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# Yoga in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark: Making it Our Own

*MARIANNE QVORTRUP FIBIGER*
*Aarhus University*

Abstract

Yoga has become increasingly popular in Denmark, much as in other European countries. However, its integration into Danish society often involves secularization or recontextualization to fit local cultural and religious frameworks. This article examines yoga's increasing incorporation within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (ELCD), known in Danish as *Folkekirken* – the Danish National Church. It explores how priests and church-affiliated groups navigate the balance between cultural appropriation and appreciation, redefining yoga within a Christian framework. By delinking yoga from its traditional Hindu roots and relinking it to Christianity in a broad sense, practitioners aim to create a form of yoga that is aligned with their faith while benefiting from its meditative and physical practices. The study highlights the complex interplay between religion, cultural adaptation, and globalization, demonstrating how yoga is reshaped to fit new contexts while retaining aspects of its original emphasis on the cultivation of the body as part of a religious or spiritual practice.

Keywords*: yoga, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark, 'bodyfication', adaptation, appropriation, appreciation*

> 'Hindu yoga did not speak to me, simply because the tradition felt too foreign. By bringing yoga into the church, it has become more present and meaningful.' Pastor Stine Ravnborg Nissen, quoted in *Kristeligt Dagblad*, 21 June 2014 (Lauritsen 2014).

Yoga in Denmark is booming, much as in many other European countries. It functions in most cases as a positive signifier or cultural trope (Fibiger 2020), provided it is adapted to fit a Danish context, either through secularization or its association with a system of meaning distinct from classical yoga rooted in Indian traditions. This process involves delinking yoga from

one system of meaning and relinking it to another, as the above quotation exemplifies.

This article explores the growing interest in integrating yoga into the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (hereafter the ELCD), also referred to by informants and authors as the Danish National Church (or *Folkekirken* in Danish). The primary focus is on how priests and groups affiliated with the ELCD navigate the balance between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation (Cruz et al. 2024; Kennedy and Makkar 2020; Rogers 2006; Schneider 2003; Ziff and Rao 1997) in their adoption and legitimization of yoga within the church.

Cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation are broad and often ambiguous terms applied across a range of arenas, including fashion, music, art, language, and religion, in discussions of cultural exchange (Cruz et al. 2024). This ambiguity is especially pronounced in a globalized world and in the growing focus on identity politics and cultural 'ownership' within postcolonial discourse (Borup 2023; Foxen and Kuberry 2021, 201–6). In these cases cultural appropriation is usually understood negatively as a hegemonic act in which elements of one culture are perceived or used inappropriately by members of another (Young and Brunk 2009; Ziff and Rao 1997). This can result in the erasure of the original meaning of a concept or practice, making it nearly unrecognizable to the culture from which it was taken. However, cultural appropriation can also occur in a more subtle form, where elements from one culture are adapted in another, thereby changing its form or part of its meaning but remaining with some of its original parts. It is in such cases that the concept of cultural appreciation becomes important in cultural encounters.

In this paper cultural appreciation should not be seen as a contrast or direct opposition to the concept of cultural appropriation. Rather, it refers to an understanding of the appeal that certain elements, concepts, or practices from one culture can have for members of another. For such cultural forms to take root in a culture from which they did not originate, however, they must be translated or transformed in ways that make sense in the new cultural context. For example, this occurs when Asian concepts such as karma, zen, or avatar are used as positive tropes in European, American, or African societies (Fibiger 2020), as well as when practices rooted in an Asian context become part of other cultural contexts.

It is this dynamic or balance between appropriation on the one hand and appreciation on the other that I see at stake when seeking to understand yoga in a Danish context more broadly, and particularly within the ELCD. How this balance or interrelationship between appropriation and apprecia-

tion, along with conceptual dissonance and resonance, plays out, however, can vary from group to group and from one historical or social context to another, including within the ELCD.

To understand how this dynamic can fluctuate or be balanced differently across various milieus and contemporary contexts, I propose two concepts: (a) centrifugality (movement from the centre to the periphery); and (b) centripetality (movement from the periphery to the centre) (Fibiger 2023). Centrifugal movement primarily moves away from yoga's historical and philosophical roots. It can also be understood as a more or less deliberate delinking of yoga from a specific Indian system of meaning, but not as a bodily practice that can simply be linked to any other system of meaning. By contrast, centripetal movement seeks to align yoga as a practice with its historical and philosophical roots. This differentiation between centrifugal and centripetal processes is not intended to essentialize them as binary opposites but to illustrate how different milieus or systems of meaning – each shaped by distinct ontologies and worldviews (religious, secular, etc.) – attempt to navigate a dynamic field of practice and discursive space where multiple meanings coexist. These dynamics are evident not only in yoga's broader adaptation within Danish society but also in the evolving understanding of yoga within the ELCD.

Understanding yoga's historical development in Denmark provides a valuable framework for analysing its integration into the ELCD – an adaptation that allows it to be redefined while remaining recognizable. Although the overall approach to yoga in Denmark resembles trends in other Nordic countries, there are nuances. In particular, the ELCD's status as a state-supported church, with approximately 71.4 per cent of Danish citizens as members, is a crucial factor in understanding yoga's placement and replacement in the particular Danish context (Folkekirkens videns- og udviklingscenter n.d.).

## A brief outline of yoga's history in Denmark

A Dane named Gunnar Raman, also known as Yogi Raman, established the first yoga school in Denmark. His practice was closely connected with *Patañjali's Yogasūtra* and *Rāja Yoga*, which became the foundation of his teachings and the training of future yoga instructors (Kumar 2011). This form of yoga and a growing interest in *Hatha Yoga* and its *āsanas* initially defined yoga in Denmark. It was strongly associated with an 'authentic' yet exotic Indian Hindu practice focusing on liberation from rebirth or union with a transcendental power – concepts many Danes perceived as too 'ex-

otic' and distant from their own religious or spiritual understanding. Over time, however, *āsanas* from *Hatha Yoga* were gradually delinked from their Indian roots and adapted to Danish society. They were often understood simply as a form of gymnastics (Singleton 2010).[1]

The theologian Johannes Aagaard, founder of the Dialog Center in 1973,[2] played a key role in critiquing the growing interest in yoga between the 1970s and 1990s. Aagaard argued that yoga could not be separated from its religious roots in Hinduism. He insisted it was not merely a neutral form of exercise but a spiritual discipline aimed at uniting the soul with the divine (*Brahman*, in the Hindu tradition). He cautioned Christians against practising yoga, fearing it could lead them away from their faith. Aagaard warned that even its physical exercises (*āsanas*) could expose practitioners to yoga's spiritual dimensions, which he considered potentially dangerous – an influence that in his view could lead to 'spiritual deception' or openness to forces incompatible with Christianity (Aagaard and Blichfeldt 1997).

Although Aagaard's critique met resistance from those who viewed yoga as harmless or even beneficial, his concerns continue to resonate among more conservative groups within the ELCD. However, these concerns are often overshadowed by views that yoga can complement rather than contradict Christian faith. This has become the primary argument used to legitimize yoga's introduction in church spaces.

## Yoga's contemporary development in Denmark

The debate about the nature of yoga and its role in Danish society continued into the early 2000s, when yoga began to flourish across Europe. This growth was largely driven by a shift in focus: yoga's physical and health benefits came to overshadow its mental or transcendental aspects (Newcombe 2020; Strauss 2005). For example, yoga schools began offering specialized classes in prenatal yoga, postnatal yoga, and yoga for the elderly which tailored physical exercises for specific groups. Yoga thus also became a standard offering in fitness centres across Denmark.

Yoga then became increasingly commercialized and integrated into marketing strategies for yoga schools dependent on a clientele. This diversification is aligned with David Gordon White's observation that

1 In the Danish case Mark Singleton refers to Niels Bukh and the gymnastics he taught at the Danish *højskoler* (folk high schools).

2 The Dialog Center (1973–2003) was an organization dedicated to informing about and warning against new religious movements and forms of Eastern religion, as well as studying them from a Christian perspective.

'[e]very group in every age has created its own version and vision of yoga' (White 2012, 2), challenging fixed definitions of yoga, especially when it is disconnected from its roots but still marketed as yoga because it sells (Jain 2015). This transformation can be understood as the 'healthification' or 'wellnessification' of yoga, in which its religious elements recede to the background. However, it can also be linked to the broader 'spiritual turn' (Heelas and Woodhead 2005), in which yoga has become part of personal self-development movements and has been integrated into other systems of meaning, including within the ELCD. While secularized yoga is widespread, a countermovement has emerged in which yoga is being 'de-secularized' or 're-religionized', either by emphasizing its traditional background or connecting it with another system of meaning (Fibiger and Borup 2024).

The influence of Aagaard's critique remains evident, especially in debates about yoga's legitimacy within the ELCD. A recurring argument holds that yoga does not erode Christianity but can in fact strengthen the connection with Christian faith or the broader Christian tradition. Placed within the analytical framework outlined in the introduction, there is general agreement that the Christian tradition must remain the centre. However, disagreement arises in two areas: a) whether this centre is strengthened or weakened by yoga's incorporation; and b) whether yoga, understood as a bodily practice that strengthens Christian tradition (as a form of appreciation), must be significantly adapted to fit a Christian context. Should yoga be fully disconnected from its Indian background (centrifugality)? Or can its presence in the church be strengthened by acknowledging that yoga is not merely gymnastics but a spiritual discipline with deep historical roots in Indian tradition (centripetality)?

## Yoga and the ELCD from 2000

I have followed the development of yoga in Denmark for approximately 25 years, especially in Aarhus, the country's second largest city, with around 310,000 inhabitants. With my students I have mapped yoga in Aarhus four times – in 2002, 2012, 2016, and 2021.[3] Our 2016 survey and subsequent findings reveal a significant increase in both the number of yoga schools

3 I have followed the yoga milieu in Aarhus since 2002, primarily in connection with an ongoing mapping of religion, religiosity, and spirituality conducted as part of a project on religious pluralism in Aarhus, which I have conducted every ten years in collaboration with colleagues and students from the Department of the Study of Religion. The results are available online at https://samtidsreligion.au.dk/.

and the overall availability of yoga (in fitness centres, stress management programmes, public schools, hospitals, kindergartens, and so on). Yoga has come to be associated with stress relief and personal wellbeing rather than being given religious or spiritual connotations (Fibiger 2020). It is important to remember this when examining yoga's use in the ELCD, which can be understood as an umbrella organization encompassing many different forms of Christianity – from very conservative branches like the Home Mission (*Indre Mission*) to more progressive initiatives, especially those represented by various 'Young Church' communities.[4]

The first Danish church to offer yoga was Brorson's Church in Copenhagen in 2013. Michelle Thielen, founder of the American YogaFaith movement, which is part of the Christian Yoga Association (CYA),[5] visited the church and sparked interest in incorporating yoga in religious settings. This initiative soon spread to other major cities, including Aarhus, Odense, and Aalborg. YogaFaith emphasizes a centrifugal process in which yoga as a bodily practice is separated from its Indian religious and philosophical origins and recontextualized within a Christian framework. As YogaFaith Denmark puts it:

> At YogaFaith Denmark, we seek God and His intentions for our lives through movements known from yoga. Yoga is both a physically active way of encountering God and a space where individuals can find rest and time with God. YogaFaith's values are rooted in the Bible and its portrayal of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. This is expressed through prayer, intention, movement, and meditation. Being a Christian is not a requirement for participation – only being open to Christian peace (YogaFaith 2025).[6]

Since 2020 yoga has expanded to churches throughout Denmark, reflecting both yoga's broader societal embrace and its redefinition within Christian contexts. Today at least 36 churches offer yoga regularly either as part of a service or as an additional weekday church activity. New initiatives have also emerged: for example, *Himmelske Dage* ('The Days of Heaven'), a church

4 See e.g. *UngK.dk – Youth Church in Aarhus*. The church states the following on its homepage: 'UngK is part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (ELCD), but your religious beliefs are your own – and you are most welcome, regardless of whether you have a faith or not' (Ungk.dk n.d.).

5 YogaFaith, founded in the same year in the United States as part of the Christian Yoga Association (CYA), has certified thousands of yoga instructors worldwide, including in Denmark.

6 This YouTube presentation was published online on 19 April 2015 as part of the promotion of YogaFaith in Denmark.

festival held annually in central Jutland, which includes church-based yoga among its many programme offerings.[7]

Yoga's growing popularity Danish churches can be seen in many ways as a strategic response to its increasing acceptance more broadly within Danish society. This trend is particularly noteworthy given that yoga has largely been detached from its Hindu or Indian origins and recontextualized within new paradigms emphasizing physical and psychological health, as well as personal coping strategies for life's challenges.

In our 2016 and 2021 surveys of yoga in Aarhus nearly all yoga groups described yoga's benefits in terms of both physical and psychological health. Among the 52 respondents[8] 89 per cent believed yoga could significantly or very significantly reduce stress. Additionally, 78 per cent practised meditation, and 41 per cent engaged in mindfulness, indicating that yoga practitioners often incorporated other stress-reducing activities in their routines.

Beyond its stress-reducing effects, 83 per cent of respondents believed that practising yoga promoted a healthy body. Furthermore, 80 per cent regarded yoga as an effective form of exercise, and 46 per cent even considered it healthier than other forms of physical activity. A key reason yoga was viewed as especially beneficial was its integration of both physical and mental wellbeing. Indeed, 62 per cent of respondents ranked this holistic combination as the most or second most important reason for practising yoga.

This perspective is well aligned with Beatrix Hauser's description of yoga as being adapted to a specific scientific discourse in which the integration of mind and body is considered essential to overall health (Hauser 2014). In the context of this study, however, one of the most significant findings is that more than 80 per cent of respondents emphasized that yoga was neither merely a form of gymnastics nor a purely spiritual practice. Rather, they perceived it as a holistic approach that uniquely integrated body and mind – an experience they did not find elsewhere.

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7 It should be noted that the inclusion of church-based yoga at the festival also drew criticism from conservative representatives of the Danish National Church. '*Bringing yoga into the church will make people become Hindus*,' stated Jens Dammeyer, priest at Nørremark Church in Augustenborg, in a letter published in the newspaper *Kristeligt Dagblad* on 23 January 2023 (Dammeyer 2023). See also Ravn (2023).

8 We conducted surveys in both 2016 and 2021, with a total of 52 respondents, along with 15 individual interviews. The survey data and interview material have been archived in a database and are available on request. This material has also been cited in two of my previous articles (Fibiger 2023; Fibiger and Borup 2024).

This final point is particularly relevant when considering the motivations for incorporating yoga in church settings. Yoga offers a way of uniting body and mind within the framework of faith – an aspect largely lost in modern Danish church practice but one that many view as essential to making Christianity meaningful again, as the following statements illustrate:

> We had a vision day back in 2012, where we talked about the body and the church. We wanted to focus specifically on how we could cultivate the body and use it as part of our faith.
>
> For many Christians and those who attend church the body is cut off. Faith has become far too intellectual, something that resides only from the neck up. Pastor Stine Ravnsborg Petersen, quoted in an article in *Kristeligt Dagsblad*, 21 June 2014 (Lauritsen 2014).
>
> In the Danish National Church it's fair to say that we mostly concern ourselves with the spirit and not so much with the body. We fold our hands when we pray and kneel when we receive the sacrament, but that's about it. I believe that yoga can connect body and spirit. Pastor Nicolaj Stubbe Hørlyck, quoted in *Berlingske Tidende*, 27 March 2016 (Sonne 2016).

**The development of yoga in the ELCD over the last 12 years**

As the above quotations illustrate, yoga has become a widely recognized practice and is increasingly integrated into the ELCD as a means of deepening engagement with the Christian tradition. However, this integration is not a one-way process; rather, it involves various ways of connecting with and distancing from yoga tradition, where the balance between appropriation and appreciation continues to be negotiated.

In the following sections I examine how yoga has been incorporated in the ELCD, highlighting the various forms of negotiation that emerge from my analysis of newspaper articles from the last twelve years, church websites advertising yoga offerings, and events discussing yoga as a potential component of the ELCD.[9] I have also reviewed reports on yoga commissioned by the ELCD, conducted interviews with priests offering yoga in church settings, and attended both yoga sessions and yoga-based church services. During these participatory observations I also conducted informal interviews with some of the attendees.

9 I have been invited to some of these events to speak briefly about yoga's historical background.

Regarding the introduction of yoga to the ELCD in 2013 and its development until the present (2025), I have identified both overarching characteristics and notable differences in how yoga is understood as a bodily practice and is linked – or needs to be linked – to Christian liturgical and theological traditions.

Furthermore, my analysis reveals key differences across four interrelated issues – body, space, symbols, and faith – which are central to nearly all church-affiliated yoga offerings. However, what is considered central versus peripheral varies not only in defining yoga but also in how the church presents itself: is the primary focus on Christian faith, Christian symbols, or the church as sacred space? This fluidity reflects the ELCD's balancing act between maintaining its traditional identity as a recognizable institution rooted in Danish culture and adapting to contemporary trends, where the appreciation of yoga is obvious, but where it also needs to be appropriated and translated to a Christian context for the church to make it its own.

This dilemma is explicitly acknowledged in a report commissioned by the Danish National Church:[10]

> The Danish National Church is tasked with spreading the gospel, providing pastoral care, and engaging in diaconal work. The question is whether yoga can serve as a tool for the church to reach the modern individual. Across Denmark more and more churches are incorporating various forms of yoga, movement, stretching, or dance in an effort to engage with the general public. However, this is not without complications and leaves many questions unresolved. For example, yoga's origins lie in the East and it has Hindu roots, so how can it be used in a Christian context? How can yoga within the Danish National Church be distinguished from yoga offered in evening classes or fitness centres? Can the body and various movement practices be integrated into church services? (Ziethen and Skårhøj 2019, 3).[11]

This report has played a crucial role in bridging the gap between scepticism and adaptation, tradition and innovation, and appropriation and appreciation. It offers a potential framework for integrating yoga into the ELCD in a

10 'Yoga in the Danish National Church: A report that informs, discusses, and outlines perspectives on the use of yoga in the Danish National Church' ('*Yoga i Folkekirken. En rapport som oplyser, diskuterer og perspektiverer brugen af yoga i folkekirken*') (Ziethen and Skårhøj 2019).
11 Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger, the author of this article, translated all the quotations from the report.

way that is aligned with Christian teaching, enabling the church to preserve a sense of authenticity by *making yoga its own*.

The nineteen-page report consists of an introduction followed by nine chapters: (1) Why is yoga popular? (2) What is yoga? (3) Yoga philosophy; (4) Yoga, body, and theology;[12] (5) Yoga in the Danish National Church; (6) Challenges in incorporating yoga in the Danish National Church; (7) What is Christian yoga? (8) What can yoga contribute? and (9) Conclusion. The report's authors, who are themselves Christian yoga practitioners, clearly aim to promote yoga's use in the ELCD. At the same time they incorporate perspectives from a nationwide survey of 140 Danish priests who completed a questionnaire, and from ongoing discussions they held with clergy involved in a network focusing on the relationship between yoga, bodily practice, and the church (Ziethen and Skårhøj 2019, 12).

The two authors highlight some of the key findings from the questionnaire, which lead them to conclude that there is a need for 'a clearer framework for what yoga in a Christian context can offer' (ibid. 2019, 13). The survey responses were divided concerning the motivation for incorporating Christian yoga in churches. Approximately half the respondents did not believe that yoga belonged in the ELCD at all. However, the other half supported its inclusion, provided that it promoted faith – though faith in a broader sense, not necessarily in God. Some respondents believed yoga could help participants develop a closer connection with the church; approximately a third saw it as a valuable tool for reducing stress and fostering inner peace. Others suggested that yoga could help reintegrate the body into religious practice.[13]

The report's introduction emphasises this tension between scepticism and support:

> This report is the first attempt to clarify and articulate what yoga can contribute to the Danish National Church. At the same time it highlights the challenges yoga may pose to the church and the areas where care must be taken to avoid syncretism (Ziethen and Skårhøj 2019, 3).

Chapter 6, titled 'Challenges in incorporating yoga in the Danish National Church', further outlines five key concerns:[14]

12 This chapter was written by a guest author, Pastor Rebekka Maria Brandt Kristensen.
13 Only 2% of respondents had experience of offering yoga in church when the questionnaire was distributed in 2019. In 2025 this has changed.
14 The five key concepts were translated from Danish to English by Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger.

1. Can yoga philosophy be integrated into the Danish National Church? Where should the boundaries be drawn to avoid unintended syncretism?
2. How can it be ensured that yoga remains consistent with the church's creed? That is, how can Christian yoga be 'purified, qualified, and enculturated' within a Christian framework?
3. What level of explicit Christian teaching, preaching, and liturgical practice should be included in Christian yoga? There is a risk that efforts to welcome newcomers may dilute the Christian perspective.
4. Is there a risk of overemphasizing physical health, making yoga in church resemble yoga in a gym? Connected with this, can the practice become overly self-focused, prioritizing individual well-being over communal faith?
5. Does yoga have the potential to manipulate emotions and beliefs? As yoga practices can lay bare vulnerable aspects of human experience, how can the church ensure that individual values and beliefs are respected? (Ziethen and Skårhøj 2019, 13).

These concerns are further explored in the chapter, illustrating that the report's authors seek to balance their support for integrating yoga with the criticisms raised by the 140 surveyed priests. Their overarching aim is to legitimize and qualify yoga as a potential component of the ELCD by distinguishing between appropriation and appreciation. The report further underlines that yoga as a practice can be separated from yoga as an Indian philosophical system rooted in Hindu cosmology, ontology, and the pursuit of union with Brahman. This distinction is aligned with the framework proposed by Foxen and Kuberry, who differentiate three aspects of yoga: the *yoga of going* (goal); the *yoga of doing* (practice); and the *yoga of knowing* (philosophical system) (Foxen and Kuberry 2021).

Similarly, this differentiation is supported by the etymology of the word *yoga*, which is derived from the Sanskrit root √*yuj*, meaning 'to connect', 'to join', or 'to yoke'. Because this meaning is inherently open-ended, yoga possesses discursive fluidity, allowing it to be adapted across a variety of cultural and religious contexts (Fibiger and Borup 2024). This openness forms the central argument for promoting yoga within the ELCD not as an external imposition but as a means of reclaiming something perceived as lost in contemporary Danish Christianity: the integration of bodily practice into faith.

In the following sections I highlight key aspects of the report, supplemented by additional sources, to illustrate the ongoing negotiation between appropriation and appreciation, and how the church is seeking to make yoga 'its own'.

## Appropriation

> In encountering Christianity, it[15] can be enculturated – that is, made Christian. This is the same process that occurred with Christmas and Sankt Hans. While we have retained the dates and names, we have reinterpreted the content and imbued these days with Christian meaning. For example, we no longer celebrate the solstice, but instead the birth of Christ and John the Baptist. In the same way yoga can be situated within a Christian interpretive framework. In that sense we can 'Christianize yoga' (Ziethen and Skårhøj 2019, 10).[16]

By referring to historical examples such as Christmas and Sankt Hans (the midsummer festival), the authors emphasize the natural and long-standing integration of folk traditions in the church, albeit in translated or transformed form. The appropriation of festivals and practices has thus always been part of the ELCD, so why should yoga be an exception? The argument is that yoga can be incorporated in a Christian framework in a way that is aligned with the church's traditions, rather than the other way around. This central issue recurs throughout the report and is in line with most of the material I have consulted in relation to this study. Examples include the following:

> We do not seek to offer an alternative to Christianity's proclamation of Jesus Christ as the Saviour of humanity. On the contrary, our offering of yoga meditation in the church is intended to help individuals discover the heart of Christian preaching so that it may hold significance in their daily lives. We are convinced that this is a shared concern among priests and churches that host similar activities in parishes across the national church. […] When the Jesus Prayer follows the rhythm of the breath, the whole person is drawn into the prayer's address to Jesus. In the same way we involve the whole person, both soul and body, in prayer by integrating yoga exercises with Christian meditation (Rosengren and Bøggild 2017).[17]

15 Referring to yoga.
16 Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger translated the quotation.
17 Two priests from Næstved participated in a critical debate in the newspaper *Kristeligt Dagblad*. Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger translated the quotation.

**The second wave of yoga in the Danish National Church after 2020**

Although I cannot establish a direct causal link between the publication of the 2019 report and the spread of yoga to churches across Denmark, the period between 2019 and 2020 marks a significant turning point. This is evident not only in yoga's growing prevalence as part of church offerings in general but also in how it is integrated. In nearly all the churches surveyed there is a clear emphasis on yoga as a means of rediscovering the body. However, the primary reasons for incorporating yoga vary. In many churches yoga is considered a tool for deepening one's relationship with Christian faith, with theology remaining central. In others the focus is more on how yoga, combined with the church's sacred space, can serve as a refuge for those dealing with stress. In such settings it has become increasingly common to invite professional yoga instructors or therapists to collaborate with the priest in helping people find peace. The ongoing initiative called *Heavenly Bodies* illustrates this:

> No body, no church!
> We reach towards the sky, bow towards the earth, seek presence, and breathe our breath.
> In the church the ceiling is high. We can come just as we are.
> Heavenly Bodies is a collaboration between psychomotor therapist Tanja Bloch and parish priest Ane Øland Bækgaard at Ishøj Church. Together, we use the whole body as a tool to settle into the presence and peace a church space can offer. We focus on bodily balance, breathing, and calm. We strengthen ourselves, and we stretch (Kirkerne i Ishøj n.d.).

This development in different directions illustrates how yoga in the church in contemporary Denmark is in many ways just as diverse as yoga in the public sphere. This diversity is also reflected in an online publication of the Diocese of Ribe from June 2023, titled *Yoga in the Danish National Church* ('*Yoga i Folkekirken*'). The magazine aims to inspire further debate and encourage new ways of using church spaces (*Ribe stift, stiftsblad* 2023, 2–3). The magazine features two articles: a longer piece by priest and yoga instructor Line Søgaard Christensen with the intriguing title 'Yoga in the church: pagan import or meaningful fellowship? Why on earth do we have to do yoga in a church?'; and a shorter, historically grounded article titled 'The church building as a holy space?' The magazine concludes with a brief afterword by the bishop of the Diocese of Ribe, who expresses support for yoga in church as long as Christianity remains at its centre. He emphasizes

that when yoga is practised in connection with a biblical text and within the church space, it can offer a different kind of 'language' for preaching, functioning as a form of Christian meditation that unites spirit and body (Westergaard 2023, 14).

Line Søgaard Christensen's article forms the central and most debated part of the magazine, offering a valuable insight into the diverse directions in which yoga in the church is developing. She is a strong advocate for yoga in the church, while also being aware of some priests' scepticism concerning the practice. In other words, she knows what she is up against. She begins by emphasizing that the Danish National Church must be a broad and inclusive institution – one that makes space for both conservative and progressive priests, and not least for the many ordinary people who do not feel represented in the church. She believes yoga can serve as a way to invite members of the Danish National Church who rarely attend services back to the church. As she puts it, reflecting on her own experiences offering yoga in church settings: 'We are met with overwhelming interest in yoga in the church – and it appears to be a pathway to the church's landscape' (Christensen 2023, 7). She then emphasizes that yoga has changed over the last thirty years in Denmark, and that it now exists in both secular and religious forms. Despite these different versions of yoga, she believes its popularity stems from two core aspects: (1) the focus on the individual; and (2) the integration of body and spirit. These aspects, she argues, can also be meaningfully integrated into the church, provided Christianity remains a central part of the equation. In her own church-based yoga sessions she explains that what she does is 'to remove some of what I call the yoga philosophy and replace it with a cautious way of talking about Christianity' (Christensen 2023, 8). She continues by referring not only to the church space but also to yoga as a pathway for reconnecting with the church:

> At the same time the church space proclaims its own message, for the church space can offer people a special kind of calm, and perhaps it makes people reflect on something greater than themselves. Maybe it makes them feel the unique sense of togetherness that the church helps express (Christensen 2023, 8).[18]

She then provides a historical overview of yoga, including its etymological roots, before turning to her own church-based yoga practices since 2019 and

18 Translated by Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger.

the small adjustments she has made along the way. These include integrating church music, referring to the specific form of yoga that inspires her (*yin* yoga), and using passages from the New Testament in a new way. As she describes it:

> At the beginning of the session I read from Ephesians 4:2 (in my own translation): 'Be humble and gentle, be patient and bear with one another in love'. The passage was read twice as a phonetic and repetitive aid to awareness so that it could serve as a form of Christian mantra (Christensen 2023, 8).[19]

She also emphasizes the importance of using Christian symbols during Christian yoga sessions: focusing on the cross; viewing the church space itself as shaped like a cross; and incorporating paintings of biblical events. Like most other Christian yoga instructors, she stresses the importance of engaging the body in the practice.

This renewed focus on the body can also be seen in the revival of pilgrimages, which have become increasingly popular, both as local events and as organized journeys to important Christian sites in Europe or around the world. I refer to this phenomenon as a form of 'bodyfication' or spiritual corporality within Christianity. These concepts are inspired by Jeremy R. Carrette and his theoretical development of spiritual corporality as an alternative to embodiment in his analysis of Foucault. In Carrette's framework spiritual corporality is situated within Foucauldian structures of power:

> The 'displacement' of the body and soul as interconnecting surfaces not only re-orientates the understanding of the body but reconstitutes the understanding of spirituality as well. Foucault's understanding of the soul opens the possibility of an embodied religion, a religious discourse which animates the body materiality. Spirituality is transformed into a process of shaping matter, of making bodies matter (Carrette 2000, 125).

## Conclusion

As the examples in this article have shown, yoga in contemporary Danish churches appears to be nearly as varied as yoga in the broader public sphere. In some churches the focus is on yoga as a bodily practice that helps reduce stress and racing thoughts. In others it is seen as a tool for both physical and

19 Translated by Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger.

mental wellbeing. In still others yoga is used as a bridge to the surrounding society, inviting new churchgoers and thereby revitalizing the church by giving it a new bodily 'language' that not only provides meaning but also reconnects people with a faith from which they may in many ways have become disconnected. This illustrates how cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation are entangled in a complex network.

What distinguishes yoga in Danish churches is that nearly all forms emphasize a central focus or pivot around which the practice is oriented: the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark, understood broadly to encompass *faith*, *symbols*, *space*, *spirit*, and *body*, of which the bodily dimension appears to have been lost. A revitalization of the body – or a renewed connection between body and spirit within Christian faith or a sense of belonging – is a recurring theme among nearly all priests who offer yoga in the church, but in a 'Christianized' form. This balance between (a) the appropriation of yoga by delinking it from its Indian philosophical roots and relinking it to a Christian meaning system and (b) the appreciation of yoga as a practical tool for rediscovering the important connection between body and spirit is a pervasive feature of nearly all yoga offerings in Danish churches.

I have followed the development of yoga in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (ELCD) – also known as the Danish National Church – since 2013, which, to my knowledge, is the year yoga was first introduced in a Danish church, until 2025. Over this period, I have identified certain overarching characteristics, as well as notable differences, in how yoga is understood, both as a practical body-oriented discipline and as something connected with Christianity in its broadest sense. This is particularly evident in discussions about what constitutes Christianity. In the earliest offerings from 2013, which were heavily influenced by the American movement YogaFaith, I observed a strong focus on theological and liturgical elements. However, around 2019–2020 I noted a shift as more Danish churches began offering yoga. This shift coincides with the publication of a report supported by the ELCD.

Where the first wave of church-based yoga emphasized matters of faith, the church space with its symbols and music and the revitalization of 'the Christian body' gradually became more central to what could represent Christianity or evoke a sense of connection with it. In other words, I identify at least four interrelated key elements in various forms of church-oriented yoga in Denmark: *body*, *space*, *symbols*, and *faith*. However, what is considered central versus peripheral among these four elements has shifted, from a primary focus on Christian theology to a greater emphasis on the

sacred space, while consistently retaining a holistic understanding of body and spirit (what might be described as corporality or 'bodyfication'). This has given rise to new centrifugal and centripetal movements, reflecting ongoing negotiations of what kind of Christianity defines the new centre (centripetality), and which elements – once central – may be moved to the periphery without losing their symbolic significance. In this context it appears crucial that yoga, as a holistic bodily practice, is appropriated in a Christian system of meaning that includes sacred space, symbols, and faith, expressed through specific rituals and texts.

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MARIANNE QVORTRUP FIBIGER is Associate Professor in the Study of Religion at Aarhus University, Denmark. Email: mf@cas.au.dk

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