



## Protestant Theological University

### Introduction

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# Introduction

Pieter Vos

I note the obvious differences  
Between each sort and type  
But we are more alike, my friends,  
Than we are unlike.

We are more alike, my friends,  
Than we are unlike.

MAYA ANGELOU<sup>1</sup>

In many societies all over the world, an increasing polarization between contrasting groups can be observed. Tendencies of polarization—forms of us-them thinking—extend from the political to the economic and from the religious to the social sphere. Fuel for polarization are prejudices about differences in ethnicity, race, religion, culture, gender, sexuality, and class. Driven by fears about losing what is regarded as valuable, one group begins to question the moral legitimacy of another group and even demonizes this group as the cause of imagined or real threats. These ‘culture wars’<sup>2</sup> are often motivated by a longing for a strong and fixed (group) identity, which is constructed as being in contrast with the (attributed) identity of the other group. Polarization is not just diversity, disagreement or holding different views, but, as Lauren Swayne Barthold explains, “occurs when a fear born of difference transforms into ‘us-versus-them’ thinking.” Moreover, polarization rules out any form of compromise and “shuts down the desire to communicate.”<sup>3</sup>

On the political level, polarization becomes manifest in populist movements with the explicit aim to polarize against others and distance themselves entirely from any political establishment, as for instance in new populist political parties in many European countries. In some cases, populists succeed in occupying important positions in the governments of democratic countries, as in the USA and Hungary. Often, they promote nationalism and protectionism

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1 From the poem “Human Family,” <https://allpoetry.com/Human-Family>.

2 The term was coined by James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

3 Lauren Swayne Barthold, *Overcoming Polarization in the Public Sphere: Civic Dialogue* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 2.

as counterforce to a globalizing world. Different but related is the polarized discourse against newcomers of those who claim to be native to the country, for instance native inhabitants of European countries who fear the arrival of large numbers of migrants from the African continent. This discourse often suggests such migrants are associated with the worldwide danger of Muslim extremism. In other cases, religious or ethnic minorities are regarded as not belonging to the national identity and therefore marginalized and oppressed, as for instance in Indonesia. Worldwide, debates about racism are highly polarized, as recently became manifest in the Black Lives Matter movement and the opposition it received. In addition, sociologists and political scientists observe an increasing tension between high-educated people, who often live in cities and have a global orientation, on the one hand, and less-educated people, who often live in the countryside or poor neighborhoods in the cities and are locally oriented, on the other.<sup>4</sup>

All these processes of polarization affect the church as well. The church worldwide and locally is often deeply divided on highly contested issues, as for instance on how one views same-sex relationships, nationalism, or migrants. There is a great gulf between the so-called 'main-line' (or ecumenical) and the so-called 'evangelicals,' a gulf which can be experienced within one church community. As a result, Christians tend to define themselves in opposition to other Christians, as either orthodox or liberal, either conservative or progressive, either anti or pro same-sex relationships. The controversy regarding the Nashville Statement, with its bold, conservative claims about sexuality and gender roles and the sometimes fierce reactions it provoked from progressive Christians, demonstrates that the churches themselves are part of, and internally experiencing, polarization.

Given this increasing (or at least ongoing) polarization of various groups within societies as well as within churches, what may be the calling of the church? How can the church contribute to societies and faith communities where people of different backgrounds and convictions live together peacefully? What should be the role of the church in society? How can we cope with polarization within and between the churches and their theologians? How may the Bible and tradition shed light on these questions?

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4 Cf. Kristen Bialik, "Key Findings about American Life in Urban, Suburban and Rural Areas," American Pew Research 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/22/key-findings-about-american-life-in-urban-suburban-and-rural-areas/>; Mark Bovens & Wille Anchrif, *Diplomademocratie: Over de spanning tussen meritocratie en democratie* (Diploma democracy: On the tension between meritocracy and democracy) (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2011).

These questions have been addressed at the thirteenth biennial conference of the International Reformed Theological Institute (IRTI), which took place from July 4 till 7, 2019 at Vrije Universiteit and Protestantse Theologische Universiteit in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. This volume contains a selection of keynotes and papers presented at the conference in their elaborated and extended form and reflect the discussions and exchange that took place between the around 100 theologians that attended this conference from all over the world.

The theme touches upon the heart of what IRTI basically is and wants to be. In 1995, IRTI was founded with the aim to bridge polarities, i.e., polarities between the East and the West, the North and the South. The fall of the Iron Curtain and the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa created the *momentum* for its foundation, making it possible to bring together various Reformed theologians from Hungary, South Africa, the Netherlands, and the USA. This was followed by theologians from Asia, in particular Indonesia and South Korea, which joined the network as well. From the start, the aim has been to contribute to 'Living Reformed Theology,' which means doing theology in post-colonial, post-communist and post-apartheid contexts, i.e., going beyond polarities, in a Reformed ecumenical spirit searching for the catholicity of the church. At the same time, it must be noted that Reformed theology also has tended to increase polarization by polemizing and building the Reformed identity in strong opposition to others, rather than searching for unity and catholicity. Polarization is part of the Reformed heritage as well, and it is still present within churches that split and push theological and ethical controversies to the extreme.

The IRTI conference took place in the year of the international celebration of the 400th anniversary of the Synod of Dordrecht (1618–1619), which was held by the Dutch Reformed Church, in particular to settle a divisive controversy initiated by the rise of Arminianism. The synod typically exemplifies the ambivalence in the Reformed tradition. On the one hand, the Synod of Dort may be seen as an instance of the transnational, ecumenical character of the Reformed identity, with the participation of various international representatives. In times of tribulation, it contributed to national and social unity, certainly thanks to the privileged position of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands. On the other hand, the Synod of Dort itself contributed to polarization in how it dealt with religious and political conflict at the time and how its Canons were promoted or blamed in its aftermath. The same holds for another relevant and influential document to which the Synod of Dort agreed: the so-called Church Order of Dort (1619). For centuries this Church Order influenced to a great extent not only how the Dutch

Reformed Church was organized internally, but also how the church related to society as a whole and to the government in particular. Its influence was not limited to the Netherlands. In more or less revised form, the Church Order is still used in various Reformed denominations in North America, South Africa, Indonesia, the Netherlands, Australia, and New Zealand. Interestingly, it contains regulations about the relation between church and government as well as all kinds of public affairs such as marriage, charity, education, funerals, and disciplinary jurisdiction. It allows for great difference within the church and in this respect guards against polarization. At the same time, the Order has been used as a political tool, at times making it an instrument of polarization.

## 1 Polarization: Us-Them Thinking

Given the polarized contexts in society and church, scholars must urgently analyze the very nature of polarization, both as a concept and as a concrete phenomenon. Originally the concept stems from the natural sciences, designating how light, radiation, or magnetism moves in different directions. Outside natural science, polarization refers to how people think, especially when two views emerge that drive people apart, like two opposing magnets.

Dutch philosopher and expert on polarization processes Bart Brandsma describes polarization primarily as a “thought construct,” a cognitive frame basically built on images of opposite poles, in which always two identities are set against each other: men against women, Muslims against Western people, politicians against citizens, homosexuals against heterosexuals, black against white.<sup>5</sup> According to Barthold, “polarization occurs when fear of certain identity-based difference leads to avoidance, and avoidance leads to hostile stereotypes that result in ‘us-versus-them’ thinking.”<sup>6</sup> As such, polarization is an activity, the activity of dividing. That is why polarization is not a value-neutral term that just describes a state of affairs. Polarization is making a sharp division, dividing a population or group into opposing fractions.

In all cases of polarization, a dynamic of us versus them is at work.<sup>7</sup> In polarization processes, the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly is aligned along a single dimension and people increasingly perceive and describe what is going on in politics and society in terms of ‘us’ and

5 Bart Brandsma, *Polarisation: Understanding the Dynamics of Us versus Them* (Schoonrewoerd: BB in Media, 2017), 18.

6 Barthold, *Overcoming Polarization*, 3.

7 Barthold, *Overcoming Polarization*, 2; Brandsma, *Polarisation*, 13.

‘them,’<sup>8</sup> defining oneself in strong contrast with the other. In-group/out-group dynamics immediately come into play. The language of belonging, safety and even survival is evoked, framed in terms of ‘us-versus-them.’ Such language draws on deep emotional structures, in particular fear of losing protection and safety. People fall back on us-them thinking when they are afraid and when the only answer to the question ‘who will protect me?’ is ‘my own group.’<sup>9</sup> This is why rational argument can be so ineffective in bringing polarized groups to common ground or peaceful coexistence.<sup>10</sup>

Dutch philosopher Hans Achterhuis describes the us-them dynamics as one of the main sources of violence, in particular ethnic violence and genocide, either religiously motivated or inflamed by nationalistic movements.<sup>11</sup> This does not mean that polarization is the same as conflict and violence. As Brandsma clarifies, there is an important difference between conflict on the one hand and polarization on the other. A conflict always features directly involved parties, who are so to say the immediately identifiable “problem owners”; “The characteristic of a conflict is that the actors have chosen a position, because they are participating, whether they want to or not.”<sup>12</sup> This includes not only opposing parties, but also those who want to make a compromise, or those who try to sidestep. All are part of the rising tension and conflict. Polarization is fundamentally different; it “always involves a choice whether or not to assume the position of problem owner. Deciding to join in is itself a crucial choice for ‘the actors.’ Are we or are we not going to participate in the black-and-white thinking and to what extent?”<sup>13</sup>

## 2 Theology and Polarization

Given these preliminary characteristics of polarization, the question is how theology and theologians decide whether to join in. This is an important question, since one can easily be entrapped in the dynamics of polarization and

8 Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman and Murat Somer, “Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 62:1 (2018), 16–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218759576>.

9 Cf. Michael Ignatieff, *Etnische conflicten en het moderne geweten* (Ethnic conflicts and modern conscience) (Amsterdam: Contact, 1999), 57.

10 Barthold, *Overcoming Polarization*, 3.

11 Hans Achterhuis, *Met alle geweld: Een filosofische zoektocht* (With all violence: A philosophical enquiry) (Rotterdam: Lemniscaat, 2010), 311–397.

12 Brandsma, *Polarisation*, 15.

13 Brandsma, *Polarisation*, 15.

unintendedly become the victim of polarization. One trap is that we take polarization as just a given state of affairs in which we take a position somewhere on the spectrum between two extremes, with the result that the language of polarization from the start permeates our perception and perverts our theological understanding. The risk is that speaking in terms of polarization itself evokes and strengthens the language of division and driving apart. It seduces us to reduce complex matters to a matter of mutually excluding polarities. If we adopt this language from the start, how could we ever overcome the duality of one position excluding the other? This could prevent us from the possibility of seeing it differently. Moreover, all kinds of terms have become affected by polarization, as Robin Lovin states:

We are so polarized that any terms we might use to begin a discussion of shared goals are already the property of one side or the other. Freedom, responsibility, rights, duties, choice, and even life itself have acquired connotations that identify the politics of those who use the words. This makes it easy to tweet about what you already believe, but almost impossible to think together about what the human good is in relation to political choices that we actually face.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the first theological task seems to practice a 'hermeneutics of suspicion,' in order to unmask the polarizing effects and aims in the language of polarization itself.

Importantly, the language of polarization presupposes that division is primary. This presupposition should be questioned. One of the descriptions mentioned in Merriam Webster's dictionary helps us acquire a different understanding. Polarization is described as "division into two sharply distinct opposites, especially a state in which the opinions, beliefs, or interests of a group or society *no longer range along a continuum* but become concentrated at opposing extremes."<sup>15</sup> This description of polarization as a concentration into opposing groups that *formerly ranged on a continuum* indicates that in polarization division is not primary, but always secondary. It is secondary to a primary status in which the continuum is original.

This means that potential solutions may be expected from rediscovering the continuum. To put it simply, when people who were formerly united are

14 Robin W. Lovin, "Reimagining Christian Realism: Church in an Amoral Time," *The Christian Century*, February 27, 2019, 26–29, 27.

15 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/polarization> (accessed August 23, 2020; emphasis mine).

driven apart, we need to re-envision what precisely united them before they were driven apart. To speak theologically, what matters is reconciliation, in the sense of reconciling what has been divided. For what is essential is not what makes 'us' different from 'them,' but rather that we are just like other people. This is described in a text by Maya Angelou, which was nicely performed by the King's Singers in the song 'We are': "We are more alike, my friends, / Than we are unlike." In a polarized world, people emphasize the differences, reducing them to polarities and using them as fuel for conflict. Starting from our basic human likeness, we see commonality behind differences.

Here we get a glimpse of the calling of the church in times of polarization. Reconciliation is the central unifying story of the Christian faith. And the church lives from the gospel of "God reconciling the world to himself in Christ ... entrusting to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:19). Being part of and truthful to this story is the calling of the church. In many cases it will be an open question what this means *in concreto*. But at least we can say that it deeply changes our perception of what is at stake. Polarization is neither the first word nor necessarily the last.

Yet, overcoming polarization and reconciling what has become divided is a difficult task for several reasons. First of all, those who are in particular responsible for polarization, positioning themselves at the extremes of the spectrum, are not interested in reconciliation at all. Distinguishing between five roles in polarization processes, Brandsma describes the driving actor of polarization as "the pusher," the one who supplies fuel to polarization by continuously setting the opposite pole in an evil light. The aim is to exert maximum pressure on those in the middle, "the silent ones," to choose a party. Pushers like Donald Trump, Geert Wilders or Marine le Pen use their simple one-liners ("Mexicans are profiteers," "Refugees are testosterone bombs," or "they cannot integrate") not primarily for the sake of those who have joined them already, "the joiners," but in order to press "the silent ones" to start to think in such terms and to choose one of the poles. Because this is where ground can be gained, it is most important to the pusher to make an impact on this middle group, not necessarily to win them over for their own camp, but to force them to choose, either for or against.<sup>16</sup> The effect is what may be called "the disappearing center."<sup>17</sup> It is tempting to oppose such pushers with similar munition. However, in that case one becomes a pusher oneself. As Brandsma observes, "In the polarization between right and left, the pushers on the left (the 'cosmopolitans') are very

16 Brandsma, *Polarisation*, 26–7, 33.

17 Cf. Alan I. Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).



certain of one thing. ‘Right-wing voters are wrong.’<sup>18</sup> Both pushers think that evil is on the other side. Moral self-righteousness drives the pushers, both on the right and on the left, and supplies them with lots of energy. The only way is to become ‘more extreme’ while moderating means losing face. In any case, the pushers want to strengthen polarization:

Anyone who does not choose black-and-white thinking is a thorn in the pusher’s side. We are wrong to think that the opposite pole is the pusher’s target. For pushers, the opposite pole is the subject of conversation—sometimes ‘the enemy’—but their actual target is the middle group.<sup>19</sup>

Secondly, building bridges between the extremes that the pushers on both poles have created is difficult. It is the work of the “bridge builder,” the fourth role Brandsma distinguishes. The bridge builder spots the deficiencies in the worldview of both poles and tries to do something about polarization by intervening, in particular by arranging dialogues and by producing counter-narratives, e.g., demonstrating the humanity of Muslims, the rights of foreigners or the inhuman misery of refugees. However, the bridge builder unintendedly supplies fuel to polarization, as Brandsma notes:

On the way, the bridge builder does something that really pleases the pusher. The bridge builder supplies fuel to the polarization despite their best intentions. Organising a dialogue between the pushers, providing a podium to the opposite poles (read: confirming polarisation’s right to exist) as well as producing counter-narratives is what supplies the fuel. The pushers tolerate bridge builders because they give them impetus. ... It is a major misconception of the bridge builder to think that you can build a bridge from the middle of a ravine. ... Pushers tolerate bridge-builders, but in the meantime are seldom interested in having a real talk with their opposite pole. Geert Wilders and Marine le Pen do not want to talk with their counterparts. Jihadists are not open to talking with secular thinkers. The pushers expand their monologue.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, when polarization increases, the middle zone more and more becomes a danger zone. Whereas the middle zone was tolerated in an earlier stage, a time may come when tolerance is zero. The bridge builder may become

18 Brandsma, *Polarisation*, 27.

19 Brandsma, *Polarisation*, 33–34.

20 Brandsma, *Polarisation*, 37.

a “scapegoat,” which is Brandsma’s fifth role. Because bridge builders are not entirely trusted, they are easily seen as traitors.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, as Brandsma observes, the similarity of people is not just the basis for overcoming polarization but also its source. Referring to René Girard’s theory of mimetic desire, he states that we do not have original desires, but desire what others desire. In resembling the desire of the other, the other is a model. At the same time, the other is an obstacle, because not all can have what all desire.<sup>22</sup>

These short observations indicate that there is no simple cure to polarization. The complex dynamics of polarization easily make one powerless. There are no simple solutions. Organizing dialogues between the opposing parties may even fuel polarization rather than contribute to depolarization. In dialogue, often the identity of the other is central, with the aim to further harmony between the opposing parties. This may be effective in a preventing stage, but counter-productive in a stage in which polarization has increased and escalated into (violent) conflict. As Brandsma demonstrates, what is needed in that stage is not trying to understand the other, but adequate skills to deal with conflict. Dialogue and reflection are not adequate during the conflict, but after escalation, when the opposing groups have become tired of conflict and violence, they can be appropriate. Religions, life views, and faith communities may contribute significantly in this final stage, the stage of reconciliation. According to Brandsma, religions and life views are not the cause of the major conflicts of our time, but rather provide sources of reflection that enable people to deal with conflicts.

The question is not whether we can use these sources to convince each other, or even if we tell each other about them. The question is: can we use these sources to form an attitude that enables us to deal well with conflict? ... Now the other’s identity is not central, but instead, a fundamental recalibration of our own attitude...<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, Barthold proposes a model of dialogue that is aimed at effecting a shift of perspective in how one thinks about the other rather than shoring up better arguments: “In dialogue there is a re-orientation toward underlying meanings and values that expose a fundamental human connection with the

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21 Brandsma, *Polarisation*, 40.

22 Brandsma, *Polarisation*, 63–64.

23 Brandsma, *Polarisation*, 79.

other; our stories about the other, about ourselves, and about the nature of our relationship begin to change.”<sup>24</sup>

Here, church and theology come into view. Surprisingly, following Brandsma and Barthold, the core task of church and theology in contributing to depolarization and reconciliation in society is not so much to become a bridge builder between the opposing parties, but rather to try to understand the meaning of one's own faith tradition with regard to the attitude towards life, conflicts, and how to deal well with them. Following this line of thought, one could say that the calling of the church is first of all to be the church, and to understand what it means to be the church, i.e., being a community gathered around Christ which practices a Christ-like attitude in dealing with conflict and polarization. From this follows that the primary theological task is contextual self-explanation, i.e., to explain the meaning of the Christian faith and the church in particular with regard to conflicts and processes of polarization in which the church and its members actually are involved. This task asks for theology as critical self-reflection, as recalibration of one's basic view and life attitude in light of scripture and tradition, in particular with regard to how the other is seen. Similarly, dialogue is not primarily about understanding the other, but about understanding oneself. As Barthold argues, dialogue “draws on personal experiences articulated in first-person narratives.”<sup>25</sup> It is first and foremost about “self-change.”<sup>26</sup> In turn, precisely this first-person approach encourages one to avoid generalizations about the other and prevents one from speaking about, much less for, the other, acknowledging the other as sharing a common humanity and in concretely experiencing the other as a ‘Thou.’<sup>27</sup> In a second instance, such a fundamental recalibration of one's own views and attitudes from the sources and in dialogue can contribute to a new ‘we,’ a new understanding of the common good, not as the primary aim or as a preliminary condition, but as a by-product, so to speak, of deep, critical, and honest self-reflection. The result is the creation of a new space, a new horizon, in which not only one's own position is seen anew, but also that of the other, enabling the creation of a new, shared perspective.<sup>28</sup>

All this asks for both analyses of polarization and conflict in particular contexts and profound theological and ecclesiological reflection, as well as theological reflections on and evaluations of the role and meaning of the

24 Barthold, *Overcoming Polarization*, 4.

25 Barthold, *Overcoming Polarization*, 5.

26 Barthold, *Overcoming Polarization*, 111.

27 Barthold, *Overcoming Polarization*, 91, 93–95, 112, referring to Martin Buber.

28 Barthold, *Overcoming Polarization*, 111.

Reformed theological tradition with regard to polarization. Therefore, in this volume three subthemes in particular are addressed, which order the various contributions: (1) polarization in church and society, (2) polarization and the Reformed tradition, and (3) the calling of the church. In the first section the focus is on analyzing contemporary phenomena of polarization in church and society as well as the search for adequate ways of preventing and overcoming polarization. The second part focusses more specifically on the Reformed tradition, its social and political view and in particular the role of the Canons and Church Order of Dort. The final part of this volume is more specifically devoted to the calling of the church and how the church may contribute to depolarization and reconciliation.

### 3 Polarization in Church and Society

The first sub-theme addresses the phenomenon of polarization and how it appears *in concreto* in debates on racism, social justice, sexuality and gender, feminism, euthanasia, and ecology and agriculture in various contexts. Attention is paid to the specific contexts and situations in various countries such as South Africa, the USA, Malawi, the Netherlands, and South Korea. Adequate responses to polarization depend on the particular contexts and situations, socio-political conditions and also how local congregations understand themselves and their role in society. It has been part of the Reformed identity that the context of every church is acknowledged as an important factor in the way discernment takes place. What is precisely at stake in a particular situation of polarization? Given the specific contexts, what is precisely the challenge for church and theology in these situations? Do church and theology themselves play a role in processes of polarization? Which theological concepts and approaches are promising in countering polarization?

In the first chapter, “Can Conviviality Trump Polarization?” Nadine Bowers du Toit explores polarization with regard to race, class and religion, in deeply divided societies, in particular in post-apartheid South Africa. Against this background, the author introduces the notion of conviviality, i.e., the art and practice of living together. Conviviality has recently been revived within the field of diaconia as a way to think anew about what it means to live together in solidarity, and to share resources in the joint struggle for human dignity and a sustainable community. Bowers du Toit argues that conviviality is directly linked to calls for justice, dignity, and a shared understanding of the common good as a way to seek and build life-giving community in direct opposition to the fragmentation brought about through increasing polarization. This

contribution explores the possibilities inherent in this notion for challenging faith communities to engage forces of polarization at the grassroots level.

In the next chapter, Thandi Soko-de Jong focusses on the question of how unprecedented exchanges of polarizing content between populations in our times should be engaged. The task is to address the factors that drive polarization, such as fear, disconnection, apathy, and hate. Soko-de Jong also examines some common pitfalls in the social engagement of Reformed faith communities, pointing to the need for more conscientious commitment to including the voices of its members that are negatively affected by fallouts of polarization conflict. Including these voices challenges the idea that the Reformed tradition speaks with universal authority while only privileging as orthodox the voices that conform to its traditional, Western roots. To elaborate on this point, the author examines the Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel (also known as the Dallas Statement), to show the need for reforming the conversation between different sides of polarizing topics such as sexuality, gender, immigration, religion, race, and so on. The growth of robust engagement can potentially enrich the fabric of Reformed Theology, enabling it to better respond to polarizing issues as they arise. For further practical illustrations, Soko-de Jong draws from research among faith communities in Southern Malawi focusing on experiences of faith, *tcheni pa kalanka* (orthodoxy) and health, a combination of topics that has its own polarizing elements.

In Chapter 3, Willem van Vlastuin addresses polarized debates on sexuality and gender in the Netherlands and in postmodern Western culture, which is very sensitive to, and polarized by, pronouncements about sexuality. Against this background, van Vlastuin explores the apostle Paul's understanding of the Christian identity in the mystical union with Christ, as detailed in the New Testament, and its implications for understanding sexuality. As marriage refers to the Christian identity in Christ as the body, determined by Christ as the head, the holiness of marriage is central in the apostle's treatment of sexual life. The author applies these Biblical investigations to the current cultural context. First, reading the Bible means that one hears the voice of the eternal Word, namely Jesus Christ, in an existential way. Second, finding one's identity in Christ means one must have a struggle with one's old identity in this world. This personal struggle is part of the suffering of the whole of creation, caused by the expectation of the breakthrough of the kingdom of God. Third, in union with Christ, sexual identity is not made absolute because the main issue is holiness. The author argues that these perspectives give direction to both heterosexuals and homosexuals, transgender people and bisexuals.

In a different approach, Heleen Zorgdrager addresses the same topic in an analysis of the dynamics of polarization around sexuality and gender in the Netherlands which became manifest in the case of the Nashville Statement,

in January 2019. Zorgdrager contextualizes the debate both locally and globally, addresses the dynamics of polarization and the identity-politics involved, and seeks to find a theological way forward beyond oppositions that tend to emphasize and prioritize ‘identity’ in the debate. Zorgdrager demonstrates how ‘Nashville’ is situated within international neo-conservative campaigns for ‘traditional family values’ and contextualized in the Dutch political landscape, in particular in the ‘culturalization’ of Christian identity in the political party that openly supported the Nashville Statement, the SGP. Some contemporary orthodox Reformed theologians, critical of modern identity discourses, depart from grounding identity first and foremost ‘in Christ’, such as van Vlastuin in the preceding chapter. According to Zorgdrager, however, they disconnect this identity from the body’s desires or even oppose them. She then suggests three possible ways to move beyond the polarized sexuality debates in church and society: to opt for the notion of sacramental character (Mark Jordan/Marco Derks) instead of identity, to embrace the concept of the broken middle (Gillian Rose), and to envision the church as a learning community on a transformative journey, dedicated to conversational openness on matters of gender and human sexuality.

In “Passivity, Abuse, and Self-Sacrifice: Daoism and Feminist Christology,” Jaeseung Cha continues reflecting on gender. Cha shows how polarized debates on gender in both Western and East Asian contexts, as for instance on the ordination of women, reflect polarized debates on the theological understanding of the crucifixion of Christ, in particular between traditional atonement theology and feminist theological critiques of atonement as a glorification of suffering and martyrdom. In order to find an alternative to this polarization, the author analyzes the feminist nature of the non-dominating and non-violent sacrificial deity in Daoism. It is women, not men, who represent this passive, non-violent but also active and productive power of the Dao. This sheds light on the fact that Christianity is not the only religion to value the sacrificial aspect of the Deity, and that sacrifice may neither necessarily be violent nor submissive. This understanding is brought into a dialogue with critical feminist views on atonement as abusive and violent sacrifice and results in a proposal for a revision of classical atonement theology, thus finding a way beyond polarization in acknowledging both feminist theological criticism of oppressive aspects of atonement and the central meaning of Christ’s crucifixion as sacrificial love aimed at transformative justice.

In Chapter 6, Annemarieke van der Woude relates the notion of holiness to the Dutch euthanasia debate. In the Netherlands, the number of people dying on request—both euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide are regulated in the Dutch Euthanasia Act (2002)—is increasing. What is more, the files of reported euthanasia show that the number of people dying on request

without a life-threatening disease is growing as well. In the public domain, this is a highly contested issue that often leads to polarization between opposing groups. Van der Woude argues that the biblical notion of holiness can serve as a meaningful concept to go beyond polarities. In scripture, holiness is not a static attribute, but a dynamic one: nothing is holy in and of itself, but anything can *become* holy. The author proposes approaching the multi-layered issue of dying on request with the same timidity as that of Moses when he drew near to the burning bush where the Lord called him. She elaborates on the liturgical as well as on the ethical aspect of holiness and concludes that in the combination of the two the Christian faith tradition can contribute to a new understanding of the common good, in believers as well as non-believers.

In the final chapter in this first section of this book, titled “Sewing Hope in a Polarized Agricultural Debate,” Jan Jorrit Hasselaar, Philipp Pattberg and Peter-Ben Smit focus on increasing conflicting and polarized positions in debates on agriculture in the Netherlands between farmers, consumers, supermarkets, banks and activists. This polarization in agriculture can be understood as a ‘wicked problem,’ which does not allow for a one-dimensional solution, but rather asks for a new perspective that stimulates cooperation and transformation of agriculture instead of conflict and polarization. To this end, the authors explore Jonathan Sacks’ concept of hope, understood as a narrative of individual and societal transformation, and show that the concept of hope can be promising in relation to joint decision making in situations of increasingly polarized positions and large uncertainty. Diversity and conflicting positions are considered as a source of creativity and renewal instead of polarization. This concept of hope also provides a governance structure to develop trust, hope, and love in times of transition. The approach that is developed can be viewed as issuing from the structure of the biblical canon and the hermeneutics implied in it. Operationalized in a case study in the Food Valley region in the Netherlands, Sacks’ concept of hope indeed appears to be promising.

#### 4 Polarization and the Reformed Tradition

The second sub-theme is devoted to the question of what the Reformed tradition may contribute to the understanding of and the response to polarization. The position of the church in a particular country depends on how church, state and society are related. In turn, this affects how the church may respond to processes of polarization. For instance, the role of the church and its contribution to society are dependent upon how much space the government gives

to societal initiatives and associations in general and religious communities in particular. Traditionally, in Western countries there is much space for such initiatives. The separation between church and state was precisely intended to save the church from governmental interventions in religious affairs. This created many opportunities for churches to contribute to civil society. When the freedom of religion or the freedom of opinion is under pressure, this requires a different approach from the church.

How the church relates to the state and to society and what this means for its calling with regard to the various phenomena of polarization to a great extent depend on historical backgrounds and developments. In his contribution, David Fergusson outlines various traditional themes of Reformed social and political theology: politics as vocation, civil resistance, coordination of church and state, democratic tendencies, nationalist ideals, and economic concerns. While many of the Reformed churches initially followed a Christendom model of church-state partnership, this has been problematized in the modern era. An assessment of the place of these national churches is offered, followed by a consideration of ways in which the classical themes might be retrieved at a time of rising populism and polarization.

In the next chapter, David Daniels addresses the threat of xenophobia, which fractures many societies around the world, and relates it to an illuminating debate at the Synod of Dort in 1618 on baptizing children of non-Christian parents in Asia. Daniels demonstrates that this debate offers an inclusive framing of incorporating new peoples into the Christian community. Occurring prior to the rise of modern racism and orientalism, the progressive currents in the 1618 baptism debate point to a constructive manner in which difference can inform how societies think of community and peoplehood in terms other than ancestry, land, and language, supplying an alternative to the polarizing currents within today's world. As an alternative to xenophobia and its polarizing force, the author introduces Fred Moten's concept of xenogenerosity, which means generosity toward strangers.

In Chapter 10, Jozef Hehanussa addresses religious polarization in Yogyakarta. He highlights that in Yogyakarta tolerance and harmony have prevailed for centuries since the beginning of encounters between religions. Local people have welcomed new faiths, even consciously integrating spiritual practices of other religions (Hindu, Buddhism, and Islam) into their own religious practices. Therefore, syncretism could be found in each religion in the city. The situation changed when Christianity was introduced by the Dutch Reformed, who, rejecting syncretism, kept a radical distance from Javanese cultural traditions. Nowadays, tendencies of polarization have grown stronger



as the influence of religious radical groups in society has also become stronger. These groups oppose the presence of other religions, especially Christianity, in the city and accuse Christian schools and hospitals of being agents of ‘Christianization,’ although today these organizations are primarily social in their purposes. Hehanussa shows that religious polarization in Yogyakarta has a strongly negative impact on interfaith relations, including social services to the community.

In his contribution titled “Election and Hope: Van Ruler and Dort,” Allan Janssen, who passed away one year after the IRTI conference, explores how the doctrine of election found in the Canons of the Synod of Dort might provide a theological foundation for hope in the contemporary, highly polarized world. Furthermore, Janssen demonstrates how the theology of Arnold A. van Ruler, himself an advocate of Dortian theology, may assist in this effort through his doctrine of election. The author examines Van Ruler’s more extensive comments on election, only recently published (in Dutch). His understanding of election as “actual,” i.e., as the action of God toward the believer, an action that has its origin in the eternity of God’s love, offers possibilities for the contemporary believer to engage with Dort in fresh ways.

In the final contribution to this part of the volume, Klaas-Willem de Jong and Jan Dirk Th. Wassenaar take as the starting point of their reflection on polarization and the Reformed tradition article 31 of the Church Order of Dort, which reads: “that which is decided by majority vote shall be considered settled and binding unless it is proved to conflict with the Word of God or with the articles adopted in this general synod.” From the beginning of the Reformation in the Netherlands, this approach has been questioned in church and theology. In their article, an overview is offered of positions and practices in successively the period up to the Synod of Dordrecht (1618–19), the last decades of the 19th century and the second half of the 20th century. The authors conclude that decision making in the church cannot just be a case of simple majority, but should recon with the nature of the church as unity in Christ. Two extremes should be avoided. On the one hand, it should be avoided that decision makers in the church force their own way of understanding this unity in ecclesiastical practice onto others and increase polarization. On the other hand, it should be avoided that unity in Christ becomes abstract, allowing for all kinds of differences and views, so that in the end this unity becomes indifferent and has no real implications for overcoming conflict and fulfilling its call towards polarization.

## 5 The Calling of the Church

This brings us to the question central to the final part of this volume: What is, theologically speaking, the calling of the church, given the specific challenges in particular contexts? Whereas the first sub-theme starts reflection from society and its challenges, this sub-theme addresses similar questions but starting from the church's self-understanding, i.e., from ecclesiology.

Though in the Western world religion is conceived as basically restricted to the private sphere of life where one may choose to relate to a church or other religious community, churches still play their role in the public sphere. Governments and civilians regularly ask for the support of churches because of the binding potential of religion and its contribution to civil society. However, what is the calling of the church in countries and regions where the church has a minority position and is permanently at risk of becoming the victim of societal polarization between groups of different religious backgrounds, sometimes ending up in violence? What is the calling of the church in African or Asian countries that are still deeply marked by ethnic, religious and social-economic polarizations, regularly exploding in violent conflicts?

In Chapter 13, Gerrit Singgih describes how in Indonesia violence against those who are regarded by the majority as deviating from true religious tenets has increased sharply. In particular, LGBT people and those who support them have become the target of attacks, resulting in a criminalization of these people, as exemplified in the Indonesian Constitutional Court charge of homosexual acts as criminal offenses. At the same time, the Constitutional Court has recognized local religions of Adat Society as of equal status as the official six world religions. The author shows that oppression of LGBT people in Indonesia is related to interreligious polarization, through which LGBT people have become the scapegoats. Responding to these instances of polarization, the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI) both re-examined the traditional theology of mission and sent a Pastoral Statement, imploring the member churches to reconsider their negative attitude toward LGBT people. The Pastoral Statement on LGBT was rejected by the majority of the member churches. The positive impact is that the outside world, for instance Muslims who advocate acceptance of LGBT people, welcomes the PGI initiative on LGBT. In this sense, the PGI has established signs of hope for all people of Indonesia, thus strengthening the calling of the church to contribute to overcoming polarization.

Elizabeth Welch addresses the issue of polarization in terms of the separation and division of churches in the 2nd millennium and offers an understanding of *koinonia* as central to the calling of the church on its way to address

polarization both in the church and the world. A brief history is given of different separations of the churches, followed by a look at twentieth-century ecumenical developments, from the 1920 World Mission Conference in Edinburgh, via the Second Vatican Council, to the World Council of Churches' work in the area of *koinonia*, and international dialogues that have taken up this theme. *Koinonia* is seen as God's gift and calling, arising out of the *koinonia* found in the Trinity, which draws people to the gift of the fullness of God's inclusive love and calls people to live in relationship with one another, despite divisions, differences and diversities. Welch examines International Reformed Anglican dialogue as a particular example of two traditions of the church looking at their separate lives and seeing the way in which they can come closer together by embracing more fully the gift of God's *koinonia*.

In "No Calling without Being Called: The *Vocatio Interna* at the Heart of Sanctification," Henk van den Belt argues that the Reformed understanding of the inward work of the Holy Spirit is helpful for understanding the calling of the church with regard to polarization. There is no Christianity without conflict, because all Christians are called into the kingdom of God. Still, they are called to strive for peace. After a short historical survey on the background of the use of *vocatio*, this chapter dwells on the two sides of the church's calling. The church is called out of the world and to liberty and holiness. The Reformed emphasis on the work of the Spirit, however, shows that the most essential borderline is not the one between the church and the world, but between the Spirit and the flesh. This emphasis also sheds light on the nature of sanctification as a call to freedom and holiness and away from passivity and pride.

The question of how the church perceives its own alterity in relation to its existence and mission in the world is taken up critically by Najib Awad. He unearths the self-otherizing tendency in a perception of alterity that can make the church one of the causes of polarization in the world, rather than a victim of it. Reading Christ's prayer in John 17 on 'being in the world, but not of the world' from a Levinasian perspective of alterity, Awad argues that this sheds critical light on Jesus followers' perception of alterity. It means that Christians, like all other humans, makes them be who they are vis-à-vis their relation to others, not only by virtue of their faith convictions. Rather than separating the disciples from the world, Jesus is afraid that his disciples' relation to him would create in them a sense of alterity that will turn them eventually into a 'separate anti-society' entity. Next, the author sheds light on a contextual, down-to-earth example of a Protestantism in one part of the world, namely Protestants in Greater Syria, whose self-otherizing perception of alterity alienates them from

the world of the Orient. By placing themselves in this state of 'foreignness' (Julia Kristeva) they willingly or unwillingly contribute to furthering rather than overcoming polarization. This example shows that today's Christianity might be responsible for forms of polarization in the world due to how it perceives its own alterity.

In Chapter 17, Viktória Kóczyán takes the response of the Churches in Hungary to migrants as the starting point. First, she shows how the World Council of Churches (wcc), being actively involved in fighting for the rights of refugees and migrants, has reacted to major events in the so-called 'migrant crisis' since 2015 and has voiced its opinion in different statements and speeches. Kóczyán examines the theology behind these reactions and how it deals with issues of national identity and self-understanding of the member churches. Next, Kóczyán focusses on the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Hungary (ecch), which shares member churches with the wcc, but has not been committed to the defense of migrants in the same way as the wcc. The Hungarian example shows how an ecumenical organization performs its tasks in a divided society, as a communion of churches polarized in themselves while aiming at unity. However, wcc concerns such as supporting and welcoming refugees in the destination countries, integrating them in societies, hospitality and fighting against racism are less prominent in the Hungarian discourse. Rather, in this discourse the limitation of incoming migrants is defended as a theologically valid solution to fears and concerns in society. The contrast between the two ecumenical organizations raises the question as to what ecumenical theology has to offer and what the unity of Christians can mean against the backdrop of the migration crisis in Europe. Kóczyán suggests that in order to take another step towards unity, the churches must acknowledge underlying fears about losing identities in the host countries on the one hand, and make practices of dialogue and ecumenical common services in contexts of migration fruitful to overcoming such fears on the other hand.

In the final chapter, Louise Prideaux argues that a pursuit of Christ-centered 'otherness' presents an answer to the question how the church may respond to polarization in society. 'Otherness' is a popular theme in contemporary cultural anthropology, particularly in considering the meaning of culture, the implications of binding cultural communities to repeated patterns of past behavior, and the awareness that every person brings their own partiality to every social relationship. From the insights of Louise Lawrence, Mario Aguilar, Joel Robbins, and Will Rollason it becomes clear that the prioritization of 'the other' in cultural engagement is paramount. Robbins acknowledges that

the idea of ‘otherness’ is borrowed from theology. Taking up this observation, Prideaux interestingly shows that a theological ‘otherness’ is present in the theology of the neo-Calvinist Abraham Kuyper. Through a recontextualization of sphere sovereignty into this idea of ‘otherness’ that is informed by Kuyper’s commitment to freedom of conscience and his concern for the poor, ‘the other’ becomes both a theological and a social priority. Prideaux finds an extension of Kuyper’s theology in the idea of ‘commonness,’ which provides a necessary counterpart for ‘otherness’ in cultural engagement, that preserves inclusivity and visible unity at the same time as the distinctiveness of the cultural ‘other.’ In addition, Herman Bavinck’s exhortation to confess Christ in all areas of life gives the idea of ‘otherness’ its distinctly Christian character. As the church is formed into this sense of ‘otherness,’ Prideaux concludes, it will be better equipped to respond to polarization in society through all its encounters with the cultural ‘other.’

In an epilogue, Heleen Zorgdrager makes concluding observations and reflections on the theme of polarization and the calling of the church. She points out similarities and differences in theological approaches between the authors, how these are derived from Reformed, ecumenical and other theological and non-theological sources, and what the authors offer constructively to understanding the calling of the church in times of polarization.

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