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The Yoga of Stillness: How a Christian Yoga Programme was Created and Established in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland

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Abstract

This article reports the results of the first detailed investigation of the Yoga of Stillness Christian yoga programme in Finland. It describes how the practice is structured, framed, and legitimated as specifically Christian, and the meanings its instructors ascribe to the programme. It also describes the practice's gradual but increasing establishment in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. The article thus provides a case study illustrating a broader transnational trend whereby originally non-Christian meditation techniques are increasingly making their way into traditional and institutional Christian settings.

Keywords: Yoga of Stillness, yoga, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland

The most notable and visible development in postural yoga since the 1990s has been its continuous diversification. Only three decades ago postural yoga practice was often simply referred to as either 'yoga' or 'Hatha yoga'; there are now more than a hundred varieties, including 'Vinyasa flow', 'hot yoga', 'power yoga', and 'aerial yoga' (Rautaniemi 2015, 269; Singleton 2010, 3). Yoga today thus exists in a large variety of different forms and is practised for a multitude of different reasons. Since the introduction of yoga to gym culture in the early 2000s, the practice has also become increasingly coupled with the attainment of wellbeing and fitness (Rautaniemi 2010, 40–41; Puustinen et al. 2013, 35–36). While forms of yoga focusing on wellbeing and fitness tend to divorce the practice from any religious and/or spiritual frameworks or connotations (e.g. Jacobsen 2006), the last couple of decades

have also witnessed growing efforts to reinterpret and resacralize yoga, including efforts to align the practice with Christianity and refashion it as a means of expressing Christian faith. This can be seen in the proliferation of Christian yoga books and manuals, formalized Christian yoga teacher programmes, specifically trademarked Christian yoga programmes like Holy Yoga®, and the establishment of the pan-denominational Christian Yoga Association (Christianyogaassociation.org 2025; Brown 2016; 2018; Rautaniemi 2015, 266–69).

More recently, the institutional Nordic Lutheran churches have also started to display a growing interest in yoga and its potentially stronger integration into their practices (e.g. Johnsen et al. 2024; Plank et al. 2023). This development reflects a broader international trend whereby various (mainly Indian or ‘Eastern’) meditation forms have gradually found their way into traditional Christian ecclesiastical settings (e.g. Klassen 2005; Lüddeckens and Schrimp 2018; Kalvig 2017; Brown 2018; Moberg and Ramstedt 2023). However, the degrees and extent to which such practices have entered institutional Lutheran settings varies between the Nordic countries. While the practice of yoga has become increasingly common and established in the Church of Sweden in particular, its adoption in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) has been slower and more gradual. Whereas several forms of yoga are practised today in the Church of Sweden, the integration of yoga in the ELCF has been limited to a specific trademarked programme called the Yoga of Stillness, created in 2019.¹ According to the ELCF Church Institute for Research and Advanced Training the Yoga of Stillness is currently practised in 67 parishes, approximately a fifth of all ELCF parishes (Salomäki et al. 2024, 91). Instructor training in the Yoga of Stillness started in 2019 (and in Swedish in 2024). Around 170 people, most of them ELCF workers, have since completed the instructor course.

This article reports the results of the first detailed investigation of the Yoga of Stillness, focusing on its history, content, framing, legitimation, and its most prominent representatives’ understanding of it. The primary data for this article consist of seven interviews conducted with people associated with the ELCF who all occupy leading positions in the creation and organization of the Yoga of Stillness in Finland. All the interviews were conducted

¹ The trademarks *Hiljaisuuden yoga*® (Finnish) 26.4.2019 and *Stillhetens yoga*® (Swedish) 13.9.2023 have both been registered at the Finnish Patent and Registration Office. The registration of the trademark ‘Yoga of Stillness’ in English was denied by the office on 16.04.2024. The direct translation of ‘*hiljaisuus*’ is ‘silence’, but in this article we use Yoga of Stillness in English because it is the name the programme’s creator prefers.

(in both Finnish and Swedish) between 2023 and 2024.² They were preceded by participant observation at nine Yoga of Stillness events in the city of Turku. All the interviewees were female. Christianity had already played a central role during their childhood and adolescence. Their personal histories included family involvement in revival movements, attending Bible school as children, and personal stories of struggles with faith. All the interviewees also had a history of intense physical activity from an early age, including ballet, gymnastics, and rock climbing. All but one of the interviewees had practised yoga for a long time before they heard about Christian forms of yoga or the Yoga of Stillness, and some had already come into contact with yoga as children. None had attached any particular religious or spiritual meaning or significance to their earlier practice of yoga. At the time of the interviews six had completed the Yoga of Stillness instructor training course and themselves led Yoga of Stillness sessions.

This article is divided into three main sections. The first briefly recounts the history of yoga in Finland, situating the Yoga of Stillness in relation to broader recent developments in the Finnish social, cultural, and religious landscape. The second recounts the particular ways in which the Yoga of Stillness has gradually made its way into the ELCF, how the practice is structured, and how it is framed and legitimated as a specifically *Christian* form of yoga. The third recounts the main function and meanings our interviewees attach to the Yoga of Stillness in their capacity as instructors. The article thus provides a detailed exploration and analysis of both earlier and currently ongoing efforts to integrate yoga as part of the ELCF's recognized practices.

The history of yoga in Finland: a brief overview

Providing a brief summary of the history of postural yoga in Finland is somewhat challenging because the Finnish yoga scene is highly diverse, encompassing many different types of yoga and associated groups and actors. To be clear, in speaking of 'postural yoga', we refer to yoga that focuses on *asana*, which is the Sanskrit word for various yoga poses (for a detailed history of yoga in Finland see e.g. Halén 1981; Rautaniemi 2010; 2015).

Yoga's introduction to Finland can be traced to the 1960s. The *Viittakiven opisto* International Folk High School in Hauho in Southern Finland was particularly significant for the practice's early establishment and popularization. The school's theologically trained rector, Elvi Saari, endorsed postural

² The authors translated all the interviews to English. The aim is equivalence of meaning rather than literal translation.

yoga, and guest lecturers from India and later Saari herself taught it at the school. In the teaching the school offered yoga was framed as a universally beneficial practice suitable for anyone, regardless of their faith or religious belonging or commitment (Repo 2011, 22). Saari would later become one of the founding members of the Yoga Federation of Finland (est. 1967). She also functioned as its president between 1971 and 1979. The Federation describes itself as religiously and politically neutral and takes no interest in its members' religious affiliations (Joogaliitto.fi 2025). Throughout the 1970s and 1990s yoga courses were also firmly integrated into the services of various adult education centres (also called workers' institutes) under the label of 'physical education', further contributing to the practice's wider popularization and accessibility. A firm tradition of 'nonreligious' or 'secular' postural yoga thus developed in Finland at an early stage. As the practice also became popular among representatives of the counterculture in the 1960s and 1970s, however (Repo 2011, 16–19), some degree of association between yoga and Indian religion/spirituality remained in wider public discourse on the practice. Yet by the 1990s yoga was increasingly viewed and publicly depicted as an essentially 'nonreligious' practice intended for the attainment of health, fitness, and physical wellbeing (Rantanen 2022, 7–8).

The development of the Finnish yoga scene has more or less mirrored broader international trends, not least including an increasing diversification and commercialization of the practice. For example, 'nonreligious' yoga has become an established part of Finnish gym culture, which has served only to popularize the practice further (Rautaniemi 2010, 40–41). Since 2014 the wider spectrum of yoga practices in Finland is displayed each year at the large *Jooga Festival Helsinki* (Joogafestival.fi 2025). It is estimated that around ten per cent of the Finnish population currently practise some form of yoga regularly (Ketola 2020, 25).

Yoga, the ELCF, and the context in which the Yoga of Stillness was developed

The development and relatively rapid spread of the Yoga of Stillness and its endorsement by the ELCF needs to be understood in the light of recent broader changes in the Finnish religious landscape, including changes in the self-perception of the ELCF itself. Mirroring similar developments throughout the other Nordic countries and other parts of Northern Europe, the ELCF has experienced a gradual but accelerating decline on virtually all fronts since the late 1970s (e.g. Furseth 2018; Salomäki et al. 2024). Church

membership figures continue to decline, regular attendance at church events is low, and growing numbers are becoming increasingly indifferent to the church and its teachings. In the last couple of decades ELCF discourse has therefore been increasingly marked by a language of crisis and need for renewal (e.g. Moberg 2017, 125). As part of these developments, the ELCF has also become more open to experimentation in its traditional activities. This has seen the introduction of popular music to traditional church service settings (Moberg 2018) and the employment of holistic wellbeing practices such as mindfulness in pastoral work (e.g. Moberg and Ramstedt 2023). These developments also illustrate a gradual but increasingly visible emphasis on the importance of embodied practice and sensory experience in traditional church settings, doubtless due to the broader proliferation and mainstreaming of wellbeing culture and holistic practices across the Nordic countries, not least in the form of yoga (e.g. Opas and Mahlamäki 2022, 25–26; cf. Jacobsen 2006). At the same time they are arguably also indicative of a gradual departure from the intellectualist approach to faith that has marked Nordic Lutheranism for centuries. It should therefore be noted that the development and establishment of the Yoga of Stillness has occurred during a period of general renewal within the ELCF and several concentrated efforts to align church practices more closely with today's Finns' cultural sensibilities.

There was already a connection between yoga and Christianity in the early days of the practice's establishment in Finland. For example, the above-mentioned Finnish yoga pioneer Elvi Saari saw similarities between the yoga philosophy of Patanjali and the Christian faith; lectures held at the headquarters of the Yoga Federation sometimes discussed the relationship between yoga and Christianity; and the relationship between yoga and Christianity was occasionally discussed in the Federation's magazine (Romppainen 2021, 80–84). On Saari's initiative an anthology of the relationship between yoga and Christianity was published in 1984, including chapters by seven contributors who wrote about how the practice had influenced their spiritual life and strengthened their Christian faith (Hatakka et al. 1984). More noticeable interest in the practice by the ELCF did not emerge, however, until 2011–2012. Around this time yoga teacher Rita Saari contacted the Helsinki Parish Union to enquire about whether they might be interested in retaining her services to arrange a meditation course for Easter. In our interview with her she wondered whether it was a coincidence or perhaps guidance from a higher power when she learned that the Parish Union had apparently already planned to arrange yoga sessions:

Well, I called the church, a woman answered, and I started talking about meditation. Pity I don't know who this woman was, but she said: 'This can't be true! You're a yoga teacher! I'd just promised at a meeting that I would find a yoga teacher for the church, and now you're calling' [...].

There had been a meeting where they were thinking that there was already Christian yoga in the United States, so the idea was already with them in a way [the Parish Union] (IF mgt 2024/15).

Saari's services were indeed retained, and she set out to develop a Christian yoga programme with some workers from the Helsinki Parish Union. For this purpose she ordered books on Christian yoga by American authors. The programme she created was eventually advertised as *Kristillinen jooga* (Christian Yoga), though she would have preferred to call it *Joogaa kristityille* (Yoga for Christians). Saari's Christian yoga was a success, but as she was the programme's only teacher, it was mainly restricted to parishes in the Helsinki area. Saari recalled that the actual sessions were not arranged inside churches but in gymnastics halls or club rooms belonging to the Parish Union. Saari's programme for the Helsinki Parish Union therefore constitutes the first known case of an organizational body of the ELCF formally endorsing yoga.

In 2012 the ELCF took another important step towards the endorsement of yoga within the church more broadly. The ELCF organized a seminar titled *Taipuuko kirkko joogaan?* ('Does the Church Bend towards Yoga?') in Helsinki on 10 October 2012. The seminar's main purpose was to consider and discuss how the combination of yoga and Christianity could be understood and justified theologically. The first part of the seminar included a more general presentation of the practice by Kimmo Ketola from the Church Institute for Research and Advanced Training, followed by theological reflections on the combination of yoga and Christianity by the then Secretary of the Bishop's Office Jyri Komulainen (Korhonen 2012). Komulainen discussed several international attempts to combine yoga and Christianity, eventually arguing that any actual, more tangible adoption of the practice would need to be carefully considered and based on certain criteria. These included the practice being rooted in a Christian cosmology and firmly informed by the gospels. He also stressed the importance of acknowledging that the notion of 'Jesus yoga' might not be equally well received by all church members. The seminar's second part consisted of a panel discussion in which Rita Saari was one of the participants. Although some attendees expressed some critical views, the majority of both presenters and attendees

appeared to have a positive view of the potential adoption of yoga in ELCF settings. The seminar thus constituted a watershed that not only served as a general discussion opener but also paved the way for the actual, if gradual, introduction of yoga to ELCF settings, including the subsequent development of the Yoga of Stillness some years later.

The Yoga of Stillness: creation and content

The Yoga of Stillness programme was created and trademarked by former hospice chaplain Heli Harjunpää in 2019. She came into contact with yoga in her early twenties through the adult education centre in Kirkkonummi (IF mgt 2024/11). In 2014 she co-authored a yoga manual with her yoga teacher Ulla-Maija Rönkä. In 2016 she went on to study at the Yoga Nordic yoga school to become a certified yoga teacher. Yoga Nordic offers yoga teacher training in several styles of yoga, including Vinyasa flow, Yin, and Hatha yoga (Yoganordic.fi). Harjunpää's diploma from the school explored the relationship between yoga and Christianity. As part of her diploma work, she also interviewed Rita Saari, who had previously created a Christian yoga programme for the Helsinki Parish Union. When researching her diploma, Harjunpää discovered she had a personal link with the theologian Elvi Saari, who had been key to yoga's initial establishment in Finland in the 1960s:

And then I realized that my own teacher Ulla-Maija Rönkä was a student of this Elvi Saari. That it went like a straight link. I have felt very strongly like Elvi Saari has been there supporting me. I feel that Elvi Saari is sort of my predecessor (IF mgt 2024/11).

Harjunpää went on to relate that the first time she was asked to hold a Christian yoga session was during a retreat in Assisi in Italy in 2016, at which Olli and Leila Valtonen, both ELCF pastors, had organized a course on the Enneagram of Personality, originally developed by the Bolivian spiritual teacher Oscar Ichazo and the Chilean psychiatrist Claudio Naranjo. As word spread that she offered instruction in Christian yoga, she was invited to hold yoga sessions in several parishes in Finland. In 2017 she published an explicitly Christian yoga manual called *Hiljaisuuden tie: kristillisiä jooga-harjoituksia* ('The Road of Silence: Christian Yoga Exercises'), in which she first outlined the programme's contours, which would later develop into the official Yoga of Stillness programme. The name *Hiljaisuuden jooga* came

to Harjunpää by chance as part of a discussion with a pastor about organizing a yoga course in a particular parish:

And then the pastor [...], he had that book in his hand [her own manual] and asked when the 'yoga of stillness' would begin. Like, what a day [laughs]! Then I was like, Yoga of Stillness, hey, there's the name for the whole thing (IF mgt 2024/11).

That same year Jyri Komulainen invited Harjunpää to lead a yoga session at an event organized by the ELCF National Church Council (the highest governing body of the church). There she met Mika K. T. Pajunen, who had become the new executive director of the Finnish retreat association *Hiljaisuuden ystävät* (the Friends of Silence), which had already been founded in 1986 to promote silent retreats and provide instruction for retreat leaders, spiritual guides, and pilgrimage guides. The association came to play a central role in many practical aspects of organizing the Yoga of Stillness instructor training programme, as Pajunen suggested Harjunpää should start instructor training under the association's auspices (IF mgt 2024/11). The Yoga of Stillness was eventually registered as a trademark at the patent and registry office in April 2019. The reason for trademarking the programme was partly to protect its name but more importantly to ensure that it maintained its particular structure and content. The programme was in most respects based on Harjunpää's earlier manual from 2017, and in 2022 she published the official Yoga of Stillness manual for instructors.

Yoga of Stillness instructor training is organized under the auspices of the Friends of Silence association, either in ELCF parish facilities (including churches) or at silent retreat centres run by various voluntary associations. Information about the courses is spread through official ELCF channels, as well as various social media platforms. Although the courses are open to anyone, the vast majority of participants has thus far been ELCF workers. The cost of the course, about 800 euros, is usually covered by the parishes where the participants work. A few participants pay their own fees. Thus far the Yoga of Stillness has remained heavily dominated by women, who make up a large majority of all organizers, instructors, and practitioners.

The Yoga of Stillness is based on Hatha yoga. The postures therefore bear a close resemblance to many other forms of postural yoga commonly practised at adult education centres and gyms in Finland. The programme

contains 23 postures or sequences of postures like the lotus position or the sun worship sequence. The manual explicitly states that the Yoga of Stillness is suitable for everyone, which is reflected in practice in the programme's exclusion of physically demanding postures like *shirshasana*, or the headstand posture. The sequence is generally gentle and slow. The programme's first and last parts focus on relaxing postures and sequences; the middle part includes some slightly more physically demanding ones. In advertisements for the practice participants are encouraged to bring woollen socks, as the floor inside churches can be cold.

A session usually lasts an hour, though lengths can vary. As some American Christian yoga programmes tend to rename postures to situate the practice within a Christian framework (e.g. the *Surya Namaskar* sequence, or Sun worship, becomes 'Son worship'), the Yoga of Stillness programme has renamed the asana *vīrabhadraśana*, or 'Warrior', 'Warrior of Peace' (*Rauhan soturi*). Harjunpää explains these changes thus: '... because the idea of peace and love is so important to the Yoga of Stillness, when other yoga forms have Warrior 1 and 2, we instead have Warrior of Peace 1 and 2' (IF mgt 2024/11). She goes on to explain enthusiastically how the programme can be seen as representing a person's life journey.

The manual itself contains instructions accompanied by pictures for how the postures should be performed, and a script for what instructors should say to participants at the different points of each session. Maria Repo-Rostedt, a pastor and retreat leader who translated the manual to Swedish, explains its importance and what it means to be an instructor:

It is the case that you should actually know those instructions really well. One should preferably know them by heart. Although one is allowed to have the instructions there in front of you... But still, you should be able to lead not simply by reading from the instructions. And one should follow the instructions to guarantee that it is indeed the Yoga of Stillness, not someone else's yoga that someone has invented. So that is also why it is a registered trademark, to protect it (IF mgt 2024/14).

During the sessions a singing bowl is used to signify the end of a posture. The explicitly Christian character of this programme is already made clear during the first posture, the lotus position, which is called the 'position of gratitude' (*kiitollisuusasento*), when the instructor reads the following text, inspired by the hymn *Veni Sancte Spiritus*:

Come Holy Spirit,
 send your light from heaven
 to illuminate Christ in our hearts
 Bless each one of us, bless our exercise
 In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit
 Amen.
 (Harjunpää 2022, 38).

These words, referring to the Christian Trinity, the Holy Spirit, heaven, and blessings, unmistakably place the practice within a Christian framework. Indeed, most postures are accompanied by some form of Christian message, and some also include direct excerpts from the Bible. For example, during the sixth posture, a static resting position where the practitioners lie on their sides with their heads resting on their arms, the instructor reads from Psalm 139: 12–13a:

For you yourself created my inmost parts;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.
 I thank you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made (Harjunpää 2022, 40).

Although the programme is deeply rooted in Christian cosmology and doctrine, the notion of sin is never explicitly addressed. Arguably, it is touched on as part of a text that is read during the mountain pose: 'Here we stand in front of you God, as we are' (Harjunpää 2022, 42). Overall, the image of God rendered in the manual is that of a Father figure who loves human beings unconditionally. Regarding the main purpose and goal of the practice, the manual states:

The primary goal of the spiritual exercise of the Yoga of Stillness is that the person who participates has an experience of God's love, where one can resign from all performance pressures and rest as a whole physical and spiritual being carried in God's eternal hands (Harjunpää 2022, 10).

The idea of relaxation highlighted here is similar to many other slower yoga programmes offered by gyms and adult education centres. The Yoga of Stillness, however, clearly seeks to sacralize the practice by adding an explicitly spiritual and edifying element.

Legitimizing the Yoga of Stillness

Since its establishment proponents of the Yoga of Stillness have been compelled to repeatedly defend and legitimate the practice, and especially its stronger integration in the ELCF itself. This is mainly because yoga in general (along with other 'Eastern' meditation practices such as mindfulness) remains strongly associated with non-Christian Indian religious frameworks throughout large parts of the conservative Finnish Christian milieu, including conservative elements of the ELCF. Indeed, yoga has been the subject of repeated critical debate in the conservative Finnish Christian media for several decades. While this cannot be described as an extensive debate, critical discussions have nevertheless tended to flare up fairly regularly. For example, after the seminar on yoga and Christianity held in Helsinki in 2012, Saari related that she had received some angry phone calls from people with misgivings about her Christian yoga (IF mgt 2024/15). Harjunpää also mentioned receiving some emails and phone calls every year with negative feedback. Mari Leppänen, Bishop of Turku and current president of the Friends of Silence, shared similar experiences. She told us that her bishop's office had received some negative feedback in the form of emails, letters, and postcards criticizing her open endorsement of the Yoga of Stillness. She jokingly says of this feedback:

Well, [the argument of the critics] is that religions get mixed up, from foreign traditions. Sodom and Gomorrah (laughter), and do I realize the responsibility I have in my position? (IF mgt 2025/007).

Based on our interviewees' information, critiques of the combination of yoga and Christianity tend to stem from the view that yoga is so firmly rooted in non-Christian foreign religious frameworks that it becomes virtually impossible to reconfigure it for Christian use. Critics also frequently provide detailed arguments to this effect. Despite such critical voices, the Yoga of Stillness has succeeded in establishing itself quite firmly within a relatively short period. However, this has happened far from automatically but has required continuous and focused legitimation and defence of the programme, the main thrust of which has been thoroughly to (re)define and (re)frame the practice as a specifically *Christian* form of yoga. The practice will likely have to continue to be further legitimated following the 2025 General Synod of the ELCF where critical debates on yoga flared up once again.

Such legitimating efforts tend to involve a certain set of identifiable main steps (see also Moberg and Ramstedt 2023). A first step – which also

constitutes a central element in the reconfiguring of cultural and/or alternative spiritual practices for Christian use more broadly – entails the practice needing to be thoroughly and convincingly framed as ‘religiously neutral’, as something that can be practised by anyone, religious or not, ‘without religious conflict’ (Brown 2016, 77). This is to *divorce* or *disassociate* the practice from any evident connections with any non-Christian religious/spiritual frameworks and thus argue that no inherent incompatibility between the practice and Christianity exists. As part of this, the importance of the underlying *intention* is also frequently emphasized – the notion that ‘one’s belief, or “intention”, determines whether a practice is religious or what kind of religion it expresses’ (Brown 2015, 11). This also tends to be emphasized in cases where previous Christian adaptations of the practice already exist. A second step entails an emphasis on the practice’s universal health and wellbeing benefits (a type of argument that is further strengthened if it can be convincingly argued that these benefits have been scientifically proven or validated). A third step entails proponents of the practice also emphasizing its wider popularity and significance to growing numbers of people, including Christians.

These main steps provide the groundwork for subsequent tangible ‘Christianizations’ of the practice. As Candy Brown explores in detail in focusing on the phenomenon of Christian yoga in the United States, this Christianization process involves what she refers to as ‘linguistic substitution’ (Brown 2018, 661; cf. Brown 2015, 6). As we have already illustrated in relation to the Yoga of Stillness, this is the process whereby the practice is infused with Christian terminology and imagery to mark an expressed ‘intention to repurpose a practice for Christian uses’ (Brown 2018, 669). Christianization also involves reorienting the practice’s goal from mere health and wellbeing to a higher purpose. It thus entails reinscribing a practice that has first been framed as religiously neutral with a specific Christian content and goal, usually by comparing, if not directly equating, the newly Christianized practice with traditional Christian practices such as prayer or contemplation (Brown 2019, 183). All these elements are evident in the framing of the Yoga of Stillness in its official manual, as well as its continuing legitimation by its main proponents. For example, Harjunpää devotes a few pages of her manual *Hiljaisuuden tie – Kristillisiä joogaharjoituksia* to addressing the roots of yoga, also mentioning the yoga sutras of Patanjali. She notes the existence of many different forms of yoga, drawing an analogy between yoga and music:

In practice, yoga is a general term for many kinds of human activity. It is a term similar to, for example, music, which has throughout the ages been a natural way for humans to express themselves and their existence in this world. Yoga comes in many different forms today, just like music, from heavy rock to classical and spiritual music (Harjunpää 2017, 12).

This affords a typical example of framing yoga as a ‘religiously neutral’ and universal human practice that can be used for a variety of reasons and that is therefore also suitable for Christian adaptation. Similarly, in a lecture on 20 September 2023 at St Henry’s Church in Turku that aimed to introduce the Yoga of Stillness programme to a new audience, Pastor Toto Hannele Päiviö told the audience that yoga was a multifaceted phenomenon that had been practised in Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and secular/non-religious contexts alike. She compared yoga to an ‘open-source code’ that anyone could adapt and adjust to fit their particular needs and sensibilities.

Concerning what exactly is adopted in yoga for Christian use, Bishop Leppänen argues:

To understand that, okay, a certain type of religiosity is part of Hinduism and Buddhism, but that the type of commercial yoga that is familiar to us has come to us from America. Or that Christian yoga has already been around for a long time. Or that when yoga came to Finland, how central a role was, for example, played by a female theologian, who was part of it when it came via the adult education centres (IF mgt 2025/007).

In referring here to Elvi Saari’s pioneering work, Leppänen legitimates the practice by connecting two types of arguments. First, she highlights that yoga as we have come to know it is an essentially ‘religiously neutral’ practice that is derived from ‘American’ commercial forms of yoga as opposed to forms more firmly coupled with Hinduism and Buddhism. Second, she highlights the long history of the practice and its longstanding connection with Christianity in a Finnish context, as well as that Christian forms of yoga have already existed for a long time. This is to argue that the Yoga of Stillness is based on a ‘religiously neutral’ form of yoga that has become thoroughly disconnected from any non-Christian religious frameworks (and therefore no longer contains any ‘Trojan horse traces’ of Hindu or Buddhist notions, for example). Yet it is also to argue that as Christian adaptations of yoga have existed for a long time, the Yoga of Stillness can be seen as constituting part of *already* established Christian practice more generally.

The legitimization of the Yoga of Stillness has unfolded on several fronts. For example, the practice was (at least implicitly) endorsed by the ELCF pastors' labour union (*Pappisliitto/Prästförbundet*) in 2022 when they decided to give Harjunpää the 'Pastor of the Year' award *specifically* for her development of the Yoga of Stillness and its instructor training programme:

Yoga of Stillness represents a new type of spirituality [in the Christian sense³] in changing times, a spirituality that also appeals to those who are not regularly seen in the church pews. [...] Many parish workers have also found support for their work and their own spiritual growth in the Yoga of Stillness. Harjunpää has already trained almost a hundred new Yoga of Stillness instructors in collaboration with the Friends of Silence association (*Akiliitot.fi* 2022).

Others also use Harjunpää's award to further legitimate the practice. For example, an advertisement for the Yoga of Stillness on the official webpages of the Turku and Kaarina Parish Union states:

The Pastor's Union of the ELCF chose Heli Harjunpää as Pastor of the Year in 2022 and thus also signalled that the Yoga of Stillness is a recognized and accepted part of the prayer life of our church. The Bishop of Turku, Mari Leppänen, is also a Yoga of Stillness instructor. She states that for many the Yoga of Stillness provides a path into the church. People are longing for many types of spirituality, and the church must offer different opportunities to realize that spirituality (*Turunseurakunnat.fi* 2025).

In both the above quotations the Yoga of Stillness is explicitly endorsed and rendered an acceptable Christian practice (the latter quotation also contains the phrase 'recognized and accepted part of the prayer life of our church'). It is also noteworthy that both quotations highlight how the Yoga of Stillness can attract people who may not otherwise be interested in the church's activities. The practice is therefore framed as one that can contribute to reigniting peoples' interest in ELCF activities and the church as a whole.

³ The Finnish words '*hengellinen*' and '*henkinen*' are both translated in English as 'spirituality'. However, in the Finnish context the former is mainly used to denote specifically *Christian* forms of spirituality; the latter is commonly used to refer to what is conventionally known as 'alternative spirituality', 'holistic spirituality', or 'new age spirituality'.

The meaning and function of the Yoga of Stillness from the perspective of instructors themselves

In this final section we briefly focus on how the Yoga of Stillness instructors themselves view the practice and its main function and value in a Christian setting. Based on our interviews, the instructors generally understand and discuss the practice as something that can combine relaxation and a sense of calm with Christian spirituality and edification. However, although our interviewees repeatedly emphasize the importance of bodily and sensory experience for attaining a sense of calm, they rarely talk about any specific health or fitness aspects in relation to the practice (instructor ST Paul being an exception, IF mgt 2024/16).

Bishop Leppänen, for example, relates that she was at first a little sceptical of the Yoga of Stillness, as she used to associate yoga with physical exercise and fitness in the first instance. Yet having acquainted herself with the Yoga of Stillness, she began to see how it could facilitate the attainment of a sense of calm and peace and thus aid Christian edification. Similarly, Yoga of Stillness instructors Maria Olin and Mia Pusa both emphasize how the practice helps participants focus at least temporarily simply on ‘being in the moment’ and thus experience God’s presence (IF mgt 2024/13; IF mgt 2024/12). Likewise, retreat leader and Yoga of Stillness instructor ST Paul emphasizes the importance of instructors themselves always striving to create the calmest and most peaceful atmosphere possible during every session (IF mgt 2024/16). All our interviewees therefore repeatedly emphasize these elements – ‘being in the moment’ and attaining a sense of calm and peace. Of course, this is also reflected in the fact that the Yoga of Stillness is very gentle and slow-paced compared with most other forms of yoga.

When discussing the practice’s more specifically religious and/or spiritual aspects, Olin observes:

One kneels, one clasps one’s hands, one raises one’s hands, one kneels, and puts one’s forehead to the ground or in a downward position. So, there’s like nothing new in that. And since a human being is a whole, it feels totally natural that it is not only the head or a single hand gesture that joins in that prayer, but that the whole body can be involved. And like God has created our bodies to be unique, our whole body can join in that conversation with God (IF mgt 2024/12).

Olin’s account further highlights the importance and centrality of embodied and sensory experience. In this example Olin tangibly underscores the

need for one's entire body to participate in the 'conversation with God'. She thus seems to express a desire to depart from the traditional Lutheran tendency to locate religious faith primarily in people's minds. Saari shares some very similar thoughts:

Because the body is so full of sensations, it can be felt how the blood flows and the body tingles and things like that. It's a very tangible way for a person to sort of find that invisible space where one can remain attentive. Then in the physical exercise one has to concentrate so much that it automatically focuses the mind. It's wonderful to direct people to that, to wonder in silence and feel how one's breathing happens by itself, and the heart beats automatically. What the force is that keeps us alive. That one doesn't have to do anything oneself. That one can sort of surrender to it or let oneself be in the presence of that higher power that sustains our lives. It comes through one's own experience and own way of finding it (IF mgt 2024/15).

Saari's reflections focus strongly on the body and one's awareness of its purely physical functions as providing a kind of pathway to sense the 'higher power' that sustains our minds and bodies alike. The emphasis is therefore firmly on the *individual's* own personal experiences and sensations. Similarly, Pusa comments:

And for me from the side of Christianity comes this theology of silence, and from the world of the theology of retreats comes this notion that God is present in this moment. God is not... God is surely present in the past and in the future, but God is encountered in this moment. And when we concentrate on being in the body, on what the body is sensing at this moment, we inevitably find ourselves in that moment. [...] So moving the body and being in the body and encountering God there, that's where they become one (IF mgt 2024/13).

As all these quotations illustrate, the instructors attach great importance to embodied, physical, and sensory experience. As can also be seen, this is typically connected with the notion of 'being in the moment' and of encountering God in the here and now. Again, our interviewees often come close here to describing the body and sensory experience as a *conduit* for establishing some kind of clearer awareness of God's presence. This awareness, however, resides not only in the mind but flows through one's entire body. To guide people towards this therefore becomes a central aim of the Yoga of Stillness from the perspective of the instructors themselves.

Concluding remarks

This article reported on the results of the first detailed investigation of the Yoga of Stillness in Finland, describing the broader context in which it developed; its process of creation, main content, and structure; efforts and reasons to legitimate the practice in church settings; and its main function and purpose from the perspective of the instructors themselves. The article's broader scope means we have been unable to cover every aspect in detail. Rather than reiterating what has already been said, we now provide some broader concluding observations about what the establishment and relatively rapid recent spread of the Yoga of Stillness tells us about currently ongoing broader changes and transformations in the Finnish religious landscape, especially in relation to traditional 'mainstream' Christianity.

First, as our interviewees also repeatedly highlighted, the Yoga of Stillness is generally illustrative of an increasing emphasis on embodied and sensory experience in traditional Christian settings, which arguably reflects a much broader gradual movement away from a view of faith as residing primarily in the mind. This development has been the subject of extensive previous (and ongoing) scholarship. While a detailed discussion falls beyond the scope of this article, the practice of the Yoga of Stillness constitutes a prime example of a broader continuing turn towards embodied and sensory experience in traditional Lutheran settings. Arguably, the Yoga of Stillness can therefore perhaps also be seen as illustrative of how people develop and learn new ways of not only 'understanding' but also practising and tangibly experiencing and 'feeling' their Christian faith (Annunen et al. 2022).

Second, reflecting broader transnational trends, the establishment and spread of the Yoga of Stillness doubtless illustrates how originally non-Christian or 'Eastern' meditation practices are increasingly making their way into traditional and institutional Christian settings. The *particular ways* in which this has occurred in the case of the Yoga of Stillness also reflects a more general pattern that applies equally to the ELCF's more recent adoption of other meditation practices such as mindfulness (see Moberg and Ramstedt 2023). This first entails framing yoga in general as a 'religiously neutral' and universally beneficial practice. This having been sufficiently established, the practice is readapted for Christian use in the 'Christianized' form of the Yoga of Stillness. This process also involves the organization of a special church-connected seminar on the topic that has lent it further 'institutional backing'. To the extent that we will see other efforts to introduce additional meditation practices to the ELCF in future, they are likely generally to follow the same pattern.

Third, the fact that the Yoga of Stillness always has been and remains heavily dominated by women is arguably illustrative of broader ongoing changes in hierarchy and authority structures across large parts of the religious field, and especially as they are related to changes in layperson-officeholder relationships in institutional Christian settings. There is a gendered aspect to the entry of new mediation techniques (including yoga) into traditional ecclesiastical settings that certainly deserves more detailed investigation.

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