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Sound Healing in Churches: Spiritual Sounds in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland

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Abstract

This article explores the incorporation of sound healing in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF), analysing how this embodied spiritual practice is reinterpreted within a Christian framework. Using digital ethnography, the article examines how ideas of embodiment, therapeutic sound, and silence intersect with Lutheran traditions. The theoretical concepts of acoustemology, sonic skills, and esoteric sounds are employed to highlight how non-verbal and non-musical sonic experiences are adopted and reshaped within the ELCF to fit Christian aesthetics. The findings reveal that sound healing is primarily framed through the following strategies: redefining churches as acoustic spaces; framing sound healing as silent prayer; and negotiations of theological and ritual boundaries. Ultimately, the study provides knowledge about how the ELCF has integrated new understandings of sensory experiences in relation to sound and silence and their therapeutic potential into its activities.

Keywords*: sound healing, Evangelical Lutheranism, alternative and holistic spirituality, sound, silence, embodiment*

Approximately a year after completing my ethnographic research on holistic spiritual[1] sound healing in Finland I encountered one of my former interlocuters, 'Heidi', at her sound healing studio in Helsinki. We were informally

1 In this article I refer to holistic spirituality as contemporary practices that integrate body, mind, and spirit. They often emphasize interconnectedness in the form of personal wellbeing and harmony with the surrounding environment, e.g. nature or the universe. Holistic spiritualities typically draw on diverse religious, cultural, and therapeutic traditions, placing experiential knowledge above institutional authority and problematizing a religious–secular binary. These practices are often also situated within the broader context of New Age spirituality (e.g. Sutcliffe and Gilhus 2013).

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discussing how she had continued her practice since our interview. During the visit an advertisement for a sound healing session at the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (henceforth the ELCF) popped up. 'Come and experience a new kind of relaxation practice, where sound bowls lead the body and mind into deep relaxation. The bowls' vibrations can often be felt in different areas of the body, depending on their pitch. The class relieves tension, is pleasant, and clears the mind. The whole body is balanced gently and enjoyably at the same time,' the email declared (Taidekappeli 2023). I showed the advertisement to Heidi and asked if she had considered performing sound healing at a church. 'Yes, of course,' she said, and it emerged that she had in fact done so at one in Helsinki. I was surprised this had not arisen in our earlier discussions. Heidi told me that in her opinion the event had not differed significantly from her sound healing sessions at the studio. There was one thing she found profoundly different, and which she had particularly enjoyed, however: the quality of sound within the church building. She continued by describing the acoustics of the church's high ceiling and echoes. This coincidental discussion stayed in my mind, and when the *Majority Churches and Contemporary Spirituality* research conference provided an opportunity to elaborate on this topic, I wanted to form a better understanding of sound healing in the ELCF.

This article aims to present a pilot study for investigating how the holistic spiritual practice of sound healing is reinterpreted, reframed, and reshaped when it enters the realm of the ELCF. As a preliminary investigation of the field, the article uses media material depicting sound healing in Christian settings. The analysis provides an exploration of sensory experiences and embodiment as transferrable elements from the holistic spiritual realm to Lutheranism, especially in relation to producing, embodying, and listening to sounds. The overarching aim is approached with the aid of three research questions:

> How has the ELCF adapted new understandings of the body and senses, and their salvific potential, in its activities?
>
> How is an esoteric notion of sound as therapeutic and healing interpreted and depicted in ELCF media?
>
> How are somatic experiences of listening and non-verbal sounds portrayed in relation to theological and philosophical ideas?

Sonic approaches to religion and spirituality

The most essential aspect of sound healing in any context is the prominent role of sonic attributes. The practice is built around the notion that soundwaves can produce holistic health and wellbeing by providing experiences of deep relaxation and healing.[2] Courses in sound relaxation can be described as follows:

> Singing bowls for deep relaxation produce deep harmonious sounds when played. The singing bowls' effects are based on these soundwaves and vibrations. They thus enhance relaxation, and a balanced mind and wellbeing (Rentoutumisen ullakko 2024).[3]

Producing and listening to sounds of certain instruments such as singing bowls, gongs, drums, chimes, and tuning forks therefore extend beyond more mundane and secular engagements with sound. The instruments used are often described as therapeutic, and sounds produced with them are given a heightened role in relation to other 'non-healing' sounds.

However, the pivotal role of sonic expressions and experiences in sound healing is not a unique phenomenon. Sonic properties can in fact be regarded as important aspects of religious and spiritual practices in general, providing powerful means of communication, worship, and transcendence. Besides spiritual practices like sound healing, sonic engagement plays an essential role in institutional religions and Indigenous belief systems throughout the world (e.g. Eisenlohr 2018; Kraft 2023; Povedák and Kajanová 2024; Lorea and Hackett 2024). Moreover, popular music and religion, as well as music as a spiritual exercise, are topics with which scholars have engaged broadly (e.g. Reed 2003; Illman 2018; Moberg and Partridge 2023). Sound and music are also sometimes perceived as religion or religionlike spirituality, without any formal dependence on a specific religion (Wilke 2019, 108).

2 However, sound healing is not always described as a therapeutic or healing activity as such. This emerged clearly in my ethnographic work among sound healers in holistic spirituality, where many interlocutors refused to speak of their activities as healing practices, even though some described very strong personal therapeutic experiences of sound healing. One reason for this hesitation was a fear of reactions from surrounding society, as well as anxiety about giving false promises to people attending the interlocutors' sound healing activities. This hesitation is also reflected in the many names that are used for sound healing, such as sound massage, sound bath, sound relaxation, and sound therapy.

3 Translation from Finnish. See the reference for the original. All quotations in this article are translated from Finnish to English for the sake of readability.

In the context of Christianity sound traditionally appears in the form of musical performances and silence – for example, in liturgical music, prayer, and expressions of monastic life. Monique Ingalls (2018) describes congregational music as more than merely texts, regarding music within Christianity as dynamic performative acts that embody theology. Musical and extramusical expressions in Christianity can thus be understood as providing knowledge about embodiment and physicality in Christian settings. Meanwhile, Povedák and Kajanová (2024) point out that the interplay of sound and silence is also crucial in shaping community and personal identities. In Pentecostal Christianity music occupies a central position in relation to both healing and transformation (Björkander 2024).

In addition to being studied as musical expressions, sonic experiences have been studied in relation to producing and hearing speech, especially in relation to the Christian God (e.g. Schmidt 2000; Dein and Littlewood 2007; Luhrmann 2012). God is often imagined as both communicative and audient. For example, God can be experienced speaking personally or through mediators such as nature sounds and prophets. Moreover, God is often described as a listening entity who can hear prayers. Schimdt (2000, 53) thus conceptualizes the human relationship with God as a 'participatory encounter with divine speech'. God's voice is heard both internally and externally and is often associated with positive emotional change (Dein and Littlewood 2007, 219).

A somewhat less studied aspect is the role non-verbal and non-musical sounds play in religious and spiritual settings. Most prominently, Rosalind Hackett has consistently called for more 'sonically aware' research, or a 'sonic turn', in the study of religion (e.g. Hackett 2012; 2013; Lorea and Hackett 2024, see also Laack 2015). According to Isabel Laack insights into responses to and the use of sound are 'important for the understanding of religion in general and contemporary religiosity in particular' (Laack 2015, 241).

However, in studying sound and religion, the focus should not solely be on the sounds produced but also on the absence and elimination of specific sounds. In religious contexts silence is often associated with sacred practices, meditation, or the ineffable aspects of spirituality. For example, scholars have discussed silence as a tool for creating space for the divine and fostering introspection (Taylor 2020). I understand notions such as silence, hearing, and voice as constitutive ideas that actively shape religious experience (cf. Novak and Sakakeeny 2015). The practice of sound healing in church environments should not therefore be understood only as an aesthetic expression but as something that specifically forms and affects participants' religiosity.

Esoteric sounds and sonic skills

My analysis incorporates and combines the theoretical perspectives of acoustemology, sonic skills, and esoteric sounds. I aim to capture how non-verbal sounds are framed as healing in a Christian context to further understand the motives behind the ELCF's incorporation of spiritual sounds that exceed speech (in contrast with discursive doctrines and beliefs, for example).

First, I examine how sound is related to knowledge and skills. Music scholar Steven Feld has introduced the concept of *acoustemology*, or the study of sound as a way of knowing. His work explores how sound and silence are experienced and understood as part of soundscapes, often laden with emotional and cultural significance. Feld defines acoustemology as a combination of the words acoustic and epistemology, where sound becomes a way of knowing and experiencing the world (Feld 1990). Following Feld, I regard sound as producing different kinds of knowledge cultures (Tkaczyk and van der Miesen 2020) that require a specific set of contextual expertise, making it relevant for discerning the skills and knowledge the ELCF obtains from holistic spirituality.

The idea of *sonic skills* is also useful here. Historian Karin Bijstirved (2019) introduces the concept to study the skills doctors, engineers, and scientists acquire when listening – for example, when doctors learn how to listen for specific sounds to detect heart disease with a stethoscope, or a mechanic attends to the sounds of an engine:

> An experienced mechanic, in this view, would be able to distinguish a problematic, discontinuous 'prr-prr-prr' from a reassuring, continuous 'prrrrrr' and know that it signified an issue with one of the cylinders. He would be able to key such sounds into his theoretical knowledge of how subsystems in the car affected each other, and might check, for instance, whether a particular sound disappeared or changed in pitch once specific parts were separated from the engine and drive train or the gears were moved up and down (Bijsterveld 2019, 36).

I have elsewhere suggested that the concept can be used to detect *enchanted sonic skills*, or techniques and skills for internalizing new ways of comprehending and experiencing sound as transcendental (Annunen 2022). This study continues this experimentation within the realm of the ELCF. Religion and spirituality can generally be described as spheres of life from which a variety of skills and knowledge is transferred to other more secular parts of

life (Utriainen et al. 2024). This article is concerned with what is imported from one religious sphere (holistic spirituality) to another (Evangelical Lutheranism). Acoustemology and sonic skills provide useful notions for this study for discerning which techniques, skills, and knowledge are imported from holistic spiritual sound healings into the ELCF and the motives behind such incorporations.

Cultural historian Ruth Barcan's definition of the *esoteric conception of sound* provides another essential aspect for my analysis. According to Barcan (2011) esoteric practices engaging with sound see it as a tool with agency, a fundamental substance of reality, and as a dynamic moving force:

> Sound, in this esoteric conception, is a tool, like a spade. But this tool is not just a pathway to meaning. It does not just represent or signify; it does physical things. What it does, what it is and what it means cannot be completely separated. Moreover, sound is the fundamental stuff of which everything is made: the stuff of the body and the stuff of the cosmos (Barcan 2011, 140).

It becomes relevant for this study to observe how such an esoteric idea of sound fits into the ELCF, and what esoteric sounds 'do' in this new environment.

Data and method

I base my analysis on data gathered using digital ethnography. The data were gathered in the winter of 2024 and extend from 2012 to 2024. My previous ethnographic study of practitioners of singing bowl sound healing in Finland serves as crucial background knowledge. It also provides comparative knowledge of how sound healing is presented and experienced within the context of holistic spirituality (see e.g. Annunen and Utriainen 2023a; 2023b; Annunen 2022).[4] Even if these data are not themselves explicitly used for analytical purposes here, they also profoundly influence my interpretation and reading of the data for this article.

For this study I systematically explored media material on sound healing in the ELCF. I used articles from magazines, websites, and social media advertisements covering sound healing in various ELCF spaces. The publica-

4 These ethnographic data on holistic spiritual singing bowl practices were gathered and analysed in the Learning from New Religion and Spirituality research project (LeNeRe) between 2020 and 2022. For more information see https://blogs.helsinki.fi/lenereproject/.

tions *Kirkko ja Kaupunki*[5] and *Pyhä Arki* in particular provided useful sources. Additionally, I analysed articles from the websites of *Suomen Raamattuopisto* (the Finnish Bible Institute, https://sro.fi), a private Lutheran organization, and *Hiljaisuuden ystävät* (the Friends of Silence, https://hiljaisuudenystävät.fi), an association promoting Christian life through retreats and contemplation. I also used previously gathered data consisting mostly of social media advertisements for sound healing activities within various parishes.

The data were gathered in three stages. First, I conducted online searches to identify which parishes offered sound healing.[6] I then conducted a more targeted data search for specific keywords on the detected parishes' websites and in social media (primarily Facebook and YouTube).[7] Third, I conducted additional searches in online ELCF publications and on *Hiljaisuuden ystävät*'s website. The process resulted in a limited yet qualitatively informative set of texts, pictures, and videos. Altogether, I analysed 16 documents (e.g. articles, event advertisements) and three videos. The limited number of sources reveals that sound healing is a recently introduced practice in the ELCF. This study's findings may therefore be read as preliminary insights into the processes of *introducing* holistic spiritual practices in Christian settings.

When conducting ethnography online, the researcher is in mediated contact with the research participants. My data gathering for this article did not consist of in-person interactions with individuals doing sound healing in church settings. This had some implications for my ethnographic practice. Instead of listening, which usually constitutes a key method in in-person ethnography, digital ethnography is mostly defined by reading (Pink et al. 2016, 3). Similarly, my ethnographic focus in this exploration was retuned in crucial ways. For example, instead of conducting interviews online, which arguably offers more avenues, I chose to engage with the phenomenon by watching, reading, and listening to a multitude of media data, including texts on websites and in social media posts, newspaper articles, blogposts, and video recordings. This approach provided effective tools for examining

5 A newspaper and online media site for ELCF parishes in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area. The magazine is distributed to ELCF members in the Helsinki region.

6 For this primary Google search I used combinations of keywords (e.g. *äänihoito+seurakunta*, 'sound healing+parish'): *äänimalja* ('sound bowl'), *sointumalja* ('singing bowl'), *äänihoito* ('sound healing'), *ääni* ('sound'), *hiljaisuus* ('silence'), *seurakunta*/*seurakunassa* ('parish/in parish'), *kristitty* ('Christian'), *kristillinen* ('Christianlike'), *luterilainen* ('Lutheran'), kirkko/kirkossa ('church/in church').

7 The following keywords were searched for on parish websites: *äänimalja* ('sound bowl'); *sointumalja* ('singing bowl'); *äänihoito* ('sound healing'); *ääni* ('sound'); *sointu* ('chord'); *malja* ('bowl'); *parannus* ('healing'); *parantaa* ('cure'); *resonanssi* ('resonance'); *värähtely* ('vibration').

how sound healing was introduced, framed, and negotiated as a Christian practice on public virtual platforms. However, the method gave me less access to personal experiences of or reflections on sound healing than more traditional ethnography.

According to anthropologist Tom Boellstorff (2020) scholars need to scrutinize their definition of anthropological and ethnographical methods online. Ethnography online constitutes a methodological approach rather than merely a study of online spaces. He maintains this methodology should be rooted in participation, underlining that ethnography always requires a degree of immersion: 'Just saying something is ethnographic does not make it so' (Boellstorff 2020, 40). I wanted to take this point seriously when gathering data online. I therefore asked myself how my data collection reflected ethnography online instead of a qualitative reading of online sources, for example. In a situation where onsite observations were not applied, I instead aimed to immerse myself in the topic by reading articles about sound healing and healing sounds more generally in the ELCF in various outputs. Moreover, I strove to gain insights into the field by watching video recordings available online of sound healing concerts in Christian contexts, both in and outside Finland. I also read the comment sections thoroughly for these recordings.

The research material's mediated character also had implications. The data reflect the ELCF's self-representational strategies, which actively choose to include these events in online communications. Simultaneously, the material offers a valuable perspective on the ongoing negotiations and contestations surrounding the incorporation of sound healing and other holistic spiritual practices in the ELCF, as they are articulated in digital spaces. Media platforms therefore do not simply reflect institutional practices; they reshape and influence prevailing interpretations and uses of sound healing within the ELCF (cf. Hjarvard 2011; Evolvi 2024, 531). Moreover, these platforms afford distinct modes of religious communication, particularly through audiovisual expressions and (especially in the case of social media) by inviting interaction and commentary. Media sites thus operate as environments with specific affordances that both structure and shape religious ideas, practices, and community life (e.g. Hjarvard and Lövheim 2012).

Sound healing in Finland

Sound healing is a relatively new practice in Finland that operates around the idea that certain frequencies and vibrations possess specific health ben-

efits. Its practitioners engage in a variety of activities such as sound bathing, sound massage, and sound therapy, mostly to produce a sleep-like state of deep relaxation. The practice primarily aims for stress reduction. It also occasionally addresses physical symptoms such as tension or injuries. The use of therapeutic sounds and instruments can be situated in the broader field of alternative health and wellness (e.g. Congdon 2007; Barcan 2011; Annunen and Utriainen 2023b). It can be challenging, however, to draw sharp lines. What are considered therapeutic, spiritual, and secular sounds often depend on their framing: 'When does a choir become choir therapy?' asks Barcan (2011, 124).

Sound healing is broadly influenced by Eastern meditation practices, esoteric ideas, and Indigenous traditions. The instruments are frequently described as ancient or as embodying foreign wisdom. Such incorporation of Eastern elements is common in new forms of religion, spirituality, and healing practices globally, as well as in a Nordic context (Enstedt and Plank 2023). Some scholars have critiqued the construction of the bowls' history and commodification and scientification. They primarily identify them as expressions of contemporary Western spirituality (Brown 2020; Congdon 2007). A discrepancy concerning the idea of the practice's Eastern history can be detected in the Finnish sound healing field. While some actors emphasize the technique's reliance on ancient Tibetan knowledge, others explicitly distance themselves from this (see Annunen and Utriainen 2023a, 9–10).

In Finland sound healing practices are primarily offered by private beauty, sport, and wellness entrepreneurs (for example, yoga studios), spiritual shops and venues, and adult education centres. Some actors offer more extensive training and certification in singing bowls. An example is the international Peter Hess Institute, which has run a national academy, Medi-sound Kg,[8] providing training in Finland since 2010. Many of the individuals who offer sound healing rituals within the ELCF often acquire their training or background in these new spiritual contexts (cf. Plank et al. 2024).

Sound healing in Christian contexts

'A sound bath in a neo-Gothic church? "It's like a massage for the brain"' (L.A. Times 2023), states an article in the Los Angeles Times about sound bath sessions in the First Congregational Church of L.A. The article continues to further emphasize strong embodied and aesthetic experiences in church settings:

8 For more information see https://medi-sound.fi/.

> Two hours later the traditional chapel had been transformed into a vivid, flickering, cosmic sanctuary. The altar was lit in hues of red and pink (a nod to Venus being in retrograde), galaxy lights swirled on the ceiling and padded mats were laid out on the stone floor along with pillows, eye masks and blankets. By the time the first rhythmic sounds of Bawa's skin drum began to fill the room, the space felt like a cross between a yoga class and an enchanted sleepover party (L.A. Times 2023).

There is clearly an emphasis on the event's affective and aesthetic dimensions, and theological references are completely absent. Reference is made to the spiritual practices of astrology and yoga. The focus at these events is on personal somatic experiences.

Pamela Klassen (2005, 378) notes that liberal North American Protestants have adopted alternative and complementary healing to engage with a 'spirituality that acknowledges and works through the body'. The incorporation of holistic spiritually embodied practices, especially yoga and meditation, in Finnish Christianity is accompanied by a rapid decline of membership in the ELCF, which decreased from 85.1 per cent in 2020 to 63.6 per cent in 2023 (and only 50 per cent in Helsinki). This reflects Lutheran teaching's weakening impact in society at large. According to the Church Research Institute changes in belief are also reflected in religious practices. For example, there has been a decrease in the number of people listening to religious music (Salomäki et al. 2024, 96). This is further accompanied by increasing interest in alternative and holistic spiritual practices, especially in different forms of meditation. The introduction of sound healing to the ELCF can be regarded as occurring within this cultural process.

Within the ELCF sound healing appears to operate as part of practices adapted from new forms of spirituality and holistic approaches in general. Such expressions of holistic spirituality or its Christianized modifications are offered in a variety of forms. For example, one can participate in Christian meditation or yoga, or use stones or pearls to assist with prayer.

The practice of sound healing in the ELCF does not in itself constitute an extensive field. Nevertheless, various aspects of sound healing appear regularly in both urban and rural Lutheran settings around Finland. They therefore cannot be described as uncommon either. Like new spiritual practices in Swedish churches, most of these events' participants and organizers are women (cf. Plank et al. 2024). This is also in line with the Finnish spiritual sound healing scene in general.

Ideas of healing sounds often appear within the context of Christian meditation and yoga in the ELCF. In addition, there are other examples of sound healing in Lutheranism, such as therapeutic concerts performed in churches or more informal sound baths arranged in parish halls. Besides various activities and events, other outputs – for example, an article entitled 'Sound heals'[9] (Sarlin 2012) – speak to the presence of the idea of healing sounds within the ELCF.

It is difficult to determine exactly when and in what form sound healing began to appear in Finnish churches. However, it is relatively new, having been introduced to the ELCF in the last decade. It can also be observed that the people offering these activities in the ELCF have often been trained in sound healing in the holistic spiritual sphere, where courses have been offered more systematically and widely since about 2010.

A prominent element of healing sounds in the ELCF is the notion of silence and stillness. A common definition of silence is the complete absence of sound. For example, the prominent role of silence in the ELCF was obvious in a large banner outside the Turku and Kaarina Parish Union's service centre in the spring of 2024 declaring, 'Silence is God's mother tongue'. A similar example is the article 'Guru's teaching: Silence is the first language of God'[10] in a parish newspaper (Maarala 2018).

On the official webpage for *hiljaisuuden jooga* (yoga of stillness)[11] it says:

> you open towards inner silence, which is a spiritual dimension, where the mind is silenced and room is created to experience God's presence. It is a uniform meditative experience, a mini retreat (Hiljaisuuden ystävät 2025).

This text is paired with a picture of a smiling woman dressed in comfortable clothing sitting on a yoga mat in front of a large window opening onto a green-leaved tree in the background. In front of her is a burning candle in a holder in the form of a lotus flower, an icon of Christ, and a brass singing bowl. With my observations and discussions at a Christian yoga event in 2022 the aesthetic and actual use of singing bowls in stillness work demonstrates that ideas of silence seldom equate to the total absence of sound. This is also the case in general, as silence is culturally constructed and con-

9 Original title: '*Ääni parantaa*'.
10 Original title: '*Gurun opissa: Hiljaisuus on Jumalan ensimmäinen kieli*'.
11 A direct translation of '*hiljaisuuden jooga*' is 'yoga of silence', which is of particular interest for this study, as it refers to the absence of sound. However, the term yoga of stillness is a translation introduced by the inventor of Stillness Yoga and is more widely used in Finland. For more on this topic see Moberg & Ramstedt in this issue.

stitutes a meaningful phenomenon shaped by historical and social contexts (Sterne 2003). The idea of silence in this setting is thus specifically formed, interpreted, and contextualized by including sounds from therapeutic instruments and excluding others. The tree in the picture's background subtly suggests that silence is facilitated or experienced in nature, outside urban noises, which are thus excluded from this soundscape. Barcan proposes: 'We reserve the idea of noise pollution for sound produced by humans rather than nature' (Barcan 2011, 113; Sim 2007, 21). The sound of silence in this representation is therefore made up of the sounds from the singing bowl and the natural environment, while excluding speech and urban noise.

In the following sections I analyse representations and interpretations of sound healing in the ELCF. The analysis is built on the following topics that appear frequently in the data: the church building as an acoustic environment; sound healing as a form of prayer; esoteric ideas of sound; and tension and debate about sound healing in the ELCF.

Churches as acoustic environments

One of the most prominent perspectives when we examine the data is the idea of church buildings as optimal acoustic spaces. In my previous fieldwork this appears to be the case to at least some extent among both holistic spiritual practitioners and people involved in church events.

In this logic churches are described as the optimal aesthetic setting for sound healing, primarily due to their architectural design and acoustics. Churches are described as spaces that enhance the sonic qualities and immersive nature of sound healing. A typical example is the following description of a sound concert called 'Nurturing sound concert – the calming world of singing bowls':[12]

> A sound concert in a church is special because the church's soundscape and atmosphere calm both body and mind. The church's unique acoustics give these wonderful sounds an even deeper echo (Helsingin seurakunnat 2024).

The description emphasizes the sacred space's capacity to facilitate intense sonic experiences, portraying the church not primarily as a place of worship but as a material environment where sound itself can be experienced and embodied as desired.

12 Original title: *Hoitava äänikonsertti – äänimaljojen rauhoittava maailma*.

In this view the church tends to be regarded pragmatically, with a strong focus on experiential aspects rather than on verbally expressed theological justifications or thoughts. The main value lies in the heightened auditory and bodily sensations participants can encounter and experience in church buildings.

Another example is an instructional video for using singing bowls in the ELCF for contemplation and relaxation. In the video's comment section on the Turku and Kaarina Parish Union's Facebook page one commenter expresses their dislike of singing bowls in the ELCF. The parish workers responsible for the video respond as follows:

> In this video the cathedral is primarily a place for filming (even if it is certainly also a place of prayer). In choosing this location, we didn't really want to take a stand on where you should pray or practise silence. It can definitely be in the pews, in one's own home, or at the bus stop on the way to work (Turun ja Kaarinan seurakuntayhtymä 2021).

The response portrays the church building like any other more mundane environment or place – a 'home' or 'bus stop'. Describing the church as a mere backdrop for filming downplays the Christian atmosphere of church buildings, portraying them like any other (secular) surroundings.

The church therefore emerges as a ritualized space where sensory and acoustic elements are foregrounded to evoke a sense of presence and spiritual engagement. The practice of sound healing in the ELCF demonstrates how the integration of holistic spiritual practices can result in a redefinition of the ritual space, at least for a moment, creating a multisensorial environment that invites participants to connect with the sacred in new and alternative ways. This in turn may enrich traditional understandings of what constitutes spiritual presence and community in Lutheranism. Furthermore, the example illustrates how the Facebook platform enables multimodal communication and the representation of church buildings, as well as providing a place to negotiate the use of these buildings.

Occasionally, however, the performance of sound healing activities in churches is also explicitly connected with Christianity. This is detectable in the following quotation from a Facebook advertisement for a sound healing concert, which describes therapeutic instruments as enhancing Lutheran aesthetics:

A therapeutic sound concert suits [the church] in this sense: the soundscape can soothe and provide insights into symbols in the church like crosses and altar paintings (Kajaanin seurakunta 2024a).

While interpreting sound healing as a method of deepening Christian experiences and environments, the focus remains on the church building's aesthetics instead of Lutheranism's theological or discursive features. However, therapeutic sounds are paired with Christian symbols and material culture, in contrast with the previous examples. These redefinitions of churches as acoustic spaces can be regarded as a way of creating acoustemologies where the focus shifts from aspects of belief and worship to experiences and sonic skills.

Reframing sound healing in Christian aesthetics

> I use the bowls mostly to quiet and focus the mind for prayer. I first play the bowls, and then we're silent for twenty minutes, say. You can also end a contemplative prayer by playing the bowl (Rautionmaa 2014).

The quotation is from a priest who was interviewed about Christian meditation. It provides an insight into a frequently occurring idea of redefining and reconceptualizing sound healing as a form of prayer. The absence of verbal expressions is key for this process, as sound healing and prayer are both portrayed as practices that transcend the limits of spoken language. Sounds made with singing bowls are thus used here, in Barcan's terms, to 'do things': to transfer the individual to a wordless space that facilitates meditation, reflection, and prayer. This view depicts silence as a universal language that bridges prayer and meditation practices across culture and time. The idea of sound healing as silent prayer depicts a form of spiritual communication that is seen as overcoming obstacles that might be expressed with language. The article continues:

> For [name] the bowls are like a tool for the silence of the heart and to find a way to be spoken to by God (Rautionmaa 2014).

Communication scholar Jonathan Sterne stresses that sonic practices and the absence of certain sounds can convey complex meanings that resonate deeply within cultural and religious frameworks (Sterne 2003). Silence here emerges as a space imbued with a distinctive significance, as something that allows a type of prayer that prioritizes experiences of presence and stillness

over words or thoughts. Such an approach redefines the idea of Lutheran prayer, suggesting that the interplay of silence and sound provides a profound means of spiritual engagement.

In observing sound healing concerts in the ELCF, it is evident that ideas associated with the practice, including the idea of healing sound vibrations and therapeutic applications of sound and silence and the prioritization of sensory experiences, are largely consistent with ideas found in holistic spiritual sound healing. This prompts the suggestion that listening to therapeutic instruments in the ELCF equips participants with a set of sonic skills and acoustic knowledge to enhance the Christian experience. Specific sonic skills are acquired to help translate sound healing from holistic spirituality to Lutheranism, or from healing to prayer.

Lutheran sound healing practices emphasize the body's response to sonic frequencies and the psychological and spiritual benefits of sound-induced states, aligning closely with holistic and esoteric traditions that prioritize sensory experiences as tools for healing and meditation (Hackett 2012; Annunen 2022). A priest says when playing a singing bowl in a video:

> I play the bowl as a call for presence and silence (Turun ja Kaarinan seurakuntayhtymä 2021).

Despite these similarities, a difference arises in the practices' ritual framing. While therapeutic notions of sound healing are often maintained, a Christian aesthetic framework is certainly applied in the ELCF. This is especially evident at the beginning and end of sound healing events. This Christian contextualization is expressed through blessings and prayer, or more abstract verbalizations such as 'the singing bowl resonates like this in the church building and within the vaults of your soul' (Turun ja Kaarinan seurakuntayhtymä 2021). Additionally, visual elements such as focusing the camera on images of a cross, altar, or religious paintings while therapeutic instruments play in the background are sometimes incorporated at the beginning or conclusion of recorded sound healing events (see e.g. *Kajaanin seurakunta* 2024b). This can be seen as reinforcing the practice's Christian identity and symbolism. Moreover, it may illustrate attempts to create a ritual space that appeals to both Christian worshippers and spiritual seekers. The YouTube and Facebook social media platforms thus enable viewers' attention to be directed to Christian visual elements in combination with a holistic spiritual sonic realm. Social media platforms therefore become channels where experiences and expectations of Christian sound healing

can be curated in particular ways, allowing a combination of Lutheran and holistic spiritual modalities.

A somewhat more prominent Christian framing can be observed in an article in which a deacon describes how she relaxes by listening to the organ and choir while lying on the church floor or in a pew. 'The organ's soothing sounds resonate physically in the human body,' she says (Huhtala 2024). Here the idea of healing sounds is paired with an instrument familiar from the Christian soundscape.

A therapeutic application of sound more in line with holistic spiritual practices can be found in the description of an event:

> The nurturing effect of sound and its movement has a tradition of thousands of years in Eastern cultures. For example, singing bowls have been used by [name] to calm people with memory, activity, and attention disorders (Rautionmaa 2014).

The processes this section describes exemplify how holistic spiritual sound healing has been framed and Lutheranized by using Christian aesthetics in combination with therapeutic notions of sound. Knowledge of specific sounds as healing is derived from holistic spiritual settings and then reframed to fit the ELCF. To interpret the organ's therapeutic effects, for example, one needs first to acquire an understanding of sound and vibration as soothing and healing: acoustemologies or sonic skills that consume sounds in this way. It can thus be concluded that sound healing in the ELCF constitutes an activity that provides Lutheranism with alternative somatic engagements and experiences derived from holistic spirituality.

Boundary negotiations

Thus far the incorporation of sound healing in Lutheranism has appeared a relatively unproblematic process. The following section offers a more nuanced picture by focusing on the issues of overcoming, maintaining, and creating boundaries that healing sounds in the ELCF raise.

An example of sound healing as a way of transgressing boundaries is provided in the article 'Christians and Buddhists meditate together in Kallio':

> A strong hollow sound echoes around the room as [name] strikes the crystal bowls. Between the strikes you can hear soft clinking sounds.

> In the chapel a Christian-Buddhist meditation is in progress. The bowls belong to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Twenty or so participants sit quietly, breathing calmly.
>
> 'Everyone can focus on what touches their own inner spiritual life,' says [name], who has been a Buddhist for fifteen years. [...] Silence is common to all religions. I think it's better to approach others through silence than through dogmas, texts, and verbal dialogue,' she says (Heikkinen 2015).

In this example meditation with singing bowls is used as a method for religious dialogue. This sensory-driven dialogue is described as particularly effective due to the exclusion of 'dogmas, texts, and verbal dialogue'. What seems most important is sitting in a room together without the burden of words and jointly experiencing the sonic environment singing bowls produce. Singing bowls are thus used to create a soundscape that promotes feelings of togetherness without having to discuss beliefs or teachings.

Sound healing in a Lutheran context is not, however, always smooth and boundary crossing: there are also debates about these rituals' suitability in Christian settings. Such debates reveal a broader tension in the integration of holistic spiritual activities into Christianity. The criticism gives expression to an attempt to recreate and maintain boundaries that in commenters' opinion have been trespassed when incorporating sound healing in the ELCF.

Critics of sound healing in Finnish churches seem mostly to highlight concerns about theological appropriateness, questioning whether practices associated with alternative and holistic spiritual traditions are aligned with Christian doctrine. This creates a rupture in the previously described attempts at adaptation, revealing anxiety about the underlying incorporation of holistic spirituality in churches.

A vicar who has a sceptical view of holistic spirituality in churches expresses his concern in an interview:

> Sadly, we've had to witness mumbling yogis bringing in singing bowls and tarot cards through parishes' backdoors. I recall the Bishop of Mikkeli saying that the church should be open to everyone, but not to everything. If the church is open to everything, we certainly lose something (Suomen Raamattuopisto 2022).

Singing bowls and tarot cards and yoga represent activities for this vicar that cannot be combined with Christianity. He feels it is problematic that they are subtly planting a seed of holistic spirituality in Christianity.

The comments on YouTube videos of sound healing events in Lutheran settings echo these concerns. 'A singing bowl in church? Thanks, but NO thanks!!!!!!!!!' (Turun ja Kaarinan seurakuntayhtymä 2021), a commenter on Facebook declares. Another comment posted in response to a YouTube recording of a sound healing concert in a church asks:

> How is it possible to use singing bowls that evoke magical forces in a church that is made for God? (Kajaanin seurakunta 2024b).

This illustrates how the adoption of sound healing in church settings is neither always easy nor encountered positively. Instead of providing a means of overcoming boundaries, esoteric sounds in these examples are the very element that compels critics to draw a line. Critics are unwilling to accept sonic skills related to esoteric notions of sound and more broadly to holistic spiritual views in their idea of Lutheranism.

Conclusions

Churches' adoption of sound healing often entails practices grounded in ideas of vibrational healing, resonance, and silence, all of which are also common elements of holistic spiritual sound healing. In line with Barcan (2011) these represent typical esoteric understandings of sound as stuff, tool, and dynamic force. While the practice of sound healing in holistic spirituality and Lutheran settings may not seem remarkably different, a closer examination reveals some recurring strategies when this practice is transferred to the ELCF – namely, a focus on churches as primarily aesthetic environments, Christian ritual framing, and negotiations of boundaries. Meanwhile, the incorporation of holistic spiritual sound healing in the ELCF prompts the reframing and reinterpretation of Lutheran practices and environments, especially in connection with prayer and church buildings.

The analysis demonstrates that sound healing offers an effective way to overcome verbal restrictions, as well as providing participants with embodied knowledge, skills, and methods to express and (re)define Lutheranism, including its limits and boundaries. Non-verbality is thus a crucial feature when adapting sound healing for the ELCF. Indeed, it may be easier to adopt the ambiguous sounds of a singing bowl than a musical piece with lyrics because doing so allows more room for individual interpretation.

By including (or excluding) sound healing experts, access to a particular embodied knowledge and sonic skills acquired from a holistic spiritual

sphere are either ensured or denied. The introduction of holistic spiritual sonic skills in churches may thus reflect a specific kind of bodily expertise that is lacking in the ELCF.

The described adaptation and Christianization of sound healing is not completely unproblematic: new interpretations, universalization, and de-religioning of rituals occasionally also resemble the processes ascribed to religious appropriation (Bucar 2022; Fibiger 2023; Annunen and Utriainen 2023c; Moberg and Ramstedt 2023).

The online ethnographic data used in this article highlight sound healing as a less well-known holistic spiritual practice that has found at least a temporary place in the ELCF. They also illustrate how (social) media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube not only constitute passive spaces for the communication of such rituals but actively shape how these events are interpreted and experienced in a Lutheran setting. Moreover, the platforms invite and facilitate debate about contemporary spirituality in church settings.

This study has laid the foundations for an understanding of the issues and processes that are relevant when practising sound healing in the ELCF. However, gaining a deeper understanding of the practice's underlying personal experiences and motives will require more thorough onsite ethnographic studies with individuals engaged in these activities. Interviews with holistic spiritual sound healers about their views on the incorporation of the practice into institutionalized religion will also provide another important reference point.

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