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Editorial Note

The theme for this special issue of Temenos is *New Spiritual Practices in Nordic Lutheran Churches*. It is the result of a conference held at Karlstad University on 5–6 December 2024 investigating *Majority Churches and Contemporary Spirituality: Integrations, Negotiations, and Demarcations*. The conference brought together scholars from the Nordic countries researching new spiritual practices within the Nordic Lutheran churches. The presentations during the conference covered all the Nordic countries. They highlighted how a variety of practices could be found, ranging from enneagram, sound healing, yoga, dance, meditation practices, dreamwork, and retreats to what a secular spirituality might entail.

The conference aimed to draw attention to individually centred practices and the social institutions in which they are practised, how these are linked, and how they influence each other. The conference addressed the following questions: Which strategies have Protestant churches in the Nordic countries developed to meet a growing quest for spirituality and new spiritual practices? How have new spiritual practices been integrated into the churches' activities and rituals? How have they been negotiated theologically and ritually? Are there any demarcation lines, and if so, where are these lines drawn, and by whom? What theoretical implications can we draw from the empirical observations?

During the conference Minna Opas from University of Turku offered an important reflection on terminology. Translating empirical findings from one cultural context to another can be challenging, as English concepts may not fully capture the nuances, connotations, or historical layers of terms used in the original cultural sphere. This can lead to misinterpretations or oversimplifications, where key ideas are either lost in translation or forced into conceptual frameworks that do not entirely fit the local reality. The Nordic vocabulary gives slightly different meanings to the concept of spirituality. Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, and Icelandic are all North Germanic languages, stemming from a common tongue spoken by the Vikings. They are part of the Indo-European language family, and they use the same words *andlig* and *andlighet* (Swedish), *åndelig* and *åndelighet* (Norwegian and Danish), *andlegt* and *andlega* (Icelandic) to express what is thought to

be connected with the soul. Finnish and Sámi, as part of the Finno-Ugric language family, use three different words to express spirituality: *henkisyys* for spirituality in general; *hengellisyys* for Christian spirituality, which is the preferred term in the Evangelical Lutheran Church; *spiritualiteetti* for older Christian spiritual and meditative traditions. In Sweden and Denmark the word *spiritualitet* has also been introduced and is sometimes used to connote different types of Christian spirituality – for example, 'Ignatian spirituality', equivalent to the Finnish *spiritualiteetti*.

The discussions during the conference pointed to several further themes that remained to be explored: therapeutic churches; the necessity of paying attention to embodiment; the blurring of boundaries; how authority and tradition were negotiated; whether churches had become actors in a spiritual market; and how other spiritual actors and settings might react to the practices in the churches.

This thematic issue features articles covering developments in Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland.

The first article in this thematic issue, 'An Immanent Turn in Protestant Spirituality', is an overview of the development of new spiritual practices in Nordic churches. Based on data from the 'The New Faces of the Folk Church' research project focusing on the Diocese of Stockholm in Sweden, the authors, Katarina Plank, Helene Egnell, and Linnea Lundgren, argue that these new spiritual practices are part of a larger 'immanent turn' in Protestant spirituality that has been ongoing since the 1970s.

The second article, 'Sound Healing in the Finnish Church', explores how sound healing is being incorporated into the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) and reinterpreted within a Christian framework. Linda Annunen uses digital ethnography to examine the intersection of embodiment, therapeutic sound, and silence within Lutheran traditions. Using concepts such as acoustemology and esoteric sound, the study demonstrates how practices are framed as silent prayer and how churches are redefined as acoustic spaces. The article contributes to an understanding of how sensory and sonic experiences are granted theological legitimacy in a post-secular context.

The third article, 'The Yoga of Stillness', has a descriptive focus. Authors Marcus Moberg and Tommy Ramstedt present the first detailed analysis of the Yoga of Stillness® programme within the ELCF. It examines how the practice is structured, legitimated, and interpreted by instructors as explicitly Christian, and how it has become increasingly institutionalized. The article presents a case study of how non-Christian meditative practices

are adapted for traditional Christian contexts, providing an insight into the revitalization of contemplative spirituality within Lutheranism.

In the fourth article, 'Yoga in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark', Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger investigates the integration of yoga within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (ELCD) and how religious actors navigate issues of cultural appropriation and adaptation. By detaching yoga from its Hindu roots and reconnecting it with Christian spirituality, a hybrid form emerges that blends bodily awareness with theological reflection. The study contributes to an understanding of how global spiritual practices are localized and reshaped within Lutheran frameworks.

The fifth and final article, 'Appropriating Yoga as Their Own', provides a rich analysis by Elisabeth Tveito Johnsen, Kristine Helboe Johansen, and Kristin Graff-Kallevåg. Drawing on a Vygotskian-Bakhtinian understanding of appropriation, the authors demonstrate how churches strike a balance between the dual impulses of making yoga 'their own' while respecting its otherness. The god-centrism of church yoga resonates with and complements the dominant holistic paradigm of self-spirituality. Based on empirical data from field visits and qualitative surveys, the article identifies the key mechanisms through which yoga is integrated in Christian contexts, especially through what the authors term 'linguistic' and 'material domestication'.

The articles in this thematic issue deepen our understanding of how Nordic churches are not merely passively absorbing global spiritual trends but actively reshaping them in ways that reflect both tradition and innovation.

We extend our sincere gratitude to the reviewers, whose critical and constructive feedback has sharpened the articles' analytical focus.

Katarina Plank and Helene Egnell, guest editors

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

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

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

An immanent turn in Protestant spirituality

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

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

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

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

The Nordic countries and their folk churches

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Towards an immanent turn in Nordic Protestantism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sonic approaches to religion and spirituality

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Esoteric sounds and sonic skills

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Data and method

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sound healing in Finland

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

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

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

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

Sound healing in Christian contexts

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Churches as acoustic environments

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Reframing sound healing in Christian aesthetics

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Boundary negotiations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

More recently, the institutional Nordic Lutheran churches have also started to display a growing interest in yoga and its potentially stronger integration into their practices (e.g. Johnsen et al. 2024; Plank et al. 2023). This development reflects a broader international trend whereby various (mainly Indian or 'Eastern') meditation forms have gradually found their way into traditional Christian ecclesiastical settings (e.g. Klassen 2005; Lüddeckens and Schrimp 2018; Kalvig 2017; Brown 2018; Moberg and Ramstedt 2023). However, the degrees and extent to which such practices have entered institutional Lutheran settings varies between the Nordic countries. While the practice of yoga has become increasingly common and established in the Church of Sweden in particular, its adoption in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) has been slower and more gradual. Whereas several forms of yoga are practised today in the Church of Sweden, the integration of yoga in the ELCF has been limited to a specific trademarked programme called the Yoga of Stillness, created in 2019.[1] According to the ELCF Church Institute for Research and Advanced Training the Yoga of Stillness is currently practised in 67 parishes, approximately a fifth of all ELCF parishes (Salomäki et al. 2024, 91). Instructor training in the Yoga of Stillness started in 2019 (and in Swedish in 2024). Around 170 people, most of them ELCF workers, have since completed the instructor course.

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

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

(in both Finnish and Swedish) between 2023 and 2024.[2] They were preceded by participant observation at nine Yoga of Stillness events in the city of Turku. All the interviewees were female. Christianity had already played a central role during their childhood and adolescence. Their personal histories included family involvement in revival movements, attending Bible school as children, and personal stories of struggles with faith. All the interviewees also had a history of intense physical activity from an early age, including ballet, gymnastics, and rock climbing. All but one of the interviewees had practised yoga for a long time before they heard about Christian forms of yoga or the Yoga of Stillness, and some had already come into contact with yoga as children. None had attached any particular religious or spiritual meaning or significance to their earlier practice of yoga. At the time of the interviews six had completed the Yoga of Stillness instructor training course and themselves led Yoga of Stillness sessions.

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

The history of yoga in Finland: a brief overview

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> Well, I called the church, a woman answered, and I started talking about meditation. Pity I don't know who this woman was, but she said: 'This can't be true! You're a yoga teacher! I'd just promised at a meeting that I would find a yoga teacher for the church, and now you're calling' [...].
> There had been a meeting where they were thinking that there was already Christian yoga in the United States, so the idea was already with them in a way [the Parish Union] (IF mgt 2024/15).

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

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

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

The Yoga of Stillness: creation and content

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Legitimating the Yoga of Stillness

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> Yoga of Stillness represents a new type of spirituality [in the Christian sense[3]] in changing times, a spirituality that also appeals to those who are not regularly seen in the church pews. [...] Many parish workers have also found support for their work and their own spiritual growth in the Yoga of Stillness. Harjunpää has already trained almost a hundred new Yoga of Stillness instructors in collaboration with the Friends of Silence association (Akiliitot.fi 2022).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Concluding remarks

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

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

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

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

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

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A brief outline of yoga's history in Denmark

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

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

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

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

Yoga's contemporary development in Denmark

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yoga and the ELCD from 2000

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Appropriation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

18 Translated by Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger.

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

19 Translated by Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger.

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

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

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

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

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

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Appropriating Yoga as Their Own: Properties of Mediated Action within Two Nordic Majority Churches

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Abstract

Cultural appropriation has recently become a central topic in discussions regarding majority churches' adoption of 'Eastern' spiritual practices. This article employs a Vygotskian-Bakhtinian perspective on appropriation as developed by James Wertsch (1998) to examine the research question, how have the Danish and Norwegian majority churches made yoga their own, and how is yoga preserved as something that also belongs to someone else? The data consist of two types of sources: ten field visits conducted between January and November 2023; and a qualitative survey distributed in January 2024, with fifteen submissions from Norwegian respondents and sixteen from Danish respondents. The analysis reveals that 1) the churches' primary objectives play a crucial role in how yoga is incorporated in existing practices such as church services; 2) Christian concepts do not entirely replace historically attributed yoga expressions; and 3) the God-centrism of church yoga is well aligned with the prevailing holistic doctrine of self-spirituality. Based on our findings, we conclude that the majority churches in Norway and Denmark have appropriated yoga as part of their own theological tradition, introducing two novel concepts: linguistic domestication; and material domestication.

Keywords*: cultural appropriation, mediated action, Wertsch, Bakhtin, yoga, self-spirituality, majority churches*

Prelude

It is late evening as we enter the church as participant observers. Gregorian music is playing softly from the speakers, candles are lit on the altar, and a pastor welcomes us. A few people have already rolled out their yoga mats on the floor at the front of the church, waiting for the service to begin. Jackets and water bottles are placed in the pews. There are about fifteen of us when the yoga church service begins, mostly women between forty- and sixty-years-old dressed in comfortable clothes, and some have brought blankets from home with them.

The pastor and the yoga instructor enter the chancel together, taking their places on yoga mats at the front of the group, facing the participants. With three strokes on the Tibetan singing bowl and the Trinitarian invocation the pastor signals that the service has begun. She welcomes both newcomers and those already familiar with yoga church services warmly. The pastor explains that these services focus on connecting with oneself and with God bodily and through breathing. She emphasizes that if any of the physical exercises are too challenging or not to our liking, it's perfectly okay – what matters most is practising yoga in a way that feels right and being as you are while you're here.

The service continues with a reading from the Bible, followed by a brief reflection on the text by the pastor. After a prayer the pastor hands over to the yoga instructor, signalling that it's time to start moving. The yoga instructor guides us through various poses like the 'Tree', the 'Downward-facing Dog', and the 'Child's Pose'. As we pose, she incorporates words from the pastor's reflection. We're encouraged to notice our own breath as God's power filling us, and to recall God's all-embracing grace as we lie on the floor. After about thirty minutes of yoga the pastor resumes her role. Standing in front of the group, she invites us to pray the Lord's Prayer, silently or aloud. Finally, she concludes the yoga church service with the Trinitarian blessing and nine strokes on the singing bowl. Some participants linger for a while; others leave the church in silence.[1]

Introduction: is church yoga cultural appropriation?

The question 'Isn't this cultural appropriation?' has often been raised when we have presented our 'When yoga goes to church' research project, which studies yoga services like the one described in the prelude, and other kinds of yoga activities taking place in parishes in the Church of Norway (CoN) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (ELCD).

Yoga in churches started as pop-up events in inner-city locations about a decade ago but has gradually evolved into a regular activity across a broad

1 With some modifications this prelude has been published in a previous article (Graff-Kallevåg, Helboe Johansen, and Johnsen 2024).

array of churches, including in the Nordic majority churches (Plank et al. 2023). In Norway and Denmark church yoga is held in both urban and rural areas, including places known to be theologically conservative. Intrigued by this development, we decided to investigate the phenomenon empirically. Our study contributes to the scholarly discussion of cultural appropriation (Annunen and Utriainen 2023b), addressing the growing research interest in how yoga, as well as meditation, tantra, spiritual retreats, acupuncture, and mindfulness, has become part of religious institutions in the Nordic context (Enstedt and Plank 2023, 1).

Recognizing that the concept 'Eastern' functions more as a discursive marker than a geographical term, Enstedt and Plank highlight that public schools, healthcare systems, and fitness and gym companies in the Nordic countries have integrated 'Eastern' spiritual practices without much debate (ibid., 1). Furthermore, they assert that 'the spiritual revolution' is unfolding not only in society at large but also within the established majority churches, exemplified by the churches' increased interest in offering yoga to their members (ibid., 12). As part of their discussion, Enstedt and Plank ask if a situation where churches are incorporating non-Christian practices necessitates a theological reframing to render these practices legitimate (ibid., 12). In contributing to this discussion, our analysis focuses not on descriptions of web pages but on how church yoga is enacted in specific parishes.

In the Danish context Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger observes, like Enstedt and Plank, that yoga has evolved in different parts of society; the ELCD's growing interest in incorporating yoga in its church activities is a more recent trend. According to Fibiger the various Christian types of yoga delink it from its Indian background and relink it to Christianity (Fibiger 2023, 72). She argues that yoga in churches exemplifies a broader trend of cultural appropriation, suggesting that the church's aim is 'optimizing the relationship with Jesus' through yoga (ibid., 72). Building on Fibiger's research, we delve more deeply into the issue of cultural appropriation, exploring whether church yoga indeed enhances participants' relationship with Jesus.

Like Fibiger, Marcus Moberg and Tommy Ramstedt, writing from a Finnish context, explore the extent to which churches' interest in 'Eastern' spirituality and practices can be understood as cultural appropriation (Moberg and Ramstedt 2023). In examining the justification and legitimization of mindfulness within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF), Moberg and Ramstedt argue that cultural appropriation is a pertinent issue. Liz Bucar restricts cultural appropriation to instances where there is

a demonstrable 'explicit harm' (Bucar 2022); Moberg and Ramstedt argue that her definition is too narrow: if an agent like a church actively seeks to change or alter a practice, it should be determined as a case of appropriation proper. This holds true even in situations involving mindfulness and yoga, where it is challenging to link the practice to a specific religious tradition (Moberg and Ramstedt 2023, 121). Moberg and Ramstedt conclude that the ELCF creates 'Christianized' versions of mindfulness (Moberg and Ramstedt 2023), exemplifying what they term 'appropriation of religion *into* religion' (ibid., 134). They encourage future scholarship to use their case as a point of comparison when examining other national and ecclesiastical contexts (ibid., 134), which is what we seek to do in this article.

These research contributions are predominantly based on survey material, as well as the mapping of media debates and web pages (Fibiger 2023; Lundgren et al. 2023), including an analysis of two theses by BA students in a ministerial programme (Moberg and Ramstedt 2023). Such empirical material is suitable for investigating a specific discourse. Our aim, however, is to study how individuals responsible for organizing yoga in church settings practise and describe it. Our data therefore consist of participant observations and a qualitative survey, with detailed descriptions of how yoga is performed within this setting.

Furthermore, our theoretical framework differs from the aforementioned contributions. Instead of utilizing theories developed within religious studies and critical appropriation theory, our project applies analytical tools developed within sociocultural learning theory, specifically James Wertch's *Mind as Action* (Wertsch 1998). Other scholars have emphasized the role of learning in the context of new religious and spiritual practices (Annunen and Utriainen 2023c), yet few have employed sociocultural learning theory as developed by Wertsch in studies that examine appropriation within a religious framework (Afdal 2013; Holmqvist 2015; Johnsen 2014).

Like other sociocultural theorists, Wertsch argues that the task of sociocultural analyses is to 'explicate the relationships between human *action*, on the one hand, and the cultural, institutional, and historical contexts in which this action occurs, on the other' (Wertsch 1998, 24). We have chosen Wertsch rather than other sociocultural theorists because of his unique blend of Vygotsky's focus on mediation as an artefact-mediated process and Bakhtin's understanding of language as social systems of meaning, which together allow a multifaceted analysis of the relationship between yoga and church. Given that appropriation has become a central topic in recent scholarly discussions of yoga in and beyond churches, we find it

particularly compelling that Wertsch views appropriation as a fundamental and unavoidable property of human action (Wertsch 1998, 58).

As part of his discussion concerning appropriation, Wertsch includes a quotation from Bakhtin:

> The world in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker postulates it with his own intention, his accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention (Wertsch 1998, 54; cf. Bakhtin 1981, 294).

This article's overall research question is: how have the Danish and Norwegian majority churches made yoga their own, and how is yoga preserved as something that also belongs to someone else?

Method, material, and positionality

The data analysed in this article comprise two types of sources: field visits; and a qualitative survey. We all conducted field research at yoga events within parishes between January and November 2023. Participant observation of religious groups, communities, or activities is sometimes conducted over an extended period or through a sequence of shorter visits, as has been the case in our project (Harvey 2013, 218). Based on our geographical locations, Kristin Graff-Kallevåg and Elisabeth Tveito Johnsen conducted field research at seven yoga activities in parishes of the CoN; Kirstine Helboe Johansen observed three in the ELCD. The parishes we visited were selected using a snowball sampling strategy (Bremborg 2011, 314). We conducted internet searches for yoga activities within the churches and contacted church workers – usually pastors – listed as contacts for yoga activities. All the church workers we approached welcomed us as participant observers. None of us has extensive experience of yoga, but we have all conducted multiple research projects concerning church practices. While easy access to the field is a privilege, it also heightens the risk associated with the project. If our informants find our visits intrusive or feel our analyses are misconceived, it can have a bearing on our future research initiatives (Erdal 2016, 153).

We deemed ten field visits insufficient for achieving theoretical saturation (Bremborg 2011, 314). To supplement our material, we therefore developed a qualitative survey in January 2024. As is typical in qualitative surveys (Anker and von der Lippe 2015, 88), we included narrative questions, inviting respondents to describe various elements of their church yoga

activities in their own words. Targeting individuals responsible for yoga activities in parishes, we distributed the survey through channels such as journals for pastors and Facebook groups for church workers and pastors. Between 11 January and 12 August 2024 we received 31 responses – fifteen from Norwegian and sixteen from Danish respondents. The survey material confirmed that the practices we observed during our field visits were aligned with those conducted in the parishes we did not visit.

Theoretical framework: properties of mediated action

This article explores how yoga is mediated in church yoga activities within parishes in the Church of Norway (CoN) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (ELCD). As we have mentioned, Wertsch's concept of mediated action serves as our primary analytical framework. The following analysis is structured in accordance with three properties he identifies as fundamental elements of all forms of mediated action. As part of the integrated analysis, we consistently compared our findings with the contributions mentioned in the introduction, as well as other relevant scholarly works.

First, a key characteristic is that mediated action serves *multiple purposes*, and that these purposes often conflict (Wertsch 1998, 32). A central analytical task in sociocultural learning analyses is to investigate the complex relations between the different goals of action (ibid., 32–34). Utilizing this property analytically, we identified how church workers and yoga instructors presented church yoga to the participants, and how the importance of different objectives was rated.

Second, Wertsch asserts that mediated action consists of *tensions between agent and artefact*. Material or linguistic artefacts have been attributed a fixed meaning over time, yet agents use artefacts creatively, and an artefact's meaning therefore constantly changes. This emphasizes that tension between actors and artefacts is more a rule than an exception. When analysing mediated action, one should expect 'some form of resistance or friction' between agent and artefact (Wertsch 1998, 55). In this part of the analysis we examine how yoga expressions are used or avoided in church yoga, focusing on how the yoga exercise is framed linguistically.

Third, what Wertsch calls *appropriation* characterizes the relationship between agents and mediational means (ibid., 53). As we mentioned in the introduction, Wertsch adopts this term largely from the writing of Bakhtin (Bakhtin 1981). Following the convention of other scholars, Wertsch trans-

lates Bakhtin's Russian terms to 'appropriate' and 'appropriation', 'with the understanding that the process is one of taking something that belongs to others and making it one's own' (Wertsch 1998, 53). When borrowing or 'renting' the words of others, Bakhtin considered these words 'as "half someone else's"' and consequently also half the speaker's populating of them '"with his own intention, his own accent"' (Wertsch 1998, 56; Bakhtin 1981, 293).

Influenced by Vygotsky (Vygotsky 1967), Wertsch posits that Bakhtin's perspective is applicable to cultural tools in general, not only language. Wertsch maintains that every cultural tool is inherently half someone else's, half one's own. Acting with a mediational means – for example, using a cultural tool or artefact – requires the knowledge that it is partly someone else's property, while populating it with one's own intentions and accent (Wertsch 1998, 56). In addressing appropriation, we explore what the churches do to make yoga their own. The next section focuses on the unique properties that distinguish church yoga from other kinds. We thus identify how the churches imbue yoga with their own intentions and accent.

Analysis and discussion: multiple purposes of mediated action

A low-threshold activity

The first part of this analysis examines the goals of church yoga, seeking to capture any conflicts and the complex relations between different goals. How is church yoga presented to the participants, and how is the importance of different objectives rated?

At the start of nearly every church yoga session, either the church worker or the yoga instructor (or both) includes explicit explanations of its goals and purpose, as described in the prelude. These introductions encourage the participants to adjust and feel comfortable during church yoga rather than performing all the exercises perfectly:

> If any of the exercises are challenging, or if you don't want to do them, just leave them out. It should feel good, and you can be yourself when you're here (Church 4, NO).

> If any of the exercises are difficult or intense, just step out of them or modify them a little. In church yoga we're present without performing (Church 3, DK).

The organizers also emphasize that church yoga differs from other forms of yoga at gyms or yoga studios. For example, 'This is a church service, not a yoga class, so I'm not going around correcting anyone. Just do the best you can' (Church 1, DK). Similarly, in another parish a church worker introduced church yoga by saying, 'Church yoga isn't like a workout. Here, it's all about just being present; you don't have to look a certain way or be able to do anything special' (Church 3, DK). While the distinction between church yoga and other types of yoga may vary in accuracy, what sets church yoga apart is its setting within a church rather than a gym or yoga studio. Viewed as a church activity, the focus on participation without requiring previous skills, achievements, or long-term commitment is aligned with other low-threshold initiatives in majority churches, such as baby hymn singing (Nielsen 2017). Although it is rarely the case, church workers often hope these low-threshold activities will encourage new attendees to participate in church services or volunteer in the local parish (Johnsen 2021).

However, we observed some initiatives where church workers actively used church yoga to recruit participants for more established parish involvement or activities. On a scale of 1 to 10 only 6.7 percent of respondents rated 'Encouraging participants to join other activities in the parish' as most important (10). This suggests the main objective of church yoga is not to transform 'passive' members into more permanently involved participants (Schlamelcher 2018). Instead, the primary focus, as 60 per cent of respondents indicated, is for participants to 'connect with their own breath and body' (60 per cent rated this at 10). The second most important goal was 'ensuring participants feel comfortable in the church space' (46.7 per cent rated this at 10), followed by 'helping participants connect with God' (36.7 per cent rated this at 10).

Connecting with oneself and God

Vincett and Woodhead describe holistic spiritualities emphasizing the integration of body, mind, and spirit as being historically positioned as reactions to traditional forms of Christianity (Vincett and Woodhead 2016, 234). Although the distinction between holistic and Christian spiritual practices has become increasingly blurred and intertwined, Fedele and Knibbe have proposed that spirituality within an institutionalized Christian context differs from holistic practices, as the latter primarily aims to achieve the wholeness and wellbeing of 'body, mind, and soul' (Fedele and Knibbe 2020, 6). However, the introductions given to the participants, as well as

the survey results, suggest that one's wellbeing and connection with one's breath and body are considered primary aims within this institutionalized Christian context, even to the extent of being rated as more important than connecting with God.

In one of the parishes we visited the pastor introduced the church yoga service with the following remark:

> Yoga church services are about breathing and presence. When people ask how you can have a yoga service in a church, I usually reply that there's nothing strange about it. It's about being connected with yourself and God – through breath and body (Church 4, NO).

So the pastor did not see a connection with oneself and God as conflicting. Instead, she viewed the breath and the body as essential for both connections. Yoga instructors leading church yoga sessions without the broader church service framework tended to place greater emphasis on church yoga's distinctly Christian elements. One instructor explained church yoga as follows:

> This is a Christian form of yoga, and I will mention God and use a biblical verse during the session. However, you're all free to place whatever meaning you want on the movements and interpret them from your own perspective. Even though I'll suggest movements, you're free to do whatever works for you (Church 3, NO).

Making participants aware that this was a Christian type of yoga distinguished it from other forms. However, the biblical verse was not presented as an authoritatively binding religious source. On the contrary, as we have seen in the previous excerpts, the yoga instructor stressed that everyone could do yoga as suited them, inviting each participant to interpret the movements from their own perspective. Emphasizing that everyone was free to attribute their own meaning to the movements is well aligned with what Woodhead and Heelas famously describe as 'self-spirituality' (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). Aupers and Houtman argue that self-spirituality has gradually evolved into a foundational doctrine within the holistic spiritual milieu (Aupers and Houtman 2006, 204). Encompassing a well-defined doctrine of 'being and wellbeing', self-spirituality posits that 'in the deeper layers of the self, one finds a true, authentic, and sacred kernel, "unpolluted" by culture, history, or society, which informs evaluation of what is good, true, and meaningful' (ibid., 204). When yoga instructors or church work-

ers incorporate a biblical verse, the primary authority therefore appears to reside not in the Bible but within the participants themselves.

Plank, Lundgren, and Egnell's mapping of new spiritual practices within the Church of Sweden indicates that yoga is often framed as a 'more' Christian and church-based activity in Norway and Denmark than in Sweden (Plank et al. 2023, 224). However, our analysis shows that holistic practices also occupy a significant place in the majority churches of Denmark and Norway. Additionally, we observe that the strong emphasis on allowing participants to interpret church yoga from their own perspectives is closely aligned with a fundamental belief within holistic environments. It therefore seems the doctrine of self-spirituality has become ingrained within parishes organizing church yoga in Norway and Denmark.

In summary, both pastors and yoga instructors aim for church yoga to be a space centred on wellbeing, without the pressure of achieving specific goals. Even within an institutionalized Christian context there seems to be no conflict in prioritizing the connection with one's breath and body over the connection with God. Increased involvement in the parish is not a primary goal. The limited efforts to recruit participants to regular parish activities indicate that long-term involvement is no longer a realistic aim (Fretheim 2014). As a threshold activity, church yoga is therefore valued for its intrinsic benefits rather than being seen as a stepping stone to more extensive engagement.

Tensions between agent and artefact

Linguistic substitution

According to Wertsch tensions and frictions between the agent and artefact make mediated actions a fruitful site where meaning is both maintained and continually redefined. This section examines how yoga expressions are used or avoided in church yoga, focusing especially on the linguistic framing of the yoga exercise. As the prelude describes, the yoga exercise consists of various yoga poses, with a guided meditation at the end. In each parish this part took about 30 minutes and was the most substantial element in terms of time spent. How is meaning negotiated between agent and artefact during the actual yoga exercises? What kind of frictions exist when yoga is used creatively in a church setting?

The initial example comes from a parish where a pastor and a yoga instructor sat together in front of the participants during the yoga church

service. Following a brief devotional segment led by the pastor, the yoga instructor took the lead. Although the exercises consisted of familiar yoga postures, the language the instructor used diverged from traditional yoga terminology. The following excerpt from the fieldwork captures how the 'Sun Salutation' sequence took place:

> The instructor explains what is happening in a calm voice, consistently incorporating religious interpretations in the explanations of the movements, such as 'stretching towards God', 'opening the heart to God', 'letting God's power move you', and 'reaching towards the heavens'. The language is thoroughly religious, employing an inclusive 'we' within this spiritual context (Church 1, NO).

After the yoga church service the pastor explained she had requested the yoga instructor to avoid words and phrases the pastor perceived as theologically inappropriate:

> Our yoga instructor only recently became a Christian and has previously been more familiar with Eastern yoga spirituality. So she initially used terms unassociated with Christianity. […] I've had several conversations with her, and she understands which terms are less appropriate, and which are more fitting for a church yoga setting. She's even 'Christianized' some of the expressions she originally used, so I'm very pleased with our collaboration (Church 1, NO).

One of the frequently cited articles in the previously mentioned work by Moberg and Ramstedt is Candy Gunther Brown's study of how evangelical Christians in the United States 'Christianize' yoga (Moberg and Ramstedt 2023, 123). Brown contends that one method Christian communities use to reclaim yoga from its Hindu origins is *linguistic substitution*, where English and Christian terminology replace Sanskrit (Brown 2018, 660). These Christian yoga programmes in the US aim to bring participants closer to Christ. Brown observes that practices like the Sun Salutation are 'Christianized' by substituting linguistic elements – for example, replacing 'Sun' with 'Son' – thus transforming it into a salutation for the Son, Jesus (Brown 2018, 670).

The above excerpt illustrates that linguistic substitution is a relevant concept when analysing church yoga practices in Norway and Denmark. However, the Christianization we observe differs from what Brown reports in evangelical churches in the US. In our research the yoga instructor per-

forms the 'Sun Salutation' focusing solely on God, without any explicit references to Jesus. This approach differs from what Brown refers to as *crucicentrism* (Brown 2018, 670). Although the church setting guides participants towards the Christian God, we find what we will term *God-centrism* present in our material. It may be that Scandinavian creation theology plays a role here. This tradition 'emphasizes the important idea that each human being is to be recognized and respected as created in the "image and likeness" of God (*imago dei*)'" (Wyller et al. 2025, 23). Following Fedele and Knibbe, this type of Christianization is closely aligned with a holistic approach (Fedele and Knibbe 2020, 332). They point out that the theistic view of God as a personal saviour with authority over individuals like that seen in evangelical Christ-centred yoga in the US has often marked the division between theistic and holistic spirituality (ibid., 332). Furthermore, a theistic spirituality that emphasizes mystical unity with God and employs more impersonal god-language, as the excerpt describes, can facilitate a renegotiation of boundaries between the theistic and holistic approaches (ibid., 332).

Yet both Christ-centred and God-centred substitutions represent creative methods of redefining the linguistic meaning attributed to yoga. Linguistic substitution thus serves as a Christianizing strategy, whereby church agents attempt to control the yoga artefact's meaning, minimizing the productive tension Wertsch asserts is an essential element of every mediated action. This is not a main tendency in our material, however. Only five out of 31 respondents reported that they never used yoga expressions, but only a Christianized vocabulary. The following section analyses instances where yoga expressions are kept and used more in line with their historically acquired meanings, representing a main tendency in our data.

Linguistic domestication

Following Brown, Moberg and Ramstedt argue that 'linguistic substitution' is a dominant approach within churches (Moberg and Ramstedt 2023, 125). Although this may hold true for evangelicals in the US, it does not accurately describe church yoga activities in Norway and Denmark. Some yoga sessions we observed occurred in a church setting with little or no explicit use of Christian terminology. Several yoga expressions were used, but primarily in Norwegian and Danish. Yet Sanskrit terms like '*namaste*' were seldom employed. Our survey asks whether respondents use expressions like 'Child's Pose', 'Downward Dog', 'Warrior Pose', and '*namaste*', or whether

they try to avoid traditional yoga expressions. Several respondents say it is quite important to them *not* to Christianize traditional yoga expressions:

- The instructor names the exercises using yoga expressions out of respect for yoga's distinctive features regarding the positions (DK).
- The yoga instructor decides what to call them; I participate as a pastor, welcoming everyone and hosting the session (DK).
- We use regular yoga terms because the exercises are yoga exercises. There's no need to call them anything other than what they are (DK).

Others mention that they prefer to use Danish or Norwegian names for the different positions, but that they avoid Sanskrit, and specifically '*namaste*'.

- I use Norwegian names for yoga poses like 'Downward Dog' and 'Child's Pose', but I don't use Sanskrit words like 'namaste' (NO).
- I use the classic Danish names for the poses because it connects with what many of them already know. 'Dragonfly', 'Child's Pose', 'Downward-Facing Dog', 'Cat/Cow', and so on. I don't use 'namaste'. I say, 'Peace be with you', and the participants respond with 'And peace be with you' (DK).

This preference for national languages suggests yoga expressions are part of everyday vocabulary in Denmark and Norway, which corresponds to how yoga has become part of everyday life and is regarded as part of mainstream culture (Vincett and Woodhead 2016, 327; Pagis 2019). Moreover, one of the respondents hints at another explanation in her response to the survey question about yoga expressions:

- I use the Danish words for the poses. I avoid Sanskrit to make it as accessible as possible. After all, I'm a Protestant. :)

It is well known that translating the Bible from Latin to national languages was a key concern for Martin Luther. His aim was to make the Bible accessible to people, rather than only to the clergy. This is probably what this respondent was hinting at in the above quotation.

At the same time several respondents mention that they never use '*namaste*', and in some cases '*namaste*' is replaced by the liturgical greeting 'peace be with you'. This active avoidance indicates that Sanskrit is perceived as inappropriate in a church context, probably because it relinks yoga to its

historical and assumed roots within 'Eastern' spiritualities in general and Hinduism in particular (Fibiger 2023, 72). Sanskrit seems to represent a linguistic boundary within church yoga. Neither those who actively Christianize yoga nor those who use yoga expressions in Danish or Norwegian employ words in Sanskrit.

However, it is equally important to note that yoga's roots are diverse. Jacobsen explains that modern yoga as we know it today from gym and wellness centres can be traced to Indian yoga teachers in the late 1800s. These teachers, trained in Western medicine, embarked on 'mission trips' to the US and Europe to promote the idea that yoga was not solely for Hindu monks but was accessible to everyone, including women (Jacobsen 2006, 7). The explicitly religious roots tied to traditional yoga and Hinduism therefore gradually became less prominent (ibid., 4). Arguing along the same lines as Jacobsen, Fibiger claims modern yoga is best perceived as a global fusion consisting of elements from traditional Indian yoga, bodybuilding, and – of particular relevance to our study – Swedish-Danish forms of gymnastics, which became part of the Indian education system during the interwar period (Fibiger 2023, 75).

This historical and contextual backdrop therefore explains why church workers and yoga instructors do not use Sanskrit widely. The historical link to which Norwegian and Danish parishes relate is not the Indian and Hindu traditions of yoga. The use of Danish and Norwegian is simply because yoga is embedded in their countries' everyday life and language. As the concept of 'linguistic substitution' fails to consider this historical development and is inadequate for analysing the linguistic renewal of yoga expressions, we propose *linguistic domestication* as an additional term. This term highlights that, as in other countries, yoga has become domesticated in the Nordic context.

To summarize, when we focus on the exercise part of church yoga, we observe significant tension between agent and artefact. There are deliberate efforts to Christianize yoga and linguistically replace traditional yoga terms with Christian terminology. However, unlike in the US, the language in Norway and Denmark tends to be God-centred rather than Christocentric. This God-centred approach aligns church yoga more with a holistic perspective. Eliminating traditional yoga expressions can be seen as an attempt to control the interpretation of yoga, limiting it to conveying exclusively Christian meanings. Nevertheless, only a few of our respondents choose to avoid yoga expressions entirely. The prevailing approach is to use traditional yoga terms – primarily in Norwegian and Danish – alongside Christian language.

This blend facilitates a dialogue between yoga's historical development and its creative adaptation to fit the church's intentions and accent.

Appropriation

Material domestication of the singing bowl

The previous sections have explored how church yoga is presented to its participants, and how church workers and yoga instructors practise and describe yoga. This final section of the analysis focuses on elements and practices that are typically *not* found in yoga sessions in gyms, yoga studios, public schools, healthcare facilities, and similar venues. What are the distinctive properties of church yoga? How do churches make yoga their own?

As the prelude describes, the object commonly known as the Tibetan singing bowl is integrated into several of the church yoga activities we have observed. According to our survey, 25.8 per cent of the respondents incorporate singing bowls in their yoga practice within a church setting. Although we have not observed this object in other church activities, Annunen and Utriainen note that it is widely used in various holistic practices (Annunen and Utriainen 2023a, 198).

These researchers argue that the bowls are often presented as having historical ties to Tibetan religious and spiritual ceremonies, though the validity of this claim is widely debated (Annunen and Utriainen 2023a, 197). Annunen and Utriainen describe how the bowl is frequently played on top of participants' bodies during sound healing sessions. The sound and vibrations are believed to promote health benefits, particularly in reducing stress and anxiety (ibid., 197). Interestingly, one of the goals is to help participants break free of a traditional Lutheran view of the body as dry, controlled, bounded, and strictly confined, and instead encourage an experience of the body as 'watery, porous, and limitless' (ibid., 204).

The singing bowl is not played on top of the participants' bodies in church yoga. Instead, it is used to signal the start of the session, and sometimes its conclusion. Typically, the pastor strikes the bowl three times and greets participants in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As discussed in the previous section, adapting the singing bowl in this manner comes close to what we term linguistic domestication, but in this case it is more accurate to call it *material domestication*. The singing bowl is endowed with a role akin to that of church bells, serving as a call to gather and marking the beginning of a sacred activity.

In the sound healing context restricting the bowl's sound to single strokes creates a more controlled, bounded, and confined use, which could be interpreted as an attempt to Christianize or even 'Lutheranize' the bowl. However, Annunen and Utriainen underline that the singing bowl is a versatile object that has been appropriated in many different settings such as yoga, meditation, traditional massage therapy, and parish retreats and activities (Annunen and Utriainen 2023a, 198). As the adaptation of the singing bowl causes no harm to a specific religious or spiritual tradition, Bucar would not necessarily classify it as an instance of cultural appropriation (Bucar 2022). Given Moberg's and Ramstedt's focus on the intention of an agent to change and modify a practice, however, it is more likely that they would classify the transformation of the singing bowl into a church bell as appropriation proper (Moberg and Ramstedt 2023, 121).

Following both Wertsch and Bakhtin, appropriation is a fundamental property of mediated action. When churches use the bowl for their specific purposes, they are populating an artefact that belongs to someone else with their own semantic intentions and accent. However, the artefact does not belong to a single different religious or spiritual tradition but to many different actors. We argue that there is a difference between using yoga as it has been presented in holistic health contexts and using a Sámi drum in a non-Sámi church setting, for example. Given how the Nordic churches and state authorities have suppressed the drum, such an act of appropriation would be more controversial and probably a case of unacceptable appropriation. The singing bowl therefore exemplifies an appropriation in which ownership is shared. The parishes are taking something that belongs to a broad spectrum of others and adapting it to their own context (Wertsch 1998, 56; Bakhtin 1981, 293).

Unique properties of church yoga

Despite the singing bowl's restricted use, its soft sound remains distinct from the sharp tones of traditional church bells. Singing bowls' sound is also blended with other sounds as part of church yoga. Every time we entered a church as participant observers, we were welcomed by music. While music is commonly featured in other yoga activities, Gregorian chants and hymns are probably unique elements within this church-specific yoga soundscape. Our survey indicates that 67.7 per cent of the respondents use instrumental music, and 29 per cent incorporate hymns in their yoga practice.

Most parishes used electronic devices for music, but two churches we visited featured live performances on the organ and on a harp. While the organ is a staple of church music, using a harp is more exceptional. The following excerpt describes how the harpist created a unique atmosphere in the church building:

> As people are lying on the floor in a final stretch, the pastor quietly stands up, puts on her priest's robe and collar, and steps in front of the altar. Before she starts speaking, there's a moment when the harpist is singing and playing. Everyone lies on their mats with their eyes closed while the sound of the harp and the harpist's very beautiful voice fills the room. It doesn't last long – only about five minutes – but it creates a very powerful atmosphere. When the harpist finishes, the priest begins to speak (Church 1, DK).

This sensory interaction between music, room, and participants highlights an aspect that we have seldom seen reflected in previous research on yoga. Berndsen, who has researched pupils visiting churches, cites Böhme, who explains how architecture, materiality, shapes, light, and sound can create sensations and a distinct atmosphere (Berndsen 2024, 2). In a related study Marschner, like Böhme, argues that church buildings can foster powerful atmospheres independent of any religious activities occurring within them (Marschner 2022, 245). Although church yoga is a religious activity, lying on a yoga mat with one's eyes closed while listening to music is not a typical behaviour for most churchgoers, especially in a Lutheran church. The atmosphere of church yoga differs markedly from yoga in gyms, yoga studios, and other settings.

Another unique property of church yoga is, as the prelude mentions, the incorporation of Bible readings, which is not typically associated with other types of yoga. Indeed, 74.2 per cent of the survey respondents reported that Bible readings were part of their yoga practice. When we examined how the Bible was used in the fieldwork material, verses from the Old and New Testaments, with a focus on comfort, rest, and finding peace, were often involved:

> And finally, she [the pastor] said she wanted to share one of her two favourite Bible verses with us, which Jesus spoke just before he died: 'Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.' She repeated it twice (Church 4, NO).

Fibiger argues that Christian-based yoga is directed at optimizing relationships with Jesus (Fibiger 2023, 72). However, although the biblical verses make some references to Jesus, they are above all seen as words of wisdom, in contrast with Brown's US study, where Jesus is promoted as a personal saviour (Brown 2018, 670). Regardless of the biblical passage, rest and finding peace are emphasized. This is aligned with previous research, which shows a focus on managing daily life (Angel and Johnsen 2019, 66) and depictions of God as a comforter and caregiver (Mjaaland 2020, 31), both common themes in regular church services.

As the prelude outlines, the third distinctive property of church yoga is prayer. A significant 64.5 per cent of the respondents include the Trinitarian blessing, while 38.7 per cent report that the Lord's Prayer is part of their yoga practice. These prayers are part of every church service and are perceived as theologically foundational within the studied churches, as in other churches. This means that when an activity begins and ends with these prayers, it is theologically classified as a Christian practice.

In summary, the singing bowl's adaptation and the incorporation of unique mediating features of the churches' established religious traditions demonstrate that yoga's integration extends beyond it merely being hosted as an activity within a church setting. Yoga has been woven into the fabric of the church and has become an integral part of its core expressions and practices. The singing bowl's use as a church bell alongside music, biblical readings, and prayer creates a distinct type of yoga within the church context. Church yoga's unique properties clearly demonstrate that the majority churches in Denmark and Norway have appropriated yoga. In the words of Bakhtin and Wertsch (Wertsch 1998, 56; Bakhtin 1981, 293) yoga has been adapted to fit the churches' own semantic and expressive intentions, thereby making it their own.

Conclusion

The first part of our research questions asks: how have the Danish and Norwegian majority churches made yoga their own? Enstedt's and Plank's observation that yoga and other 'Eastern' practices have entered public and private spaces with little controversy may stem from these practices not being classified as religion (Fedele and Knibbe 2020, 3). However, a less explored explanation is that these contexts have made yoga fit their own organizational intentions and expressive accents, thus avoiding debate. Overall, the analysis suggests that while an agent's goals may be multiple

and sometimes conflicting, an actor's primary objectives play a crucial role in how a new cultural tool is incorporated in existing patterns of practice. Therefore, in contrast with Moberg's and Ramstedt's view that churches' religious nature makes the appropriation of yoga more ethically problematic (Moberg and Ramstedt 2023, 134), we contend that the ways in which the Danish and Norwegian majority churches have adapted yoga are comparable with how other agents have adapted yoga to their needs.

The second half of our research question is: how is yoga preserved as something that also belongs to someone else? Moberg and Ramstedt argue that churches tend to remove almost every association with Eastern and Buddhist cultures and traditions (Moberg and Ramstedt 2023, 134); Fibiger notes that churches delink yoga from its Indian roots and the Hindu tradition (Fibiger 2023, 84–85). We find that while churches do Christianize yoga, they also maintain it as a practice that belongs to others. Our research reveals more instances of what we term *linguistic domestication* and *material domestication* than linguistic substitution, in which Christian concepts completely replace historically attributed yoga expressions. Furthermore, yoga's complex origins – especially those of modern yoga (Fibiger 2023, 75; Jacobsen 2006) – make assertions about yoga as the sole property of specific religious or spiritual traditions problematic. An intriguing feature of yoga is its ability to belong to a diverse range of actors while maintaining its fundamental properties. The majority churches we studied treated yoga respectfully as something they shared with many others.

In conclusion, Enstedt and Plank pose the question of whether non-Christian practices' incorporation necessitates a theological reframing to render them legitimate (Enstedt and Plank 2023, 12). Our study suggests that the need for a theological reframing is not pressing. The churches' focus is not primarily on optimizing the participants' relationship with Jesus (Fibiger 2023, 72) but on creating a space for stress reduction and wellbeing. The religious teaching and practice were not crucicentrist as in the US (Brown 2018, 670) but entailed an open and nonspecific God-centrism that was well aligned with the holistic doctrine of self-spirituality (Aupers and Houtman 2006). Our study therefore supports Enstedt's and Plank's assertion that 'the spiritual revolution' is occurring not only outside but within the majority churches in the Nordic countries (Enstedt and Plank 2023). However, in contrast with Enstedt's and Plank's suggestion, yoga is no longer understood as a non-Christian practice. The majority churches in Norway and Denmark have appropriated yoga, integrating it into their own theological practice and tradition.

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Book Review

Oliver Grimm (ed.): *Bear and Human: Facets of a Multi-Layered Relationship from Past to Recent Times, with Emphasis on Northern Europe,* vols 1–3. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2023, 1198 pp.

The relationship between bears and humans has been rich and diverse wherever they have lived side by side, as A. Irving Hallowell (1926) demonstrated a century ago in his pioneering study of the spiritual and cultural dimensions of human–bear relations in different societies in the northern hemisphere. This relationship extends far back into human history, and it can be widely observed in archaeological findings and ethnographic texts, oral history, art, and artefacts. It is therefore unsurprising that several studies and analyses of the bear's significance in different cultures have appeared in the century since Hallowell's study. One of the most recent and notable is the three-volume *Bear and Human*, edited by Oliver Grimm.

Scholarly anthologies frequently have their roots in conferences and workshops. This is also so here as a result of discussions held in Germany in connection with the establishment of the Centre for Baltic and Scandinavian Archaeology (ZBSA, Zentrum für Baltische und Skandinavische Archäologie) in 2008–2010. *Bear and Human* continues the series of publications based on the ZBSA workshops.

This multidisciplinary work explores the complex relationship between bears and humans from prehistory to the present day across Europe, from England to Russia as the publisher puts it. It brings together 64 articles in the fields of biology, archaeology and archaeozoology, art history, the study of religions, and philology. Topics include the role of the bear in religious and cultural practices, the representation of the bear in art, bear-related taboos, and the presence of bear remains in tombs and churches. Due to the large number of authors and diverse themes, the book is multifaceted and even fragmented. By combining research from different disciplines, however, the collection also provides a comprehensive overview of the diverse and varied relationships between humans and bears throughout history in northern Europe.

The three books consist of twelve thematic chapters that are not entirely consistent. Except for the first chapter, which is an introduction by the editor, there are two chapters (three on bear hunting and four on animal agency) with only one article each, while the most extensive chapters contain nine, and one even sixteen. Chapter 2 focuses on bears in biology, with eight articles offering a multidimensional picture of the bear in Europe. The bear is a biologically fascinating and highly adaptable species, but it is also a symbol with historical and cultural

significance. Bear management and conservation cannot rely only on natural science but require an understanding of the cultural value attributed to the bear.

The books' emphasis is on archaeological research, which is understandable given their background. Two chapters (5 and 6) are devoted to bears in archaeozoological studies in northern Europe. These cover a third of the books, but they of course overlap with other disciplines such as history and the study of religion. Chapter 5 focuses on five geographical areas, Britain, Sweden, eastern Fennoscandia, Germany, and eastern Europe. Hannah O'Regan points out that the significance of bears in Britain varied greatly and at different times: they were commodities, symbols, and entertainers for people. Ola Magnell notes that in Sweden bears were associated with both hunting and the fur trade, and bear claws and teeth were used in ritual contexts. In Finland bears were regarded as almost humanlike ancestors, as Kristiina Mannermaa, Tuija Kirkinen, and Suvi Viranta-Kovanen point out. Ulrich Schmölcke writes that bears were once common in northern Germany but gradually became extinct, with the last individuals disappearing in the eighteenth century. In the early stages bears were little hunted, but during the Iron Age their claws were used in burials. Ekaterina Kashina and Anastasia Khramtsova write that in the forest zone of eastern Europe the bear was both game and a special spiritual creature.

Chapter 6 continues the archaeozoological theme in northern Europe but includes sixteen more focused analyses covering a wide geographical and temporal range. The articles show that the bear acted as a versatile border crosser, moving between nature and culture, the sacred and the everyday, the pre-Christian and the Christian, and the local and the global. However, differences in research traditions reveal how much current interpretations depend on the available material (archaeological, literary, ethnographic) and the perspective chosen by the researcher.

Bear remains from the Stone Age are discussed in articles by Tobias Lindström and by Lutz Klassen and Kristian Murphy Gregersen. Lindström examines bear remains and descriptions at sites of the Pitted Ware culture in Sweden. Klassen and Gregersen show that bears were revered as sacred animals in the Danish Mesolithic context, whereas their status in the Neolithic environment became that of more utilitarian and symbolic animals. Hannah Strehlau examines burials during the late Iron Age in Uppland in Sweden.

Five articles focus on the Viking Age. John Ljungkvist and Karl-Johan Lindholm examine the role of the bear in the cultural and religious transition of the Viking Age; Ola Magnell investigates the remains at Frösö church, which link the bear to religious rituals and the arrival of Christianity; and Jane Jordahl, John Ljungkvist, and Sabine Sten provide

an overview of bear claw finds in Gotland, which are interpreted as symbols of status, power, and possibly of a connection with ancestors. Meanwhile, Rudolf Gustavsson and John Ljungkvist compare bear remains in two different contexts: Iron Age graves and in a castle after 1500 CE. Anja Mansrud offers a multispecies perspective on the use of bear claws in burial traditions in southern Norway.

Four articles discuss the Sámi context and burials in particular. Oliver Grimm examines bearskin burials in Norway and Sweden; Elisabeth Iregren discusses Sámi bear burial rituals in the Swedish part of Sápmi; Ingrid Sommerseth presents similar observations from Norway; and Marte Spangen, Anna-Kaisa Salmi, Tiina Äikäs, and Markus Fjellström examine bear remains at offering sites.

Three papers focus on the Russian region. Andrei Zinoviev examines the trade in bearskins in the late first and early second millennia, based on Russian sources; Elena Tianina examines what archaeological finds reveal about the bear cult in medieval Novgorod; and Alexander Syrovatko, Natalia Svirkina, and Liudmila Plekhanova present the use of bear remains in a cremation burial in the Moscow region in the twelfth century.

From a museological perspective the article by Kristin Armstrong Oman and Elna Siv Kristoffersen is particularly interesting. It discusses the world's oldest intact polar bear skeleton, found in southwestern Norway, and its presentation in a museum exhibition.

Chapter 7 focuses on bears in the history of religion, and its articles provide a multifaceted picture of bears' status. Olof Sundqvist examines the role of bears in the warrior-band of *berserker*, while Håkan Rydving compares the bear rituals of the Khanty and Sámi peoples based on local sources, emphasizing their differences and diversity. Vesa Matteo Piludu offers three articles, one of which deals with Finno-Karelian bear hunting rituals in the forest, another with bear feasts in the village with the bear a guest of honour, and the third with bear skull rituals, in which the skull and bones were returned to the forest and their heavenly origin to ensure regeneration. Marja-Liisa Keinänen examines the relationship between swidden cultivators and forest peasants and the bear in Savonia in Finland and in central Scandinavia, and Tuija Kirkinen describes the use of bear meat in Finland in ritual and contemporary culinary contexts. Two authors examine how Christian churches adopted symbolic and practical elements from bears. Teppo Korhonen explains how bearskins were used as gifts to churches from the mid-Middle Ages until the 1890s, and Jahn Børe Jahnsen shows that bearskins, paws, and claws were used in medieval churches as both practical and magical objects.

Other key themes in the books, organized by chapter, include the bear in literary studies and the history of ideas, philology, image

science, and classical antiquity. The last chapter contains a scattered collection of articles which, according to the title, examine bears from a broader perspective.

These comprehensive books contain one article on bear–human relations in North America. In his article in Chapter 12 Kerry Hull discusses the multifaceted relationship between bears and Indigenous peoples in North America. The text is based on archaeological and ethnographic research that sheds light on the role of bears as spiritual, cultural, and economic factors in various Indigenous communities. He provides an overview of how Indigenous peoples have viewed bears in a multifaceted way for thousands of years, both as animals to be hunted and as spiritual and cultural beings. Of the books' 1,198 pages, only 22 are devoted to North America, which raises the question of why the subject is not dealt with more extensively and comprehensively. The relationship between bears and humans in the cultures of North American Indigenous peoples certainly deserves much more attention, especially as the bear–human relationship has been so significant and multiform in these cultures and has also been extensively studied.

Multidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity do not automatically imply global coverage; rather, the articles are limited to the academic and institutional network within which the books were created. Given the books' background, it is understandable that the editorial focus is on Europe, but its starting point, the different dimensions of a multilayered bear–human relationship from the past to the present, suggests that the subject should be dealt with more broadly. It would have been justified to have included a comprehensive and diverse selection of articles examining the significance of bears in the cultures of North American Indigenous peoples. The Ainu bear-sending ceremony, *iomante*, in northern Japan would also have deserved attention. Of course, this would have meant expanding the books, perhaps even to four volumes, but it would have been worthwhile. The books would thus have been a valuable update to the study of the relationship between bears and humans in the northern hemisphere that Hallowell initiated a century ago.

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Book Review

Jørn Borup, Mitra Härkönen, Knut A. Jacobsen & Katarina Plank (eds): *Buddhism in the Nordic Countries.* Abingdon: Routledge, 2025, 212 pp.

Buddhism in the Nordic Countries is a welcome anthology, providing the first overview of historical and contemporary Buddhist movements in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. It is a product of the maturing of the study of immigrant Buddhism, providing much to consider on the marked difference between migrant and native interest in Buddhism. The book is divided into ten chapters, composed of an introduction, five country presentations, three sections highlighting selected Buddhist individuals, and a joint conclusion.

The editorial team of Jørn Borup, Mitra Härkönen, Knut A. Jacobsen, and Katarina Plank is well equipped for its task, incorporating a multifaceted knowledge of the topic. Associate Professor Jørn Borup from the University of Aarhus specializes in Japanese Buddhism. Academy Research Fellow Mitra Härkönen from the University of Helsinki is a specialist in Tibetan and Thai Buddhism. Professor Knut A. Jacobsen from the University of Bergen has an encyclopaedic knowledge of several Asian religions. Associate Professor Katarina Plank from the University of Karlstad specializes in contemporary meditation movements and new spiritualities. Four other scholars have contributed to the volume: Stefan Larsson and Predee Hongsaton from Sweden; Johannes Cairns from Finland; and Haraldur Hreinsson from Iceland.

The book starts with the Vikings, who brought the first Buddhist material object that has been found: the bronze Helgö Buddha on Helgö island, Sweden. The small statue was probably produced in the eighth century in the Swat Valley in modern Pakistan. It remains an isolated find: the actual history of Buddhists in the Nordics starts during the eighteenth century, when Buddhist Kalmyks were among the soldiers of the Russian Army occupying the Finnish part of Sweden. The nineteenth century brings an emerging academic knowledge of Buddhism, the rise of the Theosophical Movement, and Nordic emigrants encountering Buddhism elsewhere in the world, especially in the United States. These early influences remained fairly marginal. It was the growth of Buddhist New Religious Movements such as Soka Gakkai and the immigration of Buddhists to the Nordic countries after the Second World War that saw Buddhism becoming gradually better known and more popular.

The book makes a basic distinction between the Buddhism of converts and the Buddhism of immigrants. While convert Buddhism can be understood in the context of New Religious Movements and new spiritualities, immigrant Buddhism

is better viewed in the context of globalizing migrant flows and integration. Although there are some overlaps with singular converts, mixed marriages, and joint representational platforms, convert and migrant Buddhism are in practice quite distinct – for example, regarding the focus of religious practice. However, both phenomena are characterized by extensive transnational linkages and the influence of a gradually diversifying religious environment.

While proving numbers is not without its challenges, the authors offer the following estimate of the key characteristics of the Buddhist population and its movements in the Nordics: 200,000 Buddhists; around 200 monks and nuns; roughly the same number of associations; and at least 100 temples. The estimate of adherents per country is as follows: Denmark 36,000; Finland 30,000; Iceland 1,500; Norway 40,000–50,000; and Sweden 80,000. Immigrant Thai and Vietnamese Buddhists are the largest groups, but there are also Burmese, Chinese, and Sri Lankan communities. Thais are clearly the largest group, both in the number of temples and followers, but they also have a very specific demography, with high rates of intermarriage with native Nordics. The Vietnamese are a much more ethnically endogamous group. These demographic features reflect distinct migration histories, with Thais being primarily international marriage migrants, and Vietnamese to a large extent being refugee and more recently work migrants.

Among converts Tibetan and Zen Buddhists are the most common. Zen was popularized in the West by popular books at an early stage, supported by interest in Japanese martial arts. Tibetan Buddhism arrived a little later, popularized worldwide by the Dalai Lama's flight from Tibet in 1959 and later Tibetan activism. Diamond Way Buddhism and Soka Gakkai International are important movements in most countries, including some arriving as immigrants from non-Buddhist majority societies. Besides the more formally organized communities, activities such as Buddhism-based mindfulness and vipassana mediation are quite popular.

The country chapters provide detailed insights into Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian, and Swedish Buddhists' histories and particularities. Common features include the role of the state, which basically encourages religious communities to organize themselves as either recognized religions or associations. Funding may also serve as an incentive to supplement the communities' often meagre resources. Such processes make the communities subject to national interests and bureaucratic regulation. A further issue concerns invited religious specialists' visa regulations. For example, how can a monk living on donations acquire the income required for a work visa? In such cases help is often needed from people familiar with national legislation and bureaucratic practices, such as the native spouses of immigrants.

The three chapters on selected individuals are a wonderful addition to the book. The texts focus on Tibetan teacher Lama Ngawan and Thai missionary Phra Chamnong Chutinattharo from Sweden, and Mauno Nordberg, who established the first Buddhist organization in Finland, the Friends of Buddhism. The chapters discuss these individuals' role in the making of Nordic Buddhism. Simultaneously, they highlight wider societal changes affecting emerging Buddhist organizations and communities. I would have liked to have read more such chapters, though several similar personalities are discussed in the other chapters. However, if there is something missing from the book, it is a full chapter on Diamond Way Buddhism and its leader, the Dane Ole Nydahl, who in my understanding is the most internationally prominent, if controversial, Nordic Buddhist personality.

Although the book fulfils its role well as it is, more comparisons between the Nordic countries would have been useful for the reader. For example, comparative tables summarizing key features of Buddhist populations and movements would have made the similarities and differences between the countries more explicit. A joint discussion of the many, especially Tibetan, groups would also have been helpful, as well as more discussion of how transnational networks link communities with each other and the rest of the Buddhist world. As I am not myself immersed in Buddhist studies, reading the volume was sometimes challenging because of the wide variety of actors among convert Buddhists. While many of these groups are usually centred on local teachers and devotees, they are nevertheless highly transnational and well connected, which also makes them interesting for a non-Nordic readership.

Altogether, *Buddhism in the Nordic Countries* is an excellent addition to the literature on contemporary religious minorities, both immigrant and native, as well as the first general presentation of the topic. It provides historical depth and a current overview of the scholarly understanding of Buddhism in Northern Europe. Overall, the anthology is well edited, and despite their country-specific features, the chapters provide sufficiently similar information for the totality to read well. Although the book is obviously suitable for people interested in understanding the variety of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Buddhism, it should also be of interest to people studying contemporary religious diversity, both among immigrants and the majority population. The book will be suitable reading from graduate studies onwards and for people pondering their eventual thesis on Buddhism, as the final paragraph of the book is solely composed of further research questions.

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Book Review

Christel Gärtner, Linda Hennig & Olaf Müller (eds): *Families and Religion: Dynamics of Transmission across Generations.* Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2025, 425 pp.

Families and Religion: Dynamics of Transmission across Generations is an anthology focusing on the generational transmission of religion in Canada, Finland, Germany, Hungary, and Italy. The selected countries represent Western and post-Communist countries with either a Catholic or Protestant Christian majority, or mixed as in Canada and Germany. The editorial team of Christel Gärtner, Linda Hennig, and Olaf Müller is based at the University of Münster in Germany. The other main national contributors are established scholars in the sociology of religion. The book is based on a research project funded by the John Templeton Foundation.

The editors' introduction explains the study's point of departure: 'We rely on the widely shared interpretation that this religious change can be understood primarily as a process of generational replacement, i.e. that over time less religious generations are replacing their more religious predecessors' (p. 11). The book's main aim is 'to investigate how, when exactly, and under what circumstances subsequent generations become less or differently religious' (p. 11). Families are selected as a window onto the generational replacement thesis, as the contributors investigate 'the claim that religious decline is due mainly to the changing conditions and influences that subsequent generations experience in childhood, and particularly in adolescence' (p. 11). The research focus is on religious transmission, changes of meanings and practices, and factors and mechanisms (p. 12).

After an overview of previous research and related findings the introduction explains the book's shared theoretical and methodological basis. Generations are the main theoretical starting point and are understood in two different ways: as family generations (grandparents, parents, children); and historical generations (birth cohorts). These are then related to socialization theories of growing up in 'a specific historical-political community' (p. 21). This is motivated by the statement that 'while in the phase of childhood it is primarily the family that influences religious beliefs and practices, in the phase of adolescence it is the societal and cultural context' (p. 21). The entire volume follows a joint methodology consisting of nationally representative surveys and generational family interviews. In the German case data collection was planned to differentiate the East (GDR) and West (FRG) German experiences, as the country was divided after the Second World War until 1990.

The core of the book is five national chapters that follow a similar

structure, starting with a historical background, followed by survey and interview analysis and discussion. The chapter on Germany is authored by Christel Gärtner, Linda Hennig, and Olaf Müller. Religious socialization was challenging for families in the GDR, and the data show clearly that the East became increasingly secular. This was probably also related to that region's mainly Protestant Christian history. The German case underlines the significance of state policies on religion, so different are the religious developments between the Communist East and the Liberal Democratic West.

The Italian team consists of Roberta Ricucci, Ferruccio Biolcati Rinaldi, Luca Bossi, Marcello Cabria, Renzo Carriero, and Francesco Molteni. Italian society has undergone significant religious changes in recent decades, but the majority Catholic Church still has a significant if eroding position in society. Weekly attendance and other basic indicators of religiosity have declined, especially among younger generations. Ricucci et al. divide Italians into three categories: practising Catholics; cultural Catholics; and nonreligious. The chapter's basic message is clear: 'The power of religious institutions seems to be waning when it comes to forging new generations of Catholics' (p. 131).

Peter Beyer and Jacob Legault-Leclair introduce the Canadian perspective. The overall religious situation in Canada differs somewhat between provinces, especially along the Anglo Protestant – French Catholic dividing line. Canada has not had an established church since the mid-nineteenth century. It is also a country of historical and contemporary immigration, with increasing religious diversity. The authors note a feature also taken up in several of the book's other chapters, 'that not all religions or subdivisions of religions have been affected to the same degree by this [downward] trend [in religiosity]' (p. 138). While the general picture of religious change is somewhat similar across many countries, there are both tradition-specific and country-specific variations to this of which we should be aware. Islam and Catholicism appear to resist secularization more effectively.

The Hungarian chapter is written by Gergely Rosta, Zsuzsanna Szvetelszky, and Virág Sövegjártó. Hungary is a post-communist country that had a slightly more relaxed relationship with religion than the GDR. It is also somewhat more religious today than the former GDR, perhaps also because of its Catholic history. The role of grandparents was significant: the state promoted an anti-religious agenda to working parents.

The Finnish chapter is by Kati Tervo-Niemelä, Jenni Spännäri, Laura Kallatsa, and Heidi Toivanen. Finland is a Protestant (Lutheran) Christian majority society where the church has become less important, though church membership remains more than 60 per cent. Religious socialization is less common than previously, and church member-

ship is significantly lower among younger generations. The findings also show that both self-defined religiosity and spirituality have declined. Unlike in many countries the decline is stronger among women than men, though women are still more religious/spiritual.

The country analyses are brought together in comparative chapters focusing respectively on the quantitative and qualitative data. The study's main results support the generational replacement theory, in which successive generations are less religious, but differences between religious traditions are observed. Religious socialization in the family is now less common, and the general societal climate does not support it, though in this respect the countries differ slightly. The authors also note that the transmission process is reflexive: parents consider what to transmit or not, and with which specific content. Transmission is thus also a reflexive process of the transformation of beliefs and values. This aspect deserves further study.

Despite its merits, the book could have opened up its key concepts of 'family' and 'generation' better. The family is more or less taken for granted as a biological, conjugal, and three-generational succession. The book does not really discuss single parents, divorcees, blended families, parenting at a distance, and so on, all of which are increasingly common in today's world. Although some chapters point to different families, they do not reflect extensively on the differences. More discussion of various understandings and types of family, as well as in relation to the vast anthropological and other literature on the topic, would also have made the book a better resource for researchers focusing on religion and family in non-Western societies.

Generation, the other key term, is defined, but its meaning includes only a biological or genealogical, as well as a Mannheimian historical, understanding of generations, the latter of which is basically applied as birth cohorts. While these are obviously essential, I missed reflections on the notion of generation as understood in the migration studies literature. Migration studies understand generations in relation to parents and their descendants' country of birth as referring to the central socialization context of respective generations, including age at migration. These views can also be related to country-internal migration (there are few migrant families in the qualitative samples), which has also been an important factor in Western societies in the last two centuries.

I had the opportunity to be the discussant in an author-meets-critics session on *Families and Religion* at the 38th biennial conference of the International Society for the Sociology of Religion in Kaunas in Lithuania in July 2025. At that session I raised this critique, which the authors considered valid. Family life is becoming increasingly complex in mobile societies with blended families, so a more sensitive approach to basic

categorizations is probably required in future studies of the generational perspective on religious socialization in families.

Families and Religion: Dynamics of Transmission across Generations is a coherent and well-written anthology. It is rich in data, and its comparative approach allows its authors both to discuss country-specific developments and dwell on general observations of religious transmission over more than half a century. The volume is a good addition to the existing literature on families and religion and will be an inspiration for others in its results and methodological setup. Researchers focusing on religious transmission will find this book of great value, as will many others working on religious change in Western societies.

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