatedness and in awareness of one's dependence, and forms a robust opposition to human dominion over creation.

The realisation of one's relatedness and dependence appears to be heightened by the climate crisis and the uncertainty it brings. The insight into one's dependence and relatedness, however, is more striking in the Swedish material than in the South African. This might have its roots in the Swedish context, characterised by the individual's independence from others, made possible owing to the trust in others, which could be replaced by trust in the welfare state, as discussed in the description of the Swedish landscape in Chapter 1. It could also be assumed that the individual's independence from others has been possible because the context has been free from significant crises for a longer period than in the South African context. However, what makes this insight so striking in the Swedish material might have to do, above all, with its origin in spiritual experiences that enable the activists to discover, on a deeper level, their dependence on others, God, and nature – a transformative experience of discovering their relationality, which redirects their pathfinding.

In contrast to the Swedish context, the understanding of dependence appears already to exist in the South African context, given the collective spiritual identities. This also becomes dominant in the South African material, as indigenous knowledge and spirituality are represented, with relationality and

dependence, particularly in relation to the land, being central themes. Yet, the climate crisis has deepened the understanding of dependence and expanded it to those less familiar with the reliance on land. Drawing on both contexts, my research reveals that the heightened insight into dependence has its origin in a growing awareness of the climate crisis, alongside the relational spirituality.

Conceptualisations of God and nature

I move now to construct the conceptualisations of, and the relationality between, God and nature. Despite earlier claims that everything is interconnected – God, humans, nature, and self, relationships that transcend both individual experiences and temporal boundaries – the empirical material does not provide a single, definitive understanding of either God or nature. Instead, the theological theme *relate* includes a variety of understandings of God and nature that coexist under the umbrella of relationality.

The conceptualisation of God that is most prominent in the material could be described as perceiving God in all and all within God, characterised by the interconnectedness of all things. Thus, it involves understanding God as distinct yet not separate from the world, or as both transcendent and immanent. This perception of God includes the possibility of encountering the divine through nature, which is a dominant theme throughout the material in both contexts. It reflects a panentheistic perspective. Some individuals also explore, develop, or are guided by another perception of God, namely seeing the divine as synonymous with the world, meaning that God is all, and all is God. This understanding perceives God as entirely immanent, such as the view that the soil embodies the divine. Such a perspective could be based on indigenous spirituality, interfaith theological views, or spiritual experiences of truly perceiving the soil as divine. Such views could be described as reflecting a pantheistic understanding of God. There are also more theistic views with a distinct, separate God who can be incarnated in the world.[343]

However, in practice the lines between theological concepts of God and nature often become fluid, as evidenced in my material. One interviewee may report multiple seemingly contradictory understandings of God without perceiving any inconsistency – for instance, to regard God as distinct from creation and

[343] For an academic exploration of a panentheistic understanding of God in relation to the climate crisis, see, for instance: McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*. For a comprehensive academic examination of various theological perspectives on the relationship between God and the world – including panentheism, pantheism, and classical theism – as well as their practical implications for environmental well-being from a philosophy of religion standpoint, see: Langby, *God and the World*.

humans as separate from nature, yet concurrently to describe spiritual experiences that evoke a profound sense of interconnectedness in a wholeness in which everything is related. Furthermore, the concept of creation emerges as a pivotal unifying principle in diverse faith traditions, serving as a foundational element that is integrated with various theological perspectives. Consequently, some activists combine interpreting the world as God's creation with views that equate the world with the divine or consider the land and the nurturing soil as embodiments of the divine. Conversely, other activists perceive God as immanent and present in the world in, for example, Christ or the Holy Spirit, without viewing the universe as a direct embodiment of the divine. In addition, references to land, trees, or mountains as sacred serve to reinforce the belief that divine presence resides in these natural objects or that they are innately holy. This fluidity and combination of theological concepts highlighted under the theological theme *relate* highlights the diversity of interpretative theological frameworks in faith-based activism.

Regardless of differing ontological views on the interconnectedness between the divine, nature, and humanity, breaking these connections contradicts the core of the theological theme *relate*. The relation to nature is particularly under threat, as nature is seen as wounded by humanity, which could be understood as a break in the relationality that should be acknowledged and respected. For example, the material presents an instance emphasising the importance of this theme in descriptions of how colonisers and Christian missionaries destroyed Khoi spiritual identity by severing their bond with the land and instructing them not to see it as sacred.[344] Another example from within the Christian faith tradition is the perception that breaking this relationality could be understood as sin, symbolising humanity's fall, which emphasises the importance of this theological theme. My analysis of the empirical material reveals that, regardless of faith tradition and context, being a person of faith involves maintaining relationships with the divine, others, and nature. This includes actively participating in climate and environmental efforts; this is further discussed under the theological themes below.

The relational spirituality in the two contexts, comprehensively analysed in Chapter 5, was not merely derived from the spiritual experiences and insights that are characteristic of the Swedish context, nor solely from the collective spiritual identities rooted in the South African context. Instead, it was also

[344] This aligns with the argument of Georg William Byarugaba, who states: "Breaking our relationship with God leads not only to human suffering but also to the suffering of the rest of creation." Byarugaba, "Inter-Religious Discourse on Climate Change," 333.

significantly shaped through a critical analysis of how these spiritual modalities engage with particularly normative theological voices. This indicates that activists intentionally use specific normative theological texts and draw on faith leaders and historical figures who serve as authoritative interpreters, effectively situating personal spiritual experiences within broader religious frameworks. These figures and texts function as sources of inspiration, fostering a form of spirituality that seamlessly integrates faith with activism. Notably, there is a tendency to de-emphasise the institutional and dogmatic aspects, emphasising instead the centrality of lived spiritual experiences and collective spiritual identities. This underscores the predominance of contextual, experience-based, and practised dimensions over institutionalised religion in shaping activist spirituality, thereby underscoring the dominance of lived spiritual experience rather than doctrinal authority in the theological theme *relate*.

In conclusion, the construction of the theological theme *relate* demonstrates that faith-based activism encompasses a diverse spectrum of perceptions of God, humanity, nature, and self, perceptions that coexist and are not confined to specific faith traditions. Moreover, individual activists can hold a range of theological understandings without seeing them as contradictory. Their varied theological understandings can be conceptualised along a continuum from eco-centric to anthropocentric perspectives. This highlights the intricate complexity of theological engagement in activist contexts, and underscores the notion that relationality, as a theological concept, holds primacy over other theological understandings in their pathfinding amid the climate crisis. It becomes clear, and is explained further in upcoming sections, that different theological concepts, such as responses to who God, human, nature, and self are, do not define the various forms of activism being practised, but the God–human–nature–self relationality does. Consequently, in response to the theological question of how we should relate to one another, God, and nature, it is primarily about recognising an existing relationality. Relationality is the dominant and unifying theological understanding that unifies individual faith-based climate activists across contexts and boundaries of faith traditions; and faith-based climate activism could be understood as a practice that recognises this relationality.

React – manifestation of holistic theologies

The construction of the theological theme *react* is grounded in a comprehensive analysis of activists' climate and environmental actions as expressions of both words and actions, which I have framed as *holistic theologies,* a concept discussed in Chapter 5. The unifying element in these holistic theologies in

both contexts, despite their diversity of practices, is that they oppose a separation of transcendent reality from worldly matters. This could be understood as their theological imperative. In addition, in practice, their holistic theologies incorporate faith in climate activism as both a dimension and a practical tool. Moreover, in the Swedish context, holistic theologies are characterised by a fusion of protest and contemplative practices, manifested as what I have termed ContemplActions. In South Africa, these theologies not only synthesise the spiritual and worldly but also emphasise bridging social and environmental issues, connecting local and global levels, fostering interfaith collaboration, and integrating the past, present, and future.

It is crucial to recognise that religious faith does not initiate the faith-based climate activism studied here; rather, it is the urgency of the climate and environmental emergencies that sparks the activists' actions. This distinction explains the choice of the term "react" over simply "act": it emphasises that activists' responses are reactions to the climate catastrophe itself. In this context, the climate crisis acts as the primary catalyst for initiating activism, superseding personal or spiritual motivations related to theological perceptions of God, others, nature, or self. Nonetheless, spiritual relatedness, stemming from their relational spirituality, fundamentally strengthens and sustains their activism, fostering activism in which reconnection and recognition of their relationality are essential. Consequently, faith-based climate activism could be understood as a response to external crises that is driven by spirituality and a manifestation of holistic theologies.

Analysing the activists' holistic theologies reveals that their focus lies primarily beyond the fundamental theological questions outlined in my theory: "Who is God?", "Who are we as humans?" or "What is nature?" Instead, their holistic theologies address other fundamental theological questions: "How should we relate?", "How should we live?", and "Whom can we trust in times of crisis?" Their responses are rooted in the theological imperative that transcendent reality and worldly matters are inherently interconnected and inseparable, constituting a core principle that transcends specific cultural or local expressions. Instead of focusing on detailed conceptualisations of divine, human, nature, or self, these theologies prioritise notions of spiritual relatedness and action motivated by environmental concerns. For instance, faith-based activism manifests diverse representations of God: as the creator empowering action, as a divine companion in climate advocacy, as the nurturing ground of life, as the Holy Spirit inspiring activism, as a power of righteous anger against injustices, as present among those suffering the consequences of climate change, or as a source of comfort amid climate anxiety. Despite these varied

depictions, a unifying core of the activist holistic theologies is their conviction about the inseparability of transcendent reality and worldly matters. Consequently, adherents of faith are compelled to act in response to the climate crisis, as such action embodies their theological imperative, rooted in the intertwined nature of transcendent and worldly realities.

Examining the holistic theologies and the theological questions they address reveals that these actors predominantly manifest orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy. While orthodoxy emphasises the correctness of belief, such as adherence to established doctrinal schemes, orthopraxy centres on the correctness of conduct or the accepted course of action. Thus, orthopraxy constitutes actions that seek harmony with God's aims, helping practitioners to discover divine truth through practice. It also serves as a way to understand and relate to God through action.[345] The orthodoxy among faith-based activists is evidenced by their theological conviction of the inseparability of transcendent reality from worldly matters; however, this conviction is not necessarily reflected as a shared set of beliefs, as a doctrinal orthodoxy. Instead, it manifests through their activism practices as an embodiment of their theological imperative. This dynamic is also exemplified by their critique of local faith communities, in which, according to the activists, such holistic theological practice is often either inadequately embodied by or entirely absent among faith leaders.[346]

Another significant finding is that diverse theological interpretations of concepts such as God, humanity, nature, and self do not fundamentally determine the specific forms of activism undertaken. This underscores that their holistic theologies are better understood as manifestations of *orthopraxy* rather than orthodoxy. For instance, Christian activists in the Swedish context often express their connection to a transcendent reality or to God through ContemplActions, while indigenous activists in South Africa do so through rituals that honour and integrate the land. These practices occur independently of their conceptualisations of the divine, whether viewing the land as a manifestation

[345] For a more detailed examination of the concepts of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, refer to: Afaradi, "Holistic Christian Leadership"; Michaelis, "Quakers and Climate Change."
[346] Although there are notable parallels between my findings and the empirical research conducted by Finlay Malcolm and Peter Scott on eco-theological beliefs among Christian climate activists in the United Kingdom, specifically the activists' emphasis on ideas such as social justice, neighbour-love, and stewardship, my results diverge in significant ways. While Malcolm and Scott argue for a more prominent role of particular theological beliefs as motivation for activism, my study suggests a more nuanced relationship, indicating that particular theological beliefs may not translate into active engagement in climate efforts. This contrast underscores the complexity of the interplay between theological beliefs and environmental activism. Malcolm and Scott, "The Ecotheological Values of Christian Climate Change Activists," 3.

of God in pantheistic beliefs or adopting more theistic or panentheistic perspectives (see discussion under the theme "Relate").

Given that the theological imperative, which is central to faith-based activism and is best understood as orthopraxy, serves as a foundation for facilitating interfaith collaboration, it consequently functions to promote inclusiveness. While diverse theological understandings are present in faith-based activism, they are not regarded as equally critical, owing to the intrinsic inseparability of spiritual and worldly realities and the way in which this theological imperative manifests in activism. This shared theological foundation is crucial for fostering effective interfaith cooperation, even amid other theological differences.

My analysis demonstrates that divergent theological perceptions concerning notions of God, humanity, nature, and the self do not serve as the primary determinants of faith-based activism. Rather, such activism is predominantly characterised by the alteration of activists' theological expressions. Consequently, climate activism emerges as a crucial domain for theological reinterpretation and revision.[347] Activists typically alter their theological understandings through spiritual experiences, insights into relational interconnectedness, and personal theological reflections, all of which are enriched through engaging with normative theological texts or with leaders and others in the past who serve as inspiring authorities for the activists. Under the theological theme *relate,* it was suggested that these varied theological perspectives could be situated along a continuum ranging from eco-centric to anthropocentric perspectives. My analysis reveals a prominent pattern: there is a marked tendency for activists' theological stances to shift increasingly towards eco-centric paradigms through their activism. Such shifts are notably mediated by spiritual experiences encountered during climate activism that foster a profound sense of relatedness with God, others, nature, and self. For instance, spiritual encounters are shown to have expanded conceptualisations of human identity, emphasising humanity's dependence on the natural world, the divine, and community. Experiences described as perceiving the soil as embodying the divine or as the source of life contribute to a theological understanding of God

[347] In the academic field of eco-theology, scholarly discourse often posits that a reformation of theological understandings is essential to engender a transformation in the practices of adherents of faith, as exemplified by the work of Sallie McFague. McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*. Conversely, my research findings align more closely with the perspectives of Dorothee Sölle, who investigates the interplay between spiritual experience and social and political behaviour. She argues that the unity with God begins in action. Sölle, *The Silent Cry, Mysticism and Resistance*, 3, 201.

as being the soil. Moreover, encounters with indigenous spirituality, reported as spiritual experiences gained during activism, offer insights into a sacred interconnection with the land, which includes a redefinition of Christ as the cosmic Christ and Christ as the first ancestor. Notably, Khoisan activists have consistently maintained an alignment with eco-centric theologies from the outset; however, they report how their people have been compelled to fight for these expressions of faith amid oppressive encounters with missionaries and colonialist structures.

When activists interpret spiritual experiences in the light of normative religious texts, these tend to reinforce and amplify eco-centric viewpoints. For example, this can be seen in the expansion of the concept of salvation to include not only humanity but also the entire Earth or even the cosmos, drawing on the Greek version of a biblical text. Overall, these spiritual experiences encourage a re-evaluation of humanity's role and reliance on nature, God, and others, thereby fostering more inclusive and environmentally focused theological voices.

The rise of climate activism as a vital arena for theological reinterpretation and revision is rooted in profound spiritual experiences and insights acquired through activism. While the material does not explicitly posit relatedness as a primary motivation for activism, a compelling insight from my research suggests that activists often experience a deep sense of relatedness to God, others, nature, and self during their activism – connections that transcend temporal boundaries. These experiences are not merely incidental, but can also be actively nurtured through the practice of climate activism. Consequently, engaging in activism provides a meaningful context in which individuals can deepen their spiritual connections. Climate activism turns out to be not only a space express holistic theologies but also a sacred space for divine encounters, becoming most evident in activism conducted outdoors or in acts of civil disobedience. Furthermore, the deliberate integration of contemplative practices in activism, such as ContemplActions or meditative walks in nature, consciously enhances this relatedness, fostering active reconnection to the transcendent reality. Thus, faith-based climate activism emerges not only as a response to ecological crises but also as an act of recognising and cultivating activists' spiritual relatedness. In this light, the theological theme *react* could be understood as positioning faith-based climate activism as a dynamic arena in which engaging with the climate crisis simultaneously becomes an occasion for spiritual reception and growth.

Another compelling insight from my research is that the presentation of holistic theologies, and their emphasis on the inseparable connection between transcendent reality and worldly matters, often encounters resistance from local faith communities. Although numerous religious institutions at regional, national, and international levels advocate climate action and reject the dichotomy between spiritual and worldly realities, my study uncovers a persistent theological divide and resistance in these very institutions at the local level.[348] My analysis reveals a notable tension: despite official doctrines that support climate commitment, local faith communities often maintain a dichotomous view, thereby creating significant obstacles for activists who attempt to integrate ecological concerns into their religious practice. This dissonance is particularly evident not only in the absence of theological teachings that explicitly link spiritual and worldly domains in the context of the climate crisis, but also in the failure to manifest these principles in tangible practices. This gap between doctrinal emphasis and practical implementation frustrates activists, especially given their focus on orthopraxy, through which they seek to manifest their faith-based climate commitment. Consequently, my study identifies a gap between the doctrines promoted at higher levels and the actual practices of faith communities – a gap that hampers the integration of ecological concerns into the religious practice for which the activists aim.[349] It also highlights the fact that orthopraxy acts as a hindrance, unlike the inclusiveness it fosters for interfaith collaboration, as previously mentioned.

Although my material suggests that specific theological concepts are not the main driving force behind activism, and also that they do not primarily shape particular forms of activism, the shift among activists towards more eco-centric theological understandings widens the divide between them and their religious institutions. The material reveals strong negative emotions, such as

[348] This strong commitment to climate issues has been shown, for example, by Pope Francis in his Encyclical *Laudato Si*, and the engagement of the WCC in these issues since the 1970s, including active participation in the UN climate negotiations since 1992. In addition, the United Nations Environmental Programme, Faith for Earth Coalition, has recently launched a new initiative called "Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth". This effort is developed in dialogue with Islamic organisations and scholars, aiming to show how Islam could serve as a powerful catalyst for sustainable development and environmental stewardship. Similarly, as previously highlighted, several of the activist religious institutions are strongly committed to the climate, including the Catholic, Lutheran, and Anglican churches. Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home*; World Council of Churches, "Care for Creation and Climate Justice"; UN Environment Programme (UNEP), "Faith for Earth Coalition"; Othman Llewellyn, Fazlun Khalid and others., *Al-Mizan, a Convenant for the Earth.*

[349] As highlighted in Chapter 5, prior research has identified barriers such as the bureaucracy of religious organisations, while my study elucidates intradenominational tensions that have theological roots. See, for example: Monnot, "The Slow Greening of Established Churches in Switzerland: Tensions Between Local Parishes and Church Head Organizations."

disappointment, sadness, and anger, about the lack of environmental commitment in their faith communities. This absence of environmental engagement conflicts with the activists' more eco-centric theologies, which integrate climate knowledge alongside faith as a form of orthopraxy. As a result, local faith communities are not inherently supportive spaces for climate activism; instead, temporary or organisational faith-based platforms and secular movement organisations serve as the main arenas for activists to express their holistic theologies as orthopraxy. Therefore, constructing *react* as a theological theme shows that faith-based activism is not conducted in ordinary local faith communities; when viewed through a theological lens, this could be understood to have theological roots.

Although categorising the holistic theologies of the activists as orthopraxy does not imply a single understanding of correct practices beyond their shared commitment to addressing the climate and environmental crises. Instead, the theological theme *react* as a manifestation of holistic theologies reveals a broad spectrum of engagement strategies. This diversity of practices cannot be attributed to divergent theological conceptualisations. As discussed in Chapter 5, these differences should be more accurately linked to variations in their relational spirituality, their cultural and religious backgrounds, and their organisational roles in religious communities, and in the broader landscape of the climate crisis. Collectively, these factors profoundly shape the diverse expressions of holistic theologies, highlighting their complex and multifaceted nature. For instance, a salient feature of collective spiritual identities is their capacity to link the past with the future, a trait that extends temporal reach in South African activists' holistic theologies, unlike with their Swedish counterparts. Moreover, South African activists demonstrate a greater diversity in theological expression, facilitated by their formal positions in religious institutions and networks, which enable them to connect the local and global levels effectively. Their ability to foster interfaith collaborations, supported by networks such as SAFCEI, exemplifies further how contextual factors enhance their engagement capacities within religious diversity. Therefore, these findings underscore the intricate interplay between the spiritual, cultural, and organisational dimensions, alongside the climate landscape, in shaping the varied and contextual expressions of holistic theologies.

Reorient – *metanoia* through faith in practice

The imperative for a societal reorientation away from fossil fuel dependence in response to the climate crisis is firmly established in the core of climate science. Likewise, prominent theologians and religious leaders advocate

transformative societal and lifestyle changes that are rooted in theological reasoning. My research aligns with these perspectives, but it also introduces a novel dimension: it shows that climate activism itself can function as a catalyst for reorientation, in which spiritual experiences and insights gained during and through activism serve as pivotal drivers. Thus, it shows that a reorientation process could emerge while expressing holistic theologies. While previous sections, particularly under the theme *react*, have acknowledged climate activism's potential for theological reinterpretation, this section specifically emphasises the reorientation process observed in the Swedish context, highlighting its significance as a dynamic and spiritually rooted way of navigating that is aimed at sustainability.

The core of the theme *reorient* is reorientation through faith in practice, which is prominently reflected in the Swedish material and forms the basis of this theme's construction.[350] My material reveals that this reorientation process in the Swedish material is characterised by a disconnect-reconnect process in which spiritual experiences and insights into the activists' relationality gained during activism, as described under the theme *relate*, play a significant role. This involves disconnecting from mainstream society, which the Swedish activists depict as characterised by individualism, materialism, and consumerism. To disconnect opens up a space for reconnecting with and acknowledging one's relatedness to God, others, nature (as presented under the theme *relate*). Consequently, while the reorientation process is recognised as urgently needed to shift from a consumer-driven, individualistic society to a sustainable one, manifested through lifestyle modifications that are aimed at reducing fossil fuel emissions, it could still be understood through a theological lens. Thus, this theme most clearly addresses the theological question of "How should we live?", which is particularly significant for Swedish activists. However, the responses to the questions "How should we relate?" and "Who to trust in times of crisis?" are equally essential in this theological theme, as elucidated below.

I contend that the reorientation process could be understood as mirroring the Christian concept of *metanoia*, the Greek word used in New Testament writings, meaning a change of heart and mind.[351] The reorientation process among

[350] Based on the findings from my Swedish material, I have also discussed this theme in the following article: Oreland, Pilgrim's Walk for Future – I vandringen erfar och utvecklar kristna klimataktivister sina visioner om en annorlunda framtid.

[351] The theological theme of *reorientation* shows significant parallels to the theological rationale behind the concept of ecological conversion, as articulated by notable figures such as Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si*, on ecological stewardship. Pope Francis underscores the imperative

Swedish activists is initiated primarily by climate knowledge, especially by experience-based knowledge that triggers climate anxiety. This emotional response often marks the beginning of their *metanoia*. However, their religious faith plays a crucial role in supporting this transformation, acting as a catalyst for the shifts prompted by climate awareness. The fulfilment of *metanoia* is achieved through spiritual experiences and insights, commonly made during activism, characterised as a reconnection process. This process often involves practising ContemplActions, an integrative approach that combines contemplative practices and political protest, or practising civil disobedience, practices that evoke spiritual experiences that foster personal insights into relationships with God, others, nature, and self. Such experiences facilitate perceiving all existence as interconnected through God (as previously discussed under the theme *relate*).

The fulfilment of *metanoia* occurs when activists express their holistic theologies, leading to a deeper understanding of God and a redefined perception of humanness. This perspective helps them to navigate the climate crisis by recognising human dependence on and relation to all facets of existence through divine relatedness. Consequently, they explore and develop what I have termed beyond material values, presented in Chapter 5, such as simple living, valuing a slower pace, and fostering relationships with others – values rooted in their faith traditions and cultivated through spiritual experiences while practising their holistic theologies in climate activism. In the Swedish context, this reorientation also engenders a longing for faith communities that are aligned with their newly discovered insights, and seeking environments in which they could live according to their *metanoia*.

The analysis reveals that this process of reorientation, characterised as *metanoia*, extends beyond mere behavioural change: it involves a profound theological reimagining of human purpose and relationship with God in the face of the climate crisis. Ultimately, this reorientation emphasises that

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of restoring a healthy relationship with creation, necessitating an ecological conversion. Similarly, documents from the WCC, detailing their Ecumenical Decade of Climate Justice Action beginning in 2025, emphasise: "At its core, this decade calls for profound spiritual transformation or metanoia – a fundamental change of heart, mind, and practices". In addition, WCC consultant Louk Aourelien Andrianos, who focuses on creation, sustainability, and climate justice, discusses concepts such as ecological sin, *metanoia*, and eco-conversion. It should be noted that these theological discourses tend to emphasise sin and repentance more explicitly than the empirical material discussed in this thesis. This distinction is elaborated on in the epilogue to this thesis. Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home*; World Council of Churches, *Ecumenical Decade of Climate Justice Action*; Aourelien Andrianos, "Ecological Sin, Metanoia (Repentance), and Eco-Conversion."

theological questions, such as how we should relate to and live in this world, are central considerations for faith-based activists. While they draw on both climate knowledge and faith in visualising a sustainable future, an approach that is evident also in eco-theology and in religious institutions, their distinctive contribution lies in exploring and developing their responses while practising climate activism. Significantly, their future visions for building a sustainable future are not based on premade theological understandings of God, humans, nature, and self, but continually explored and refined through the lived practice of engaging with ecological issues, allowing their theological understandings to evolve organically through action.[352]

Another significant finding is that the activists' process of reorientation sustains the critical belief that another world is possible, despite prevailing negative outlooks. This is rooted in their faith, which, in contrast to purely scientific climate knowledge, offers a hopeful vision for the future that is founded on divine reliance, an aspect that is elaborated on under the theme *rely*. By constructing the theological theme *reorient*, the analysis reveals that activists' future visions involve concrete suggestions drawn from climate science, often acquired through popular sources or training, which reveals a pragmatic integration of faith and scientific understanding. Swedish activists, in focusing mainly on mitigation rather than on adaptation, emphasise actions such as reducing fossil fuel emissions to foster sustainability, which aligns with current climate science. However, their process of *metanoia*, as has been argued, encompasses a broader transformation, including shifts in their understanding of God, humanity, and relationality, accompanied by the exploration of beyond material values. Generally, the themes of *relate* and *react* have revealed perceptions of God as a relational being, deeply concerned about justice, angry about injustices, caring for the vulnerable, and present in climate activism. This perspective implicitly envisions a future that is rooted in justice, empowerment, and the protection of vulnerable populations, alongside a flourishing natural world and harmonious relationships between God, humans, and nature. Notably, a detailed vision of a sustainable future is less critical; reliance on divine faith enables activists to embrace uncertainty while maintaining hope. This reliance guides their actions, with their future oriented towards

[352] Integrating faith and science in climate efforts is not a novel idea. *Laudato Si* states: "If we are truly concerned to develop an ecology capable of remedying the damage we have done, no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out, and that includes religion and the language particular to it". However, what is striking in my material is that the future visions are shaped through theological practices in which science and faith collaboratively contribute to imagining sustainable future societies, and that the activists' theological understandings evolve through action. Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home*, 45.

what could be described as God's future, meaning a movement towards divine fulfilment rather than towards a specific, fixed goal. This conceptual framework resonates broadly, including among activists in the South African context, irrespective of their faith traditions. Thus, responses to the theological question "Whom can we trust in times of crisis?" are essential to the theme *reorient*, elucidating that trust in God creates hope for the future.

Sustaining the belief that another world is possible, despite prevailing negative outlooks, could, in the Swedish and Christian context, be understood as an embodiment of the Christian eschatological hope. Traditionally, Christian eschatology links God's salvation of the world to Jesus' death, resurrection, return, and to the last times, highlighting the tension between believing that salvation has already occurred and acknowledging ongoing suffering. Later theologians, including Moltmann and those influenced by his thinking, have criticised eschatology as merely a doctrine about the end times, arguing instead for its role in transforming the present and underpinning Christian faith. Hope can serve as both a future expectation and something to strive for. Recognising that suffering, sin, and death are not God's ultimate reality encourages Christians to oppose them. Hope involves trusting in what cannot yet be seen, but striving towards it, not as a distant afterlife state, but as a goal to pursue in everyday life.[353]

Applying this theological framework to the Swedish activists' perspectives shows that it aligns with how the biblical events of Christ's death and resurrection serve as a source of hope for activists, both as something to rely on and as something to strive for through their activism. This also aligns with the previously highlighted theological imperative of their holistic theologies: the impossibility of separating spiritual and worldly realities. Even if Christian hope depends on the divine power that triumphed over death through resurrection, the expression of hope seen in the activists' theological voices does not focus on the afterlife. Instead, they emphasise the salvation of life on Earth. This eschatology could be understood as collective eschatology, as it is not limited to the salvation of the individual through resurrection and life after death, but is viewed as humanity's survival, and implicitly extends to the preservation of the whole creation. This aligns with well-established theological scholarly discussions on hope's capacity to catalyse social and political change, as previously highlighted. However, the material underscores ongoing resistance to this theological interpretation in local contexts in Sweden, but

[353] Moltmann, Theology of Hope, 20–22; 324; Bergmann, Eschatology as Imagining the End, 2–4.

also in South Africa, suggesting that, while this interpretation of eschatological hope is theoretically well-established, its practical acceptance remains contested.

The Swedish activists' capacity to reorient through a faith in action, characterised by a robust future-oriented perspective, demonstrates that, although their relational spirituality does not encompass future-oriented spiritual relations as previously noted, it nonetheless serves as a crucial resource for fostering creativity in envisioning a hopeful future and for strategising pathways to realise it. Furthermore, while their relational spirituality is primarily centred on individual spiritual experiences and insights, rather than on the collective spiritual identities observed in the South African context, their collective eschatology underscores a developing collective approach through their activism.

The South African activists do not emphasise personal reorientation as activists in the Swedish context do, as highlighted in Chapter 5. However, they promote a reorientation of values in their awareness-raising efforts; and here, faith is put forth as something that reaches the heart and fosters values that are rooted in faith traditions that oppose self-interest and greed. In addition, activists draw on indigenous practices, such as connecting with the land and listening to ancestors, to promote a sense of relatedness with and dependence on creation. However, the construction of the theological theme *reorient* mainly stems from the Swedish material, in which the process of reorientation through faith in practice is more prominent.

Rely – reliance on God builds resilience

The theological theme *rely* emphasises human reliance on God as a fundamental element in fostering resilience. As previously highlighted, faith complements and often goes beyond climate knowledge, which predicts a dire future. In stark contrast, trusting in God provides activists with a powerful source of strength amid an uncertain and rapidly changing climate landscape. Even sceptics, who doubt humanity's future, find refuge and hope through reliance on divine power, helping them to navigate the turmoil and to maintain a sense of purpose. The theological theme *rely* is rooted in the activists' relational spirituality, and emphasises the importance of human relationships, similar to the theological theme *relate*; however, here it focuses on these relationships as a vital source of strength amid the climate crisis. Drawing on the South African material, relying on God appears to be essential beyond the sphere of personal resilience. Thus, when constructing this theological theme,

I draw particularly on the South African material, where reliance on God seems especially important in the process of building climate-resilient communities.[354] This perspective becomes especially salient in an era when climate resilience is of the greatest importance, highlighting the critical role of spirituality in adaptive responses.

Relying on God fosters a profound sense of hope among activists as they navigate the complex and disruptive climate landscape. This hope is not rooted in naïve optimism or illusions of control, but emerges as a humble act of surrender that is grounded in spirituality. In both contexts, trust in divine providence cultivates hope amid uncertainty. Importantly, this reliance, although rendering hope, should not be interpreted as a static theological answer to the question, "What can we hope for?", but rather as a response to the previously highlighted theological question, "Whom can we trust in times of crisis?" And their trust in God cultivates hope. This perspective underscores the significance of faith as an active source of resilience amid a complex global catastrophe.

Although relying on God during times of crisis is not a novel phenomenon, my research shows that here its roots lie in a broader framework of relational spirituality, which manifests uniquely in diverse settings. Constructing the theological theme *rely* reveals significant differences between the studied contexts of South Africa and Sweden, rooted in their differing forms of relational spirituality.

In the South African context, relying on God reflects their collective spiritual identities, which are shaped by the activists' strong affinity for their context and historical experiences. Past instances of divine intervention foster hope for future intervention, making hope in divine action a central theme. The historical and community-based foundation gives South African resilience a broader, deeper base, connecting past divine interventions to present crises. Their resilience, rooted in their relational spirituality, extends from historical experiences to future hope, including not only the individual but the entire community.[355] While the South African material references historical crises,

[354] When referring to resilience, I lean on a definition by two scholars in the field of psychology that, based on empirical research, intentionally seeks a broader understanding than typical psychological definitions: "The potential to exhibit resourcefulness by using available internal and external recourses in response to different contextual and developmental challenges". Pooley and Cohen, "Resilience: A Definition in Context," 34.

[355] This type of resilience shows similarities with that of liberation and feminist theology scholars who emphasise theology in a way that can be described as resilience against oppression. In the

Swedish accounts lack such historical references. The South African activists draw strength from a collective memory of past divine acts and from a collective awareness of relatedness to and dependence on God, others, and nature, enabling a resilience that is rooted in community and history.

In the South African context, reliance on God as a means of resilience is also manifested concretely through community and environmental care initiatives. These initiatives exemplify the South African activists' holistic theologies as well as their collective form of relational spirituality, which is deeply rooted in their strong contextual ties.[356] The projects led by South African activists aim to contribute to building resilient communities that go beyond individuals' capacity to withstand stress and maintain normal functioning. Instead, they enhance both personal and collective resilience, in which faith plays a crucial role, enabling communities to respond to severe problems such as the climate crisis and other socio-environmental issues.[357]

To demonstrate the pivotal role of faith in these projects, it is essential to recognise how faith functions as both a catalyst and a foundational element in strengthening and guiding practical action. While previous studies have highlighted that the social capital and governance of religious actors can contribute to bolstering resilience and adaptive capacity, my study in particular underscores theology as a critical factor in this.[358] Various initiatives in my empirical material highlight that the activists use normative theological texts as tangible tools in mobilising and developing adaptive strategies for communities, such as establishing food gardens aimed at vulnerable populations. Furthermore, faith-driven efforts to create "safer places for worship" demonstrate

South African context, this has been demonstrated, for example, by Beverly Haddad, who, from her empirical work among poor and marginalised women in South Africa, has identified what she calls "survival theologies", which are used as an "active weapon" in resistance to their oppression. She highlights these theologies as community-based. Haddad, *Gender, Development, and Faith*, 441.

[356] It is worth noting that these faith communities and projects initiated or supported by South African activists cannot replace what I have described as the holistic faith communities that South African activists yearn for and seek: communities in which activists can share their holistic theologies, which include concrete climate and environmental commitments as essential, while also functioning as communities of worship.

[357] Loosely inspired by discussions in: Berkes and Ross, "Community Resilience."

[358] See for example: Andreana Reale, 'Churches Building Resiliency to Climate Change'. Other researchers emphasising the importance of eco-theologies—both Indigenous and Christian—in climate adaptation strategies include Loreen Maseno and King'asia Mamati. Additionally, Beth E. Elness-Hanson has conducted empirical research on this topic. Their collective perspectives underscore the potential role of theologies in developing effective climate resilience frameworks. Maseno and Mamati, "The Nexus between Indigenous Beliefs on Environment and Climate Change Adaptation amongst the Sengwer in Embobut Forest, Kenya"; Elness-Hanson, "A Wandering Aramean and the Wandering Maasai."

how empowering local religious leaders and communities in their worship fosters resilience amid crises, including disasters caused by the climate crisis and rising crime rates linked to socio-economic vulnerability. In addition, initiatives such as tree planting during Christian ceremonies such as confirmation exemplify how religious ritual and environmental action intersect to foster community engagement and ecological stewardship. Collectively, these activities underscore the capacity of faith, illustrating how the activists' manifestation of their holistic theologies integrates spirituality with pragmatic resilience-building strategies. This combination not only bolsters communities' adaptive capacities amid the immediate impacts of climate change, but also aims to contribute actively to broader environmental mitigation and awareness, reinforcing faiths' and theologies' indispensable role in fostering sustainable, resilient communities amid the climate catastrophe.

In contrast to the South African context, the Swedish activists internalise spiritual relatedness and dependence at a personal level, relying on spiritual experiences and insights rather than on collective history and community ties. Consequently, here, reliance on God emerges from individual spiritual experiences and insights of relatedness and dependence. In the Swedish material, expressions of trust tend to be implicit, emphasising spiritual insights and a belief that the future is in divine hands, including personal trust in and surrendering control to God, which support hope amid climate catastrophe. In the Swedish context, reliance reduces activists' climate anxiety; therefore, reliance fosters resilience mainly on a personal and psychological level.[359]

However, what unites the two contexts is that reliance functions as a vital resource for action. Thus, the theological themes *rely* and *react* are intertwined. While some may interpret reliance on divine agency as fostering passivity, in fact, to rely and to react are two sides of the same coin for the activists. Reliance on God empowers and liberates activists in both contexts to engage proactively, despite negative future outlooks. The hope rooted in reliance on God is also perceived by the activists as a call to action by people of faith, urging them not to be passive but to contribute actively to addressing the climate crisis. It energises the activists to act with purpose, having faith as a catalyst for hope and transformative change. Consequently, reliance

[359] This aligns with Sallie MacFague's discourse on internalising vulnerability in the face of the climate crisis, using the Twelve-Step philosophy of "let go and let God" as a metaphor for acceptance and surrender. Similarly, Swedish activists explicitly reference the Twelve-Step programme to emphasise that relinquishing personal control and entrusting oneself to a God facilitates a reorientation of lifestyle, which can also be understood as resilience in confronting environmental crises. McFague, A New Climate for Theology, 16.

becomes a crucial force for climate action, and so could be understood as a dimension of resilience.

The theological theme *rely* highlights the significance of relying not only on God but also on other humans. This concept is closely connected to the theme of *relate*, as the relationship between God, humanity, and nature underscores the importance of community. As previously discussed, this can manifest in the Swedish material as a spiritual experience and insight, while in the South African material it is integral to the activists' collective spiritual identities. But regardless how relatedness is manifested, it emphasises the value of relatedness with others, which includes the need to rely on others. This is particularly evident in the South African material, where hope is anchored not only in trust in God's actions but also in human actions. In addition, in both contexts, communities, especially those rooted in God, are emphasised as vital spaces for resilience and reorientation in times of climate crisis.

It is also important to recognise that not only relational spirituality but also normative theological texts contribute to and reinforce the activists' reliance on God. For instance, the story of God helping Moses and the Israelites cross the Red Sea during the Exodus is referenced by activists to highlight this dependence. Furthermore, religious texts often reinforce reliance by fostering a personal bond with God. The recurring references to the story of Christ's death and resurrection emphasise divine involvement in the world, thereby bolstering activists' reliance and hope.

The analysis indicates that the resilience revealed in the South African material is grounded in their relational spirituality and their contextual knowledge of climate change, in which adaptation to an already rapidly changing and difficult climate shapes their resilience. Meanwhile, the Swedish material mainly emphasises mitigation strategies and addresses the root causes of climate change, with resilience appearing less as a response to immediate extreme weather events and more as a psychological trait. Consequently, the theological construct *rely* underscores the significance of divine reliance, elucidating that faith and theologies are essential not only in fostering psychological comfort during periods of crisis but also in empowering engagement with political and social activism, particularly in efforts aimed at building climate-resilient communities. The analysis underscores, therefore, that the thematic notion of *rely* is important across psychological, political, and social domains, reaffirming its pertinence within the activists' theological frameworks.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have constructed the most salient theological themes that are integral to the activists' process of pathfinding amid the climate catastrophe. While my findings reveal that the pathfinding process is initiated or deepened by transformative encounters with climate-related knowledge, I contend that the theological themes of *relate, react, reorient,* and *rely* are fundamental in guiding the pathfinding. My findings demonstrate that a profound, experience-based sense of spiritual relatedness, one that transcends both time and the individual spiritual experiences, and that is also deeply embedded in contextual realities, serves as a crucial compass. This form of navigation does not rely on specific or fixed understandings of God, humanity, and nature; rather, it depends on a receptive openness to being spiritually connected to a broader whole and on integrating one's acknowledgement of dependence on this larger reality. This sustains the ongoing process of pathfinding.

Moreover, the foundational theological imperative underpinning the pathfinding process is the integration of transcendent reality with worldly concerns. This integration compels individuals of faith to respond in practice to the prevailing crises. Therefore, reacting to such crises not only serves as a way to navigate immediate problems, but also functions as an expression of religious faith and a mechanism for restoring spiritual interconnectedness. In this context, a transcendent reality is as integral and tangible as the crisis itself, emphasising their equal significance in the navigation process. Unlike the crisis, which poses challenges and despair, faith – not least spiritual experiences of transcendent reality – engenders hope and liberation, providing a vital impetus for a constructive response.

Faith also serves as a catalyst for creativity, enabling a reorientation towards innovative pathways that promote a sustainable future. This process of reorientation, characterised by the exploration of new pathways, can be understood as a climate-knowledge-initiated *metanoia*, an existential transformation facilitated through spiritual experiences and insights garnered during the navigation of the difficult climate landscape. Such insights foster a profound understanding of the divine and a redefinition of human identity, leading to tangible shifts towards more fossil-fuel-free lifestyles and the revaluation or rediscovery of beyond material values. The conviction that another world is achievable embodies the Christian eschatological hope, reflecting a collective eschatology that emphasises the salvation of all life on Earth. This perspective underscores the integrative role of faith in shaping responses to the ecological crisis and transformation towards sustainability.

My research highlights that reliance on God serves as a vital source of resilience in the face of the climate crisis. It provides psychological stability amid the uncertainty of a rapidly changing environment, and serves as a spiritual refuge that fosters hope, not as naïve optimism but as a humble surrender to and trust in God. Furthermore, reliance on God extends beyond individual comfort, empowering activism and fostering a collective resilience. This spiritual approach, extending from historical experiences in the past into a hope for the future, encompasses individuals and communities alike. By integrating faith-based resilience, this paradigm contributes to the development of climate-resilient communities, thereby transcending personal coping mechanisms to effect broader socio-environmental change.

Consequently, at the core of the pathfinding process are action-oriented theological themes that demonstrate how, for activists, theology transcends mere abstract doctrines and normative texts. Thus, adherence to specific theological doctrinal beliefs is not necessarily what catalyses effective climate responses. Instead, it is through activism, which serves as a domain for the reinterpretation and revision of theological concepts, that more responsive theological frameworks are developed. The theological themes I have constructed exemplify how faith-based responses to the ongoing climate crisis are cultivated through active engagement in climate activism, irrespective of whether such activism occurs in or outside established religious institutions. Furthermore, the lived experiences of encountering the climate crisis, either through direct confrontation with its consequences in one's own context or through personal transformation induced by climate knowledge, are instrumental in shaping theologies that respond practically to this global challenge. Thus, my research indicates that it is the climate catastrophe that initiates activism and prompts changes in theological beliefs, rather than changes in theological beliefs that inspire climate responses.

This study contends that faith-based climate activism serves as a vital domain for the reinterpretation and dynamic revision of theological frameworks. It proposes that the theologies encapsulated in the themes of *relate*, *react*, *reorient,* and *rely* are not merely abstract intellectual constructs, but are inherently contextual and experience-based, shaped through spiritual experiences and participation in activism. This perspective underscores the fluidity, embodiment, and context-specific evolution of theological responses to the climate crisis, positioning activism as a crucial catalyst that anchors theological responses in lived realities and tangible engagement. However, although the foundational theological imperative that transcendent reality and worldly matters are inseparable is shared between the activists and their religious

institutions, the findings reveal that the activists' theological responses often encounter resistance from local faith communities. This highlights the complex interaction between theological innovation and communal acceptance, emphasising the challenges faced when proposing new theological responses in local religious contexts.

The research should convincingly demonstrate that theology has a significant capacity to foster innovative and creative pathways towards sustainability. Moreover, it serves as a vital element of resilience in confronting the adverse impacts of climate change, regardless of whether such responses are initiated in or outside formal religious institutions. This underscores the need to integrate theological perspectives into the wider academic and policy discourse, particularly when addressing issues that transcend purely scientific considerations. Such integration could contribute to bridging the persistent gap between the urgent scientific evidence that advocates immediate action and the observed deficiencies in its effective implementation.

Future options

Throughout the research process, I identified several promising avenues for further investigation that, owing to the scope of this study, remain to be explored. My findings emphasise the critical importance of integrating theological perspectives into research on both climate activism and broader environmental initiatives. In this section, I briefly outline potential directions for future research to develop this understanding.

While my study incorporated actors from various faith traditions, the theological framework used for analysis was specifically rooted in Christian theology. Considering the interfaith climate activism that prevails in the South African context and the emerging interfaith climate collaborations in Sweden, I would propose a more comprehensive theological investigation into interfaith climate activism. Such a study should incorporate diverse theological perspectives to illuminate a broader spectrum of theological themes, which was limited by the scope of my current approach.

Studying faith-based climate activism in two distinct contexts has underscored a significant gap: activists, and potentially also religious institutions, in Sweden are noticeably lagging behind their South African counterparts in having spirituality and theology as resources for resilience. While the South African material reveals that these have been proven to play a vital role in fostering

climate resilience aimed at managing extreme weather events, especially through the development of resilient communities, this potential remains unexplored in Sweden. In the Swedish material, climate resilience is limited to a psychological trait in which faith brings comfort for those suffering from climate anxiety. Given the escalating severity of the climate crisis, I strongly suggest that research into the role of theology in promoting climate-resilient communities is a crucial avenue for future scholarly enquiry. Including theology would enhance current research on community-based climate resilience.

I suggest that including groups of people who feel the direct impact of climate change – particularly those who, as in their daily lives they have to handle the consequences of the climate crisis, are forced to engage in adaptive strategies such as food cultivation, water management, livestock care, and heat resilience – could substantially enrich our understanding of diverse activist responses and innovative practices in the face of environmental crises. These groups, often operating under resource-constrained conditions, may, similar to the faith-based climate activists explored in my study, be strengthened by faith, positioning them as vital actors of innovation amid the climate emergency. Therefore, I emphasise the need for expanded empirical theological research into the theologies of these communities, particularly from the perspective of climate resilience. Such investigations could uncover how their faith-based frameworks enhance the capacity to adapt to and endure environmental crises, providing valuable insights that could inform broader climate resilience strategies.

My study reveals that spirituality and theology can play a pivotal role in facilitating inner transformation among activists. Spirituality and theology aid in reconnecting with others, nature, God, and self, exploring beyond material values, and integrating various types of knowledge, ultimately enriching the understanding of and response to climate challenges. Although this study does not address whether such inner transformation translates into tangible outer change, I suggest that this would be an important avenue for future research. This gap aligns with broader scholarly concerns about the concrete contributions of religion to the systemic transformation that is necessary to mitigate fossil fuel emissions.

In various academic disciplines and among climate actors worldwide, visualising alternative futures and sustainable societies has been identified as a critical need. My findings suggest that spirituality and theology serve as valuable resources for creative future imagining. Despite the current lack of focused research in this area, incorporating faith and theological perspectives into

climate studies could significantly advance our understanding of and efforts towards sustainable transformation.

Epilogue – An emerging revival movement?

While the ongoing debate questions whether we are witnessing a genuine "greening" of religions and seeks to evaluate the impact of climate activism, my research concentrates on individual faith-based activists and their theologies, rather than on organised movements.[360] Nevertheless, the findings reveal notable parallels with historical revival movements, suggesting that faith-based climate activism could serve as a catalyst for a broader revival. Such a movement has the potential to reinvigorate religious institutions and, moreover, to inspire societal transformation, an aspect underscored in Chapter 1 as vital to addressing the climate crisis effectively.

The revival movement phenomenon is often primarily linked to the rapid growth of Christianity; however, historical evidence shows that such movements are found in a broad range of faith traditions.[361] I have observed compelling parallels between religious revival movements and faith-based climate activism, as demonstrated by the efforts of activists from various religious backgrounds. These similarities emphasise the wider relevance of revival dynamics beyond a single faith context, and underscore their importance in contemporary environmental advocacy. Nonetheless, since Christianity is the dominant religious tradition in my material, I draw on characteristics of Christian revival movements in the following.[362]

When activists engage with climate knowledge, the transformative process they undergo could be understood through the lens of a concept that is

[360] Numerous scholarly investigations have examined the proposed phenomenon of the "greening of religions". Nevertheless, empirical evidence does not conclusively support the existence of such a trend. See, for example, Hulme, "Climate Change: Varieties of Religious Engagement"; Haluza-DeLay, "Religion and Climate Change"; Koehrsen et al., "How 'Green' Can Religions Be?"; Köhrsen et al., *Religious Environmental Activism*; Taylor, "Earth and Nature-Based Spirituality (Part I)"; Taylor, "Religion and Environmental Behaviour (Part Two): Dark-Green Nature Spiritualities and the Fate of the Earth."

[361] See, for example, Lapidus, "Islamic Revival and Modernity"; Kumar, "Hindu Revivalism and Education in North-Central India"; Lai, "The Religious Revival in China."

[362] In my argument, I specifically reference certain aspects of Christian revival movements as described by Michael J. McClymond in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to World Christianity*. However, the characteristics McClymond identifies are consistent with other research on Christian revival movements, revival movements beyond Christianity, and, more broadly, revitalisation movements. I also use other research to identify further the characteristics of revival movements. McClymond, "Christian Revival and Renewal Movements."

prevalent in revival movements: "awakening". This process is characterised by a heightened sense of immediacy and a notable shift from a state of unawareness to one of informed urgency. Prior to this awakening, activists may lack a comprehensive understanding of the severity of the climate crisis or have only a superficial awareness. The awakening itself typically involves a progression to a more profound, experience-based understanding of the climate crisis, which then catalyses or intensifies their commitment to climate action. In the Swedish context, the awakening is also frequently characterised by intense emotional responses, such as climate anxiety. Importantly, in the faith-based activism studied here, this awakening is mainly driven by experience-based climate knowledge rather than by heightened spiritual experiences and emotions connected to spirituality, setting it apart from traditional revival phenomena.[363] However, the awakening of the activists elevates the climate crisis to a matter of life and death, a sentiment often associated with revivalist phenomena. Typically, stagnation in religious institutions does not serve as a catalyst for revival; instead, it is often stimulated by pressing contemporary issues that generate uncertainty about the future.[364]

While the initial catalyst for climate activists' awakening is not spiritual, the role of personal and experience-based factors is indispensable in faith-based climate activism, paralleling characteristics observed in revival movements. My empirical material indicates that knowledge grounded in lived experiences, both spiritual and related to the climate crisis, is crucial to their activism. Although spiritual experiences do not directly trigger awakening or an intense emotional response, they serve to reinforce and drive ongoing activism efforts. Analysing the material through the four voices of theology framework reveals that normative or formal theological voices tend to exert less influence than personal experiences in shaping the activists' theological voices. Furthermore, these personal encounters transform their theological understandings. This pattern resonates with scholarly arguments about feminist theology as a

[363] McClymond, "Christian Revival and Renewal Movements," 245.
[364] Mark Shaw, in the academic discipline of Global Christianity, examines the dynamics of global revival by analysing contextual examples from Africa, Asia, North America, and South America during the 20th century. He describes this as the justice component of revival movements, arguing that revival movements are "both caused by change and a catalyst of change. They arise from a widespread sense of fear and uncertainty about the future. … Revivals are not generally caused by stagnation in the church. Something more dramatic is needed. The soil into which revival is sown is one of discontent, uncertainty and volatility". Shaw, *Global Awakening*, 23.

revival movement, which emphasises the centrality of lived experiences in theological development and reform.[365]

Evidence from both the South African and the Swedish contexts indicates that this awakening often engenders significant tensions with activists' religious institutions, particularly their local faith communities. This phenomenon is a salient characteristic of revival movements, as it reflects a fundamental discord between individuals who have undergone spiritual awakening and the faith institutions that remain unaltered by such experiences.[366] I contend that these tensions are significantly increased by underlying theological discrepancies. The activists' holistic theologies, which emphasise the intrinsic unity of transcendent reality and worldly matters, fundamentally challenge the theological perceptions they encounter in their local faith communities. A key source of this tension lies in the activists' prioritisation of orthopraxy over orthodoxy: their focus on correct practice rather than on doctrinal orthodoxy conflicts with the established theological norms they encounter in their local faith communities. Furthermore, their development of eco-centric theological perspectives throughout their activism serves to deepen the theological divide, thereby widening the gap between the activists and their local faith communities.

My analysis suggests that the theological doctrines expressed in religious institutions at the national level closely align with the theologies and environmental commitments advocated by activists. The material also reveals a noticeable discrepancy, recognised by activists, between the doctrinal teachings promoted by these institutions and their actual practices at the local congregational level, indicating a gap between ideology and implementation. The tension arising from their encounters with local faith communities significantly hampers the activists' capacity to articulate and manifest their activism in these traditional religious contexts. Consequently, these activists seek alternative platforms beyond conventional religious institutions, such as secular climate organisations or faith-based platforms dedicated to environmental issues.

Nonetheless, in both settings, activists experience profound frustration stemming from their inability fully to articulate and practise their holistic theologies in local faith communities. Such an imagined community would embody

[365] This is similar to what Amanda Porterfield argues for, with the support by writings by Shelia Collins, in her article on feminist theology as a revitalisation movement, that personal experiences are a more significant source for the revitalisation movement than theoretically formulated theologies. Porterfield, "Feminist Theology as a Revitalization Movement," 235.
[366] McClymond, "Christian Revival and Renewal Movements," 245–46.

qualities that secular climate organisations and environmental faith-based platforms cannot entirely replace, given the absence of the relational, contextual, and worshipping reality that is characteristic of local faith communities. This dynamic highlights the complex interaction between experience-based awakening and the theologies encountered in the local congregations of religious institutions.

It is important to note that, throughout history, revival movements have consistently pursued dual objectives: to revitalise religious institutions and to catalyse broader societal transformations.[367] This pattern is evident in the faith-based activism examined in this study, which responds primarily to the pressing climate crisis. In addition, these movements embody an aspirational desire for their local faith communities to align with and support their commitment, thereby reinforcing the intertwined nature of religious revival and societal change. To faith-based activists, operant theological voices are at the heart of their theologies, as they view climate action as a fundamental expression of their faith. This perspective aligns with another key aspect of revival theology: emphasising practical activism as a manifestation of faith.[368] Typically emerging during uncertain times, these revivals inspire people to manifest faith that is aimed at affecting positive change in the world.[369]

Another trait identified in my research that aligns with revival movements is the way in which the awakening evokes eschatological perspectives.[370] However, as previously noted, the eschatological view of these activists is not focused primarily on afterlife concerns but on worldly issues – notably, the climate crisis. These perspectives are articulated as collective eschatological visions that aim for the salvation of humanity, the planet, or even the cosmos. Importantly, the greatest source of comfort does not lie in having detailed

[367] While different interpretations of religion have, on the one hand, been used as a source to legitimise oppressing and exploiting humans and nature, revival movements have, on the other hand, also contributed to positive developments, such as the contribution to abolitionism and the possibility for the enslaved to demand freedom, to women's leadership, and to democracy. Thus, revival movements throughout history have had both trans-local and global impacts. McClymond, "Christian Revival and Renewal Movements," 151, 244; Fahlgren et al., *Ostädade väckelser*, 12, 15.
[368] Historically it has been exemplified in the fight against slavery and for women's rights. Fahlgren et al., *Ostädade väckelser*, 37, 38, 41, 71.
[369] In his study on Christian revival movements in diverse contexts, Shaw characterises this as a transition from "survival mode" to "transforming mission", encompassing not only evangelism but also social action. He conceptualises this mission as holistic, occurring both locally and globally. Shaw, *Global Awakening*, 18.
[370] McClymond, "Christian Revival and Renewal Movements," 244.

visions but rather in reliance on God, which could be interpreted as embodying an eschatological hope.

Throughout history, periods of revival have served as catalysts for intensified theological debate, particularly about themes such as sin, faith, and repentance.[371] Currently, the faith-based climate activists critique their religious institutions and faith communities, which could be understood as theological disputes. Their awakening has brought operant theological voices to the fore, and they are eager to see others join their cause. While these activists generally avoid using terms such as "sin" and "repentance" when condemning institutional inaction, their advocacy of climate justice rests fundamentally on principles of accountability, calling for those who emit fossil fuel gases to accept responsibility not only to mitigate the emissions but also to support communities that are adversely affected by the climate crisis they did not create. The activists encourage their institutions and faith communities to act in alignment with these principles, reflecting an implicit expectation that their religious institutions will acknowledge their "sin" and "repent".

The absence of an explicit discourse of sin and repentance among faith-based activists in both contexts signals a crucial distinction between faith-based climate activism and traditional revivalist paradigms.[372] However, this omission warrants further theological enquiry, particularly when examining the process of reorientation in the Swedish context, conceptualised as a climate-knowledge-based *metanoia* facilitated by spirituality. In Christian theology, *metanoia* is typically characterised by the recognition of guilt, which then progresses to repentance, restitution, and proactive efforts to amend harm. Theological scholarship has underscored this trajectory as a compelling theological pathway for advancing Christian environmentalism.[373] In the light of this, the Swedish activism, with its pronounced focus on lifestyle modifications, could be interpreted as a mechanism for managing unarticulated guilt about unsustainable lifestyles. It may also be linked to a collective sense of national responsibility for the environmental crisis, stemming from a history of economic development that has relied on fossil fuel emissions. This interpretive lens positions lifestyle changes not merely as behavioural adjustments but also as

[371] McClymond, "Christian Revival and Renewal Movements," 245.
[372] This observation corroborates the findings of Malcolm et al., who show that Christian climate activists in the United Kingdom are ambivalent about categorising humans' environmental damage to nature as a sin. Notably, Roman Catholic activists in particular hesitated to employ the terminology of sin in this context. The arguments presented for refraining from using the term "sin" included concerns that it may impose an excessive burden of guilt or serve as an obstacle to transformative action. Malcolm et al., *Religion, Theology and Climate Change*, 33.
[373] Aourelien Andrianos, "Ecological Sin, Metanoia (Repentance), and Eco-Conversion," 68.

acknowledging one's sin and acts of repentance, thereby aligning with revivalist frameworks.

Another notable parallel with revival movements is the strong and pervasive international networks, which often form a defining feature of such movements.[374] Despite their critiques of local faith communities, activists in both contexts demonstrate a high regard for these communities and actively engage with broader international religious institutions. This dynamic underscores the critical role of global religious networks in shaping contemporary activist practices. Furthermore, unlike their local counterparts, global and transnational networks serve as essential platforms for climate activism, offering sources of inspiration and support, at least for activists in South Africa.

After a thorough analysis of various aspects of revival theology in the material and its alignment with the defining characteristics of revival movements, I contend that the material demonstrates an embryonic potential for a revival movement that is driven by faith-based activists who respond to the climate crisis. This emerging movement has the capacity either to become integrated into existing religious institutional frameworks or to diverge from them entirely, thereby facilitating independent trajectories. My empirical evidence shows that faith-based activists often live out their holistic theologies beyond traditional faith communities. At the same time, they eagerly seek local faith communities in which to practise their holistic theologies. These findings suggest that this potential revival movement might detach from established religious institutions, leading to the creation of new faith communities in which holistic theological paradigms could be fully realised.[375]

On the other hand, as previously noted, numerous theological themes derived from my material show notable similarities with theologies articulated by prominent religious organisations and initiatives, such as the WCC, the Catholic Laudato Si' movement, as well as the United Nations Environment Programme Faith for Earth Coalition initiative on Islam as a catalyst for environmental stewardship. Similar theological motifs are also observable in religious institutional initiatives at the national levels of both South Africa and Sweden. These parallels suggest that religious institutions may be more inclined to

[374] Shaw, *Global Awakening*, 31, 115.
[375] As early as 1982, in the Swedish context, Olov Hartman – who was a priest in the Church of Sweden, who engaged in environmental issues, and who was author of an extensive list of books – claimed that concerns about nature and the environment could be yet another revival that the Church of Sweden was about to overlook. Hartman, *Fågelsträck*, 192.

embrace faith-based climate activism, as it aligns with their promoted theologies and organisational commitments.

However, critical examination of the theological foundations of the tensions faced by activists reveals specific obstacles that could hinder the "greening of religions". Activists report a persistent divergence between official doctrinal teachings at global and national levels and the actual practices in local faith communities. This discrepancy fosters ongoing tension and engenders uncertainty about the future of faith-based environmental responses. This situation raises crucial questions about whether local faith communities will evolve towards a more inclusive, climate-responsive stance or maintain their insular approaches. Such dynamics reflect patterns seen in revivalist movements, emphasising the complex relationship between institutional theological doctrines and grassroots environmental activism. This underscores the difficulties involved in cultivating cohesive faith-based climate initiatives. Nevertheless, historical precedents demonstrate the influential role of revival movements in revitalising and reformulating theological paradigms in religious institutions, having an impact on both doctrinal orthodoxy and practical orthopraxy. Consequently, the trajectory of this nascent revival depends critically on how religious institutions respond to the theologies manifested by faith-based activists, thus shaping the future landscape of faith and environmental activism.

In contrast to intra-denominational tensions, my research indicates that cross-faith collaboration on climate initiatives in South Africa is not hindered by interreligious conflicts. The emphasis on orthopraxy diminishes the significance of theological differences and doctrinal divergences. The urgent need to address the climate crisis supersedes theological disputes, thereby creating an environment conducive to the emergence of an interreligious revival movement. This movement has the potential to catalyse meaningful socio-environmental transformation.

To conclude, historically, religious revivals have shown a capacity not only to reshape theological doctrines and practices but also to instigate extensive societal transformations. Therefore, should faith-based climate activism develop into a comprehensive revival movement, it could function as a significant catalyst for societal transformation. This underscores the potential of faith-inspired responses to environmental crises to move beyond the transformation of individuals and to influence broader cultural and political landscapes, thereby aligning with the imperative for urgent action that is emphasised at the outset of this thesis.

Appendix 1 – List of interviewees

To protect the privacy of the interviewees, pseudonyms are used. An overview of the interviewees is provided in Chapter 2, in the section headed "Interviewing", under "Characteristics of interviewees".

South Africa

Amir – Interview conducted on 7 May 2022.
Amir actively participates in civil disobedience in South Africa and occasionally abroad. He works professionally on climate and other environmental issues. Muslim.

Betty – Interview conducted on 20 May 2022.
Betty has been involved in political administration and environmental activism throughout her life. She is currently managing a farm that employs eco-friendly methods and actively supports younger environmental activists. She is one of the older among the South African interviewees. Khoi.

Busi – Interview conducted on 10 February 2023.
Busi collaborates locally with other faiths on environmental and climate issues, participating in activities such as strikes, while also addressing these matters in her local parish through worship and community clean-up initiatives. Christian.

Dina – Interview conducted on 18 August 2022 (via Zoom).
Dina is involved in environmental activism, mainly by managing food garden projects for vulnerable communities, as well as through writing. She is a trained academic theologian and a Christian.

Dumisani – Interview conducted on May 20 2022 (via Zoom).
Dumisani has worked at several faith-based organisations in various southern African countries, focusing on climate change and environmental issues, including activities such as lobbying and awareness-raising. Christian.

Fatima – Interview conducted on 9 February 2023 (via Zoom).
Fatima engages in interfaith grassroots efforts to emphasise environmental issues, but her contribution is especially related to indigenous rights. She has left her Christian faith community and is exploring her Khoi identity, which includes her role as an environmental activist.

Grace – Interview conducted on 20 May 2022 (via Zoom).
She takes part in environmental activities in the local community, including lobbying and raising awareness in collaboration with various faith traditions. Christian.

Linda – Interview conducted on 19 May 2022 (via Zoom)
Linda has been actively engaged in campaigning and working at a religious institution for many years to address environmental and climate issues. She trains others at various levels in her religious institution. She is a trained academic theologian. Christian.

Musa – Interview conducted on 20 May 2022.
Musa is involved with an environmental organisation at both national and local levels, organising cleanup initiatives in vulnerable urban areas and conducting awareness-raising activities. Muslim.

Sharon – Interview conducted on 6 February 2023.
Sharon has worked with various environmental organisations over the years, and takes an active part in interfaith collaborations, such as awareness-raising initiatives and training others. Interfaith.

Sthembiso – Interview conducted on 16 May 2022 and 13 March 2023 (the last one via Zoom).
Sthembiso has worked at the national level in various environmental organisations, yet he is also actively involved in his church at all levels, from local to international, which includes lobbying and training others. He is one of the younger among the South African interviewees. Christian.

Sweden

All the Swedish interviewees identify as Christian.

Camilla – Interviews conducted on 7 September and 29 December 2021 (the second one via Zoom).
Has been involved in various forms of activism for several years, including civil disobedience actions through Extinction Rebellion, both in and outside Sweden, as well as actively participating in Fridays for Future and awareness-raising activities.

Jenny – Interviews conducted on 19 August 2021 and 8 December 2021 (the second one via Zoom).
Has been engaged in various forms of activism for most of her life, with a deep interest in and understanding of theological perspectives. She also organises climate activism events and awareness-raising activities for others.

Karin – Interview conducted on 15 September 2021.
Has been actively involved in Fridays for Future for several years, as well as coordinating other climate networks and activities, including awareness-raising initiatives. Trained academically as a theologian.

Kristina – Interview conducted on 11 January 2022.
New to activism, she has become more actively involved in recent years and is deepening her understanding of the crisis together with others. One of the older among the Swedish interviewees. Engaged in her local congregation, but struggles to find a platform for her climate activism.

Magdalena – Interview conducted on 15 October 2021.
Actively engaged in Fridays for Future over the last few years, as well as collaborating with other local actors to raise awareness about the climate crisis. Trained academically as a theologian, and has a deep interest in contemplative practices.

Maria – Interview conducted on 2 February 2022 (via Zoom).
She has been deeply involved in climate activism, including civil disobedience, but in recent years has shifted more towards contemplative practices. She is an academically trained theologian. One of the younger among the Swedish interviewees.

Nils – Interview conducted on 13 January 2022 (via Zoom).
Actively involved in activism and exploring contemplative practices for several years. One of the older among the Swedish interviewees. Trained academically as a theologian.

Ove – Interview conducted on 13 December 2021.
He has been actively engaged in grassroots activism with Fridays for Future for several years, and also leads climate workshops for all ages in Christian congregations. One of the older interviewees in the Swedish context. Trained academically as a theologian.

Thomas – Interview conducted on 11 September 2021.
Has been involved in various forms of activism for several years, including civil disobedience through Extinction Rebellion, and is simultaneously engaged in organising occasions for contemplative practices for others, as well as climate campaign activities such as Fridays for Future.

Vera – Interview conducted on 22 December 2021.
Youth activist engaged in her church's youth network. Has experience living in a disadvantaged African country, and has also worked on climate issues with a global outreach. She is the youngest among the Swedish interviewees.

Appendix 2 – Interview guide

Introduction
Reminding the interviewee of the focus of the study, formalities, and set-up of the interview.

Interview themes and possible follow-up questions

1. **Who are you, and what do you do?**
    a. Could you describe what your climate commitment looks like today?
    b. How did it all begin?
    c. What is it you want to achieve?
    d. Could you give an example of a time when you did something that made you especially satisfied?

2. **Why do you do what you do – and what role does your faith play in your climate commitment?**
    a. Science clearly states what needs to be done — so what does faith contribute with?
    b. What motivates you?
    c. Do you think that being involved in climate activism is challenging? If so, where do you find strength and hope?
    d. Does God/your faith play a role in your engagement?
    e. Can you give any concrete example of when you have felt that your faith was significant to your climate commitment?

3. **Faith and political/social engagement**
    a. Throughout history, a commitment to political change and religious faith have sometimes been viewed as being in opposition to each other, in conflict. What is your opinion on that? If politics and faith are somehow connected, how does that manifest? How does it play out in your life?
    b. There are various ways to view what constitutes political or social engagement or activism. Do you believe that your climate commitment is political? How? Or why not?

c. Where and what kind of political and social change do you want to see?
d. What do you think of the climate commitment of your own (and other) religious institution's/faith traditions' climate commitment?
e. Can you express your climate commitment in your own religious context? If so, where? Why? If not, why not?

4. Looking to the future

a. In the climate crisis, the question of the future is central. What are your thoughts about the future? Where are we going?
b. If you got the chance to imagine a future in which we have successfully addressed the impacts of climate change and live within the planet's limits, what would that look like?
c. Does your faith play a role in shaping such a vision of the future?
d. If we imagine such a positive vision of the future, what could religious faith contribute to building and creating such a society?

Closing questions

a. I don't have any further questions. Is there anything else you believe is important that I have not asked about or that you would like to share?
b. Do you think that the questions were relevant in your context? Are there other questions that you suggest I add?

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