Using Theologies of Hospitality for Dealing with Disagreement in the Local Church

A dialogue between the theologies of Andrew Shepherd and Olli-Pekka Vainio exploring the concepts of boundaries and identity

Wouter Rijneveld, May 2025

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Date	May 28, 2025
Place	Gorinchem

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1 Introduction

This introduction describes the background for this research and offers an initial idea of important concepts: polarisation, disagreement, hospitality. The central research question, the scope, and the approach used are briefly elaborated and the purpose of this research is mentioned.

1.1 Background of the Research

Anyone following the six-monthly publications of the research on citizen-perspectives of the Netherlands Institute for Social Research can see that the theme 'polarisation' keeps coming back in recent years. In the most recent version of this publication, the word is mentioned twelve times, among others as reason why living together with different groups of people is regarded as a societal problem.[1] It is important to note that the research quoted here is about citizens' perceptions: people perceive an increase in polarisation. This raises the question if there is an actual increase in polarisation or only a perceived one. In an earlier publication in this series, the researchers address this question and indicate that the actual divisions and differences along various dimensions of difference are hardly increasing, but the perception of the importance of these differences is. Hence the perception of an increase in polarisation. One reason for this could be that minority opinions are being expressed more strongly.[2]

However, as the Thomas theorem states: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." The perception of an increase in polarisation can lead people to withdraw if they do not have pronounced opinions, or to affiliate themselves with one of the poles. This self-reinforcing dynamic is a core aspect of the model for polarisation that Bart Brandsma offers in his book on the topic.[3] This dynamic implies that an

[1] Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, "Burgerperspectieven 2024 Bericht 3" (Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, December 30, 2024), 29.

[2] Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, "Burgerperspectieven 2022 Bericht 1" (Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, September 1, 2022), 14. See also: Paul Dekker and Josje De Ridder, "Percepties van Tegenstellingen En Polarisatie," in *Politieke Polarisatie in Nederland*, ed. Paul Dekker (Utrecht: Het Wereldvenster, 2022), 76. See also: Steef Post, "Pastor, Polarisatie En Preventie" (Masterthesis, Apeldoorn, Theologische Universiteit Apeldoorn, 2023), 7.

[3] Bart Brandsma, *Polarisatie: inzicht in de dynamiek van wij-zij denken*, Vierde druk (Schoonrewoerd: BB in Media, 2020). In 2022 I evaluated a programme on depolarisation of migration discourse, in which over twenty civil society organisations in the Netherlands and Flanders were involved. Ths programme was explicitly based on the concept of the "silent middle" or the "movable middle" of the framework of Brandsma. Corina Dhaene and Wouter Rijneveld, *Evaluatie van het programma Other Talk in Vlaanderen en Nederland*. Unpublished report, 2023. See also www.onmigration.nl

increased perception of polarisation is an important issue, even if it is not based on an increase of differences of opinion. The way in which such differences and disagreements are handled becomes all the more important. In this thesis, I accept the common parlance that we live in a context of increasing polarisation, but I focus on what often underlies it: how we deal with disagreement.

This context is also relevant for church and theology. Almost every topic on which different viewpoints lead to polarisation in society also find adherents of opposite sides in the church. In recent years, this was true about COVID-19, and it is true about migration, nitrogen, nature conservation, the presence of wolves, and right-wing or left-wing politics more generally. In addition to this, the church has its own topics of contention, such as liturgical choices, the roles of men and women in leadership, and issues related to sexual ethics. In the Dutch and Belgian context alone, four conferences took place in recent years, where theological reflections were offered on polarisation, the role of the church in this context, and on dealing with difference more broadly.[4]

Another part of the background for this thesis is formed by a previous thesis I wrote; on theologies of hospitality.[5] 'Hospitality' is not to be restricted to the practice of receiving friends and family with a cup of tea, and even less to the commercialised version of the 'hospitality business'. Rather, hospitality can be tentatively defined as "the openness to others in their being different."[6] In this broad understanding of hospitality, it forms the structure of our interactions with others. Theological hospitality reflects on the interaction between God's hospitality and ours; God's dealing with us and our dealing with those who are different.

In that thesis, I explored the role of sin and salvation and concepts such as boundaries, identity, freedom and reciprocity in the theologies of hospitality of Andrew

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[4] Heleen E. Zorgdrager and Pieter Vos, eds., "The Calling of the Church in Times of Polarization," vol. 46, Studies in Reformed Theology (Leiden: Brill, 2022); Jack Barentsen and Cees Tulp, eds., *Bridge-Building Leadership in a Polarizing World* (Peeters Publishers, 2023); Bernhard J.G. Reitsma and Erika Nes-Visscher, eds., *Religiously Exclusive, Socially Inclusive: A Religious Response* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023); Judith Gruber, Michael Schüßler, and Ryszard Bobrowicz, eds., *Dissenting Church: Exploring the Theological Power of Conflict and Disagreement*, Pathways for Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024).

[5] Wouter Rijneveld, "Sin and Salvation in Theologies of Hospitality. An Analysis of the Theologies of Hans Boersma and Andrew Shepherd" (Masterthesis, Leuven, Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, 2023).

[6] Robert Vosloo, *Engelen als gasten? Over christelijke gastvrijheid*, trans. Margriet A.Th. van der Kooi-Dijkstra (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2011), 22. "openheid voor andere mensen in hun anders-zijn, voor vreemden in hun vreemd-zijn", translation mine. See also Robert Vosloo, "Identity, Otherness and the Triune God: Theological Groundwork for a Christian Ethic of Hospitality," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa; Scottsville*, no. 119 (July 2004): 71. And: John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 6.

Shepherd and Hans Boersma. Hospitality is also a personal theme that I started reflecting on while living in a Nigerian context (2000-2005), and later when living in an intentional community in Gorinchem (2009-2018), and in working with migrants in a church-related context (from 2016). In the current research, I explore the intersection of theologies of hospitality and dealing with disagreement in the church, in the context of polarisation.

1.2 Research Question, Scope and Method

The research question derives from the intersection of theologies of hospitality and dealing with disagreement in the church in a context of polarisation. The question is formulated as follows: "What can insights from theologies of hospitality contribute to reflections on dealing with disagreement in the church in the context of polarisation?"

The basic approach to answering this question is that of a dialogue between theological reflections on hospitality and theological reflections on dealing with disagreement. First, I explore the concept of disagreement and its relation to (the context of) polarisation. For theological reflections on disagreement, I mainly use the work of Finnish theologian Olli-Pekka Vainio. The reason is that he takes a systematic-theological approach in his publications about disagreement, while interacting with a variety of other disciplines within and beyond theology. I use various other voices to discuss his work.

Next, I present some theological reflections on hospitality, mainly using the work of Andrew Shepherd. The reason to focus on his work, is that he develops the outline of a rather complete theology of hospitality, using many of the traditional systematic-theological *loci*. In presenting his work, various other authors are used to complement his ideas. In presenting theological reflections on hospitality, I zoom in on concepts that I focused on in my previous thesis and those that have potential relevance for the dialogue with theological reflections on disagreement. The reason for doing so is to keep this work within necessary limits.

In a first round of dialogue I elaborate the intersection between the two sets of theological reflections: on hospitality and on dealing with disagreement. From this dialogue, two major issues emerge: boundaries and identity. These issues are explored in-depth and an attempt is made to constructively use reflections on hospitality to enrich the reflections on dealing with disagreement.

1.3 Purpose of the Research

The context of increasing polarisation was described above. The question can be raised if the church could play a constructive role in relation to polarisation. But before the question about the church's external influence comes the question how polarisation plays out in the church itself, with respect to both societal and ecclesial topics. And while the question how the church can deal with polarisation is important, the purpose of this research is to contribute to an earlier stage, or one of the underlying issues for polarisation: dealing with disagreement. Could the church be a place where disagreements can exist without resulting in vicious cycles of polarisation?

It is hoped that this research offers some theological reflections that have practical implications for how church leaders or members deal with disagreement. The theological concepts and frameworks used to handle disagreement matter for the type of approach or interventions one employs in situations of disagreement.

2 Theological Reflections on Disagreement

This chapter offers an introduction to some aspects of disagreement, starting out with a definition and delineation of the concept. The work of Finnish systematic theologian Olli-Pekka Vainio is leading, but his insights are complemented with other voices. Vainio wrote a monograph about religious disagreement, *Disagreeing virtuously*, in which he offers an interdisciplinary approach with insights from history, psychology, science and philosophy, ending in a proposal for a virtue-ethical approach to dealing with disagreement.[7] In other publications, he offers additional insights on truth claims, faith and certainty, diversity and tolerance.

2.1 Disagreement and Polarisation

Disagreement is part of life and this is also true of religious disagreement and disagreement in the local church. In the introduction, the contemporary context of polarisation was briefly sketched. Polarisation is always related to a disagreement, and one way to frame the relation between the two is to view disagreement as a stage that comes before polarisation. Disagreements can become polarised, leading to the vicious cyclical dynamic with vocal extreme positions and a silent middle position that gets

[7] Olli-Pekka Vainio, *Disagreeing Virtuously* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2017), Logos edition. Because an electronic version of the book is used, references are made to section numbers rather than page numbers.

emptier or more silent over time. When an environment is already polarised on an issue, disagreements can develop into polarised situations faster.

Pieter Vos regards fear for the loss of what is considered valuable or even fear for survival, as underlying reason for polarisation, distinguishing it from disagreement or diversity.[8] Because of the feature of polarisation that it exerts a pressure on all to choose between one of the extreme positions, speaking about polarisation is not neutral. The language of polarisation itself can induce this dynamic and stimulate a binary discourse about mutually exclusive positions with identity-defining characteristics.[9] Elsewhere in the same book, this line of argument is developed further into the suggestion to deconstruct the use of the term polarisation in the church, in order to avoid that the term serves to accuse 'the other side' while placing 'our own side' on the moral high ground, and to avoid that the term becomes a label to suppress disagreement.[10] Because of these arguments, this study focuses on disagreement rather than polarisation in the church.

The argument that language of polarisation can have a polarising effect, cannot be used to deny the reality of polarisation in the church though. If society is polarised about a certain issue, the question can be raised if the same processes of polarisation also take place among members of a local church, and if they also influence the practices of being church. Inasmuch as the church represents the diversity of society, the same range of positions is to be expected. And inasmuch as the composition of church members differs from that of society, the influence of polarised debates may also differ. Also, the extent to which such societal debates influence church life likely depends on the extent to which church members share aspects of their daily lives.

In addition to this, the church has its own issues of disagreement that have the potential of developing into polarised situations in a local church context. These can be issues that are debated in national or even global church communities, such as sexual ethics and male or female leadership. They can also be doctrinal, ethical, ecumenical or liturgical issues that emerge from the local context, for example from the relations with other local churches and their beliefs and practices, or from church members who raise

[8] Pieter Vos, "Introduction," in *The Calling of the Church in Times of Polarization*, ed. Heleen E. Zorgdrager and Pieter Vos (Brill, 2022), 1,5.

[9] Vos, 6.

[10] Henk van den Belt, "No Calling without Being Called: The Vocatio Interna at the Heart of Sanctification," in *The Calling of the Church in Times of Polarization*, ed. Heleen E. Zorgdrager and Pieter Vos (Brill, 2022), 316. Elsewhere in this article, it is argued that the work of the Spirit reveals that the real lines of conflict run not between human hearts but through them (322).

such issues.[11] While it is not easy to delineate exactly which issues can be classified as disagreements rather than mere differences in preferences, a preliminary understanding of disagreement is that they often require a choice, involve people emotionally, involve multiple church members, and that because of these characteristics, they have the potential to develop into a situation of polarisation.

There is one more difference between disagreement and polarisation that is reason to focus on disagreement in the context of polarisation rather than on polarisation itself. This relates to the perspective for action. In polarised situations, bridgebuilding and dialogue are no longer feasible, since the so-called pushers of the extreme positions no longer have an interest to connect. A major approach is to focus on the so-called silent middle.[12] In a situation of 'only' disagreement, the range of options is much broader: dialogue, promoting mutual understanding, and truth-seeking could be part of such interventions. This broader range of options is another reason to focus on disagreement rather than polarisation.

The question can even be posed if disagreement itself could have a mitigating effect on polarisation. In other words, is stimulating some forms of disagreement a feasible strategy when the danger of polarisation is looming? There seems to be some evidence that this is indeed the case, but only when people at both sides are not yet deeply entrenched in their so-called 'information bubbles'. Kim researched this question (if disagreement can mitigate polarisation) in the context of political polarisation and found that engaging in disagreement led to less polarisation when people had low selective exposure to information (i.e. they were engaging with different sources of information). However, if people already had a high selective exposure to information, the effect was opposite: disagreement led to more polarisation.[13] If disagreement has a potential to contribute to and develop into a polarised situation, and also a potential to avoid this development, it is all the more reason to reflect deeply on dealing with disagreement in the church.

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[11] See for example the recent practical-theological masterthesis of Steef Post that describes a number of real-life case situations of polarised situations in local churches: Post, "Pastor, Polarisatie En Preventie," sec. 3.4.

[12] See footnote 3, where I refer to an evaluation I did of a portfolio of interventions to persuade civil society organisations to focus more on strengthening the voice of the 'silent middle' in their communications about migration.

[13] Yonghwan Kim, "Does Disagreement Mitigate Polarization? How Selective Exposure and Disagreement Affect Political Polarization," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 92, no. 4 (2015): 915–37.

The preliminary understanding of what disagreement is, and how it differs both from polarisation and from mere difference of opinion is an invitation to dive deeper in what constitutes disagreement. This is done in the next section, whereas the two sections after that focus on the specific nature of disagreement in the church and an approach to dealing with disagreement.

2.2 The Nature of Disagreement

Disagreement can be viewed from the perspective of many disciplines. Vainio, in his book *Disagreeing virtuously*, starts by offering perspectives from history, psychology, and the science of religions.[14] Because of the focus on a theological account of disagreement, and the interaction with theologies of hospitality, I mainly zoom in on the theological and epistemological perspectives he offers, both in the book mentioned and in his other writings. The interaction with epistemological literature is necessarily limited.

From an epistemological point of view, disagreement is when two epistemic peers who share all relevant information come to different conclusions about what the evidence confirms more strongly.[15] The concept 'epistemic peers' is central in many writings about disagreement. It refers to the situation where the disagreeing persons or parties have equal reasoning capabilities, are sufficiently knowledgeable in the subject at hand, use an adequate reasoning process, have equal access to the relevant information and have shared the reasons for their positions with each other. The combination of being epistemic peers and yet having different beliefs constitutes a disagreement.

In this situation, there are two basic options: the 'conciliatory' view argues that the parties loose the (epistemic) right to their views; they should change or withdraw their view. It is no longer justified to stick to their conclusion. The 'steadfastist' view states that both still have the right to their respective beliefs. Vainio argues that it is not possible nor helpful to adopt either of these two views as a general position. This would lead to either scepticism or dogmatism. Rather, he argues for a dynamic view where it depends on the issue whether a conciliatory or a steadfast position is more rational. While 'dynamic view' is Vainio's term, other authors propose similar in-between options. For example, Pittard proposes what he calls 'weak conciliationism', where an 'equal weight view' (equal weight is given to the outcomes of epistemic peers) is used for so-called 'easy cases' of

[14] Vainio, *Disagreeing Virtuously*, secs. 1, 2, 3.1-3.3.

[15] Vainio, sec. 3.4. Much of what follows is also based on this section in Vainio's book, unless indicated otherwise. The same applies to quotes without footnotes from Vainio that appear in this section.

disagreement, while the possibility of reasonable confidence for fundamental disagreements is also maintained.[16] For fundamental issues, such as religious belief, Pittard argues that one is justified to hold one's belief confidently on the basis of 'affective rationalism' in which emotional experiences are also accepted as religiously important insights.[17]

In other publications, Vainio probes deeper into the certainty we can or cannot have in our (religious) convictions. We need to be certain about matters of ultimate importance and we need to have faith in our convictions in order to act on them.[18] However, what type of certainty and what type of faith is this? Vainio argues that we can achieve psychological certainty (to be maximally convinced that something is true) and moral certainty (to be so much confident about something so as to act on it with confidence), but epistemic certainty (that a belief could not have been false) is not available in this life.[19] This is a similar claim as Dirk-Martin Grube makes: certainty of faith is not epistemic, but rather a certainty of the heart: "we are certain about our faith even though we are cognitively ambiguous about it."[20] The type of faith that is required for this type of certainty (using a taxonomy proposed by Robert Audi) is not simply propositional faith (the belief that a statement is true), although this is also included, but can include attitudinal faith (faith in someone or something, as an act of the will), acceptant faith, allegiant faith and doxastic faith (taking something to be true on the basis of faith, which does not necessarily exclude the existence of an evidence base for it). In real life, people holding religious convictions that motivate them to action move back and forth through various forms of faith. For example, when doxastic faith is lost, attitudinal faith is a good fallback option. One can entertain temporary doubts, but not "pervasive and dominating doubt," because doubt in faith is as doubt in love: to entertain strong doubt destroys the

[16] John Pittard, *Disagreement, Deference, and Religious Commitment* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), sec. 3.5. Christensen an Lackey refer to a "spectrum" of positions in-between the steadfast and conciliatory views. David Christensen and Jennifer Lackey, "Introduction," in *The Epistemology of Disagreement: New Essays*, ed. David Christensen and Jennifer Lackey (Oxford University Press, 2013), 2.

[17] Pittard, *Disagreement, Deference, and Religious Commitment*, 182. In a later work, Vainio invokes the arguments of Pittard to argue against the 'critical stance' theory which holds that all religious belief should be held tentatively only. Olli-Pekka Vainio, *Faith in Certain Terms*, Routledge Studies in Analytic and Systematic Theology (London: Routledge, 2024), 18.

[18] Olli-Pekka Vainio, "On Believing and Acting Fallibly," *Studia Theologica - Nordic Journal of Theology* 64, no. 1 (June 1, 2010): 102; Vainio, *Faith in Certain Terms*, 77.

[19] Vainio, *Faith in Certain Terms*, 79–82.

[20] Dirk-Martin Grube, "A Humble Exclusivism? Reconstructing Exclusivism under Justificationist Rather than Bivalent Parameters," in *Religiously Exclusive, Socially Inclusive: A Religious Response*, ed. Bernhard J.G. Reitsma and Erika Nes-Visscher (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 34.

thing.[21] To summarise Vainio's position: one can believe fallibly with firmness and certainty, while at the same time continuing to search for truth and improvement of one's beliefs, ready to revise those beliefs that are less fundamental, when good reasons are given.[22]

One of the reasons that Vainio opts for a dynamic view (alternating conciliatory and steadfast views depending on the situation) is that the condition of being epistemic peers is an ideal condition rather than a real-life one. Vainio mentions various reasons why the condition of epistemic peerage is often not met: it is difficult to ascertain that all have equal access to the same information, the nature of the evidence is often person-relative, the reasons for one's religious position are often not fully transparent, not even to oneself, and there are dependencies between persons holding a position, which shows that such positions also have relational components.

One last important concept to introduce here is 'epistemic goods'. Vainio uses the idea of epistemic goods (in the plural) to broaden the idea that disagreement is only about truth. While truth is indeed the most important and desirable epistemic good, other goods such as understanding, reliability and coherence can also be sought after in disagreement.[23] Such goods can be looked for in the positions of other participants in a disagreement and they can also be found in the process of approaching the disagreement. For example, seeking understanding (of other positions) is an epistemic good in its own right, and could be necessary on the way toward finding truth. From an epistemological perspective, these additional epistemic goods ultimately cannot be divorced from the truth, but "often the path toward greater understanding and truth proceeds through the realization of several epistemic goods."

After this generic introduction to what disagreement is, we can now zoom in on disagreement in the church in the next section.

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[21] Vainio, *Faith in Certain Terms*, 76–77; Vainio, "On Believing and Acting Fallibly," 103–4; Vainio, *Disagreeing Virtuously*, sec. 3.4.

[22] Vainio, "On Believing and Acting Fallibly," 104–6.

[23] Vainio bases this approach on the work of William Alston, who uses the term 'epistemic desiderata'. Alston mentions truth as the first, then a set of fifteen additional desiderata in the categories of truth-conducive desiderata (e.g. having adequate evidence, using a reliable process), desiderata that help to discriminate (e.g. being able to defend successfully), deontological features (e.g. that the belief is held responsibly and permissibly), and features of systems of belief (e.g. explanation, understanding, coherence). Most of Vainio's examples are from the latter category. William P. Alston, *Beyond "Justification: Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 41–45.

2.3 Disagreement in the Church

Disagreement in the church is a subset of religious disagreement. Vainio distinguishes various types of religious disagreement: 1) in the public domain, a) violent clashes and b) ideological clashes; 2) intrareligious disagreements, a) between members of the same faith community, b) between members of neighbouring faith communities, as in ecumenical debates; 3) personal conflicts, a) between individuals, b) individual feelings of cognitive dissonance.[24] This thesis restricts itself to his type 2.a, disagreement between members of the same faith community. The focus is even narrower, as Vainio's type 2.a also includes global debates and disagreement in a single faith community, as in the Roman Catholic Church or the Anglican Communion, while here the setting is the local church.

This restricted setting influences the argument: there is likely to be more common ground, a shared set of convictions and practices, and a shared conviction about the justification to hold religious beliefs with certainty. Seen from the outside, the difference between the standpoints is likely to be small compared with other churches or other religious or non-religious faiths. However, the experience of these differences and their emotional impact could be bigger rather than smaller, because of the relative closeness of the people with different standpoints.[25] This is even more the case if the disagreement relates to beliefs that were thought to be shared convictions but are less shared after all, because in such cases issues of identity are at stake.

One way in which the local church setting changes the situation, is that there is a difference between issues for disagreement from outside and from inside the church. If (polarised) discussions from outside take place among members of a church, then there is a likelihood that both (or all) viewpoints are represented in the church. If the disagreement is on church-related issues, it is more likely that there is an established conviction or practice that is dominant, and an alternative view that emerges. This alternative view may always have been present in latent or suppressed form. Such different viewpoints could grow into disagreement, fed by internal dynamics, or fuelled

[24] Vainio, *Disagreeing Virtuously*, sec. Introduction.

[25] While this is understandable on the basis of psychosocial realities (the closeness of the relationship and its emotional implications), this can also be explained by referring to the idea of "the narcissism of small differences," a term coined by Freud to explain that the closer people are, the more hypersensitive they are to minor differences. At the same time, referring to all difference in local churches as "small differences" does not do justice to the (perceived or real) nature of these differences. "Narcissism of Small Differences," in *Wikipedia*, February 15, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narcissism_of_small_differences.

through interaction with the broader context. This could be other churches that are already divided over an issue, or the experience of a growing dissonance between the cultural matrix in which the church operates, particularly when this is an increasingly homogeneous cultural matrix.[26]

A core question is how difference and disagreement in the church is to be viewed theologically. A common approach to this question is to work with the pair of concepts unity and diversity, both of which can be traced throughout the pages of Scripture. The concept of unity can be linked to truth, forgiveness and reconciliation, keeping the faith, penitence, and a Christological viewpoint. The concept of diversity can be linked to pluriformity (sometimes opposed to plurality), creativity, spiritual gifts, acceptance, and a pneumatological viewpoint. Leadership can be linked to both concepts depending on the leadership model. Biblical metaphors combining both concepts are the body and its parts and the stones built on the one foundation. Depending on the argument and theological stance of the author, the focus is more on one or the other pole, but most would argue for the right balance.[27]

A more radical approach is proposed by contributors to a recent conference that explored the theological power of conflict and disagreement under the name *Dissenting church*.[28] The editors argue that earlier theologies of conflict and disagreement in the church were always done from the standpoint of unity, whereas in reality, orthodoxy and heresy are "twinned discursive constructions" in which orthodoxy was simply a matter of power relations. They argue that contestation of normative claims has always been constitutive of ecclesial identity.[29] Conflict is therefore to be seen as a positive force in the church, but a tamed force if there can be acceptance across opposites in communion, rather than in unity.[30] John Caputo proposes radical deconstruction that

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[26] The American researcher Matthew Kaemingk, writing in 2018 after having lived in the Netherlands for some years, offers an historical analysis of Dutch society and refers to evidence that "the Dutch are more ideologically uniform today than they have been in any age since the Reformation." This is particularly true in moral matters: "contemporary Dutch citizens demonstrate a higher degree of moral uniformity than nearly any nation in Europe." Matthew Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2018), 42.

[27] A thorough theological treatment of this is given by Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, Sacra Doctrina (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans, 1998).

[28] Gruber, Schüßler, and Bobrowicz, *Dissenting Church*.

[29] Judith Gruber, Michael Schüßler, and Ryszard Bobrowicz, "Introduction," in *Dissenting Church: Exploring the Theological Power of Conflict and Disagreement*, ed. Judith Gruber, Michael Schüßler, and Ryszard Bobrowicz (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), 4.

[30] Annemarie C. Mayer, "Theological Perspectives of Conflict, Contestation and Community Formation from an Ecumenical Angle," in *Dissenting Church: Exploring the Theological Power of Conflict and Disagreement*, ed. Judith Gruber, Michael Schüßler, and Ryszard Bobrowicz (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), 27.

always searches for the plurality that precedes any seeming unity or non-existing essence. Disagreement can only be celebrated, because it helps replace binary thinking about difference with "differential difference" in which we refrain from any claim to unity or truth.[31] It is the "fantasy of oneness" that has rendered the church unable to deal with disagreements, except by repression and power.[32] While this approach shows the important role that disagreement had and still has in ecclesial identities, and the poor choices that have been made in suppressing it, the question can be raised if this radical approach with an almost complete denial of unity, truth and the possibility to hold convictions with confidence, does not come close to scepticism.[33] In any case, as presented in the previous section, Vainio leaves more room for truth-seeking and holding convictions with confidence.

As a reminder, the question about disagreement in the (local) church in a context of polarisation is important in the light of the church's presence and mission in society. If the church is able to deal with disagreement in an agreeable manner, or even to overcome polarised disagreements, then it has something exemplary to offer to society. However, historically, this has often not been the case, and it still is not, and that situation is even more incentive to study how to deal with disagreements.

2.4 Dealing with Disagreement

Vainio argues that a virtue-ethical approach offers the best prospect for dealing with disagreement. Disagreement will always exist and may even have positive value, so there is a need to deal constructively with disagreement. Vainio finds this approach in virtue ethics: being the right type of person is the best way to deal with different types of disagreements by balancing different virtues. In a more recent work, he states: "The most crucial question is not how to define the possibility of true knowledge or error but rather how to understand who we are and what kind of persons we are as we come to hold

[31] John D. Caputo, "A Radical Theology of Conflict and Contestation," in *Dissenting Church: Exploring the Theological Power of Conflict and Disagreement*, ed. Judith Gruber, Michael Schüßler, and Ryszard Bobrowicz (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), 44.

[32] Marika Rose, "Love Your Enemy: Theology, Identity and Antagonism," in *Dissenting Church: Exploring the Theological Power of Conflict and Disagreement*, ed. Judith Gruber, Michael Schüßler, and Ryszard Bobrowicz (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), 205.

[33] Another question that this publication raises is the apparent lack of congruence between the book and its message: all authors seem very much in agreement; there is a rather uniform message, without a single discordant voice, saying that dissent is always present and needed in the church. Whereas dissent is said to be constitutive of ecclesial identity, nothing of such dissent is visible in the common identity that the book radiates. And if heterodox voices in respect to the message of the book existed in the context of the conference, one wonders about the dynamics through which such voices did not appear in the publication.

beliefs."[34] Virtues also have a potential for contextualised action and provide a language between different religious positions, since all religions and worldviews use virtues that are often rather similar.[35]

While I summarise and discuss Vainio's proposed virtues below, it is worthwhile to first pose the question why dealing with disagreement is framed as an ethical issue, and why virtue ethics. Alternatives could have been to focus on approaches, principles, strategies, process or procedures of dealing with disagreement,[36] or to offer more theological grounding (which is what this thesis attempts in subsequent chapters).[37] The question how to deal with disagreement is helpful to offer suggestions at the generic level, realising that it is always the particular disagreement in the particular context that demands our actions. Within an ethical approach, another option could have been to work along the lines of value ethics.[38] An example could have been to use the axiology of Max Scheler with his proposed hierarchy of values with sensory, vital, spiritual and religious sets of values and to elaborate how dealing with disagreement on the basis of specific values could be done.[39] Apart from the reasons Vainio mentions to use a virtue-ethical approach, this is also part of a broader trend. In epistemology, but also in writing about disagreement, the language of (intellectual) virtues is common.[40]

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[34] Vainio, *Faith in Certain Terms*, 89.

[35] Vainio, *Disagreeing Virtuously*, sec. 4.1. The last argument is from Olli-Pekka Vainio, "Virtues and Vices of Tolerance:," in *Religion in the Public Sphere*, ed. Roger Trigg and Niek Brunsveld, vol. 5, Ars Disputandi Supplement Series (Utrecht: Ars Disputandi, 2011), 279.

[36] For example Edward Langerak, *Civil Disagreement : Personal Integrity in a Pluralistic Society* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014), 17. He suggest careful listening in order to find whatever common ground there is as a first necessary step in dealing with disagreement.

[37] See also Vos, "Introduction," 10. He argues that the task of theology (in the context of polarisation) is to work toward self-understanding.

[38] Patrick Nullens and Ronald T. Michener, *The Matrix of Christian Ethics: Integrating Philosophy and Moral Theology in a Postmodern Context* (InterVarsity Press, 2014), chap. 6. A related suggestion would be to use all four ethical approaches in complementary fashion: consequential ethics, principle ethics, virtue ethics, and value ethics. This complementary approach is what Nullens and Michener propose as a general approach to ethical questions.

[39] Interestingly, Vainio does refer to Scheler's axiology in his chapter with psychological approaches (2.4). Here, he argues that the right brain hemisphere follows the order of Scheler's values, while the left hemisphere turns it upside down. He also refers to the Moral Foundations Theory of Jonathan Haidt (sec. 2.5) with his five core values of care, fairness, loyalty, authority and sanctity.

[40] For example Jewelle Bickel, "Intellectual Virtues and Reasonable Disagreement" (PhD Thesis, Oklahoma, University of Oklahoma, 2019). Another author who uses a virtue-ethical approach toward dealing with disagreement in the church, published the same year as Vainio's book is James Calvin Davis. I will use insights from his book. However, his book is mainly framed in terms of the binary 'evangelical' and 'liberal', where Davis introduces himself as bilingual. The book has a subtext that argues in favour of moving from the evangelical to the liberal fold. This makes his book less useful in the current continental context. The virtues Davis proposes in dealing with disagreement are forbearance, humility, patience, wisdom, faithfulness, friendship, truth, and justice. James Calvin Davis, *Forbearance: A Theological Ethic for a Disagreeable Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017).

Vainio proposes three necessary virtues for dealing with disagreement: open-mindedness, intellectual humility and intellectual courage. He then discusses tolerance more extensively because it is often proposed as the most important virtue.[41] Open-mindedness is the willingness to reflect on the pros and cons of each standpoint and to remain somewhat longer in uncertainty. It is not a lazy acceptance of whatever, but a conscious temporary inhabitation of a different mode of thinking. However, as with many virtues, excessive open-mindedness is a vice.[42] Open-mindedness is only preferable when we have good reason to believe it will lead us toward the truth and this depends on one's knowledge of the subject, the confidence in one's own standpoint and the trustworthiness of the other. However, these conditions increase the risk that some of the best ideas are not considered with an open mind. Vainio proposes to consider if the other standpoint could bring some desiderata such as "simplicity, explanatory power, moral virtues, epistemic virtues, correspondence, coherency, scope, beauty, truthfulness, and effectiveness." Any standpoint that exhibits at least one of these desiderata should be considered seriously with open-mindedness, which does not imply that the other standpoint needs to be accepted as truth.

The second virtue is intellectual humility, which is seeing oneself as one truly is: no overestimation nor underestimation of position, power, status, skills, knowledge, etcetera. It also includes an awareness of limitations and weaknesses, a low focus on oneself, and an ability to appreciate contributions of others.[43] In common parlance, intellectual humility is often used as synonymous to doubt, but Vainio argues that true humility is being able to see strengths and weaknesses of one's convictions, understand those of other convictions and being able to relate them, leading either to adaptation of the conviction or to a reasoned rejection of the other view. Michener, in his discussion of Vainio's work argues that humility is to be regarded as the core virtue for disagreement, from which the other virtues follow as practices. Contrary to Vainio, Michener does interpret humility to include doubt of one's convictions: the "redemptive dynamic of

[41] The three virtues are discussed in sec 4.2 (from where this summary is taken). Tolerance in sec 4.3 and in Vainio, "Virtues and Vices of Tolerance"; Aku Visala and Olli-Pekka Vainio, "Tolerance or Recognition: What Can We Expect?," *Open Theology* 2, no. 1 (2016): 553–65. I postpone a discussion of tolerance to a later chapter.

[42] Grube contends that exclusivism of beliefs and a 'cognitive hierarchy' is required, e.g. holding that the conviction that 'the earth is round' has more truth-value than the conviction that 'the earth is flat.' Grube, "A Humble Exclusivism?," 29–31.

[43] Vainio, sec 4.2. See also Ian M. Church, "Intellectual Humility and Religious Belief," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 46, no. 4 (December 2018): 228. He defines intellectual humility as "the virtue of reliably tracking what one could non-culpably take to be the positive epistemic status of one's own beliefs."

doubt."[44] Davis adds a more theological grounding for this virtue: God is God and we are not, and God's truth is always greater than our understanding.[45]

The third virtue is intellectual courage which means to persist in defending our standpoint with a view toward achieving epistemic goods, even if this implies a threat to our wellbeing. Borrowing from Foucault's analysis of the term *parrhesia*, Vainio argues that such courage also implies that the speaker is willing to speak the truth, even when it hurts: to give a complete and exact account of what she has in mind. The community and leadership are important to nurture this virtue. Although Vainio indicates that sometimes wisdom requires giving up one's position, he does not elaborate on the reverse direction of intellectual courage, namely the courage to change one's mind or position when this is the best thing to do, even in the face of a community or tradition that resists such change.

3 Theological Reflections on Hospitality

This chapter provides some theological reflections on hospitality, mainly based on the work of Andrew Shepherd but complemented with the work of others.[46] This chapter builds on work I have done for my previous master thesis.[47]

3.1 Theology proper

In theologies of hospitality, the doctrine of the Trinity is important. The close link between Trinity and hospitality is illustrated by the two names of the Rublev icon. This icon depicts the three persons of the Trinity as they visit Abraham and it has two different names: "the Old Testament Trinity" and "Abraham's hospitality."

For Arthur Sutherland, in his *Christian Theology of Hospitality* it is obvious that hospitality draws upon the mutual sharing of the persons of the Trinity with one another.[48]

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[44] Ronald T. Michener, "Navigating Theological and Ecclesiological Friction in the Church: Olli-Pekka Vainio's Insights on Virtuous Disagreement," *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 22, no. 6 (December 1, 2022).

[45] Davis, *Forbearance*, chap. 2.

[46] Andrew Shepherd develops his theology of hospitality in dialogue with the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. Here I do not focus on his interactions with these interlocutors, but rather on his constructive theology in which he incorporates, complements or counters their work on hospitality.

[47] In this section, I use summarised material from section 2 of my previous thesis ("Survey of Theologies of Hospitality"), with additions from section 3.2 ("Sin and Salvation in the Theologies of Boersma and Shepherd / Andrew Shepherd."

[48] Arthur Sutherland, *I Was a Stranger: A Christian Theology of Hospitality* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 77.

Hospitality is grounded in God's overflowing communion.[49] Andrew Shepherd elaborates these insights further. One God in three persons means that personhood is ontological and the communion of the three divine persons constitutes God's being. The concept of *perichoresis* indicates the interiority of the persons into one another. The divine persons do not enter into relation with each other, but they constitute one another in their relations. This provides a strong basis to keep unity and otherness together: true otherness without oppression, without denial of difference and with perfect openness to one another.[50]

The doctrine of the Trinity is not merely an inspiration to think about unity and otherness. Creation of human beings *Imago Dei* indicates that the relation is much closer. Shepherd argues that this image consists not in the substance of creation, but in our mode of being, namely relational and making room for the other in gift-giving and receiving.[51]

Amos Yong finds yet another way in which the doctrine of the Trinity leads to a "Trinitarian shape of hospitality." The hospitable God is "Giver, Given and Giving." The Father provides his abundant, excessive gifts ("Giver"), particularly in the Son, Jesus, who is te greatest gift ("Given"). He is journeying into the far country, performing the hospitality of the Father and in his role of guest, he empowers his hosts with the Holy Spirit to perform hospitable practices in multiple ways, and he continues to do so through the indwelling of this Spirit ("Giving").[52]

To reflect further on the relation between God and his creation, Shepherd uses insights from Zizioulas, and argues that *creatio ex nihilo* indicates God's freedom from necessity: creation is a free act. God is the complete Other who is not of necessity involved in creation, but out of free will creates something completely other and different. For Shepherd, these thoughts provide an ontology of freedom and otherness. This creation and the naming that is involved is not imposing a definition or categorisation, but

[49] Elizabeth Newman, *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers*, The Christian Practice of Everyday Life (Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos Press, 2007), 84.

[50] Andrew Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other: Levinas, Derrida, and a Theology of Hospitality*, Princeton Theological Monographs Series 207 (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 109–10; Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, 142.

[51] Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, 124.

[52] Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor*, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2008), 100–108, 127.

creating an identity and person. It is a joyful and loving naming that is expressing free gift.[53]

3.2 Christology

All hospitality is rooted in Christ. Christological ideas in theologies of hospitality necessarily lean on insights from the Gospels. Christ is the "poor, wayfaring stranger," always guest and always homeless.[54] He is the heavenly stranger who left his natural habitat and came to make his dwelling on earth, where he was refused a hospitable reception by most.[55] The idea of divine visitation as a test for humanity's hospitality was not uncommon in the ancient world.[56] And also in the Gospels, hospitality shown to the guest Jesus is often a sign of having embraced his message and his person.[57]

Jesus is not only the stranger from heaven in a general sense. In a very concrete manner, he often figures in the role of guest. The table fellowship of Jesus is particularly prominent in Luke.[58] The fact that Jesus' ministry comprised of so much eating and drinking was noteworthy, but the company he chose was even more surprising. The marginal Messiah often met and ate with marginal people: the poor, the sinners.[59] This was too indiscriminate to people's liking and Luke often describes a 'triangle' between Jesus, his table company and others, who mutter and murmur about this company.[60]

It is surprising that in these situations, Jesus often turns into the divine host, who shares the excess of God's abundance. He is not afraid of contagion with sin but changes the direction of contagion by making his holiness contagious.[61] The man without a home

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[53] Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, 105-107,118. Shepherd is here in dialogue with Foucault and argues that naming is not necessarily violent, as "power over" and as control. See also Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, 97.

[54] Sutherland, *I Was a Stranger*, 2; Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness amid Moral Diversity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010), 135.

[55] Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 17; Joshua W. Jipp, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017), 80.

[56] Vosloo, *Engelen als gasten?*, 70; Jipp, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality*, 128; Joshua W. Jipp, *Divine Visitations and Hospitality to Strangers in Luke-Acts: An Interpretation of the Malta Episode in Acts 28:1-10*, vol. 153, Supplements to Novum Testamentum (Leiden: Brill, 2013), chap. 3.

[57] Jipp, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality*, 6.

[58] Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality*, 86; Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke's Gospel*, Revised Edition (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2015).

[59] Vosloo, *Engelen als gasten?*, 78; Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness*, 128; Pohl, *Making Room*, 20; Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality*, 91.

[60] Jipp, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality*, 23; Byrne, *The Hospitality of God*, 91.

[61] Craig L. Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness. Jesus' Meals with Sinners*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 103.

is the host who invites into God's kingdom.[62] As host he provides wine, water, bread and even life itself. And in doing so, he transforms hostile strangers into guests and even family of God and thereby changes their identity status.[63]

Christ was not only a stranger from heaven; He continues to be this stranger who comes in the guise of 'the least of my brethren' and He may continue to be received by his followers in this way.[64] This provides a theological underpinning of the guest/host role-reversal that is so essential in hospitality: the guest received as Christ becomes the host to the host.[65]

3.3 Hamartiology

Sin in relation to hospitality can be conceived of in various ways. According to Shepherd, sin, understood in the light of hospitality, can be regarded as "the failure of humanity to live as gift-receivers/givers, our inability to participate freely in divine hospitality and thus our incapacity to enter into genuine 'personhood'."[66] Death is the consequence since we are cut off from real life. In this manner, sin is in the first place the context in which both God's and our hospitality take place. Sin is a great equalizer of people who are otherwise quite different. Both we and the other, the stranger are by nature radically on the same side, namely the opposite side of God.[67]

The refusal of hospitality, closing off toward the other, is sin. Apart from an outright refusal, there are several distortions of hospitality, which are denials of true hospitality. The most common example is an economised version of hospitality, where guest and host are reduced to customer and producer and where the idea of free gift and reciprocity is changed into contractual market exchanges.[68] Hospitality is about overcoming boundaries and about opening up boundaries to make space for the other. A house offers

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[62] Pohl, *Making Room*, 17; Jipp, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality*, 21,82; Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality*, 27,90; Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness*, 135.

[63] Joshua W. Jipp, "Hospitality in the New Testament" (Logos Mobile Education, Bellingham, WA, 2017); Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, 146; Yong, *Hospitality and the Other*, 102.

[64] Sutherland, *I Was a Stranger*, 21.

[65] Jipp, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality*, 84; Amy Oden, ed., *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 51. Oden shows how the motif of recognizing Christ in the stranger has played a role in writings of theologians from the first eight centuries of the church.

[66] Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, 125.

[67] Sutherland, *I Was a Stranger*, 37; Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 37.

[68] Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, 12; Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, 28; Pohl, *Making Room*, 4.

hospitality to those who live in it, but if it remains without further hospitality, it easily distorts into a prison.[69]

Finally, even within hospitable relations, the question of sin is present. While hospitality in its true sense is an expression of dignified and equal relations, there is a real risk for unequal or oppressive relations. Nouwen argues that the guest can become an object for the host to fulfil his hunger for connection and attachment and to relieve her loneliness.[70] Pohl describes the kind of hospitality that, in absence of humility, keeps people in needy situations, while upholding and reaffirming the generosity of the host.[71] Russell uses a postcolonial feminist approach to argue that hospitality often serves to dominate and therefore the binary category of otherness should be resisted.[72] Oppressive power relations also happen when freedom is compromised. In hospitality, it is essential that the guest is free to come as well as free to go.[73] Freedom is compromised when hospitality is used to force the guest into assimilation to the host or to force ideas on the guest instead of a free, fair and mutual dialogue.[74]

3.4 Soteriology

The role of soteriology in theologies of hospitality is prominent and diversified. First of all, hospitality is used as one of the main metaphors for the saving work of God.[75] Hospitality is the essence of God and the hospitable arms of the father of the lost son in the parable are also the arms of Christ on the cross, that welcome lost humanity into God's presence, the hospitable household of the Father.[76]

God's hospitality and ours are deeply connected. In all hospitality, there is a role-reversal of guest and host. In the section on Christology we saw this as Jesus regularly turns from guest into host. At the deepest level, God is host and we are guests with God, as his creation and even more in redemption. We dwell in Christ, in his body, and at the

[69] Vosloo, *Engelen als gasten?*, 45. Cf Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, Cultural memory in the present (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2000), 61, who states "a house has to have a door to be a house, to be ipse."

[70] Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Open uw hart: de weg naar gastvrijheid, onszelf en God* (Heeswijk-Dinther: Abdij van Berne, 2016), 93; Stoppels, *Gastvrijheid*, 273.

[71] Pohl, *Making Room*, 120.

[72] Letty M. Russell, *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference*, 1st ed (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 49.

[73] Vosloo, *Engelen als gasten?*, 123; Nouwen, *Open uw hart*, 65.

[74] Nouwen, *Open uw hart*, 65; Stoppels, *Gastvrijheid*, 273.

[75] Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006), 17, 112; Jipp, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality*, 2.

[76] Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 185; Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 170.

same time, we receive Christ when he knocks on our door. God provides his Spirit to dwell in us, but as our divine guest, the Spirit also transforms us.

And hence God's hospitality also leads to our hospitality to others. Our hospitality is both a reflection and an extension, a re-enactment of God's hospitality.[77] In this way, the reciprocal character of God's hospitality and ours could be called 'forward reciprocity', since we offer God's hospitality to us forward to others and thereby we turn from guest to host, and as we meet Christ in the guest, the tables are turned once more as we let ourselves be ministered unto by the guest.[78]

3.5 Ecclesiology

By experiencing God's hospitality, we are constituted as new humanity, albeit in the process of becoming what our identity has already become. In this new humanity God welcomes us, but we also welcome one another.[79] Using another metaphor, we are received into the hospitable family of God and this forms us into a hospitable self as we are intended. We dwell in Christ, which is inaugurated by baptism and he dwells in us through the Holy Spirit, who is the presence of the absent Christ in us, but who is also a disturbing Comforter, who does not leave us with the remnants of inhospitality.[80]

As the recipient of God's hospitality is formed into a hospitable self, she does not lose her identity. This hospitable self has true identity, freely granted and restored by God. This is an important issue, and even a precondition for true hospitality. As Nouwen states: an empty home is not a hospitable home and a dialogue between somebody and nobody is not possible.[81] Homeless hospitality is a distortion of true hospitality.[82] The church as the hospitable community is at home with the Father and is filled with a confident awareness of this identity as a basis to engage with itself and with others. The issues of identity and boundaries is further discussed in subsequent chapters.

One characteristic of this hospitable community is the experience of being a stranger. Christine Pohl summarizes the Biblical theology of hospitality as "strangers welcoming strangers." In the Old Testament this storyline is conveyed through many

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[77] Sutherland, *I Was a Stranger*, 27; Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 25; Jipp, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality*, 2; Yong, *Hospitality and the Other*, 131.

[78] Rijneveld, "Sin and Salvation in Theologies of Hospitality," sec. 4.4.

[79] Jipp, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality*, 35; Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 171; Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality*, 52.

[80] Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, 181.

[81] Nouwen, *Open uw hart*, 90.

[82] Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, 33.

stories about hospitality (with Abraham's reception of the three divine visitors as the archetypal story) and stories about the lack of it (with the story of the angels in Sodom as the archetypal story), but also by a strong legal motif of care for the stranger and the alien.[83] The experience of strangeness derives mainly from Israel's sojourning in Egypt and later the Exile, but the theme is continued in the New Testament. On the one hand, the wall of enmity is broken down, so that Paul can write to the Ephesians that being stranger and alien is something of the past, but on the other hand, the theme of being stranger is continued, for example by Peter who addresses his audience as "aliens and strangers." The biblical aspect of acknowledging one's own experience of strangeness is related to the need for mutuality and for role-reversal in hospitality.

The hospitable community's experience of being a stranger is also connected to a certain poverty. Several authors state that to be hospitable requires at least a certain inner poverty. We need to realise that we have empty hands, so that we can receive hospitality, not only from God but also from our guests.[84] Using insights from Victor Turner, Pohl argues that there is a strong connection between hospitality, marginality and liminality. Liminal persons live in an in-between state; they belong to neither side or only to the margins of society (hence the connection with the experience of being a stranger) and this is a condition that enhances the formation of relationships. And it is from these margins that hospitality often appears to flourish more than from the centre of society.[85]

Members of the hospitable community are called to receive and accept one another. The home of the new humanity that God prepares for us, happens to consist of other people, who together with us form this home.[86] Members of the church are diverse in almost every respect, but are to be one. The church is not a lifestyle enclave, but a company of strangers and hence the theme of unity in diversity is prominent in the New Testament.[87] Particularly the shared meals were intended to reaffirm unity rather than social divisions, as was the more common role of meals. Both to Rome and Corinth, Paul writes about receiving one another in the context of meals in order to form the churches into communities that embody the reality of divine friendship. The place where this unity

[83] Pohl, *Making Room*, 27, 24; Jipp, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality*, 128–42; Vosloo, *Engelen als gasten?*, 53–60; Stoppels, *Gastvrijheid*, 268.

[84] Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, 95; Jipp, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality*, 35.

[85] Pohl, *Making Room*, 117; Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, 95.

[86] Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality*, 58, 62.

[87] Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 212; Sutherland, *I Was a Stranger*, 27; Jipp, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality*, 53, 61.

is particularly visible, is the Lord's Supper, as anticipation of the eschatological wedding banquet and with hospitality themes abounding.

Therefore, the church cannot be a self-enclosed group that focuses mainly on the wellbeing of its members.[88] Those who accepted God's hospitality in turn invite others into the same divine household. The practice of hospitality combines the centrifugal movement of the church where it reaches out to others, and the centripetal movement, where both the members as well as others who are invited are welcomed to abide in Christ.[89] Hospitality is also important for the mission of the church. The book of Acts is a collection of stories about guests and hosts and partnerships could consist of offering hospitality or financial support to travelling missionaries, hosting a house church, or even making people available for the gospel, as Paul requests to Philemon.[90]

The manner in which hospitality takes place is important. Hospitality has the potential to retain dignity, equality and recognition. People receiving one another look each other in the eye. The guest is not an anonymous recipient of aid, but gets to be known by name. Hospitality is therefore "irreducibly particular" to the unique person who is received. The potential of hospitality to retain dignity is mostly realised through the aspect of mutuality and reciprocity. This builds on the realisation that we are all guests of God's hospitality and the realisation of being (or having been) strangers and aliens.[91] A second condition is the realisation that the guest is a gifted person and always has something to offer. This leads to a constant switching of guest and host roles in true hospitality and to the importance for every host to also be a good guest.[92] This switching of roles implies that a true host cannot retain his position as charitable giver and the guest cannot retain his position as only a humble beneficiary. For the host, switching roles implies giving up control and letting go and this preferences patience and inefficiency over predictability and efficiency.[93]

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[88] Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 211.

[89] Michael J. Gorman, *Abide and Go: Missional Theosis in the Gospel of John*, Didsbury Lectures 2016 (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018), 199.

[90] Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality*, 71, 87; Vosloo, *Engelen als gasten?*, 89; Pohl, *Making Room*, 32; Stoppels, *Gastvrijheid*, 270; Jipp, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality*, 70.

[91] Nouwen, *Open uw hart*, 62; Stoppels, *Gastvrijheid*, 272.

[92] Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, 92; Nouwen, *Open uw hart*, 75; Stoppels, *Gastvrijheid*, 240. Yong, *Hospitality and the Other*, 133; Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality*, 6.

[93] Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, 90.

3.6 Eschatology

Eschatology plays an important role in theologies of hospitality. Shepherd engages Derrida and Levinas in a critical dialogue, and while he adopts many of their ideas, one of his criticisms is their lack of eschatology and *telos* out of fear to fix the future and thereby to exclude the other. In Shepherd's view, the hospitable self is also an eschatological self that sojourns with others in an in-between situation. The face of Christ, and hence of the Father is seen as a brief glimpse and it summons to a journey along with others. But it is a journey that is aware of a final resting place: the entrance of the fulness of God's hospitality, the complete presence of God and the table fellowship of God and his people.[94]

Hospitality in the time before the *eschaton* is the joyful expectation of the eschatological banquet, but also the realisation that hospitality in this time is still finite and bounded. For this reason, Bretherton argues that both feasting and fasting are the sacramental enactments of hospitality.[95] The other to whom we want to be hospitable is sometimes in dire circumstances and being truly hospitable means we even need to find those who are invisible, either because they are at far margins, or lost in anonymous multitudes, or they hide themselves or are hidden by others.[96] But it is not only the other, where the 'not yet' of the eschatological tension occurs. Ecclesial hospitality is cruciform hospitality and the pain of one-sided love may not be the only suffering that comes with the practice of hospitality.[97]

The brokenness related to the 'not yet' of the in-between time does not only come from others. Boersma goes a step further: in this time before the *eschaton*, there is a paradox that a certain amount of (what he calls redemptive) violence and exclusion is required to make hospitality possible. Focusing on a pure and unconditional hospitality here and now to the exclusion of all forms of violence amounts to an over-realised eschatology. Hospitality in a violent world requires a certain amount of necessary and unavoidable violence that is instrumental to an eschatological pure hospitality.[98]

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[94] Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, 91, 198–99; Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness*, 142; Jipp, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality*, 20.

[95] Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness*, 143.

[96] Sutherland, *I Was a Stranger*, 60. Letty Russell discusses margins in the context of hospitality and draws attention to the constructed nature of margins: "margins are socially constructed sites that dominant groups consider to be the location of those who are of 'no account'." Russell, *Just Hospitality*, 2.

[97] Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, 235.

[98] Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 257, 35–37.

4 Dialogue between Hospitality and Disagreement

This chapter offers a dialogue between the two fields of interest: disagreement and hospitality, in order to develop an answer to the research question: What can insights from theologies of hospitality contribute to reflections on dealing with disagreement in the church in the context of polarisation? In arranging this dialogue, the fields of disagreement and hospitality, as presented in the previous two chapters are taken as interlocutors or dialogue partners. The caveat of using this approach is that the dialogue partners could appear as a unified voice, whereas the previous chapters presented a chorus of voices, spearheaded by the key authors of each field: Vainio and Shepherd. Sometimes, the multiplicity of these voices will be heard in this chapter, as a reminder that these 'dialogue partners' are not single persons.

The first section below briefly summarises the theological nature of approaching disagreement and how and why a theology of hospitality could offer a framework for theological grounding. This section also identifies a cluster of related core issues that emerges from this initial interaction, particularly questions around boundaries and identity. The second and third sections explore these issues in-depth as a further dialogue between theological reflections on hospitality and on disagreement.

4.1 Theological Framework

A first comparison between the two fields of interest, as represented by key authors Vainio and Shepherd, shows a difference in theological approach. Vainio (and others with him) use a virtue-ethical approach: how to be a good person when dealing with disagreement. The proposed virtue-ethical approach is theological in the sense that there is a theological rationale to be virtuous and for the specific virtues, but a deeper relation between the story of the virtuous person dealing with disagreement and the story of God with this world, dealing with humanity is less explicit. This observation is not meant to denounce a virtue-ethical approach, but is an argument to complement it with a more theological approach.[99] Shepherd and other voices on hospitality offer such grounding very explicitly, and applying the theological story they offer to disagreement is

[99] One example to develop a theological approach to dealing with disagreement is offered by Christopher Landau. He develops an ethical approach on the basis of a model by Richard Hays and an analysis of New Testament theology. This results in a combination of a Biblical Theological approach (focusing on the New Testament only) and an ethical approach. His major focus is to use the double command of love as guiding point. Compared with his work, my efforts here are much more limited, and focus more on a systematic theological approach, taken from theologies of hospitality. Christopher Landau, "A Theology of Disagreement" (PhD Thesis, Oxford, University of Oxford, 2017).

a first fruit of our dialogue. It brings the relation to God more directly in reflections on dealing with disagreement.

To arrive at this applied theological story, we can re-read chapter 3 and apply every section to dealing with disagreement. This is a rather straightforward exercise and I will only offer a very brief summary of this below. However, there is a risk that applying a theology of hospitality to another domain is simply going around stamping the label 'hospitality' on everything just by recognizing a surface level correspondence, or by setting up a chain of reasoning that inevitably and predictably ends with hospitality.[100] Therefore, the question needs to be addressed what justifies this application of one domain to another and why this seems to be a straightforward process.

Disagreement and hospitality share the characteristic that they are abstract terms that allow for reflections from every possible discipline (including all theological sub-disciplines), while they are always tied to a praxis in the life and existence of people. And this praxis is irreducibly particular: there is always the concrete other whom we meet, with whom we are in the position of host or guest, and with whom we disagree. And at this level, hospitality can be conceived as the broadest and most basic. This is not to be understood in the sense that hospitality is the positive concept and therefore it has the right to set the terms for the negative practice of disagreement. It is more nuanced: hospitality can also be negative and disagreement can be positive, and both give rise to a set of concerns and questions that need to be addressed below.

Rather, the reason that hospitality can be conceived as the broader term, and can therefore offer the theological matrix on which a virtue-ethical approach to disagreement can be developed, is that hospitality can be understood as dealing with the other in his or her being different, dealing with alterity in relation to one's identity. Hospitality is about the structure and nature of our dealing with the other and for this reason Jacques Derrida in a paper describing the work of Emmanuel Levinas can say: "For hospitality is not simply some region of ethics,(...) it is ethicity itself, the whole and the principle of ethics."[101] And Shepherd, referring to this quote, summarises both philosophers' standpoint as "ethics

[100] An example of this approach can be found in George Newlands and Allen Smith, *Hospitable God: The Transformative Dream* (Farnham, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010). In this book, almost every domain of life and many other concepts and ideas are linked to hospitality, from media to geopolitics to human right to religions and cultures to literature and arts to slavery and poverty.

[101] Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1999), 50.

is hospitality and hospitality is ethics."[102] In less philosophical terms: hospitality is about dealing with the other who is different, and this is exactly what happens in disagreement. And reflecting on such dealing with otherness within God, and between God and human persons deepens the reflections on dealings between humans in (in-)hospitable relationships and in (dis-)agreeing with each other.

As stated above, we can re-read chapter 3 and apply all issues found there to the domain of disagreement. In brief summary fashion, this results in the following account: Hospitality draws upon the overflowing communion of the persons of the Trinity in love and human beings are created *imago Dei*, which refers to their mode of being: relational. This relational mode of being implies that the otherness of the one we disagree with needs to be respected. There can never be an unlimited effort to reduce the other to sameness, even if the disagreement is about important matters. In the relationship to God, human beings are fundamentally on the same side, namely the other side of God, and after the Fall, this is the disagreeing side of God. All are strangers, guests, and peers and this avoids simple binaries between ourself and the other who disagrees with me. Salvation is God's hospitality and the cross, as the most inhospitable and disagreeable place, became the source of it, and God receives us as guests in his mercy and grace. At the Lord's Supper we enact this and being guests, we also become home to Christ and his Spirit and become co-hosts to each other and others, even as we disagree over certain issues. In doing so, our hospitality is an extension of God's and it becomes ours as it transforms us when we extend it. This transformation is the basis for development of virtues, even if such virtues grow in community and through the practice of hospitality in situations of disagreement. In dealing with disagreement, because of the blurring and reversal of guest and host roles, it is important to display good guest-behaviour as well as good host-behaviour. And in receiving the other, we may discover something of Christ.[103] Realising this possibility precludes all condescending forms of dealing with each other in disagreement, from a basis of benevolence, dependency, or condescension, and this in turn forms a true basis for the virtues of open-mindedness and humility. At the same time, this hospitality of engaging with the other in disagreement is offered from a particular location, an identity with convictions. As we respect the

[102]Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, 27,53. On p.27, Shepherd also agrees with Derrida that Levinas' work can be regarded as "a giant treatise on hospitality."

[103] In my previous thesis, I propose the term "forward reciprocity" to refer to this: God offers us his hospitality. We offer it back to him by offering it to the other, the stranger. And when we discover Christ in the stranger, it turns out that this hospitality was indeed reciprocal: from God to us, and back from us to God in Christ. See: Rijneveld, "Sin and Salvation in Theologies of Hospitality," 94–102.

alterity of the other, we also respect our own identity, and this is the basis for the virtue of (epistemic) courage. And in this interaction with the other, we realise that the guest never comes empty-handed: we are willing to receive, and the necessary guest/host role-reversal makes us open to search for the (epistemic) goods of the other. This leads to an attitude of goodwill toward the stance of the other, and even if we end up rejecting the other's convictions, we will still be able to recognize what we have received in the encounter with this other person we disagree with.

This brief account is only an initial attempt to link a theology of hospitality to dealing with disagreement in the local church. And while this account is intended to be nuanced, it has a sweet and smooth ring to it. So far, the focus is more on the togetherness, unity, recognition, mutuality and equality of the disagreeing parties, rather than on the fact that they really do disagree and that a choice may be required at the individual or the ecclesial level. Disagreement is not so smooth, but neither is hospitality.

The major issue that requires further reflection is present in both domains and has already been referred to in the previous chapters. It becomes even more pronounced in the dialogue between them. This is the question of boundaries: the virtue of intellectual courage implies that notwithstanding the open-mindedness and the intellectual humility, there are occasions where disagreement will not be resolved and where convictions need to be held and defended unflinchingly in order to maintain identity. Also in hospitality, the question of boundaries is urgent: does Derrida's claim of "pure hospitality" require that we need to "say yes to who or what turns up", even to the devil?[104] Or is there a way to keep evil out in order to protect the hospitable space? And if we admit the necessity of boundaries, how can we distinguish between sinful exclusion that destroys the essence of our and God's hospitality on the one hand, and legitimate boundary maintenance on the other hand?

These questions around boundaries relate to questions about identity: can I maintain boundaries around my identity, or does a hospitable mode of being require that the boundaries to the self have a "fissure through which the other can come in?"[105] Another way of asking the same question is to ask if the virtues for dealing with disagreement can also turn into vices if there is too much of them, and is boundary setting a way of using practical wisdom to keep the virtues in their balanced places

[104] Derrida and Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, 77; Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 35,255.

[105] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 51.

between extremes that turn them into vices? The twin issues of boundaries and identity are close to the core of how to deal with disagreement, and exploring insights from theologies of hospitality is the focus of the remaining sections.

4.2 Boundaries

The previous section has set the stage for a more profound enquiry into the issue of boundaries, in which we listen to voices from the literature on hospitality and on disagreement. First, the concept of boundaries requires further clarification in the contexts of hospitality and disagreement. Secondly, because it is easy to simply assert the need for boundaries, the problematic nature of boundaries is addressed. Boundaries can be set for various reasons and these are explored in the third paragraph. The final two paragraphs explore the relationship between boundaries and certainty and the question what is to be done with boundaries.

4.2.1 What Boundaries Are

First of all, the existence of boundaries simply needs to be asserted. Boundaries are ubiquitous: as physical facts, such as fences between plots of land, and walls as the boundary of a house; at a conceptual level, such as a circle that is defined by a line; and as socially constructed realities, such as laws that forbid a certain action, or member registrations that define who belong to a group.[106] This simple assertion of the existence of boundaries seems redundant because of its obviousness, but in the context of the local church, it is not.

Paul Hiebert used the mathematical set-theoretical concepts ‘bounded set’ and ‘centred set’ to address the question who can be considered a Christian.[107] Since then, many churches claim to work with the concept of a centred set, meaning that the church is not defined by a boundary (or stronger yet: does not have boundaries), but by its centre, Christ. In a recent series of articles that explored boundary management of churches in missionary contexts in the Netherlands, it turned out that many of these churches claim to work with the idea of the church as a centred set. But several articles show that in

[106] In the past years as consultant, I worked and published on using systems approaches in the (Catholic) church. In systems analysis, boundary setting is the primary activity. It defines the system. System boundaries are always artificial and negotiated and they have ethical and political consequences. See Wouter Rijneveld, “Systems Approaches in the Catholic Church. Guidebook for Systems Change Practitioners and Funders” (Avance Impact, September 2022), 24, https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.33193.88164.

[107] Paul G. Hiebert, “The Category ‘Christian’ in the Mission Task,” *International Review of Mission* 72, no. 287 (1983): 421–27.

practice there are boundaries, defined by common practices, shared narratives and implicit expectations. The editors conclude that there are no pure examples of churches as centred set. The challenge, they conclude, is not to opt for or against having boundaries, but to deal with the inherent tension between openness and identity-related boundary management and to be honest in communication about both aspects.[108]

Caroline Westerhoff, who wrote a monograph on the boundaries of hospitality claims that not acknowledging one's boundaries leads to "destructive ambiguity" and "when I have no boundaries for myself, I will tend to invade yours."[109] Boundaries simply exist and they are essential because they establish identity.[110] The subject of identity is picked up in the next section. First we need to become more concrete in understanding what the concept of boundaries means in the concrete praxis of hospitality and of disagreement.

Boundaries in hospitality can mean two things. The first is that we do not let someone in as guest. Our door is closed. Or, in the broader meaning of hospitality, we choose not to open ourselves to the other. The second meaning refers to boundaries within hospitality. We do receive someone as guest, but set limits to what she can do. Such limits are mostly implicit. Hospitality in antiquity was strongly rule-based.[111] The threshold of a house can be seen as places to decelerate and hesitate as an expression of civility and of extending an invitation to the host to invite and put one at ease.[112] The question can be raised if there are also boundaries to God's hospitality. Is God's hospitality an unlimited, unconditional, absolute, pure hospitality, or does even God need to keep evil out? This is a question that theologians of hospitality disagree about.[113]

Boundaries in dealing with disagreement are analogous to those in hospitality. A boundary can mean that one refuses to engage the other in disagreement. Boundaries

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[108] Sake Stoppels and Bernhard Reitsma, eds., "Tussen Grensbewaking En Grensvervaging," *Inspirare* 2022, no. 4 (December 2022).

[109] Caroline A. Westerhoff, *Good Fences: The Boundaries of Hospitality* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse, 2004), 56.

[110] Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, 185; Westerhoff, *Good Fences*, 13; Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 67; Jipp, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality*, 40.

[111] Andrew E. Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in Its Mediterranean Setting*, New Testament Monographs 8 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2005), pt. I. Meditteranian hospitality in antiquity.

[112] Jacques De Visscher, *Figuren van de Gastvrijheid. Naar Een Filosofie van de Concrete Herbergzaamheid*. (Utrecht: Klement, 2017), 18,40.

[113] In my previous thesis, I analysed the theologies of Andrew Shepherd and Hans Boersma. Boersma argues that pure hospitality exists only in the *eschaton* and God's justice requires that evil be kept out. Shepherd focuses stronger on the transformative aspect of God's hospitality as a way to maintain pure hospitality while keeping evil out. See Rijneveld, "Sin and Salvation in Theologies of Hospitality," sec. 4.2.

can also function within the process of dealing with disagreement, for example by setting a halt to changing one's convictions or by setting limits to what one considers acceptable. The thoughts of Alisdair MacIntyre are helpful here: he argues that there are four attitudes in reacting to a specific disagreement: 1) we may welcome the utterances of the other in order to reinforce or reformulate our own convictions; 2) we may welcome them in order to change our point of view; 3) we may not think the other's perspective very helpful but find it worthy to reply and prove its flaws; 4) or we may choose not to engage at all and exclude the other from the conversation.[114] I propose to change the order of the first two options in order to arrive at a scale of decreasing openness. I also propose to broaden the third option to also include peaceful coexistence or conviviality: a choice is made, but the other position is condoned without a too strong rejection. With these proposed adaptations, the four possible reactions to disagreement are: 1) engage in disagreement with preparedness to change conviction; 2) engage in disagreement to understand the other and strengthen our conviction; 3) engage in disagreement either to refute the other or to take a practical decision and let the other position co-exist; 4) refuse to engage in disagreement.

Boundary management in dealing with disagreement can be considered as having (explicit or implicit) rules about adopting these four attitudes toward a concrete disagreement. The fourth attitude puts the boundary before the disagreement ('rules to engage'), whereas the other three attitudes put boundaries within the disagreement ('rules of engagement'). Such rules on which attitude to take in which type of disagreement can be formulated around certain convictions. For example, those convictions or practices we need to be certain about, even if we can engage in a disagreement. And those disagreements that are so far removed from what is relevant that we can dismiss the idea without taking the effort to engage. In a subsequent section I explore the relation between boundaries and certainty further. The fourth option also needs further exploration: when is it that one should agree not to engage in a disagreement at all? Which disagreements are unacceptable to entertain? This is a debate that is mostly conducted in the discourse about tolerance. In the excursus below, a brief look into this debate is offered.

Boundaries in disagreement also relate to the virtues that Vainio proposes: open-mindedness, intellectual humility and intellectual courage. Boundaries can be set and

[114] Alasdair MacIntyre, "Toleration and the Goods of Conflict," in *Ethics and Politics: Volume 2: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 206.

used within each virtue in order to protect it from turning into a vice. For example, a boundary to prevent excessive open-mindedness protects it from turning into scepticism, and Vainio's definition of intellectual humility already includes a boundary to distinguish it from self-deprecation.[115] The concept of boundaries can also be applied to balancing the relationship between the virtues, particularly between open-mindedness and intellectual humility on the one hand and intellectual courage on the other hand. The additional key virtue of *phronesis*, practical wisdom or prudence, is required to deal wisely with this balance, or, in other words, to set boundaries to each of the other virtues that are appropriate to the sensitivities of the given disagreement and to the specific situation.[116]

Excursus on Tolerance

The concept of tolerance is often referred to in literature about hospitality as well as in literature about disagreement. The original concept, developed by Locke and Hume referred to refraining from the power to interfere while disagreeing with someone. Some newer interpretations of tolerance (Ricoeur, following Habermas) refer to acceptance or even appreciation of what is different, and this changes the disagreement aspect into its opposite: approval. The concept of tolerance is critiqued because it is used as indifference or self-felicitation (Vainio, Bretherton). Others critique it because its newer interpretation leads to unjustified dissolution of disagreement and suppression of epistemic virtues (Furedi, Langerak, Bickel), or because it is an empty concept (Žižek Bretherton). Still others propose distinctions between persons (appreciation, respect) and convictions and practices (tolerance with limits) (Volf). Vainio proposes another adaptation of the concept: its original meaning plus maintaining critical debate and intellectual virtues.[117]

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[115] Vainio, *Disagreeing Virtuously*, sec. 4.2.

[116] Bickel, "Intellectual Virtues and Reasonable Disagreement," chap. 4; Vainio, *Disagreeing Virtuously*, sec. 4.1.

[117] Vainio, *Disagreeing Virtuously*, sec. 4.3; Vainio, "Virtues and Vices of Tolerance"; Visala and Vainio, "Tolerance or Recognition"; Langerak, *Civil Disagreement : Personal Integrity in a Pluralistic Society*, 78; Paul Ricoeur, "The Erosion of Tolerance and the Resistance of the Intolerable," *Diogenes* 44, no. 176 (1996): 189–201; Paul Ricoeur, "Obstacles and Limits to Tolerance," *Diogenes* 44, no. 176 (1996): 161–62; Paul Ricoeur, "To Think Tolerance," *Diogenes* 44, no. 176 (1996): 25–26; Jaco Dreyer, "Difficult Tolerance: A Ricoeurian Account and Some Practical Theological Reflections," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 4, no. 2 (December 31, 2018): 33–54; Bickel, "Intellectual Virtues and Reasonable Disagreement," 126; Frank Furedi, *On Tolerance: A Defence of Moral Independence* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2011); Luke Bretherton, "Tolerance, Education and Hospitality: A Theological Proposal," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 17, no. 1 (April 2004): 80–103; Miroslav Volf, *Flourishing : Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), chap. 3; Slavoj Žižek, "Tolerance as an Ideological Category," *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 4 (April 2008): 660–82.

4.2.2 The Problem of Boundaries

The previous section elaborated what boundaries consist of in hospitality and in disagreement. The existence of boundaries was asserted as an unavoidable reality. The next section will discuss the reasons for having boundaries. But before we further unpack those ideas, we need to reflect on the problematic side of boundaries, instead of simply accepting them as a neutral or even positive good.

Boundaries are necessary, and, as I argue, also good. But not every boundary is good, and not every manner of boundary management is good. There is a problematic reality of exclusion. Miroslav Volf puts exclusion in relation to dealing with boundaries. Boundaries between persons (or groups) exist to enable interdependent relationships that include aspects of 'binding' and of 'separation'. Exclusion can either erase the binding by making oneself independent, and this results in seeing the other as an enemy or as a nobody. Or exclusion can erase the separation, thereby removing the otherness of the other and assimilating or subjugating him. Based on these distinctions, Volf distinguishes four forms of exclusion: by elimination, by abandonment, by assimilation, or by subjugation.[118] It is not difficult to find examples of each of these forms at global level, between ethnic groups, in contemporary society, and possibly also in the local church, for example by removing people from positions or roles, by ignoring them, by forcing everyone into uniformity, or by all sorts of powerplay or even power abuse. Also in hospitality practices, there is a risk that all or some of these forms of exclusion are promulgated. Letty Russell, in her plea for 'just hospitality' complains that hospitality is often done from a position of superiority and dominance, leading to subjugation and exclusion, and many other authors join in the chorus to underline this risk.[119]

It is therefore not surprising that much of the discourse about the concept of boundaries is actually a plea against them. Many authors writing about hospitality do so with practical applications arguing for more, deeper, broader and more heartfelt practicing of hospitality.[120] Their discussion of boundaries is often an argument to enlarge, open, overcome, or even erase or deny them. Even if these authors discuss the reality of boundaries and argue in favour of having boundaries, the punchline of their

[118] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 67,72-75.

[119] Russell, *Just Hospitality*, 49,80,116; Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, 85; Nouwen, *Open uw hart*, 89; Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, 55; Jacques Derrida, "Hostipitality," trans. Barry Stocker, *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 5, no. 3 (December 1, 2000): 3–18; Pohl, *Making Room*, 120.

[120] Examples of theological authors include Boersma, Bretherton, Jipp, Kaeminck, Nouwen, Pohl, Newman, Russell, Shepherd, Sutherland, Vosloo, and Yong. Apart from this, there is a whole body of more practical or devotional literature about practices of hospitality.

argument is still in favour of less boundaries or more porous boundaries in a world of inhospitality and exclusion. This is notably the case with Andrew Shepherd.

The argument against boundaries often goes (implicitly or explicitly) back to the works of the French philosophers Levinas and Derrida, the interlocutors of Andrew Shepherd. Levinas speaks about the "infinite responsibility" towards to Other that precedes essence, consciousness or action.[121] Derrida likewise speaks about "infinite duty", "absolute duty", and "pure hospitality" so that "when I open my door I must be ready to take the greatest of risks."[122] In the next section, when I discuss the reasons for having boundaries, I will relate to the criticism raised by Shepherd (and Boersma) on these positions, but it is important to keep hearing these voices that developed as criticism to totalising forms of philosophy that led to exclusion of the other in the form of elimination (as in Nazism) or in other forms. Perhaps, Michener summarises it well when he discusses the absoluteness of Levinas' position and suggests that instead of rejecting his absolute position, it is better to read Levinas as a "prophet who summons us away from the selfish complacency that generally typifies our everyday lives," because in a world of calculated exchange, ethics must use the "rhetoric of hyperbole."[123] Miroslav Volf discusses a third French philosopher, Michel Foucault, who argues in favour of a radical inclusion that erases all divisions and boundaries after having shown that the Western story of modernity consists of a series of exclusions and repressions.[124]

In the introductory chapter, the context of polarisation was sketched, and the purpose of this research arose from a desire for the church to play a constructive role in relation to polarisation, by first of all become a little better in dealing with disagreement within its own ranks. This stated purpose in this context seems not to be served by a defence of boundaries, but rather by a proposal to overcome, erase or pierce them, following the argument of the philosophers referred to above. This problematic aspect of boundaries needs to be kept in mind when further exploring them. So far, we have asserted the existence of boundaries and what this entails in hospitality and in disagreement, and we have seen the deeply problematic aspects that boundary setting can exhibit. It is now time to take a deeper look at why there still is a need for boundaries, before we can move to the question what is to be done with boundaries.

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[121] Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, 24.

[122] Shepherd, 65–68.

[123] Ronald T. Michener, "Face-to-Face with Levinas: (Ev)Angelical Hospitality and (De)Constructive Ethics?," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 43, no. 2 (April 2019): 119–20.

[124] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 62–63.

4.2.3 Reasons for Boundaries

If boundaries have a problematic aspect to them, why have boundaries? They simply exist, but they also exist in conscious choices, also as local churches deal with disagreement in their midst. We have also seen that theologians of hospitality see the problematic nature of boundaries and yet argue for their need. But for what purpose? I will discuss two major answers to this question.

The first reason why it is necessary and good to have boundaries is finitude. We cannot be hospitable to all, we cannot engage in every disagreement, and we cannot engage with every conviction and proposed praxis at the same time, so we need to make choices and set boundaries. In this purpose, setting boundaries is something we could avoid if we had no limits. But denying our finitude is arrogance.[125] This is also the line of argument of Andrew Shepherd, and he provides a set of arguments how to make choices when faced with finitude. Based on ideas of Karl Barth, he develops a fourfold mutuality as a heuristic rule for deciding what hospitality to engage in: mutual seeing, mutual hearing, mutual aid, and mutual gladness of heart. This heuristic rule avoids a distant, abstract hospitality of benevolent giving to the nameless, faceless other. To counterbalance the effect that this might lead to only engage with those close to us, he also argues for a "pilgrimage to the periphery" in order to facilitate the encounter with the other and avoid the safe hospitality of the secured ghetto.[126]

How do these suggestions translate into the domain of dealing with disagreement? In dealing with disagreement in the local church, finitude also needs to be acknowledged as a legitimate reason for having boundaries, i.e. for making conscious choices about which of the four different attitudes toward disagreement to use. There may not be resources (of time, human effort, spiritual energy) to engage in every possible disagreement. If quantitative choices have to be made what disagreements to engage with, the fourfold mutuality could be of some help. This application of mutuality does not lead to a selection on the basis of proximity, but rather to a focus on real human interaction, hearing and seeing each other, being face to face, and really listening to each

[125] Pohl, *Making Room*, 129, 134; Christine D. Pohl, "Responding to Strangers: Insights from the Christian Tradition," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 19, no. 1 (April 2006): 94. Even Derrida and Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, 77, agree that "unconditional hospitality needs conditional laws that pervert it." Letty Russell acknowledges finitude, but prefers to focus on the perspective that we participate in God's unbounded hospitality, with his resources, Russell, *Just Hospitality*, 117. See also Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality*, Currents of Encounter, v. 39 (Amsterdam ; New York: Rodopi, 2011), 280. She emphasises that finitude is a pre-ethical category.

[126] Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, 227,231.

other's arguments and expecting to receive something good out of it ('mutual aid', more on this below, in the section on dealing with boundaries). The mutual gladness of heart may be the most difficult to realise and can only be grounded in the fundamental reality that the local church is made one in the body of Christ and that we are all guests and reconciled strangers with God.

The suggestion of the pilgrimage to the periphery is a good reminder that even in the local church, there could be a periphery. Deciding what disagreements to engage with in a situation of finitude should not be based on closeness to the centre of power and influence. Engaging those on the periphery (of whatever nature) could be an essential choice for a local church that wants to be true to its nature.

Finitude can also be expressed in a qualitative sense: the impossibility to put everything at stake. This brings us back to the suggestion that there can be core convictions and practices that are so undisputed that the boundary to engage with a disagreement about these core convictions could either be placed before the disagreement itself (i.e. a decision not to engage), or the boundary could be to take the third attitude, to engage in order to refute.

A second major reason for having boundaries is actually a double function: to define and protect. This reason consists in maintaining existence or identity, and in maintaining a safe and just space. When Volf discusses the ideas of Foucault (as briefly quoted above), he states: "Without boundaries we will be able to know only what we are fighting against but not what we are fighting for."[127] Likewise, Shepherd in his appreciative engagement with Levinas, argues that his boundary-less responsibility of the host and the infinite claim of the Other lead to a denial of identity.[128] In his discussion with Derrida, Shepherd makes a similar claim: Derrida's thought leads to an identity that is always changing, a divided self. In the end, this even removes the possibility of welcoming, as Derrida himself also agreed: to welcome can be to claim a home for self and this is already a form of violence toward the other. Because of this, Shepherd argues, Derrida has an "ontology of violence". The focus on the unconditionality of hospitality (i.e. without boundaries) leads to a destruction of self-identity, and thereby of otherness as well.[129]

The identity-keeping function of boundaries in theologies of hospitality is also relevant for dealing with disagreement in the local church. Westerhoff discusses these

[127] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 63.
[128] Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, 40–44.
[129] Shepherd, 72–91.

boundaries at the point of entry: if inclusion is without any qualification, without obligation and accountability, "then we finally have not joined much of anything at all." There is a need for "beliefs, values, commitments, loyalties, stories that differentiate us from those outside our boundaries."[130] Boundaries are required to keep identity, and this informs the conscious decision-making about what disagreements to engage in, and with which degree of openness. By stating this, we have not yet provided arguments to decide where exactly these boundaries should be, and such arguments can only be discussed in the context of concrete beliefs and practices that are disagreed with.

This second reason for having boundaries is not only to define, but also to protect that which is defined. In terms of hospitality, boundaries are required to maintain a safe and just hospitable space, or to keep evil out. Particularly, in cases of abuse or other forms of oppression, there can be a need to concretely refuse hospitality, even entrance, of one person in order to protect the other. Protecting a safe space also includes the aspect of justice.[131] It is evident that in hospitality, boundaries are required to protect a safe space, evil needs to be kept out, and guest and parasite need to be distinguished.[132] This is even true of God's hospitality: in the eschatological new heaven and earth there will not be any evil, otherwise it would not be a Messianic future. Theologians of hospitality do not agree about the way in which God will realise this, through transformation of evil into good or through the exclusion of unrepentant evil-doers. The argument that protecting the boundaries of the hospitable space in the church is an act of hospitality is taken far by Elizabeth Newman. She argues that even excommunication is an ecclesial form of hospitality, namely telling the notorious sinner what he or she must do to come back into the communion of the church.[133]

In dealing with disagreement in the local church, assuming this is between members in good standing with the church and not the 'notorious sinners' referred to

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[130] Westerhoff, *Good Fences*, 29–30.

[131] Because of lack of space, I do not elaborate further on the relation of justice to boundaries in hospitality. Two authors discussing this relation in-depth are Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, chap. V; Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, chap. 10. Both argue (in different ways) that justice requires boundaries. A contrary argument is made by Letty Russell, namely that justice requires the erasure of boundaries, Russell, *Just Hospitality*, chap. 5.

[132] Vosloo, *Engelen als gasten?*, 141. Hans Boersma, "Liturgical Hospitality: Theological Reflections on Sharing in Grace," *Journal for Christian Theological Research* 8, no. 2003 (2003): 76. Thompson calls attention to the boundaried nature of hospitality in the New Testament (and in early Patristic writings): Steven Thompson, "The Boundaries of Christian Hospitality in a Postmodern Setting," in *Exploring the Frontiers of Faith : Festschrift in Honour of Dr. Jan Paulsen*, ed. Borge Schantz and Reinder Bruinsma (Lueneburg: Advent-Verlag, 2009), 332–35.

[133] Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, 166.

above, the protecting side of this second reason for having boundaries should be less framed as the need to keep evil out, but rather as the direct flipside of protecting identity. There could be a need to keep out those convictions and practices that clearly violate that which constitutes identity of the church. However, there is a fine line between this need for a defined common identity, and the unholy desire to maintain the false safety of uniformity that leads to quenching any potential disagreement through domination and exclusion. Particularly in a cultural context where risk and uncertainty avoidance is high, the pressure could be toward too much like-mindedness and a too quick and easy call to cancel out that which deviates from the mainstream.

When discussing the protective function of boundaries, we need to address the notion of harm. This notion is introduced by Paul Ricoeur in relation to the concept of tolerance.[134] Harm is wrong done to the existence of the other and doing no harm is a minimal ethic that is to be used as a criterion for what is to be regarded as intolerable, i.e. for placing a boundary. But how is this harm to be recognised? It is inductively recognised by the "scream of indignation", when "intolerable wrongs in the eyes of enlightened consciousness" would denounce tolerance as passivity, and "in the name of carefully weighed convictions."[135] This sounds dangerously easy: if the majority conviction denounces something as intolerable, it can be placed outside bounds, i.e. not worthy to be engaged. However, the examples that Ricoeur provides are deportation to concentration camps, or the activities of a paedophile, and he also insists on using practical wisdom to manoeuvre between two risks: the risk of letting wrong be done to the fragile in the name of liberty, and the wrong to return to intolerance under the cover of moral order.[136]

Vainio discusses this notion of harm, and links it the fourth option of MacIntyre discussed above (i.e. deciding to exclude a disagreement from engaging it). This notion can easily lead to an extreme focus on placing boundaries, particularly when it is based on the "enlightened consciousness" of the majority.[137] Furedi critically argues against the expansion of the meaning of harm from physical harm to subjective, emotional harm

[134] Actually, John Stuart Mill already introduced the idea of harm as a boundary: one should be free to act in accordance to one's inclinations as long as one does not harm another person. Furedi, *On Tolerance*, 100.

[135] Ricoeur, "The Erosion of Tolerance and the Resistance of the Intolerable," 197–200; Ricoeur, "Obstacles and Limits to Tolerance," 162.

[136] Ricoeur, "The Erosion of Tolerance and the Resistance of the Intolerable," 200.

[137] Vainio, "Virtues and Vices of Tolerance," 280.

because this leads to therapeutic censorship and a "cult of intolerance".[138] A similar argument could be developed if a local church would label almost any disagreement as harmful for its core convictions and practices and use that label to decide not to engage in the disagreement with a more open attitude. The notion of harm is hardly relevant in the local church to decide what disagreements to engage in, but it is very relevant as a notion about the manner in which to engage in disagreements, particularly when the subject of disagreement has direct bearings on the lives of those involved.

4.2.4 Boundaries and Certainty

In the previous sections, boundaries in dealing with disagreement were operationalised as making decision about whether or not to engage in a certain disagreement, and if so, with what degree of openness. When discussing the reasons for boundaries, the focus was on defining and protecting identity. This assumed that there is some core of convictions and practices that constitute identity more than other convictions and practices. Formulated differently, the previous sections were about boundaries to protect incursions on certainty. However, boundaries can also be viewed from the opposite perspective, namely boundaries as limits to certainty. This perspective focuses on the function of boundaries in the opposite direction than that of the previous sections: not to protect the certainty of core convictions and practices, but setting limits to the expansiveness of those; setting limits to certainty.

Boundaries can be set to the type of certainty and to the contents of what one is certain of. To start with the latter, the boundary between core convictions and practices (Vainio calls this "the centre of our noetic structure"), and what one is less certain of, is difficult to draw and there may not be any concrete insights from theologies of hospitality that shed additional light on this.[139] In the context of a local church, the boundary between what is certain and what is done or believed with less certainty may not be defined and it may vary for different members of the church. For example, in a local church, the Nicene creed may belong to what the church is certain about, and the concrete liturgical practice of singing songs from a specific tradition may be done with conviction of a different, less certain kind. The relevance of the boundary between what is more and what is less certain derives from the previous section where we discussed the attitudes toward disagreement: the attitude toward core convictions will be less open

[138] Furedi, *On Tolerance*, 106–15. See also Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting up a Generation for Failure* (New York, NY] [London: Penguin Random House, 2018). who call this trend "safetyism".

[139] Vainio, "On Believing and Acting Fallibly," 106.

than that toward convictions that are further from this core. The question can be raised though, how important it is to spend much time reflecting on where exactly this border around core convictions is. Can this boundary be drawn once and for all? In the faith journeys of individual believers, there will often be convictions or practices that move either in or out of the set of core convictions, and the same may be true for a local church. It seems best to hold the idea of a set of core convictions and practices about which one is more certain and less open to change, as a heuristic instrument rather than a fixed reality.[140]

The second type of boundary setting discussed here is about type of certainty. In section 2.2 we discussed Vainio's distinction of types of certainty: we can have psychological and moral, but not epistemic certainty in matters of faith. We can believe fallibly with firmness and certainty, while continuing to search for truth.[141] Katherine Dormandy unpacks this idea further. She compares dogmatic belief and epistemic humility in religious beliefs, which is the same distinction as that between epistemic and other types of certainty, and discusses the advantages and disadvantages from the assumption that the religious beliefs are indeed true. Dogmatic belief can use four lines of defence to guard the boundary of what is considered as epistemic certainty: "the disposition to hold beliefs in defiance of counterevidence that one cannot explain away, the disposition to explain counterevidence away, the disposition to overlook counterevidence-generating features in one's environment, and the disposition to inhabit environments with minimal features of this sort."[142]

These lines of defence do indeed guard core beliefs, but the price paid is that cognitive limitations are less recognised, cognitive dissonance is avoided, and critical self-assessment is reduced, and this can lead to the tendency to form false-positive beliefs, i.e. to extend the boundary around what is believed with certainty to include ever more content. Hence, neglecting the type of boundary around certainty (i.e. not epistemic certainty) can lead to wrong expansiveness of this boundary. Being certain but wrong about derivative beliefs can be a high price, also because if the falsity of these

[140] It is possible to interrogate or even deny the distinction between core convictions and other convictions, even if it is held as a heuristic distinction. For example, Judith Gruber calls the kernel / husk distinction, where there is a set or kernel of core convictions 'untenable'. Judith Gruber, *Intercultural Theology: Exploring World Christianity after the Cultural Turn*, Research in Contemporary Religion, v. 25 (Göttingen [Germany] ; Bristol, CT: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), 11. This difference could be explained by a critical realist philosophical stance (Vainio) versus a poststructuralist one (Gruber).

[141] Vainio, *Faith in Certain Terms*, 79–82.

[142] Katherine Dormandy, "Does Epistemic Humility Threaten Religious Beliefs?," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 46, no. 4 (December 2018): 4.

auxiliary beliefs becomes clear, there is an increased risk of forfeiting the true core beliefs. Likewise, holding core convictions with epistemic humility increases the epistemic good of understanding: allowing further complexity instead of simplifying categories can strengthen and deepen core convictions.[143]

So far, we have considered boundaries as a layered concept that can be operationalised in different (even opposite) ways, and we have seen what functions boundaries have, even if they also have inherently problematic aspects to them. In the final section that follows, we will see what can happen to boundaries, or how one can deal with boundaries in the light of theologies of hospitality.

4.2.5 Dealing with Boundaries

We have considered the existence of boundaries, what it means in hospitality and in dealing with disagreement, their inherently problematic aspects, and yet also the reasons why boundaries are not only necessary but also good. The question in this final section about boundaries is what can happen to boundaries if we allow the light of theologies of hospitality to shine on how we deal with disagreement. What is to be done with boundaries to our hospitality to the other who is different, and with boundaries to our openness to convictions and practices of the other? In this section we consider several possibilities and particularly what happens to boundaries when we take the guest/host role-reversal seriously.

From an eschatological point of view, the question can be raised if the existence of boundaries itself is finite. Should we hope for the ultimate erasure of any and all boundaries? One could hope for a positive response: life without borders, and no exclusion whatsoever. Boundaries for reasons of finitude may indeed no longer exist, and any sinful or painful aspect of boundaries will no longer exist, but this is not the same as the total erasure of all boundaries. Boundaries that define identity will still exist, but without violence. The question that concerns us here is what can or should happen to boundaries at this side of the *eschaton* if grace abounds, if the body of Christ functions, if the transformative work of the Spirit is operative, if insights from theologies of hospitality are put into action, both at individual and ecclesial level? I will describe six types of dealing with boundaries. Some of these types complement each other and can

[143] Katherine Dormandy, "The Epistemic Benefits of Religious Disagreement," *Religious Studies* 56, no. 3 (September 2020): 6–7; Dormandy, "Does Epistemic Humility Threaten Religious Beliefs?," 8–12.

be invoked at the same time, whereas others contradict each other and are only applicable some of the time.

The first type of dealing with boundaries is that they fulfil their most important function, namely to mark identity, difference and otherness. If boundaries function to establish identity, they also function to indicate alterity. If there is inside, there is also outside, and this creates the basis for invitation.[144] The very existence of boundaries opens up the possibility of welcome, or to engage with the other who is different, even if this is engaging in a disagreement. This marking of difference is a form of respect to the alterity of the other by not reducing her or him to sameness. In dealing with disagreement within the local church, there is already inclusion in an important way: both sides are part of the church. But even there, if the boundary between the two sides of the disagreement is not marked, the alternative is a too glib emphasis on similarity and sameness. This can be totalitarian and appropriating, especially if this emphasis on sameness is stressed by those in positions of power. At least for one side of the disagreement, the difference can be very real and this deserves attention.

This marking of difference can be done on the basis of the realisation that difference (or even dissent) is always and necessarily part of the church, as Gruber and others argue, or even as a way to celebrate "riotous difference" as a gift.[145] This can be a wise and necessary approach in some conflictual situations, but it resolves the disagreement by choosing not to address it and by redefining it as something nice rather than something that needs to be engaged with. This approach can be criticised as a way of reducing to sameness, since it assumes (or forces) all sides to have the same opinion, namely that difference or dissent is something to be celebrated. However, this does not do justice to the reality that disagreements often are perceived as problematic and that they sometimes require a choice to be made when positions are mutually exclusive.

The second type of dealing with boundaries is that boundaries can open. The focus can shift from walls to doors. The other can actually be let in, welcomed, received in her otherness. In hospitality, the other can be the concrete other person, and in dealing with disagreement it can also be the other conviction or practice. Westerhoff explores boundaries to hospitality with the image of a semi-permeable membrane: its function is to keep out, but also to let through. It should not be too rigid, nor too porous.[146] Shepherd

[144] Westerhoff, *Good Fences*, 28.
[145] Gruber, Schüßler, and Bobrowicz, *Dissenting Church*; Russell, *Just Hospitality*, chap. 3.
[146] Westerhoff, *Good Fences*, 83.

elaborates on the porosity of the boundaries of the hospitable self through the image of Jesus who is the door for the sheep. And as the door, his role is not simply to protect, but also to let in. He decides which other person is to be let into our home and into our identity. The door is a passageway.[147]

This thought can also be used in dealing with disagreement: if Jesus is also the door in the boundary around that which constitutes the core of our convictions and practices, He also has the key to decide what to let in, keep in, or let out through this boundary. Then He also decides how to balance the virtues of openness (related to boundaries that open), humility, and firmness. Especially at ecclesial level this opens up a new array of questions about listening, and discernment of Christ's voice; at least the use of the image of Christ as door and passageway takes away the question of opening of boundaries from the all too human level.

The third type of dealing with boundaries is closely related to the second: boundaries can move. They can expand to offer hospitality to more or different people, and boundaries can move from more closed to more openness in dealing with disagreement. Boundaries around the body of core convictions and practices can also expand. But boundaries can also contract. This can be (and is best regarded as) a temporary contraction, for reasons of finitude: there are no resources to offer hospitality to more others, or time is needed to regain energy, or for self-reflection or re-focusing; or after engaging in congregation-wide dialogues, it is decided to close off some topics for further discussion for a while; or even during a disagreement, it can be an option that both are given space to withdraw within their own tighter boundaries for a while. However, the command of hospitality should always lead back to exploring the possible expansion of boundaries. Westerhoff offers a set of heuristic questions for making decisions about contracting or expanding boundaries that come down to the question: does it serve the ultimate purpose better if boundaries are moved more tightly or more widely?[148]

When considering the boundaries around what is considered as true convictions and acceptable practices, it could seem preferable to strive toward contraction of these boundaries, in order to accommodate as wide as possible a variety of others, so that disagreements can be avoided. However, it can be argued that there is always a duty of seeking truth, i.e. a duty to include more instead of less within that which is considered as true. Dirk-Martin Grube, who argues against a position of claiming epistemic certainty

[147] Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, 185–88.
[148] Westerhoff, *Good Fences*, 112–13.

for religious beliefs, and in favour of dialogical instead of hierarchical communication with those we disagree with on religious issues, nevertheless insists that we have a duty to be exclusivist about ontological claims, especially in the face of the dangers of 'post-truth', 'alternative facts', and complot theories.[149] Vainio takes a similar position. In the context of his criticism of "the right to feel comfortable" as a reason to avoid engaging in disagreement, he defends the epistemic duty to be truth-seeking.[150] In another article he provides more grounding for this assertion, namely Thomistic realism. He claims that only a teleological interpretation of reality can justify growth in knowledge and progressive insight, and this possibility also provides an incentive to keep on striving for truth.[151]

The incentive from a theology of hospitality toward expansion of boundaries in order to include more others, and the incentive from dealing with disagreement to be truth seeking and hence to expand the boundaries around that which is considered as true are in tension with each other. If our body of what is held as true grows, there seems to be less instead of more space for the other who is different: contracted instead of expanded boundaries of hospitality. This tension can be mitigated by referring to Vainio's nuanced analysis of fallibilism: we can be certain, even if we do not have epistemic certainty. We can believe fallibly, being open toward the other, even inhabit other perspectives temporarily, out of love for understanding and acquaintance, but in the end, in the core of our convictions, we can hold onto one.[152] Grube proposes something similar: we can hold those beliefs we are certain of in a justificationist rather than in a bivalent way: we believe we are justified to hold to a certain belief or conviction on epistemic grounds (i.e. by incorporating all possible evidence), but remain open to the possibility that those who hold onto a different conviction could also be justified in their belief, at least in some cases.[153]

The fourth type of what can happen to boundaries is that they become less clear and pronounced. If boundaries become more porous and expanding or contracting, their exact location can become less obvious. Even if current boundaries are clear, it becomes impossible to predict the future movement and location of these boundaries. We cannot

[149] Grube, "A Humble Exclusivism?," 28–35.

[150] Vainio, *Disagreeing Virtuously*, sec. 4.4.

[151] Olli-Pekka Vainio, "After Relativism: Alasdair MacIntyre on Tradition and Rationality," *Nova et Vetera* 20, no. 1 (January 2022): 324–26.

[152] Vainio, "On Believing and Acting Fallibly," 105–6.

[153] Grube, "A Humble Exclusivism?," 39–40. Vainio formulates slightly different : we can hold our convictions to be true, and can regard the other conviction to be wrong, but yet regard them as rational. Vainio, *Disagreeing Virtuously*, sec. 3.5.

know with certainty who the people will be that we will offer hospitality to, and what they will offer to us, and we cannot know with certainty how the boundaries around that which we consider as certain will expand or contract. Westerhoff refers to this phenomenon as "living in the gray" and she calls gray the colour of humility and of hospitality.[154] This can be a discomforting thought and it could be argued that there is a limit to the extent to which boundaries can move, but this statement is hard to defend on the basis of either theologies of hospitality or theologians on dealing with disagreement. The image of Jesus as the doorkeeper of these boundaries can still be a comforting image, but this can even add to the discomfort if we realise that we cannot prescribe nor predict in which way He will manage our doors and boundaries.

Vainio's concept of "partial defeaters" can be helpful to understand the possibility that boundaries become less clear. His dynamic view on reacting to disagreements includes the possibility that our convictions become less certain: the boundary between more and less certain moves or becomes less clear. Arguments against our position or in favour of alternative convictions or practices are also rational and they weaken the exclusivity of our position. According to Vainio, this does not imply that we change our conviction (unlike the situation of complete defeat) or retreat to neutral ground (that is impossible and would be a sign of cowardice). But it does imply that we acknowledge the epistemic goods that the other position brings, and we remain open for further truth-seeking.[155]

The fifth type of dealing with boundaries is that boundaries get subsumed into a higher order commonality. This type of dealing with boundaries is opposite to the first type mentioned, namely to mark difference. The danger is that difference is reduced to sameness, and that disagreements are evaded rather than resolved. Nevertheless, subsuming boundaries is legitimate, even if this leads to the conclusion that the disagreement did not qualify as a real disagreement. Steef Post discusses this option extensively in his proposals for preventing polarisation in the church. He argues that every opposite pair of 'we' versus 'they' is embedded in a higher-order 'we'.[156] An example is that different liturgical preferences about what to sing can be subsumed under the common category of the importance of singing as part of Christian liturgy. Subsuming boundaries into a higher order requires from both sides of the disagreement the first of MacIntyre's attitudes to disagreement: being open to changing position. Both sides

[154] Westerhoff, *Good Fences*, 91–94.
[155] Vainio, *Disagreeing Virtuously*, sec. 3.5.
[156] Post, "Pastor, Polarisatie En Preventie," 69.

would agree that the boundaries should be placed elsewhere, and that a real disagreement does not exist, certainly not from an epistemological point of view, with its sense of mutually exclusive epistemic positions.

The sixth and last type of what can happen to boundaries in hospitality and in dealing with disagreement, is that boundaries can reverse or flip. This happens when roles reverse. The guest/host role-reversal is essential in genuine hospitality. Even in God's hospitality, God is the ultimate host who is also guest dwelling in us. And in our hospitality, being good guests is essential, not only in visiting others, but even in recognising in our guests their gifts and host-like qualities. This role-reversal questions the boundaries between who is at home and who is stranger, or to whom belongs the domain. In practical situations of hospitality this is often clear, when the guest takes on a temporary and limited host role in the broader context of being guest, but in the alternation between being host this time and guest next time, the boundaries are being crossed over and over.

Also in disagreement, in a process of genuine exchange and engagement, boundaries can flip. We may regard ourselves as host in engaging with the other side of the disagreement, but we can flip host and guest roles if we temporarily inhabit the other conviction.[157] This temporary inhabitation of the other conviction places us in the role of guest, and good hospitality requires being a good guest. This endeavour can lead to multiple epistemic goods, such as understanding and acquaintance. It can even lead to reinforcement of our own position, by finding defeaters to the other position, or by finding additional arguments for our own. Hence, the temporary flipping of boundaries does not necessarily lead to their erasure. But having visited the other side of a boundary with genuine interest, at least one will always remain aware that there is life at that other side, probably even hospitable life.

4.3 Identity

Questions about identity and boundaries are intertwined and in the previous sections, the issue of identity emerged several times. In some, if not all, questions of boundaries, the underlying question is about identity: who am I, and who is the other? Therefore, a further exploration of the concept of identity is warranted in order to see if theologies of hospitality can further enrich reflections about dealing with disagreement in the local church as they relate to identity.

[157] Vainio, "On Believing and Acting Fallibly," 105; Vainio, *Disagreeing Virtuously*, sec. 4.2.

4.3.1 Bounded Self

Can we have a defined identity, as persons and as local church? Before engaging this question, the difference between these two levels of identity needs to be acknowledged. An ecclesial identity is a form of group identity that has a complex and layered two-way interaction with the personal identities of those who form this group. If we reflect on dealing with disagreement within a local church, then the dividing lines are within the ecclesial identity, not between several of those. This has implications for assuming common ground. Social identity theory could be one avenue to explore the interrelationships between individual and group identity, but in the framework of this thesis, I do not further explore this, but only note the added complexity that could complexify some of the conclusions reached below.[158]

Andrew Shepherd explores the question of identity in dialogue with Levinas and Derrida. While he is appreciative of both, a major point of criticism is that their views lead to a denial of identity. The "infinite responsibility" of Levinas turns the unknowable other into a universal category without identity, but also the identity of the hospitable self is denied, because the other is always master (requires infinite responsibility as defining characteristic of who I am), and the subject is taken hostage, and this "seems to commit the very act of totalization and dehumanization he is seeking to overcome". Derrida makes this even more explicit: the other is transcendent and unknowable and the alterity of the other is in me before I am, and hence there is no possibility of a welcoming subject and "I am not the proprietor of my I". The subject is in a constant process of deconstruction and reconstruction, and therefore identity is equal to division, and relation is dissociation.[159]

As alternative to this erasure of any stable identity, Shepherd invokes the theological concept of *creatio ex nihilo* which grounds the gift of identity upon otherness, and freedom from necessity. This concept of creation is not the exercise of power of God over something else, because there was not something else. It is not imposing a definition, but creating an identity. God's address to us and calling us by name is far from totalising knowledge and 'power over', but is lovingly calling us into being, like parents

[158] S. Alexander Haslam, *Psychology in Organizations: The Social Identity Approach*, 2. ed. (London: Sage, 2004); Michael A. Hogg, Daan van Knippenberg, and David E. Rast III, "The Social Identity Theory of Leadership: Theoretical Origins, Research Findings, and Conceptual Developments," *European Review of Social Psychology* 23, no. 1 (2012): 258–304; S. Alexander Haslam, Stephen Reicher, and Michael J. Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership: Identity, Influence and Power*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2020).

[159] Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, 40,42,72,84.

joyfully naming a child.[160] As discussed in section 3.1, Shepherd interprets this identity as formed *imago Dei*, namely as relational in essence. This concept of identity keeps us away from a Cartesian view of the self as self-constituted, and a view that would close our identity off from the other. And this brings Shepherd to an elaboration of the hospitable self as a bounded self, with a centre. But, using ideas of Miroslav Volf, Shepherd posits that the boundaries of the self are porous and expanding and the centre is a "de-centered center".[161]

The self is also a "catholic self" who is defined by its relation with Christ and is enriched and shaped by making space for the other and by what the other contributes. This differentiates his nuanced and relational understanding of identity both from an essentialist and from a constructionist view of identity. The hospitable self is also a renovated and eschatological self, that continues to receive its identity through participation in Christ and that "journeys alongside others as they seek the final revealing of their full identities" which is only in the *eschaton*.[162] The concept of the bounded self provides the bridge between this section about identity and the previous section about boundaries. The relation between the self and the other brings us closer to reflections about dealing with disagreement.

4.3.2 Identity and the Other

The place of the other in relation to one's identity already emerged in the previous section, because identity can only be defined in relation to others, as it marks the difference between the self and the other. However, it is possible to conceive of the relation of the other in relation to the self in different ways and this has important implications for dealing with disagreement.

In this section, I describe three models to describe the relation between the identity of the self and the other. In addition to these, there are three additional models I mention briefly in order to exclude them from further reflection because they hardly allow

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[160] Shepherd, 104–22. Shepherd interacts with Caputo's theological interpretation of Derrida who proposed creation as an endless process of deconstruction and reconstruction of already existing material, which Shepherd denounces as equivalent to Greek mythology's demiurge. See John D. Caputo, "Before Creation: Derrida's Memory of God," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 39, no. 3 (2006): 91–102.

[161] Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, 185.

[162] Shepherd, 185-188,195-196. Compare also the statements of Henri Nouwen about the impossibility of hospitality of an empty home, and the comment of Edward Langerak that we need to have moral selves before we can develop tools to interact well with others. Langerak, *Civil Disagreement : Personal Integrity in a Pluralistic Society*, 22. The fact that our own identity here and now partly escapes ourselves is also brought forward by Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 263.

space for relationship between the identity of the self and the other. One is the position that could be called the "Cartesian self", a view that the self can be defined in complete independence of others.[163] The reason to exclude this view, is that in literature it is only encountered as a naïve view of the past, replaced by views that do reflect on the relation with the other. The fact that this view is no longer considered a serious option does not necessarily imply that it does not still exist in practice, though. The second position to mention and exclude from further discussion is that of Derrida and Levinas (as interpreted by Shepherd and discussed in the previous section). The other is transcendent, such that there is no relationship, only responsibility to an unknowable other, and the only relation is dissociation. This approach underlines the alterity of the other, but hardly allows for relationship between the self and the other. The third model to exclude is the model in which the self is positive in every respect and the other is the negative mirror-image. This model is excluded for its simplicity and lack of nuance.

In their book *Grammars of identity / alterity*, anthropologists Gerd Baumann and Andre Gingrich describe three models, which they call 'grammars' of speaking about identity and alterity (or about the self and the other).[164] For the (theological) purposes of this thesis, I consider two of their models to be variations of each other, something which they also hint at.[165] Moreover, I argue that the second model can be regarded as counterimage of the first model, and a pitfall that emerges for those who intend to escape the trap of the first model. In addition to this, I add a third model, from literature on hospitality, that could serve as a better alternative. Finally, I reflect on some applications for dealing with disagreement.

The first model, "orientalising" derives from postcolonial analysis (mostly Edward Said). The other is pictured as the opposite of self. This does not necessarily happen in terms of self as good, and other as bad, but also reversed. The other is good or strong in aspects where the self is bad or weak. Self and other condition each other in "reverse mirror-imaging".[166] Judith Gruber discusses the work of another postcolonial thinker,

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[163] Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, 128.

[164] Gerd Baumann and Andre Gingrich, eds., *Grammars of Identity / Alterity: A Structural Approach* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2004), chap. 1. Their use of the word 'identity' is slightly different from the way used here. In their work, 'identity' and 'alterity' refer to the extent to which the other is spoken about as similar or different from oneself. However, this can be translated as referring to the relation between the identity of the self and that of the other. They frequently use the language of self and other, selfing and othering, and us and them.

[165] Baumann and Gingrich, 30. They refer to the fact that two of their grammars can easily morph into each other and are often ambiguous.

[166] Baumann and Gingrich, 18–20.

Homi Bhabha, and summarises his thought this way: "the other remains by way of exclusion, a constitutive part within the self. Each identity continues to be haunted by what it has excluded as other."[167] This quote shows that mirror-imaging is not only a way of defining the other, but also the self as the reverse imprint. Baumann and Gingrich present this model as more nuanced and layered than the simple model of self as good, and other as bad. At least, the self is put under critique, even if it is in the perspective of a "self-invented other."[168] In postcolonial analysis, this discourse of viewing the other is seen as highly problematic, as a form of "essentialising" both the identity of self and other.[169]

The antidote is the proposal to remove boundaries between binary categories. An example of this approach from theologies of hospitality can be found in the work of Letty Russell, who also uses postcolonial analysis. Her proposal is to move from a "hermeneutic of otherness" to a "hermeneutic of hospitality"; to remove the language of otherness altogether, because from "God's side, no one is 'other'" and "all, *not some*, are *insiders*: Bush, bin Laden, all belong…" and we need to redefine the 'other' as 'partner'.[170] This antidote gets us to the second model of Baumann and Gingrich.

As indicated above, I combine two models and consider them variants: "segmentation" and "encompassment". Encompassment is when the other is co-opted and redefined subtly as being similar to the self. It is an act of "selfing by appropriating". Difference is a fiction of lower levels of understanding.[171] This reduction of otherness to sameness is what Derrida and Levinas oppose as forms of totalising knowledge and why they posit the unknowability of the other. A critical assessment of this model can also be given because of its often selective nature: it is specific elements of otherness that are redefined as sameness, and other aspects are muted or suppressed. Marianne Moyaert discusses approaches to theologies of religions and points out that the approach of inclusivism is an instance of encompassment: you think you are different and have different religious convictions than me, but in fact you are, even though you do not realise it, equal to me. Likewise, the approach of pluralism suffers from the same, and Moyaert calls it a form of "meta-inclusivism" that is deaf to the otherness of the religious other,

[167] Gruber, *Intercultural Theology*, 62.

[168] Baumann and Gingrich, *Grammars of Identity / Alterity*, 21.

[169] Baumann and Gingrich do not add this layer of evaluative reflection, but merely describe the different grammars. In a final note (47-48) they offer some comparative reflections on the potential of their three grammars to work for the peaceful society.

[170] Russell, *Just Hospitality*, 24,43,49,67. Emphases original. On p.67, the part "Bush, bin Laden, all belong" is part of a longer quote from Desmond Tutu that she cites.

[171] Baumann and Gingrich, *Grammars of Identity / Alterity*, 25–27. Quoted phrase on p.25.

and indifferent to religious difference. The pluralist, in a 'paternalistic' stance, knows the identity of the other better than he or she does, and knows that in the end, it is all the same at a higher level.[172] Segmentation is similar to encompassment, but it recognises levels: while the self and the other differ at one level, at a higher level they form a broader self that is different from another other, and at yet a higher level, those can also join and face yet another other. This model derives from studies of tribal and lineage identities of the Nuer in Sudan where lineage-groups can oppose each other at one level and join hands at a higher level.[173]

The third model derives from theologies of hospitality and is well expressed in a quote from Miroslav Volf that has already been used in shorter form before:

> The Spirit of God breaks through the self-enclosed worlds we inhabit; the Spirit re-creates us and sets us on the road toward becoming what I like to call a 'catholic personality,' a personal microcosm of the eschatological new creation. A catholic personality is a personality enriched by otherness, a personality which is what it is only because multiple others have been reflected in it in a particular way. The distance from my own culture that results from being born by the Spirit creates a fissure in me through which others can come in. The Spirit unlatches the doors of my heart saying: 'You are not only you; others belong to you too.'[174]

Volf's quote is taken from his reflections on distance from and belonging to one's culture, group and identity. The first service that "distance born out of allegiance to God and God's future" does is shown in the quote above. The second is that it "entails a judgment against evil in every culture."[175] The other has a place, not only outside and opposite the self, but also forms the identity of the self, because boundaries around this identity are porous. However, this is much less predictable than the mirror-imaging of orientalising and it is less wholesale and one-sided than the model of encompassment, because the other is not claimed to be similar to the self, but 'only' to enrich the self. Shepherd uses these insights of Volf and elaborates them further, as discussed above, about boundaries that are porous and expanding. He also grounds this model further in a Trinitarian model of personhood, where humankind is created *imago Dei* in a relational mode of being.[176] It seems possible to relate this model to what Moyaert calls 'fragility of

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[172] Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 64,111,119.

[173] Baumann and Gingrich, *Grammars of Identity / Alterity*, 21–24.

[174] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 51. Volf goes on to apply this idea to the local church, in which the church as a whole is also present (hence the word catholic).

[175] Volf, 52.

[176] Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, chap. 4. Robert Vosloo explores a similar line of argument: openness to the other is not a "romantic openness to otherness" which is totalitarian and abstract. He

identity', the fact that there is always a strangeness in the self, an element of never being completely at home with the self.[177]

Before the explicit application to dealing with disagreement is made, one level of complexity needs to be added. The term 'another other' is already used above, and this raises the question if these models are to be regarded as binary models, with a 'self' and an 'other', or if they are rather ternary models, with an 'other' and 'other others'. Baumann and Gingrich discuss this question explicitly, and for each of their models they argue that they are ternary models. In the segmentation model this is very obvious: self and other merge and face another other at a higher level. The same is true for the (related) encompassment model: some others are appropriated, while other others are not. And in the orientalising model, there can also be different groups of others. The other is the mirror-image of the self, but some other others are even more clearly the opposite of the self. Another way of differentiation in this model is the "individual exceptions from collective prejudices," where my specific other is okay, while the group to whom she belongs is still defined as the mirror-image of the self. Another way of viewing this distinction is to move from only 'we' and 'they' to 'we', 'you', and 'they', where the 'you' is the exceptional other who is less other than 'they'.[178] We also see this in the example quoted above from Russell: she redefines the 'other' into 'partner' with the invitation to join in the struggle against injustice – and this implies that there is yet another 'other' who is not yet included as 'partner' of the 'we'.[179] In the third model, this added complexity is also relevant: the other is let in through the fissure in the self, and identity is enriched by otherness, but this is selective: there is a process of sifting through what otherness is let in to enrich, and what otherness is kept out.

With the risk of not doing justice to the nuances of each model, the table below provides a simplified summary of the models discussed above (or left out from discussion). The models are not mutually exclusive and are only useful as heuristic tools for a dialogue about identity and otherness.

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roots his argument for nuanced openness to otherness also in Trinitarian theology. Vosloo, "Identity, Otherness and the Triune God," 70.

[177] Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 263–64.

[178] Baumann and Gingrich, *Grammars of Identity / Alterity*, 38–40.

[179] Russell, *Just Hospitality*, 50,118.

Table 1: Overview of models for the relationship between the identity of the self and the other

Model	Self and other
Isolation	Cartesian self, no others
Condemnation	Self as good, other as bad
Dissociation	Unknowable other with infinite claim on self
Orientalising	Other as reverse mirror-image of self
Encompassment	Other framed as self
Enrichment	Other enriches self

In dealing with disagreement I propose that the last model offers much potential and can be regarded an enrichment from theologies of hospitality. This model allows for nuance and this brings us back to the question of boundaries. The enrichment that derives from being open to engage with the other in disagreement can be framed in terms of epistemic goods, such as understanding, reliability and coherence. Even though this model offers the possibility for nuance, it may not serve every situation of disagreement, and most (if not all) of the other models could serve a purpose in specific situations.

An important point is the recognition of alterity, an insight that is key in theologies of hospitality. In disagreement, this relates to the virtue of epistemic courage: the courage to name and respect difference as real difference. However, since identity does not only have a stable and bounded aspect to it, but also a fluid, porous and being-under-construction aspect, it is quite possible that in a disagreement, the boundary between the two sides in a disagreement dissolves or subsumes: the model of encompassment and the subsumption of boundaries (see section 4.2.5) correspond. This can also be linked to the four attitudes of MacIntyre toward dealing with disagreement: either or both of the two sides can welcome the insights of the other in order to change position and this is a legitimate option in which alterity is overcome. This reflection also raises the question if disagreement is always about identity, and while identity is often at a deep level connected with disagreements, and emerged as an important issues connected to boundaries, the answer to the question must be negative: disagreements are not in every case connected with identity, or with the core convictions and practices that constitute ecclesial identity. This distinction between identity, convictions and practices is a last point to be discussed in the next and final section.

4.3.3 Identity, Convictions and Practices

Identity, and particularly ecclesial identity, is constituted by (among others) convictions and practices. But how strong is the link between identity, convictions and practices? Can they be separated and can our attitude toward identity be different than our attitude toward convictions and practices? Or is a judgment on the latter inevitably a rejection of identity?

Theologically, ecclesial identity is not formed by a set of convictions and practices, but by being the body of Christ through the indwelling Spirit. However, this is expressed and confessed in what this body of Christ believes, such as in the confession "Jesus is Lord" or in more elaborate versions. And while this confession is liturgy and worship, it is also a conviction, and making this confession is a practice. Likewise, it is not difficult to list other fundamental convictions and practices. In the context of dealing with disagreement, this relates back to the idea of a set of core convictions and practices that are considered certain, which constitute ecclesial identity. This implies that ecclesial identity cannot be obtained in absence of core convictions and practices, and it also implies there could be other convictions and practices that are not directly attached to identity. In the section about dealing with boundaries, it was also discussed that the boundaries around that which is certain and the boundaries around one's identity are porous and can move. This implies that it may not be static, nor fully clear which convictions and practices do or do not belong to this identity-related core. In practice, there could be a continuum of convictions and practices that are closer or further removed from the core of ecclesial identity.

At the personal level, more distinction between the identity of a person, and his or her convictions and practices is possible, if only for the fact that convictions and practices develop later in life, whereas identity is already present in a person from the beginning. At the same time, what a person believes (particularly religious beliefs) and does also relates closely to who the person is. Volf discusses that this distinction between 'person' (deserving equal respect) and 'work' (convictions and practices, having to earn respect) was most clearly expressed by Immanuel Kant, but has its roots in Christianity (unconditional love for people, not for many of their deeds) while the same distinction is also present in other major religions.[180]

[180] Volf, *Flourishing : Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World*, 118–20.

Particularly because religious convictions are closely related with identity, Volf proposes that religious beliefs are treated with an "initial presumption of worth." This means they are approached in a way that honours their integrity (instead of distorting or co-opting it), critically engages its truth claims, with respect in the case of disagreement, and a willingness to recognise positive moral effects. And even if respect for beliefs and practices is refused based on "informed and considered judgment rather than mere prejudice," respect for the person is still due. In the case of practices, Volf falls back to the option of 'mere tolerance', and even that within limits in order to avoid tolerance of what is evil. "Respect for beliefs and practices must be earned, and therefore disrespect and, at times, intolerance are the appropriate wages of contemptible beliefs and practices."[181] Visala and Vainio discuss the differences between older and newer conceptions of tolerance (see Excursus on p.31), or between tolerance and recognition. They agree with the demand for respect (rather than tolerance) for persons, but also maintain that normative assessments of truth claims are still important, and that there can be a moral duty not to esteem a certain conviction or practice. Likewise, when recognition is claimed not only for persons but also for convictions, this can easily lead to 'scripted identities', where the one with power to recognise stabilises (and probably selects) the convictions and the way they are expressed. Their conclusion is that recognition and tolerance have different objects (persons or convictions and practices).[182]

In dealing with disagreement in the context of the local church, respect and recognition should be assumed as both sides to the disagreement are part of the church. Recognition should have a spiritual weight to it as recognition as fellow-believers, baptised into the same body, and partakers of the same Lord's Supper. The close connection, yet distinction, between persons and their convictions and practices is important. Realising that convictions and practices over which there is disagreement could be part of someone's core convictions, and hence close to (or part of) someone's identity is important, and exploring the boundaries of what is this core, and how this could be different or change over time could be an important intervention in dealing with disagreement.

[181] Volf, 123–25. Quotes on p.125.
[182] Visala and Vainio, "Tolerance or Recognition," 559–62.

5 Conclusions

5.1 Answering the Research Question

The research question for this thesis was: what can insights from theologies of hospitality contribute to reflections on dealing with disagreement in the church in the context of polarisation? This section refers to some of the major elements of an answer harvested from the previous sections.

First of all, a theology of hospitality offers a framework that grounds all reflections about dealing with disagreement in the story of God's works of creation and salvation. The relation between God and people, and between people is to be kept closely together. God created us *imago Dei,* as relational persons. His hospitality in salvation receives us as estranged sinners, and we receive Christ and the indwelling Spirit in return. In the church, and as persons, we extend God's hospitality to others, which means we are open to others in their being different. In doing so, we are transformed as both guest and host and are open to continuous role-reversals. In addition to this, the following suggestions could prove to be useful in dealing with concrete disagreements.

- It is important to respect the alterity of the other; to be hospitable, which is to be open to the other in his or her being different, without power-based or avoidance-based attempts to reduce difference to sameness.
- It is necessary to consider that all parties to a disagreement are fundamentally on the same side of God, the side of estranged and hopefully reconciled sinner: guests of God, sharing the same table and relying on his hospitality.
- It is good practice to balance the virtues of open-mindedness, intellectual humility, and intellectual courage. Boundary management because of finitude or because of protection and safety can inform the balance of these virtues.
- Boundaries are necessary to protect identity and those convictions and practices considered certain. They have the important function to mark and respect difference. At the same time, these boundaries (between two sides in a disagreement, or around that which is considered certain) can also be crossed, moved, subsumed, become less clear, or flipped. It could be important to make conscious decisions about these options, led by the consideration what serves the ultimate purposes best. Likewise, it can be relevant to realise that Jesus is the door, the gatekeeper: He decides what can

or cannot come in or go out through the boundary of our identity and of what we consider certain. This requires joint discernment.

- It is a good practice to at least temporarily inhabit other perspectives and display good guest-behaviour. This promotes a more equal process in which role-reversal takes place. This can lead to epistemic goods such as understanding, coherence, improved evidence or arguments, or to an increase of truth and an improved position. Allowing more complexity can deepen core convictions.
- Boundaries in disagreement can be seen in the decision (not) to engage, and the degree of openness with which to engage. That which is closest to the core of convictions and practices can be protected by engaging with less openness. Decisions not to engage (i.e. to exclude) should be taken with care, and the argument of harm to one's identity should not be too easily invoked.
- It is important to reflect on the relation of one's own (personal or ecclesial) identity in relation to others. It can be helpful to reflect which of these models is or are preferable in a specific situation: isolation, condemnation, dissociation, orientalising, encompassment, enrichment (see Table 1). If the model of enrichment is used, discernment is necessary to sift through what aspects of otherness can enrich one's identity.

In addition to these theological considerations, it could be worthwhile to explore the use of practices of hospitality for dealing with disagreement as well. A first candidate for such practice would be sharing a meal together. Sitting around the same table, sharing the same food, and stories, could be a great equaliser and could prepare the ground for a frank further engagement with the disagreement.

5.2 Evaluation of the Methodology

The approach in this thesis has been to introduce two theological fields: theologies of hospitality, and theological reflections on dealing with disagreement, and then to bring them in dialogue with each other. For both fields of interest, one theologian was identified as first spokesperson, joined by other voices.

The dialogue did actually work, but not so much as equal partners. Hospitality is the broader theme and this was applied to disagreement; the directionality was slightly one-sided. The title of the thesis already expressed this directionality: theologies of hospitality are used to inform dealing with disagreement. The question could be raised if theologies of hospitality have also benefited from the reflections on dealing with

disagreements. This reciprocity and role-reversal would be in the spirit of hospitality. I think the answer is positive: theologies of hospitality have been enriched by the other, in this case the field of dealing with disagreement, for example by expanding the range of hospitality-virtues with those of (intellectual) humility and courage. Also, the reflections about certainty, and modes of certainty as a form of boundary management are helpful for the further development of theologies of hospitality.

The approach to bring the two fields together and offer some constructive theological reflections at each topic of interaction worked well. From the similarities, contrasts, analogies between the two fields, suggestions for some creative further reflections beyond mere comparison almost automatically presented themselves, sometimes with the help of another voice.

The intention to use one theologian of each field as spokesperson did not fully function as intended. While both of them (Shepherd and Vainio) did receive much attention, many other voices joined in the chorus, to the extent that the chorus sometimes was more loud than the voice of the spokesperson. The selection of these other voices was not done on the basis of a structured approach, but rather on the basis of a wish to hear every voice, with the limits of finitude as a sole boundary.

The decision to explore boundaries and identity in more depth presented itself with some force from the initial dialogue. Decisions (not) to engage in some additional issues, or to mention them in passing were made on the basis of the limitations of this thesis, and below I offer some suggestions of what could be explored further.

5.3 Relevance of the Research

This thesis started with an exploration of the context of polarisation. This context is real and current. Also, the situation that local churches are faced with disagreements in their midst that they have to deal with is true for almost every local church. And this takes place in the context of polarisation. And whereas dealing with disagreement in any context deserves careful theological reflection, this context makes it even more urgent. The church can be a source of polarisation, it can replicate societal polarisation in its midst or contribute to it, or it can show how to deal with disagreement without giving food to (further) polarisation.

These insights and reflections could help local church leadership in dealing with disagreement. More insight in what disagreement is, and being aware of more dimensions and options, deriving from theologies of hospitality, could broaden the

repertoire for actions of church leaders and members when faced with disagreement. It could also inform their teaching, the range of attitudes to focus on, and the range of virtues to stimulate. All of this could help embed dealing with disagreement more strongly in God's story instead of approaching it as a management issue.

Imbibing the insights from this research could give local churches the courage to face disagreements with boldness instead of shying away from them and waiting too long to take any action. In facing disagreements with courage, openness, and humility, this research can help find the balance between these virtues, and between boundary management to protect and to include. It can also encourage church members and leaders that engaging in disagreement with open-mindedness, humility and courage, and being open to the other in his or her being different does not remove the possibility to maintain certainty about that which constitutes their identity.

5.4 Follow-up Research

This research was a limited effort to explore insights from theologies of hospitality and their implications for dealing with disagreement in the context of polarisation. Several issues have been mentioned in passing and deserve further exploration, while other issues have not even been mentioned, but deserve a similar attention. They include the following:

- The relation and interaction between identities of individuals and churches, in relation to hospitality, or in relation to dealing with disagreement. This could be approached as layered or nested identities, or through social identity theory with a two-way interaction between individuals and groups.
- The importance of the concept of narrative identities of individuals and in the church, and its implications for dealing with disagreement.
- The concept and debates around tolerance were briefly discussed in an excursus. This debate has its own body of literature and could be explored in relation to hospitality and in relation to dealing with disagreement.
- Other factors that influence the answer to the research question of this thesis, but are neglected here and deserve further attention, are the role of authority in dealing with disagreement, the role of cultural factors or an intercultural context, the role and (theological) importance of pluriformity.

- Further research could also apply this same question to specific content areas of disagreement, such as liturgical practices, theological beliefs, or ethical issues.
- Further research could also take an interdisciplinary approach and use Biblical theological, or practical theological approaches (for example exploring how dealing with disagreement works in practice.

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