TEMENOS
Nordic Journal for the Study of Religion
Temenos Vol. 61 No. 2 (2025), 143–61
DOI: 10.33356/temenos.159800

An Immanent Turn in Protestant Spirituality: New Spiritual Practices in the Nordic Lutheran Churches

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Abstract

This article examines the emergence of a range of new spiritual practices reshaping traditional religious expressions within Nordic Lutheran churches over the last fifty years. These holistic practices, which include meditation, yoga, sacred dance, and other creative forms of expression, integrate influences from Eastern traditions, folk religiosity including New Age practices, and secular approaches to wellbeing. Rather than existing as peripheral or fringe phenomena, these innovative practices have been woven into daily church life, serving not only as vehicles for spiritual progress but as expressions of holistic care and community building. The article argues that these practices are part of an 'immanent turn' in Protestant spirituality that has been ongoing since the 1970s. By adopting a bottom-up, lived religion perspective, the study challenges conventional top-down theological frameworks. It shows that when the focus shifts to laypeople's everyday practices in local parishes, Lutheran Christian practice is revealed to be more flexible, inclusive, and deeply connected with embodied experiential spirituality. This approach encourages a rethinking of how Lutheran Protestantism is conceptualized, highlighting the importance of personal bodily centred experiences in the pursuit of engagement in the world and the ongoing evolution of church practice in contemporary society.

Keywords: *spirituality, lived religion, Lutheran churches, Nordic countries, new spiritual practices, immanent turn*

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In the last fifty years new spiritual practices have emerged in church settings in the Nordic countries. The practices are of many and diverse kinds. Some are mediated by external materials such as enneagrams, tarot readings, icons, or biblical texts. Others use the body and span a variety of tempos: slow movements like yoga, qigong, and meditative movements; dances that work with intense or faster movements; and practices of stillness like meditation (Plank et al. 2024, 115).

Although these spiritualities are new in the context of the Evangelical Lutheran churches, they are not new in themselves. Sociologist Adam Possamai argues that the phenomenon of spirituality, or 'practices and beliefs of people who are seeking a closer connection with the divine and/or the supernatural, with a degree of autonomy within or outside of a religious group' (Possamai 2019, 1), is not new, but a phenomenon that started with modernity. Industrialization, urbanization, and mass education challenged and eroded the monopoly of institutionalized religion, bringing about a shift in religious authority. In late modernity, with the social and cultural changes brought about by globalization, post-industrialization, and post-colonialization, these spiritualities are surprisingly considered 'new' in contemporary Western societies, Possamai argues. They are, however, late modern adaptations of mysticism and popular religion, with the two strands today becoming intertwined: 'mysticism is becoming more and more popular, and popular religion more mystical' (Possamai 2019, 1). Mysticism, defined by Possamai as a more intellectual and individualistic religious practice in opposition or in addition to official religion, involves a stronger and more personal reflection than is provided by the authorities within an institution. As mysticism tends to be elitist and not always mainstream, popular religion has been the religion of the people, encompassing eclectic elements that are not always officially recognized. Unlike the official religion promoted by intellectual elites and clergy, 'popular religion is a religion of rites and myths, of dreams and emotions, of body and the quest for this-worldly well-being' (Parker 1998, 205).

Since the Reformation Protestant spirituality has theologically distanced itself from Roman Catholic tradition by repudiating spiritual practices as a means to attain salvation and emphasizing the three sola doctrines: *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, and *sola gratia* (by scripture alone, by faith alone, by grace alone) – that is, granting scripture precedence over tradition, faith over deeds, and grace over merit. Many Catholic practices, including some rituals associated with the sacraments, retreats, pilgrimages, and devotion to saints, were abandoned because they directly or indirectly challenged the central

doctrine that salvation only occurs through the grace of God. Although this was a gradual process in which the faithful long retained many practices (Zachrisson 2018), the Reformation eventually deprived believers of many of the bodily aspects of faith: making the sign of the cross; the smell of incense; the act of lighting a candle; and so on. Instead, Protestant spirituality has had a more worldly approach, focusing on the daily life of the laity, where married life has been considered more honourable than monastic celibacy. Literacy has been an important skill, and Bible study has been a key component of Protestant spiritual practice, with prayer and worship in which the singing of hymns and choruses has been central, as the texts of hymnody have mediated Protestant spirituality (Holt 2004).

An immanent turn in Protestant spirituality

However, since the 1970s there has been a return to more embodied and experiential practices, which has been widely embraced. This started with the World Council of Churches' assembly in Uppsala in 1968, at which the Revd Martin Lönnebo (later bishop of Linköping) introduced the Tree of Reconciliation, where visitors to the cathedral could light candles. Such candlestands can now be found in most churches in Sweden, and in the cathedrals alone it is estimated some 600,000 candles are lit every year (Svenska kyrkan 2022). In 1996 Bishop Lönnebo introduced the Wreath of Christ, also called the Swedish Rosary, as an aid to meditation or prayer (Lönnebo 2016). The bracelet, which is simultaneously open-ended and anchored in Christian tradition, has gained wide popularity and is also used as a pedagogical tool in the church. Other popular embodied practices are pilgrim walks and icon painting. The general weekly celebration of the eucharist has returned since the 1980s, and the principal service in most parishes on Sundays includes it, which was not previously the case. According to Fallberg Sundmark (2018, 169–70) these phenomena – along with making the sign of the cross, images of the Virgin Mary and other saints, and the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday – should be understood as a return to, or reorientation towards, a material dimension of devotional life in the Church of Sweden. We argue, however, that these practices point to a broader development, an immanent turn in the Church of Sweden, that also encompasses the new spiritual practices. The immanent turn here refers to an orientation towards the sacred as embodied, experienced, and embedded in everyday life. Rather than positioning the holy as transcendent or removed, this turn emphasizes immanence as a mode through which sacredness is encountered – in sensory

practices, bodily rituals, emotional presence, and material-symbolic actions such as lighting candles, meditative movement, or tactile prayer. It signifies a shift from abstract belief to lived, affective, and corporeal forms of meaning-making, where the divine is not elsewhere, but here and now.

This immanent turn also makes it challenging to maintain a distinction between (institutional) religion and (individual) spirituality. Rather than treating them as separate and opposing categories, scholars have increasingly highlighted their interconnectedness. In the study of everyday religion Ammerman (2014) argues that religion and spirituality are better understood as a continuum. As new spiritual practices and spiritualities enter Evangelical Lutheran churches, it is even more important to acknowledge this continuum, with the added observation that the church facilitates individual expressions of spirituality by providing both tools and spaces.

In previous research such new spiritual practices were primarily studied when they occurred outside established religious institutions or as '"secular religion" based on private "symbolism"' (Hanegraaff 1999, 146). They have therefore often been approached as part of New Age or new religious movements, or as belonging to a holistic milieu centred on individual spirituality and immanent dimensions of life and of being 'here and now'. Within these perspectives these practices 'tend to blur boundaries between expressions of "religion" and "culture"' (Sutcliffe and Gilhus 2013, 4). At an individual level, however, they may not necessarily be perceived as religious or spiritual at all but as bodily practices for enhancing one's health. In this sense they can be understood as various forms of 'secular sacralizations' (Jespers 2013) that operate on the borders of religion and often enter secular institutions such as the healthcare sector and schools. Typically, these practices lack the structures and authorities associated with 'prototypical' religious organizations. Yet, as they have entered the established majority churches in the Nordic countries, processes of resacralization and Christianization occur, thereby challenging – and in some respects collapsing – the distinction between (institutional) religion and (individual) spirituality. To contextualize how contemporary Nordic churches are incorporating such practices, the next section offers a brief overview of their similarities and differences.

The Nordic countries and their folk churches

Lutheran churches have for centuries played a central societal role in the Nordic countries, with their dominance enshrined in national constitutions. In 1397 Sweden, Denmark, and Norway united to form the Kalmar

Union, a great Nordic kingdom spanning areas of what today is known as Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, and Greenland and the Faroe, Orkney, and Shetland Islands. The Kalmar Union lasted until 1523, around the time Protestantism arrived in the Nordic region. Two new states emerged, dividing Scandinavia along West–East lines with the new nations of Denmark-Norway and Sweden-Finland. During the following five centuries these two blocs would develop into five independent Nordic countries, all with Lutheran state churches (Lande 2004). While other religions were eventually tolerated, the Lutheran churches enjoyed and still enjoy various privileges and monopolies. The shift to religious freedom was accompanied by growing societal tolerance but also apprehension concerning non-Lutheran religions. In the last five decades, however, pluralization and separations between church and state have dramatically transformed the religious landscape, leading to increased religious diversity and a decline in traditional religious affiliations (Gustafsson and Pettersson 2000; Furseth 2017; Markkola 2015).

The legal recognition of religious freedom and changes in the status of the Lutheran majority churches has been a process with both similarities and differences between the Nordic countries.

Denmark's 1849 constitution laid the groundwork for religious freedom. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark has since been called *Den danske folkekirke* (the Danish Folk Church). The pietistic movement of the nineteenth century was largely contained within the church, making the folk church designation all the more pertinent. It remains a state church, with the monarch and parliament the supreme temporal authority (Folkekirken n.d.).

Iceland, which remained part of Denmark until gaining sovereignty after the First World War, introduced freedom of religion in the constitution of 1874, though the Lutheran Church retained its special status as the national church. A law of 1997 regulates that church property is owned by the state. According to this law ecclesial legislation was turned over from parliament to the church. Through a cooperative agreement in 2019 the status of the clergy – both priests and bishops – as state employees was terminated. This marked a significant step, whereby the state ceased to appoint ecclesiastical officials and moved instead to a system of providing the church with a fixed annual grant in lieu of paying clergy salaries directly (U.S. Department of State 2020).

In Finland the 1919 constitution guaranteed religious freedom, further detailed in the 1922 Freedom of Religion Act. Finland has two national churches with a special relationship with the state: the Evangelical Lutheran

Church of Finland; and the Finnish Orthodox Church. The latter comprises one per cent of the population (Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland n.d.).

In Sweden the Religious Freedom Act was implemented in 1952, guaranteeing freedom of religion to all Swedish citizens and the right not to belong to any religious community. State and church were separated in 2000; however, a special legal framework regulating the Church of Sweden as a nationwide ecclesiastical institution remains, and the Church of Sweden still clearly plays a semi-official role (Lundgren 2023).

Finally, religious freedom was established in Norway's constitution in 1964, and since 2020 the Lutheran Church has no longer been a state church. Norwegian society has since been characterized by law as being open to different beliefs and philosophies ('*livssynsåpent samfunn*') (Kirken n.d.).

Lutheran churches have steadily lost their dominance, challenging the perception of Nordic societies as religiously homogeneous. While Lutheran churches remain the largest Christian denominations and thus hold the position of majority churches, membership has significantly declined. This downward trend has persisted since the 1960s, largely due to simplified resignation processes and increased immigration of individuals unaffiliated with the Lutheran Church. In 2000 the great majority of the populations in the Nordic countries were members of the folk churches: around 83 per cent in Sweden; 85 per cent in Finland and Denmark; 87 per cent in Norway; and between 85 and 90 per cent in Iceland. By 2022 membership had declined to 52.9 per cent in Sweden, 61 per cent in Iceland, 63.8 per cent in Norway, 65.1 per cent in Finland, and 72.1 per cent in Denmark (Edqvist 2024, 44).

It is noteworthy that with the exception of Finland the Nordic countries also exhibit lower levels of religiosity than the rest of Europe. Many Nordic residents report limited belief in God and minimal participation in religious activities and attribute a general lack of importance to religion in daily life. Attendance at religious services has also steadily declined (Taira 2019; Taira et al. 2021; Pew Research Center 2018). Yet, despite being in many ways highly secularized societies, a notable paradox – sometimes called the Nordic paradox – exists, where widespread secularization coexists with a deep intertwining of cultural tradition and religious identity, and a relatively high proportion of the population still maintains church membership and participates in religious life cycle rituals (Pettersson 2017; Bäckström et al. 2004).

In Denmark many identify as 'Cultural Christians', emphasizing cultural heritage over religious belief and practice (Lundmark and Lundahl Mauritsen 2022), and the same has been argued for Sweden, where Thurjfell (2015) argues that there is a secular post-Christian habitus among Swedes. This

change, where many are neither churchgoers nor identify as nonreligious, is also part of a larger European trend: a casual loyalty to church tradition has been described as a 'fuzzy fidelity' in which religion plays a minor role in individuals' lives (Voas 2009).

Additionally, since the 1970s refugees and migrants have contributed to increasing religious pluralism in the Nordic countries. This influx has introduced a wide array of Christian denominations, Muslim communities, and religious groups from Asia. The resulting religious diversity is now a visible and significant feature of the Nordic religious landscape, analysed by scholars as a key aspect of societal change (see e.g. Kühle 2011; Bäckström 2014; Willander 2019).

In summary, the Nordic countries have transitioned from religious homogeneity to pluralistic and increasingly secular societies shaped by legal reforms, cultural shifts, and immigration trends. While Lutheranism remains culturally significant, its influence has markedly diminished over the last half-century. The Nordic folk churches, as majority churches embracing the whole population, therefore face several contemporary challenges. 'Folk church' theology emerged in Sweden in the early twentieth century, when almost everyone belonged to the church and had a basic knowledge of Christianity, though church attendance was already in decline, and growing free church movements posed a challenge to the established church. Today, when populations are culturally and religiously diverse and many church members '[belong] without believing' (Mountford 2011), this theology needs to be renegotiated. Our data suggest that one way of doing this is to espouse a 'low-threshold religiosity' and be open to new spiritual practices where secular spirituality, health, and wellbeing intersect (Plank et al. 2024).

'The New Faces of the Folk Church': the Diocese of Stockholm, Sweden

Using the methodological approach of lived religion, *The New Faces of the Folk Church* research project aimed to investigate the everyday spiritual activities in which laypeople engaged *within* ecclesial institutions. Historical research shows that the practice of religion has never been identical with the prescribed practices based on the church's theology as found in church documents. As historian Hanna Enefalk puts it in her book on Swedes and their churches, religious practice has always included "a wild grown variety of traditions, superstition, spiritual-secular mixes and creative reinterpretations" (Enefalk 2017, 185). However, the scholarly gaze has rarely been directed at these hybrid forms of practice *within* church institutions.

Instead, when focusing on new spiritual practices, several researchers have identified a New Age fringe to Christianity (Jorgensen 1982; Heelas 1996) or investigated Christian responses to the New Age movement (Saliba 1999) and have even coined the term 'Christaquarians' (Kemp 2003) to name the phenomenon. They have also been located on the outskirts of the church (Nynäs et al. 2015) or have been termed 'alternative spirituality' (Sutcliffe and Bowman 2000), and they have been analysed from a critical perspective as commodities, part of a consumer culture where spirituality is sold (Carette and King 2005), or as appropriating religion (Bucar 2022). When focusing on the church's institutional settings, participation in activities outside worship has been analysed from a 'consumer profile perspective' (Vejryd Nielsen 2015).

In the research project we were instead interested in what actually took place, who participated, who taught the new spiritual practices, and how these practices were legitimated. Based on a bottom-up approach, with an extensive mapping of all activities occurring outside worship and concerts in the Diocese of Stockholm, as well as fieldwork and archive studies, with interviews with participants, leaders, and vicars, several patterns emerged. Stockholm, the capital of Sweden, became its own diocese in 1942 through the merger of parts of the Diocese of Uppsala (north of Stockholm) and the Diocese of Strängnäs (south of Stockholm). Stockholm was then home to ten per cent of the country's population, and it was considered essential for the city to have its own bishopric. From the late nineteenth century migration from other parts of Sweden resulted in many newcomers losing their connection with the church, contributing to a particularly strong secularization process in Stockholm. Forty-four per cent of the diocese's population were church members in 2022 (Svenska kyrkan 2023). The Diocese of Stockholm has often been at the forefront of progressive developments within the Church of Sweden, advocating more liberal attitudes (Krook 2020). Its 61 parishes are highly diverse, ranging from affluent inner-city and suburban congregations to economically disadvantaged multicultural areas and rural communities with medieval churches. Reflecting its history, the diocese is generally open to exploring new forms of church engagement, though some parishes remain more traditional.

Our findings highlight the Church of Sweden's evolving role as a hub for both traditional and contemporary spiritual practices. While music and leisure activities continue to dominate, meditation, movement, creative expression, and community meals have emerged as significant aspects of modern church life. These activities not only reflect spiritual engagement but also

foster social connection, wellbeing, and holistic community participation. The netnographic study identified 1,293 activities, for which we collected data on location, timing, target audience, leadership, and descriptions. The quantitative data were then subjected to qualitative analysis, conducted collaboratively by our research team in two coding rounds (see Lundgren et al. 2023 for a fuller discussion).

Of the 1,293 activities identified, two thirds were traditional activities such as choirs and children's and youth programmes, categorized under music and leisure activities. Music (42%) was the largest category, comprising church choirs and musical activities. The leisure activities category (22%) covered children's and youth programmes, including baby groups, open preschool, infant massage, homework help, and afterschool activities.

Traditional Lutheran spiritual practice, based on Bible studies and discussions, were found in the discussion groups category, which comprised eight per cent of activities, including not only Bible studies and faith-based conversations (e.g. Alpha groups, Lectio Divina) but also personal development groups such as book clubs, self-help groups (e.g. Life Steps), men's and women's groups, and stress management groups.

Activities centred on meals were almost equal in size, at nine per cent. These food-centred gatherings ranged from soup lunches, café meetups, and afternoon tea to family-focused events like hamburger nights and *Himmel och pannkaka* ('Heaven and Pancake'). Social engagement initiatives such as *Matkassen* ('The Food Bag') and *Café Kryckan* ('The Crutch Café') also fell into this category.

Cultural activities, including film screenings, cinema events, and lectures, often with Christian themes, only amounted to one per cent (and it is important to note here that we excluded concerts, as they were abundant).

Many churches also hosted open-door events focusing on social integration, support, and community building. The Open House category (2%) included daily activities, language cafés for migrants, and meeting spaces for socially vulnerable groups, often advertised as Open Door, Open House, or Open Church Square.

The last three categories, creative practices (5%), meditation (6%), and movement (5%), included many new spiritual practices. Various meditation forms were identified, including Zazen, Christian Deep Meditation, Angel Meditation, the Eightfold Path of Meditation, Heart Meditation, and Mindfulness. The creative practices encompassed visual arts, writing, drama, and horticulture, ranging from icon painting to free-form painting. Activities based on movement included yoga, qigong, dance, pilgrimage

walks, and pram walks. Dance styles varied from meditative circle dance and 'sacred dances' to free-form dance.

Among these holistic practices meditation classes appeared to be the most commonly offered new spiritual practice in Church of Sweden parishes. The variety of meditation techniques was striking: they included guided visualizations of nature walks, mantra meditation using Christian words like God or amen, angel meditation, silent meditation, Bible meditation, dance meditation, mindfulness, Marian meditation, zen meditation, and meditation on impermanence and observing the mind. Similarly, we found a wide range of yoga practices. Unlike in other countries, where churches often label yoga as explicitly Christian (e.g. 'Christian Yoga' or 'Church Yoga'), the Church of Sweden rarely brands yoga in religious terms. Instead, classes are promoted based on their specific type, such as medical yoga or senior yoga. This prompts the question of whether there is simply no perceived need to redefine yoga within a Christian framework in this context.

A notable exception was Tikva, a uniquely Swedish practice. Meaning *hope* in Hebrew, Tikva incorporates movements reminiscent of yoga but explicitly distinguishes itself from it, often emphasizing its alignment with biblical passages.

Unlike the other Nordic churches, meditation and other spiritual practices in the Church of Sweden lack standardized forms (see e.g. Fibiger 2023 and the discussion below). Instead, they appear to be shaped by individual instructors rather than established schools of thought. There is a network for sacred dances, but otherwise there are no formal networks or organizational structures for these leaders. This further contributes to a highly personalized and diverse landscape. Additionally, the lack of formal networks or organizations for leaders of these spiritual practices may contribute to a landscape in which personal interpretations and variations take precedence over structured or standardized approaches.

Our observations, as well as interviews with participants and leaders, indicate that maintaining strict distinctions between Eastern and Western traditions – or between Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian influences – is often challenging, as Christianization processes take place in and the practices are integrated into a Christian material culture where the church space is the central place where activities are practised.

The new spiritual practices in the Church of Sweden originate in diverse sources. Some are rooted in older Christian traditions or other denominations outside Lutheranism, making them new within the Church of Sweden's context. Others stem from Eastern religious traditions, secular movements,

or Western New Age spirituality. As discussed in an earlier article (Lundgren et al. 2023), we have identified five main contexts through which these practices have entered the Church of Sweden: holistic spiritual care; Asian body-mind techniques; ecumenism; New Age and alternative spirituality; and feminist theological practice.

Holistic pastoral care was developed in the 1930s, inspired by the emerging practice of psychotherapy, which the churches had hitherto regarded with suspicion. The St Luke's Foundation (*S:t Lukasstiftelsen*) began offering both psychotherapy and pastoral care. Its founder, Methodist pastor Göte Bergsten, also introduced retreats to Sweden based on Anglican traditions from England. These retreats incorporated Ignatian spiritual exercises, though they were not labelled as such in the Church of Sweden until the 1990s because of strong anti-Catholic sentiment in the 1930s.

A second major influence comes from Asian body-mind techniques, introduced in the 1970s through zen meditation. *Meditationsgården*, affiliated with St. Davidsgården (Sweden's first retreat centre, established in the 1960s), became a key location for these practices. The priest and philosophy of religion professor Hans Hof promoted meditation as a means of physical and psychological healing. Later, in the early 2000s, physiotherapist and psychotherapist Gudrun Khemiri introduced qigong to several parishes in the Diocese of Stockholm.

Ecumenism, the third influence, enabled these developments. Internationally, Catholics have been at the forefront of integrating Asian spiritual practices in Christian traditions, a trend that has extended to Sweden. During the ecumenical openness of the 1970s and 1980s zen-inspired meditation became part of church life. Dominican nuns played a role in this development at the Rättvik centre and the Sigtuna Foundation's Refugium. Catholic figures such as Gunnel Vallquist and Gun Kronberg, alongside Church of Sweden priest Sven Åstrand, led courses in what became known as zen-inspired deep meditation. This ecumenical openness also facilitated the acceptance of other Catholic and Orthodox traditions that were no longer considered controversial, such as pilgrimages, Ignatian spiritual guidance, and icon painting.

A fourth, though less prominent, influence comes from folk religiosity expressed through movements such as New Age and alternative spirituality. The Findhorn community in Scotland played a key role in the emergence of sacred dances, which, while linked to older biblical and ecclesiastical traditions, also reflect New Age influences. Other spiritual practices such as guided meditations, angel practices, and enneagrams also stem from this alternative spiritual milieu.

The final source of influence is feminist theology, which emphasizes the body as central to spirituality. Several important conferences have contributed to this perspective, notably the 1991 *God's Daughter, Who Are You?* conference in Sigtuna. This event, inspired by the World Council of Churches' Decade in Solidarity with Women (1988–1998), explored women's spirituality through mythology, creation narratives, and ritual dance. These conferences played a key role in renewing spiritual practices, leading to the spread of sacred dances in parishes across Sweden.

This summary of influences indicates that what started as relatively exclusive retreat centre activities has now become an integral part of everyday church life. Compared with the other Nordic churches, the Church of Sweden appears to have less need of explicit theological justification for these practices. However, interviews suggest that many leaders, particularly priests, still operate within a Lutheran framework, even if this is not always overtly stated (Plank et al. 2024). Rather than articulating theological justifications, they express Lutheran values through action, viewing these practices as embodying concepts such as grace, freedom, and the priesthood of all believers. This is aligned with the Church of Sweden's identity as a folk church – open to all, regardless of specific confessional beliefs. In analysing the data, we conclude that the parishes we have studied offer new spiritual practices less as a vehicle for spiritual progress or for attracting new church members than as an expression of care that is thus part of the church's diaconal mission (Plank et al. 2024). Ninna Edgardh observes that diaconal work emerged as a lay movement led by women, partly in opposition to the established church. Being gendered as female, it is seen as subordinate and is not strictly regulated in church order, leaving it to deacons themselves to work it out (Edgardh 2019).

The result also questions whether the notion of vicarious religion, used by Davie (2007) to describe the dynamic of a small and active minority practising religion on behalf of a much larger group, is valid. It relies on the understanding that the folk church serves a dual function: a theological role for religious specialists and committed members; and a broader cultural role that accommodates various personal motivations for participating in lifecycle rituals (Beyer 1994; Luhmann 1977; 1982). However, based on our data, we propose that the Church of Sweden fulfils at least four key functions: (1) theological; (2) lifecycle-related; (3) community building; and (4) the provision of holistic practices for health and spiritual care. The theological function encompasses the transmission of Christian faith and teachings, including worship, Bible study groups, and pastoral care provided by priests and deacons, particularly

in times of grief. Beyond this, individuals engage with the church through various avenues: lifecycle rituals such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals; social spaces where the church fosters community through activities like choral singing, music, shared meals, sewing groups, youth programmes, and pram walks; and finally, through holistic practices that integrate body, mind, and spirit in an accessible non-elitist manner (Lundgren et al. 2023).

Thus, the Church of Sweden extends beyond its traditional theological functions, integrating broader social, cultural, and spiritual practices that engage individuals in diverse ways. Far from being peripheral, these holistic practices are now an integral part of church life. Eight out of ten parishes in the Diocese of Stockholm offer holistic practices, accounting for approximately 15 per cent of all non-worship activities (Lundgren et al. 2023). These sessions often take place inside church buildings, reflecting their normalization within the Church of Sweden. Despite this integration, clear boundaries exist, shaped by theological traditions, external influences, and practical considerations, regarding which activities are deemed suitable for inclusion.

Towards an immanent turn in Nordic Protestantism

The Nordic churches take various approaches to these body-mind practices, as they are Christianized and integrated in worship in various degrees. Christianized yoga practices are branded as '*Kirkeyoga*' in Norway, '*Hiljaisuuden jooga*' (Yoga of Stillness) in Finland, and as alternative bodily practices like '*Bøn i bevegelse*' (Prayer in Movement) in Denmark and 'Tikva' in Sweden. In Denmark 'Christfulness' has been introduced as an alternative to mindfulness. In Iceland individual priests practise dreamwork and yoga. Many kinds of meditation are also to be found: zen-inspired and guided meditation in Sweden; 'Centering prayer' being more prevalent in Iceland, Norway, and Denmark. Sacred dances have made their way into worship in Sweden especially, where more intense forms of dance like 'Five Rhythms' have also been introduced recently.

The development of new spiritual practices within the Nordic folk churches raises several questions about the churches' therapeutic functions, as well as theological legitimation. Is the separation of state and church leading to an openness to a more diverse church incorporating new spiritual practices, for example? Or is it leading to a more inward search, in which it becomes crucial to feature traditional beliefs and practices? How are secularization and sacralization articulated in new spiritual practices? Sweden has long been seen as a pioneer of religious transformation, particularly in

the Church of Sweden's embrace of new spiritual practices and progressive theology. Is this gap between Sweden and its Nordic neighbours closing? Could we see Norway and Denmark adopting more alternative spiritual elements, while Sweden in turn moves towards a stricter or more traditional approach in which practices are even more Christianized and integrated into worship? A defining characteristic of majority churches in the Nordic countries is their self-understanding as churches for all, rather than exclusive institutions for a devout minority. This inclusive identity allows a broad spectrum of engagement, from lifecycle rituals to social initiatives and spiritual exploration. The question remains, however: are churches becoming more introvert or more extrovert? While some data indicate that churches are moving towards a more spiritual and experiential approach, this may suggest that their role as cultural and social institutions is expanding at the expense of traditional religious authority.

A key aspect of these developments is sensory engagement within church practices. Which senses are activated in modern church life? Many new spiritual practices such as meditation, sacred dance, and holistic body movements place greater emphasis on bodily awareness, sound, and movement, in contrast with traditional Protestant worship's more intellectual or verbal focus. This shift raises questions about how people experience the sacred in contemporary Nordic churches.

Another growing focus is physical healing. The Nordic churches' healing traditions' roots are in prayer and pastoral care, with deacons trained as nurses in medical schools, but in recent years influences from alternative spirituality, psychology, and Eastern practices, as well as traditional church practice like using consecrated oil for healing purposes, have gained traction. How these traditions evolve – whether through the integration of new methods or a return to more explicitly Christian healing rituals – may indicate the direction in which the Nordic churches are heading.

The emergence of new spiritual practices within the Church of Sweden and other Nordic majority churches can be understood as part of a broader Christian polydoxy in which multiple interpretations and expressions of faith coexist, as Paul Hedges (2025) suggests. This development is aligned with the ecumenical shifts that began in the 1960s, when African and Asian theologians called for the decolonization and decentralization of Christian tradition. Their voices challenged the dominance of eurocentric theological frameworks, advocating instead a broader and more contextually rooted understanding of Christianity – one that could incorporate local spiritualities, hybrid practices, and embodied faith expressions.

In this light hybridity becomes a key lens through which to understand everyday spirituality in the churches. Rather than rigidly categorizing spiritual practices as 'Christian' or 'non-Christian', it may be more productive to acknowledge individuals' simultaneous engagement with multiple traditions, blending influences from contemplative prayer, meditation, movement-based spirituality, and holistic wellbeing practices. This perspective also broadens the understanding of who participates in shaping church life, as it includes the laity as active agents of spiritual development rather than passive recipients of clerical authority.

Protestant spirituality has traditionally tended to be more scripture-centred. However, this emphasis needs reconsideration in the light of new spiritual practices, as they are sometimes more prominent than traditional Bible study groups. This shift suggests a broader, more inclusive understanding of spirituality that values lived experience alongside scripture, where mysticism, popular religion, and health are intertwined. Based on our data, we argue that this shift in focus can be understood as part of an immanent turn in Protestant spirituality that has been ongoing since the 1970s from abstract belief to lived, affective, and corporeal forms of meaning-making, where the divine is not elsewhere, but here and now. Importantly, these expressions of everyday religion and spirituality are no longer merely fringe phenomena. To some extent they are also recognized and encompassed by the church establishment itself. Many priests and vicars facilitate or integrate such practices within their pastoral work, whether through separate activities with guided meditation, dances, or bodily practices such as yoga and qigong, or through alternative liturgical forms. In doing so, they contribute to a wider, more inclusive Christian landscape, in which spiritual life is not confined to doctrinal purity but is shaped by the diverse ways in which people seek meaning, connection, and sacred experience in their daily lives.

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This study was supported by the Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, grant number P20-0606_RJ, and has undergone ethics approval (EPM 2021-05807-01).

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