

Caring for Health, Bodies, and Development

Teaching New Spiritual Practices in the Church of Sweden

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Over the last fifty years a plethora of new spiritual practices has emerged in the Church of Sweden. Many fall within a category of holistic practices, aimed at engaging body, soul, and spirit. Among these, two categories are dominant: meditations and movement-based bodily practices. Some of these practices are contested by other Christians on a theological basis. The article asks: Who are the new ritual specialists teaching these practices? Why do they teach these practices? Why in the church? By using a bottom-up perspective and studying practices which lie outside the traditional Christian religious rites, which has been the focus in research on the Church of Sweden, we find that the holistic practices are framed in a culture of care, focusing on bodily and spiritual wellbeing. We suggest that the predominance of women in body-movement practices should be understood as a generational feature rather than as an expression of the feminization of the church. Many of the leaders are women who were part of new spiritual movements as well as body-mind practices and various forms of dance in gyms and yoga studios in the 1990s and early 2000s, finding an openness to bringing their knowledge into the church.

IT IS AN ORDINARY THURSDAY morning around 9 o'clock, and we have been invited by a priest to participate in a yoga session only for women, and to have breakfast afterwards together with the participants. The yoga session has a focus on "bodily and mental health", and attracts women living close to the church. The church is located

in a multi-cultural neighbourhood, and six middle-aged women from Kurdistan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Greece have come to exercise together. One of the women is wearing a head scarf, two of them are wearing crosses. They appear to know each other well, and they are greeted by the female priest with hugs in an informal and welcoming atmosphere. The first thing they do is to collect yoga mats from cupboards in the back of the church, and place them in front of the altar, where candles are burning.

The priest leading the class has no formal yoga teacher education, yet she is an energetic woman, involved in many different sports, not least as a marathon runner. As a part of an integration programme to bring migrants of both Muslim and Christian backgrounds together, the priest has developed a yoga training programme for her "girls" where both movements and verbal expressions are adopted to strengthen and empower the women.

She has been working in the neighbourhood and with this group for a couple of years; her experience tells her that yoga and other bodily movements are especially important for women who suffer from trauma that expresses itself in bodily pain. The women also assert that they get stronger by doing yoga.

As the yoga session begins, the priest reminds us of the importance of posture, holding a position where we can imagine a thread pulling the top of one's head, leading to heaven and connecting us with God. Sitting on the floor, we are encouraged to feel our bodies, not only from the inside, but also to gently stroke our arms, shoulders, legs, and stomach as we simultaneously tell ourselves "I love you. Please forgive me. I am sorry. Thank you." This is reiterated several times during the class with the priest validating feelings of sadness and sorrow that can crop up during the exercises, reiterating that such feelings are OK.

The priest also gives encouraging pep-talks during particularly difficult or demanding exercises where bending and movement are combined into a training programme: "You go, girls! Go on! A few more times!"

We sweat, we bend, we stretch and we smile as we try to follow the instructions with bodies that are stiff and ageing.

* * * * *

This yoga class is one example from a plethora of new activities that have emerged during the last fifty years in the Church of Sweden. As a holistic practice, it aims to engage body, soul, and spirit, with the priest working to break the isolation that some of the women were in, strengthening their bodies and helping them recover from traumas caused by war and forced migration.

Although many of the holistic practices are led by ordained clergy, several are also led by laypeople, with no formal theological training. As ritual specialists, they convey knowledge of techniques of the body or mind that did not exist in church settings earlier. In this article, we focus on these

"new ritual specialists", the teachers, leaders, or instructors of meditations, dances, yoga, qigong, and meditative movements. Who are teaching these new spiritual practices in the Church of Sweden? Why do they teach these practices? And why in the church?

The data have been collected within the research project "The New Faces of the Folk Church – New Spiritual Practices, Lived Religion and Theological Legitimacy",¹ where we have used a multi-methodological approach to investigate everyday spiritual practices within an ecclesial institution and how these are linked to notions about *gender* and *health* and how they relate to the church as a *religious institution*. Our ethnographic fieldwork² has been concentrated

1 The research project "The New Faces of the Folk Church – New Spiritual Practices, Lived Religion and Theological Legitimacy" examines what everyday spiritual practices people practise within the framework of the Church of Sweden, how they are perceived by the practitioners, and how they are negotiated and legitimized in Lutheran theology. The three-year project is linked to Karlstad University and is run with funds from the Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (RJ P20-0606). The research project has undergone ethics review (EPM 2021-05807-01). The project is led by Katarina Plank. The netnographic survey, as well as interviews and observations, was carried out by Linnea Lundgren. Katarina Plank and Helene Egnell are researchers in the project, where Plank was responsible for research design, contemporary data-collection and theory within religious studies, and Egnell was responsible for historical data-collection and theological theory. For more information about the data, please see Plank, Egnell, and Lundgren 2023. All translations are made by the authors.

2 Initially, a netnographic study was carried out during the autumn of 2021, where we observed all activities taking place in the diocese of Stockholm *outside* communion services and concerts. In this study we



Figure 1. Yoga stop. The holistic practices can be part of a larger “package” with worship, and a social dimension where participants share a cup of tea or breakfast.

on three distinct groups of holistic practices with different tempos: 1. body-mind practices like yoga, tikva,³ qigong, and meditative movement that tend to work with *slow movements*, 2. various dances that work with more *intense or faster movements*, and 3. meditations that are usually carried out in *stillness*. Sometimes the differences

observed the location of the activities as well as the occupational role of the leaders. In May 2023 we performed a control study for two weeks (where we mapped all new spiritual practices in the diocese of Stockholm once again) to see whether our results from 2021 could be matched, and the results correlated. The results guided our continued investigation and worked as a base for our ethnographic fieldwork (see Lundgren, Plank, and Egnell 2023 and Plank, Lundgren, and Egnell 2023 for a discussion on the results from the netnographic study).

- 3 Tikva is a Swedish version of Christian yoga, a branding that is advertised as containing training and relaxation exercises. See Svenska kyrkan 2023b.

between these practices might not be very distinct, since many of the holistic practices are intended to work with interoception and exteroception, that is sensing both internal and external aspects of the body, as well as with mental practices.

Twenty-seven observations have been conducted, as well as interviews with participants (27) and leaders (21) of these holistic activities, and also with priests (5). The observations have been conducted, mainly during weekdays, when the holistic activities usually take place; sometimes they are scheduled in close relation to more formal morning, lunch, or evening worship services or presented as part of a “package” of different activities (see Figure 1).

Below, we give a short introduction to the research field of new spiritual practices, as well as an introduction to the location of our study: the diocese of Stockholm.

Researching new spiritual practices in the diocese of Stockholm

The practices we examine have previously often been described as New Age spirituality or have been considered as “alternative spirituality”. As such, the practices have primarily been researched as parts of an esoteric or holistic milieu, or as occurring among new religious movements, with a focus on individual spirituality (see e.g. Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Frisk 1998; Hammer 1997; Hammer 2013; Sutcliffe 2003; Sutcliffe and Gilhus 2013; Svanberg and Westerlund 2008). When related to a Christian environment, some researchers have indicated that these practices take place on the fringes or outskirts of the church (Jorgensen 1982; Heelas 1996; Kemp 2003; Saliba 1999; Nynäs, Illman and Martikainen 2015). Sometimes healing practices, such as Angel spirituality, can be seen as “crossroads” where Lutheran Christianity and esoteric or alternative spir-



Figure 2. Some of the movement-based practices work with slow movements that have a meditative quality, like qigong.

ity meet in the everyday life of individuals (Utriainen 2020, 269). Further, many of these practices are not necessarily perceived as religious by the person who practises them but can instead be understood as various forms of “secular sacralizations”, a kind of secular spirituality on the borderland of religion, where health has become an important part of the meaning of life (Jespers 2014).

In relation to institutions, several of the practices, especially of Eastern origin, have undergone a secularization process and have been adopted in new areas and places in the Nordic countries “where more explicit expressions of religion would be more or less impossible, for instance, in public schools and healthcare, but also in other municipal and state agencies as well as in professional development and leadership training in corporations” (Enstedt and Plank 2023, 1). Some of them are now found in or offered as activities by Christian churches, together with other holistic practices like sacred dances, pilgrimages,

meditative movements, and meditation. Our data show that these practices are far from marginalized; in the diocese of Stockholm these new spiritual practices are offered in eight out of ten parishes, and make up around 15 per cent of all activities offered by the churches outside worship services and concerts (Lundgren, Plank, and Egnell 2023). They are thus everyday practices that are incorporated into the church, very often in the church room itself in front of the altar (see Figures 2, 3 and 6).

The practices are new in the context of the Church of Sweden, in so far as they have developed during the last fifty years, or they are new in the context of the Church of Sweden, even if they existed in older church traditions (see also Plank, Lundgren and Egnell 2023).

The Church of Sweden is an Evangelical-Lutheran former state church, understanding itself as a “folk church”. As a folk church, it is regulated in the Church Order (Kyrkoordning) Chapter 2, §1 stating that it should serve all those who reside

within the geographical bounds of a parish (Kyrkoordning för Svenska kyrkan 2024, 7). Though membership figures have been declining rapidly since it was disestablished in the year 2000, it is still the majority church in Sweden with 52.8 per cent of the population as members 2022 (Svenska kyrkan 2023a). As the majority church it is characterized by a high degree of comprehensiveness with a vast variety of theological stances, but it is generally seen as a liberal church with openness towards LGBTQ+ persons and engagement in social and political issues. Ordination to the priesthood has been open to women since 1958.

The diocese of Stockholm was established in 1942 by merging parts of Uppsala diocese (north of Stockholm) and Strängnäs diocese (south of Stockholm). Stockholm – the capital of Sweden – then housed 10 per cent of the population, and it was seen as important that it should be a bishopric of its own. From the late nineteenth century onwards, people from other parts of Sweden had migrated to the capital and often lost their connection to the church, meaning that the secularization process was especially strong in Stockholm. Membership in 2022 was 44 per cent of the population (Matrikel för Svenska kyrkan 2023). Stockholm diocese has had a vanguard position in the development of the church towards more liberal attitudes (Krook 2020).

The 61 parishes have differing characteristics: well-to-do inner-city parishes, affluent suburbs and multi-cultural disadvantaged suburbs as well as rural areas with medieval churches. Given the diocese's history, there is an openness to finding new forms for church activities in many of the parishes, even though some may be more traditional.

Every parish is, according to the Church Order, required to produce a “parish

instruction” to be renewed and confirmed by the diocesan chapter every four years. This document should include a contemporary social and environmental analysis to assess the needs of the people living and working within the diocese and an action plan of how to meet these needs.

The new spiritual practices that we have studied can be understood as an answer to the needs found in the analyses in the parish instructions. It is apparent that the parishes want to serve people in many different circumstances. In our netnographic study⁴ we found that the church offered a large variety of activities, covering different stages of life: baby massage, communal meals as support for single parents, language cafés for newly arrived immigrants, etc. The holistic practices are often held at times when the church buildings and the other premises of the church are not needed for services, in particular in the mornings, meaning that they are mostly attended by retirees and those on long-term sick leave. However, there are also a number of activities such as dance, meditation, and yoga that are arranged in the evenings when more people can participate. Generally, there seems to be a shift in the self-understanding in the parishes of the Church of Sweden, including new ways of understanding the role of the church in a multi-cultural society. As noted by Andreas Holmberg, now bishop in the diocese in Stockholm, there is “an ongoing shift in their self-understanding and way of seeing and interacting with the surrounding world. The shift is a journey from self-sufficiency and control towards dependence and living in trust” (Holmberg 2019, 6).

4 See footnote 2 for more information about the netnographic study.



Figure 3. Yoga sessions often have an emphasis on recovery, relaxation, and rest.

In the next section we turn to the question of who are teaching these new spiritual practices in the Church of Sweden. In our observations we found that gender is an important category as most of the teachers of movement-based practices are women, while the gender-balance is more even within meditation. We trace this difference back to how the different practices were introduced into the Church of Sweden.

Gender, leadership, and bodily practices

It is no surprise that women outnumber men among the participants in the holistic practices we have observed, as this has also been noted by several other researchers when studying religion and gender. In most religious cultures and traditions, women tend to be more religious than men; women pray, worship, and express their faith to a larger degree than men (Trzebiatowska and Bruce 2012). This pattern is also found in European and Western

churches and “this difference holds across a variety of theological types and across all age-groups” (Davie 2000, 67). There is also a female over-representation in the New Age field and in many new religious movements (Tøllefsen 2016) as well as in neo-spiritual therapies focusing on well-being (Hornborg 2012). In complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), mind and body practices like yoga and meditation attract especially women in or above the middle class (Mulhollem 2021).

In the practices that we have observed, the number of participants has varied greatly, from just a few participants to around forty participants. In practices such as yoga, dance, and qigong there have been very few (if any) male participants and women have been clearly over-represented. The only activity where there has been a clearer balance in terms of gender is in the meditation classes, where more men took part even though males never outnumbered females.



Figure 4. Dances, on the other hand, can be quite intense sessions, almost like workouts, and cover the range from choreographed dance movements, to slow circle dances, to the free, wild and expressive. They often bring a lot of joy to the participants.

However, our fieldwork shows that most of these activities are also *led* by women. Using method triangulation we conclude that there were only female leaders during dance activities, and almost only female leaders during body-mind activities, while in meditation sessions there were somewhat more male leaders.

We have also observed that different activities attract different types of leaders. The Church of Sweden is very affluent, meaning that apart from clergy there are many different professions employed by the parishes: pedagogues, pre-school teachers, musicians, janitors, and administrative

staff. Traditionally, there have been few volunteers, but with declining membership and the ensuing lack of income, the church is actively seeking ways to engage voluntary workers.

We find that priests lead meditation sessions and dances to a larger extent than body-mind practices, where laypeople are more visible as leaders.

Our observations also show that while the majority of those who lead the new spiritual practices are employed by the church, there are also externally engaged lay leaders, especially in the movement-based activities. The laypersons, who can be understood as ritual specialists, often relate more freely to a diversity of sources in their teachings, and usually embrace an inclusive stance where acceptance of others is at the centre, as expressed by this lay female teacher:

The usual creed, to me it is too hard and excluding. And in this congregation, we sing the hymn no 219 “I want to believe that someone loves me”, and that is lovely, it is like those words are including the fellowship. And to me that is to be a Christian. To include and promote fellowship and that no one is better than anyone else. But this insight came through, that is the same as you find in Buddhist meditation.

The leaders have many years’ experience of a practice they have learnt outside the church, and they bring an embodied expertise to the church that they generously share with the group. Their embodied expertise can bring a tangible intensity of presence to the group practice, that we as both observers and participants have often been deeply moved by.

Another common theme that we found interviewing those leading the practices is



Figure 5. However, meditations are usually quiet with an invariant body position, sitting or lying down – or walking very slow.

career and lifestyle changes,⁵ where personal experiences of hardships in life, such as depressions, illness, fatigue, loss, and sorrow, prompted people to find ways to recover and heal. One example comes from an observation of a yoga class in an inner-city church, where the lay leader worked within the administration in the parish. She started practising yoga as a way of recovering from fatigue. As she told her colleagues about her experiences, one of the parish priests asked if she would be willing to lead classes in the church. She was a bit taken aback, finding the notion of yoga practice in the church somewhat strange. This prompted her to train as a teacher of

5 This is also noted as a theme by Anne-Christine Hornborg (2012) in her study of women who change careers to start coaching and work as lay therapists in Sweden.

yoga, and then to start to lead classes in the church. Her focus lies in guiding elderly persons, with ageing and stiff bodies, as they struggle as best they can with the different positions, reminding them that the exercises mustn't hurt, to give the bodies rest, and to "be grounded". She incorporated a short sitting meditation and a longer guided relaxation, lying down and focusing on "yogic breathing". After her session and a tea break where "Yogi Tea" was served in the church, a female priest held a short worship with a guided meditation followed by a short pilgrim walk.

So how are we to understand that a majority of the leaders of holistic practices are women? Does it relate to a feminization of the church, where women have become more involved in teaching and preaching than before? The first female priests in the Church of Sweden were ordained in 1960 and broke ground in a previously entirely male priesthood. Today, the total percentage of female employees in the Church of Sweden has reached 62 per cent. Within the priesthood, women constitute 51 per cent, and within the diaconate 87 per cent, of administrators 90 per cent are women, of pre-school teachers 97 per cent, of parish educators 79 per cent and of church musicians 63 per cent.

The term "feminization of the church", which has been debated since the 1970s, can mean (at least) three different things: 1. more women than men attend religious services; 2. there is a growing number of female leaders in the churches; 3. the theology and piety of the churches is increasingly geared towards emotions and "soft" values, which are culturally coded as feminine. The former two are sociological facts, while the third is more value-laden and seen as a problem by churches who fear that the feminized church is bound to attract women and repel men.

Patrick Pasture, in his study of gender and Christianity in modern Europe, urges caution when using the concept in the third sense, arguing that it should not be used in an absolute sense, “but conceptualized and historicized specially when one refers to feminization with regard to changes in piety and culture, one easily runs into trouble, as there is no fixed standard of femininity or masculinity” (Pasture 2012, 33).

In her report from the Swedish implementation of the World Council of Churches’ Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women 1988–1998, *Folkkyrka – i solidaritet med kvinnor?* (Folk church – in solidarity with women?), Ninna Edgardh Beckman refers to the feminization debate. Many of the activities during the decade were expressions of the need to get away from verbal expressions of faith and to explore body language. But she questions whether this was an expression of femininity and surmises that it was more a question of “how new forms emerge in contexts where people feel free to express their prayer out of their experiences and needs, rather than from a given pattern” (Edgardh Beckman 1998, 83, authors’ translation). Anders Bäckström (1994) argues that the emergence of women in church leadership is a consequence of a general tendency of the churches to focus more on values of care-giving, traditionally seen as a female domain. This is consistent with the emphasis on care which we have found in our material.

Lena Gemzöe and Marja-Liisa Keinänen argue that gender has been an under-theorized phenomenon when studying contemporary religion in Europe (Gemzöe and Keinänen 2016, 16), and they therefore encourage studies that focus on how religious expertise and knowledge can manifest itself in different ways from the prescribed. To do that, one needs to focus on

what is practised and not only on what is taught in formal settings. Thus, by studying the holistic practices and shifting focus from “the prescribed” to “the practised”, we can investigate how religious knowledge and expertise might manifest in other ways than in the established Lutheran services and traditional Christian worship.

One explanation for the gender difference between the practices might be role models: by whom the practices were introduced. In Sweden, Zen-inspired meditation practices were introduced by the Rev. Hans Hof (1922–2011) at a retreat centre in Rättvik in the 1970s, and promoted by the Carmelite Wilfrid Stinnissen (1927–2013) under the name “Christian Deep Meditation” (Stinnissen 2008). There were also women who taught this kind of meditation, but the fact that it was introduced by these very distinguished clerics might account for the relative dominance of male leaders in the groups we have studied. In a similar manner, a background to the predominance of women in practices connected to bodily movement might be found in the activities during the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women, which, as stated above, were geared towards bodily expressions of faith (Edgardh Beckman 1998). Sacred dances were introduced by the Rev. Maria Rönn, who started giving courses for dance leaders in 1994 and who also wrote an influential book on the topic (Rönn 1997). Qigong was introduced into the church by the female physiotherapist Gudrun Khemiri (Hemmets Journal 2008), and the unique practice of “Tikva” with movements reminiscent of yoga and qigong accompanied by biblical quotes was also created by a woman, Mimmi Edin (Svenska kyrkan 2022).

It is not only female leaders of new spiritual practices that emphasize the need to move away from only being in the mind



Figure 6. Most of the practices we have observed take place within the church room, close to the altar. Here the meditation benches are arranged with the possibility of using icons as meditative objects.

and to recognize the *body* as a site of spiritual knowledge; this insight is felt by men as well. One of the male priests leading Christian deep meditation sees meditation practices as a help to becoming “present for God’s presence”. There are many ways of doing that, he says, but meditation adds another dimension than what happens during divine service, where other dynamics are at play: “it becomes more of a movement [in the service], an energy in a different way and you go forward and receive communion and you also get to hear words and you get to stand, you get to sing. [Meditation] it’s like different variants or tastes or the same relation to that mystery of God.” Still, this mystic experience is dependent upon the body, and during his meditation session the participants take

off their shoes to be able to stand barefoot on the brick floor, in a semi-circle around the altar. We start the meditation by clasping our hands in front of our chest and take a few deep breaths, the priest asking us to experience how we are standing, encouraging us to stand firmly on the floor and to feel the ground under our feet. He says that the focus in meditation is on the good and bright in existence. God is here and now, the priest emphasized, and it is within this presence we can experience God. During meditation, we should let go of all achievements or we shall achieve nothing. It should be seen as a wakeful rest. The priest highlights that another possible entry into the meditation is the words “God, you who are love – let me rest in your stillness”. He then strikes the singing bowl three times, lets his hands rest in each other, thumbs together at the navel, and closes his eyes. Later, during the interview, he acknowledges the importance of the body in meditation, and how important the present moment is for a mystic experience:

Yes, it is a very physical exercise, that you constantly just try to come back to the body and be, as it were, in the body. We live in a tradition, and culture and so on where it is so unbelievably theoretical, all in the head. And also when you train to be a priest, there is a lot of theory, so a lot of literature, a lot in the head, a lot you have to yes it’s easy to think a lot. And my experience was probably that I had missed a lot because I have thought too much. So I discovered that when I kind of got to practise not thinking but instead just being present instead of being in my thoughts. So well, then I discovered a lot.

This meditation session appears to be focused mainly on spiritual content and connecting with the divine, even though the starting point is being present in the body. However, many of the practices we have observed have an explicit connection with health – physical and mental as well as spiritual health. This is the theme of the following section, where we discuss the notion of health and further explore why the leaders of new spiritual practices have chosen to teach them.

Teaching for health and well-being

Existential health is a concept that has increasingly gained attention in Scandinavian health-care as well as in the church. There is no consensus on the definition of the concept, but it is used to connote meaning-making and spirituality (Rodriguez Nygaard et al. 2022). Cecilia Melder offers the definition “the ability to create and maintain a functional meaning-making system” (Melder 2011). The concept is now widely used in the church and promoting existential health is seen as something that the church is well equipped for (Svenska kyrkan 2019).

In their analysis of the needs of the parishioners, many of the parish instructions mention existential health, highlighting that mental disorders, stress, and fatigue are problems that they need to deal with. Keywords for what they want to offer are community, meeting places, and prayers. Although meditation and dancing are mentioned as activities, few – if any – explicitly mention that they want to implement body-mind practices as a remedy to these problems. Body-mind practices therefore seem to enter from a side door, through the initiatives of employees and volunteers, rather than as a conscious strategy from the leadership. However, when the holistic practices are presented on the

parishes’ home pages they are described precisely as stress-reducing ways to inner calm. We attended one such yoga session, led by a female priest who has consciously worked on integrating yoga practices into holistic practices, opening them up not only for physical recovery but also to spiritual dimensions. It took place a Friday morning in a church in a rural-type parish, where twenty-three participants gathered: five male and eighteen female. Most were older than sixty, although a few were younger and one was on long-term sick leave due to a severe illness. This individual told us how the fatigue was severely handicapping, and had destroyed much of his social life, but coming to the yoga session in the church not only gave him tools to handle the difficulties he experiences in daily life, but also gave him the chance to meet one of his friends and have breakfast with him afterwards.

The priest had carefully put together meditative music to accompany the session. After an initial relaxation and soft stretching, performed sitting on woolen yoga mats, the priest prepared us for a meditation. We were encouraged to meditate silently on a sound or a word that accompanies the breath, “it can be your name or the word AMEN. A on inhalation and MEN on exhalation.” We relaxed our shoulders and jaws, and were encouraged to “feel how you are carried here and now”. Following a body scan, the priest continues: “We open ourselves to what is higher, greater, and the knowledge that wants to take up a place in us here and now.” During this meditation, a singing prayer with one single word, “Elohim”, is played in the background.⁶ The priest brought out a painting

6 The meditative prayer, “Elohim”, sung by Jane Winther, can be listened to on YouTube.

by the medieval Saint Hildegard of Bingen (see Figure 7), telling us how it depicts a choir of angels, and in the middle – a white light. The white light is an image of G-O-D. The light is a life energy that flows through everything, filling everything living with strength and a life energy. “Imagine the possibility that everything around you is light, that everything is good, that you feel this goodness.” We feel calm as we breathe, we breathe deep in the belly, we breathe in pure clear light, which spreads to the rest of the body. When we breathe out, we breathe out everything that we feel we don’t want to keep, all the imbalances in the body disappear. “The whole of you is blessed, enclosed, carried by the white, warm light.”

A striking feature of the holistic activities offered by the churches in Stockholm is the great variety of practices and that very few follow a standardized manual, such as those found in Denmark and the US, where Cross Yoga, Faith Yoga, or Christian Yoga are promoted as specific Christian practices (Fibiger 2023; Déchanet 1956). Some unique Swedish brandings such as Christian deep meditation and Tikva have been developed (Plank, Lundgren and Egnell 2023), yet most of the practices that are taught are either interpreted by individual teachers or follow a school of practice such as Hatha yoga, Medi yoga, Kundalini yoga, The Five Rhythms, and Groove. They share a common ground in that they use the embodied experience of human existence as a basis in the practices, and the leaders often reiterate that the body has been under-emphasized in the theology or the practice of the Lutheran Church, despite embodiment being a part of the central doctrine of God’s incarnation, and in taking the holy communion. A priest and dance leader says:

The body, that is such a big concept in the church. That we are, we don’t just have a body, but we are a body. We are bodies and everything happens through our bodies, even the encounter with God. If you just think about the eucharist, could it be more body? Whilst we very seldom are [encouraged to be] in our bodies in the church.

Even ordained clergy find that there is too much of an emphasis on the soul in Christian teachings, and that the body needs more attention, as expressed by these two female priests:

Sometimes I find that there is in the church a kind of well I wouldn’t say a contempt for the body. But if you think contempt for physical exercise in the sense of wanting to move, take care of your body being somehow not spiritual enough. And I think that is part of our spirituality.

I used to work as a hospital chaplain, and there [in the hospital] all the focus was on the body. In the church all the focus is on the soul. My hope is to unite body and soul in the church. What delights me most is when people come who otherwise don’t come to church, and when they make the church building their own.

Many of the teachers, both lay and ordained, are engaged in various forms of physical exercises in their spare time, also teaching holistic practices in yoga studios or gyms. Now, they want to bring these bodily practices into the church to offer ways of healing:

Well, the Bible says that the body is our temple. And we should cherish that. We should take care of our body. If you take care of your health, and the body in various ways, if you have a general well-being, have a good social network, then you feel better and then you can also engage more in spirituality.

We have found that the parishes harbour a culture of care: they are concerned with the parishioners' well-being, finding ways to promote existential health including physical, mental, and spiritual health. The holistic practices are a means to do so. Even though the emphasis is on the body, the spiritual dimension is present and participants are invited to explore what they need to heal (physically, psychologically, or spiritually), offering comfort without a predominant theological discourse.

In the next section we develop the topic of how the leaders relate to the church as a religious institution. There are two aspects of this: a material, i.e., the church building; and a spiritual: Christian beliefs and theology.

Low thresholds into the church

Most of the practices we have observed take place in the church, not in a parish hall, which is significant (see also figures). The idea of the folk church is that the church is open for everyone, not only for the faithful, and that pertains to the church building as well: it is a place for all who reside within the parish. In an episcopal letter (Biskopsbrev) from 2001, the bishops of the Church of Sweden developed their thoughts on the church building: "the church is a sacred room, but it also stands for something more. It is a symbol for religious life in general and on a personal level people are given the opportunity to tie their

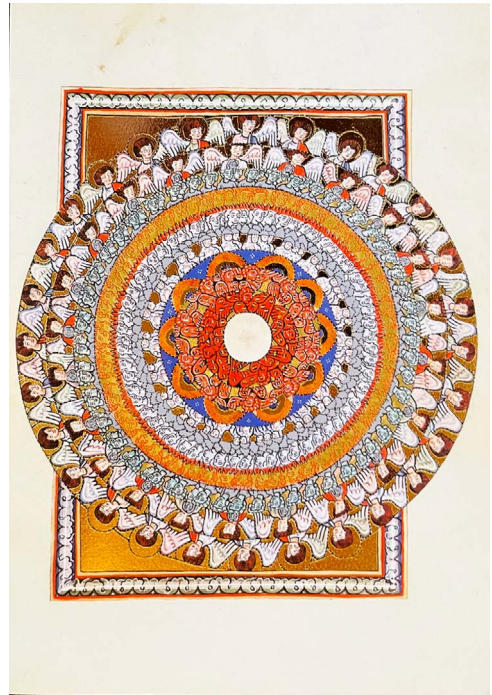


Figure 7. Hildegard of Bingen. All beings celebrate creation, postcard of a drawing by Hildegard of Bingen, used during a yoga session.

lives and experiences to the church building.” The bishops found that the church building is a great asset for the church in that it is “one of the public buildings of the locality, accessible to all regardless of faith or conviction” (Biskopsmötet 2001: 9, authors’ translation).

This quotation from the episcopal letter points to a church with low thresholds, which provides a space for people’s lives and experiences. “Low threshold religiosity” was in fact an expression used by one of our interlocutors and this view of the building is reflected in our material. A female lay yoga teacher says:

And the church room is so, I think, everything from like before we are born until after we have died, that whole journey, that whole experience, which enables me to both exhale

and that I feel that there I can be me.
Because it is such a rich space.

That being in the church room adds something to the practices is a recurring theme in the interviews. Often this added value is defined as a vague “something”, but seems to be associated with the existential or spiritual dimension of the practices. Thus, the practices seem to undergo a resacralization as they move from the secular arena into a new religious context.

On the other hand, being in the church building with its artefacts, altar, font, art, candles, etc., is also an invitation to step deeper into the Christian community. A woman priest and dance leader puts it like this:

And that is also something I want others to feel that – there isn’t just little me, that is also part of my faith. I am not just me, I am part of something larger. And I want those who participate in the dance to experience that you can step into a larger flow. I am part of a larger flow and that is God. God is like both this perpetual inner conversation with Christ, with Jesus, but also to be part of this flow. So yes, to dance is a way of coming close to God. It is to be, to be danced it is no longer I who dance, but I am being danced.

It can also be about embedding the practice in the Christian tradition, as this male layperson says:

Yes, the place and the room are very important, for when we sit here, when we attend the service, when we receive communion, when we meditate here, the Holy Spirit is with us, that’s how it is.

There can, however, also be a limit to how inclusive and open the church should be. There has been, and still is, criticism against introducing holistic practices in the church.

When the Rev. Hans Hof, as mentioned above, introduced Zen meditation in the early 1970s, he was so severely criticized that he felt he had to leave the priesthood as well as his church membership. Later, when meditation became more accepted, he returned to the church and ministry. But the debate still flares up now and then in Christian media when those who introduce meditation and yoga are accused of being syncretistic. The practices are, however, increasingly defended by the leadership of the church (see also Lundgren, Plank, and Egnell 2023).

Still, there are priests who even if they themselves practise yoga or qigong are reluctant to lead these practices in the church. It is a question of different “brands” or languages, and the church should stick to its mother tongue, they say:

I am one of those who think that under the roof of the Church of Sweden there is no need to use mantras and such from other traditions. There is no need to do yoga either. We can use our own stuff, can’t we? Personally, I do yoga regularly on my own – but it’s like you don’t sell Coop brand items in an ICA shop, it is about clarity.

I think it is better that I as a professional and a spiritual leader add new possible experiences and interpretations to the Christian language, the Christian world, than to speak different languages. In the church there is dancing and meditation which have clear biblical and Christian foundations. My gift in the church context

is to lead worship. I prefer to develop my professionalism in preaching and music, but I can do that with the new knowledge I acquire through my [private] qigong practice.

Thus, there seems to exist a sensitivity for questions of what the church as an institution should promote in a pluralistic context. The criticism, by those who also practise in their private lives but do not want to teach new spiritual practices in the church, is not so much against the practices *per se*, but that the church should have a unique voice, and teach and develop its own heritage.

Since the Reformation, Lutheran theology has distanced itself from the Catholic Church by repudiating spiritual practices as a means to attain salvation and emphasizing the three *sola* doctrines: *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, and *sola gratia* (scripture over tradition, faith over deeds, and grace over merit). “The Protestant reformation of the body, especially in its Lutheran and Calvinist forms, accelerated processes which did much to disinvest the human flesh of superstition and sacred significance, and emphasize instead the *mind’s* ability (in this case, to receive the Word of God)” argue Philip Mellor and Chris Shilling (1997, 9–10, italics in the original). This has led to Protestant bodies becoming more oriented towards words and symbols, and less appreciative of the sensory potentialities of bodies. Parallel with this development is also the separation between the institutional responsibility of bodies and souls, in which biomedicine has claimed control over bodies and physical remedies while religious institutions were made responsible for life’s spiritual dimension (Mellor and Shilling 1997). The emergence of somatic psychology and body-mind techniques, such as in mindfulness and

yoga, can be seen as challenging this duality (Baratt 2013). Integrating these practices into a church setting could be a similar strategy; a turn, and return, to the body.

Mellor and Shilling detect a development in contemporary Western societies where another form of embodiment is emerging, “marked by a sensualization of experience” (Mellor and Shilling 1997, 11). Linda Annunen and Terhi Utrianen (2023, 192), drawing on this argument in a study of an Eastern healing practice in Finland, suggest that part of the attraction “lies in the ways in which it enables practitioners to learn to imagine and sense the body in relational and sensuous ways that are different from traditional Lutheran or Enlightenment thinking”.

We have not encountered any references to the Lutheran apprehensiveness of spiritual exercises among our informants. But then, the practices we have observed have a decidedly non-elitist quality, both materially and spiritually. They are presented as being “for everyone”, and those who attend are generally not there to “show off” in smart-looking yoga attire, but have found a place where they can come as they are with bodies that are not able to perform perfect movements and positions. In Lutheran terms, the practices are not understood as a means to attain salvation. The aim is not to attain physical nor spiritual perfection, but to find rest for body and mind.

Concluding remarks

To summarize our questions and findings: Who are teaching these new spiritual practices in the Church of Sweden? Why do they teach these practices? And why in the church?

By studying practices which lie outside traditional Christian worship which has been the common focus in research on the Church of Sweden, we have through

a bottom-up methodology found that the holistic practices are commonly framed in a culture of care, focusing on bodily and spiritual well-being.

We have found that holistic practices are taught in the parishes in the diocese of Stockholm by a wide range of professionals. Most are employed by the parish, many being ordained priests and deacons, but we also find laypersons, some of whom are external resources. Given that most activities in the Church of Sweden are led by staff this is somewhat remarkable. The majority of the teachers of movement-based practices are women, while the distribution between men and women is more even when it comes to meditation teachers. We suggest that the predominance of women in body movement practices should be understood as a generational feature rather than as an expression of the feminization of the church. Many of the leaders are women who were part of new spiritual movements as well as the upsurge of body-mind practices and various forms of dance in gyms and yoga studios in the 1990s and early 2000s, who now find that there is an openness to bringing their knowledge into the church. This would, however, need to be further analysed.

Many of the leaders we have interviewed have learned holistic practices while seeking healing from mental and physiological illness. They have then gone on to train as teachers to share with others what they have found to be beneficial practices. Their reasons for bringing the practices into the church vary: some are employed by the parish and can do it as part of their ministry, others have been invited by someone in the parish, or taken the initiative themselves, feeling that the practice has a spiritual dimension that can be harboured within the church.

A common theme in our interviews has been that the church “is too much in the mind”, and that coming in contact with the body not only brings relaxation and destress to frail bodies, be it due to age or illness, it also means an institutional embeddedness where practising in the church room is of importance. As the church provides practices for health and healing, to recover from illness, sorrow, or stress, and largely does so without a theological discourse framing the practices, we note that this is a church with low thresholds, that one might actually talk about “low-threshold religiosity”. Also, importantly, it is a church with an openness to manifold relations to the sacred, that enables one to develop a deeper knowledge about one’s self; through one’s body, or to use techniques that facilitate contact with celestial beings or a direct relation with the sacred. Here, Jesus Christ is not necessarily central. Instead, what is important is a direct relationship with that ultimate reality that might be termed God or Higher Knowledge, Higher Being, or even brightness. Ordained teachers may describe or portray Lutheran understandings of God in new ways, careful to both reach out and not to exclude, to give comfort and care and at the same time point to another dimension where unconditional care and love can hold pain.

The holistic practices we have observed operate on a spectrum from stillness to intensive movements. Some of the practices aim to empty the mind of daily thoughts, and thereby facilitate experiencing the presence of the body through intero- and exteroception. Others bring about an intensity of emotions such as joy. Many of the practices are “open”, in that they can harbour this spectrum of experiences that cover the range from secular and non-religious understandings of the world to individual spirituality that can incorporate

many different sources. This openness can be seen as being too wide, not so much in terms of the practices *per se* – several of those critical of incorporating new spiritual practices in the church themselves practise them in their private lives – but that their openness is not anchoring them in a clear way in the Evangelical-Lutheran church.

At the same time, the practices are spatially and materially embedded in the specific religious tradition of Lutheran Christianity as they usually take place in the church room and before the altar. A resacralization of the secular practices takes place in the church rooms, thereby contributing to a “Christianization” of the practices, also enabling new ways of experiencing God: in the body. ■

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