

# The roles of spirituality and social cohesion in the transformation to an agroecological food network: A case study in the Dominican monastery of Zwolle

Master thesis



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Place and date:

Utrecht, May 2022

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## Acknowledgements

Throughout the fieldwork of this thesis I have received a great deal of support and assistance.

Firstly, I would like to express my gratitude to the community of Dominican Monastery Zwolle, that welcomed me in their environment. Their commitment to my research was of great help. The community includes the Dominican brothers: Dominicus, Jan, Jozef and Wijbe, who invited us in their home and shared inspiring conversations with us. I would especially like to thank all participants that were willing to be interviewed, including the parishioners, lay-Dominicans and nearby farmers. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge the programme team of 'GROND', including Elsa Eikema and Kitty Nijboer, that organised a wonderful week where I had the chance to meet the inspiring Dr. and Father Godfrey Nzamujo.

In particular I would like to thank my host family, Anneke and Joost Kuijper, where I could stay during my one month of field work and with whom I shared great conversations and meals. I am extremely grateful that Anneke and Joost opened up their house for me and made sure I had a comfortable place to stay.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Jelle Behagel, whose expertise was indispensable in writing my thesis. You especially helped to bring my theoretical groundings to a higher level. Your insightful feedback during the weekly meetings was very helpful.

I would additionally like to thank the WUR Scienceshop, that supported me and guided me during this research project.

I performed the fieldwork with my fellow master student Anouck Fietje, who I shared fruitful conversations and memorable moments with. I am grateful for her endless enthusiasm and useful feedback during the writing of this thesis.

Lastly, I would like to thank my friends and family that kept me motivated throughout the process, in particular Andrea Knotter and Marloes Brunsting that reviewed my work and my grandpa, who is my greatest source of farming inspiration.

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## Abstract

Modern agriculture is not sustainable and a major change in the way we farm is needed. An alternative food system is agroecology, a science, a movement and a practice based on holistic strategies. To shift to a new agricultural paradigm, collective action is needed. Here, food networks can play a key role. To identify the foundations that are necessary to build such a food network, the Dominican monastery in Zwolle, the Netherlands is used as a case study. The main objective of this thesis is to identify the role of human-nature relationships, spirituality and social cohesion in creating and sustaining such an agroecological food network. In order to reach this aim, ethnographic field research is performed, including observation and interviews. I address four central questions: 1) What spiritual values are recognizable in the human-nature relationships of the individuals in the food network?; 2) How is social cohesion established in the church community?; 3) How does social cohesion support the extended food network?; and 4) How do human-nature relationships, spirituality and social cohesion support transforming the (local) food network from the dominant agriculture paradigm to agroecology? I conclude that most participants share an anthropocentric view on nature, which would not be stimulating for creating an agroecological food network. Spirituality is often neglected in agroecology, while it plays a key role in the transformation and execution of agroecology. Experiencing and connecting to God or God's creation in nature, or connecting to the moment and self in nature, gives participants a feeling of stewardship for the earth, which moves them towards sustainable behaviour. Additionally, spiritual values that are shared lead to a spiritual kinship that connects people; strengthening the social cohesion. The social cohesion of the church community is strong, but lacks on certain points in the food network; between church and farmers, and consumers and farmers. The two most important dimensions that establish social cohesion in the church community are participation and inclusion. Within the food network, where other actors are included, recognition is an additional important dimension that needs improvement, since farmers and the community do not feel connected. It is essential to find connections between each actor, to make the food network successful. I recommend that the norms and values shared by the community are put into action. By being active in nature and implementing agroecological practises, people learn by doing, thereby experiencing radical relationality for themselves.

## 1. Introduction

The Vatican recently spoke up about sustainability, referring to the current problems on social, economic and ecological aspects caused by climate change. In a joint message for the Vatican's followers, the stewardship for the earth was addressed, and extra attention was brought to take care of the earth for future generations. To make this latter point, the Vatican referred to the following statement in the Bible: "*God mandates: 'Choose life, so that you and your children might live' (Dt 30:19). We must choose to live differently; we must choose life.*" (Vaticaan, 2021).

The Vatican mentioned the responsibility to feed the world and specifically poor people in their joint letter as well. Over the last decades, agriculture has been intensified and globalized. While this form of modern agriculture has led to more production, answering to the world demand, the system has not proven to be sustainable (IPES-Food, 2016; Singh Bisht & Chand Rana, 2020): There is degradation of land and water quality, high greenhouse emissions, a great loss of biodiversity and many more environmental problems. Moreover, there are health problems such as malnourishment and diet related diseases. Lastly, there is huge economic pressure on farmers, that struggle to provide in their own livelihoods (IPES-Food, 2016). To overcome these issues, a major change in the way we farm is needed. In many parts of the world solutions are sought, leading to movements that are recognizing the value and sacred values of agriculture again (Singh Bisht & Chand Rana, 2020).

Dominican Father Dr. Godfrey Nzamujo is someone that has been combining the sacred values he has for the earth and his religion to set up a zero waste farm in Benin, called Songhai centre, in 1985. The idea behind Songhai is that solutions to Africa's problems should come from Africans themselves. The view Godfrey Nzamujo has for his farm comes from an African philosophy called radical relationality, which in short means everything in life, humans and non-humans, is interconnected (Nzamujo, 2020). Besides, his centre and his religion are in a continuous reciprocity, including its thoughts and practises. When he founded the Songhai Centre, he was convinced "*Tomorrow would be different, because God was going to help us and that injustice could be pushed away*" (*History of Songhai*, n.d.).

The farming method used in the Songhai Centre, which is considered to share a lot of the beliefs and incorporates the view of radical relationality, is agroecology. This is a fundamentally different agriculture system, based on holistic strategies (Wezel et al., 2018). The concept of relationality could be partly expressed by holism as well, as the concept holism is referring to a state of complex interdependency in which each organism plays a role (Ikeke, 2015). According to the African philosophy, every being exists to strengthen other beings; no being just exists for just individually existing. This fits within the interpretations of holism that says that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts (Callicott, 1988).

Agroecology is described as one of the solutions to overcome problems in food scarcity and quality and to contribute to economic, social and ecological justice. The first mention of this form of agriculture in science was in 1928, and it can refer to a science, a movement and a practice (Silici, 2014; Wezel et al., 2018). A common used definition is: "*the application of ecological concepts and principles to the design and management of sustainable agro-ecosystems*" (Altieri, 1995, p.10), because it describes the theoretical and practical aspects used to make the farm more resilient and sustainable well (Silici, 2014). However, the essential idea of agroecology, which includes social and political aspects such as autonomy, community and bottom-up local management is missing here (Anderson et al., 2019). Therefore in this thesis the following definition will be used, which I also consider to fit better within Nzamujo's view:

*"Agroecology entails a process of continuous transition that does not follow prescriptive rules, but*

*is based on core principles, values, or elements that inform agroecology in the cultural, ecological, and social specificities of place. In the long run, agroecology aims to reduce dependence upon external inputs, thereby contributing to the autonomy of food-producing families and communities”* (Rosset & Martínez-Torres, 2012, p2).

Besides the concept of interconnectedness that the philosophy of radical Relationality provides, it also gives a possible different perspective on the human-nature relationship. In western philosophies, an anthropocentrism view exists where there is a clear distinction between humans and nature; it is a very dualistic relationship. In the Christian church, this distinction can be recognized as well. Originally, the Christian church described the relationship between humans and the earth in the way that the earth was gifted by God, and the humans could treat it any way they preferred. Around the fifties, this view shifted and the bible’s interpretation of humans being a steward of the earth became more popular (Browning, 2008; Mckeown, 2007). In a study on human-nature relationships of US Midwestern farmers, it is confirmed that some farmers share this interpretation, as they see themselves as the stewards of the earth, which means they feel like they have to take care of their lands and it is their responsibility to feed humanity. (Yoshida et al., 2018). However in the African philosophy this distinction is not that clear, and both human and non-human objects can have the same value and power.

The relationship that exists between humans and nature affect the behaviour of people, including farmers. Closer relationships, which are expressed in different ways, have proven to lead to an increase in sustainable behaviour and a greater appreciation to non-human species (Gosling & Williams, 2010). This applies to farmers as well, because when farmers perceived a stronger human-nature relationship, more choices in favour of the earth were made by them; transforming to organic agriculture (Klimek et al., 2002), improving water quality (Yoshida et al., 2018) and nature conservation (Gosling & Williams, 2010). This means additionally, that great possibilities for agroecology lie ahead here (Singh Bisht & Chand Rana, 2020).

These relationships are influenced by factors that go beyond local landscapes (Yoshida et al., 2018). Among others, religion including its spirituality can attribute to the human-nature relationship (Vieira Botelho et al., 2016). Spirituality has always been important in food and farming and there is a close relation to the origin of religion and human’s way of dealing with nature. This spiritual origin should be the source of inspiration for farmers and for the modern society, according to Grün (2010). For agroecology, spirituality is an important value and is the base in our way of working with nature (Silici, 2014).

I will illustrate the relation of farming and spirituality with an example of the farming communities of Uttarakhand, India. These farmers have been praying for good farming weather, protection from plant diseases and for fruitful harvests for millennia. Furthermore, based on traditional ecological knowledge, many crops and food resources are used for spiritual or religious purposes. Another spiritual aspect of farming can be made explicit by the saying: ‘You are what you eat’. This saying acknowledges the spiritual aspect to the food farmers consume (Singh Bisht & Chand Rana, 2020). These farmers have an understanding that *“in order to be healthy in mind, body and spirit, it is essential to be spiritually connected to the food they eat and to relish the experience of eating”* (Singh Bisht & Chand Rana, 2020, p.13). For them it is as important or even more important *how* to eat, than *what* to eat. This case, representing local farming communities, shows us that by listening to their inner feelings and relations, farmers can contribute to overall health, well-being and a wholesome life for communities (Singh Bisht & Chand Rana, 2020).

With the current high-production pressures of the dominant paradigm of conventional agricultural industry however, and while taking into account their livelihood and humanitarian



considerations, it is hard for farmers to act on upon their human-nature relationships, spirituality and own perspectives to individually transform their food system (Karami & Keshavarz, 2010; Yoshida et al., 2018). In other words, stronger human-nature relationships and alternative and sustainable farming ideas are not enough; collective action is essential. Here, food networks can play a key role to transform the current food system that is into place (Anderson et al., 2019; Gliessman, 2016). Cooperation is a key value of agroecology, and using this to set up a food network could help to stimulate local change, as well as upscaling agroecology (Anderson et al., 2019; Wezel et al., 2018). The Songhai Centre is a perfect example of a successful and upscaled agroecological food network by sharing the same beliefs, religion and a goal, a food network was created with three ethical principles: autochthonous, autonomous and authentic (Verharen et al., 2021).

As the Songhai Centre shows us, setting up alternative food networks could help to set up and sustain agroecological farming practises. Therefore it is important to explore the foundations that are necessary to build such a food network. According to multiple case studies, food networks are mostly founded in niches: spaces that are in some way, either in time or space, away from the hostile pressures of the dominant paradigm (Anderson et al., 2019). Bottom-up approaches and community-based organizations are of great importance here and communities are mostly based on sharing a collective identity, history or morals (Andersson Djurfeldt et al., 2014). Moreover, the social relations trusts and cooperation that exist between different actors within the network, from now on described under the umbrella term 'social cohesion', are considered to play a huge role in setting up and sustaining food networks (Wezel et al., 2018). As Mier y Terán Giménez Cacho et al. (2018, p.645) state: "*Social organization is the culture medium upon which agroecology grows*". They reviewed five case studies and found that social cohesion played a crucial role in the succession of an agroecology organization. Hirschi (2010) confirms this by stating that a high level of social cohesion can facilitate change within the network. The higher the level of social cohesion, the more likely that a local network pursues a joint strategy and achieves a common goal together. Furthermore, the case studies of Mier y Terán Giménez Cacho et al. (2018) identified eight key drivers of scaling-up possibilities for agroecological practises, including social organisation. The concept of social cohesion has been described in many ways so I will further elaborate on this concept in my theoretical framework.

Now I have shown that social cohesion is crucial to set up an alternative food network and to change the dominant agricultural system, I will explore how social cohesion is created or strengthened. According to Bruhn (2009), social cohesion in communities can be created by one or more of the following methods: Community covenants, kinship and ethnic ties, cultural spirituality, collective socialization, social transformation, intervention, a subordinate goal and community. These methods, that strengthen social cohesion, could be stimulated by religion and a church that is functioning as an overarching organisation, both in tangible and intangible aspects (Jarosz, 2000). By that is referred to the church' practises which could contribute to collective thoughts, worldviews and spirituality, as well as that the church as a building could function as a meeting point and the centre for the local community (Otsuki, 2013). The role of religion and its spirituality has not been well addressed in either of social cohesion theories (Bruhn, 2009). Yet, religion and spirituality may play key roles forming and sustaining agroecological food networks. Religion is an important factor in in social issues and public life, thereby also important in the forming of social cohesion: According to Cloete (2014), religious traditions are the moral social and spiritual bedrock that build communities and enhance social cohesion. Another study even showed that the social cohesion that is associated with those inside religious institutions, could have some kind of spill-over effect into the broader community (Mason, M.J., Schmidt, C. & Mennis, 2012). In addition to this, Andersson Djurfeldt et al. (2014)

mention that religious communities have been able, on several occasions, to scale up and diversify their practises and activities from local and proceeded to large scale, (inter)national scope.

To explore the role of spirituality and social cohesion in a food network further, I performed an ethnographic study in the Dominican monastery in Zwolle, the Netherlands. This monastery, which is my case study, is inspired by Nzamujo's work in Benin and desires to put his ideas into action in Zwolle. He visited the monastery of Zwolle in the first week of November 2021, to exchange ideas, teach his methods in seminars and talk with farmers. This visit was part of the project 'GROND' (ground) that has been happening over the year prior to his visit. For this agroecological project, both practical and theoretical activities have been organised, including reflection groups and days to work on a farm. Therefore this monastery perfectly lends itself for this research on the role of religion in a agroecological food network. In this monastery, Christianity is practised according to the Dominican tradition, where there is no strict order of practising spirituality, but some key elements are: a great focus on intellectual studies, spreading knowledge and a critical attitude towards the church and society. Moreover the Dominican followers always stay close to urban life (*Dominicanen*, n.d.).

The monastery has been existing and practising their religion with their parishioners for more than a hundred years, therefore some kind of social cohesion is already existing. This kind of cohesion is referred to as accumulated cohesiveness, which describes how well a group has maintained its cohesive features over time. The current cohesiveness describes how a group or community is maintaining its cohesiveness at the current time (Bruhn, 2009). The former is referring to cohesiveness that might be found in the church community, while the latter is interesting for this case study, since the agroecology project 'GROND' is rather new, in practise since one year, so it is interesting to study how the cohesion is currently developing or maintaining in the extended food network, thus including other actors. Examining the social cohesion between actors in the local food network can identify the obstacles and opportunities within the network (Jarosz, 2000). Moreover, it could give insights how the agroecological message of 'GROND', which is including the relation between nature and humans, is incorporated in the cohesion of the local food network.

This research's general objective is to determine the role of human-nature relationships and spirituality in creating and sustaining agroecological food networks, by investigating how social cohesion is established in the food network of the Dominican monastery in Zwolle, the Netherlands. This objective translates into the following research questions:

General research question: What are the roles of social cohesion and spiritual values in creating an agroecological food network ?

- What spiritual values are recognizable in the human-nature relationships of the individuals in the food network?
- How is social cohesion established in the church community?
- How does social cohesion support the extended food network?
- How do human-nature relationships, spirituality and social cohesion support transforming the (local) food network from the dominant agriculture paradigm to agroecology?

In order to answer these questions, I performed a ethnographic study for the period of one month, including participative observation and interviews with people connected to the monastery. I

further explain my methods in my methodology. While observing, I took on a relationality approach, which I further elaborate on in my theoretical framework.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Social cohesion and spiritual values through an radical relationality lens, in an agroecology context.

In this study I will use the radical relationality lens to study the concepts of social cohesion and spirituality. In this theoretical framework, I first describe the main ideas of radical relationality, as well as the concepts behind spirituality. Furthermore I describe human-nature relations and how these relations differs in light of a western world view and looked at it through the radical relationality philosophy. This is relevant to describe here, since in agroecology relations between nature and humans play a role. Moreover this relation must be taken into account when I study social cohesion, as nature plays a role in the social network and possibly in spirituality as well. Lastly I describe the concepts to understand social cohesion.

### **2.1. Radical relationality**

Radical Relationality is a key principle of African cosmology. It extends throughout all of African understanding of the natural world, the ecosystems, humanity, and life beyond the present life. Godfrey Nzamujo, who is the key guest of the 'GROND' agroecology project in Zwolle, lives and works accordingly to the radical relationality philosophy (Nzamujo, 2020). Since the project 'GROND' is organised to learn from African's view of agroecology, it makes no sense to use any other theory than the African relationality. However, the relationality philosophy is not place-restricted to Africa and can be practiced by people of African ancestry and by people of other nationalities (Ikeke, 2015).

It believes that all things in the universe are inter-related (Ikeke, 2015). Bénézet Bujo, a Central African theologian states about the relationality: *"The African is convinced that all things in the cosmos are interconnected. All natural forces depend on each other, so that human beings can live in harmony only in and with the whole of nature."* (Behrens, 2014, p.66). From the relationality perspective, human life is connected to the ancestral world and linked with God, gods, divinities, spirits, and other forces in the universe. In this view, the relationship of interaction among the various things, persons, and beings in the universe, is a necessity; without it, life will be stagnant, immobile, and inert, or more drastically; there is no life. Without being related to other beings and realities, no beings of life are existing (Ikeke, 2015). Cooper also describes this importance of relationality, where she explains that *"belonging together in a relationship is a fundamental characteristic of human life and it tells us something important about who we are and how we ought to live our lives"* (Cooper (1988), as mentioned in White, 2020, p.209). Cooper's general conception of humanity is that each human exists as part of an *"interacting, evolving, and genetically related community of beings bound together inseparably in space and time"* (Cooper, 1988, as mentioned in White, 2020, p.209).

### **2.2. Spirituality**

Spirituality is a complex concept, has many and various interpretations and means something different for many people. A lot of overlap exists with religion, the two are not mutually exclusive (Ferguson & Tamburello, 2015). Sheldrake describes that the word spirituality finds its origin in Christianity, from the Latin word 'spiritualis', which is found in the new testament. Here, a spiritual person was described as someone that was seeking how to live with God in its life, without seeking its individual success. Therefore, Sheldrake (2012) concludes that the term spirituality always have been connected with Christianity. However, Waaijman (2000) makes an interesting point by saying that it is incorrect to state that God is only for religious people; spirituality should not restrain God just in the religious spheres. God finds its origin in both religion and other secular spiritualities. This also applies to spirituality, that even within

postmodern society, finds a wide form of expressions, including in various kinds of religious affiliation (Chile & Simpson, 2004). In this section I will define the spirituality which arises from a base of religion, but can ascend from that as well.

A simple definition of spirituality is: *“An experience in which one is connected with something ‘other’ than one’s self that transcends individuality and gives a deeper meaning to life”* (Schroeder, 1992). Bucher added two different dimensions to the concept of spirituality, when he attempted to define spirituality by studying several qualitative and quantitative studies. He found a vertical and horizontal orientation on the phenomenon of spirituality (Bucher, 2014). The horizontal dimension is about the connectedness between human, nature, cosmos and fellow creatures. The vertical dimension describes the connectedness between the immanent (the deepest being of man) and the transcendent (the higher being). So Bucher concludes that the key of spirituality is the vertical and horizontal connectedness.

However these vertical and horizontal dimensions contradict with the African relationality perspective, in which is believed that the physical and spiritual are not existing far away in two separated worlds, but that physical and spiritual are closely related: *“Man lives in a sacramental universe where there is no sharp dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual. The spiritual acts as a vehicle for spiritual power whilst the physical realm is held to be patterned on the model of the spiritual world beyond”* (Turaki 2006, 32, as cited in (Ikeke, 2015). It does not mean however, there is no division between the two at all. As mentioned before about natural objects, it also applies to spiritual and physical realms that are not similar, but do share some intrinsic unity. Furthermore, some aspects of nature are viewed as more sacred and special than others, as the natural world is not homogenous. In the African perspective some things are considered to carry a higher power than others, however all things do carry some power, and all reality is considered religious (Ikeke, 2015). All these different elements in nature intersect and interpenetrate, as Oborji confirms: *“The universe is a composite of divine, spirit, human, animate and inanimate elements, hierarchically perceived, but directly related and always interacting with each other”* (Oborji, 2005. p.38).

The following definition does not make any distinction in dimensions, therefore is more fitting for this thesis: *“Spirituality is the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature, and to the significant or sacred.”* (Puchalski et al, 2009, p.887). I will use this definition, but with the footnote about the practising of spirituality that Sheldrake (2012) shed light on: He states that self-reflection is a necessity of spirituality, without reflection it is not possible to experience the full spirituality. Moreover it is about developing multiple interpretations of the concept of religion and finding meaning. The way someone experiences spirituality, is dependent on the context and culture (Sheldrake, 2012).

### **2.3. Radical-relationality and human-nature relations**

Western worldviews, that have likely played a part in the global ecological crisis that I shortly described in the introduction, are dualistic, colonial, and tend to radically separate the natural world from the human, promote human superiority over nature, and place the human as distinctively distinct from nature (Ikeke, 2015). This is considered as anthropocentrism and include capitalism where modern agriculture acts and also Christianity has these human-over-nature aspects in their worldview (Paterson, 1998). On the contrary, in almost all indigenous philosophies, the earth is portrayed as equal. For example the Andean philosophy ‘Vivir Bien’, where ‘Pachamama’, simply translated as Mother Earth, is seen as the whole and where

everything on earth and above is interconnected (Solón, 2017). Here, the earth is more like a living organism where all parts are related to each other, interdependent and exchange things, similar to a big ecosystem (Solón, 2017). This means that the whole, the earth and its surroundings, has a spiritual dimension in which the conceptions of self, of the community and of nature are based on inter-relations. (Solón, 2017).

Radical Relationality is a corresponding philosophy which also has an opposing view to the west on the human-nature distinction. In this philosophy it is argued that while humans are not the same as nature, humans share so much with nature that humans should be seen as one of nature (Ikeke, 2015). Agrawal & Gibson (1999) mention that plants have always played a key role in the life of humans and humans are entangled in relationships with plants. However, in western science, plants have been viewed as passive, while according to relationality, plants have an active nature and agency. Fundamental is the assumption that all natural objects share something, this could either be an individual, intrinsic property, which could be a spirit or ancestor, or a relational characteristic, like mutual dependence. Whether it is individual or relational, natural units are still understood as interrelated, because something is shared among them. This interrelatedness is an opposing perspective on the Western anthropocentric view of humanity's position against the rest of nature (Behrens, 2014).

#### **2.4. Social cohesion**

When defining social cohesion, social capital comes up in a lot of literature, as it is a concept that is closely related to social cohesion. In this thesis I specifically look at social cohesion instead of social capital, since social capital is about the individual's sacrifices that are made to cooperate in a certain group, while social cohesion is about characteristics of the society itself (Oxoby, 2009). So while social capital is the prerequisite of social cohesion (Cloete, 2014), the focus of this research is on the local network with its foundations in the monastery of Zwolle, therefore social cohesion is more fitting. Moreover, social cohesion fits better within the relationality perspective, where the focus is on relations instead of personal sacrifices.

**Table 1** The five dimensions of social cohesion (Jenson, 1998, as mentioned in Fenger, 2012)

Dimension of social cohesion	Description of dimension
Inclusion	The state of being included within a group
Recognition	Acknowledgement of the existence of others and their actions
Belonging	An expression of a feeling of belonging the group or church is mentioned
Legitimacy	Belief that a rule, institution, or leader has the right to govern
Participation	Willingness to participate or help, or the action of participating or helping in the group

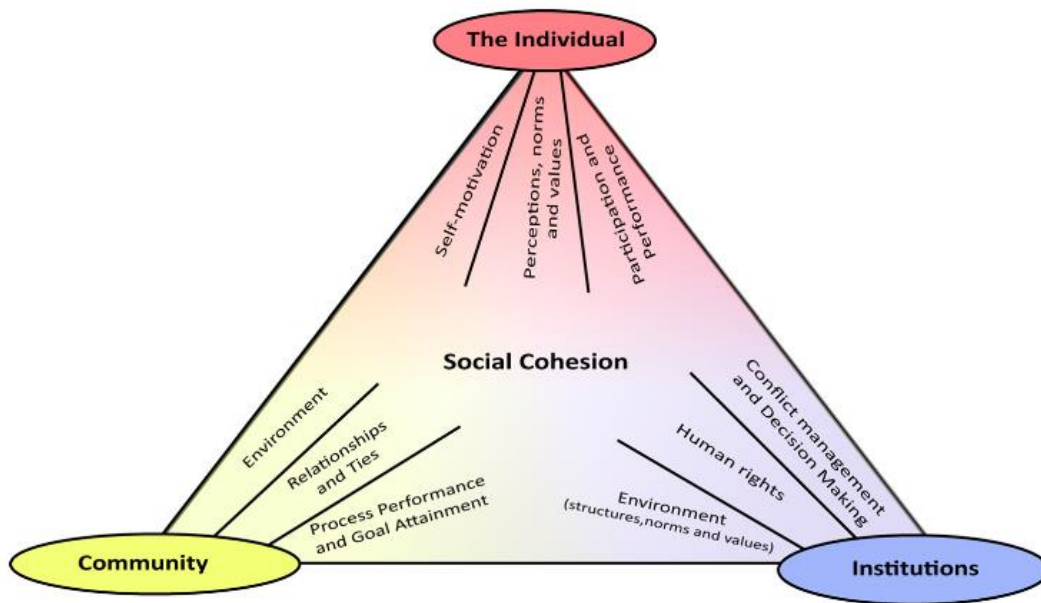
It is hard to find consensus on a definition of social cohesion, but what is clear, is that it is something that glues us together (Fenger, 2012). It is understood to be a multidimensional and multilevel concept, with five explicit dimensions: inclusion, recognition, belonging, legitimacy and participation (Table 1) (Jenson, 1998, as mentioned in Fenger, 2012). I will use these five concrete dimensions of social cohesion in my research. Michalos (2014) emphasize this strong sense of belonging, which is often created through an interdependence of goals within the group. Shared feelings of morale influence the perception of social cohesion by individuals as well (Michalos,

2014). Fenger (2012) proposes that social cohesion consists of four dimensions: Economical, cultural, social and political. I believe those dimensions fit within the following definition: *“a state of affairs concerning both the vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of society as characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioural manifestations”* (Chan et al., 2006, p.290). With vertical Chan et al. (2006) refer to the relation between the state and society, which fitting into this study could also refer to the relationship between church and society. Horizontal refers to the interactions between different individuals and groups in society (J. Chan et al., 2006).

Adjusted to the radical relationality philosophy, members of society do not have to refer to individuals, neither just to humans. In the network where social cohesion is observed in this thesis, other natural and sacred objects are also considered to play a role in the network, since social relations can exist and occur with non-humans as well; all objects do play a part in social cohesion (Petersen et al., 2019). Behrens (2014) confirms that according to the African relationality perspective, not just living human beings but also inanimate objects and spirits are involved in the social network. Thereby the African philosophy stresses that social cohesion is essential, as only through connection, bonding and a strong community, the fullness of life is achieved. Humans share life, instead of owning it. Furthermore, all aspects of nature are interconnected, which means that also the ecological activities are a network (Behrens, 2014). This is in line with the agroecological way of thinking, where an imbalance in one aspect of the ecological or social network always has consequences for other aspects in the network (Silici, 2014).

#### 2.4.1. Framework of social cohesion

To enable the creation of a research design around this concept and to conceptualize social cohesion in the food network, I make use of the work of Fonseca et al.(2019). This framework (Figure 1) is created on the basis of an extensive literature review and shows what factors are important to social cohesion. Although these aspects can measure cohesion, the framework is generic enough to be extended by other factors that are now not mentioned, but can still be discovered. The framework describes cohesion based on three different actors and shows the connections and interdependencies between the individual, the community and institutions. For each actor in this triangle, factors that describe social cohesion have been identified. On the basis of these factors, I am able to illustrate the food network’s cohesion from a different angle, while the five different dimensions of social cohesion described by Jenson (1998, as mentioned in Fenger, 2012) are found within these factors simultaneously. In my studied food network, the individuals are farmers, parishioners, and brothers. According to this framework, I focus on their self motivation, perception norms and values and participation and performance. These factors have similarities with, and furthermore expand the five dimensions. The community’s social cohesion covers the church community, which is extensively described in 4.2.. Here the factors include the environment the community exists in, relationships and ties, including their relationship with farmers and lastly goal attainment. Process performance is not applicable in the community. The institution involved in the church community is the Catholic church, with the Vatican as the highest power position. Concerning the food network, the local and national governments are additionally in place. The institutions’ part of the food network’s social cohesion is described by conflict management and decision making, human rights and the environment including structures, norms and values.



*Figure 1 Framework to characterize social cohesion (Fonseca et al., 2009).*



### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Methods

In order to answer the research questions one month of ethnographic field research was performed. During the ethnographic field research I used multiple methods to study the case, which is common in qualitative research. Combining multiple methods, understood as a triangulation of methods, provided me to understand the phenomenon as well as possible (Kumar, 2019). Moreover, it increased the validity of my research. As Fontana and Frey (2005, p.22) stated: *“Humans are complex, and their lives are ever changing. The more methods we use to study them, the better our chances will be to gain some understanding of how they construct their lives and the stories they tell us about them”*.

In this one month of field research, I stayed in a host family in Zwolle and I attend the activities of the monastery in Zwolle for which I got consent to join. This included, among others, the programme when Father and Dr. Godfrey Nzamujo was in the Netherlands, in the first week of the field research month, including two focus groups where farmers and brothers were present, praying sessions of the brothers, church masses, choir rehearsals, coffee breaks, reflection groups organised by my fellow master student who also performed her field research there. I was at the monastery almost daily during this month, to experience as much of the monastery activities as possible.

During attending those activities I performed participant observation and small interviews. I acted as an *observer as participant*, which means participated in the group activities, though the focus is on collecting data (Kawulich, 2005). This participant observation allowed me to check for nonverbal as verbal communication, find out who is interacting with whom, check their interrelations and determine how participants communicate with each other and perhaps with the spiritual aspects. Participant observation was useful in this study as it allowed me to use multiple methods and it reduced the reactivity of members within the community, as I was present for a longer period of time. During these activities I used a notebook where I wrote short notes, that might be useful for quoting and I wrote notes during observations of occurrences that were relevant to my research questions. Herewith I carried out a *focused observation* (Kawulich, 2005), meaning that insights I gained during interviews and observation, functioned as a guide line on what is relevant to focus on. Afterwards, I wrote out what I observed. Moreover I wrote down my own reflections, including my reflection on my own objectivity and my key takeaways of that activity, which are more similar to a diary type entry. Except for church masses and praying sessions, I had the opportunity to ask for consent from all participants, which allowed me to record the session. These recordings came in handy when reflecting or when quoting someone correctly. Recording a session allowed me participate more in the moment itself and focus less on taking notes at the same time. The small interviews performed during participant observation were open and based on interview formats (Appendix II). This topic list was based both on the first participant observations notes, as on relevant literature.

Next to participant observation, 11 semi-structured interviews were carried out. I performed the interviews with a fellow master student that also studied the community, though with different research questions. We performed the interviews together to not bother the participants twice. The interviews were planned, so participants were not asked on the spot. Semi-structured interviews were based on an interview format (Appendix II) and allowed me to probe and alter the order of questions. This allowed participants to elaborate on some answers, while I still was able to keep direction and focus during the interviews (Kumar, 2019). The duration of these semi-structured interviews varied between 50-120 minutes.

Using multiple methods helped me understanding my results better: With participant observation I understood the context of the interviews better and with interviews I was able to elaborate and find more in-depth information about things I observed during participant observation.

## **3.2. Dataset**

### **3.2.1. Location**

I performed the research in the Dominican monastery in Zwolle (Figure 2), where brothers have been living since 1901, after a farmers couple offered their land to them. Currently four brothers are still living in the monastery, from which three are ordained as a priest.

The monastery is a rectorate church, so that the brothers are connected to parishioners as well. The church community describes itself as a community of faith where everyone is welcomed and the community is open to developments in church and society.

Since the Dominican church is Catholic, the legitimacy is eventually coming from the Vatican. However, since it the church is connected to the monastery, the Vatican's influence is less so the church is are a bit more free in Zwolle, as some of the participants explained. Some brothers are priests and are preaching in the church, next to two female pastoral workers that preach on the Saturdays and Sundays. Also there is a church board that makes decisions on activities and programmes. Since a new generation of Dominican brothers is lacking, but some people do not want to lose the Dominican spirituality and beliefs, the group of lay-Dominicans was founded in 1999. The lay-Dominicans organise themselves nationally and share and contribute to the Dominican beliefs.



*Figure 2 Courtyard garden of the Dominican monastery  
(Erik Karst, 2019, <https://bijzonderzwolle.nl/blog/bijzondere-historie-dominicanenkerk-en-klooster>).*

### **3.2.2. Sampling and sampling group**

During my participant observations I observed the brothers and the parishioners. Being present during several activities allows me to get to know the community members and facilitate meetings for interviews with them. This could be described as convenient and snowball sampling to arrange more in-depth interviews. I interviewed two farmers, a father and son, which were connected to the monastery. Next to this I also interviewed a farmer that was present during one

of the focus groups with farmers and brothers. This sampling gave me a diverse sampling group, which is visualised in figure 3. I stayed at a couple of 50-60 years old that are both parishioners of the monastery. Therefore, conversations and practises I experienced with them, were very fruitful as data and background information for my research. My main studies focused on the data I collected during observations and interviews. Some paper documents were used during my field work, such as the Sunday's mass booklet, however I did not make use of those in my data analysis, since I was interested in the participants' perspectives.

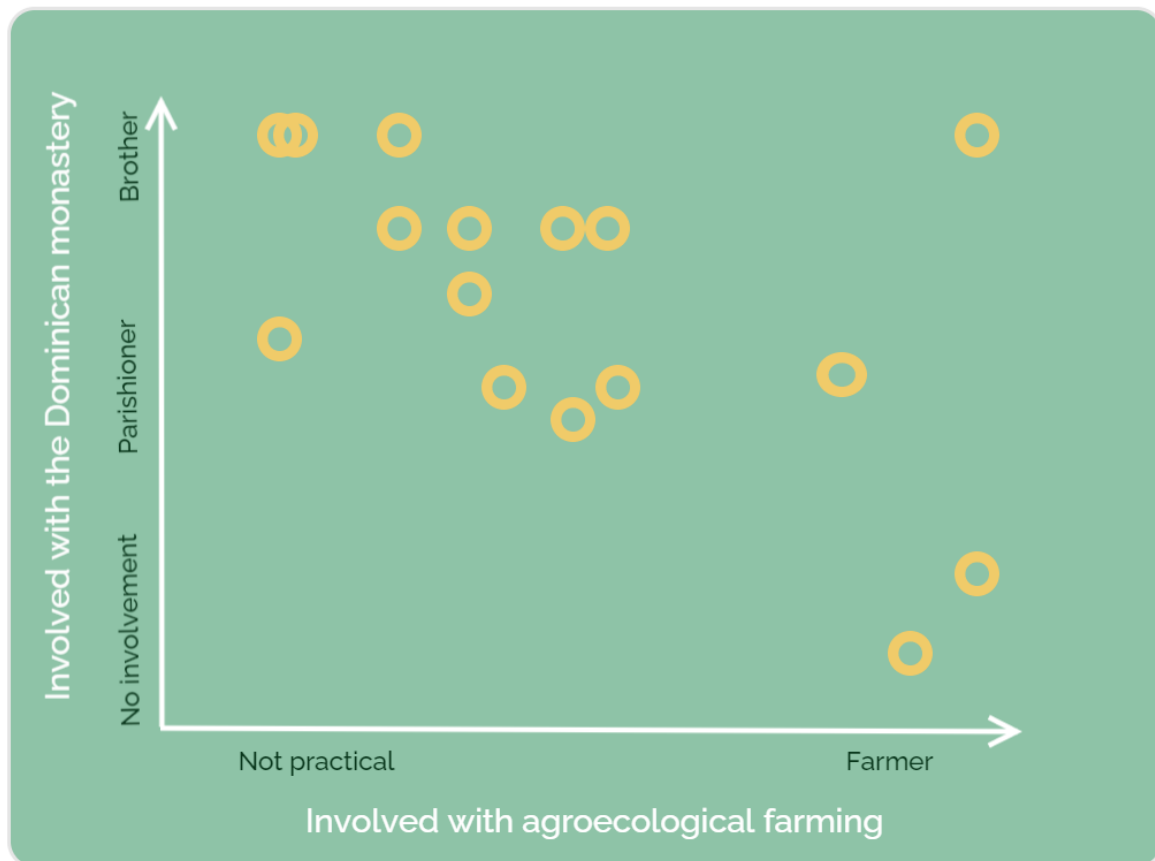


Figure 3: Visualisation of sampling group.

### **3.3. Data analysis**

Field notes gained during participant observation, are considered to be both data and analysis (Kawulich, 2005). I did use the observation notes particularly to understand the context of what has been said and I could use some relevant quotes gained during observations. Otherwise, I did not analyse the participation notes.

Interviews, focus groups and reflection groups were transcribed, making use of the tool otranscribe.com. Then, the transcripts were loaded into the coding programme *Atlas.ti*, which allowed me to organise all of the codes and visualise the results. Codes are described as "rules for organizing symbols into larger and more meaningful strings of symbols. It is important, no imperative, to construct a coding system not because the coding system represents the 'true' structure of the process you are studying, but because it offers a framework for organizing and thinking about the data" (Munck, Victor C. & Sobó, 1998, p.48). The transcripts, a total of 15 documents (Appendix III), were coded in two different rounds (Appendix IV). First, inductive coding was used, which means codes were created during the coding process, based on the document's content. Then these codes were grouped and visualised in coding networks. Those

networks, each showing a theme, were described (Appendix V). The other round of coding is deductive, which means a codebook was created before coding. This codebook was created with the help of grounded theory that was relevant for my research questions.

Finally, I used both the themes constructed in the inductive coding round as the coding obtained from deductive coding to work out my results. On the basis of my research questions, I merged my data and added relevant quotes that capture specific aspects. When referring to participants, I only used their function related to the monastery, since their names are not relevant in this study. When merging data, I excluded the opinion of the farmers when discussing social cohesion, since farmers are not involved with the monastery and thus are not included in the social cohesion community. So when mentioning the farmers' opinions concerning cohesion, I made that explicit. When talking about the regional food network, farmers must be included since they belong in this extended network.

#### **3.4. Positionality**

I am a female, mid-20's, Dutch, middle-class Caucasian master student. I live in a big city, Utrecht, and my political orientation is left and progressive. I am a vegetarian and make sustainable choices concerning food, which might have affected my positionality on the transformation to a agroecology food system, since I am pro that development. Additionally, since I am in favour of sustainable living, participants might have felt like having to give the socially desired answer or felt judged by me. Next, I am non-religious, but I grew up in a Christian environment, where I went to a Catholic primary school. Because of this, I do celebrate Christian holidays, such as Christmas and Easter. Although I do not practise any religion, I believe because of growing up in this environment, I unconsciously share some values that could be recognized in the Christian church. To study a religious network while being non-religious, could have affected my positionality in two ways. First, participants could be reluctant to give me some answers. Secondly, I could feel like an outsider or intruder for coming into their space while not sharing their same values and beliefs. I could feel uncomfortable or fake for attending religious activities. I reflect on this in 5.6

#### **3.5. Ethics**

I already gained access to the monastery since their board has requested the science shop of WUR to perform research on the connection of their monastery and agroecology. Still, other people than the board were present during observations and interviews. Therefore I always explicitly asked for their consent to participate in my interviews and make them aware I was doing research. During my observations, the present people knew I was an observer as participant, which means the participants were aware of being studied. Additionally, I shared the purpose of my studies and explain what activities I was observing. However during the mass, I was not able to explain to everyone that I was observing, yet on the monastery's website there had been an announcement that two master students would be present for one month, explaining the research in a blog post. All data were collected anonymously, however the functions/relation with the church were mentioned with their consent, since that was relevant for the data analysis.

I am aware that I was taking up space in their religious practises, which could be considered as an invasion of their privacy. Though, most of the practises I attended were open to the public, and this church welcomes everyone.

## 4. Results

The data have been analysed through deductive and inductive coding and here I present the results of this analysis. The results are discussed based on the research questions, which provides four chapters: First, the human-nature relationships and its spiritual values are discussed (4.1.), following the church community's (4.2.) and food network's cohesion (4.3.) and finally the potential and challenges of the transformation to a new food network is discussed (4.4.), using the results presented in 4.1., 4.2. and 4.3..

### **4.1. Human-nature relationships and spiritual values**

Among the study pool, I observed a variety of human-nature relationships, varying across a scale from anthropocentric views to radical relationality.

#### **4.1.1. Anthropocentric views**

I recognized anthropocentric views, when nature is described as something humans are not a part of. A concept that is included in this anthropocentric view and is abundantly found in my data is 'wilderness'. Wilderness is recognized when nature is described with a certain roughness and outside of humans' influence. Many respondents described nature as green environments, without human-made things in there. The participants' definition of nature sheds light on conserved nature areas that are left alone, where animals live freely 'in the wild'. As mentioned in one of the interviews, their definition of nature is: *"Almost everything which is not human"* (Parishioner). To farmers, the same applies when they spoke about enjoying nature. When the interviewed farmers spoke about their farms and agriculture, the view of only wild animals that are considered as nature is confirmed (Ikeke, 2015; Paterson, 1998); they do not see their living animals and land as nature, but they do consider them as their commodities.

#### **4.1.2. Separated, yet inferior**

Literature shows that within an anthropocentric view, humans often view themselves as superior to other living creatures (Ikeke, 2015), while my data show that participants often feel small in nature. Their description of feeling small is associated with them being a very small part of an unimaginable universe. Some stated it as feeling inferior to the universe and the creation of God. The latter is mentioned often: The participants paraphrased stories of the Bible about creation, and how the creation is 'something' to be grateful for. Participants mentioned that this gratefulness should be expressed through responsible and caring behaviour towards the earth and nature, again placing humans next to nature instead of within. This theological belief is often described in literature as stewardship (Browning, 2008; Mckeown, 2007). Reasons for this stewardship are, as explained by participants: It is the gift of God, so you have to be grateful for it and you have to pass it on to the next generation. Moreover, people feel a certain reciprocity when taking care of nature. The following quote both stresses that the earth is a gift of God and humans have to treat it that way, as well as the concept of wilderness. In addition, by mentioning the holy ground, this lay-Dominican does separate itself from nature, but is not above it:

*"There is a text in the Bible, where God tells Mozes: Do not go any further, the ground you are standing on is holy ground. And I believe we have to approach the earth in that way, as holy ground. Nothing more or less. Just taking care of it. (...) well, The Netherlands is of course becoming more like a park instead of nature."* (Lay-Dominican)

#### **4.1.3. Radical relationality views**

A small group of participants mentioned aspects of radical relationality exclusively, most participants mention both, depending on the context. For there is a contrast between what the participants are saying when directly answering the question on radical relationality, and talking

about something else, such as spending time in nature. Then, thoughts with a more anthropocentric perspective shine through. Such as, a participant explained viewing everything alive as nature, but later while talking about being in nature, the participant spoke about how they could only enjoy nature in a conservation park where no other humans were present. While their definitions of nature have a lot of anthropocentric aspects, simultaneously nature is seen as something that is connected to everything. Hence, my data confirm the traditional ideas of an anthropocentric worldview, yet inferior, Christian stewardship, though some aspects of radical relationality are found as well (Ikeke, 2015; Paterson, 1998). For instance, after Godfrey's visit that taught them about the term radical relationality, participants confirm this idea, for example:

*"Well, it's a concept that I already came across before while reading Francis of Assisi, when he says, when he talks about sister earth, brother earth, sister sun: That is kind of, looking at nature in a kind of family term. So that relationality is not just a fun innovative idea, it is also fundamental to creation, which is put together like that. That already starts with micro-organisms, but the overall coherence is at the core of existence. Moreover, it is not just that coherence, but also relationality in the sense of involvement, relationship, back and forth, needing each other, enjoying each other. That wholesomeness, that evokes a certain way of looking. Exactly this concept of relationship. I think that's a beautiful thing."* (Parishioner)

#### 4.1.4. Spirituality and nature

One aspect of spirituality according to my theoretical framework is connectedness with nature. Descriptions of connecting with nature, which I describe here as dancing with nature, are abundant in my data. Connecting to the moment and self are other aspects of spirituality that the participants experience regularly when they are present in nature. Along these lines, God is experienced in nature by the participants and farmers have their own kind of connectedness to nature. I describe both in the following sections.

##### Connecting and dancing with nature

Participants expressed the following feelings towards, their definition of, nature: Wonder, appreciating and paying attention to the beauty, gratitude and calmness. Most participants spend their time in nature and connect with nature by just being present in it, instead of having physical interactions with it. For example, working with your hands, such as farming and gardening. Godfrey Nzamujo described connecting with nature as dancing with nature: listening to nature, looking at it differently, and acting on that. *"If you don't let nature talk to you, you are reflecting yourself in nature and you are talking to yourself."* (Nzamujo). The participants dance with nature, thereby connecting, each in their own way. Some participants spoke about how they dance aligned with nature's seasons. One participant explained that during autumn they have less energy so they undertake fewer activities and they get rid of things, just like a tree let go of its leaves, while during spring they invest in new friendships and projects, similar to plants that are sprouting and growing. This shows that participants are both connecting to nature as to the moment. The following quote from one of the brothers describes how he dances with nature very well:

*"Yeah, dancing with nature, what is nature for me? Nature means the age, you age, with its limitations. Dancing, can you dance with your limitations? That is a challenge. Dancing to music. We have in our city, in our building, in the midst of it there is a beautiful garden and that is something of nature. So to look at the seasons, that is dancing with nature. The summer, but also autumn, wintertime and to enjoy every season, not only the summer but all things, I like it. It is to accommodate yourself with changes, our situation today is, our building is sold, but we will still live in it, the circumstances and the situation are changing a lot. And so can you... enjoy it, see the*



*challenge, see new possibilities, for me that means dancing.”* (Dominican brother) Another participant explained that by dancing with nature, nature is like a tutor for them, teaching them the flow of life. With this, the participant meant that nature shows that everything in life flows naturally; people are born and are dying, and sometimes there is nothing else to do than just accept this reality. This means not resisting too much, but just letting life flow.

*“Nature is teaching me the limits and perhaps the horror of life. Things that could go wrong, animals that die, or a harvest that fails, and you cannot do anything else than just let it be. You have done everything you can but then realize: it is not one’s control. I think that is a spiritual experience; that all the time, you are confronted with the fact that some things cannot be created, and just happen.”*(Parishioner)

Other aspects of spirituality are recognized in nature as well, namely connectedness to self and the moment. Some participants find calmness and quietness aspects of nature that connect them to it, by bringing themselves to a calmer mental state as well, finding peace. I describe these feelings towards nature as meditative values, as these effects are often achieved after meditation (Unsworth et al., 2016). Two of the following quotes capture these feelings:

*“That you, in addition to everything you have to do in the hustle and bustle of life, can be done in all kinds of ways, but that you stop for a moment, become attentive, what is going on with me and with the people on the earth and everything.”* (Dominican brother)

*“I call it perceiving the mystery, although it got nothing to do with your eyes; it is all about the inner component. Everyone is able to see it if your inner component is touched.”* (Parishioner)

#### 4.1.5. God in nature

The creation, as mentioned before, is mentioned often during talks about connecting with nature. These mentions were spread out over all the participants, except for the farmers, which makes sense since farmers are not connected to the monastery. The participants explain that, because God created the earth and humans, it inherently means nature and humans are connected through God. God is experienced in nature by the participants in multiple ways, whether it is getting a sign from God in the sky, feeling grateful for the creation He made, linking beautiful and great details to God’s mystery, or feeling connected through the horizon. The following quote gives an insight into how God is experienced in nature and how a spiritual connection in nature is made:

*“Being and dealing with nature is also connecting me with the creator, with God. Cycling outside could then become some kind of meditation form of praying. And of course, you have the suspicion beyond that horizon. There is more to it than just what you see. It also has something of a desire to get out of your limitations and to relate and to know how to connect with the other.”* (Dominican Brother).

The mystery and God that are experienced in nature are linked to radical relationality: Radical relationality, which covers the existence of all kinds of connections in the universe, has a spiritual aspect. Within this uncertainty of existence, humans have accepted and experienced the existence of a mystery (Toledo, 2022). Toledo explains that *“this is a truth that is reached through revelation or enlightenment, rather than through exploring or researching. (...) Spiritual traditions have thus regarded the desire for a relationship with a larger transcendent reality, such as gods, nature, or the universe as an innate, defining aspect of the human self.”* (Toledo, 2022, p. 5). Thus, the research participants experience radical relationality.

### Farmers' spirituality

During the interviews with the farmers, connectedness with nature was found as well, although it differed from the connectedness that was found for the other participants. I refer to this as farmer's spirituality and it was captured in the following expressions: It is a way of life, gaining energy from working on the land and seeing your crops or cattle grow, calmness in the stable means calmness in your mind and calmness at home, working in the moment, listening, flowing and working together with nature, adjust yourself to all the natural changes, being free. It differs from the other participants, as farmers mostly spoke about their work and their commodities when they explained how they connect with nature. This is surprising since their definition of nature did not include their commodities. Farmers spend much more time outside in comparison to other participants, who only spend their spare time outside. Another difference is that farmers are financially dependent on how they connect to nature, while for participants connecting to nature is only about enjoyment. The following quotes emphasize farmers' spirituality:

*"When you are dancing with nature it works. When you are stressed out yourself, it does not work, you break, because you are not dancing left when nature goes left or right when nature goes right, you are too stressed to dance and you break. Observe, see what is going on and embrace it. It is not your own, you only contribute your own, and let it flow."* (Farmer)

*"My father was a farmer and he could also sit and wonder... and other farmers, every day there is a moment when they see at that moment: Everything is okay, it is some kind of calm feeling."* (Farmer)

#### 4.1.6. Motivations and actions for the environment

Next to their experiences and relationships with nature, participants spoke about the actions they do that concern nature. Their motives for this are mostly based on what is described earlier; stewardship, including passing the earth on to their children and the fulfilment participants feel when taking care of the environment.

Equally to this feeling of stewardship, the knowledge coming from science and media is motivating them to improve their sustainable behaviour. Dominican ideas are all about studying, and this shines through in the brothers' and lay-Dominicans' answers. It shows the brothers and lay Dominicans have read a lot about sustainability issues such as biodiversity loss, CO2 reduction and nature pollution. The community members are influenced by this knowledge as well but refer less to studying it and refer more to media sources. What struck me was that most of the participants only talk about the environmental issues that are happening, and less on social sustainability issues, while the participants take great care in taking care of other people within the community. This contradicts the literature that states Christian values involve, besides the biblical mandate for humans to take care of the earth, eco-justice. Eco-justice combines environmental and religious concerns about inequality and supporting marginalized, powerless groups in society (A. Chan & Islam, 2015)

Other motives for being and acting sustainable are feeling responsible, solidarity with others, worrying about the future and having the desire to contribute to something. Feeling responsible and worrying about the future are aspects that might belong to stewardship, but can exist on their own as well. Other motives that were mentioned to a lesser extent were a feeling of complacency, which were mostly mentioned by the farmers and being recognized for what you do. The latter applies to activities that happen in public spheres, such as cleaning the streets or improving the church's sustainability.



Taking care of nature is mostly described as sustainable actions, which were abundant in the community. One participant is very active in a zero-waste community, where they remove litter from the local areas. Many participants avoid driving a car or do not even own one. For them, this is very doable as they live in a city where all necessities are nearby accessible. Also many avoid flying and adjust their holiday plans on destinations that are reachable by car or train. Some participants also mentioned avoiding owning a lot of electrical devices and another participant explained they prefer second-hand shopping. In their gardens, many implemented bee and insect attracting objects, such as flowers, insect hotels, or even a green roof. During small-talk conversations about sustainable actions, I noticed many community members are conscious about the small actions: Reducing water and energy use at home, for example. A small part of the participants explained that they donate to sustainable NGOs, as they realise they are not capable of doing everything themselves, so they like to invest in people and organisations that can. A great part of the participants' sustainable actions is expressed in their choices in food.

### Food choices

Most participants believe in having the power to influence the food system as a consumer, so they are conscious about what they are buying. There are three main themes to distinguish in the arguments of participants' food choices: Arguments concerning the environment, their health and finance. In these food choices, their motives to be sustainable shine through as well.

### *Environmental arguments*

Environmental arguments include buying more organically because it is better for the environment and some believe it tastes better as well. It is about respect and caring for the earth and nature, so participants want to invest in certificated products that give crops their time to grow, with less use of chemicals. Additionally, some participants are paying attention to the packaging, as they want to reduce their use of plastic. Lastly, most of the participants are conscious about the amount of meat they eat and are all trying to reduce it or cut it out of their diets completely. Although most are not interested in growing their food, a great part of the participants are looking for local options to buy their vegetables, milk and eggs, since they prefer to know where their food is coming from and how it is grown. Just as with their motives to be more sustainable, the focus here is on the environment, which translates here to organic certification. Other social and ethical certifications such as Fairtrade were not mentioned by any participant.

*"What we also learn, during the Thanksgiving celebration at the church as well: There is enough, can we work with what is available here and appreciate what is available locally. Can we discover the richness of local products and availability a little better?" (Parishioner).*

*"(About a local farmer) I actually do not know the place, but she also sells her products on a market in Apeldoorn and I helped her there last summer. That is also the place where I buy my vegetables. I went there again this morning. That is a connection I have with local food. Perhaps I am seeking something like that because I grew up on a farm and I ate vegetables from our allotment garden. We never bought our vegetables in a supermarket; I am used to eating what you have grown yourself and I enjoy that." (Lay-Dominican.)*

### *Health arguments*

About health related to the food choices participants mentioned the following: They want no added substances or chemicals, as pure as possible. Healthy food, which participants often link to organic food, is better for your body and mind and you make a better connection to the earth, to where your food is coming from. Some say food is feeding their mind and spirituality. Then, it is even more important to eat food that is good for you; *"that it had the time to grow and make connections in the soil, just as you make connections with others."* (Parishioner). Connected to this

spirituality, are the Christian values concerning food. Soberness, gratitude and sharing are the most important ones. These are expressed in many of the conversations we had. Soberness translates to no excessive use of the earth, of its products and moderate use of treats and alcohol. There also are traditions of fasting, 40 days before Easter, and the brothers used to start this fasting already in September by eating simple meals until easter. Sharing food and drinks is combined with the soberness of not taking too much, and the social aspect of having conversations and finding connections while sharing a meal or a coffee or tea. This was seen after church masses as well, where parishioners and brothers drink a coffee together once a month to reflect on the mass and to find a connection with each other.

#### *Financial arguments*

Concerning the financial arguments, most are willing to pay a bit extra, since they see the positive effects of organic products and find it important that organic farmers exist. For farmers, prices and financial pressures are the main arguments that is withholding them to become more sustainable.

*"We are not free to do what we are supposed to do because we are blinded by passion, by pressure, by money or by influence." (Farmer)*

*"People say: 'Money is the root of all evil'. I don't believe it. It's the love of money that is the root of all evil. Without money, I wouldn't be here, but making money superior is a problem. Let's have a moral autonomy to use money, to create social wealth, spiritual wealth, ecological wealth. Money should serve us as they say in the Bible. You must have the moral autonomy to use the money to create a better world. But today some people are using money to create a bad world." (Nzamujo)*

## **4.2. Community's social cohesion**

During my first meetings at the church I experienced the presence of social cohesion, as I always felt very welcome in the church. People noticed me being new there, so approached me to start a conversation and the people I spoke with were very friendly and open to diversity. For example, when I first joined the choir repetition, the woman sitting next to me started some small talk, so eventually we spoke about my reasons for being there. Then she asked me: *"Are you religious as well?"* I was a bit hesitant and answered her 'no'. She told me: *"That does not matter at all, half of the people in this Catholic church is protestant and we all get along and sing together on Sunday"*.

The five dimensions of social cohesion as stated in literature, such as inclusion, recognition, sense of belonging, legitimacy and participation were found in the data (Jenson, 1998, as mentioned in Fenger, 2012). In addition to this, some other values that the community shares were found, including sharing morals and values, trust, respect, diversity, solidarity and inspiration. Therefore, this adds to the literature on social cohesion. Below I will elaborate on the five dimensions and how these are present in the church community, and I will add the additional values to these dimensions. An important note here is that I excluded the farmers' experiences here because they do not belong to the church community where this accumulated cohesiveness exists.

### **4.2.1. Inclusion**

The first dimension is inclusion, which is present in the Dominican church community because of shared morals and values, as well as shared diversity. The Dominican church community is by many described as a close group, where you feel like you are included. One participant said: *'All our faces are aimed in the same direction on Sunday, to the altar, to God.'* (Parishioner). Each person has their interpretation and thinks for themselves in the Dominican church, yet there is a certain spiritual kinship. Religion is an explicit aspect of spirituality that works as a connecting factor, which brings understanding and trust. Sharing their religion is a form of sharing norms and values, which has a strengthening effect on social cohesion. Searching for purpose and the value of life together is a valuable spiritual activity that strengthens the community according to some participants. This could be understood as connecting to the sacred or significant, or self-reflecting as a communal activity. Another aspect of spirituality that is shared and induces connection is the connectedness to others, which is very abundant in the church community (Puchalski et al., 2009). In addition, some values could be described as spiritual, for example, one participant described the connection they have with others as a connectedness to your and their roots. A Dominican brother explained this:

*"You are connected with people from back in the days. Let's say family, say uncles from earlier centuries in Dominican history. People that made history and made a name for themselves. Who built something that many more people can build on"* (Dominican brother)

The diversity that is present in the church is greatly appreciated in this community. The church is described as not dogmatic, there is room for different thoughts and ways of life. Some explained that this diversity is possible because it is a safe environment where people are open-minded so you feel free to be who you are, allowing room for different opinions and beliefs. This is for example found when focusing on their spiritual characteristics. Spirituality has individual and collective aspects but those are all expressed differently. The definitions of their spirituality diverge. This diversity is seen as a positive and beautiful phenomenon, that despite, or perhaps because of, differences in beliefs, politics and personalities, you can build a community. This diversity feeds inspiration, as they learn and inspire each other during conversations.

*"I decided to bind myself to the [Dominican] order, to a group of people. And the people I connected*

*with are people who keep me sharp, feed me so to speak, we feed each other and together we are trying to shape our community.” (Lay-Dominican)*

*“Freedom, finding freedom in connection, not like everyone can do whatever they want, but freedom exists because we live together and take responsibility, it is the value of respect. The value of respect, or rather reverence, is even stronger. That you respect the other people for their individuality and thus also respect the secret that lies in every human and in the secret of God. And this all in a form of ‘Involved aloofness.’” (Parishioner)*

#### 4.2.2. Recognition

Participants expressed that they feel recognized by the others in the church community and they believe it is very important to see the other, listen to them and let them be in all that they are. Trying to understand the other’s perspective is seen as a great value. Solidarity was additionally mentioned as an important value when you are interacting with each other. Multiple participants spoke about showing solidarity and recognizing the other in a way that the sense of self-esteem is stimulated. This means you have to recognize the other in all its good and bad qualities, and accept or even appreciate each other's individuality, each other's differences and quirks.

*“We call each other brother and sister, and you have to live up to that. That means that you will not walk past each other, but you pay attention to the other, seeing the other person, helping the other. Show solidarity.” (Dominican brother)*

*“Because it is so wonderful to try to form a community in which everyone's strengths can emerge and where weaknesses are then absorbed by the others; it's relational too right? This is what an ideal community should look like; that you complement each other without feeling less yourself.” (Dominican brother)*

Some people would appreciate it more if there was more recognition, acted out in small acts like asking someone how they are doing, welcoming someone in the church. Some participants had this experience especially in the beginning when they were new in the church community, as they experienced it was a close community where it was sometimes hard to find their place. However, others had the opposite experience and felt like the community is very open and is always approaching new people, not to convert them, just showing interest in their reason for being there.

Aside from recognizing the other person, it is also good to recognize the activities that are carried out, according to a lay-Dominican. This lay-Dominican explained that sometimes it is not necessary to set up any new project and teach people new things, while many things are already happening and just need a bit more recognition. By this, the people that carry out these projects feel like they can inspire other people as well, instead of always focussing on new things and improvement. The community often feels like not doing enough, which also applies to their sustainable behaviour; they have a desire to move into a more sustainable direction. According to Lay-Dominican and theologian prof. dr. Erik Borgman this is a common phenomenon in church communities. He explained during the interview that church communities always think about ways to improve, sometimes while forgetting and reflecting on the things they are already doing.

#### 4.2.3. Sense of belonging

The feeling of welcomeness I felt on those first days was not unique; participants described that they feel welcome, at home at the Dominican church. In line with the previous section, they feel some kind of recognition, experience an inspiring environment, feel connected to other people and some described it as feeling home. These expressions could be categorized as a sense of belonging. A lay-Dominican explained that many people come to church because they have a desire to belong to a group. People come to this church not just for practical reasons of the nearest

church, because some of the participants live in other neighbourhoods or cities. The parishioners came here, after considering other churches, and they finally decided to connect themselves to the Dominican church as they felt most at home here.

Some other participants explained wanting to stay in the community for a longer period of time because they feel so inspired by others, by the environment. Participants feel like the church is a place where there is space to be yourself, to reflect on what you are feeling and thinking, to rest, regain energy and come to your inner self. These meditative expressions are closely connected to aspects spirituality, such as the connection to self, the moment and finally, self-reflection (Puchalski et al., 2009; Sheldrake, 2012).

#### 4.2.4. Legitimacy

Legitimacy is an aspect of social cohesion that was recognized in the church community. On a large scale, the church is following the Vatican's rules. Since the church is a rectorate church connected to the monastery, this church feels freer to not always follow these rules so strictly, this was mentioned both by the brothers and by parishioners.

On a local scale, there is the church, which is connected to the monastery. The brothers that live there used to have the greatest influence in the church. This changed over time since the brothers are getting old, and only four are still living there, of whom three are priests. The brothers have a system wherein every three years a *prior*, the executive of the brothers is chosen. After this period of three years, a new prior is voted for and the old prior is degrading to a common brother again. By this system, abusing the prior's power is prevented, as the prior could be punished for this by the next prior that used to be a subject to the previous prior.

Currently, there is a church board, where parishioners, brothers and lay-Dominicans are represented. Aside from this, there is a programme team that organises activities, there is a group of lay-Dominicans that are nationally organised and there are several working groups active within the church.

As an outsider, I did not notice any differences in power, except for who preaches during masses, those have an obvious leading role at that moment. During interviews, however, these differences in power were mentioned a couple of times; there are not a lot of possibilities for participation by the parishioners and lay-Dominicans. Some participants do not mind, others would appreciate to hear more about the decisions and possibilities before these are already made. However, their participation has been growing over time and is still growing. Due to the fact that the brothers are getting older and reducing in numbers present in the monastery, the tasks within the monastery are shifting. What these shifts entail was not made explicit, as it is still a developing process. Especially the lay-Dominicans are thinking about what the future for the Dominican monastery entails.

*"The trick is to know how to find each other as parishioners. That we can inspire each other again. And of course, the priests have a part in this, they certainly do. But no longer in that guiding role we were used to for years."* (Parishioner)

Lastly, the building was sold in 2021, this means that the Dominicans are no longer owners of the church and monastery. Concerning the sustainable improvements of the building, the church community does not have a say in this anymore. All participants are curious to see where this new development will take them.

#### 4.2.5. Participation

Within the church, many people are willing to participate. Aside from attending the church masses Saturday or Sunday, multiple working groups are active, consisting of a great number of

volunteers. For example, there is a working group that is concerned with people that physically are not able to go to church, so a preacher will come to their house, and there is soul care for people that are (mentally) ill. Next, there are two working groups concerned with the church's sustainability. There is a working group called 'Green Church', which is part of a national initiative to make churches more sustainable. They green church is concerned with sustainable matters such as separating waste in the church, green energy and motivating the community to make more sustainable choices. One of their most recent ideas is to organise a workshop on buying more sustainable groceries. Furthermore, there is a gardening working group that is concerned with the convent's courtyard garden.

Finally, there are three different choirs in the church community that rehearse weekly and perform during the masses. This music contributes to the connectedness the participants experience during masses. Next to the music that sounds wonderful and magical in the church, the act of singing together binds them, according to many participants.

Next to these working groups, there are many volunteers that, among other activities, provide coffee and cake after Sunday's mass and are cooking for the brothers. This shows that many people are willing to contribute to the community and are actively participating. Alongside contributing to the community, many participants showed a great amount of volunteering work outside of the community, for instance helping elders, cleaning the neighbourhood and teaching asylum-seekers Dutch.

*"And in our church, people like to do something, to volunteer. And our job, of me and the other brothers, is that when people have a nice idea, I support them and say: 'Do it! And if you need any help, we, the brothers, will help you to make it happen'." (Dominican brother)*

There are enough opportunities to be involved in the community by joining these activities or organising them. Organising, doing things and just being together, induces social cohesion according to some participants. This allows for creating new memories together and most participants appreciate the inspiration that happens during these activities.

### **4.3. Food network's social cohesion**

Below I describe the social cohesion of the food network, on the basis of the framework by Fonseca et al. (2019) (Figure 1), which describes the cohesion based on three different actors: The individual, community and institutions.

#### **4.3.1. The individual**

##### **Self-motivation**

Each participant showed a certain amount of self-motivation to be a part of the community, to behave sustainably, to come to church every week. A great amount of self-reflection was shown during the interviews. However, it is hard to grasp their self-motivation, since the participants are also part of a religious community, which might be a greater motivation than self. For me as the interviewer this is hard to distinguish and perhaps for the participant as well? I have not been able to gain an understanding whether the things participants do are individually made decisions or decisions influenced by their community's pressure. When this was the case, it was not made explicit. Concerning their sustainable behaviour, as discussed in the 4.1., participants gained their motivation from their belief, their norms and values and scientific knowledge. Gaining knowledge on how the individual within the group is motivated is useful because it can teach us how to inspire and motivate the community to move an agroecological direction.

##### **Perception, norms and values**

I mentioned in the 4.2.1. that sharing norms and values is a great value of the community. The norms and values are mostly based on the Christian values of the Dominican church. The brothers experience the social cohesion differently than the parishioners and lay-Dominicans, since the brothers are living in the monastery, so their world is smaller to some extent. Their dedication to the Christian religion is in that sense also greater than that of the parishioners and lay-Dominicans. Still, they exist in a community together, so they share a lot of morals and values as well. There are a couple of values that the participants find important when interacting with people and building cohesion, which are best reflected in the following quotes:

*"Keep on including people; telling family and friends, children: what is going on and what you are planning to do. You build that authority. You build that movement around it. We call it social capital. Social capital is important, just me alone, I don't care if I am going to work, but now because you told your wife and children, you will be more relaxed because they are expecting something. They make you work."* (Godfrey Nzamujo)

*"Trying to give the other all the space they need to be themselves. And autonomy and freedom, that someone is coming to you out of their own free will."* (Parishioner)

During activities that are occurring at church, connection with a spiritual aspect is experienced, as many experience connection to the significant and this connection is a great theme for reflection (Puchalski et al., 2009; Sheldrake, 2012). According to a couple of participants, the connectedness between all aspects of life is radically related. A brother explained that practicing religion and spirituality is not a one-way direction; it is a movement that comes from within, goes out to people, to nature, to the significant and the other way around. These movements are recognised in my definition of spirituality (Puchalski, C., Ferrell, B., Virani, R., Otis-Green, S., Baird, P., Bull, 2009). The participants explained it is about finding the way through these connections together, where guidelines on how to do this are missing. There are some core values, those are listening, learning from each other, being confronted with an opposite opinion sometimes and learning and showing empathy.

*"Not just in nature, radical relationality is recognized, also within the connection between people: "I noticed it already: everything is somehow connected. I can imagine that when I would say something*

*in the morning, someone else would take a part of my energy or my words or something with them. All positive things reinforce each other, so we have to pass it on.”* (Parishioner)

#### Participation and performance

A brother explained that being a preacher, means building a network and to propagate ideas. It is their way of creating a connection to other people in the church, in society and making the connection between the city and the country. This explanation agrees with one theoretical tradition on the relationship between religion and politics in modern society, which is that churches could play a public role in modern societies, as churches function as force for collection action, social unity and political mobilization (Chan & Islam, 2015).

Things the participants values important when making connections and creating cohesion, are just being there and seeing each other. This means, not just talking to the other person, but really listening to the other and trying to understand the other’s perspective. Another brother told about his belief that sometimes, you have to party: celebrating happiness together, celebrating that you are together and you are sharing beliefs.

These values are contributing to the knowledge on how the church is activating people to participant and therewith maintaining its social cohesion.

#### 4.3.2. The community

While there is a great diversity in individual people, the community itself is something where the participants feel very connected. Participants appreciate that they can still be an individual within the group. All the brothers and some parishioners also expressed a proud feeling when talking about the community; *“Every Sunday the church is filled with enthusiastic people, what a wonderful, blooming group of people, that makes me proud.”* (Parishioner)

I found that in the church community many individualistic sustainable actions are carried out, but actions by the whole community are lacking. Based on their social cohesion, I think creating a new project is a very reachable goal that will excite the community to take a part in. When I asked the participants what drives them to do the sustainable actions they are currently undertaking, they explained: feeling responsible, solidarity with others, worrying about the future and having the desire to contribute to something. These values, based on their human-nature relationships, match the values behind social cohesion.

Investigating how the food network is connected, sheds light on the possibilities and pitfalls of transforming the network to an agroecological paradigm.

#### Environment

##### Intangible aspects

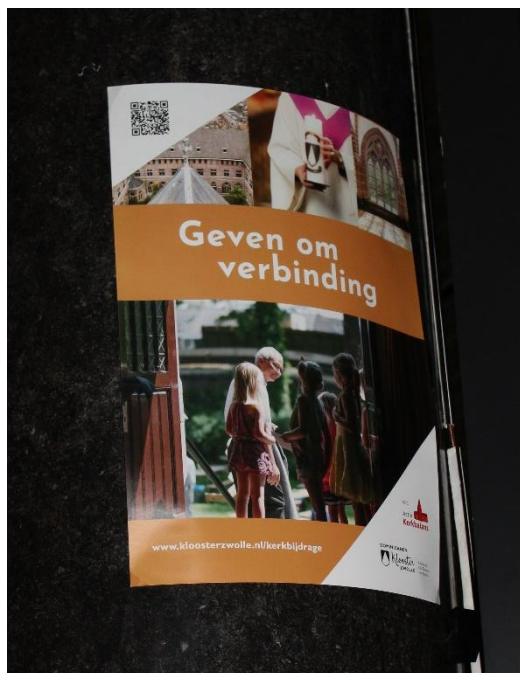
The church community has created an active environment over time, where many activities take place. The church has a liturgy, which includes Saturday and Sunday masses each week, and holidays and traditional celebrations. Additionally, the church holds three choirs that rehearse weekly. The brothers have praying sessions every morning during the week, which are open for everyone that feels like joining. Next to these regular activities, there is a team that organises programs and activities. Here people can participate in activities outside of the liturgy and are also free to suggest new activities. For example, there are bible reading workshops, where a brother and parishioner together with participants go through specific bible texts to reflect, understand and discuss them. Also, there was a group that came together over the past year to discuss and reflect on living in simplicity and soberness, which arose as a result of Black Friar Day, a countermovement to Black Friday with ‘Less is more’ as the main theme. Also, the visit of Godfrey Nzamujo was finalizing a year-round program where the importance of the ground, soil and sustainable farming was the main theme. This program included Bible lessons, food



workshops, working on farm days and lectures. In these activities, people that do not always connect in church, find each other. By using social media such as Facebook and Instagram, as well as a newsletter and their website, the church is reaching people from inside and outside of the church community. Some activities are aimed to reach people with a non-Catholic background as well. For some activities, this works well, such as the Black Friar day, and Movie nights in the monastery. Lastly, the brothers are involved in projects that connects them with people from outside of the church community. For example, one of the brothers is participating in an art project where he works together with a saxophonist.

### Tangible aspects

There are tangible aspects that contribute to cohesion in the church community (Jarosz, 2000) . One parishioner told us that just creating a space where people can get together, maybe provide a coffee or a beer, is important for people to connect. The church building functions as a meeting point for all the community members. The building is more than just facilitating, it has a special effect on people, according to some participants. In the church, there are numerous symbols (Figure 5 & 6), such as statues of saints and on the floor images of the zodiac signs and the four elements are represented. Although these have strong messages and rich backstories, no participants linked these symbols as a reason to come to church or what strengthens the cohesion. Lastly, music in this building has been mentioned many times, 'functioning as glue' in the community. For some people, the music during the masses feels like magic, and it might attract non-religious people as well.



**Figure 5** A poster in the church building. It says: 'Caring about connection'



**Figure 4** Stained glass in the hallway of the Dominican monastery. It shows a shovel and a bucket.

### Relationships and ties

A Dominican brother explained that to connect with others, is about seeing the potential in the other, and letting the other be:

*"It is about making people believe in themselves, that is one of the most important things. We had a fellow brother who said: 'to treat each other well, lovingly, that translates for me into 'promotingly looking '. Or like, someone else, who said 'looking at the other so they appear'. To treat someone in this way, to pay attention to the other in such a way that they have an attractive power. In essence,*

*you give the other the invitation to show themselves, to not hold back. come for the day. Don't hold back. Practically it can just be the question: 'I have a problem, could you help me?'. It is about the potential that you already see in another when you pay attention to it, perhaps even before that person knows they have that potential."* (Dominican brother)

### Church community

For the brothers apply that they live together with the other brothers. Although they all spoke positively about their fellow brothers, my observation is that their relationship is not strong, rather it is practical. The brothers share a house and dinners, but I did not observe any close friendships. I often observed miscommunications and irritations between them. From my perspective, the brothers feel connected through God and their Bible studies, but a personal connection is missing. Their main reason to live in the monastery is of a spiritual nature, their communality is a spiritual connection to be closer to God. Living together with other brothers is incidental, so perhaps the brothers focus to a lesser extent on making this connection. However, although each brother has their individual relationship, they share a spiritual kinship, which is assumably connecting them.

The relationship between brothers and parishioners is partly of the traditional priest and parishioner, where the priest lends life advice and Bible knowledge, and partly quite casual, where the brothers and parishioners have a small talk over a cup of tea. Both parties expressed that these talks are meaningful conversations and they feel more connected to each other.

The relationships between lay-Dominicans are somewhat pragmatic. Lay-dominicans are organised nationally and talk about the organisational or content matters of the Dominicans. I think between individuals, friendships exist, but these are not different from the ones the parishioners have.

I noticed close relationships between the parishioners. I was told some originated in the church, These friendships meet outside of church activities as well. Next to these closer relationships, many people feel connected and tied to each other and they care for each other. For example, choir rehearsals are started with an update on how people that had been ill were doing.

Traditionally during the mass, there is a moment where everyone wishes their nearby seated neighbours love and peace, which allows for a moment of attention for the other.

### Consumers-farmers

Multiple participants, that are the consumers in the food network, believe people from the city and consumers have to reconnect to the farmers. The relationships express themselves mostly in financial transactions, a social connection is lacking. Because their relationship is only financial, this relationship lacks aspects of social cohesion. I believe sharing morals and values, recognition, respect and trust and are the most important values missing here. I described before that community members and farmers do not share the same human-nature relationship, nor their spirituality. Moreover farmers expressed they do not feel recognized by their consumers; farmers often feel like consumers are too far removed from agriculture and do not feel supported by consumers if they make buying choices and show they are not willing to pay extra. Farmers explain that they are often portrayed as the bad guy, for example in the current nitrogen emission issue (de Wolf & Vellinga, 2020). The farmers feel like consumers and especially policymakers need to have respect for their craft of farming. Moreover, there is no trust between farmers and the supermarket chains, indirectly linking consumers and farmers, because supermarkets always aim for the lowest price and do not take their amount of work into account. The biggest challenge here, according to all participants, is to learn how to reconnect again.

### Goal attainment

The participants are very goal-oriented, looking for ways to improve or renew. Besides their human-nature relationship motives explained in 4.1., spirituality might function as an aiding factor for the active working groups and volunteers because the people in these groups share a common goal. For some this goal means caring for the environment, for some caring for others and others find their common goal in the Bible, their share in beliefs and God.

*“Often in society, you see groups excitingly starting a new project, but at a certain point, it stops. So I think you need a deep spirituality, a powerful drive, to say; we are obligated to our values and norms to continue this project.”* (Parishioner)

### Future goals

After Godfrey's visit, participants felt very inspired to think, learn and do more on agroecology and sustainability. Therefore participants hoped the theme will reoccur in the activity programs. A great part of the participants showed an eagerness to learn more about how to improve their sustainable behaviour. In addition, participants hoped Godfrey's energy and passion will stay around within the church for a long time. The participants appreciated how motivated he was for his own goal, and participants saw him as a man who was completely himself, something they admired. Moreover, participants found it interesting how he managed to combine his religion with agriculture, although they found it sometimes a hard combination to comprehend. This link could have been made more clear for some participants. This is a subject that could be elaborated on when the programme of 'Ground' will be continued and return yearly, as some participants desire.

*“I think we have to look for ways to turn this environmental disaster around (...). That is a choice we have to make as Dominicans and as the people that come here regularly on Sundays. (...) We cannot deny it this project has to return yearly. We have to put it in our diaries, just like the liturgy is in our diaries”.* (Dominican brother)

For future activities, reflection groups, sharing organic meals, working with youngsters were mentioned. Participants mentioned they would like a low-key approach, with no obligation, but with a recurring structure. The participants would appreciate such an approach because they feel like they do not have a lot of time to invest in it but would like to join and be a part of it.

#### 4.3.3. The institution

As previously discussed in 4.2.4., the institution involved in the church community is the Catholic church, with the Vatican as the highest power position. Concerning the food network, some other institutions are in place additionally. These institutions are the local and national governments.

### Conflict management and decision making

Concerning the decision-making in church, this is discussed in 4.2.4.. Concerning the food network, the government is an institute that makes policies that concern the farmers, which are part of the food network. Since the food network would be agroecological, the farmers are influenced by decision-making and certification rules created by the government. Farmers often feel like policies are holding them back to do the things they desire to do on their farms. Things that are currently restraining them from moving into a more sustainable way of farming are financial and policy issues.

### Human rights

Human rights have not been mentioned during the interviews.

### Environment (Structure/norms and values)

The structure of the church community in its environment is described by its relations with farmers and society, I elaborate on this in the following sections. Moreover, the norms and values of the Catholic Church influence social cohesion. These norms and values are interpreted differently for each individual and have been described in 4.2., therefore I do not touch up on this subject here.

### Church and farmers

Traditionally, there was a connection with the church and farmers, by renting land, by celebrating thanksgiving and harvesting. This also meant that the cohesion between them was institutional and dependent because the church often rented their lands to farmers, whereby the church influenced their way of farming. But, this relationship has slowly faded away, although both farmers and brothers believe values are still shared. When farmers became owners of their lands, there was perhaps more room for them to act upon their human-nature relationships. Currently, farmers are being held back to act on this relationship by governmental policy and financial pressures.

The relationship between farmers and the church is not as distinct as it used to be, but farmers still feel connected in a certain way. This way includes the pride of Christian culture and supporting the church financially. The brothers believe the connection to farmers is lost and the gap between city life, where the brothers live, and the agricultural countryside is increasing. The brothers believe reconnecting is possible by preaching, by organizing more agricultural focussed lectures and activities such as the arrival of Godfrey.

### Church in society

At the Dominican monastery, there is a strong focus on the society, which fits within the Dominican spirituality, where talking and reflecting on what is going on in society is important. Brothers often expressed their spirituality as a movement from within to the outside and the other way around. Many activities are organised to connect different worlds, for example, there is a brother involved in an art project and the visit of Godfrey also had a social theme of sustainable farming and creating community. These activities are open to parishioners and non-parishioners, for them to find each other. The brothers often take a position in social issues, such as being present at a black lives matter strike and signing petitions, as well as presenting themselves, their beliefs and activities in local and national media. For example, during my fieldwork, there were two articles in the national newspaper Trouw, reporting on Godfrey's spirituality and Black friar day (Spreksel, 2021; Weseman, 2021).

*“Concerning the Dominican spirituality, the focus is on the study and having both feet in society, while living in the monastery. So it is about connecting between the monastery and society. First studying what is happening in society and then again preaching that in society, so to speak. Dominicans are more often found in cities and in places, where universities and education are as well.” (Lay-Dominican)*

Furthermore, many participants expressed they appreciate to keep looking for opportunities to build connections with society, including farmers.

#### **4.4. Transforming to agroecology?**

Previous chapters discussed the human-nature relationships, the spirituality and the social cohesion of the church community, as well as the food network. Here, the potential and challenges of transforming the community into an agroecological food network will be discussed by connecting previously discussed human-nature relations, spirituality and social cohesion to the food network.

##### **4.4.1. Human-nature relations and spirituality in the food network**

When discussing human-nature relations, it became clear that most participants share an anthropocentric view. In this view, participants feel like nature and humans are separate. Especially farmers did show an anthropocentric view on nature. This is not stimulating for creating an agroecological food network, where nature and humans are much more related, in a sharing way (Silici, 2014). However, participants do not feel superior over nature and have a feeling of stewardship towards the earth. Stewardship potentially has the transformative power to move the food network into an agroecological direction, as the participants feel responsible for taking care of the earth. The link of between taking care of the earth and agroecological practises must be enhanced to reach this transformative power. When Godfrey lectured on agroecology and his radical relationality philosophy that are inseparable according to him, many members of the church community understood this and recognized his idea. Putting this idea into practises and relating it to more to their own context was difficult for the participants. Multiple participants expressed that they need to learn more on agroecology, as well as radical relationality to put this into action. Reflecting on these ideas together might stimulate to shift from the anthropocentric view, to a more radical relationality perspective that ultimately supports agroecology. This shift will be easier when stewardship, a concept well-known to the participants is incorporated into the radical relationality perspective. Eventually, in both schools of thought I recognized the same goal; that the earth is treated respectfully.

Godfrey explained his Songhai centre as a new epistemic: *“Where you learn, by seeing, by doing, by feeling, it is a new way of teaching. The old way of learning is in their brains, I now want people to learn in a wider sense, from their head, their heart and their hands. So Songhai is not just a new way of agriculture, it is a new way of life.”* His Songhai centre is an example of an agroecological food network where they produce and use their own products.

Godfrey thus explained his food network as a place where people learn with their heads, hearts and hands. He also expressed that these three different aspects were important to him in his spirituality. While the participants expressed multiple examples how they practise their spirituality with their heads and hearts, they found it hard to explain when or whether they use their hands. Many sustainable actions were expressed by the participants, but they did not link this directly to their spirituality. They do however act on feelings such as stewardship and feeling grateful, in which they find a connection to God or the Mystery, which is an aspect of spirituality. Many participants act upon their feelings of stewardship, which could support the creation of a food network. Because of their stewardship, multiple sustainable activities are carried out. Multiple participants expressed that they are always looking for more opportunities to improve their sustainability and are very conscious about their food choices, but they do not have the desire to farm themselves. Not working and learning with their hands, hinder the transformation to an agroecological food network. Therefore, involving farmers in the food network would make the transformation to agroecology more accessible. The Dominican monastery as a food network would include thus local farmers and their church community. This means the church community

are consumers and only purchase the products, and the local farmers are suppliers of the products. This food network would be supported by multiple participants.

Spirituality is often neglected in agroecology, while it plays a key role in the transformation and execution of agroecology. According to Toledo (2022), spirituality recognizes the basic existence of an invisible dimension of nature within agroecology. Although spirituality means something slightly different to each of the participants, they share one significant or sacred, which is God. Sharing the same religion and thus the same morals and values, strengthens cohesion, therefore the food network. In this community, there is still room for diversity in world views and ideologies, because the correspondence in religion brings them together.

Other spiritual values experienced in nature that I found in my data are wondering, appreciating and paying attention to the beauty and gratitude. In nature, participants do experience meditative values such as calmness and quietness. Participants can connect to the moment, to self, to nature and the sacred when spending time in nature. Wonder, appreciation and gratitude refer to their feeling of being small in nature. This humility is according to Toledo (2022) a key attribute when practicing agroecology, and is also contrasting with the anthropocentric view of humans ruling over nature. The idea of 'ruling over nature' is not present in the church community, since the participants see humans separated, yet inferior to nature.

Farmers also experience spirituality when they are working, such as connecting to the moment and self. Farmers' spirituality can improve in an agroecological setting because there is room for spirituality and beliefs more in an agroecological system. However, the farmers I interviewed had strong anthropocentric views, where they see their cattle and land as commodities, instead of nature. These views are not in line with agroecology and would perhaps impede the food network.

#### 4.4.2. Cohesion and the food network

Agroecology is often described as a social movement (Peter M. Rosset & Martínez-Torres, 2012). For a successful social movement, social cohesion is necessary. The social cohesion of the church community is strong, where sharing the same morals and values, space for diversity and thoughts and also recognition and giving the other attention during church events are the key characteristics. Next to this, the community shares the same goals and there is a great pool of volunteers; the participants showed a great willingness to help and participate. This strong social cohesion is a great ground to create an agroecological food network. Sharing the same morals and values and goal, could also hinder the transformation to a new paradigm, because these morals and values are based on old traditions, whereby moving these into another, agroecological, direction, could be complicated. Simultaneously, Dominicans their spirituality is practised by studying, which was also expressed as an inspiration and motivation to act sustainably. This shows that the community is progressive and open to new information, which means that agroecological ideas could possibly be incorporated as new morals, values and goal attainment.

Additionally, the farmers showed interest in a local food network, as they feel proud and good about selling their products locally. The farmers are included in the food network, however social cohesion is not supporting the food network here. The connection between the farmers and church community, here the consumers, was expressed as weak. Farmers and consumers need to find each other again. As I mentioned in the previous section, agroecological practices could contribute to this reconnecting, because then farmers and consumers are sharing the same morals and values again. In addition, being together in a food network would result in having the same goal attainment determination, which also strengthens social cohesion (Fonseca et al., 2019). Multiple participants expressed that the connection with farmers and the church need to be rediscovered or renewed as well. This is a challenge where no solution has been proposed for by any of the participants.

Some other challenges to transform were expressed during the interviews. Farmers told about the concerns they have with a local food network, such as the fear of being dependent on one party, so the farmers want a variety of clients, but perhaps long-term contracts could solve this. Furthermore, farmers need a political environment where sustainable changes in food systems are supported, and they desire some advocacy for change. Farmers think it is necessary to get more parties involved; political, social and financial supporters. The need for more political enabling is in line with the research of Silici (2014), which explains farmers' choices are greatly influenced by, among other things, the incentives and the opportunities provided by policies and institutions. Parishioners also believe it is important to get some more support from the government. They feel their responsibility as consumers but sometimes find it hard to see the non-sustainable investments made by the government and feel like what they are doing individually is not enough.

*"It is easy to say: 'You must change'. First of all, we have to support and help each other and find out what part we can play ourselves. Look, the politics tend to designate a scapegoat, to say: that is where the big emissions are. As a consumer, you of course have a responsibility as well, but just on your own you cannot do much, you need a lot of consumers together. And the parish can create that. As a parish, we can create support for good political decisions, by preaching and the liturgy. And I think that's one of the most important things you can do as a church: create support."*  
(Dominican brother)



## 5. Discussion

In my discussion I provide answers to my four research questions (5.1., 5.2., 5.3. & 5.4.) and compare my findings to relevant literature. Following these first four chapters, I elaborate on how my findings contribute to theoretical debates, where I zoom into the connection between spirituality and agroecology (5.5.1.) and agroecology as a movement (5.5.2.) Finally, I reflect on my used methodology and the possible limitations of the research (5.6.).

### **5.1. What spiritual values are recognizable in the human-nature relationships of the individuals in the food network?**

In the food network, mainly anthropocentric perspectives on nature are recognized. The participants perceive humans as separate, yet inferior to nature. Although there is an openness to new ideas such as the radical relationality perspective on nature, the traditional value of stewardship is still the strongest.

While in agroecological food networks human-nature relationships are more equal and interconnected, I find that in my case studies' food network there is a greater emphasis on the separation between humans and nature. Often, aspects of the concept of wilderness were mentioned by the participants, for example a nature park is a park with no human presence in it. However, participants feel small in nature. This is in contrast with the anthropocentric view where humans often view themselves as superior to other living creatures (Ikeke, 2015).

The stewardship the participants expressed is a common theological belief, one which the participants described as feeling inferior to and grateful for God's creation (Browning, 2008; Mckeown, 2007). The interconnectedness through nature with God that is experienced by the participants links to radical relationality. Experiencing God and the mystery in nature links to radical relationality as it covers the existence of all kinds of connections in the universe (Toledo, 2022). My findings are in line with spiritual traditions where people are seeking a relationship with a transcendent reality. Seeking it in nature shows the openness of the participants; they are capable of exploring this relationship and connecting to self and others (Toledo, 2022). Making these connections makes them even more spiritual.

When participants act on their stewardship, knowledge on climate change and solidarity with others, the focus is on environmental sustainability and social sustainability is neglected. According to many African theorists, radical relationality requires that people should respect and live in harmony with the community of nature. This community carries a moral requirement to live in harmony, which can only be gratified through their relationship with other members of the community. Characteristics of these harmonious relationships are mutual support, solidarity, care and nurturing (Behrens, 2014). Although this shows in the community's environmentally sustainable behaviour, these values are not reflected in their socially sustainable behaviour. While I observed that caring for others happens frequently on a local scale, meaning within the community and for family and friends, participants did not express this caring outside those bonds. In my introduction I speculated that a shift to a radical relationality perspective could improve their environmental behaviour. This argument is based on the conviction that the core of the ecological crisis is philosophical in nature, meaning that the solution lies in a change in people's perception of nature (Behrens, 2014). However, this emerged to be irrelevant, since the participants already express environmental sustainable behaviour as they are acting upon their feelings of stewardship. Nevertheless, shifting to a more radical relationality perspective can improve their behaviour in terms of social sustainability, since it would teach the community to



feel more connected to people outside of the community, which contributes to the food network's social cohesion.

A major part of the participants' sustainable convictions is expressed through their food choices. According to literature, food and spirituality are linked, although this link has only recently started being explored. Both spirituality and food are lived every day, which allows for both fields to be studied through a lens of a symbiotic relationship (Michopoulou & Jauniškis, 2020). This relationship is novel in academia, however farmers have been understanding this link for a longer time. Singh Bisht & Chand Rana (2020) describe how interviewed farmers found it essential to be spiritually connected to the food they are eating and enjoyed the experience of eating. In the church community, I found participants sharing a great common ground concerning their food choices. They described basing these choices on environmental and financial arguments, as well as health factors. The religious and spiritual values of soberness, moderation and gratitude for God's creation that they described in other contexts fit their attitudes towards eating as well. Though they found common ground in their food choices, they found it less in food growing. The aspect of hands, from Godfrey's learning philosophy where spirituality is lived with your head, heart and hands, is missing. Thus this aspect of the connection of human-nature relationships and spirituality is lacking in the community.

## **5.2. How is social cohesion established in the church community?**

The two most important dimensions out of five studied that establish social cohesion in the church community are inclusion and participation. Inclusion builds on shared morals and values. While inclusion is easier when morals and values are shared, diversity in this church is greatly appreciated. In the community there is a great willingness to help; multiple working groups are active, consisting of a great number of volunteers.

Shared morals and values are based on Christian spirituality. Within these shared morals and values, diversity is appreciated. Different ways of thinking and believing bring inspiration to the community. The Dominican church shares a spiritual kinship, that transcends the individual interpretations of the churchgoers. However, autonomous thought is valued in this community. This diversity within the church channels characteristics of spiritual individualism, which overturns established structures for the transmission of religious identity (Hervieu-Léger, 2003). This does not need to be the case, as this church community shows they do not need to share the same form of spirituality. Spiritual individualism, therefore, does not mean that conventional religious traditions are declining, but they are serving more as symbolic repositories, that each individual can use and interpret in different ways (Motak, 2009). Finding each other despite religious individualism is key for this church community, as well as searching for purpose and the value of life together. These are valuable spiritual activities that strengthen the community's social cohesion. It refers to connecting to the sacred or significant, self-reflecting and connecting to each other induces everyone's spirituality (Puchalski et al., 2009).

Many people in the community are willing to participate in church activities. With their participation in working groups or as volunteers, they contribute to the community. Besides, many participants showed a great amount of volunteering work outside of the religious community. This is in line with the research of Yeung (2018) that showed being religious predicted more participation in volunteering activities. Moreover, practicing religion in a public sphere, opposed to private religiosity, showed an even higher effect on the amount of volunteering. Volunteering and religion are linked, because pro-sociality and altruism are religious values (Yeung, 2018). In my research, these values are related to solidarity and participation.

I found that recognition of sustainable activities can be improved in the community. Recognizing other people is present, but the recognition of activities and impactful initiatives that are carried out in the community is lacking. Currently, focus lies with future projects or flaws in their current occupations. While this attitude might be the driver for the great amount of participation, it can also leave people with an unsatisfied feeling. Partly shifting this focus to recognizing and reflecting upon past projects can bring more satisfaction.

A challenge to the community's social cohesion is that the community is aging. This makes conveying legitimacy difficult and might entail a shrinking group of participants. More religious institutions face this issue and it relates to secularisation. Though secularisation is occurring in the Netherlands on a large scale (Hervieu-Léger, 2003), this church is a very active society. The strong community's social cohesion I found, is perhaps keeping the active members in the church, which is then again reinforcing the social cohesion. Still, the community has a high average age, therefore conserving the community may be achieved through involving younger generations in project such as a food network. New people involved in the community will feel the present solidarity towards others and participate in the community. Secularisation was thought to be an unavoidable feature of modernity itself and even to be a condition of modernisation (Hervieu-Léger, 2003). As the aim of this case study's food network is to move away from modernised agriculture, both the church community and the food network shift away from dominant

paradigms; those of secularisation and the dominant modern food system. When both go against the modernisation these shifts might go together very well.

Lastly, Being able to trust in and rely upon a community can offer support when that community is going through times of change (Jarosz, 2000). In the case of the Dominican monastery, it is the aging of the brothers, the selling of the monastery's real estate and the shift in agricultural paradigm to agroecology.

### **5.3. How does social cohesion support the extended food network?**

In the church community, social cohesion is established through inclusion, participation and sharing morals and values. In the food network, where other actors are included, an additional dimension is needed: recognition. In order to create a strong cohesive food network, recognition between farmers and the church community needs to be improved.

Inclusion is important in a network such as the agroecological food network, because when individuals feel included in a network, they are motivated to participate, by taking up volunteering work. Inclusion can be extended from the church community, by sharing morals and values, as well as spirituality together. Feelings of inclusion are currently lacking between farmers and community members, as well as with farmers and the church, which entails weak social ties. Next to the value of inclusion, recognition seems to be an additional important dimension to reconnect farmers and community members. This recognition is necessary to improve their relationship, according to both parties.

In church and the community, some experience connectedness to all aspects of life, which is linked to radical relationality. Shifting to a more radical relationality perspective can contribute to stronger communitarian values (Behrens, 2014). Radical relationality philosophy, which is to an extent overlapping with the agroecological values, can therefore form a bridge between farmers and consumers as well. When farmers and consumers form an agroecological food network, it means consumers and farmers will share some of the same morals and values; that of agroecology. This would improve their relationship and thus the food network's social cohesion. Currently, radical relationality is partly strengthening social cohesion. While the radical relationality perspective is not supported when talking about human-nature relationships, some participants expressed that they feel interconnected with human beings; that moments you share all have a purpose and meaning. These explanations with spiritual facets contribute to their caring behaviour towards other people.

Concerning morals and values on ecological sustainability, Nijboer (2018) explained a green revolution in the church community is needed and mentioned that there is a demand to institutionalise values such as sustainability and vitality. In this monastery, this institutionalisation is currently in progress, whereby initiatives such as the green church and the Ground project are concepts to grow this ecological spirituality on (Nijboer, 2018). My findings are consistent with her statement, as I found aspects of this green revolution in the way the participants are very goal-oriented, looking for ways to improve or renew. Both human-nature relationships and their spirituality, including connecting to others, are aiding factors for the active working groups and volunteers. They share a common goal and future goals are inspired by Godfrey's visit; to think, learn and do more on agroecology and sustainability. At the same time, I found that relations with people outside of the community are hard to create and maintain, which can obstruct this green revolution.

The local and national governments play a role in the food network. These governments make policies that concern the farmers, which are part of the food network. Farmers often feel like policies, as well as financial reasons, are holding them back to do the things they desire to implement on their farms. These policies are holding them back to act upon their human-nature relationships. The feelings these farmers have are not unique and are produced by the constellation of policies, corporations and other institutions that are dedicated to maintaining the best policy and economic environment for the modern agriculture paradigm (Van der Ploeg, 2008). When farmers organise in the food network, they would have a greater constituency, because the consumers can, in a greater amount than the farmers, influence the governments, so forming a food network together can enhance agroecological friendly policies. Understanding

how to push politics into the agroecological direction is essential for transforming and scaling up agroecology (Mier y Terán Giménez Cacho et al., 2018). Therefore I recommend studying this political enabling for future research.

The historically strong relationship of the church and farmers has slowly faded away, yet both farmers and brothers believe there is still a connection. The relationship used to be institutional and financial, where the church controlled the farmers' work. I found that the Dominicans still find it important to have a connection, although now this relationship is rather built on spiritual values instead of material matters. On the one hand, sharing a spiritual bond can increase social cohesion, as the food network would share a spiritual kinship. On the other hand, no legitimacy would be present in this relationship, which is another aspect of social cohesion. No legitimacy would thereby possibly restrain social cohesion (Fenger, 2012).

#### **5.4. How do human-nature relationships, spirituality and social cohesion support transforming the food network from the dominant agriculture paradigm to agroecology?**

Most participants share an anthropocentric view, which would not be stimulating for creating an agroecological food network. However, the farmers expressed they cared more for their lands with love, which is in line with what the church community expressed towards nature; stewardship, which would support the transformation to agroecology. The social cohesion of the community is strong but lacks on certain points in the food network. Inducing political and social enablement is essential in this transformation. Spirituality is often neglected in agroecology, while it plays a key role in the transformation and execution of agroecology. Participants expressed great spiritual values in nature such as experiencing god and meditative aspects, that would contribute to the transformation.

The anthropocentric view that most participants share, contradicts an agroecological food network, where nature and humans are much more related, in a sharing way (Silici, 2014). Especially farmers did show an anthropocentric view on nature. However, the research of Vieira Botelho et al. (2016) showed that farmers' relation to nature was rearticulated when they started implementing agroecological practices. The practices brought them closer to the natural environment and it acquired new importance and status, where their human-nature relationship shifted to a much more radical related perspective: *"Nature is no longer subordinate to human interests but is seen as an entity with its own characteristics and intentions."* (Vieira Botelho et al., 2016, p. 124). The farmers expressed they cared more for their lands with love, which is in line with what the church community expressed towards nature. It has the religious origin of feeling gratefulness towards the creation, which participants express in a stewardship behaviour. Sharing and learning about this new attitude towards the earth, can bring farmers and the church community closer together within the food network, enhancing its social cohesion. Thus this adds to my research because this enhanced social cohesion can induce the transformation to a new paradigm in the food network.

Mier y Terán Giménez Cacho et al. (2018) identified eight key drivers of scaling-up agroecology, of which I found two that my research on the food network contributes to: Social organisation and external allies.

The social organisation driver is rather obvious in the food network. The food network would establish the culture on which agroecology grows. In countries with modern agriculture as the dominant paradigm, shifting to agroecology proved to work better when the farmers formed social partnerships (Silici, 2014). The social cohesion of the church community is strong, while cohesion between the farmers and the church and its members is weak. Both sides expressed that these relationships need to be rebuild. Rebuilding a more direct connection between farmers and consumers is described by Gliessman (2016) as the fourth out of five levels to transform food systems into agroecology. He explains that transformation occurs within a cultural context, therefore the transformation must promote more sustainable practises. Practically, it means the church community would form a food citizenship, which expresses itself in sustainable behaviour, such as being willing to pay more for agroecological products. Building direct and closer relationships between farmers shorten the food chain (Gliessman, 2016). When forming a food network, I found that values such as participation, recognition and sharing morals and values and a goal are useful to extend from the existing community's cohesion to create cohesion. Participants are not focused on the transition yet, while there is a great motivation, and many actions, within the network for sustainability. This motivation is fed by stewardship values, scientific knowledge, and de spiritual enjoyment of nature. The food network's cohesion then

provides the structure through which values, meanings, lessons learned, and horizons of political action circulate (Mier y Terán Giménez Cacho et al., 2018).

Food networks also provide opportunities to link with external allies, these allies can come from multiple areas, such as media, academia, political parties, NGOs and religious institutions (Mier y Terán Giménez Cacho et al., 2018). Of course, the religious institute is an easy link and might not only support this food network but can support the forming of other food networks at other churches as well. When the food network works well at this Dominican monastery, social process methodology supports expanding agroecological practises at other farms and institutions (Peter Michael Rosset et al., 2011). The Dominican church as an institute can support the transformation by its network with media, as well as academia; my research project is an example of this. Furthermore, enabling the political parties is simpler when farmers connect to their consumers and share common ground.

## **5.5. Contribution to theoretical debates**

### **5.5.1. Spirituality and agroecology**

The role of spirituality in agroecology has not been well addressed in most of the agroecological studies, while the spiritual dimension contributes greatly to the agroecological movement (Toledo, 2022). It is a spiritual connection to the land and nature, regardless the type of the faith the farmer and people are holding. Shiva explains: *“Over the last three decades I have learned that agriculture is primarily about caring for the earth. The growing and sharing of food is, therefore, a spiritual act”* (Shiva, 2016, p. 129). Connecting to and caring for the earth were abundantly expressed across my research pool, thus these feelings must be taken into account more, since those feelings are useful for transforming to agroecological practises. Recognizing and integrating these feelings, referring to spirituality, into the agroecological practise would emphasise the socially and environmentally liberating activity, because it incorporates indigenous concepts that are recognizing the earth as a holistic system, such as radical relationality (Toledo, 2022).

Spirituality is built around two mysteries: that of the Universe, and that of Nature. In both these mysteries, the food network recognized spiritual aspects; participants referred to the universe as a mystery created by God. In this universe, which participants experience as overwhelming sometimes, they feel connected to all humans, as humans are all created by God. In nature, God is experienced by being in there and the participants experience calmness and rest here. Religion can influence the spiritual and personal motivation of practising agroecology (Vieira Botelho et al., 2016). Since connecting to nature entails spiritual values, it would be good to investigate whether the capacity of the individuals of the church community connecting to nature is related to their sustainable behaviour. Klimek et al. (2002) showed that when farmers moved to organic farming and gained a better understanding of ecology, their perspective on the world and themselves in relation to the world changed. Their ethical stance moved more away from individualistic, anthropocentric views, and moved to a more interconnectedness perspective. Following, farmers found greater importance in family, community and global issues, including other forms of life such as animals, plants and ecosystems, which is in line with radical relationality and the agroecology philosophy. Based on performed interviews I was able to describe their connectedness to nature and their spiritual motives for being sustainable, but I cannot say anything about a relationship of spending more time in nature influencing their worldview. Therefore, I recommend performing a questionnaire involving a greater study group in future research. This would be useful information, for project planning of the monastery, where perhaps inducing nature connectedness could improve the church community’s sustainable behaviour.

Farmers find spirituality when working on their lands as well, as they described it as connectedness to the moment and self. Spiritual motivation could help the farmers to feel a certain care and love for their environment, possibly motivated by God, as He gave the land to them (Vieira Botelho et al., 2016). Moreover, when farmers practise agroecology, it showed that farmers could reconnect spiritually to nature again, which then reinforced their agroecological practise even more. Farmers that performed agroecological experiments noticed that moving away from modern agriculture, changed their belief systems since they rediscovered traditional knowledge and their connected to nature and God was renewed (Vieira Botelho et al., 2016). For future research, it would be interesting to follow the food system and find out how their spirituality, especially towards nature, develops under the influence of agroecology.

Multiple Christian values would fit within the agroecological movement, such as caring for the earth and caring for others, which includes food security and social justice. I mentioned before that humility is described by (Toledo, 2022) as an important value for agroecology. He explains that humans need to acknowledge that they are powerless and limited in a great universe,



recognize their own mistakes and should be able to discriminate between good and evil and be compassionate, to practice agroecology. These values, which he summarised as humility, are overlapping with Christian values. Humility can be an essential attribute, as it is contrasting the anthropocentric view that fits modern agriculture, and is more in line with a holistic radical relational philosophy, where everything is equal. However, I discussed in 4.2.2. that sustainable actions that are performed among the church community, should be recognized more since the community is always looking forward and forgets to reflect and feel proud of their projects. This feeling of pride can keep them motivated and it feels rewarding. Pride is quite the opposite of humility that (Toledo, 2022) argues to be of great importance. I believe the participants should find a balance between those values, as both can contribute to the transformation to an agroecological food network.

Successfully integrating agroecology means implementing it in three different dimensions, which are material, spiritual and social (Toledo, 2022). Connecting to others, practising religion together all contribute to the social dimension, which is present in my case study. Chile & Simpson (2004) argue that the development of community and spirituality are linked by the connection of the individual to the collective. They argue that spirituality greatly influences the relationship with others and the environment. Moreover, Chile & Simpson (2004) state that spiritual approaches and community development establish respect for diversity. My data showed that diversity is greatly appreciated within the church's community, which according to their statement tells us that their appreciation of diversity is a sign that their social cohesion is linked spiritually. This respect for diversity means that there is space for diversity of interests, beliefs and approaches within the community, as well as different forms of spirituality. Despite their differences, the community shares a spiritual kinship and due to this, they created and are maintaining social cohesion.

Despite the church community sharing a spiritual kinship, spirituality is not supporting the agroecological food network's social cohesion, since the connection between farmers and church is lacking. I recommend moving away from religious kinship and finding kinship in the agroecological and human-nature values. Feelings of stewardship are shared among farmers and the church community; this is connecting them and could harmonise their individual and collective needs.

#### 5.5.2. Agroecology as a movement

Agroecology is often described as a movement (Wezel et al., 2009), whether it is a group of farmers working for food security, or a more political movement or social movement, forming allies to respond better to environmental challenges. The common ground of these movements is that they are action-oriented, with often a higher goal such as sustainable development. These movements originated mostly at small-scale farmers and indigenous people that want to work with their traditional ecological knowledge thereby decolonizing the dominant modern agricultural system.

Some studies on indigenous people showed that they practise agroecology with their hands, hearts and head. The spiritual dimension of agroecology provides it with a new identity that supports it and strengthens it as an emancipatory practice and a decolonizing discourse (Nuñez & Navarro-Garza., 2021). As I mentioned in 4.4.1., the aspect of hands is lacking in the church community, while I discovered all aspects in the farmers I spoke with. I believe it is important to incorporate all three dimensions, to fully grasp the idea of agroecology. While indigenous values do not play a role in Zwolle, agroecology can still function as an emancipating practise, where consumers and farmers create bonds to resist against the dominant agriculture.

When implementing an agroecological food network in Zwolle, that has been used by some indigenous people to decolonize their practises, it is important to respect the practise in all its forms. However, several authors noticed that when agroecology increased in popularity, it was absorbed by the large-scale agricultural systems and markets, which adapted agroecology into a form that did not reflect on any cultural, spiritual, or political meaning anymore. These forms that are presenting a narrow vision of, and essentially greenwashing agroecology, have been described as 'Junk Agroecology' (Friends of the Earth, 2020).

Therefore, when the food network in Zwolle transforms to agroecology, it should not just focus on ecological sustainability, but on social sustainability as well, which I found to be lacking in the community. This should be stimulated. I see a link with the Christian morals of taking care of the other and ecological justice. When transforming it should also be stimulating local policies to move in a more agroecological direction that include an important role for small-scale farmers and favour both environmental and social justice (Friends of the Earth, 2020).

## **5.6. Reflection on methodology**

This research provides an insight into the roles of spirituality and social cohesion in transforming the food network of the Dominican monastery into the agroecological paradigm. However, methodological limitations may have affected the findings and their validity. In this section I therefore reflect on the used methodology and the possible limitations of the research.

The considerations I described in my methodology (3.4) made me aware of the position I would be put in when performing my fieldwork. I wrote that participants might give the socially desired answer on their sustainable behaviour, because I am making sustainable choices myself. Some participants confirmed this by saying they were doing some sustainable things, but probably not as good as I was doing them. This feeling possibly influenced their answers, by expressing more sustainable actions to add up to the ideal idea some participants had of me.

My spiritual background has possibly influenced my findings and analysis. Although I have some knowledge on Christian traditions and Bible stories, during my fieldwork I noticed that I often missed out on references the participants made. Sometimes I asked for an explanation, although I did not want to distract the participant when they were telling a story. When they realised I did not understand some Christian references, they might have refrained from making more references to Christian knowledge. Then, this influenced my data because a part of their Christian values that play a role in the questions I asked them, were left out. The same applies to the analysis of my data, where I possibly missed or misinterpreted some Christian references. As a consequence, I might have left out religious aspects in my results.

Moreover, I mentioned in 3.4 that my position could influence my research in whether I would be comfortable during religious practised such as masses and when talking to people from the church community, since I am not religious and not very spiritual. I was afraid people were not willing to talk to me or I would feel like an outsider. On the contrary, I actually felt very welcome in church and in the community. I was surprised how inspired I was by all the meaningful conversations I had during my field work and it made me wonder about my own spirituality.

My role in the selection of the respondents could have a role on the collected data. Since I used convenient and snowball sampling, which I considered to be extra clever during Covid-19 restrictions, I approached people that I often saw when I spent time in church, and that were willing to talk to me. This method showed to be very useful as I collected participants in a rather short time. However, my methods of sampling resulted in interviewing people that were much involved in the church community, leading to a bias in my participants. I considered interviewing people that were sporadically coming to church, but this was rather complicated, since I only saw them during some occasional masses, where I did not have the opportunity to approach them.

Concerning my dataset, I expected to interview more parishioners that are involved with gardening more. I approached some that were not willing to cooperate and although I asked around, it seemed like those people were not very present in the church community. This means that the participants are representative for the community. Perhaps, interviews with people that are more involved with gardening, would have given another perspective the connection to nature within the community.

Regarding my research methods, I think they were fitting for my research. However, I do believe observations were in particular useful for background information and arrange participants, but did not provide me with a lot of data. I believe observations over a longer period of time, meaning longer than my one month of research, can give a good insight on how social relations are created and maintained. I learnt about their relations through interviews, which means I

only gained knowledge on their perspectives on the social cohesion in the community. I recognize my role of researcher in the interviews, since the type and formulation of question could have influenced the participant's answers. I performed the interviews with another master student, which was practical, as we did not have to ask participants to do two interviews. Doing the interviews together made it easier, because I did not feel pressured to ask the next question all the time, whereby I was able to focus on the content of their answers more. Although my fellow student had different research questions which sometimes led the interview in another direction that were not applicable to my research topics, sometimes I could still use this information, thus it provided me with answers I otherwise would not have received myself.

Furthermore, during the analysis it became clear to me that certain topics, I could have considered more in the interviews, by asking more profound questions. Such as their way of connection to each other through spirituality. Although I did ask such questions, it was hard for participants to find the words to explain their concept of spirituality. Perhaps with other defined questions I could have collected more relevant data.

Lastly, the interpretation of my data is subject to my perspective. I performed two rounds of coding, which helped me to understand and analyse my data better. However, these codebooks are created and executed by myself, so I am conscious of the bias this created in my analysis.

## 6. Conclusion

### **6.1. Conclusion to general research question**

The general research question I stated in my introduction is: What are the roles of social cohesion and spiritual values in creating an agroecological food network? I found two spiritual values that can play a role in the creating of an agroecological food network. First, experiencing and connecting to God or God's creation in nature, or connecting to the moment and self in nature, gives participants a feeling of stewardship for the earth that moves them towards sustainable behaviour. Second, spiritual values that are shared lead to a spiritual kinship that connects people, strengthening the social cohesion. Social cohesion within the church community is strong, but is lacking between the church, consumers and farmers. The two most important dimensions that establish social cohesion in the church community are participation and inclusion. Within the food network, where other actors are included, recognition is an additional important dimension that needs improvement, since farmers and the community do not feel connected. These dimensions of social cohesion, together with spiritual kinship, have a potential transformative power that can shift the network into another direction. Participants expressed great spiritual values in nature such as experiencing god and meditative aspects, that would contribute to the transformation. Living spirituality with your hands is lacking in the church community, so an inclusion of farmers, that do act and learn with their hands, is essential for this transformation to agroecology. Sharing and learning about a more radical related attitude towards the earth, can bring farmers and the church community closer together within the food network, enhancing its social cohesion. Social cohesion plays a key role in creating an agroecological food network, because it drives agroecology as the social movement it is.

### **6.2. Recommendations**

The food network is interested in sustainable projects and showed an interest in the agroecological food network as well. However, I believe it is good when participants learn more on agroecology as a science, a practise, as well as a movement, in combination with radical relationality. I believe this to be important, so the network will share knowledge and values on agroecology, which will facilitate the transformation. Doing this, should not oppose any Christian value; similarities should be found to create common ground among the participants. Because when Christian values are contradicted, you have the risk of losing cohesiveness across the food network, since sharing morals and values is a great dimension that creates social cohesion within the church.

Furthermore, these norms and values must be put into action. This can be done in small actions: the garden working group can implement small agroecological practises such as a herb garden, or it could create its own worm hotel. I would recommend to involve parishioners in these processes as well. By being active in nature and implementing agroecological practises, people learn by doing, thereby experiencing radical relationality for themselves.

Teaching the food network more on agroecology and radical relationality, must include the importance of social relations. Interconnectedness to others will improve the social sustainability that is now staying behind, perhaps due to their focus on environmental sustainability. Appreciating the social relations is of great importance, because without it, the food network cannot exist.

When the food network is successfully in place, it might be interesting to find out what part of these shared morals and values are based on values that are fed by their faith, and what other

sources they built their shared morals and values on. The social cohesion that exists in this church community, in which there is room for diversity, should be greatly appreciated, since it brings people together. This can create great movements into directions such as agroecology. Understanding this cohesion could perhaps support movements outside of religious institutions as well.

Although the church community expressed a great amount of willingness to help and showed an interest in participating in an agroecological food network, a challenge might be that a leader in this project is lacking. Many participants expressed to be too busy to lead and be assertive in new projects. Perhaps a management team could be put into place, that guides the people in the right direction, without having the power to decision-making, as some participants expressed they would like to have a say in some things.

When the agroecological food network is implemented successfully around the monastery, options for adoption of other church communities are interesting to discover. In Latin-America agroecological movements showed to be successful, and emancipating peasants. There, the role of churches is more apparent than here in the Netherlands where secularisation is occurring. Thus, there lie some challenges for the scaling-up of this project.

This monastery is situated in a city, where it is close to others outside of their community. It is essential to find connections with those people, to make the food network successful and possibly scale up. For this church, as well as other religious institutes, connecting with others, meaning incorporating different perspectives, can inspire all. Extending the community's social cohesion counters exclusion of others and enhances the transformative power of the a local network.

In the monastery in Zwolle I studied the potential transformation to an agroecological food network. Churches can be the breeding ground for other transformations, as long as they dare to take a stance.

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