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CONTENTS

EDITORIAL NOTE 5

TEMENOS LECTURE 2023

SARAH RICCARDI-SWARTZ
“Only Russia Can Save the World”: Reactive Orthodoxies Political Technology,
and Religious Worldbuilding 7

ARTICLES

MARIE GLASØ GLEIN
Yoga in Norwegian Nature: The Creation of a New Pilgrimage Practice 27

JULIA KUHLLIN
Swedish Local Free Churches’ Use of Instagram: A Negotiated Approach to Social Media
Engagement 49

TOOMAS GROSS
Spiritual Festivals as Embodied Sites of Becoming ‘Porous Selves’ 77

SAARA AITOKARI
Being Finnish, Being Muslim: National Identity, Citizenship, and Belonging among
Muslim Women in Finland 101

BOOK REVIEWS

Jørn Borup: *Decolonising the Study of Religion: Who Owns Buddhism?*
(JOHANNES CAIRNS) 125

Daniel Enstedt and Katarina Plank (eds): *Eastern Practices and Nordic Bodies: Lived Religion,
Spirituality and Healing in the Nordic Countries*
(ELLA POUTIAINEN) 129

CONTRIBUTORS 133



Editorial Note

The contemporary landscape of spirituality and religious practice in the Nordic countries and the Baltic area is marked by a dynamic interplay of tradition and innovation. This issue of *Temenos* brings together a collection of articles that delve into these practices, which take place across different online and offline contexts. It provides a rich view, first, of how religious and spiritual service providers employ the internet and social media to attract participants, and second, of how individuals experience and live out their worldview amidst the global currents and pressures from the dominant society.

Through a document study of web-based promotional materials for yoga retreats in Norway, the first article by Marie Glasø Glein, *Yoga in Norwegian Nature: The Creation of a New Pilgrimage Practice*, examines how nature is presented in relation to yoga, and how such representations relate to what she calls the Norwegianization of yoga. Drawing on Sámi spirituality, nature is depicted in the promotional materials as something sacred and an inseparable part of Norwegian yoga. According to the author the process of making yoga more Norwegian reflects a broader cultural shift in which yoga is not taken merely as a global practice but as a new form of pilgrimage that connects individuals to both their local spiritual and natural environments. The article raises important questions about the commodification of spirituality, and how local contexts shape global practices.

The second article, *Swedish Local Free Churches' Use of Instagram: A Negotiated Approach to Social Media Engagement*, by Julia Kuhlin, discusses how local Swedish Free Churches employ the social media platform Instagram to communicate their values and engage with congregants. Based on a substantial dataset of posts from nine local churches and the theory of affordances, the study challenges traditional notions of social media use among religious institutions, arguing for a more nuanced understanding of how these platforms can be adapted to serve specific goals. The findings reveal that rather than conforming to dominant platform norms, these churches adopt a negotiated approach, prioritizing coherence between online and offline practices above maximizing digital engagement. The article contributes to our understanding of how religious institutions navigate digital spaces in contemporary secular societies.

Moving the focus from online to offline settings, the third article, *Spiritual Festivals as Embodied Sites of Becoming 'Porous Selves'*, by Toomas Gross, is based on participant observation within the ethnographic context of contemporary spiritual festivals in Estonia. It explores how the 'High on Life' (*Ühenduses*) festival, which attracts a heterogeneous crowd that includes adherents of emergent religions, seekers of self-knowledge, and aficionados of fringe knowledge, serves as a holistically transformative space for participants. By employing Charles Taylor's concept of the 'buffered' versus 'porous' self, the article discusses how ritualized activities at these festivals encourage participants to engage in practices that foster openness of the body and self to the surrounding world. It highlights the importance of the body and embodied experiences in shaping spiritual identities in today's religious and spiritual contexts.

The fourth and final article by Saara Aitokari, *Being Finnish, Being Muslim: National Identity, Citizenship and Belonging among Muslim Women in Finland*, explores the intersections between religious identity and national belonging. Based on twenty semi-structured interviews, the author discusses how Muslim women in Finland view the relationship between Islam and Finnishness, and how they navigate their religious and civic identities and environments. Three main ways of perceiving the relationship are identified: the perception of oneself as a Finnish Muslim; as a non-Finnish Muslim; and as a multicultural citizen. In situating the study within the broader context of religious diversity in Finland, the article contributes to ongoing discussions of multiculturalism, integration, and the lived experiences of members of minority religions.

In addition to these four peer-reviewed articles the issue includes two book reviews and Sarah Riccardi-Swartz's 2023 Temenos lecture. This lecture also explores online and offline religion, with its focus on a group of American citizens in Appalachia who have embraced the Russian Orthodox Church and through it Putin's New Russia. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and digital content analysis, Riccardi-Swartz's research highlights an intentional community of converts who exemplify much broader analogue and digital networks of Russian Orthodox converts in the United States. Focusing the conversation on the relationship between digital media and religio-political conversion offers a window onto the shifting technological dynamics of both global politics and foreign affairs, while illustrating how particular US communities are grappling with social transformations through digital *communitas* in the global context.

We hope you enjoy this issue.

Minna Opas and Sofia Sjö



Temenos Lecture 2023

“Only Russia Can Save the World”: Reactive Orthodoxies, Political Technology, and Religious Worldbuilding

SARAH RICCARDI-SWARTZ

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Abstract

Drawing on previous research dedicated to the examination of far-right media worlds that link Christian conservatives in the United States and Russia, this talk offers a broad overview of how technology and ideology transform American social ecologies. Contending that digital media are crucial to the social recalibrations of Russian Orthodoxy in the global context, this talk invites us to see better the philosophical connections across local religious beliefs and global politics in our mediated contemporary moment.

Keywords: Russia, United States, Orthodox Christianity, far right, media technologies, worldbuilding

My research has long centered on how political authority, religious practices, and media technology are co-sharers in the transformation of American social ecologies.¹ Broadly, my work has always hinged on this idea of transformation, whether through understanding early American communal groups, print media depictions of women religious leaders, or contemporary American citizens who want to upend democracy through illiberal means. A curiosity about the role transformation plays first led me to consider the reproduction of both Eastern Orthodoxy and its iconic religious imagery in the United States. I wanted to understand how social shifts in flows of

¹ An editorial note: This lecture, given in a publicly accessible style (which I have kept here in its published form), draws significantly from the text of my first book. See *Between Heaven and Russia: Religious Conversion and Political Apostasy in Appalachia* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022).

information and ideas were expressed both in images and communities, particularly when Orthodox icons have long been understood as one of the more august artefacts of the faith that have social economies and spiritual kinship ties for believers (Hanganu 2010). I undertook early stages of this work in the Missouri Ozarks between 2011–2014 with a group of Orthodox Christians, thinking about issues of social politics, digital technologies, and rituals of worldbuilding. I settled on Missouri in part because it was where I was doing a graduate work in Religious Studies at the time, but also because it seemed to me, at first, a counter-intuitive location for the rise of this kind of trans-Atlantic thinking.

In 2017, when I had the greater time and space to unfold these ideas in what would eventually become a book, I knew I wanted to work in Appalachia with a Russian Orthodox convert community that was quite socially different than those I had worked in previously. This Appalachian community seemed to be at the fulcrum of Orthodox socio-political transformation through conversion. Community members were also keenly aware of Appalachian stereotypes held by outsiders who assumed them to be “backward,” uneducated, and – a term commonly used in media depictions about Appalachians since the twentieth century – “hillbillies” (Harkins 2003). Believers saw their conversions to Russian Orthodoxy as breaking through cultural stereotypes; they were not, many argued, “good old boys” or “ignorant hillbillies.” Indeed, I found conversation partners who were cogent about their place in the history of American politics and religion, while being philosophically adroit as they expressed why they turned eastward to intellectual ties in Russia. My interlocutors in Woodford, along with fellow converts around the United States, invite us to see better the technological and philosophical connections across local religious beliefs and global politics.²

Before attending to these connections, however, I want to address the “Orthodoxies” in the title of this paper. I use the plural here because it has been my experience that most Western observers approach Eastern Orthodoxy in monolithic and often relatively Orientalist terms. Certainly, there are core logics, traditions, and theologies that unite national forms of Eastern Orthodoxy together in shared communion that emphasizes, as Pierre Bourdieu and others have pointed out, “a straightened opinion” (Bourdieu 1982, 154–55 [130–31]). Yet, Orthodoxy is an institutionalized religion like any other, which means it affords multiple and dynamic productions of the

² Woodford is a pseudonym. The town, religious communities, and people worked with are all coded for anonymity.

social even amidst corrective rubrics for adherence. As my title also suggests, religious opinion is not the only zone where efforts to straighten are taking place. The term political technology (Russian: *polittekhniologiya*) from my title draws on legacy language around the mediatization of the political in the post-Soviet context (Van Herpen 2013). This term came into broadest use at the time of the Yeltsin administration in the 1990s as the emergent internet was upending and speeding the disaggregation of information gateways that had long been governed by the socialist state. More recently, political technology also came into play over concerns with Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections as a telescopic, transnational expression of repressive political arts linked the Putin administration (Lewis 2020; Shekhovtsov 2018; Wilson 2023). While this type of political technology, one that is tied to a foreign power trying to influence American politics via cybernetic means, is already well interrogated by scholars, I extend it here by drawing our attention to how American religious converts are making use of digital techniques and global information streams to create new American worlds (Levin 2020). To understand these larger formations at work in the United States (and abroad), we first have to consider how they are built and what gives them their shape.

Looking at both converts in rural Appalachia and digital right-wing Orthodox communities that seemingly incite political radicalization, I offer the term “Reactive Orthodoxy” (Riccardi-Swartz 2022). This hybridized conception of Orthodoxy melds together Christian nationalism, Orthodox theology, and traditionalist philosophies of social politics in ways that are socially and technologically mobilized. I should also make clear here about what I am eager to move away from: first, a longstanding assumption that American Christianity is fundamentally a narrative of Protestantism, given how influential its idioms and its torsions remain for the country today; and second, that a preoccupation with contemporary American Christianity should somehow be about missions that move from West to East. The vectors here are quite different. I turn our attention to an American movement that embraces the social ideals of a foreign power and draws together religion and politics in a reactive framing, not only against what most hold to be ideologies and practices of progressive secularism but the very political structure of the United States itself – democracy. The narratives I share with you speak not only to the ongoing transformations in contemporary American religious and political life but, as I argue, to the centering of technology and media in those social recalibrations. For the groups I have worked with and continue to engage, conversion opened the door to an

imaginative, accepting, and even radical world of religious and political possibilities that the United States, at least in the 2010s, they believed did not afford them.

The persuasive arts of reaction

The history of religious conversion is the history of ideological conviction. Persuaders and the persuaded alike typically have a desire to show the truthfulness of their positionalities. They want to express why aligning with their group or with their worldview will be advantageous spiritually, socially, and politically (Krael-Tovi 2023). Conversion can aid the construction of a social world. This worldbuilding is part design and part ideology. Creation, repair, conservation, and preservation are its cornerstones. To build a world requires time, patience, connectivity, and ideological confidence. It also requires, drawing on the work of anthropologist Jarrett Zigon, a politics of disappointment (Zigon 2018). Zigon's work focuses on the liberative possibilities of worldbuilding, whereas my use of the concept draws out how disappointment aids reactionary projects. The disappointment, disenchantment, and disillusion that Appalachian converts to Russian Orthodoxy felt with the United States and with progressive politics in the late 2010s was expressed in their turn to forms of political authority and religious belief outside of the U.S., guided by digitally persuasive, often conspiratorial information networks, their turn to anti-democracy options for governance, and to moral boundary-making steeped in traditionalist conceptions of the body.

In the context of Reactive Orthodoxy, worldbuilding is a project attuned to digital and analogue temporalities, metaphysics, and social-moral anxieties, one that is caught up with conservative biopolitics, Russian-American geopolitics, and religious soft power both at home and abroad. In the small West Virginia town where I conducted a year of ethnographic fieldwork, converts constructed their own social world made possible by the social scaffoldings of Russian Orthodoxy, conversion comradeship, and global information networks. Woodford is a town of some 1200 people; approximately 10% of the town citizens were converts to Orthodoxy when I first visited there in 2015. I arrived in Woodford after visiting convert communities across the United States. I was particularly intrigued by the founding of a digital icon studio in Woodford. In January of 2017 I returned to the community to film a documentary with the studio members central to the creation of digitally reproduced religious images; they were proud of their efforts to circulate their icons and their beliefs. This film proved to be an

access point into both the community's good graces and their understanding of Orthodox life in America.

Founded in the early 2000s, the Orthodox community in Woodford included a men's monastery of some thirty monastic brothers along with a few lay people attached to the community. At the time of my fieldwork, this monastic community was one of the largest English-speaking Russian Orthodoxy monasteries in the world. A parish of approximately 100 members was located just a few miles away; it served families who moved to the area to be near the monastery but not attached to it. While I was there, all but one of the monastery members and 90% of the parish were converts; conversions increased the community by another 10% by the time I moved away. Overall, the Orthodox Christians in Woodford were well-educated, Caucasian, and boasted a high percentage of males: this is largely because of the men's monastery but also because Orthodox ordination is limited to males, and men, by my experiences in the field, convert more often than women.

In terms of methodologies, I conducted qualitative research, including participant observation, plus hybrid formal interviews that focused on life stories, along with a series of structured questions. Over the course of the year, I interviewed members of the Woodford Orthodox community, religious leaders from other Christian denominations, local politicians, and everyday citizens. I was also engaged in digital ethnography with other Orthodox Christians online to whom Woodford residents directed me; these content creators were typically white males who were active across a variety of digital platforms, including Twitter (now X), YouTube, Gab, and Telegram. This digital research informed my first book and became the basis of a larger data collection project online that informs my ongoing research on digital information networks, social policing, and the role of online religion in the (re)production of racism.

The Appalachian converts, along with other established convert communities throughout the United States and their social media compatriots, are part of what I have termed "Reactive Orthodoxy." This hybridized form of religiosity is a worldbuilding project built on an imagined nostalgia for prerevolutionary Russian Orthodoxy and its attendant monarchic politics, Christian nationalism, traditionalism, and an apocalyptic disenchantment with modernity and democracy. By traditionalism, I mean the political philosophy that focuses on the defense of primordial and universal truth, angst about racial and sexual purity, and fears over white extinction, particularly in the strain espoused by Julius Evola, a thinker much favored in fascist Italy

who is now invoked by American king-makers such as Steve Bannon and across Europe in radical groups, including the now convicted Golden Dawn in Greece (Sedgwick 2023). Together these ideas give Reactive Orthodox a language to express their worldbuilding project of moral securitization.

In June 2021, far-right internet celebrities from across the U.S. gathered in Argos, Indiana to host a “Trad Forum” that focused on securing the social sphere of American society through the implementation of traditionalist values (Church of the Eternal Logos 2021). This group would meet again in 2022, but this time in West Virginia. Organized by Orthodox convert Michael Sisco, a former candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives in West Virginia, the conference featured E. Michael Jones, a Catholic activist labeled by the Southern Poverty Law Center as an antisemite (2007). Speakers held a wide range of political views often associated with the far right, including monarchism, neo-confederate leanings, and fascism. Crucial to their platform was the idea that a return to a broadly cast tradition, not limited to but most often conjured through firm social boundaries and gender binaries, is needed to thwart secular modernity in the U.S. Aspiring to everything modernity is not, Reactive Orthodox make use of storied thematic elements – a triptych of family, morality, and purity long associated with White Christian hegemony – to make their political vision a transnational reality (Bjork-James 2021). While these values have long been the project of conservatives in the United States – as one might track back to Max Weber – my suggestion here is that Reactive Orthodox and others are mobilizing around the issues in far more socially volatile, globally connected, and digitally savvy ways (Weber [1905] 1930).

Reactive Orthodoxy should not be read as U.S. Orthodox Christianity writ large, in the sense of a classical movement of immigrant believers and converts, expressed in the pan-ethnic attempts in the late-nineteenth and twentieth century to create a homegrown form of the faith in the United States (Erickson 1999; Herbel 2014). Historically, Orthodoxy in the United States has not been tied to White Christian nationalism or a disillusionment with democracy. Rather, groups such as the Orthodox Church in America (coming out of the Russian tradition), the Antiochian Archdiocese comprised of Middle Eastern Christians, and the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, have used their ethnic identification as part of social solidarity building projects and as outreach through heritage festivals. At the same time, however, they also took part in American enculturation and assimilation processes, including the embrace of clerical collars rather than robes, the regional use of pipe organs, inclusion of pews, and engagement with socially conscious

organizations that might appear alien to most Orthodox on the other side of the Atlantic (Kitroeff 2020).

In some contrast, Russian Orthodox parishes, particularly those of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR), preserved much of their heritage through their insular emphasis on the use of Slavic liturgical languages and practices, although by the twenty-first century, English-language use skyrocketed in services. This linguistic change happened in part because of the influx of converts, most of whom did not take it upon themselves to learn Russian or the liturgical language of Church Slavonic, as was the case in my fieldsite. Yet however these jurisdictions expressed themselves, they were still under the larger umbrella of American Orthodoxy that was synonymous with diaspora and mission. Overall, American Orthodoxy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was far too concerned with the interchurch politics of creating a cohesive pan-Orthodox community to be deeply caught up in American social politics – although the Greek Orthodox Church offered some support to the civil rights movement. Contemporary formations of Orthodox Christianity, especially ones rich with convert populations, are far more invested in having their political ideologies, often framed by former Evangelical converts as theologies, spread through and even enforced in the social sphere (Riccardi-Swartz 2023; Saler 2024).

Conversion is a central aspect of contemporary Orthodoxy in the United States. Since the latter half of the twentieth century and particularly in the twenty-first century, the immigrant faith has become a religious home for American converts (Lucas 2003; Slagle 2011). Often hailing from Evangelical and Catholic backgrounds, converts have a large hand in shaping or perhaps colonizing what many see as a new social ethos in U.S. Orthodoxy. As I write about in my book, the growth of converts in conservative forms of Orthodoxy (specifically in the Russian tradition) seems to reflect an epistemological shift in how religion is perceived of in relationship to the Western, specifically American, cultural body politic. In a survey study that I conducted with Orthodox women's groups on Facebook, I found that 32% of the respondents were either unsure about or opposed the separation of church and state (Riccardi-Swartz 2021b). Most of those respondents wanted a Christian nation to become a legal reality. This politically assertive strain of Orthodox Christianity in the United States, one that emphasizes traditionalism, is often found (but not always) in Russian Orthodox communities, and it is at the core of the reactive movement that views democracy, and its political attachments, as devilry. It is fair to say that the contemporary political preoccupations that many converts have with traditional values, and their

accompanying hallmarks – homophobia, xenophobia, science denialism, and anti-intellectualism/anti-public education – have brought about the rise of Reactive Orthodoxy, a movement that shares many similarities with other far-right conspiracy movements around the Deep State, the America First party, and Evangelical expressions of Christian Nationalism (Mudde 2019). What makes Reactive Orthodox adherents distinct, however, is their geo-political impulse toward salvation from political authorities outside of the United States.

The Eastern Promise

“The only thing that can save the world is Russia,” a young convert monk from Evangelical Presbyterianism proclaimed to me one spring afternoon in Woodford. Note that the monk said “Russia” rather than “Russian Orthodoxy.” In a geopolitical spiritual statement, he finds salvation through nation rather than church. The young monk was not alone in his apocalyptic embrace of Russia. Community members saw Russian Orthodoxy, and by extension the Russian state and Putin, as defenders of conservative morality “in a world gone mad.” Post-Soviet Russia, the creation of both church and state as it were, a geopolitical, religiously attuned country, becomes a beacon of hope for the eschaton (meaning the divine plan for the end of the world) or as one of my digital interlocutors termed it: “a lode stone for the compass of my soul.” Far-right American converts to Orthodoxy are not alone in their emphasis on foreign authoritarian politics as salvific. In 2013, far-right figure Rick Wiles and Larry Jacobs, who was the managing director of the World Congress of Families, talked about the importance of Russia in protecting Christian rights globally. Jacobs argued that “the Russians might be the Christian saviors of the world at the UN because they are standing up for these traditional values – family and faith” (Tashman 2013).³

Right-wing American communities are also turning to Hungary, with Tucker Carlson, Rod Dreher, and other conservative pundits suggesting that through the adoption of Viktor Orbán’s authoritarian ideas they might find a political respite from the diversity of democracy (Albuquerque 2023; Eisen and Joscelyn 2023). These communities are done with the American democratic project, including President Trump, turning instead to authoritarian or king figures abroad who might secure a different political future for the U.S. The American far right is a phantasmagoric amalgamation of groups

³ I talk in-depth about American-Russian conservative relations in other publications. See Sarah Riccardi-Swartz 2021a in the bibliography.

that self-select through cybernetic currents of information, comradeship, and disciplinary drive. I go out of my way not to suggest that these ideas are "misinformation" or "disinformation." When talking about the generators of reactive dispositions, it has been my experience that we lose out at the chance to understand these worlds when we have already dismissed them as misguided or invalid. The point, instead, is to understand their power, how it circulates, and their place in a changing American landscape.

An apocalyptic rhetoric of fear and alterity among Putin and Orbán's conservative comrades in Appalachia was on display daily. The abbot of the monastery, a convert by way of Catholicism, firmly believed that only Russia was "trying to turn away from abortion, sensuality, and immorality" (Interview with author, August 2018). Drawing on an inverted Cold War model, in which Russia was the global savior and the United States was an ungodly place, converts readily engaged Russian state-sponsored media, including *Russia Today* and the English-language service of *Pravoslaviye* (Orthodoxy), alongside content from conservative American media outlets. Through these media sources they crafted fictive narratives about Russia that reinforced their worldbuilding project of Russia as salvific. As one convert monk in his mid-twenties pledged to me, "There's a glimmer of goodness in Russia that we can't see anywhere else in the world. Putin is an echo of Tsar Nicholas II." While we tend to think of conversion in spiritual terms, most of these believers also converted to Russia's contemporary illiberal ideologies, seeing Putin as the guardian of conservative family values or "the divine institution," as anthropologist Sophie Bjork-James terms it, and as the potential creator of contemporary monarchic governance not just in Russia, but, perhaps, in the U.S. too (Bjork-James 2021).

For many in Woodford who viewed the United States through a narrative of moral decline and social downfall, their support of democracy faltered too. Some suggested Putin should invade the U.S.; others, channeling political messianism, believed that only Russia could save the world from the blight of liberal progressive politics. As one elder cleric explained,

It used to be in the past it was the conservatives who were anti-Russian and the liberals who were pro-Russian; now it's all flipped. A lot of it, as far as I'm concerned, is on a spiritual level. The two roles of our country, as I knew as a child in the fifties, have completely reversed. Our country now represents anti-Christianity and Russia represents Christianity. (Interview with author, 2018)

Mapping their ontological and theological views on to contemporary global politics, these reactive actors drew on the political technologies attached to Russian media worlds to form their opinions of America's demise and Russia's salvific political climate.

The community in Woodford was certainly part of the online social discourses and media worlds of Reactive Orthodoxy, posting Russian government fiat as news, blogging, and sharing conspiratorial ideas, fears, and anxieties with their online compatriots. This media engagement began in the mid-2000s with the arrival of a bishop at the monastery. Benedict, a former high-ranking monk in Woodford, recounted how the bishop would spend hours surfing the Internet, sharing videos from Russian media outlets. Enamored with this "early QAnon type of stuff," the bishop's media engagement began to transform the social ethos of the monastery. A pro-Putin convert, the hierarch's obsession with conspiracy theories "trickled down" to newer and more youthful monks, who would watch exposé documentaries about 9/11 late into the evening. Internet use to engage with Russian political technologies increased during the bishop's tenure at the monastery. Benedict told me that conversations around politics "became ubiquitous" by 2008 in the community. The monks and other converts in the community, and those on social media, have found ways to engage with the political that uses a rhetoric of spirituality to make sense of their ideologies. Putin often served as king figure in their narrative of religious oppression. Believing themselves to be oppressed by the freedom of democracy, the freedom to practice their religious beliefs openly in the United States, Orthodox ideologues take to social media and other forms of public discourse to praise countries in which religious belief is employed by the state as a form of social control, such as through the anti-LGBTQ+ laws in Russia (Kottasová and Chernova 2022).

Far-right American Christians seeing Russia as an arbiter of family values and morality suggests that these worldmaking projects, fed by digitized information, are founded in subjective realities that locate truth not in civic values, democracy, or community, but in philosophically thick, often apophatic, ideologies about the self and others (Moreton 2022). For most of the converts I encountered, democracy was hell. Numerous monks told me that America was a hellscape of liberal individualism without real leaders worth following. A paraphrased quote attributed to St. John of Kronstadt circulated at both the monastery and the parish: "In heaven there is a kingdom, in hell a democracy." The potential return to monarchy in Russia excited my interlocutors about global political change. Well-educated, philosophically inclined, and focused on ritual religiosity that could interpret the issues of

modern life for them, these converts reached beyond their country to a national leader who appeared to have their best interests at heart – or claimed to, at any rate. While Putin's romanticized vision of reality is the product of a post-truth moment steeped in unreality, he has and continues to market a potential world in which conservative Christianity and politics might cooperatively flourish. This world appealed to my interlocutors and others throughout the United States seeking a sovereign for the end of the world (Riccardi-Swartz 2021c).

Certainly, the concept of church-state unity is not unknown in historic Orthodox worlds. The term *symphonia*, the Byzantine understanding of church and state working together in harmony with the state led by a monarch, is what most Reactive Orthodox hope for in the United States, even those such as Michael Sisco, who ran for elected office (Antonov 2020). This, of course, is not theocracy – a concept we see rising among right-wing Christians in the U.S – but it is a philosophical co-traveler (Ingersoll 2015). While most of the converts with whom I spoke understood that the Russian Church and state were separate entities, they nevertheless seemed to view them through the historic lens of *symphonia*, which they often believed would help aid the return of traditional Christian values to the United States. Finian, a middle-aged family man and a historian, born and raised in Appalachia, converted shortly before I arrived in Woodford. He firmly supported Putin, suggesting that Russia should “crown him tsar and let him rule for life” and that the Russian president should invade the U.S. Others, including the abbot of the monastery, saw Putin as the embodiment of Christian leadership on the global political stage. He explained,

Russia is trying with all its might to hold up Christian morality and belief and to defend Christians. President Putin is personally rebuilding all the churches in Syria that were destroyed. Not just Orthodox but Catholic and Uniates. He's rebuilding all the churches there. There's no offer like that from America. There's no one speaking up for persecuted Christians except for Russia. (Interview with author, August 2018)

Here the abbot specifically notes that Russia stands as a global purveyor of morality. This language of morality, purity, and tradition is, in many ways, a reimagining of the Culture Wars that takes on digitized, globalized geopolitical aims bent on fracturing the structures of American democracy.

Reactive Orthodox are, of course, complicit in the globalized Culture Wars that spread ideologies with the right set of hashtags for a platform's

AI-algorithm. While not as statistically large or institutionally powerful as various lobbying groups of Christian nationalists in the U.S., Reactive Orthodox Christians are quickly becoming an important transnational node in the growing movements of online radicalism, from live streaming about the Capitol Insurrection to being interviewed by Russian media outlets about conservatism in America. Much like the pixels that comprise a digital image, Reactive Orthodox believers and their allies at home and abroad carefully craft the ideological edifice of their intentional, transnational communities. Their grassroots reach is felt and seen through social media, with users, ranging from tens of thousands of followers to just a handful, engaged with each other in virtual spiritual and political kinship networks found in rural communities with dial-up speeds, across the digital divide to suburban warriors, and stretching over oceans to join arms with comrades abroad; virtual relationships and worlds built in, on, and through technology and ideology. In these and other ways, those who study digital communities, especially Heidi Campbell, have shown how belief and practice are transformed because of technology (Campbell 2010). This is readily seen in the rise of conspiratorial religious language used in social media content about big tech, social control narratives founded in rising antisemitism, and disident political memes.

Contemporary Orthodox Christianity in the United States is one that is connected largely through digital channels because of the diffuse geographical nature of the church. Through digital platforms, believers connect with each other, offer prayer requests, provide PDFs of liturgical and theological texts, connect to current political and social events going on in regions considered to be traditionally Orthodox, and engage with the curious alike. The “Orthonet,” has profound benefits for Orthodox spirituality and sociality, but it has also had a negative impact on intra-Orthodox relations and personal spirituality depending on how it is used. In the U.S., right-wing converts make up a good deal of the English-language Orthodox social media traffic across platforms, and they are quite candid about their ideological beliefs, especially about the fact that they use digital technology to facilitate social collectivity, fight back against the deep state, and monitor “subversives” – a term used widely by Reactive Orthodox believers in reference to those who do not share their moral framings for society.

When I left West Virginia in 2018, I extended my research through digital ethnographic data collection. Emboldened by the fact that I was no longer attached to dial-up speeds in a forest cabin high in the mountains, I set about tracing out the networked connections of Reactive Orthodox actors

online. As I gathered data online, transcribed audio interviews from my fieldwork, read Orthodox social media posts, and watched the increasingly jarring actions of both Putin and the Moscow Patriarchate with respect to Ukraine and beyond, it became clear that Reactive Orthodox converts in the United States are a far more integral part of the media networks of the far/alt-right than I had imagined when I first went south to Appalachia. It is not surprising that Orthodoxy finds much of its social traction through digital media worlds. What is surprising, however, is how the connections forged by Reactive Orthodox Christians through technologies are transforming the social discourses and global production of the faith. Orthodoxy has built its social logics around the preservation of texts, tradition, and hierarchy. The rapid spread of information through digital technology is transforming religious sociality and authority, fueled by the influx of American converts one social media post at a time.

Brave American worlds

Ideological conviction is often at the heart of conversion, but the ways in which that conviction is mobilized have changed because of technological connectivity. In Woodford, most early converts made use of analogue media resources, interpersonal encounters, and institutionalized or autodidactic education. In our conversations, they were cautious about these new worlds around them, observing most simply that the “internet” is changing the Orthodox Church, but they engaged actively in reactive media worlds, nevertheless. In 2019, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow suggested that the internet could usher in the reign of the Antichrist, signaling the risks of AI and a godless technocracy (Clark and Bell 2019). The Orthodox folks with whom I have worked saw the internet as a space of religious development and, especially during COVID, reactive community mobilization (Riccardi-Swartz 2023). At the same time, however, they also expressed concern over big tech data privacy issues and government tracking. Despite hesitations over a digitizing world, Orthodox Christians around the globe do use the internet, and nowhere is that usage more evident than among those whom one might consider far right. Technology becomes a link, a social structure through which they paradoxically build their ideological movement even as they decry big tech.

The beginning of the 2020s, perhaps because of the down time the pandemic provided for many at home to pursue digital content creation, brought to the fore more social-media-focused members of Reactive Orthodoxy who

skew much younger in terms of age and, often, engagement with Christianity. While those in the Appalachian community of Woodford held similar views to the online Orthodox content producers I tracked, they were not comfortable with publicly promoting hate speech and or engaging in physical violence. However, the younger generation of Reactive Orthodoxy that are primarily connected through social media, deploy hate speech, call for violence, and engage with other far-right actors to common goals, such as Curtis Yarvin's traditionalist, neo-reactionary tech movement emphasizing anti-democratic, monarchic views. The story of these digital reactionaries and their ties to America First, nationalist, and trad movements – is one unto itself. However, this younger generation is part of the same digital, social, and kinship networks that share religious belief, political ideologies, nostalgically inclined fears, and familial ties with the Woodford community.

Social media and digital connectivity provide a spiritual space for conversions of the heart to take place; they also serve as a recruitment platform for the radical right. The democratized space of the internet, where seekers can use informal language, memes, and gifs to ask questions and find communities, provides a digital gateway to Orthodoxy, a religious community that is hierarchal, formal, and often focused on analogue print forms of theological pedagogy for seekers. Technology empowers actors to convert to Orthodoxy on their own terms, for their own ideological reasons. Creating religious authority online, they produce their own catechetical training with ideas disseminated on livestreams, podcasts, and via information on social media. Thus, these far flung far-right actors use the internet to subvert the curatorial parameters put in place by institutional authority that often seek to cull radicalism prior to conversion. Charismatic users such as Sisco, who posted on X (formerly Twitter) on January 6, 2022, "Happy Anniversary of the most epic and awesome thing to happen at the U.S. Capital," have thousands of social media followers. They offer unconventional forms of religious authority or social commentary that interested parties find reliable and relatable.

The digital world affords these reactive actors virtually endless opportunities for individual and collective (re)orientation offline through technological mediated means. Reactive Orthodox, often young males, are outraged by shifting social norms, fearful of potential political persecution, and a motivated to preserve white hegemony. Sisco, who is often featured on pro-white movement podcasts, called for a ten-year moratorium on immigration, while the *Dissident Mama*, a podcaster and YouTuber who started the Southern Orthodox movement, blends the Southern Lost

Cause mythology with Orthodox spirituality in order to thwart what she believes is the ongoing usurping of Southern culture by Yankee liberals. To do so, she networks with southern secessionists, White nationalists, and self-identified anti-Semites to resurrect the glory of Southern culture, arguing on a podcast episode "that Southerners were doing just fine before the puritanical-progressives started demanding 'reforms,' fomenting peak strife, and telling otherwise happy "'black bodies' that they were being perpetually persecuted by 'systemic racism' and 'whiteness.'" (Dillingham 2022).

In online spaces, Reactive Orthodox publicly recapitulate conspiratorial thought, social violence, and engagement with political technology – all of which make their views, often expressed in brief social media posts, intractable. Marshaling the resistance of traditionalist anti-moderns, combined with Orthodox theology, and political views steeped in a seemingly fascist language of us versus them, they are emboldened to create social control mechanisms. The gatekeeping zeal of these tens of thousands of reactive social media users is seen in their use of digital images and platforms to crowdsource what they hold to be verification, a way of marking a person as inside or outside of the group based on their facial features, assumed ethnicity or race, physical characteristics, and their potential gender, sexual, and religious identification. This combination of AI, biometrics, and rapid assumption found in reactive online worlds is at the center of my new book project. It focuses on the use of *vernacular social biometrics*, revealing how actively engaged far-right actors are in social violence through virtual verification that mobilizes racism offline. In doing so, I tease out how these intolerant conceptions of the body and person – often proliferated through digital propaganda – are intimately tied to understandings of traditionalism, the history of biologically-focused racism, and the disciplinary structures of political authority. Each of these ideas remain active "insofar as they have some medium" and continue to circulate (Keane 2007, 42). Reactive media proliferate because they are circulated in and through analogue and digital mediums by social actors.

Reactive Orthodox Christians are building their own worlds, one that extends beyond the physical locales of their American homeland through their digital *communitas* and interconnectivity (Bhatia 2023). Far from the Orthodox conservative pundit Rod Dreher's Benedict Option, a communal-living project that draws influence from ancient monasticism and Brethren groups, this reactive world-building project marshals theo-political structures in conversation and tension with ancient monasticism and contem-

porary American life. Religion as a social production, as a human-crafted understanding of metaphysics, struggles with concepts of divinity just as much as it does social connectivity, belonging, and defining boundaries of acceptability. Elizabeth Shakman Hurd and Winnifred Fallers Sullivan note that religion has long been “central to American self-understanding” (2021, 1). This is also applicable to the American political logics – perhaps far more so than many like to recognize. Reactive Orthodoxy is a theo-political project, in many ways, of American exceptionalism that is tightly linked to globalized assumptions about the self, the social, and the Other. Anthropologist Marshall Sahlins once reflected in his long-ago book, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities*, that history is motored by the premise that “men and women are suffering beings because they act at once in relationship to each other and in a world that has its own relationships” (1981, vii). Reactive Orthodoxy, a nostalgic ideological reality, is one of response to relationships that seem dysfunctional to many. Shifting the terms of debate, then, comes in the form of both American exceptionalism and self-loathing, in a world where monarchists, Christian Nationalists, and fearful (potential) expats seek a safe harbor from the storms of secularism.

Conclusion

Zigon’s theory of worldbuilding reveals potentials and possibilities constructed in and through new, liberative political models. By the same turn, reactive worldbuilding, digital and analogue, affords us opportunities to see how the political act of creating worlds rests in ideological terraforming through reactionary philosophies, foundational tenets, strict statutes for inclusion based on religious, political, and physical similarities, and even social sanctions, such as online doxing, in order to threaten those with whom they ideologically disagree. One could, and perhaps should, argue that this is the basis of fascism or, at the very least, a hybrid type of fascism that unites religion with the political. Sexual, spiritual, and racial purity fears are part of the Reactive Orthodox discourses found in the information networks, analogue and digital. It takes the form of antisemitism, homophobia, misogyny, and racism, with crossover rhetoric from longstanding right-wing conspiracies blended with traditionalist philosophies that emphasize the need to form new American worlds that extend the work of historical European fascists and contemporary Eurasian authoritarian leaders into the United States. Reactive language is exclusionary. It partitions this community as set apart, holy, and pure. Purity then is expressed

in work of ideological terraforming, of building a nostalgic world – digital and analogue – from the ground up. Panic over social norms and fears over potential persecution are imbricated within the historical layers of the long American project of conservative Christian domination. Reactive Orthodox Christians in the United States reimagine these historical projects, both through the politicization of Russian Orthodoxy in the Western context and in the radical reconceptualization of American social worlds.

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Yoga in Norwegian Nature: The Creation of a New Pilgrimage Practice

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Abstract

As modern yoga continues to be practised and spread all over the world, it is also changing and adapting to local beliefs, practices, and values. Yoga retreats in nature are now a phenomenon in Norway. This article is based on a document study of websites advertising yoga retreats in Norway, exploring how nature is described and presented. The analysis shows that nature is presented as sacred, healing, and valuable. Elements from Sámi spirituality and other religious traditions are drawn on, and nature is marketed as a necessary part of a spiritual package. This can be seen in connection with climate concerns and Bron Taylor's formulation of the concept of dark green religion. Nature's utilization in marketing material suggests a Norwegianization of yoga, where yoga is made more Norwegian by connecting it with Norwegian nature, Sámi spirituality, and local traditions. The article argues that we are seeing the emergence of a new pilgrimage practice in Norway as part of the Norwegianization of yoga. Yoga and wellness are paired here with nature experiences and nature spirituality in a local retreat setting.

Keywords: dark green religion, nature, New Age, pilgrimage, yoga

Modern postural yoga has been integrated into Norwegian culture since the 1960s, finding its way into diverse settings such as gyms, schools, hospitals, and even churches. Research on contemporary yoga practice in Norway is limited. Most has been health-oriented, focusing on the health benefits of yoga and/or mindfulness. An important intention of this article is therefore to contribute to a broader understanding of the current landscape of yoga in Norway from the perspective of religious studies.

An increasing number of companies now market yoga retreats in Norway's natural landscapes, and there seems to be a growing trend to offer yoga tied to the experience of being in nature. This phenomenon was especially

intriguing for me: I could find no research examining the connection between nature and yoga in the Nordic countries, but this is necessary if we are to understand more about contemporary yoga practice. The article therefore explores the portrayal of nature on a selection of websites promoting yoga retreats in Norwegian nature. The study draws on a document analysis of publicly available websites marketing such retreats in Norwegian natural landscapes. The research question is: How is nature described and presented in advertising and information about yoga retreats in Norwegian nature?

My analysis of the material identified several new elements that had not previously been described. Claims made about nature and descriptions of the connection between nature, spirituality, and health highlight nature's place in the contemporary Norwegian yoga scene. By exploring how nature is described and portrayed in marketing yoga retreats, we can gain a better knowledge of how modern yoga is adapted within a Norwegian context. This will contribute to a deeper understanding of the Nordic branch of what is often referred to as modern yoga.

Modern yoga

Although yoga developed in India within the framework of Hinduism, and its spiritual and physical practices were created to achieve its religious goal (Jacobsen 2003), yoga is often distanced from its Hindu origins (Singleton 2010) when practised in the West today – frequently by people not associated with religion at all (Iversen and Krogstad 2020). This raises interesting questions concerning religious appropriation, and whether yoga can be understood as secular (Bowers and Cheer 2017). De Michelis (2005) describes modern yoga as 'a technical term to refer to certain types of yoga that evolved mainly through the interaction of Western individuals interested in Indian religion and a number of more or less Westernized Indians over the last 150 years. It may therefore be defined as the graft of a Western branch onto the Indian tree of yoga' (De Michelis 2005, 2). This article uses the term modern yoga similarly as a technical term to describe a westernized version of yoga that is widely practised all over the world. Yoga is pluralistic and needs to be understood as a diverse phenomenon (Newcombe 2020). Yoga's increasing popularity worldwide has led to a commercialization of the practice (Bowers and Cheer 2017), and the marketing of yoga retreats all over the world, including in Norway, can be seen as part of this development.

Modern yoga has been prevalent in Norway since the emergence of the New Age movement, and New Age ideas have been part of the Norwegian

spiritual scene since its beginnings in the 1960s (Gilhus and Kraft 2017). The meaning of the term 'New Age' has changed since the movement's emergence in the 1970s. Hammer (2016, 348) describes how the movement today is characterized by diversity and a lack of a single central doctrine. He further explains how the idea of healing, fulfilling potential, and optimizing the practitioner's life seems to be the core theme in most New Age circles and literature. Whether a particular spiritual movement can be classified as New Age is disputed. It is possible to question how 'new' all the practices referred to as New Age really are (Repstad 2020, 27). The label 'new' can also be misleading or destructive. This is especially true when describing Indigenous spirituality like shamanism within a Sámi context (Kraft 2023, 95) and other older spiritual practices like yoga. The New Age is always influenced by location, and Scandinavian and Sámi spirituality have been especially influential in Norway (Gilhus and Kraft 2017). This is probably also true of the Norwegian yoga scene.

Many yoga practitioners do not understand yoga as religious, and yoga studios are not necessarily seen as religious places. Religion in Norway is increasingly seen as private and personalized (Repstad 2020). This is part of a broader phenomenon in which individuals are reluctant to identify with religious labels and the label 'religion' (Woodhead 2016). This also seems true of the Norwegian yoga milieu. Iversen and Krogstad (2020) describe a tendency to see yoga as non-religious. The concept of 'Lived Religion' (Ammerman 2021; McGuire 2008) is therefore relevant. It refers to how individuals practise and experience their religious and spiritual belief in everyday life. The concept originated in the 1990s from an interest in ordinary people's religious practice in every domain of life. It recognizes that religious beliefs and practices are not confined to sacred spaces or prescribed rituals but are integrated into various aspects of individuals' lives. By focusing on religion as it manifests itself in different spheres, we can expand our view of what religion is beyond official texts and doctrines, and in private and unofficial places. Ammerman writes that this 'is to focus on what people are doing, as well as what they are saying' (Ammerman 2021, 5). This is relevant here because this project examines how nature is described regardless of the facilitators' and practitioners' definitions of their practice as religious, spiritual, secular, or none of the above.

There has been a growth in spiritual tourism in general and yoga tourism specifically in recent decades (Bowers and Cheer 2017). This is also connected with a growth in global wellness tourism (Clissold et al. 2022), and yoga is often understood as a wellness practice in the Western context.

Kato and Prozano (2017) describe spiritually motivated tourism today as transcending religion to include health, wellness, and self-improvement, and yoga-related tourism like retreats and festivals seems a good example. While most organizers present such tourism as both authentic and inclusive, Lucia's book *White Utopias: The Religious Exoticism of Transformative Festivals* (2020) points to the opposite. She explores some yoga festivals and notes the cultural appropriation and white privilege occurring in such settings. In both the mainstream media and in retreat and festival settings yoga is increasingly seen as a practice for promoting health and wellness while being connected with spirituality (Bowers and Cheer 2017). There has been a shift to using the concept of spiritual rather than religious travel, even though these two concepts often overlap. However, Kujawa (2017) describes spiritual travel as often situated outside established religion, and the label may therefore be more suitable to describe modern yoga retreats in nature. Spiritual tourism can also be seen in connection with the commercialization yoga has undergone, and Selberg (2017) writes about how local trip organizers often utilize national heritage in marketing spiritual tourism. An important part of what is considered national heritage in Norway is nature and experiences in it.

Nature as a Norwegian value

Nature has played an important role in establishing what is defined as Norwegian since the Romantic movement's idolization of the wilderness in the late eighteenth century. This eventually also gave rise to the idea of *friluftsliv*, or free-air life (Gurholt 2014, 234). *Friluftsliv* can be described as the practice of spending time in nature and engaging in an active outdoor lifestyle all year round. It can also be understood as a core value in Norwegian society, as it is generally only used positively as something from which everyone benefits. *Friluftsliv* has remained an important part of everyday life in Norway and is closely connected with the idea of national identity, and what is seen as typically Norwegian (Hågvar 2008, 206). This is also evident in official documents: a 2023 parliamentary announcement states that the government's goal is high participation in *friluftsliv* for the entire population (Government document 2023, 39). The Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss (Næss 1976) formulated the concept of deep ecology, an ethical theory that holds that nature has an inherent value. He has been important in the Nordic countries for making the connection between experiencing nature, environmental philosophy, and environmental activism (Naess and

Jickling 2000). Nature-based tourism in Norway today has some elements of sustainability practices. Rosenberg et al.'s study shows that sustainability occurs in nature-based tourism in Norway but is not a central topic (Rosenberg et al. 2021, 14). It is unclear if this also applies to spiritual nature-based tourism like yoga retreats.

The practice of *friluftsliv* offers experiences that can be understood as spiritual or religious (Hågvar 2008), and seeing nature as spiritual seems to be a worldwide phenomenon. Nature can also act as a spiritual inspiration in modern Western societies (Fredrickson and Anderson 1999). Ferguson and Tamburello postulate that the local environment competes with established religions and eventually reduces participation in traditional religious organizations (Ferguson and Tamburello 2015, 295). Thurfjell and Rimmel (2024) propose that contemporary northern Europeans' love of nature is entangled with existential questions and individual wellbeing through the processes of modernization and secularization.

Nature spirituality

Nature's role in Norwegian spirituality is not limited entirely to local influence. In the nineteenth century there was a spread of intellectual pantheism, which contributed strongly to the re-enchantment of nature within modern Western shamanism, or neo-shamanism. This is also true of northern Europe in general and Norway in particular. Von Stuckrad argues that the understanding of nature in neo-shamanic discourse is derived from Western mysticism and philosophy going back to antiquity, peaking in the Renaissance and in nineteenth-century German idealism (Von Stuckrad 2002, 778). The twentieth century saw the emergence of the concept of nature religion, and American pagans increasingly referred to themselves by 1970 as a nature religion. Nature as something sacred became a way to legitimize this spiritual tradition without scriptures (Clifton 2016, 340–41). Neo-shamanism is often seen as part of the New Age, though practitioners often reject this label (Hammer 2016). The New Age can be seen as a problematic term because it is often used for all new religious or spiritual movements. I use it here, however, as it is a common label for the phenomenon.

Within the same period a strong connection has been made between the environmentalist movements that developed in the 1960s, New Age spirituality, and the popularization of neo-shamanism (Kaikkonen 2023, 26). The spread of the New Age and neo-paganism saw the passing on of environmental values from the hippie movement (Kvalvaag 2022). New Age

circles also began to show great interest in nature religions' original religiosity. 'Nature religions' is perhaps not suitable as a description of modern spiritualities, in which eco-crisis anxiety is central. Graham Harvey suggests that we should instead speak of 'religion as ecology' (Bøe and Kalvig 2020, 240). In Norway interest in nature religions became evident as old Sámi and old Norse spirituality became part of the New Age scene. As location always influences the New Age, it is unsurprising that Sámi spirituality has been especially influential in the Scandinavian New Age (Gilhus and Kraft 2017). As pre-Christian Sámi spirituality was shamanistic, this has contributed to the Scandinavian New Age's focus on nature.

Bron Taylor describes nature's prominent position as spiritual in a variety of milieus. His concept of 'dark green religion' can be understood as '...religion that considers nature to be sacred, imbued with intrinsic value, and worthy of reverent care' (Taylor 2010, ix). In *Dark Green Religion: Nature, Spirituality and the Planetary Future* Taylor examines the emergence of green religions and explores how environmentally motivated movements and individuals manifest religious tendencies, even when their participants reject the religious label. Taylor avoids defining religion and thus a discussion of whether dark green religion is indeed religion, but he exploits an operative definition of religion that does not necessarily entail a belief in nonmaterial spiritual beings (Taylor 2010, xiii). This is relevant here, for the contemporary yoga milieu lacks a stated shared religious belief, instead consisting of individuals whose only thing in common is that they practise yoga in some form. As the results presented in this article make clear, however, there are some strong tendencies in nature's perception and description in the contemporary Nordic yoga scene.

By examining the intersections of modern yoga, New Age influences, and Norwegian values and spiritual traditions, this study reveals the unique Norwegian adaptations that frame contemporary yoga retreats as more than just a place for its physical practice.

Material

This article is based on a document analysis of publicly available websites marketing yoga retreats in Norwegian nature. Document analysis was chosen because it allows an examination of how nature is framed and presented to potential consumers through digital platforms. Following Asdal and Reinertsen (2020), I understand documents to be not only text but also sources of new practices and tools that can lead to change. The material

was sourced by online searches for 'yoga' + 'nature', terms chosen to ensure that the selected yoga websites directly addressed nature. One of the first results was visitnorway.com. Visit Norway states that it is produced and maintained by Innovation Norway, which is given the responsibility by the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries. The website explicitly states that it is the official travel guide to Norway, which makes its yoga and nature content and descriptions especially interesting.

Visit Norway's material is used with 11 other websites run by people or companies organizing and holding yoga retreats in nature. The websites to be used as material were chosen by the original search process of 'yoga' + 'nature' or by links from the search process's results. I selected websites that marketed and sold yoga retreats, either in their own permanent location or as events in different locations. As the material was sourced from open online sources, the process was easily repeatable with other similar websites or other online material such as social media platforms or fora. None of the websites matching the criteria of selling yoga in nature was excluded; all the first 11 matching websites were used as material. This ensured the results' integrity. Although the sample size was small, this method made the findings more reliable in answering the research question and may therefore say something about the tendencies.

The information from the selected websites was chosen as material and collected before being coded and categorized. As the analysis was inductive, the categories emerged from the dataset (Tjora 2017, 197). The material was then analysed by examining the categories. The findings are presented in the following sections corresponding to the categories from the material: healing space; sacred place; and something valuable. I have translated the Norwegian quotations literally to English to prioritize preserving the original terminology and structure without adding interpretive alterations. The aim is to maintain the original meaning as closely as possible.

For many of the websites it is difficult to be certain of who has written the text or is responsible for the content. Several websites are linked in various ways; some have many people associated with them; some have only one. The website's name is therefore used as the name both in the bibliography and the text to make the website easily identifiable for the reader. As websites are constantly changing living documents, there are bound to be some changes in the websites used as material here. I have kept screenshots of the websites as they appeared when I collected the material, and anyone interested is welcome to ask to see them.

Ethical considerations

The use of online sources as material raises questions of privacy. While the material is publicly available, Davie and Wyatt (2022) write that in digital material like blogs ‘even when access is open, the line between what is public and what is private is very easily blurred, raising questions regarding anonymity and protection from harm’ (Davie and Wyatt 2022, 250). As I consider all the material used to be marketing material – it describes and sells yoga retreats – there is no doubt that the material should be defined as public. This is also in line with the general guidelines of the Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH 2019), which state that ‘it will be expedient to apply the concept of reasonable expectation of publicity’ (NESH 2019, 10) when considering if the material should be defined as public. As already mentioned, the material here is marketing material, meaning those who have published the websites also consider it public material.

The following section presents the findings with the website names. The themes emerging from the material – healing space, sacred place, and something valuable – are all connected with nature as something Norwegian. These themes are explored in relation to how nature is presented in marketing yoga retreats in Norwegian nature.

Nature as a healing space

All the websites describe some form of self-development or healing practice, and nature is the common healing component in them all. Venabu.no writes that the retreats ‘use nature around actively in the programme’ and that ‘getting closer to nature helps us find balance and peace within ourselves’. Finnskogenretreat.no writes that ‘[w]e are nature. While you are here and get to know your inner nature, the outer nature forms the foundation for the retreat and is healing in itself.’ Another example is ‘mindful walks in nature’ which several of the retreats include. Juicyful.no offers ‘light therapy’, where the light is the natural light in a specific place. Norwegiansage.com offers ‘yoga therapy’, ‘Ayurveda’, and ‘forest therapy, describing how ‘[b]y listening and paying attention to this conversation, we also increase our awareness of the conditions needed for preventing stagnation and disease, and nurturing healthy, thriving systems’. Naturretreat.no claims that ‘When we live close to nature and do energy work like yoga and meditation, we come in automatic deeper contact with our inner, true nature and reality. From here everything can be experienced, healed and changed.’ It also states

that '[t]he mountain with its powerful nature and clean air is a vitamin bomb for both body and soul and contributes in this way in supporting the effects of the internal processes we are diving into'. Mountainyoga.no has an instructor who has 'studied and practised energy medicine for years, from various ancient cultures and teachers'.

Visitnorway.com describes similar things to the individual websites. There is a quotation from one of the offerers of outdoor yoga on visitnorway.com: 'I practise and teach outdoor yoga, and I feel that nature adds an extra dimension to the physical practice. The combination of yoga and nature, in the wind and by the waves, is very powerful. I genuinely believe that experiences out in nature are important to people's health and life mastery.' Some descriptions go beyond healing, as on trevarefabrikken.no: 'Place yourself in the centre of the universe, be the little spoon with nature, and return well charged with a new experience or skill.' Sjobrisadventure.no writes '[e]xperience the transformative journey of yoga', '[a]cknowledge past wounds, seek healing, and embrace transformation', and '[i]t's not just about doing; it's about becoming'. On venabu.no we read that '[s]pending time out in nature has many proven effects both for our lives and our relations with other people. Practising mindfulness outside enriches the experience.'

Nature as a sacred place

All the websites used as material here feature photographs of nature, and the majority also have photos of people doing yoga outside. Most of the websites highlight nature's sacredness in one way or another. The word 'sacred' can refer to different understandings but is used here to describe how the webpages emphasize nature as inhabiting qualities associated with spirituality, religion, supernatural powers, and something holy or deeper than other aspects of ordinary life. Sjobrisadventure.no exemplifies this: 'Yoga in Nature opens up for complete presence, allowing you to take in all that nature has to offer.' The same website also states that its yoga practice offers '[t]ransformative experiences that go beyond mere tourism'. The connection between humans and nature is also emphasized, as on finnskogenretreat.no: 'We are nature.' Many also describe nature in their specific location as spiritual, as in this example from juicyful.no: 'The light in Finse is really special. This weekend you will experience being filled with light from within'; or on mountainyoga.no: 'the nature around is powerful and endless.' Nature here is given qualities like 'powerful' and inhabits certain qualities that can be understood as supernatural, like filling

humans with light. Some websites also describe specific locations as sacred. Meretesgarden.no describes a source of holy water in the mountains nearby. This water is connected with St Olaf the Holy by presenting a thousand-year-old legend. A website that stands out is vana.no, as it is more inspired by Hinduism, offering kirtan, breathwork, meditation, and mantras. This site also constantly mentions nature: '[a]bsorbing the quiet in the autumn-dressed forest', '[b]athe in the energy of the beautiful nature', '[r]efuel with the power of nature', and '[w]ith yoga as a tool we awaken the gratitude for life, nature around us and nature inside us.'

Several sites mention that they offer a variety of treatments or spiritual practices connected with different religious or spiritual traditions. Venabu.no offers yoga, mindfulness, and tai chi, for example, and this is presented within a nature setting. It offers meditation classes outside, stressing that it thus aims to bring participants closer to nature. The descriptions highlight nature as a component that makes these practices more potent and sacred. Naturretreat.no has a teacher who offers Reiki and Mayan dreamspell in addition to different types of yoga like kundalini and yin. Norwegiansage.com stands out in its explicit emphasis on Sámi and old Norse spirituality. Yoga, Ayurveda, I Ching, psychology, and shamanism are presented with deep ecology and nature as teacher. One of the site's photos shows a woman lying in the forest covered by a blanket while a man in traditional Sámi clothes touches her forehead. Beside them there is what appears to be a Sámi drum. Other places on this website describe old Norse goddesses and their connection with nature.

Visitnorway.com writes that '[d]oing yoga outdoors enables you to be at one with nature' and encourages you to '[f]ind your yoga paradise'. Among other recommendations linked from the yoga page on Visitnorway.com there is a page about how to '[f]ind inner peace on a spiritual journey'. This is a short piece on pilgrimage routes that states that '[y]ou don't have to be religious to gain a treasured experience from your journey'. It is described as an opportunity to '[c]ontemplate the big questions, consider your future, ... or just observe the little things in life along the way', all while taking in the 'stunning scenery' and seeing 'quaint villages with a strong cultural heritage'. Other links on Visitnorway.com led me to a page about the Sámi that encourages people to travel north to '[g]o find your joik', which it describes as something the Sámi got from the 'fairies and elves of the Arctic lands'. There are photos of Sámi in traditional clothing, and one is quoted as saying, 'The joik is like swirls in the northern lights and wind on the mountain plateaus. I feel otherworldly when I joik', and 'I feel that my ancestors are with me when I'm joiking'.

Nature as valuable

Visitnorway.com mentions eco-travel several times, and the same is true of some of the individual websites. The person behind meretesgarden.no writes about 'wanting to contribute to sustainable tourism'; the person behind norwegiansage.com refers to herself as an 'eco-therapist'. Sjobrisadventure.no states it is 'combining the thrill of outdoor activities with a commitment to safety and sustainability', and 'we aim to inspire sustainable care where people actively contribute to the preservation and growth of what they have a profound connection with'. All the websites that mention food write about vegetarian or vegan food. Some, like meretesgarden.no, also describe the food as organic or local: they use vegetables from their own garden grown without pesticides and natural materials to contribute to caring for the earth. Vanayoga.no writes that '[w]e will share lovely vegetarian meals, mostly made with organic produce'. Nosenyoga.no offers 'three healthy vegetarian meals per day'. Some websites omit the concepts of sustainability, eco-tourism, and climate challenges. Many are in Norwegian, probably marketed at Norwegians travelling within their own country, perhaps also relatively close to home. One of the retreats offers the option of sleeping at home and only attending during the day.

Most of the websites explicitly refer to local nature. For example, natur-retreat.no states that '[w]e cannot imagine a more beautiful place than Ringerike in the spring with hepatica, wood anemone, and birdsong'. Nosenyoga.no also describes its local nature: 'Nøsen is in beautiful, scenic mountain surroundings', and 'Nøsen is in magnificent, untouched natural surroundings.' Above all nature in general is highlighted as valuable, as a quotation from one of the entrepreneurs on visitnorway.com demonstrates: 'Nature brings an extra dimension to the physical practice.'

Making yoga Norwegian

The material presents nature as sacred, healing, valuable, and Norwegian. The emphasis on the Norwegian-ness of nature is interesting: it communicates that it is not just yoga in nature, but yoga in Norwegian nature. The previous section highlights how this is done.

Although all three of the core themes are connected, this seems particularly true of the first two. Nature's sacred aspect is presented as making healing possible. Nature as a healing space to change, grow, heal, and realize one's full potential can partly be interpreted through the previous New Age self-help literature (Hanegraaff 2013, 39). Nature as something sacred

is also linked in the material to various religious and spiritual traditions and practices such as Sámi religiosity, old Norse goddesses, Christianity, and Zen Buddhism within a broader self-help framework, as the practices described are all intended to optimize one's life. This is typical of the synchronization occurring in what can be described as the New Age. As Hammer (2016) explains, New Age innovations are characterized by a sufficient distance from beliefs and practices supported by major social institutions, individualism, nostalgia and exoticism, needs in the here and now, and recognizability. These traits are evident in the material I have examined, suggesting that Norwegian yoga retreats can be situated within a broader New Age framework in which nature and the experiences in it become essential components of a spiritual package consisting of yoga, nature, and self-help.

As New Age movements have historically been linked to environmentalist ideas, often through pantheistic views of nature (Kaikkonen 2023; Kvalvaag 2022), the connection between environmental concerns and modern yoga in the material is unsurprising. Pantheism is the philosophical idea that everything is in God, or that God is in everything, and the closely related term panpsychism refers to the understanding that there is a life force, mental activity, and animating spirit in the natural world (Irwin 2016, 417). Magical societies also frequently embrace such pantheistic views in incorporating neo-pagan beliefs about nature into their own belief systems (Irwin 2016, 428), and this may be the case at these retreats, where pre-Christian and Sámi views of nature seem to function as an inspiration. This re-enchantment of nature accords with the tradition of nature religions, and what has been referred to as shamanism. 'Shamanism' is derived from the Siberian word *saman*, meaning 'one who knows', which refers to a person who can travel between worlds and communicate with spirits, animals, and other beings. Shamanism is used to describe religions where this is a central practice. It was first used by Western researchers (Bøe and Kalvig 2020, 12) but is today also used as an emic term in Norwegian Sámi milieus. In describing and defining these different religious and spiritual traditions, it is important to be aware of the Protestant bias there has been in the classical approach to the study of religion since its inception (Hanegraaff 2013, 103). As most of the research on religions focusing on nature is still undertaken by scholars outside the religions, one must assume bias remains. Research on old Sámi religion is limited and largely based on material from Christian missionaries.

The natural world and the wilderness are understood in this context as valuable in and of themselves, and therefore something for which one

should care. This accords with Clifton's (2016, 334) description of a prevailing belief in pagan and shamanistic religion. The presence of environmental concerns in the marketing of these retreats further reinforces this connection. Some websites emphasize sustainability and environmental care; others do not explicitly mention them. This omission may be due to these websites marketing nature. Retreats themselves may discuss these topics more thoroughly, however. The promotion of vegan or vegetarian food, and the emphasis on organic or locally sourced ingredients, suggests an effort to reduce environmental impacts. Viewing nature as healing, sacred, and valuable may encourage participants to care for it. This perspective aligns with Kato's and Prozano's (2017) description of pilgrims taking a special interest in sustainable travel, which they define as 'slow'.

As I mentioned earlier, many of the retreats seem to be marketed at Norwegians, as the texts about them are in Norwegian. Situating yoga in Norwegian nature for a Norwegian audience is one way to create a more sustainable and environmentally conscious travel alternative. Local yoga retreats can thus be understood as a reaction to the growing climate concerns in the last decade. As spirituality functions as a travel motivation (Kato and Prozano 2017), nature-centred spiritual tourism can contribute to more sustainable tourism by offering local alternatives. If local nature is seen as healing and sacred, this may reduce the need for long-distance travel to specific destinations. It is also possible that these local yoga retreats function as an addition to international yoga travel, meaning they may not significantly reduce the overall environmental impact.

The examined websites' descriptions of nature suggest that environmental concerns and a spiritual view of nature similar to Bron Taylor's concept of 'dark green religion' heavily influence contemporary yoga practice. Taylor (2010) writes about the global prevalence and diverse manifestations of dark green religion as a phenomenon existing beyond environmentalist and conservationist circles, and influencing spiritual paradigms in various subcultures (Taylor 2010, 102–3), including the Norwegian yoga scene. Historically, nature has played a significant role in Norwegian spirituality, so this is not new. However, the current practice of combining nature with yoga and other spiritual activities in a communal setting seems to represent a new approach. This blending of yoga with the idolization of northern nature reflects a 'Norwegianization' of the practice. For example, yoga is presented as a partly outdoor activity, integrated with other outdoor experiences, implying that engaging with nature is essential for realizing its spiritual and healing benefits.

The wilderness functions in this framework as an aesthetically pleasing backdrop for spiritual experiences, socializing, and self-development (Ammerman 2021, 141). Nature becomes more than just a component of the spiritual package: it provides a sacred framework for the entire experience – one that is perhaps more aesthetically pleasing to the demographics attending these retreats than the aesthetic framework associated with the New Age of the 1990s. Historically, untamed nature with its wild animals has been seen as unpredictable, mysterious, and dangerous for humans. This has gradually shifted. Norwegian nature no longer poses a threat to the people inhabiting the land, so the wilderness can now be seen and described in purely positive terms, and the websites here exemplify this. None has any warnings about or negative descriptions of nature. Nature is instead presented as the positive opposite of urban places, and yoga in nature as more powerful and healing than yoga in urban settings. Connection with other people and the setting seems to enhance the experience of nature as spiritual inspiration (Fredrickson and Anderson 1999), which may explain people's willingness to pay for these retreats instead of simply practising yoga in nature on their own. Meanwhile, the sacred and healing qualities attributed to nature also probably reflect how individuals utilize and relate to nature outside yoga retreats as a form of 'lived religion' in everyday life.

One could argue that placing yoga in nature serves a commercial function that is less about ecological concerns and more about adapting yoga to local cultural trends. Is it possible that these retreats' nature aspect is less about ecology and more about making yoga Norwegian? Taylor (2016, 297) asks if advanced environmental concerns in groups are connected with the tradition within which they are operating or a strategic response to a market demand. If the current market demand is local yoga that builds on national heritage and tradition while not damaging the environment, these nature yoga retreats can be understood as a response to this demand. By pairing yoga with *friluftsliv* (free-air life), yoga retreats move closer to what is commonly understood as typically Norwegian (Gurholt 2014; Hågvar 2008, 206). Situating yoga practice in local nature is also a way of detaching yoga and spirituality from spiritual tourism. Participants are no longer on a journey into someone else's spiritual landscape; they are having spiritual experiences at home. This can create a sense of authenticity for participants, positioning yoga in nature as an inherently Norwegian practice. At the same time this process has the potential to become exclusive of certain groups, as in Lucia's (2020) description of American yoga as a familiar domestic practice

for certain Americans: yoga is seemingly becoming more Norwegian, but may not be for all Norwegians.

A new pilgrimage practice

This process of making yoga more Norwegian also distances it from its Indian and Hindu origins, a trend linked to the commercialization of yoga worldwide (Bowers and Cheer 2017). By removing obvious Hindu elements of yoga practice and incorporating Norse, Sámi, and pagan elements, retreats may be easier to market to a broader demographic. Norwegian yoga may thus be easier to sell than yoga that feels too Hindu or Indian. This raises questions about religious appropriation and the ethics of detaching yoga from its Indian spiritual roots. Nevertheless, the 'Norwegianization' of yoga may be inevitable, as location influences New Age practices (Gilhus and Kraft 2017). It is therefore only natural that the modern yoga scene in Norway draws increasingly on Norwegian nature and continues to incorporate elements from Sámi, Norse, and Christian spiritual traditions. By localizing yoga retreats in the Norwegian wilderness and building on Norwegian traditions, modern yoga can also function as part of a chain of memory (Hervieu-Léger 2000). It feels familiar to the participants, even though yoga is not part of the participants' culture. This localization also shifts yoga from international spiritual tourism, offering spiritual experiences grounded in environments familiar to participants. Sámi, Norse, and nature spirituality thus offer a component of tradition.

Nature in general is familiar to most Norwegians, and it is nature in general that the material portrays as a spiritual place. Interestingly, there is no mention of sacred sites from pre-Christian, Christian, or Sámi traditions, except for one reference to a water source connected to St Olaf. Instead, the wilderness appears to be valued more broadly, serving as a contrast with the stress of everyday life. This reinforces the idea that nature itself is seen as sacred and as a destination for spiritual pilgrimage, rather than specific sites imbued with historical or religious significance. However, the material's emphasis on local nature points to location as relevant in a historical context as lines are drawn to a Sámi and Nordic spiritual past. This not only happens in Norway: Lucia (2020) writes about the romanticization of premodern and Indigenous spirituality taking place at yoga retreats and festivals. What is special about the Norwegian retreats is that they seem to be marketed by appealing to Norwegians' connection with the land. As most Norwegians lack a personal connection with Sámi culture and spirituality,

this also raises questions about cultural and religious appropriation. As the analysis is based on website content, it is unclear what is said and done at these retreats. Perhaps particular sites are highlighted and visited. Some organizers may take participants to sacred sites even if it is not mentioned in the marketing material. Such sites may also be used more if this new pilgrimage practice continues to grow or is influenced by other spiritual traditions.

Selberg (2017) notes that local trip organizers often incorporate national heritage into the marketing of spiritual tourism, and this is clearly happening here: yoga entrepreneurs refer to Sámi and Norwegian traditions, culture, and nature. How this is done is relevant for the development of spiritual practices in Nordic societies. Eade (2020) points out that institutions and entrepreneurs play crucial roles in creating new rituals and sacred places. We may thus see commercial yoga entrepreneurs as contributing to the shaping of new spiritual practices and influencing how participants understand nature and their relationship with it. Social media probably plays an important role in spreading ideas about yoga and nature, both to possible participants and everyone else seeing posts and videos. Social media platforms have enabled the spread of religious and spiritual ideas in a hitherto unwitnessed scale and timeframe. An astonishing number of people can see ideas and practices within days. This may explain why the ideas presented here about nature, spirituality, and yoga, and the concept of the 'nature yoga retreat', have spread across the country.

Yoga retreats that emphasize the healing qualities of Norwegian nature can be understood as the creation of new rituals and a new pilgrimage practice. They also exemplify lived religion in participants' daily life if the participants take the ideas and practices with them, and in the communication of nature values through websites and social media. The phenomenon of the 'nature yoga retreat' draws heavily on the idea of nature as a Norwegian value and sacred place. We can see this new pilgrimage practice as the merging of two strong traditions in contemporary Norwegian society: modern yoga; and spiritual views of Norwegian nature. This new pilgrimage practice of yoga retreats in nature is a relatively open commercial New Age spirituality, heavily influenced by Eastern religious practices and a wellness focus, with nature a key component. Even the official Norwegian travel guide markets it, suggesting it has all the components to become – or perhaps already is – an established spiritual practice.

Conclusion

The material presents nature as sacred, healing, valuable, and Norwegian. The descriptions of nature the websites promote as material focus on nature as something other and more valuable than 'not nature' – whatever that might be. Elements from multiple religions such as Buddhism, ancient Sámi religion, nature religion, and New Age beliefs are used to underscore the natural environment's spiritual significance. Nature's therapeutic benefit is emphasized both in general and at specific sites near the retreats. Nature seems to be presented as healing in itself, but also more potently when paired with the other spiritual components yoga retreats offer. Nature is also portrayed as something valuable that humans should take care of and appreciate, especially given growing climate concerns and activism. The views of nature are in line with Bron Taylor's (2010) concept of dark green religion. Nature seems to be understood and presented as a significant part of the 'spiritual package' offered within a New Age framework.

The material shows that yoga in nature is a Norwegian phenomenon that is experiencing a process of 'Norwegianization'. Yoga is assimilated into Norwegian culture through its association with Norwegian landscapes, Sámi spirituality, Old Norse beliefs, and Norwegian traditions, while distancing it from its Hindu origins. Furthermore, yoga retreats in local nature seem to be an emerging new Norwegian form of pilgrimage practice, in which yoga and wellness experiences are intertwined with nature-based spirituality and promoted and sold online. The view of nature as sacred, healing, and valuable is an essential component in understanding why situating yoga in nature can be so relevant and attractive for participants. This article's findings thus contribute to a deeper understanding of modern yoga's complex landscape. These understandings are important because yoga is one of the most widespread modern spiritual practices. As new ideas and entrepreneurs emerge on the local yoga scene, it can be expected that understandings, descriptions, and utilizations of nature in the Nordic yoga milieu will continue to evolve and change, probably under the continuous influence of other spiritual and secular currents.

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Swedish Local Free Churches' Use of Instagram: A Negotiated Approach to Social Media Engagement

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Abstract

This study examines how local Swedish Free Churches use the social media platform Instagram. It builds on data from nine local churches' Instagram accounts gathered between February and April 2024, encompassing 952 individual posts (including stories) and accompanying captions. Drawing on Adrienne Shaw's (2017) work, the study not only investigates the technical affordances these congregations employ but observes what these platforms afford religious institutions. It thus challenges the technological determinism often prevalent in previous research, which tends to equate successful social media use with two-way communication and views its absence as a failure. The findings show that, rather than conforming to dominant platform norms, these churches take a *negotiated* approach, adapting their use of Instagram to serve their values and goals. The analysis highlights how these religious institutions translate their core values onto the platform by emphasizing congregational commitment, personal piety, and biblical authority in their posts, thus bridging their offline and online identities. The local churches included in the study belong to the Uniting Church in Sweden, the Pentecostal Alliance of Independent Churches, and the Evangelical Free Church.

Keywords: Free Churches, Sweden, social media, Instagram, digital religion, local churches

In recent decades digital transformation has profoundly affected how public, including religious, institutions operate in society. This transformation has influenced how religious institutions communicate and interact with their congregations and the wider public (Campbell 2010; Sircar and Rowley 2020; Klaver 2021; Frahm-Arp 2018; Cheong 2017). Social media platforms especially have opened new possibilities for religious institutions to connect with members outside specific physical spaces and times, and maintain a

presence in their members' daily lives (Cavalcanti de Arruda et al. 2022; Kuhlín 2022; Mahan 2020; Golan et al. 2021). Furthermore, social media platforms provide religious institutions new opportunities for visibility and participation. While religious voices were often marginalized in traditional media environments, these digital spaces allow churches to transcend the boundaries these media structures impose, facilitating direct participation in broader societal conversations (Golan and Martini 2020; Morehouse and Saffer 2021; Åhman and Thorén 2021; Lee 2018). Social media platforms thus offer more than just a new medium for communication; they provide a possible means for religious institutions to restructure their relationship with members, as well as an opportunity to be part of public debate. This shift raises important questions about how religious institutions operate in a digital society, and how they utilize the architecture and affordances of social media platforms to engage with their members and the broader public.

This study aims to examine how local churches belonging to the Swedish Free Churches navigate social media. It focuses on the visually oriented platform Instagram. It is driven by the research question: How do local Free Churches utilize Instagram as a communication channel for their ministry? The concept of *affordances* is used to discuss both the platform affordances the churches use and what the platform affords the churches as users. The study builds on data from 952 individual posts from nine local churches' main Instagram accounts (including posts in Stories), containing 1,533 images and their accompanying captions.¹ The data were collected between 1 February and 30 April 2024. The local churches included in the study belong to the Uniting Church in Sweden (Equmeniakyrkan),² the Pentecostal Alliance of Independent Churches (Trossamfundet Pingst), and the Evangelical Free Church (Evangeliska Frikyrkan).³

Religious institutions in a digitalized age

Since the rise of the internet in the 1990s, there has been an ongoing discussion about how religious institutions are adapting to an increasingly digital-

1 The discrepancy between post and image counts is due to the inclusion of carousel posts, which feature multiple images within one post.

2 Equmeniakyrkan, formed in 2011, is the result of a merger between Metodistkyrkan (the Methodist Church), Svenska Baptistsamfundet (the Swedish Baptists), and Svenska Missionsförbundet (the Swedish Mission Covenant Church).

3 EFK took its current form in 2002 as a result of a merger between Helgelseförbundet (the Swedish Holiness Union), Örebromissionen (the Örebro Mission), and Fri baptisterna (the Free Baptist Union).

ized society. *Mediatization* has been an anchoring concept in this debate. It refers to changes in the media environment caused by the increased spread and integration of technology-driven communication tools and platforms into all spheres of society (Hepp 2013; Lundby 2014). A consequence of this large metaprocess (comparable with individualization, globalization, and digitalization) is that religious institutions are increasingly shaped by and dependent on digital media, including in how they operate and communicate in society (Hjarvard 2011; Campbell 2017; Lövheim and Hjarvard 2019).

It has recently been argued that we have entered a new stage in this process, referred to as deep mediatization (Hepp et al. 2018). According to Andreas Hepp et al. (2018) several key trends in the current media environment characterize this stage. First, there has been significant media *differentiation*, with a marked increase in the number and variety of media platforms and their functionalities over recent decades. Second, *connectivity* has surged, driven by digitalization and the expansive infrastructure of the internet, which has interconnected various media systems and platforms. Third, *omnipresence* has become prevalent, facilitated by mobile communication technologies that allow constant connectivity, regardless of location. This trend also includes an acceleration in communication speed. Fourth, there is a *rapid pace of innovation* within the media landscape, constantly introducing new technologies and platforms. Finally, *datafication* has emerged as a trend, leading to enhanced surveillance capabilities and the collection of vast amounts of data.

While these trends may characterize the present media landscape, previous research has demonstrated that the attitudes to, adoption of, and use of digital media tools vary significantly among religious groups (Gelfgren 2022; Morehouse and Saffer 2021). Some religious communities embrace digital platforms as powerful outreach and community-building tools, leveraging social media to engage with their congregants and spread their message (Klaver 2021; Cavalcanti de Arruda et al. 2022; Golan and Martini 2020). Others, concerned about the potential dilution of sacred practices or the erosion of in-person connections within their communities (Gelfgren 2016; Kühle and Larsen 2021; Suslov 2016), adopt a more cautious stance. This diversity in approach reflects the complex interplay between technology and faith traditions. Heidi Campbell (2010, 19–22) has sought to explain this variance, suggesting that it may be explained by examining a combination of (1) history and tradition, (2) organizational structure, (3) core beliefs and values, and (4) internal negotiation processes.

However, religious institutions' internal structure and values only partly explain the variance in digital media use. Previous research highlights significant differences between geographical regions, underscoring the impact of societal and cultural contexts on how religious institutions operate (Morehouse and Saffer 2021; Lee 2018; Gelfgren 2015). This geographical variation should not be reduced to a matter of technological infrastructure: it depends on a complex interplay of cultural and social factors. For example, a comparison between research findings from African countries with significant Christian populations and the more secularized Nordic region in Europe reveals distinct differences in how social media platforms are utilized. In the Nordic region it seems local churches use social media primarily for in-group communication and community building (Knudsen and Nielsen 2019; Hodøl 2021). Meanwhile, local churches in Nigeria and South Africa, for example, approach social media platforms as powerful outreach and evangelization tools, strategically aiming to reach a wider audience (Ayeni 2021; Frahm-Arp 2018). The contrast in religious engagement may partly be explained by Nordic societies' greater secularization, leading churches to focus on maintaining existing congregations and keeping a lower profile, while many African societies have a more openly religious culture, encouraging active evangelization.

With only a few exceptions (Hodøl 2021; Gelfgren 2016; Knudsen and Nielsen 2019) the main objects of research on churches and digital media in the Nordic region have been the majority churches (Moberg 2018; Kokkonen 2022; Gelfgren 2015; Johnsen 2023; Kühle and Larsen 2021; Åhman and Thorén 2021). These studies of the majority churches primarily analyse how they operate at the national organizational level, often overlooking local perspectives. Moreover, the data mainly come from websites, Facebook, and Twitter, along with interviews and surveys. There is therefore a significant gap in research concerning more image-centric platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. This focus highlights a need for research that encompasses a broader range of social media platforms and at different organizational levels.

Previous Norwegian and Finnish research on local minority churches in the Nordic countries suggests they tend to adopt digital media rather slowly, often struggling to tailor their communication style to specific platforms (Hodøl 2021; Knudsen and Nielsen 2019). They primarily use social media for information purposes such as 'digital event calendars' or 'digital billboards', with limited interactivity beyond views, likes, and occasional comments. Hans-Olav Hodøl views the lack of two-way communication as 'unexploited potential' (2021, 138), and Gry Høngsmark Knudsen and

Marie Vejrup Nielsen interpret it as an insufficient 'understanding of the affordance made available by digital media' (2019, 115). In contrast with the majority churches, which act as folk churches reaching a wide audience (Åhman and Thorén 2021; Kokkonen 2022; Johnsen 2023), the target audience for these local churches is predominantly existing members. According to Knudsen and Nielsen (2019) this slower adoption than the majority churches at the national level may be attributed to resource constraints and minority churches' greater precarity as religious institutions, resulting in more cautious online behaviour. Stefan Gelfgren's (2016) study of Laestadian churches illustrates a more conservative approach to digital media, demonstrating that their deliberately restricted use maintains a clear separation between the offline and online spheres. His interviews also highlight the challenge of operating online due to the negative press surrounding the movement.

Thus far no study has examined how the Swedish Free Churches utilize social media platforms for communication. This study therefore contributes specifically to understanding how these minority churches navigate an increasingly digitalized society, and how churches at a local level use image-centric social media platforms in the Nordic region.

Affordances

This study employs the concept of *affordances* to better understand and discuss how local churches use the social media platform Instagram. In simple terms affordances refer to the potential actions available on a given platform, both in the type of action they enable and the constraints they impose (Lindgren and Eriksson Krutrök 2024, 212–13). This framework recognizes that a technology's design shapes but does not deterministically dictate its use.

However, as Adrienne Shaw points out, research can become one-sided if we focus too strongly on a platform's technical affordances, overlooking what the platform affords different users (Shaw 2017, 597). Following this, and building on Stuart Hall's work, she maps three general use positions: *dominant*; *negotiated*; and *oppositional* (Hall 1991, 598). Users who predominantly engage with social media use the platform as intended by designers and programmers. A 'negotiated' approach means users partly use the platform 'correctly' but also adapt and modify it to suit their own needs and wishes. Finally, *oppositional* use means the user deliberately subverts a platform's dominant use to disrupt the designers' intention. Moreover, Shaw stresses that we should not understand a non-dominant use or 'misuse' of a platform as a 'failure' but simply as a variance. Shaw's

understanding of affordances thus challenges technological determinism, highlighting technology's social construction. In departing from studies that highlight churches' limited platform utilization, this research, inspired by Shaw, explores how churches actively adapt platforms to meet their specific needs and desires.

The Swedish Free Churches

The churches traditionally labelled as 'Free Churches' in Sweden are principally the Christian communities that emerged from the revival movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Cedersjö 2001).⁴ During this period the Church of Sweden, previously the state church, held a dominant position in the Swedish religious landscape and had close ties with the state. Revivalist preachers emphasized the importance of a personal faith and an experience of Jesus, advocating the autonomy of congregations that should consist of dedicated 'believers' [*troende*] rather than individuals automatically included by birth, as was the case in the Church of Sweden (Cedersjö 2001, 41–42). Historically, the term 'free' in 'Free Churches' can therefore be understood in two senses, referring to their independent position in relationship to the state and the voluntary nature of individual membership, which was 'freely' chosen.

Although the Swedish Free Churches are not a uniform Christian tradition, it can be argued that they depart from a common theological foundation (Cedersjö 2001), a hallmark of which is their Jesus-centric orientation. The person and work of Jesus Christ (his incarnation, teachings, example, crucifixion, resurrection, etc.) are given prime importance in the churches' theology and preaching. This Jesus-centredness also entails a call to 'follow Jesus' by developing a lifestyle that translates into Christ-like behaviours, attitudes, and priorities (though precisely what this looks like has, of course, varied between denominations and churches, and over time). As mentioned above, the need for a personal decision to accept Christ's gift of salvation is emphasized (Cedersjö 2001, 53–56).

Another keystone of the Free Churches' theological foundation is the understanding of the congregation as a community of believers, following an emphasis on participation and fellowship. As 'brothers and sisters in Christ', members are called to love and serve one another and bear each other's burdens (Cedersjö 2001, 56–57). The ideal is thus a form of community that

⁴ However, a few churches have been added during the twentieth century, including the Vineyard and World of Life.

goes far beyond merely gathering for Sunday worship. A third distinguishing feature of these churches is their emphasis on the Bible as the authoritative guide for both the church and the individual believer. This involves not only personal engagement with the Bible but also fostering a congregational identity as Scripture-saturated communities (Cedersjö 2001, 57–58).

The relationship between the Free Churches has shifted and has been characterized by both consensus and tension. Much of the disagreement has revolved around the degree to which one should remain open to society and culture while preserving one's integrity and distinct identity as Christian communities (Cedersjö 2001, 49–53). These debates often hinge on differing interpretations of the Bible, with some denominations adopting more liberal views and others adhering to a more conservative approach. A current issue is same-sex relationships and marriage (Carlström 2023). It should be noted, however, that differences in position exist between denominations, as well as within them. Another area of tension has been ecumenism. Some of the Free Churches were quite early proponents and have been part of the wider ecumenical movement; others have long positioned themselves outside it. The general trend, however, has been that the Free Churches have drawn closer to each other and the wider Christian community (Erixon 2007; Fahlgren 2014). Regarding fundamental faith doctrines, the differences have been more about variations in emphasis than holding divergent doctrinal positions.

The Swedish Christian Council (SKR) currently includes six Free Church denominations as 'members' and three 'observers' [*observatörer*]. The member denominations are the Uniting Church in Sweden (Equmeniakyrkan), the Pentecostal Alliance of Independent Churches (Trossamfundet Pingst), the Evangelical Free Church (Evangeliska Frikyrkan), the Salvation Army (Frälsningsarmén), the Swedish Alliance Mission (Svenska Alliansmissionen), and Vinyard Noden (Vinyard) (Sveriges Kristna Råd 2024). The observers are the Seventh Day Adventist Church (Sjundedags Adventistsamfundet), the Faith movement (Trosrörelsen), and the Quakers (Kvåkarna). The largest Free Church denominations in Sweden are Pingst, Equmeniakyrkan, and Evangeliska Frikyrkan, which are also the denominations to which the local churches in this study belong.

Research design

Instagram is a photo- and video-sharing platform with around two billion active monthly users, making it one of the most popular global social media platforms (Dixon 2024). The platform was launched in 2010 and was bought

by Facebook Inc. (now Meta Platforms) in 2012. Instagram has undergone a significant transformation since its launch in 2010, evolving from a platform focusing primarily on individuals sharing personal photos with family and friends into a public arena and highly commercialized space used by a wide range of public institutions and businesses (including influencers) for outreach (Laestadius and Witt 2022). Among the various public institutions active on Instagram are political parties, governmental agencies, NGOs, and religious institutions. Religious institutions in the Nordic countries use the platform at both national and local levels.

As discussed above, many churches today use various social media platforms to connect and communicate with their members (Farquhar 2019). These platforms allow them to announce events, circulate religious content, and foster a sense of community with their digital followers. Although Facebook seems the most popular platform among churches, both YouTube and Instagram, focusing on visual content, are widely used. While YouTube is mainly used to stream and post worship and other religious events, Instagram's architecture and affordances allow more varied use. Previous research (Laestadius and Witt 2022) has highlighted this, and it is further discussed in this study. However, it should also be noted that Instagram's platform limitations – such as shorter video lengths than YouTube, less robust community features than Facebook, and fewer dynamic editing tools than TikTok – inevitably shape how local churches utilize the platform and the content it generates.

This study examines nine local churches from the Free Church denominations, the Uniting Church in Sweden, the Pentecostal Alliance of Independent Churches, and the Evangelical Free Church. To enhance dataset uniformity and facilitate the analysis of local characteristics, churches were selected from three medium-sized Swedish cities, Umeå, Västerås, and Jönköping. The selection process ensured a balanced representation by including one local church from each denomination in each city. The study's focus on local churches that had integrated Instagram into their communication schemes meant another key criterion for inclusion was the church's level of engagement on Instagram. For this study an 'active' church was defined as one that consistently posted a minimum of eight individual posts per month. This threshold also ensured the collection of sufficient data for analysis. The churches' follower counts varied significantly, with four churches having between 97 and 404 followers, and five 723 to 1,779. Pentecostal churches consistently had higher follower counts than other denominations, while Uniting Church of Sweden churches had fewer followers in each city. It

should be noted, however, that these follower counts do not directly represent church membership, as the accounts are also followed by non-members and other church accounts, for example.

The study's dataset consisted of all content posted in the nine local churches' main Instagram accounts between 1 February and 30 April 2024. This collection included single photo posts, carousel photo posts (posts including multiple images), video posts (including Reels), Stories (ephemeral content that disappears after 24 hours), and accompanying captions. To make offline access available for further analysis, a digital copy of each post, including Stories, was captured using the Toolzu software and then downloaded. The dataset comprised 952 individual posts containing a total of 1,533 images. This discrepancy between post and image counts was due to the inclusion of carousel posts, which feature multiple images within one post. Beyond comparing basic differences like post frequency and post types, the data were analysed collectively rather than through a comparative lens. The study's intention was not to compare the different denominations or the nine studied churches but principally to identify and explore more general tendencies and patterns observable across local Free Churches' Instagram use. Given this research aim, the study does not conduct a detailed contextual analysis of individual posts. This methodological approach prioritizes broader patterns above granular examination, focusing on aggregate insights rather than detailed post-level interpretation.

The dataset was coded in NVivo using two distinct approaches. The first coding round involved categorizing each post according to its main purpose. This process resulted in a classification system with five main categories, which, in order of occurrence, were: (1) providing information about upcoming worship/events or the church; (2) invitations to worship and events; (3) encouraging personal religious engagement; (4) circulating religious content; and (5) sharing images from worship and events.

Content analysis was conducted in the second coding round to examine the use of various technical affordances and visual elements within the posts. This analysis encompassed Instagram-specific features such as tagging, linking, reposting, and hashtags, providing insights into how churches leveraged these tools for engagement and visibility. Simultaneously, the visual content was categorized based on its form and origin, including photographs and videos featuring church activities, generic stock images, illustrations, and emojis. The study also explored the relationship between images and their accompanying captions in regular posts, offering a deeper understanding of how these churches constructed meaning through the interplay of visual

and textual elements. This multifaceted approach allowed a thorough examination of the churches' communication on Instagram, encompassing both technological use and visual techniques.

Before starting the data collection the study was reviewed and approved by the Swedish Ethical Board (number 2023-07413-01). I also sent a direct message (DM) through an Instagram account set up for the study in which I briefly described the project and asked the churches to contact me if they did not wish to be part of the study. All the churches included in the study had public accounts, meaning anyone with an Instagram account could follow the account and see photos and videos in the profile and in the search results, for example.

Swedish Free Churches' Instagram use

In the following section I describe and discuss the general trends in the local churches' Instagram use, including post types and frequency, the use of visual elements, and ways of engaging followers.

Post types and posting frequency

While all the local churches in this study can be classified as active on social media, there were significant differences in their activity levels. The least active church published 38 individual posts during the three-month data collection period; the most active shared 222 individual posts. As Figure 1 shows, most churches posted between 60 and 130 times during the study period, corresponding to between four and nine individual posts per week.

⁵ This finding suggests that followers of these churches' Instagram accounts encountered posts from their religious communities regularly and weekly. This consistent presence in followers' social media feeds may reinforce religious identity by strengthening followers' sense of belonging and community connection.

Figure 1 also shows that Stories were the most prevalent form of post, accounting for more than half the content shared. Whether this was a deliberate strategy or not, it enabled these churches to maintain a frequent posting schedule. Stories do not need to be as polished as feed posts because they disappear after 24 hours and are visible only to followers. In contrast, Reels, a more time- and resource-intensive content form,

⁵ The average number of posts during the study period was 106, with a median of 108.

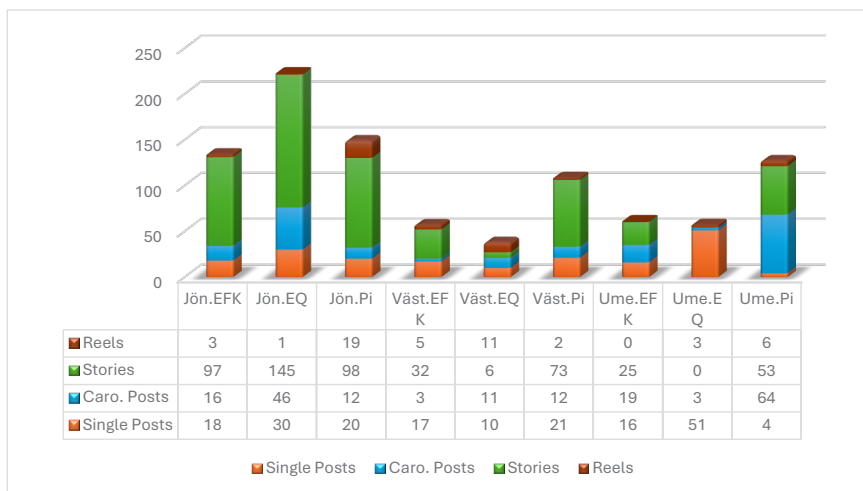


Figure 1. Post type.

were the least frequently used post among the churches studied. Stories allow more informal and personal content that is likely to resonate with church members. These posts’ temporary nature may also encourage more frequent engagement from followers, who check in regularly to avoid missing content. The popularity of Stories in this context is particularly significant because most previous studies of church Instagram use have not included these data. By overlooking Stories, studies may have missed crucial insights into how religious institutions utilize the platform. Specifically, they may have failed to capture the full extent of churches’ social media activity and the more casual everyday communications between churches and their followers.

The total number of single and carousel posts was approximately equal, though preferences varied slightly among the nine local churches studied. Carousel posts served primarily two purposes: preparing followers for Sunday services; and sharing photo dumps from worship and events. Statistics show that carousel posts generally receive many more interactions than single-image posts, as they encourage swiping and increase user engagement time (Bagadiya 2024). Although this study cannot determine whether the use of carousel posts was an intentional strategy by the churches, it did reveal that photo dumps generally gained the most likes among all post types. However, this higher engagement can be attributed to multiple factors, including the presence of people whom the followers recognized in these images and their often more emotionally resonant content.

Figure 1 also shows that churches in the city of Jönköping stand out as the most active on Instagram. This is unsurprising given that Jönköping is the 'capital' of Sweden's primary Bible Belt. This observation suggests that not only the national context but also the local environment may influence churches' presence and activity on social media platforms (Gelfgren 2015; Morehouse and Saffer 2021; Lee 2018). The higher concentration of Christians in this region, coupled with broader societal acceptance of religious expression, may foster an environment in which churches operate with greater confidence online than their counterparts in other regions. This local variation in social media engagement highlights the complex interplay between religious institutions and their sociocultural environments. It also underscores the importance of considering regional factors when studying religious organizations' digital online presence and activity, as these local dynamics may shape their online content's quantity and nature.

Use of visual elements

Among the 1,533 images in this study's dataset the most common visual elements were photos or videos showcasing activities within churches or featuring members of congregations. As many as 799 images/videos contained such content. The large number of such images, however, is due to the posting of 'photo dumps', where a single post could include up to 16 photos. Through these posts churches enhance a sense of shared experience, enabling the reliving of such moments.

Illustrations, generic photos, and the use of a single background colour featured in around 200 images. Illustrations and generic photos both quickly conveyed the post's subject. As Figures 2 and 3 show, the post about an open preschool includes a generic picture of a toddler's hand playing with Duplo blocks; the post about this week's prayer topic includes an illustration of hands clasped in prayer. These visuals help followers quickly identify the type of information being shared, even though the text conveys the key message. This approach suggests an adapted use of the platform that prioritizes textual information above visual content.

This tendency is even more pronounced in posts where the primary visual element is a single colour or a background pattern (around 100 images each). While colours and patterns are visual elements that can attract attention and make information posts more visually appealing, they diverge significantly from the spontaneous snapshot sharing for which Instagram was originally designed. Yet, as previously mentioned, Instagram has



Figure 2. Translation: Open Preschool: WEDNESDAY FUN 10AM–1PM (Pingst Västerås 2024).



Figure 3. Translation: This week's prayer topic: the Homework Club (Equmeniakyrkan Hovslätt 2024).

evolved into a multifunctional platform, with users employing it in diverse ways. Given Instagram's image-oriented nature, the heavy reliance on text and text-centred posts observed in some local churches represents an almost subversive use, however. The least used visual element was formal profile photos, which is unsurprising given that they are primarily associated with events featuring an invited speaker.

Ways of engaging followers

A key metric used to measure the effectiveness of one's communication on social media is engagement, which refers to the level of interaction, participation, and connection users have with content (Laestadius and Witt 2022). It is argued that the level of engagement reveals how well the content reso-

nates with followers, and on Instagram it includes likes, comments, shares, reposting, mentions, direct messages (DMs), and clicks. Apart from creating a connection between a posting and its followers, engagement generates increased visibility on the platform.

The most common strategies the churches used to encourage engagement were likes, links, tagging, hashtags, and carousel posts.⁶ The use of interactive features varied significantly among the nine local churches. While some employed engagement strategies in almost every post, others relied solely on the default options for likes and comments. This disparity suggests differing levels of awareness or willingness to engage followers on the platform. However, given that the content was generally directed at existing members rather than achieving a broad reach, these churches may have lacked strong incentives to use more advanced technical engagement tactics.

It is notable that the comment sections were utilised infrequently. With only a few exceptions none of the churches actively encouraged people to comment on their posts, and comments from followers were rare. As previously mentioned, it has been argued that local churches in the Nordic region fail to fully leverage social media platforms because they do not exploit opportunities for two-way communication (Hodøl 2021; Knudsen and Nielsen 2019). While this study confirms that these local churches do not use social media for conversations and discussion, a problem with this argument is that it assumes any use unaligned with the platform's intended design is somehow 'wrong', reflecting failure. As Shaw (2017) argues, given the diverse range of users on social media platforms, we should expect different types of use. When these platforms first emerged, they were expected to revolutionize communication and foster a broad participatory culture (Jenkins et al. 2015). While certain types of engagement have increased, however, the enthusiasm for these technical possibilities has often outpaced how people actually use the platforms. Nevertheless, it is clear that these local churches had no intention of using the comment section as a forum for feedback or discussion.

When examining the posts from these local churches, it becomes evident that their social media engagement strategy diverges from conventional platform interaction metrics. Rather than focusing on increasing likes, comments, or shares, the churches aim to foster a different type of engagement. Their primary objective is directed at motivating followers to engage more deeply with their faith. This involves attracting people to services, encourag-

⁶ These posts create engagement, as the viewer needs to click on the post to see the images.

ing involvement in the church's work, living out one's faith in practice, and engaging with religious content such as Bible verses, music, and podcasts. This approach reflects a broader value within the Free Church tradition, which emphasizes active participation in faith rather than passive membership (Cedersjö 2001). In this context social media is not just a tool for enhancing online presence but a means to further nurture committed and engaged Christians. This also suggests a negotiated form of use in which these churches have adapted the platform to suit their own needs and desires.

Post types and their purposes

As mentioned above, the coding of posts by their primary purposes resulted in five main categories. Below is a brief description and discussion of each category.

Information and invitation

Figure 4 illustrates that the largest category of posts consists of updates providing information about upcoming worship and events. These posts typically include details such as date, time, location, and additional relevant information – for example, the preacher's name or if children's activities are planned. Accompanied by visual elements that complement the written content, these posts give the impression of being digital posters. The primary intention appears to be to assist members to keep informed about the church's activities and schedule, and plan their participation.

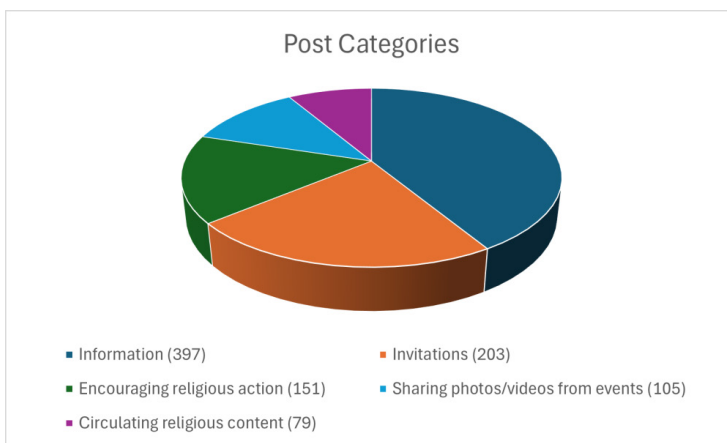


Figure 4. Post categories.

Another category closely related to information posts was invitation posts. The key difference between them is that invitation posts explicitly encourage participation and make greater use of Instagram's technical affordances, including the possibility to post videos, add links, and tag people. Typically posted in close proximity to services and events, such posts exploited the opportunity to be timely these communication channels provided. Overall, invitation posts exhibited a more creative and personal approach, with churches aiming to make their invitations more fun, welcoming, and time-appropriate.

A striking aspect of the information and invitation posts is the broad range of activities these local churches organize. They include open preschool sessions, family days, lunches for the elderly, musicals and concerts, community outreach programmes, afterwork gatherings, film nights, faith-based courses, running competitions, brunches, LAN parties, and flea markets. This variety underlines the churches' commitment to engaging all-age groups and catering to a wide range of interests. It also reflects an intention to extend their involvement in people's lives beyond the Sunday service. However, information and invitation posts also play a crucial role in shaping the churches' public identity, portraying them as dynamic spaces that embody culture and social responsibility.

Nevertheless, the content these churches post reveals that Sunday worship remains the week's most important event. Every church provided weekly information or invitations related to it. Some churches also used carousel posts to help followers prepare for the Sunday service. This could include encouragement to read a specific Bible passage, reflect on particular questions, or engage in family discussions about a theme. Furthermore, some churches posted photo dumps from Sunday services, accompanied by captions describing how great the event had been, offering followers an opportunity to remember and relive the experience as a new week began.

Encouraging personal religious engagement

The posts in this category were often text-heavy and encouraged various ways to embody one's faith, such as engaging in prayer, performing acts of love and kindness, inviting friends to church events, donating items for those in need, and supporting parents in raising their children within the Christian tradition. However, this category's prevalence points to an interesting

finding: these local churches use Instagram as a platform for encouraging personal religious engagement among their members. Accordingly, these channels serve a purpose beyond mere information dissemination or invitations to church events: they aim to inspire members actively to practise their faith in their everyday lives.

This category's posts reflect the Free Churches' understanding that being a Christian involves more than merely identifying as one or attending Sunday worship; it encompasses a commitment to a lifestyle driven by Christian values (Cedersjö 2001). This approach embodies a view of religious identity as active and integrated into every aspect of life rather than being compartmentalized in a specific place and at a particular time on Sundays. In thus using Instagram, these local churches provide consistent gentle reminders to their followers throughout the week about faith's practical aspects, reinforcing the idea that religious engagement extends beyond the church's walls into every facet of a believer's life.

Circulating religious content

A fourth content category identified in the coding process was posts circulating religious content. This category represents Instagram's use in disseminating spiritual material and resources to its followers. The most common type of religious content circulated was Bible verses, reflecting scripture's central role in these churches. However, the range of circulated content extended beyond just biblical text (Cedersjö 2001). These posts also included links to podcasts, music, educational content, and videos of personal testimonies. They thus offered content in various media formats and used their Instagram channels as a platform to direct followers to their other digital channels, creating an interconnected online presence.

A notable tendency in the Bible verse posts was the absence of captions providing an explanation or context for the verses shared. This practice suggests these local churches expected the Bible to speak for itself and be readily understandable to their audience. While some of the shared verses were more inspirational and may have had broad appeal, like 'Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it' (Prov. 4:23), others were more complex and potentially difficult to understand without previous knowledge of the context, like 'So in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others' (Rom. 12:5).

This practice is notable for two reasons. First, it implies that these churches expected a certain level of biblical literacy of their followers, sug-

gesting that their target audience was primarily Christians. It could also be seen as empowering followers to engage directly with the text and form their own interpretations. However, it also risks excluding those less familiar with biblical language or concepts, potentially limiting these posts' reach and impact to those already well versed in Christian theology. Second, it demonstrates a trust in scripture's power to convey meaning independently, without human interpretation or contextualization. This in turn reflects the Free Churches' understanding of the Bible as God's powerful word, capable of speaking directly to readers. These posts thus make a statement about scripture's authority and accessibility.

Sharing images from worship and events

A fifth category of posts was the sharing of images and videos from events and worship. These posts often took the form of carousel posts and tended to gain the most engagement, typically ranking among the most liked content in the churches' feeds. The images and videos primarily consisted of snapshots capturing moments of worship, preaching, and fellowship. Another common type of image showcased the children's ministry in the form of fun and comic programme elements during services, highlighting the church as a family-friendly environment. The churches occasionally shared shots from special events such as children's and youth camps or baptisms. The posts in this category generally portrayed people positively as happy, joyful, peaceful, and devoted in worship. These posts depict the churches as more than mere places of worship, emphasizing the strong communal aspect of congregational life. They portrayed these local churches as warm, welcoming environments where people engaged in spiritual practices but also genuinely enjoyed each other's company in a relaxed atmosphere.

However, these posts may come across as presenting a somewhat curated and one-sided representation of church life. A common critique of social media content is its tendency to inauthenticity, often showcasing an idealized version of reality where everything appears picture-perfect (Laestadius and Witt 2022; Jenkins et al. 2015). In the context of these local churches' Instagram posts this is manifested by an overemphasis on devoted moments and joyful interactions, potentially obscuring the more challenging aspects of faith and community life. Churches using social media in this way must therefore strike a delicate balance. While it may seem natural and often beneficial to highlight positive aspects of community life, it is a representation that may quickly come across as inauthentic – even fake.

What is not there?

Although present, some content types typically associated with religious organizations were notably underrepresented in the examined local churches' Instagram channels. For example, posts related to evangelism, life's hardships, and rites-de-passage such as marriages or funerals appeared infrequently. Given that the Free Churches are often characterized by their emphasis on outreach compared with other churches in Sweden, the scarcity of overtly evangelistic content was unexpected. While the primary reason was likely to be that the target audience consisted of church members, it may also have reflected an understanding that these platforms were more suitable for community building than direct evangelism. Moreover, as both Gelfgren (2016) and Knudsen and Nielsen (2019) have demonstrated in their research on minority churches, these institutions' precarity, in contrast to the more trusted and accepted national churches in Nordic countries, appears to result in more cautious online behaviour.

Equally noteworthy was the minimal representation of themes related to life's challenges, mourning, and loss. Given that churches tend to serve as important institutions of comfort and support during difficult times, the sparse appearance of such content is particularly striking. Similarly, the low representation of imagery depicting significant life events like marriages or funerals fails to showcase the full spectrum of religious practices and community support these churches offer. This curation starkly contrasts with the Church of Sweden's online presence, in which it clearly positions itself as an institution specializing in life-stage celebrations and providing support during hardships and loss (Åhman and Thorén 2021).

During the studied period there were no posts related to political or societal issues (such as the climate crisis or Israel's war in Gaza) or the current debate in the Free Churches regarding LGBTQ topics (Carlström 2023). This absence suggests a deliberate choice by these local Swedish Free Churches to avoid engaging publicly with contentious or polarizing topics on Instagram. Such a decision may reflect a strategic focus on maintaining a neutral or inclusive online presence, prioritizing community cohesion or aligning with a more conservative communication strategy that avoids potentially divisive subjects.

Discussion

Religious institutions' adoption of social media platforms in recent decades has marked a shift in their communication and engagement with their members, as well as with the broader public (Cheong 2017). This study builds on

previous research by examining how ecclesiastical institutions in the Nordic region navigate their online presence, with a focus on local minority churches and the image-centric platform Instagram. Referring to Shaw's (2017) three user positions, the findings suggest these local churches adopt a *negotiated* approach in their use of the platform. While they seldom actively subvert the platform's intended use, they have not adopted a dominant user approach – for example, attempting to maximize their reach or follower engagement online. Instead, they have adapted the platform to foster a different form of engagement aligned with the values typically associated with the Swedish Free Churches: seeking to inspire their followers to cultivate personal piety and active participation in the local congregation's work.

These findings suggest the local churches to some extent resist the media logic (and social media logic) that mediatization theory (Hjarvard 2011) identifies as a shaping force for modern institutional operations. Instead of prioritizing visually dramatic or entertainment-driven content aligned with algorithmic preferences, they appear to adapt social media platforms to serve their distinct needs and values. This approach may partly stem from limited digital competence and insufficient training in online communication among account managers, as well as resource and time constraints. However, confirming these factors would require direct interviews with the digital content creators in these local churches.

Nevertheless, compared with their Norwegian and Danish counterparts, studied by Hodøl (2021) and Knudsen and Nielsen (2019), which primarily used social media for 'information purposes' and as an 'interactive calendar', these Swedish local churches' usage appears to have a broader aim. I would also argue, however, that it is an oversimplification to view information and invitation posts as mere dissemination of information. These posts serve a broader purpose. They not only inform and invite but also contribute significantly to building the church's public identity. In sharing upcoming events and activities, these local churches reveal they are far more than just venues for Sunday services. They are also institutions espousing social responsibility, acting as cultural bearers and providers, and offering a space for *folkbildning*.⁷

Although Hodøl views the lack of two-way communication as 'unexploited potential' (2021, 138), and Knudsen and Nielsen interpret it as an insufficient 'understanding of the affordance made available by digital

⁷ *Folkbildning* is a Swedish term that lacks an English equivalent. It refers to a tradition of encouraging lifelong learning for the purpose of strengthening democratic participation, increasing equality, and promoting cultural development.

media' (2019, 115), I propose a different perspective. Rather than a short-coming, it can be argued that these churches' approach to social media represents a negotiated adaptation to the digital landscape. As Shaw (2017) emphasizes, non-dominant use of social media platforms does not need to be interpreted as a 'failure'. Such an interpretation risks falling into technological determinism and normative expectations that users should conform to designers' intentions, overlooking the social construction of technology use. Given modern platforms' complexity, it is natural for diverse users to employ them in various ways to meet different needs. The local Free Churches that are part of this study seem to maintain a digital presence that reinforces their core values. In doing so, they prioritize coherence with their offline practices above expanding their digital reach. Interestingly, this pattern is aligned with what Johnsen found in her study of the majority churches in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway: that these churches' online identities mirrored their offline organizational characteristics (2023, 71). Again, this points to limitations in mediatization's influence on Nordic churches' online operations.

If we approach affordances with a broader understanding – considering not only the technical features of a platform but also what a platform affords a user – we can gain a more nuanced perspective of these churches' social media practices. For example, this approach reveals that the local churches that are part of this study use Instagram to maintain ongoing connections with their members throughout the week, extending their community engagement beyond physical gatherings. Although the posts may not encourage explicit two-way communication, they establish a regular touchpoint between the church and its members. This consistent presence reinforces the church's role in members' everyday lives, potentially strengthening their sense of belonging and religious identity. For the local churches in this study the use of Instagram Stories plays a crucial role in upholding a regular posting schedule, as the content does not need the polish required for the main feed. Moreover, using Stories allows real-time updates and everyday moments to be shared, fostering a sense of intimacy.

This study's findings are aligned with previous research on local churches in the Nordic region indicating a cautious approach to their online presence. These churches generally refrain from using digital platforms as tools for outreach or evangelization. This strategy may reflect the highly secularized nature of Nordic societies, where overt religious messaging is often less socially acceptable. It may also exemplify the precarity of minority churches in operating online, as both Gelfgren (2016) and Knudsen and

Nielsen (2019) have highlighted. Historically, the Free Churches in Sweden have faced critical coverage in the public media, which persists to some degree today. This complex media relationship affords these institutions legitimate reasons to be mindful of their public operations and to manage their social media presence carefully. It is likely this also partly explains these churches' tendency to avoid controversial topics, refraining from taking political stances or discussing contentious social issues. This behaviour suggests a deliberate effort to foster a welcoming and unconflictual environment in their social media channels, prioritizing spiritual and community-related content. Notably, the content often focuses on positive imagery, frequently depicting individuals in uplifting emotional states. While this approach helps craft an appealing online identity, it can also result in a somewhat one-dimensional representation. By focusing predominantly on positivity, these churches may inadvertently miss opportunities to engage with their audience on more complex and challenging aspects of life. This observation underscores the nuanced challenge that churches face in digital communication: the need to balance creating an attractive online presence and to offer a comprehensive authentic representation of their core services and values.

Conclusion

This study has examined the social media practices of local Free Churches in Sweden, revealing a more complex engagement with social media than previously recognized in studies of local minority churches in the Nordic region. While the churches used the platform as a form of digital billboard, they also used it to encourage religious action and community building, for example. Moreover, although the majority of posts were informational or invitational, they contributed to building a public identity that showcased these churches as multifaceted institutions engaged in social responsibility, *folkbildning*, and cultural providers. By maintaining a consistent online presence that reinforces core values, these churches prioritize coherence with their offline practices above maximizing digital reach or engagement. Rather than focusing on increasing likes, comments, or shares, they aim to foster a different type of engagement. Their primary objective seems to be to motivate their followers to engage more deeply with their faith and become committed and active participants in their local congregation's work. Hence, the study suggests that these local churches adopt a *negotiated* approach to using the platform. The focus on projecting positive imagery

and avoiding controversial topics, however, presents a potential limitation, possibly resulting in a somewhat one-dimensional online representation. This highlights the ongoing challenge for religious institutions in balancing an appealing digital presence with an authentic representation of their services and values. This study contributes to understanding how religious institutions navigate digital spaces in secularized contexts. It highlights the importance of considering diverse user approaches when analysing social media practices, moving beyond normative expectations of platform use.

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Spiritual Festivals as Embodied Sites of Becoming ‘Porous Selves’

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Abstract

Contemporary spiritual festivals attract heterogeneous crowds of adherents of emergent religions, practitioners and aficionados of fringe knowledge, self-seekers, and many others. Focusing on the ethnographic context of Estonia, this paper approaches such festivals as occasions of self-transformation, where festival participants collectively engage in various practices that encourage them to ‘open up’ – to themselves, to others, and to the world. The physical body often takes centre stage in these ritualized activities, which are typically performed in unison and involve interacting with other bodies through synchronized movement and sound, dance, touch, or at the very least deliberate eye contact with others. Charles Taylor’s (2007) distinction between the ‘buffered’ and the ‘porous’ self provides a suitable analytical framework for exploring and understanding these activities’ transformative potential and effect.

Keywords: spiritual festivals, body, self-transformation, buffered and porous selves, Charles Taylor, Estonia

A large crowd has gathered at a stupa-shaped building on a hot summer day in July 2021 for the opening ceremony of a festival called ‘High on Life’, though its Estonian name ‘*Ühenduses*’ roughly translates to ‘In connection’ in English. This annual four-day event attracts several hundred participants and is held at a retreat centre owned by a prominent Estonian entrepreneur with a keen interest in spirituality.¹ According to the festival website ‘High on Life’ allows participants to get in touch with and become part of a ‘mindful and conscious communal existence’ to ‘discover’ and ‘create magic together’

¹ ‘Spirituality’ is admittedly a contested term. In this article I adopt a meaning similar to Ratiá’s (2023, 6), who defines it as ‘contemporary non-institutionalised religious traditions with an emphasis on individual religiosity’.

by 'being connected with oneself and others' during the 'most profound and consciousness-expanding weekend of the year'. It is intended for everyone who 'desires to experience themselves, other persons, and the whole world more deeply and colourfully'.

The atmosphere in the building is serene. People are sitting on mattresses, some in the lotus position, eyes closed, while soft meditative music plays. More attendees quietly enter the hall, carefully squeezing in between those already seated, who, with faint smiles, make room for the newcomers. On a slightly elevated stage four festival organizers – three women dressed in white and a man in a burgundy robe – greet the crowd. They introduce the festival's code of conduct and outline the programme, which consists of roughly forty workshops to which the organizers refer as 'processes', using various metaphors to describe the transformative outcome they are expected to trigger. One organizer compares it to an 'awakening experience'; another calls it 'software upgrading'. 'Here we can all be without masks, and that's how magic happens,' a third adds. The festival grounds are declared a space of 'trust', 'harmony', 'acceptance', and 'safety', where attendees can transcend their own bodily and mental boundaries.

Following this introduction a female guitar quartet performs a modified refrain from the song 'The Power Is Here Now' by British singer-songwriter Alexia Chellun, alternating between the original English lyrics and the Estonian translation of the following words: 'The power of love is here now, the power of now is here now, the power of you and me is here to create magic on earth.' The ceremony concludes with the division of the crowd into six-person 'families', which are intended to constitute one's unofficial support group during the festival days. Finally, everyone is asked to begin strolling around the hall, making eye contact with others and sharing a light touch or a gentle hug when passing another person.

This ethnographic vignette effectively captures the atmosphere, rhetoric, and bodily interactions characteristic of events that have proliferated in recent decades, particularly in contexts where institutional religion is in decline. Generically labelled as 'spiritual festivals', these events aim to foster spiritual growth and a sense of community among participants (Dowson 2019). Using the example of such spiritual festivals in Estonia, this paper approaches these events as embodied occasions of self-transformation. As I will demonstrate, participants often engage in collective practices in workshops and rituals at these festivals that encourage their 'selves' to 'open up' to and experience a wider connection with 'others'. Although 'others' in this article primarily refers to other people, in reality this category can take a

multitude of forms, depending on the festival context. For example, 'others' can also be ancestral spirits, other-than-human species, or nature in general.

Scholarly approaches to the 'self' in the study of 'new spiritualities',² particularly those that adopt an emic perspective and examine the self as an object individuals assume to be themselves, often build on Jung's ([1928] 1966) theory of individuation. As a central concept in his analytical psychology, 'individuation' refers to the process through which an individual becomes psychologically whole, integrating conscious and unconscious aspects of the self to achieve personal maturity and self-realization. A sizable body of literature on new spiritualities either directly or indirectly draws on Jung's notion of the self, further conceptualizing it and examining its relationship with personal experience (e.g. Clarke 2006; Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1991; 1996). Perhaps most notably, Heelas (1991) demonstrates that these new forms of spirituality, in his words 'self-religions', focus on personal growth, self-discovery, and self-transformation. Unlike 'traditional' religions, which generally draw on external authorities, new spiritualities allow individuals to define their own spiritual paths and construct unique religious identities. This trend is aligned with what sociologists like Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) have more broadly described as 'reflexive modernity', in which individual choices replace traditional sources of identity such as family, class, or religion.

Although these studies, especially Heelas's, are useful for conceptualizing the self – as opposed to an external religious authority – as the locus of meaning, fulfilment, and empowerment in new spiritualities, their analytical gaze tends to be rather static for providing an ethnographically nuanced and higher-resolution approach to the *process* of self-transformation. What happens to participants' sense of self in the actual ritual context? How is the self's transformation achieved? What tangible actions facilitate this change, and how can the transformation to an altered state of self be described analytically? I demonstrate that this transformation can be fostered through various ritualized practices, with certain forms of bodily interaction at their core among participants. Charles Taylor's conceptual distinction between the 'buffered' and 'porous' self, outlined in his *A Secular Age* (2007), is particularly helpful for analytically understanding the transformative impact of such embodied activities. Taylor's approach provides a refined

² I use this term in both its singular and plural forms throughout the paper. The singular form refers generically to contemporary spiritual practices, beliefs, and movements that arise outside traditional religious institutions, while the plural form accounts for the diverse and heterogeneous range of these beliefs and practices.

and historically sensitive framework for exploring the self-transformation sought more broadly in contemporary culture, but it also offers valuable insights into the dynamics of the self during spiritual festivals. As this paper argues, embodied activities in festival workshops often deliberately aim – using Taylor’s terms – to dissolve the ‘buffer’ between the self and others, thereby rendering the self ‘porous’. This study therefore contributes to the research on spiritual festivals by using an ethnographic lens to explore bodily interactions during festival rituals and workshops as potential catalysts for self-transformation, and by framing the essence of this transformation using Taylor’s illuminative yet previously untapped approach.

The paper unfolds as follows: after a brief discussion of the ‘festivalization’ of contemporary spirituality and research on spiritual festivals, and an overview of the scene of new spiritualities in Estonia, I introduce the ethnographic context and my methods and data. I then zoom in on a specific ethnographic example – the High on Life festival, also introduced in the opening vignette, providing a more detailed account of some of its workshops and festival participants’ experiences of them. The subsequent section scrutinizes these workshops’ and rituals’ potentially transformative impact, drawing on Taylor’s distinction between the ‘buffered’ and ‘porous’ self, arguing that the workshops often aim either implicitly or explicitly to trigger a shift from the former to the latter.

The ‘festivalization’ of contemporary spirituality

Although ‘self-religions’ imply spiritual individualism, this does not necessarily entail practising spirituality in solitude. Spiritual festivals are an eloquent manifestation of this communal aspect. The use of the term ‘festival’ in this context, however, warrants some further justification. Studying festivals has a long history in anthropology especially, with festivals serving as focal points in research on topics ranging from kinship and religion to political economy (Frost 2016, 570). Additionally, festivals have frequently been contexts for exploring social group formation and collective identities (Leal 2016, 584). Generally, however, the term has been applied to celebrations of commemorative or calendar events, whether ‘traditional’, revitalized, or ‘invented’ (e.g. Costa 2002; Crociani-Windland 2011; Gibson and Connell 2011).

In recent years, however, the meaning of the term ‘festival’ has broadened, now encompassing a wide range of festive occasions that in some cases have even supplanted ‘traditional’ festivals (Fournier 2009, 20).

Frost (2016, 569) notes that the number of events identifying as 'festivals' is growing, spanning 'expositions of high culture, to large-scale popular music extravaganzas, to religious commemorations or thanksgivings, to neighbourhood celebrations of a migrant presence, and to statements of alternative sexuality or national pride'. While 'traditional' festivals involved relatively homogeneous and predefined social groups, these new forms of festivals tend to attract individuals with diverse interests, backgrounds, and preferences (Fournier 2009, 19).

Contemporary spiritual festivals are well aligned with such a broader, more flexible conceptualization of 'festival'. These events often combine various culturally appropriated forms of tantric, shamanic, breathwork, meditation, and yoga practices, as well as ecstatic dance sessions and personal development workshops, to name a few. Spiritual festivals cater to increasingly heterogeneous audiences whose motivations range from long-term dedication to esotericism and new forms of spirituality to a more modest interest in self-exploration. These festivals' participants can be adherents of 'alternative' but also 'traditional' religions, as well as dedicated or aspiring practitioners and aficionados of 'fringe knowledge'. Spiritual festivals are thus events where distinct identities and lifestyles are not merely expressed and performed but also constitute spatio-temporal occasions where these identities and lifestyles are dynamically constructed (e.g. Taylor et al. 2014; Boissevain 2015).

The increasing prominence of festivals as spatial and temporal contexts for the expression and practice of spirituality and religiosity has led some scholars to conceptualize this trend as 'festivalization' (Dowson 2019) or more broadly as the 'eventization' of faith (Pfadenhauer 2010). Given this trend, it is unsurprising that studies of spiritual festivals have proliferated, often emphasizing their transformative nature. Sometimes referred to as 'transformational festivals', these events are allegedly designed and organized to provide not merely entertainment but opportunities for experiences of 'ego death' and the 'wearing down of the self' (Ruane 2017). Counter-cultural festivals like Burning Man (Bottorff 2015; Li and Zhang 2024; Ruane 2017) and many others (de Carvalho et al. 2022; Lucia 2020; Ratia 2023) are claimed to create environments that disrupt everyday identity, engendering emotional vulnerability and opportunities for introspection and personal growth. Such festivals can be considered 'heterotopias' (Hetherington 1997) or 'liminal spaces' (Turner 1987), where normal social roles are often suspended, facilitating unique expressions of self and shared experiences of unity and transcendence (see also Ruane 2017, 3).

While in many of the studies cited above psychedelics are key if not necessarily essential elements of achieving self-transformation, the spiritual festivals this study examines are substance-free. Instead, self-transformation is induced and encouraged in these festivals through deliberately choreographed interactions between participants' bodies.

Setting the scene: 'New spiritualities' in the 'most secularized country'

Historically predominantly Lutheran Protestant, Estonia is allegedly one of the 'least religious' nations in the world based on declared religious attitudes and affiliations, and the country has even been called a 'special case' among secular societies for defying the 'typical secularization path' (Heelas 2013; R. Altnurme 2021; Rimmel and Uibu 2015; Ringvee 2021). The reasons for and circumstances of dechristianization in Estonia are manifold and generally attributed to the Communist era, when institutional religion was suppressed (L. Altnurme 2021a; R. Altnurme 2021). The 'Singing Revolution' in 1987–91, which led to Estonia regaining its independence, sparked a heightened but temporary interest in Christianity that had again declined by the middle of the 1990s (L. Altnurme 2021a, 22).³ According to various surveys conducted in recent decades only around 16 per cent of Estonia's population considers institutional religion an important part of their daily life (LFRL 2015; Religio 2 2017).⁴ Such a low level of religious engagement persists despite Estonian society and the state being explicitly liberal and tolerant of both mainstream religions and new religious movements (Ringvee 2012; Freedom House 2022; Pew Research Center 2024).

Irreligious Estonians are not necessarily atheists, however. As Uibu (2021, 118) aptly argues, limited belief in God and the minor role of institutional religion in Estonia do not imply the absence of a transcendent dimension in people's lives. As in many other countries institutionalized beliefs and practices in Estonia have gradually made way for more individualized, personalized, privatized, self-designed, spongy, and non-institutionalized beliefs and practices, or, in Heelas's and Woodhead's (2005) terms, religion has been giving way to spirituality. New spiritual beliefs and practices in Estonia, as elsewhere, often focus on embodied activities and general well-

³ Russians, the country's largest ethnic and linguistic minority, have a stronger affiliation with Christianity and religious belonging in general than ethnic Estonians, with Orthodoxy serving as an important marker of Russian group identity (Uibu 2016b, 271).

⁴ A comparative discussion of the results of various surveys can be found in Rimmel and Uibu (2015) and Uibu (2016b).

being, drawing selectively from both Eastern and other religious traditions (e.g. L. Altnurme 2005; 2013; Uibu 2016c). Participation in these new forms of spirituality tends to be demand-based and situational, driven mainly by a specific need at a particular moment in a person's life (Uibu 2021, 118).

The term now commonly used in Estonia for these new beliefs and practices is *uus vaimsus* (also *uusvaimsus*), which means 'new spirituality'⁵ (e.g. L. Altnurme 2013; 2021b). This term has a layered and nuanced meaning for Estonian speakers, as the Estonian word for 'spirituality' (*vaimsus*)⁶ carries both religious and intellectual connotations, can refer to any intellectual activity, and thus also has secular meanings (L. Altnurme 2021b, 102). Yet studies have shown that many adherents of new forms of spirituality in Estonia consider themselves 'spiritual' rather than 'religious', associating the latter with constraints to human self-development (L. Altnurme 2021b, 104). Estonians identifying as 'spiritual but not religious' (SBNR) now constitute approximately a third of the country's population (L. Altnurme 2021b, 102). According to some estimates SBNR is on the cusp of becoming the dominant form of religious identity in Estonia (Uibu 2016b, 271). The growing popularity and possible mainstreaming of new spiritualities in the country are intertwined with trends of privatization, customization, and commercialization similar to those observed in neighbouring Finland (Broo et al. 2015).

Studies of new forms of spirituality in Estonia are now extensive, encompassing a range of topics, from general historical, cultural, and sociological accounts of the overall spiritual milieu (L. Altnurme 2021b; Uibu 2021) to more specific and focused case studies. These include investigations of the spiritual use of crystals (Teidearu 2023), the purported impact of 'water veins' and 'energy columns' on health (Kivari 2013), the use of ayahuasca in neo-shamanic rituals (Kaasik 2019), the blending of spiritual teachings and healing (Uibu 2016a; 2020), the dynamics of spiritual web forums (Uibu 2012), and the perception of the body among Source Breathwork practitioners (Koppel 2013). These studies' analytical conclusions are aligned with those conducted in various other ethnographic contexts, emphasizing themes such as the celebration of the self, personal growth, self-discovery, the 'sacralization' of modern values, eclecticism, a close association with healing, critiques of established religion, complex relationships with science and pseudoscience, and intersections with consumer culture (Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996; Tacey 2003). Despite the breadth of such research, spir-

5 Unlike in English, this term cannot take a plural form in Estonian.

6 The word *spirituaalsus*, essentially a foreign word in Estonian, is also commonly used.

itual festivals have thus far remained outside the focus of studies of new spirituality in Estonia.

Ethnographic context, data, and methods

Although Estonia is a small country, its spiritual festival landscape is relatively diverse. Among the most notable such events are the Shaman Days, the Estonian Tantra Festival, and the High on Life festival, all of which are organized annually and attract large crowds. These three festivals have served as my primary focus and sources of firsthand data, though the more detailed discussion in this paper focuses on the High on Life festival.

Shaman Days (*Šamaanipäevad*), also called the Shaman Festival (*Šamaanifestival*), have been organized for nearly a decade at the 'Whole-world' Archaic Traditions Centre in Northern Estonia. The centre has become a popular venue for various events which, according to its website, 'enable a broader and deeper understanding of the inner and outer world' and assist participants in 'noticing their senses and perceptions and learning to manage them'. These events are grounded in a 'shamanistic-holistic worldview', focusing on experiential learning aimed at exploring different states of consciousness. The centre provides a suitable physical environment for these practices, featuring megalithic buildings, stone circles, spirals, labyrinths, caves, a herb garden, a sweat tent, and a tepee, all constructed according to the principles of 'energetic separation and specificity'. During the Shaman Days festival participants engage in workshops where they learn to use shamanic drums, craft shamanic paraphernalia, observe ritualized healing practices, and interact with stone labyrinths, spirals, and circles. These activities facilitate connections with various 'others', including plants, animals, nature at large, and ancestral spirits.

The four-day Estonian Tantra Festival, another popular annual event, has been organized since 2013. It attracts participants from around the world, drawing on modern Western appropriation of the term 'tantra' and its philosophical underpinnings. Its website states that the festival's mission is 'to unite people [in] a [...] loving community and show the way to self-awareness through high-quality spiritual practices'. Participants are encouraged to 'grow together in [...] connection with [their] hearts'. Building on the fact that 'tantra' in Sanskrit means 'woven together', the festival also emphasizes the importance of uniting 'one's body, mind, and soul, and thereby find[ing] divinity and enlightenment [...] in oneself, as well as in other people and in the surrounding world'.

While the Shaman Days and the Estonian Tantra Festival have relatively specific thematic foci, the High on Life festival, introduced in this article's opening vignette and discussed in greater detail in the next section, offers a veritable smorgasbord of diverse spiritual practices. Many border on the secular, including relationship advice, psychological counselling, and massage therapy.

Any attempt to produce a demographic profile of an 'average' participant at these spiritual festivals would inevitably be an oversimplification. Certain generalizations, however, can be made based on my own fieldnotes and festival organizers' estimates. Female participants tend to dominate slightly, and relatively more participants at these events attend them as singles than as couples. Participants in their early thirties to early fifties dominate.⁷ All this accords with the results of various surveys showing that the appeal of new spiritualities is strongest among both the younger and middle-aged population, and women (L. Altnurme 2021b, 116).

The ensuing discussion builds on my participant observation since 2021 at these three spiritual festivals, open-ended conversations with seasonal and occasional participants at these events, and my close observation of their discussion forums, websites, and advertising practices. Connecting with 'others' and the resulting self-transformation is at the core of all three festivals. However, to keep my ethnographic gaze and analytical focus sufficiently targeted, this paper draws primarily on the High on Life festival. As an 'all-encompassing' and 'something-for-everyone' event, it explicitly caters to the most diverse audience of the three. In presenting my data, I have deliberately prioritized generalized and impersonalized observations during this festival above high-resolution portraits and individual stories to respect and secure participants' privacy and anonymity. With one exception quotations from specific festival attendees have been taken only from publicly available testimonials on the festival website. Their names in this paper are the same as they appear on the festival website.

In analysing the collected data, I first iteratively and recursively examined fieldnotes from participant observation, conversations, and online visual and textual materials. The aim was to identify occasions during festival workshops when the workshop organizers encouraged participants to interact with one another, particularly through verbal or embodied engagement. I focused on generating thick descriptions of these interactions, the organizers' guidelines, and retrospective statements from participants regarding their

⁷ Some festivals have age restrictions to participation. For example, participants of the Estonian Tantra Festival must be at least 18 years old.

experiences. The resulting accounts were then subjected to thematic analysis to discern how the notions of 'self', 'other', and 'transformation' were either implicitly or explicitly addressed during these interactions. Ultimately, the results of this analysis were reframed using Taylor's conceptual vocabulary, especially his distinction between 'buffered' and 'porous' selves. I argue that this framework effectively captures the workshops' transformative essence.

Zooming in: The High on Life festival

The following is a higher-resolution ethnographic glimpse of the High on Life festival and some of its workshops, referred to as 'processes' by the festival organizers. Held annually in July at a retreat centre relatively close to Tallinn, the grounds of the High on Life festival feature three buildings called 'temples'. The 'Temple of Connection' is a permanent wooden structure; the 'Main Temple' and the 'Temple of Power' are large tents erected for the festival's duration. In the inner open area between these temples are massage tables, small meditation tents, and several stands selling incense, crystals, medicinal plants, and spiritual literature. This space serves multiple purposes: vegetarian food is offered twice a day; and ecstatic dance sessions featuring psycho-trance music are held during lunchbreaks and in the evenings, providing an energetic and communal atmosphere.

The festival workshops and events mainly take place in the three temples. One can join and leave the 'processes' whenever one pleases, though in some cases late arrivals or early departures are frowned on. During most workshops the tents' walls are rolled up, allowing those festival attendees who prefer not to engage physically in the rituals to observe them from outside. The workshops' nature and content are varied, as the festival seeks to attract individuals with a wide array of interests and preferences. For example, several workshops entail culturally appropriated forms of meditative practices such as 'shaking', 'pulsation', 'circling', 'Kali', and 'Osho dynamic meditation'. The same applies to several forms of yoga, including 'acrobatic yoga', 'yoga nidra', and blindfold yoga, as well as ecstatic dancing like the 'Mandala and Tandava dance'. The festival also features workshops that explore 'shibari' or 'Japanese rope bondage', as well as breathing exercises based on the Wim Hof Method. Participants can also engage in tea and fire ceremonies and experience shamanic drum processions. One night of the festival is dedicated to an all-night Gong Puja.

Although gender is not an explicit focus of this paper, and it should be noted that my data did not reveal significant gender differences regarding

this paper's primary analytical focus – the self-transformative impact of embodied practices during festival workshops and the dynamic of becoming a 'porous self' – it is relevant to highlight the gendered nature of various workshops at the High on Life festival. A binary conceptualization of gender tends to underlie the festival's dominant rhetoric, and heteronormativity is implied in most workshops.⁸ The 'others' with whom participants are encouraged to connect, open up to, and establish increased intimacy – through various embodied activities as demonstrated below – are often though not exclusively individuals of the 'opposite sex'. The workshops' gendered nature is often evident in their names, particularly in those intended exclusively for men or women. Examples of such explicitly gendered workshops are 'Women's and Men's Circle of Power', 'Conscious Masculinity', and 'Female Sexuality, Orgasm, and Pleasure'. Other workshops are primarily designed for heterosexual couples, including 'Tantra Date', 'The Art of Hugging', 'The Ecstatic Awakening of the Body', 'Conscious Touching', and 'Energetic Tantric Massage'. While public nudity is tolerated in some of these workshops, it is rarely practised. It is also noteworthy that all the workshops are predominantly designed for able-bodied participants.

Although most 'processes' begin with participants focusing mindfully on their own bodies and selves, two recurring ways challenge the boundary between the self and other selves, and simultaneously that between one's own and other bodies. The first involves establishing deliberate eye contact with another person, often accompanied by light touching. In various workshops participants are explicitly encouraged to choose a partner, preferably a person they do not know, and sit or stand facing each other while maintaining eye contact. One such example occurred in a workshop called 'The Marriage between Inner Man and Woman'. This workshop commenced with approximately fifty women dressed in white dancing in the Main Temple, while a similar number of men, also in white, waited outside the tent, facing inwards. Soon the men also entered, forming a circle around the women. This formation quickly dissolved into a more fluid arrangement, during which participants were encouraged to establish eye contact and find a partner. Once paired, they were asked to hold hands and lightly touch their partners' bodies, first agreeing on and respecting the other person's boundaries. The pairs were then instructed to lie down, hug, and maintain this position for nearly fifteen minutes.

⁸ That said, festival guidelines emphasize the openness of the event and its workshops to all sexual orientations.

Although not all the pairs were comfortable with such intimacy, most adhered to the guidelines.

Triin, a participant in this workshop with whom I later discussed the experience, found it perplexing how ‘astonishing energy’, to use her own words, had surfaced during the ritual, and how quickly and intensely her body felt an ‘energetic connection’ with her ritual partner, despite being twice his age and not knowing him beforehand. Her experience well captures what Frost (2016, 572) describes as characteristic of festival-like events in general: a sense of being carried away by the event’s momentum through improvised action and kinetic excitement, the experience of a peculiar intensity that comes with a collapsing of time and space, and a blurring of the distinction between participating individuals. Various other festival participants also highlighted deliberate and prolonged eye contact with others as an extraordinary and transformative bodily experience. Kristel, for example, argued in a post-festival testimonial that by looking deeply into other people’s eyes, she had gained considerable confidence and courage, and learned something new about herself and her feelings.

The acoustic background for the ‘Marriage between Inner Man and Woman’ workshop was Estonian composer Arvo Pärt’s well-known *‘Spiegel im Spiegel’* (‘Mirror in Mirror’). The choice of this piece of classical music fitted what was meant to be happening during this ‘process’. The festival’s information leaflet, provided to all participants during registration, explicitly stated: if people chose to be ‘the mirrors of one another’, they could ‘look more deeply than ever into themselves, others, and the world’. Indeed, the trope of ‘reflection’ was frequently used in festival participants’ retrospective accounts of their interactions with others during rituals. Anni, for example, described the effect of participating in the ‘processes’, which had helped her connect more deeply with herself and others:

These activities brought me into contact with interesting pathfinders and teachers who allowed me to experience myself through the *reflections* of others.

The deliberate engineering of a connection with the ‘other’, similar to that described in the ‘Marriage between Inner Man and Woman’ workshop, was also frequent in many other rituals. The terms ‘body’ and ‘energy’ featured prominently and often together in participants’ recollections of these experiences. In the case of many new spiritualities, as Johnston and Barcan (2006, 25–29) have argued, the concept of the ‘subtle body’ is often

used to describe a model of embodied subjectivity in which matter and consciousness are not understood as ontologically distinct but as varieties of 'resonating energy' that extend beyond the corporeal self into the 'space' between the self, the other, and the world.

Participants in the workshops that required establishing deliberate eye contact with and light touching of partners were often asked to share their experiences after the session. Many reported feeling pushed out of their comfort zones, but like Kristel, quoted above, they considered this experience revelatory, rewarding, and extraordinary. However, they often found it difficult to verbalize this bodily experience's 'true' essence. This is hardly surprising, as the relationship between language, experience, and the body is complex, as Barnes (2016, 261) has eloquently demonstrated. In a phenomenological analysis of divine experience and religious conversion that transforms the body into something new, namely a habitation of divine presence, Barnes describes the challenges social actors face in expressing this novel bodily experience and state in words. Bodies that have 'opened up' to often sensory aspects of the new experience and the worlds that include the divine need to be rendered 'speaking bodies' that translate these experiences using vocabulary from more familiar everyday realms, and this can be a challenging endeavour. Importantly, as Barnes (*ibid.*) notes, these bodily experiences often emerge in situations of social relatedness with other bodies rather than in solitude, and the workshops at spiritual festivals, where participants collectively engage in various embodied rituals, are thus appropriate settings for triggering such experiences.

The second recurring practice of contesting the boundary between the self and others, in addition to deliberate eye contact and light touching, involves ending the rituals with the formation of concentric circles or a spiral of participants' bodies that, as the ritual approaches its conclusion, move increasingly tightly together. During this process the ritual's participants slowly but steadily push themselves and other bodies from the circle's edges towards its centre. These acts of 'swarming' are performed while dancing, chanting, and singing, ultimately aiming for maximum touch and contact between all bodies. This was the case at the end of the shaking meditation session, also known as TRE (Trauma Release Exercises), in the Main Temple. The workshop began with everyone 'working on' themselves individually yet in unison with others, shaking their bodies to a psycho-trance rhythm, inhaling and exhaling loudly, and occasionally shouting. The 45-minute session concluded with the formation of the Circle of Power (*væring*), in which all the by then heavily sweating bodies joined tightly together,

participants holding each other by the shoulders and waists and pushing towards the pack's centre, thus becoming 'one tribe' as the workshop organizer put it. Indeed, the 'tribe' metaphor was also frequently used in many other workshops that included such 'swarming'. Other studies have made similar observations: Duffy et al. (2011) argue that ego boundaries may be 'softened' through feelings of connection and *communitas* in shared enjoyment of rhythm and movement while dancing.

The powerful and profoundly transformative effect of challenging the boundaries between participants' selves and bodies – by shifting the focus of ritual activities from the individual to an interaction between them – features prominently in many participants' testimonials posted on the High on Life festival's website. Pille, for example, recounted:

What an amazing and life-changing experience! How many experiences of healing and transcendence! How easy it [was] to find love within yourself and be in that feeling of love. I've never seen such a group before, where there are no judgments, only understanding and true togetherness. I'm moved to tears.

Various testimonials emphasize 'opening up' as the transformative experience's key aspect. Kairi used explicitly spiritual vocabulary when describing this:

I felt my heart opening up by the end of the festival. It was something I desperately needed and was actually looking for – some form of higher-level opening [...]. I felt [...] that I was a fully Enlightened Being.

Anni described the experience as follows:

All these moments and events [...] helped me sense more deeply this space of being held, where it's safe to open up and to express myself and my truth.

Anni also highlighted the healing effect of taking care of her body and mind 'through joy and pleasure'. Other testimonials like Tom's emphasized the healing aspect of such self-transformation. For him the festival meant and contributed to 'the heart space and healing'. Various other metaphors were used to summarize the transformative experience of the festival's workshops. Kaie emphasized the resulting feeling of 'extraordinary lightness, being fulfilled, and connected'. Siim claimed the festival experience 'expanded

my world and took me to new heights'. Anton defined the experience as the creation of 'more clarity and space within myself'.

Rendering 'buffered' selves 'porous'

What is common to all the experiences described above is a certain sense of increased 'connectedness', which can mean different things to different participants. A festival organizer explained this in a promotional video for the event:

What does 'being connected' mean? First and foremost it means being in touch with yourself but also with your surroundings, your partner, your femininity, your masculinity, the universe, your emotions. It involves a more conscious and deeper look at life [... in order] to know yourself and to discover [...] all the energies that we can experience when we're present in ourselves, or when we're relating to others.

Charles Taylor's (2007) distinction between the 'porous' and the 'buffered' self is useful for theorizing the shifts during the festival workshops outlined above, from taking care of oneself and one's own body to opening up and connecting with other selves and bodies. Building on Weber, Taylor describes modernity as a disenchanted condition and moral ordering where the self is buffered from the external world's contingency. Pre-modern selves resided in an enchanted world and were by definition porous, which meant the sources of their most powerful and important emotions were outside the 'mind' (Taylor 2007, 38). The pre-modern self's porosity rendered it 'vulnerable to spirits, demons, [and] cosmic forces' (ibid.). In contrast, being a modern buffered subject entails the closing of the previously permeable boundary between one's inside – the thought or the mind – and the outside – nature, the physical, and the universe at large.

As Taylor (ibid.) suggests, the disengagement that becoming a buffered self historically entailed was carried out in relation to one's whole surroundings, both natural and social. Smith (2012, 58), engaging with and elaborating on Taylor, further clarifies that such disengagement means 'we have come to see ourselves as significantly independent of others – i.e. as individuals in an atomistic or monadic sense who can "objectively analyse" and dispassionately act in any given situation'. While 'the enchanted world [...] shows a perplexing absence of certain boundaries' (Taylor 2007, 33), to modern individuals, 'Westerners' in particular, 'meanings are understood to

be created “within” the human subject; [and their] responses to the external world are “internal”; there is (or appears to be) a sharp boundary between self and other, individual and society, subject and world’ (Smith 2012, 59). This boundary, or ‘buffer’ in Taylor’s vocabulary, leads to a ‘new sense of the self and its place in the cosmos’ (Taylor 2007, 27).

According to McClure (2020, 464) Taylor’s ‘buffered self’ accounts for many social realities of modern life, including a more general disengagement from larger institutions and social organizations: when explaining the rise of this new cultural consciousness, Taylor carefully points out that the buffered self did not emerge in a vacuum. Certain historical conditions enabled this: Taylor (2007, 239) describes these changes as an ‘anthropocentric shift’ that contributed to a new ‘social and civilizational framework which inhibits or blocks out certain of the ways in which transcendence has historically impinged on humans, and been present in their lives’.

Being a buffered self means being invulnerable to a world of spirits and spiritual powers, some of whom can be malign, and it also endows the self with a sense of independence and the capacity to order one’s own world and oneself (Taylor 2007, 300). At the same time, however, it leads to an impoverished existential condition, as it is distanced and disengaged from everything outside the mind. According to Taylor (2007, 38) this is why in the contemporary world many people – disengaged rational agents – allegedly look back nostalgically to the world of the porous self.⁹

Although occasionally criticized,¹⁰ Taylor’s distinction and theoretical lexicon have been used in many thematic contexts (e.g. Murison 2015; Murphy 2019) and constitute a helpful tool for scrutinizing the self-transformation that spiritual festival rituals encourage and aim to trigger. What seems to be at stake in the workshops of the High on Life festival, for example, is an attempt to revert to a more connected and essentially porous sense of

⁹ Taylor’s conceptualization of the porosity of the pre-modern self, with its capacity to be open to otherness, bears some similarity to what anthropologists have described as ‘dividual’ or ‘partible’ persons, first in Indian (Dumont [1966] 1980), then in Melanesian, contexts (e.g. Strathern 1988; Wagner 1991). Taylor’s juxtaposition of porous and buffered selves is in turn congruent with the distinction made in these studies between relational, permeable, fractal, composite, socially embedded, engaged ‘dividual’ personhood on the one hand and bounded, non-divisible, monadic, atomistic ‘individual’ personhood on the other. Smith (2012) has extensively discussed the differences and commonalities between these anthropological approaches and Taylor’s distinction.

¹⁰ For example, Smith (2009) suggests that Taylor’s argumentation is framed as a polarization that clearly defaults porous subjectivity as the preferred option and is oriented as an attack on the buffered self.

self, which is why the festival organizers' description of these practices as 'processes' is particularly apt. Becoming a more porous self, not buffered from other selves and the world, is deemed to lead to a more 'authentic' and comprehensive state of moral existence which concurs with Taylor's (2007, 38) claim about nostalgia for the world of the porous self and for the more intimate and fuller engagement that he claims to be 'perhaps the clearest sign of the transformation in our world' (ibid.). During the opening ceremony of the High on Life festival described at the beginning of this article, festival organizers frequently used the Estonian word '*päriselt*', which means 'truly', 'really', or 'genuinely', to outline the forthcoming festival experience and its transformative potential. The word was used when suggesting the festival's aim was to 'learn to be authentic and genuine, and to communicate honestly', emphasizing that the festival was 'a truly authentic' occasion, allowing participants to 'really meet' and 'genuinely sense the magic that this meeting of others engenders, [...] through being in touch with one's partner, with oneself, and with one's own feelings'.

As became evident, the shift during the 'processes' from being a buffered to a porous self directly involved one's physical body. In the case of rituals at the High on Life festival, as argued above, this body is often gendered and assumed to be heteronormative in its sexual orientation. In new spiritualities the relationship between the body and the self is often seen as deeply interconnected, with the body acting as both an expression and a medium for the self. This view departs from traditional dualistic conceptions that separate body and mind, instead promoting an understanding in which physical and spiritual or mental aspects are intertwined and influence one another. It is therefore unsurprising that the transformation of the *self* in the workshops is implicated in and forged by *bodies*. As Zygmunt Bauman (1983, 41) notes, 'the urge "to do something about my life" is most eagerly translated into a precept "to do something about my body."' A more accurate way to put it in the context of this discussion, however, would be: '...to do something with my body in relation to other bodies.'

A shift from being a buffered to a porous self often entails the establishment of greater intimacy with other bodies, as was evident in the above descriptions of touching ritual partners' bodies and acts of 'swarming'. This intimacy is not necessarily sexual – though it can be. As Taylor (2007, 142) also argues, the bufferedness of the self not only presumes a firm boundary with the world which has been disenchanted, but further barriers are raised against strong physical desires and fascination with the body, drastically

narrowing the range of permitted intimacy. According to Taylor (*ibid.*) buffered selves are trained to relate to each other outside the narrow circles of intimacy which remain as dignified subjects of rational control, whose defining relations are no longer intimate. In other words, bufferedness is also a state of separation from other bodies. Returning to increased porosity in turn implies the widening of the spectrum of intimacy, which is precisely what happens in festival workshops that encourage bodily contact, often between total strangers.

Of course, opening up to strangers can be challenging, or as Taylor puts it, the self's porosity renders it more vulnerable. Participants in spiritual festival workshops that require increased physical closeness to and intimacy with other bodies often feel emotional and sometimes physical discomfort, as shown above, yet consider the experience transformative and ultimately positively exhilarating. Becoming a porous self by being in touch and more connected with others can thus be interpreted as an act of embodied learning and growth. Although festival workshops entail going beyond one's comfort zone, it is precisely this moment of discomfort in the rituals when learning and growth occurs. As has also been argued concerning the connection between religion and self-inflicted pain, for example, the body's limits may be explored out of a person's desire to grow beyond their 'normal' self, and pain appears to serve as an indicator that the limit has been reached, and 'self-enhancement' has begun (Roessler 2006).

Conclusions

New spiritualities typically position the self, rather than external religious structures, as the ultimate source of meaning and guidance, prompting individuals to seek spiritual truths within themselves. Yet new spiritualities encourage self-transformation and a more pronounced sense of connectedness with various 'others'. Both acts – cultivating an enlightened sense of self and striving to transcend it – represent forms of self-transformation that in the broader subculture of new spiritualities constitute continuous pathways to spiritual growth. This paper has sought to contribute to the study of new spiritualities more generally and spiritual festivals more specifically by analysing the latter as embodied sites of fostering such self-transformation. As I have argued, Charles Taylor's conceptual distinction between the buffered and porous self provides a fitting and dynamic analytical framework for examining the *process* of self-transformation during spiritual festivals. I have demonstrated through the ethnographic example of the High on Life

festival in Estonia how festival workshops and rituals can afford their participants' transcending of their ordinary sense of 'buffered' self and render it more 'porous'. Deliberate choreographed engagements and interactions between participants' bodies facilitate this transformation during the workshops, underscoring physicality's pivotal role in spiritual practices aiming for self-transformation. Activities such as establishing sustained eye contact, mutual touching and hugging, synchronized bodily movements especially while dancing, and acts of 'swarming' during the rituals and workshops this paper describes serve as tangible and potentially powerful tools for challenging, if not dismantling, the 'buffer' between the self and others. These practices foster heightened levels of connectedness and intimacy, which participants in spiritual festivals may regard as the most meaningful and even life-changing aspects of their festival experience.

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Being Finnish, Being Muslim: National Identity, Citizenship, and Belonging among Muslim Women in Finland

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Abstract

This article explores Muslim women's views of their religious and national identities, citizenship, and belonging in Finland. The primary material consists of 20 semi-structured interviews collected in 2021 and 2022. The interviews convey three different understandings of the relationship between Finnish and Muslim identity: the perception of oneself as a Finnish Muslim; the perception of oneself as a non-Finnish Muslim; and the perception of oneself as a multicultural citizen. Additionally, two notions can be observed regarding Muslim identity: one sees Muslimness as a central and unchanging aspect of one's core identity; the other views it as a highly fluid and context-dependent group identity. Islamic religiosity does not in itself seem to reduce attachment to Finnish identity. Instead, those distancing themselves from Finnishness often referred to experiences of not having their Finnishness acknowledged by society. Identification with the ummah, the worldwide community of believers, proved to be relatively low or completely rejected.

Keywords: *citizenship, national identity, boundary-making, Muslims, Islam, Finland*

During the last couple of decades debates about Muslims' presence and belonging in the countries of the Global West have become increasingly common. Behind controversies over sharia councils, prayer rooms at workplaces, and women-only swimming hours at public pools lie more fundamental, intertwined questions about national self-understandings and definitions of liberty. In their loyalties Muslims are often assumed to prioritize their religious above any national affiliation. Scholars have also occasionally posited this: Bernard Lewis characterizes Islam as 'not just a religion in the limited Western sense of the word, but a complete system of

identity, loyalty, and authority' (Lewis 2010, 29). In countries with growing Muslim minorities this understanding of Islam as a totalizing identity has prompted an alarmist discourse concerning the alleged weakening of social fabric and the emergence of 'parallel societies'.

Research on Muslims' religious and national identities has been conducted in numerous European countries, particularly in those with sizable Muslim populations. While there are common observations across different locations, the national context also plays a role. Research on this topic in Finland has thus far been relatively scarce and has focused on specific Muslim subgroups, indicating the need for further research. My objective is to expand the current scholarly understanding by focusing on the experiences and views of Muslim women from various age groups and backgrounds. I address the following questions. How do Muslim women's religious identities reflect how they see themselves in Finnish society? Does Islamic religiosity affect their feelings of national and civic membership? I approach this topic using a constructionist framework that understands all social groups as ideas made and remade in social processes rather than clearly demarcated entities with essential characteristics (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Gergen 2001; Burr 2004). I focus on boundaries and boundary making.

Women have been chosen as the focus of this study because their position tends to be at the centre of many debates concerning Islam in the West. The age-old dichotomies reproduced in these debates manifest themselves above all in questions about women's bodies. They emerge time and again in controversies over issues such as gender segregation, veiling, family law, and exemptions from compulsory education (Ahmed 1992; Roald 2001; Fekete 2006; Kundnani 2012; Cesari 2013). By focusing on these women's experiences and views, the study aims to shed light on the factors that shape their belonging and participation, and on how they negotiate their roles and identities within both their communities and wider Finnish society.

The article proceeds as follows: in the next section I describe the religious diversity context in Finland and the history and current situation of Muslims in the country. I then outline the main findings of previous research, including both quantitative studies based on large samples and qualitative studies focusing on individual countries or cities. I then describe the theoretical framework used and present my research method and material. Finally, I discuss the findings and present concluding remarks.

Background

Finland's Muslim community was small throughout most of the twentieth century. It began to grow in the early 1990s due to immigration from Somalia, the Balkans, and the MENA region. It is somewhat difficult to estimate the number of Muslims in the country, as most are not registered members of an Islamic congregation. According to recent estimates there were approximately 120,000 to 130,000 Muslims with an immigrant background living in Finland in 2019. In addition, there were approximately 550 Tatars and a few thousand converts (Pauha and Konttori 2022; Pauha and Martikainen 2022). This equates to 2.2 to 2.4 per cent of the total population. However, the estimated number of Muslims with an immigrant background is based on countries of birth and their religious distribution, which means the number of practising Muslims is likely to be smaller. Even in a fictitious 'zero migration' scenario, their relative share of the population is expected to grow due to their being much younger on average than Finns: in 2023 approximately half of ethnic Finns were aged 45 or older, and less than a third (31%) were under the age of 30. In contrast, almost half of Iraqis and two thirds of Somalis in Finland were under 30 (Statistics Finland, n.d.).¹

Where citizenship and belonging are concerned, it is more common for Finns to emphasize civic rather than nativist elements of Finnishness: in a survey published in 2018 respect for the country's institutions and laws and the ability to speak Finnish were widely seen as important for national identity, with 98 and 68 per cent concurring respectively. However, over half (51%) the respondents felt that to truly share Finnish identity, having a family background in the country was either very or somewhat important, and almost a third (32%) saw being a Christian as similarly relevant (Pew Research Center 2018, 55). The prevailing view was that there was a fundamental contradiction between Islam and national culture and values. This view was expressed by 62 per cent of Finnish respondents, the highest percentage in the sample of 15 Western European countries included in the survey (*ibid.* 66). Almost half (49%) the research participants either completely or mostly agreed with the statement, 'Our people are not perfect, but our culture is superior to others', and 31 per cent either completely or mostly agreed with the statement, 'In their hearts Muslims want to impose their religious law on everyone else in Finland' (*ibid.* 57, 71).

¹ Statistics Finland's classification determines a person's origin and background country based on their parents' birth country information.

To summarize, significant changes in cultural and religious diversity have occurred in Finnish society in the last couple of decades. Compared with many other European countries, large-scale immigration from Muslim-majority countries to Finland is relatively recent. Further changes are also bound to take place not only due to continuing immigration but also because of the respective age structures of both the Muslim minority and the general population in the country. However, perceptions of Islam as foreign and incompatible with Finnish culture remain quite common.

Previous research

The relationship of European Muslims' religiosity and religious identity to national attachment has been studied in many countries, with both qualitative and quantitative methods and various theoretical frameworks. Quantitative research shows that strong Muslim identification is often negatively related to national ('host-country') identification. However, these studies also suggest that there is no inherent conflict between religious minority and national identities. While there are significant variations in how Muslim identity interacts with national identity across different European countries and cities and among different groups of Muslims, perceived discrimination consistently emerges as an important mediating factor (Verkuyten and Yildiz 2007; Kunst et al. 2012; Martinovic and Verkuyten 2012; Karlsen and Nazroo 2013; Fleischmann and Phalet 2016).

Qualitative studies of European Muslims' religious identities, belonging, and civic engagement have been carried out in various countries, including Spain (Boland 2020; Collet-Sabé 2020), France (Beaman 2016), Germany (Peucker 2018), Great Britain (Mustafa 2016; Shazhadi et al. 2018), and the Netherlands (Hass and Lutek 2018). While the subgroup of Muslims in focus varies from one case to another – young adults, teenagers, women, visibly observant, members of the middle class, and so on – a recurring finding in most studies is that while respondents see no conflict between their religious and national attachments, many feel others do not always recognize their claims to national membership. Another observation in several studies concerns how respondents reinterpret the meanings of both citizenship and Islam. They may frame citizenship as a membership based on civic engagement rather than ethnicity or national culture, or their religious practice and identity in ways that correspond to the prevailing liberal ideals of religion in society (Beaman 2016; Mustafa 2016; Shazhadi et al. 2018).

Several studies have explored this topic in Finland. A study based on group discussions examined how immigrants and majority Finns negotiated cultural citizenship and integration in Finnish society. They found that while Russian- and Estonian-speaking participants often expressed support for the idea of immigrants conforming to mainstream society, Somali participants did not see becoming Finnish in cultural terms as feasible or desirable (Varjonen et al. 2017). In his doctoral dissertation Teemu Pauha (2018) investigates the construction of religious and national identities among young Muslims in Finland, using the framework of the social psychology of religion. The thesis consists of three sub-studies that utilize different methodologies and datasets. While Pauha's young informants valued their Finnish citizenship, they seemed to perceive Finnish nationality as antithetical to Muslimness (Pauha and Jasinskaja-Lahti 2013; Pauha 2015). Even when not depicted as inherently incompatible, Islam and Finnish nationality appeared to exist as distinct and separate: 'They are like two different clubs; one can belong to both the Islam club and the Finnish club, but "a Finnish Islam club" is not on offer' (Pauha 2018, 56). The study indicates that young Muslims in Finland identify with transnational, de-ethnicized Islam, which corresponds to their lived reality as members of peer groups that are both multiethnic and multicultural (ibid. 55–56.) By drawing a clear boundary between Islam and Finnishness, the informants reflect the prevailing narrative of Islam as foreign to Finland and Finnish culture.

To summarize, Muslims' religious and national identities have been studied in many European countries, particularly in those with relatively long immigration histories and larger Muslim minorities. Based on the results, it is clear that although certain observations recur from one location to another, national context also matters. Studies of this topic in Finland have thus far been fewer, the aforementioned ones suggesting that the notion of Muslimness as alien to Finnishness is shared not only by the non-Muslim majority but also many Muslims themselves. As these studies have focused on individual subgroups of Muslims in the country, however, further research on the subject is needed. I aim to complement the current picture by examining the experiences of Muslim women of diverse ages and backgrounds.

Theoretical framework

I use a social constructionist framework approach for my research topic, according to which identities and boundaries between social groups are products of social processes (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Gergen 2001;

Burr 2004). Boundary-making approaches to groups draw on the works of Max Weber and Fredrik Barth. Weber defines ethnic groups as 'those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent', irrespective of 'whether or not an objective blood relationship exists' (Weber [1922] 1978, 389). It is primarily the political community that inspires the belief in shared ethnicity, not the other way around. Barth (1969) criticizes the simplistic view of cultures that treats ethnic diversity as an outcome of mere geographical and social isolation, pointing out that ethnic boundaries tend to persist despite interaction and mobility across them. The continuity of an ethnic unit, he argues, depends on a boundary's maintenance, and the focus of research should thus be 'the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses' (ibid., 15). Group identity is therefore always relational, and a key part of claiming an identity is having that identity acknowledged by others as well (Jenkins 2000; 2014). The conceptual distinction between groups and categories is relevant here. A group is formed when its members recognize themselves as part of it. A category, meanwhile, is defined by outsiders, and its members may not recognize or accept it. Collective identities emerge simultaneously through both group identification and categorization (Jenkins 2014, 113).

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979) posits that all individuals strive for a positive self-understanding, and that the stability, legitimacy, and permeability of group boundaries influence the strategies they choose to achieve this goal. Stability refers to how changeable group positions are; legitimacy to the acceptance of the status structure; and permeability to an individual's ability to move between groups. In stable and legitimate structures with permeable boundaries minority members are likely to prefer national identification and individual mobility to group identification. When boundaries are impermeable, group identification increases, as minorities are unable to improve their individual position. In Europe religion has been said to constitute a 'bright boundary' that separates Muslims from the mainstream (Alba 2005). Derived from Social Identity Theory, the Rejection-Identification Model (Branscombe et al. 1999) argues that experiences of discrimination increase minority group identification, while the Rejection-Disidentification Model (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al. 2009) suggests that perceived discrimination discourages minorities from identifying with the superordinate national group, leading to national disidentification and increased hostility towards the national out-group.

Aristide Zolberg and Long Litt Woon (1999) explore immigrant incorporation and boundary dynamics through three concepts: crossing; blurring;

and shifting. Boundary crossing resembles assimilation, in which immigrants adopt attributes of the majority culture, while group distinctions remain. Blurring involves societal changes with overlapping memberships and less rigid boundaries, making distinctions less relevant in daily life. Shifting refers to the boundary's relocation through inclusion or exclusion. Andreas Wimmer (2008) uses a mostly similar typology but adds the concept of transvaluation, involving the reinterpretation of the normative hierarchy between groups through normative inversion or equalization. The former reverses the hierarchy, elevating the marginalized group; the latter aims for moral and political equality between groups.

In summary, the relevance and permeability of a given boundary varies across historical, cultural, and institutional contexts. In some situations social groups are clearly defined by easily identifiable markers; in others the boundaries are more fluid and open to interpretation. In Europe religion has been seen to constitute a clear dividing line, especially for Muslim communities.

Data and methods

This study's primary material consists of 20 interviews conducted in 2021 and 2022. Most of the interviewees lived in the Helsinki metropolitan area, and a few in Turku and Tampere. The interviewees' median age at the time of the interview was 27, and the mean age was 31. Nine interviewees were employed full-time at the time of the interview, the majority (six) working in the field of social services and healthcare. Six women were students in tertiary education, some also working part-time. Ten interviewees were converts, and the majority (eight) had converted when they were in their late teens or early twenties. The youngest converts had been Muslims for a few years; some older ones for several decades. Three women were born abroad, the others in Finland. Of those born abroad, one had immigrated to Finland as a small child, one as a teenager, and one as a young adult. All held Finnish citizenship and spoke Finnish. To ensure anonymity, details such as exact ages, background countries, or the professions of individual interviewees are not included here.

The interviewees were found using purposive and volunteer sampling through various channels, including personal contacts, Muslim associations, and social media. The only eligibility criteria for the interviewees were that they identified as Muslims and had strong ties to Finnish society through long-term residence, proficiency in Finnish, and/or formal citizenship. The

type of purposive sampling used was maximum variation sampling. It aims to collect data from the broadest possible spectrum of perspectives and to find patterns that 'cut across cases and derive their significance from having emerged out of heterogeneity' (Patton 2002, 235). In the research data there is variance in interviewees' ages, ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and religious paths. A semi-structured interview was chosen as the data collection method. Interviews were conducted in Finnish. In each interview the same topics were discussed, but the participants were also allowed to raise issues they themselves felt were relevant. Interview questions were relatively specific but open-ended and varied slightly, depending on each interviewee's background. Some questions were modified along the way if a given choice of words produced only very short and superficial answers, for example. The interviews ranged from approximately 40 minutes to two hours. Interviews were discontinued when the point of saturation was reached.

Both social and subjective religiosity were explored by asking interviewees about their religious practices and beliefs. Social religiosity was explored by discussing habits such as participating in religious gatherings (e.g. communal prayers, study groups), active participation in Muslim online communities, and organizing or attending events held by Islamic associations. Subjective religiosity – the experienced importance of faith and commitment to it – was explored by discussing the interviewees' thoughts on Islam's meaning and impact on daily life and their observance of Islamic practices (fasting, five daily prayers, zakat, and halal diet).² Interviewees were also asked questions regarding various modes of political participation and civic engagement, and their thoughts on topics such as democracy, citizenship, Finnish culture, discrimination, and minority rights. All the women interviewed for this study considered themselves religious to some degree. When asked to describe their religious identity in their own words, almost half identified simply as 'Muslim' or 'ordinary Muslim'. Four described themselves primarily as Sunni. Most interviewees did not mention

2 It should be emphasized that the aim was not to place each interviewee on any particular religiosity scale: 'measuring' religiosity by behaviour is far from straightforward. What counts as active involvement differs significantly not only by religion but also by denomination, local context, and gender. For example, whereas many studies focusing on Christianity often measure religiosity by asking about church attendance, communal prayer at a mosque is usually only expected of men, and many mosques do not have spaces for women. Furthermore, in Muslim-minority contexts the lack of adequate easily reachable mosques and prayer rooms generally reduces communal religious practice, and the reasons for attending regularly may often be social rather than purely religious.

any particular school of thought. When asked, many stated that they used various sources and combined them in their own practice. One interviewee identified primarily as Salafi.

I used thematic analysis to analyse the interview material. This is an interpretative approach that involves identifying patterns or themes within a dataset. I coded the interviews using Atlas.ti software, utilizing both semantic and latent coding. I also paid attention to how things were said (e.g. pauses, hesitation, irritation, laughing). The codes included respondents' descriptions of their religious identities and practices, their perceptions and experiences of belonging and participation, and the boundaries they drew around their identities. These codes were then used to define themes. My approach to thematic analysis is reflexive. Unlike various coding reliability approaches, reflexive thematic analysis rejects any positivistic notions of data analysis. It is accepted that codes and themes are always the researcher's interpretations that someone else may not reproduce identically. Themes do not simply 'emerge' from the data as if they were merely residing there for the researcher to find (Braun and Clarke 2006; 2021; Braun et al. 2022).

Most discussions concerning ethics in qualitative research revolve around questions of harm, informed consent, and privacy (Bryman 2012; Bhopal and Deuchar 2016). It is often difficult to reach and motivate marginalized groups to involve them in research. There may be reluctance to participate due to a lack of trust, especially if the researcher is an outsider. To overcome mistrust, I sought to be fully transparent about the entire research process, my own positionality, and my motives for researching this topic. During recruitment and interviewing I avoided terminology that might be considered unrepresentative or alienating. I discarded the idea of using labels that denoted sects or schools of thought because they did not correspond to the various ways people self-identified. I was also mindful that although it might seem unproblematic for the researcher to approach this topic using language that highlighted stigma and vulnerability, individual research participants might not see themselves that way. Before the interview I informed participants about the specifics of the process: I told them the material would be used only for this research, that they were free to discontinue the interview at any point, that they could decline to answer individual questions, that they had the right to request the withdrawal of their material at any point after the interview, that the material would be stored in password-protected folders separately from any personally identifiable information, and that it would be deleted after the research project's completion. I also encouraged the research participants to contact me should

any questions or concerns arise later. As Muslim communities in Finland are relatively small, anonymization was undertaken with particular care. Weak indirect identifiers were either removed or categorized.

Results

The material reveals three different understandings of the relationship between Finnish and Muslim identity: the perception of oneself as a Finnish Muslim; the perception of oneself as a non-Finnish Muslim; and the perception of oneself as a multicultural citizen. Additionally, regarding Muslim identity, two notions can be observed: one sees Muslimness as a central and unchanging aspect of one's core identity; the other views it as a highly fluid and context-dependent group identity.

'Different routes, common destination'

The first understanding perceives Islamic faith and Finnishness as two perfectly compatible elements of one's identity. This notion was common among – though not exclusive to – converts, most of whom identified strongly as both Finnish and Muslim.

I'm Finnish. My lifestyle is very Finnish, my family are completely Finnish, and it's perhaps the biggest part of me, Finnishness. [...] I live like a Finn, I eat Finnish food, my home looks Finnish.

I do identify as Finnish. Like, I feel profoundly Finnish. But I would say there have perhaps been periods in my life when I've felt I'm not accepted as a Finn. So [...] I've felt like 'okay, if I'm not accepted as a Finn then maybe there's no point in being one' [laughs]. But then I've come to the conclusion that I can't erase the Finnishness from myself so I should just be proudly Finnish, that I have the right to be and to define myself as such.

Women who took this stance stressed that there was nothing inherently foreign about Islam. When asked what they associated with Finnishness, the answers revolved mostly around Finnish nature, food, sauna, design, and decor. They acknowledged that some of their habits, opinions, and values differed from those of the majority, but these differences were seen as comparable to any variance in opinions and lifestyle choices within the general population. This is quite similar to Tina Gudrun Jensen's (2008) find-

ings in her research on 'ethnic Danes' who have converted to Islam. Some of Jensen's interviewees maintain that diversity is a characteristic of Danish culture and society, 'so they go against the homogenous and exclusionary definition of "Danishness"' (ibid., 396).

The interviewed converts included some women who abstained from voting, questioned or expressed uncertainty about the compatibility of Islam and representative democracy, wore a niqab, and adhered to strict gender segregation. Moral superiority was occasionally implied in relation to both the non-Muslim majority and 'cultural Muslims', and a boundary was maintained between 'folk Islam' and their own faith. Conservative Islam appeared to be a counterculture here, in which donning the niqab was an emancipatory act. Yet they also asserted that they were Finns through and through. Although theirs was a view of supranational Islam purified of culture, it still existed alongside other identifications. They entertained no ideas of moving to a Muslim country and saw no contradiction between their religious views and national belonging. Interestingly, despite their conservative views on gender roles and their stated misgivings about popular sovereignty, all were civically active in some way: in third sector organizations; through their studies or work; and occasionally even by petitioning the very members of parliament whose legitimacy they did not recognize.

The second understanding views Islamic faith as distinctly non-Finnish. In this perspective the bright boundary between Islam and Finnishness is accepted and enforced. Finnishness is understood in ethnocultural terms as a closed community into which one either cannot or should not integrate. This view was expressed by some second-generation Muslims who identified primarily as Muslims. Being Muslim was described as 'the core', 'the meaning', or 'the overarching theme' in one's life. Religious interpretations or practices appeared to have no substantial impact on the likelihood of holding this view. Instead, each of these respondents described having experiences of not having their Finnishness affirmed by others, which had made them question whether this was a label they needed after all.

My Muslim identity is very strong. [...] There are many other parts in it, but the Muslim part is the core. [...] When I was younger, I really wanted to be Finnish, but then I realized I didn't need to be, so I don't really identify as one. [...] I don't define myself through nationality. Religion is more important to me.

When interviewees distanced themselves from Finnishness, both transvaluation strategies were observable in their comments. Equalization was evident in responses in which Finns and Muslims were perceived as distinctly different groups, yet principally equal as citizens. Normative inversion was discernible in a few comments highlighting the difference between Muslims and Finns by referring to the latter's alcohol consumption, materialism, phony religiosity, or godlessness.

The third understanding considers both Finnishness and Muslimness as components of a person's multicultural, hybrid, or hyphenated identity. Finnishness is primarily understood here as civic membership, though the responses also included some references to traits (e.g. being honest or down-to-earth) perceived as culturally Finnish. This conception was expressed by both second-generation Muslims and those who had immigrated to Finland. In this case, too, many had experiences of not being seen as part of the imaginary of Finnishness, but rather than accepting Finnishness as ethnocultural membership and their own position as outsiders, they redefined it. As one participant expressed this, '[it's] kind of like cars that are going in the same direction but might take slightly different routes to that common destination'. While Finnishness usually appeared as something positive in these civic nationalist understandings of national identity, some interviewees also challenged the prevailing moralistic narrative that portrayed citizenship and national belonging as something minorities needed to earn through model behaviour. They described their refusal to play the part of the deserving, respectable, grateful immigrant or 'ambassador' for Muslims:

Even though I'm a Muslim and a woman, it doesn't mean I'm obliged to always be like 'hey, we're good, hey, don't think like that, I'm a good person'. [...] [T]hat you're not the sort of immigrant who's totally dependent on welfare benefits, for example. You must show the Finns how good you are and [...] then, this thought came to me about two years ago that it's a really onerous job to do. Why do I have to, why doesn't a normal Finn have to constantly show that they're good? [laughs] Why does all this burdensome work fall on us? That's why I no longer do it.

Many interviewees wished to see the existing boundary between Muslims and Finns either blurred or shifted. The idea was thought of as a certain 'mainstreaming' of Islam in Finnish society. Highlighted commonalities concerned work, consumer choices, and lifestyle. A frequent word in this context was 'ordinary':

There could be more stories [about Muslims], like, for example, the sort of amusing stories about someone's life in which [...] religion or life values are not brought up. Instead, they could be about that person talking about their hobby or something they're interested in or their business. Like, sort of, ordinary things [laughs]. So that the point of departure wouldn't always be religion or some trauma or racism.

I'd like to see, like, you know those [media pieces] where they show someone's home, for example – there could be a Muslim family showing their ordinary home furnished with Ikea furniture [laughs]. So Muslims would somehow be normalized. That it wouldn't always be that family with, like, only oriental decor because I think there's perhaps a tendency to exoticize. [...] That ordinariness is missing.

'My religion is Islam, not Muslims'

When asked to freely describe the meaning of faith in their lives, approximately half the interviewees stated that their faith was a very important or even the most important part of their identity, or that it affected every part of their daily life. The rest described their religious identity more mundanely as one part of them that might show in many situations because of the Muslim-minority context – or not. In most cases being Muslim merged with other self-identification markers like class, immigrant background, ethnicity, or country of origin. No one brought up the global Muslim ummah; the concept was discussed only when I specifically asked about it. When asked, most interviewees described it as either a beautiful idea that sadly had very little to do with reality or as utter nonsense to begin with.

The ummah is more divided than the parliament's political parties [laughs]. We have no united ummah. It's a dream. It's a dream of being part of something. Which is immensely ... like, [sighs] imams argue with one another, or they pretend not to know one another. Mosques are divided according to countries of origin. [...] Speaking of the ummah is, you could say it's utter nonsense.

The idea is not, like, *Muslims* are not my religion, my religion is Islam, it's God and His revelation. [...] Perhaps some people feel they find a family in Islam and sure, that sort of thing is also possible, but I'm not that dependent on other people. [...] I don't feel it's immensely important to be surrounded by people to somehow take care of me because I put my trust in God in all things.

When probed about whether they felt invested in Muslims' struggles and grievances in other countries, many interviewees appealed to common humanity rather than shared faith. To quote one respondent: 'Well, yes, I'd say I care about what goes on in places like Palestine, but so should everyone else.' Many interviewees questioned the notion of any kind of shared Muslim experience. This finding is in line with Jocelyne Cesari's (2013) observations based on focus group discussions in Amsterdam, Berlin, Paris, Boston, and London. Here, too, Islam seemed to be 'a strong personal identity marker rather than a sign of communal or group identity' (ibid. 33). When feelings of group belonging were expressed, they were mostly connected with being a member of a visible minority. A Muslim 'us' emerged occasionally when interviewees described their experiences of prejudice or harassment. While Islam was not the primary basis for group identity for most interviewees, many referred to it as a role imposed on them in daily interactions with the majority society. This external definition largely corresponds to Jenkins's (2000; 2014) notion of categorization. A recurring theme was the contradiction resulting from the prevailing expectation that a good Muslim citizen was one whose faith remained firmly in the private sphere on the one hand and the experience of many that, regardless of what they did, their faith was the one thing through which their entire persona tended to be defined on the other. Some described how life under constant scrutiny had made them monitor and adjust their own behaviour to avoid reinforcing any negative impressions.³

Here in Finland it [being Muslim] shows more because many of the things I did when I was still in [country of birth] were things I wasn't thinking that people would go like 'look at what that Muslim is doing'. But here, in many situations, I've abstained from doing something because I've thought that everyone would then assume that all Muslims are like that. [...] Over here you feel you have to make sure you don't give the wrong impressions about Muslims.

When describing their religious identities, respondents also created boundaries around what it meant to be a 'real Muslim'. Religion in opposition to culture was a recurring topic. Women with very differing religious views embraced the notion of an Islam purified of cultural elements. Associated values were equality, autonomy, and women's empowerment. Those born

³ Teemu Pauha also mentions similar descriptions of internalized governance (2015, 94–95) in his article on young Muslims in Finland.

Muslim tended to distinguish between pure Islam and the 'folk Islam' of their parents' generation, whereas some converts drew the same line between themselves and those born Muslim in general. In both cases the interviewees contrasted what they saw as blind adherence to tradition with their own active quest for truth.

There's this difference between me and my parents. I was born into a religious minority, whereas my parents were born in a Muslim-majority country and lived there for a while. There's this difference between us where my parents are like 'this is how we've always done things', kind of like Christians going to church in Finland. They don't necessarily think what for, whereas I think: 'Why? Where does this originate? Is this culture? Is this religion?' I go through these kinds of thoughts. At some point my parents can no longer answer because they realize they haven't been actively thinking [about the issue].

The way I see it is like, in the case of a convert to Islam who has studied their religion, their way of practising may be in a sense purer than that of a Muslim immigrant because for them their culture has had a significant impact on their practice. [...] If we think of Finnish converts who return to Islam, they usually take their religion from books – they don't get it, in a way, in their mother's milk like many Muslim immigrants do.

In addition to boundaries maintained between folk Islam and pure Islam and between born Muslims and converts, class was another factor used to create crosscutting categories. When conversation touched on issues like social inclusion or marginalization, interviewees generally did not see themselves as potential recipients of support. Some highlighted their own middle-class background and contrasted it with the image of a 'troubled Muslim', usually an uneducated immigrant at risk of lifelong welfare dependency, criminality, or radicalization. Such a person was considered in need of support and some form of intervention, and attitudes towards them ranged from sympathy to contempt. In a few cases interviewees also openly expressed critical sentiments concerning immigration from Muslim-majority countries. One respondent said she had considered voting for the right-wing populist Finns Party at the next election, saying she was fed up with 'immigrants being pampered'. She did not consider the Finns Party's anti-Islam rhetoric a major problem and said it stemmed from a lack of information that could be addressed. Rhetoric emphasizing differences in

social class and cultural background not only creates a boundary between middle-class respondents and the 'troubled Muslims' they describe, it also blurs the boundary between educated middle-class Muslims and the Finnish majority.

While almost all interviewees made some kind of distinction between folk Islam and what they saw as a purer Islam embraced by many young Muslims living in the West, there was significant unease about and rejection of concepts like 'Finnish' or 'European' Islam. Although researchers and journalists have used such terms to describe local and regional developments in identification and practice, interviewees saw them above all as terms that implicitly questioned the faith's universality. Similar unease was discernible when interviewees were asked whether they thought young European Muslims should find their own way to live as Muslims. Although many saw their way of life as clearly different from that of their parents' generation or from ways of life in Muslim-majority countries, they perceived such statements as less an assertion of freedom than an expectation placed on them from outside. They felt the modern European Muslim officials and the media favoured was of a very specific kind: moderate, thoroughly assimilated, and loyal to European values and institutions.

That can be understood in so many ways [laughs]! Like, if you look at politics in France, how they want to modify how we live, it's pretty wild. Like, they don't want to see scarves in public places and so on. Someone who's in a position as high as the president or like that, that they deem it their right to dictate how their citizens should live. It's pretty wild. I would say that as European Muslims, we should find our own way to live in this society – specifically on our own terms – and not like, someone coming from above to say [that].

I feel that originates from the assumption that a Muslim cannot practise their religion and still belong to European culture or Europe. It's like when I hear something like that, I get the impression that it's said by a non-Muslim who accepts Muslims only when they don't practise Islam – or at least don't practise it visibly.

The diversity of the Islam practised in Finland reflects the apparent paradox in Islam's Europeanization Cesari (2007, 63) describes: the liberal democratic context fosters the individualization of religious practice, while the lack of local authorities and places of learning means the religious market

is dominated by the neo-fundamentalist voices of online da'wa. Alongside this conservative strand is a significant number of young Muslim women who are challenging conservative beliefs by distinguishing between religion and tradition and contextualizing religious decrees, especially in questions concerning gender equality. While most of the research participants were deeply committed to their Muslim identity, they practised their faith in diverse and personalized ways, drawing influences from various sources. This was no less true of those characterizing themselves as strictly observant. Despite their rhetoric stressing the importance of religious authorities and doctrines, their actual way of consuming religion was based on the ideals of individual choice and an active quest for authenticity.

Discussion

The interviewees' accounts indicated that Islamic religiosity alone did not diminish their attachment to Finnish identity. Not identifying as Finnish appeared more strongly influenced by ethnic minority status than by merely being part of the Muslim minority. Characterizing oneself as equally Finnish and Muslim or even 'Finnish Muslim' was slightly more common among converts but clearly not exclusive to them. Civic notions of Finnishness were common, especially among those born Muslim. Although many interviewees described their faith as a key part of who they were, it was not the only determinant of group identity – and for some not even the strongest. There is a boundary between the Muslim minority and the non-Muslim majority in Finland, but it coexists with many other crosscutting societal cleavages. Respondents drew boundaries not only around their religion but also between themselves and other Muslims based on differences in ethnic and class backgrounds, countries of origin, religious practices, and conversion.

Some women rejected norms and cultural practices prevailing in Finnish society or stated that they could not see themselves in the imaginary of Finnishness. However, most also deemed Finland a place where they were free to practise their religion and live according to their values. Importantly, those rejecting certain aspects or notions of Finnish culture and those expressing some kind of attachment to Finland or Finnishness were in many cases the same individuals. My findings thus somewhat resemble but also partly diverge from Pauha's of Muslim youth. He observes the same fluidity in meanings of Finnishness and the shifts of interviewees' identifications, depending on these meanings (Pauha 2018, 48). Yet he also observes that

his young informants see themselves as part of a transnational Islamic community (Pauha 2015, 89) and portray Finnish national identity as an 'other to Islam' (Pauha 2018, 60). Possible reasons for this difference include the different age distribution in my study and the fact that one of Pauha's sub-studies focuses specifically on Islamic and other civil society organization activists (Pauha 2015). It seems plausible that young Muslims who are active in Islamic associations are more likely to embrace a supranational Muslim identity. Another possibly relevant – and partly age-related – factor is employment. Muslim-born respondents who identified as partly or fully Finnish were often slightly older and had been in the workforce for a relatively long time. Employment, livelihood, and occupational community also appeared in their discussions concerning belonging and participation in society. This also applied to women born abroad. I would therefore say that this study's findings complement rather than contradict Pauha's.

This study has its limitations. As with all research based on voluntary participation, both self-selection bias and desirability bias are possible. As one channel used to seek participants was Muslim associations, it is possible that the call for participants reached relatively few women who identified as Muslim but were not interested in these organizations' activities and did not follow them on social media. Furthermore, the lack of longitudinal data inevitably means the study cannot offer insights into any changes in views and experiences over time. This is especially unfortunate regarding the sample's converts, half of whom had converted to Islam less than ten years earlier. As a non-Muslim, I was an outsider, which may have affected the recruitment of interviewees and increased social desirability bias: some interviewees may have felt it necessary to downplay differences in values and highlight commonalities to seem polite. However, the outsider position can also be seen as an asset in that it enabled interviewees to be more open about certain issues such as intra-community tension.

Conclusion

Islam has sometimes been portrayed as more than a religion – an overarching identity, a complete way of being that transcends all other bases of identity, whether local, national, or transnational. Another oft-repeated claim is that Islam is inherently incompatible with the basic tenets of liberalism, thus making it impossible for practising Muslims to integrate into Western societies.

This study contributes to the scholarly understanding of how Muslim minorities navigate their identities within European contexts and to the broader

discussion of citizenship in multicultural societies. Its findings complement those of previous research, indicating European Muslims' diverse attachments to their local communities, countries of residence, countries of origin, and the imagined transnational ummah (Verkuyten and Yildiz 2007; Kunst et al. 2012; Martinovic and Verkuyten 2012; Karlsen and Nazroo 2013; Pauha and Jasinskaja-Lahti 2013; Pauha 2015; 2018; Beaman 2016; Fleischmann and Phalet 2016; Mustafa 2016; Varjonen et al. 2017; Hass and Lutek 2018; Peucker 2018; Shazhadi et al. 2018; Boland 2020; Collet-Sabé 2020). Muslim identity, while often quite important, coexists with other identities, and the relative relevance of a given boundary depends on context. Varying from one individual to another, being Muslim can be described as antithetical to national membership, as largely irrelevant to it, or as a significant motivator for civic engagement.

Discrimination and negative stereotypes undermine Muslims' ability to feel national belonging in Europe, often despite formal citizenship. Muslim women experience multiple discrimination because of their gender and religious and ethnic identities. Furthermore, even sympathetic quarters sometimes fail to consider the relevance of factors such as education, income, immigrant background, and social capital. This has consequences for how and by whom Muslim women's identities, interests, and grievances are portrayed in public.

As in many other European countries the number and relative share of Muslims in Finland is expected to grow over the coming decades. Meanwhile, negative attitudes towards them are not only quite common but actively peddled by political entrepreneurs. If feelings of belonging and civic membership among the Muslim minority are to be strengthened, the effects of discrimination and securitization need to be taken seriously.

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Book Review

Jørn Borup: *Decolonising the Study of Religion: Who Owns Buddhism?*
Routledge Studies in Asian
Religion and Philosophy.
London: Routledge, 2023, 211 pp.

Decolonising the Study of Religion: Who Owns Buddhism? is a monograph by Danish religion and Japanese studies scholar Jørn Borup. It applies a decolonial frame to religious and Buddhist studies, presenting Japanese Buddhism as a case example. The book consists of nine thematic chapters. Borup sets out to investigate the scope and challenges of theories related to decolonization, focusing on the study of religion and Buddhism. Throughout the text Borup engages in a critical and multifaceted enquiry into both coloniality and the decolonial critique itself.

The first and second chapters present a historical overview of the post- and decolonial critiques and their relationship with post-modernism, post-globalism, and identity politics. A key decolonial model involves deconstruction, reconstruction, and activism (p. 29). Deconstruction consists of the identification of colonial relics of ‘whiteness’ and Eurocentrism in society and academia. These include racism and power structures, which even encompass features of knowledge such as objectivism and rationality. Reconstruction consists of re-envisioning society and academia through the diversity,

equity, and inclusion (DEI) of different groups of people and modes of knowledge such as indigenous and post-secular knowledge (i.e. subjective lived experience). Finally, activism consists of implementing these changes through diversity training, participatory research, and political engagement, for example.

The third and fourth chapters deal with the decolonial critique of the studies of religion and Buddhism respectively. Borup introduces Western-centric and Protestant biases in the concepts of religion and Buddhism, as well as their study. Religion can be considered a Western identity marker serving colonization (p. 50) and the expectation that scholars of religion surpass the representations of the studied people to reflect European exceptionalism (p. 45). The critique has led some scholars to de-centre academic knowledge production by engaging religious stakeholders, for example (p. 54).

Theosophists appropriated Buddhism into Protestant Buddhism. They envisioned it as a gateway between the spiritual East and rational West (p. 61). This created a legacy of Western men ‘whitesplaining’ (or should one also say ‘mansplaining’?) Buddhism to Buddhists, commonly depicting it as a scientific religion (p. 63) and the Buddha as a Victorian gentleman (p. 65). The decolonial critique of Buddhism spans the association of American Buddhism with white privilege to

the use of Buddhist elements such as Buddha statues, meditation, and mindfulness outside their original religious context (pp. 70–72). Efforts to decolonize Buddhism have included DEI practices to increase the representation of people of colour, including Asian Americans (p. 75).

Chapters five and six discuss Buddhist studies. The 1990s saw the emergence of critical Buddhist studies examining the textualizing, translation, and appropriation of Buddhism in academia (p. 89). This included a critique of Western scholars' position of supremacy as more qualified curators of Buddhism than Buddhist monks and Asian scholars. The critique held that Western scholars had participated in Protestant and textualized bias during the Western appropriation of Buddhism, with a pejorative relationship with rituals, magic, and miracles present in lived religion (pp. 86–87).

Lacking a unified theory, decolonial Buddhist studies focus on critiquing the 'de-ethnified, de-culturalized, and de-territorialised universality' characterizing modern and global Buddhism (p. 97). Critical studies advocate a re-culturalized differentiation going beyond the white, Western, and male Buddhist hegemony (p. 98). There has also been a critique of both classifying Buddhism using the Western concept of 'religion' and secularizing it as a 'non-religion', typical of Western-convert Buddhism and considered cultural appropriation. Moreover, identity politics has

received increasing attention, including concerning ethnocentric Buddhism, scholarly positionality (male white privilege), and scholarly classifications such as the American 'two Buddhisms' (Asian immigrants versus Western converts). The decolonial critique has created division within the scholarly community concerning how to take Buddhism seriously and negotiate the authority to represent Buddhism (p. 108).

In chapter seven Borup turns to the case of Japanese Buddhism. He begins by describing the shaping of the modern religion of 'Buddhism' (*bukkyō*) through internal developments in Japan influenced by Western science and philosophy after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Members of the New Buddhism (*shin bukkyō*) movement in the Meiji period promoted a depiction of Buddhism as scientific, rational, and philosophical in efforts to overcome Christianity (p. 118). D. T. Suzuki was a notable popularizer of a rationalized and spiritualized version of Japanese Zen Buddhism in the West under the guise of 'exotic Japaneseness' (p. 121). Buddhist institutions and priests also collaborated in legitimizing Japanese colonialism and ethnonationalism in the 1920s and 1930s. This included missionary work in occupied Korea and the oppression of Korean Buddhism.

In chapter eight Borup discusses Buddhist studies in Japan. During modernization Japanese universities adopted European-style Indian studies based on the methods of Western Buddhology, supplement-

ing sectarian Mahāyāna with Pali and Sanskrit studies. Buddhist historical studies were also developed, featuring evolutionary notions placing Japanese Buddhism at the pinnacle, reflecting the strategic use of Buddhism in religious identity politics (p. 132). Japanese Buddhism and its study illustrate that rather than being restricted to Western hegemony, coloniality and decolonization in society and scholarship are highly complex and transnational topics.

In the final, ninth, chapter and conclusions Borup critically discusses the decolonial critique. Epistemological innocence in the study of religion and Buddhism has been lost since the post- and decolonial turns, warranting serious engagement with these perspectives. The concept and study of religion involves power relations, and researchers are necessarily culturally situated. Borup holds that this calls for openminded and reflexive research. He advocates a middle path, consisting of using analytical models to understand religion as a pragmatic phenomenon seeking to avoid both overgeneralization and particular exclusivism.

While Borup welcomes engagement with the decolonial critique to 'pluriversalize' research, he is critical of 'hard decolonization' seeking revolution (pp. 177–178). Who is privileged, and who should be given representation, is a matter of debate. The fixation on identity tropes is further challenged by their fluid and hybrid nature and the different value placed on performative

identity politics in different cultures (p. 145). Moreover, if taken to the extreme, the appraisal of subjective lived insider experience can lead to hermeneutic exclusivism ('tyranny of authenticity'; p. 154) and radical cultural particularism, permitting Western religious scholars only to study the West and global modernity.

The approach may also lead to the neglect of critical enquiry into the interests and interpretations of 'insiders'. Buddhist studies has questioned the indigenous authenticity of 'cosmopolitan natives' and native scholars appropriating Western concepts and theories, including essentialized stereotypes of white Orientalists (p. 154). Borup argues that since scholars only have access to narratives of experience and must always interpret them through a theoretical frame, particular and identitarian exclusivism is unjustified. Rather, there should be room in religious studies for multiple worlds and modernities (p. 174).

Finally, Borup calls for 'continued critical discussions, including critical studies of critical studies' (pp. 177–178). This is a good characterization of the entire work. Decolonization is a highly complex and emotionally laden topic. Borup does a commendable job in averting the pitfalls of the simplistic extremist positions common in public discussion. Engaging with the topic's complexities can facilitate a conceptual change in readers. However, the reader's ability to engage with the text is compromised by the unnec-

essarily abstruse language, superfluous text, and long paragraphs. The text could have benefited from thorough copyediting for simplicity and clarity, which could have broadened the target audience. Nevertheless, the book introduces an extremely pertinent discussion that all scholars of religion should consider profoundly.

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Book Review

Daniel Enstedt and Katarina

Plank (eds): *Eastern Practices and Nordic Bodies: Lived Religion, Spirituality and Healing in the Nordic Countries*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, 306 pp.

In recent decades the field of alternative or holistic spirituality has gained increasing scholarly attention within the study of religions. Daniel Enstedt's and Katarina Plank's edited volume, published in the *Palgrave Studies in New Religions and Alternative Spiritualities* series, examines this phenomenon in the Nordic context. The book consists of an introduction and twelve chapters, providing case studies from Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. The book argues for the importance of a lived religion approach, and most of the studies are based on ethnographic or interview material; a few also incorporate quantitative approaches.

The book sets out to explore the reception, development, and construction in the Nordic countries of what the editors call 'Eastern practices'. In the introduction the editors seek to contextualize the process of the 'Easternization of the West' (p. 3) and the increasing interest in non-Western spiritual practices in Nordic societies' religious and cultural landscape. It thus provides a helpful outline of the Nordic cultural and religious context for an uninitiated international audience. As the editors describe them, Nordic societies are characterized by the welfare

state model, religious homogeneity, and the dominance of Evangelical Lutheran majority churches, as well as the prevalence of secular-rational values and high levels of religious belonging without believing.

However, the editors present the interest in holistic spirituality as part of cultural changes in relation to religion and spirituality in the Nordic countries: the decline in church membership; a gradual diversification of the religious landscape; and an increasing number of people identifying as spiritual but not religious. They further maintain that the popularization of alternative spiritual and health practices has blurred the distinction between secular and religious ideas and institutions. Hence, as the editors point out, many of the chapters deal with the entangled processes of secularization and de-secularization, and related questions of 'legitimacy, authenticity, and authority' and 'the relationship between science and practices in the area studied' (p. 2).

The editors stress on the one hand that alternative spiritualities are increasingly secularized and 'distance themselves from religion and align themselves with more scientific, medical, and therapeutic language' (p. 8). Many of the chapters illustrate this, describing a deliberate toning down of religious and even spiritual features. For example, Tuomas Martikainen's and Kimi Kärki's chapter shows that Aikido teachers in Nordic countries

clearly distance themselves from the practice's religious aspects, and even if they do identify as spiritual, they hesitate to reveal this. Other chapters further point to a discomfort with religious authorities. For example, Inga Bårdsen Tøllefsen argues that Norwegian Transcendental Meditation (TM) practitioners find submitting to an Indian guru 'unnatural' (p. 125). This also applies partly to Finnish practitioners of *kirtan*, the collective singing of mantras, as Tero Heinonen shows. Even if *kirtan* is rooted in devotional Hinduism and originally aimed to praise God or a guru, half of Heinonen's informants rejected the guru institution, as well as religious or spiritual belonging. Many chapters show that instead of religion or spirituality, the emphasis lies on the practices' therapeutic aspects, which frame them in terms of physical and mental health, well-being, and emotional management.

On the other hand, the editors point out that the field of alternative spiritualities also creates 'new religious expressions' that are not always recognized as religious (p. 11). Indeed, many chapters show that despite the secular/rational framing and legitimation, the fuzzier level of personal experience is of central importance. For example, Halvor Eifring's chapter on the Norwegian Acem meditation school shows that the shift to secular psychological explanation models does not mean spirituality is entirely rejected. Eifring points out that even if Acem deliberately distances itself from its original ties to TM and Indian spir-

ituality in favour of a more psychological approach, it rejects labelling meditation practice as therapy, partly because this would undermine its existential and spiritual dimensions. Furthermore, the secular framing of spiritual practices does not mean they are mere manifestations of individualism and the subjective turn or result in a complete void of religious authority. Enstedt's chapter on Nordic adaptations of Qigong shows that while spiritual and magical aspects are downplayed, Qigong's ritual nature is important, constituting a 'new form of collective liturgical practice' that is highly formalized and does not allow individual self-expression (pp. 157–158). Henriette Hanky's chapter on Osho meditation centres in Norway shows that these centres cater to two different crowds simultaneously. They organize shorter and more recreational retreats for a wider audience and longer retreats for dedicated devotees, where *satsang* with the guru is a central element.

Of course, the changes in religiosity the volume describes are not unique to the Nordic countries. What might be specific to Nordic adaptations of non-Western practices in contrast to the wider process of Westernization of Eastern spiritualities therefore remains somewhat unarticulated in both the introduction and in many of the chapters. In a globalized context developments in the Nordic countries naturally mirror those in Western contexts more generally, as many of the chapters observe. It would have

been interesting, however, to read more reflection on differences and adaptations not only along the East/West divide but also between Nordic countries and, for example, Anglo-American contexts, on which much of the previous research on 'spiritual but not religious' identities focuses. Given the Nordic countries' relative secularity, could it be that the secular framing of alternative spiritual practices is especially strong in the Nordic context, or that one could identify a typically Nordic position of 'secular but still a little spiritual'?

The book could generally have had a little more internal alignment and structure. The chapters are divided into two loosely thematic parts, 'Embodiment, Movements, and Practices' and 'Aesthetics, Nature, and New Contexts'. However, the division seems somewhat strained and undefined, as the editors do not elaborate on the themes, and in my view any chapter could easily have fallen under either theme. Furthermore, there is little reference between the chapters, even though many authors deal with similar themes and spiritual practices. Nor does the introduction really draw on the chapters' content, which is scarcely referenced, apart from a chapter summary at the end (which is a little unpolished and inconsistent in style and format). A greater dialogue between the different contributions in the introduction might have brought some coherence to the volume and provided valuable additional insights.

For example, given the widespread discussion of practices of holistic spirituality and therapeutic culture, both as examples of neoliberal individualism and self-management and as spaces for their contestation, it is somewhat surprising that the introduction fails to address this theme – especially as many chapters point to it. For example, Elin Thorsén's chapter argues that modern Advaita appeals in a stressful, individualized, and performance-oriented society because it functions as a therapeutic tool for coping with daily life while offering a promise of transcending the individual self. I think the volume could have contextualized the interest in holistic spiritualities not only in terms of religious change but as part of wider societal developments in the Nordic countries, such as the increasing influence of neoliberalism and the concomitant erosion of the welfare state, privatization of care, and blooming of a therapeutic self-help culture.

I would also have expected more critical engagement with questions of whiteness, religious appropriation, and exoticism from a volume titled 'Eastern Practices and Nordic Bodies'; they have been discussed in both international scholarship and recently in the Nordic context. In my view the lack of deeper engagement with these discussions is the book's biggest shortcoming. This would have been especially important because the book deals specifically with white Nordic adaptations of non-Western practices,

not with the religious practices of immigrant populations, for example (p. 7). Some chapters do address the theme of cultural appropriation, but the concept remains somewhat unelaborated. For example, in her chapter Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger identifies two contrasting tendencies in Danish yoga that she names cultural appropriation and reappropriation. By the former Fibiger refers to the tendency to disconnect yoga from Indian spirituality; by the latter she describes the quest to connect yoga with its 'authentic roots'. Little critical attention is paid to the underlying structures of racialized power and privilege or the exoticizing tendencies connected with this search for authenticity, however. The scarce discussion of whiteness and appropriation in the volume in general raises questions about which bodies count as 'Nordic bodies' and the racial power relations at play in the 'Easternization' of the Nordic countries.

That said, the book provides a rich collection of interesting case studies of contemporary spirituality in the Nordic context.

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