

Religion and Social Exclusion: A Cross-Cultural Approach and New Methodology (RELEX)

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Scientific quality, renewal and impact

What is the interplay between social exclusion and religion on a cross-cultural scale, and how can we study it in a systematic and reliable way?

This both empirical and methodological question is central to the aims and goals of the proposed RELEX CoE. It is the point of departure for conducting groundbreaking empirical research on the interplay between religion and social exclusion and developing a new mixed-methods framework specifically designed for the purpose. RELEX is cross-cultural in approach and scope, covering several more particular cultural and religious contexts across the wider the national and cultural settings of Finland, Ghana, India, and Peru.

Deepening global integration has resulted in economic and social restructurings that have made predictable life courses less viable for growing numbers of people and propelled social exclusion into a major policy concern on a global scale (e.g., Silver 2007; UN 2015; EU 2020; UNECE 2022). Social exclusion constitutes a multidimensional phenomenon that includes several and mutually reinforcing cultural, political-legal, and social-structural dimensions, which effectively work to disengage a segment of the population from recourses and provisions vital to their quality of life (e.g., Silver 2007; Popay et al. 2008). Social exclusion is also a *context-dependent* phenomenon that varies in its forms across particular social and cultural settings (Levitas et al., 2007).

When studying social exclusion, a general distinction needs to be made between social exclusion on macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. Previous social exclusion scholarship and policy alike has thus far been predominantly focused on macro- and meso-level *economic* forms of social exclusion (e.g., poverty) at the expense of other *non-economic* factors that are typically overlooked and lumped together under the ambiguous rubric of “culture” (Popay et al., 2008). Religion constitutes a particularly neglected factor in the broader scholarship on social exclusion. Little is consequently known about the interplay between various forms of social exclusion and the religious outlooks of excluded people, especially on the micro-level of smaller communities, groups, and individuals. Although the limited extant scholarship in the area has clearly indicated that religion can provide socially excluded people with recourses for coping with experiences of inadequacy, stigma, or cultural prejudices (e.g., Farnell 2001; Aydin et al. 2010), the interplay between religion and social exclusion is considerably more complex and cannot be adequately understood through a limited focus on coping alone. For example, while religion can no doubt provide people who are subjected to different forms of social exclusion with positive self-narratives that carry the promise of restoration, people can also become socially excluded *because of* their religion, and religious arguments can be used to *justify* the social exclusion of particular groups. In addition, experiences of social exclusion might also motivate a stronger engagement *with* religion on the part of individuals or, alternatively, result in estrangement and disengagement *from* religion. Whatever the case, further systematic and comparative research on *the broader range of ways* in which religion can become implicated in processes of social exclusion from the perspective of socially excluded

peoples themselves, especially across non-Western contexts, is clearly called for. This requires further development of both our perspectives and methods.

In terms of perspectives, we need to acknowledge that the religious outlooks of socially excluded groups and individuals across different cultural and national-regional contexts cannot be convincingly explored on the basis of a conventional understanding of “religion” that remains marked by a strong Christian bias and focus on the highly individualized religious sensibilities of those residing in Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and developed countries (Henrich et al. 2010; Nynäs et al. 2022a; Moberg 2022). Exploring the interplay between religion and social exclusion across non-Western cultural contexts that are determined by, sometimes severe, restrictions and life-defining disadvantages therefore requires the adoption of a more encompassing understanding of religion that covers a wider range of religious, non-religious, and worldview-related outlooks alike. Such an approach strives to avoid essentialist understandings of religion in favor of a more sustained focus on what *people* across different social and cultural contexts understand religion to “be” or “mean” and what role it plays in their everyday lives (Moberg 2022, 41). In RELEX, such a more encompassing approach is further complemented by an additional focus on peoples’ basic values.

We base our understanding of values on Schwartz’ (2012; 2017) internationally validated theory of basic values. In this theory, basic values represent universal requirements of human existence that are likely to be found in all cultures and that can be organized under ten basic value types (Conformity, Tradition, Security, Power, Achievement, Hedonism, Stimulation, Self-Direction, Universalism, and Benevolence). In essence, basic values refer to “desirable goals that motivate action.” As such, they transcend specific situations and provide the basic standards according to which individuals evaluate events, people, and actions more generally (Schwarz 2017; Schwartz et al. 2012). Peoples’ basic values are also “ordered by importance relative to one another [...] and form an ordered system of priorities that characterize them as individuals” (Schwartz 2012, 14). For the purposes of our research, an added complementary focus on basic values provides important insights into how socially excluded people act and orient themselves in their respective social worlds, as well as how they view their own religious commitments and position themselves towards religion more generally (e.g. Schwartz & Huismans 1995; Nynäs et al 2022b). For example, people who espouse the basic value of “Tradition” (to which commitment and acceptance of received norms is central) tend to willingly conform to established religious mores and practices. By contrast, people who espouse the basic value of “Self-Direction” (to which independent thought and action is central) instead tend to approach religion in decidedly more individualistic ways, or reject religion altogether (Novis-Deutsch et al. 2022). Combining and complementing a more encompassing understanding of religion with an added focus on basic values therefore allows us to explore the religious outlooks of socially excluded people as part of a *broader configuration* of life-experiences- orientations-, and priorities.

In terms of methods, we need to acknowledge that the interplay between religion and social exclusion still remains poorly understood since it often involves researching vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations, which presents a range significant methodological challenges. Rather than allowing such challenges to deter us, scholarship needs to make sure that socially excluded populations do not become systematically excluded by scholarship itself as a consequence of limitations in our existing methodological toolkits (cf. Heinritz et. al 2022). Hence, we need to develop methodological instruments that can be successfully and reliably applied across challenging research contexts.

Project description /Announcement Postdoctoral researchers in the Study of Religions

RELEX sets out to fill this highly notable, both empirical and methodological, lacuna in existing research. Although we depart from the assumption that religion and values can often be deeply implicated in both processes and experiences of social exclusion, RELEX is not a hypothesis-driven study. Rather, RELEX engages in completely new types of *exploratory* research (e.g., Stebbins 2001) on the interplay between religion, values, and social exclusion in light of several notable cases across four wider cultural and national contexts. RELEX also simultaneously engages in *experimental* research in that we will develop and apply a new mixed-methods framework that is specifically designed for research among vulnerable and social excluded populations and that is able to generate a rich and unique body of data that is unattainable by any other means.

We set out to archive wider scientific impact in three principal ways. First, by producing a wealth of new and hitherto unavailable data on the interplay between religion, values, and social exclusion on a cross-cultural and cross-national scale that provides crucial groundwork for future international research in the area. Second, by providing future scholarship with a new and widely tested mixed-methods framework that can be applied (or be further developed) in new research contexts worldwide. Third, by illustrating how a serious consideration of the role of religion in processes and experiences of social exclusion can provide a crucial complement, and even corrective, to how social exclusion as a whole is approached, studied, and understood. We also aspire to achieve significant broader societal impact. Our research is guided by the notion “Leave No One Behind” which is central to UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (UN 2015). The wealth of new knowledge that our research generates will be able to inform future policy- and decision-making efforts to combat and mitigate the corrosive effects of social exclusion on an international scale, such as those developed under the auspices of the WHO, UN, and EU.

Research questions and/or hypotheses

RELEX is governed by the following three closely connected main objectives:

- To investigate the religious and/or non-religious outlooks and values of people who are subjected to different forms of social exclusion on a cross-cultural and cross-national scale and thereby produce vital new knowledge on the interplay between religion and social exclusion more generally.
- To develop and operationalize a new mixed-methods framework that employs an accessible language and computer-assisted audiovisual aids, and that enables research among socially excluded, vulnerable, less formally educated, and less literate populations.
- To significantly contribute to a broader and more adequate understanding of the role of religion in the lived realities of socially excluded groups that can inform future efforts to combat social exclusion and mitigate its corrosive effects.

To realize our aims, RELEX conducts research the socio-economically, culturally, and religiously very different national contexts of Finland, Ghana, India, and Peru. In each national context, our empirical investigation focuses on the religious and/or nonreligious outlooks and values of persons subjected to social exclusion due to: 1) imprisonment; 2) ethnic/indigenous minority position; and 3) identification as LGBTQI+. This choice of these cases is justified for the following reasons. First, in international policymaking and scholarship alike, these all constitute widely recognized,

but comparatively very *different*, forms of social exclusion that can, however, also intersect (e.g. prisoners who belong to an ethnic/indigenous minority or identify as LGBTQI+). Second, considering that religion remains a central social factor in many of the national and more specific cultural contexts we explore, religion and values are highly likely to be deeply implicated in how the groups we focus on experience and respond to the social exclusions they face. Third, these three different cases and four national contexts provide a rich, yet practically manageable, broader research setting ideally suited for exploratory empirical research and experimental methodological testing and development.

Prison incarceration constitutes a very particular case of social exclusion whereby a person is removed from participation in wider society and (temporarily) housed in an environment that is highly exclusionary by design. The presence and function of religion in prison, both historical and contemporary, has been the subject of a fair amount of previous research, although with a predominant focus on a) the presence of religious actors in prison, and b) how religion can function as a recourse to cope with the realities of prison-life (e.g. Said & Butler 2023; Becci & Dubler 2017). Yet, little is known about incarcerated people's religious outlooks and values, especially across non-Western contexts (e.g., Clear & Sumter 2002). There are also notable differences to be observed between the official institutional provision of religious services in prisons and the actual, lived religious life among both male and female inmates (Becci & Roy 2015; Purdie et al. 2021). RELEX conducts empirical research among incarcerated people in a number of both male and female low- and medium security prisons in each country included.

The penal systems of Finland, Ghana, India, and Peru are all officially grounded in view of prison as a place for reform and rehabilitation (PPS Finland 2023; GPS Ghana 2023; UMHA India 2021; INPE Peru 2023). The incarceration rate of persons per 100,000 of the total population is low in Finland (50), Ghana (42), and India (35), but notably higher in Peru (259). Prison conditions differ significantly between the four countries. The Finnish prison-system is well resourced and firmly focused on rehabilitation. Religion is present in the form of chaplains of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran- and Orthodox churches and Imams, and religion in general makes up an important aspect of the everyday life of inmates (Kirkkohallitus 2015). Prison conditions in Ghana are more difficult due to overcrowding, inadequate sanitary conditions, and lack of medical care. The Ghanaian inmate population mainly have various Protestant Christian and Muslim backgrounds and religion is present in the system in the form of Christian Chaplains and Imams (GPS 2023). Prison conditions in India have been steadily improving in recent decades. The composition of the inmate population reflects the structural social exclusions of Indian society more generally. In 2021, over half of all Indian inmates belonged to either the so-called "other backward castes," the "scheduled castes," or the "scheduled tribes" (UMHA India 2021). The Peruvian prison system faces the most serious challenges among the four countries due to overcrowding, inadequate infrastructures, and limited resources (e.g. Bruce 2022). Prison conditions are harsh and marked by violence, gang activity, and drug trafficking. Inmates are afforded the right to religious freedom and several religious actors are present in the system. Although Peru is a predominantly Catholic country, the inmate population includes individuals of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, including Protestants, Muslims, and people who adhere to various indigenous beliefs.

Ethnic and indigenous minority groups and communities have historically experienced several types of social exclusion, including restrictions on access to education, political participation and self-determination, and denial of rights to ancestral lands (e.g., Johnson & Kraft 2017; Ødegaard & Rivera Andía 2019). For these types of groups, religion often provides an

important source of collective identity, yet their religiosities have often been socially and culturally devalued by majority institutions and groups (e.g., Aydin et al. 2014). RELEX focuses on four ethnic minorities and/or indigenous groups that are each associated with particular forms of religion and that each face several types of context-dependent social exclusion. These particular groups have been chosen in careful consultation with our international partners on the basis of their significance for each national context and the variety of social exclusions that they face.

The *Sámi* indigenous people have traditionally lived throughout northern Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Kola-peninsula Russia. In Finland, they currently number around 10,000. As a legally recognized indigenous people in Finland, the Sámi have the right to preserve their language, culture, and traditional livelihoods, although their rights to ancestral lands remains contested. The forms of social exclusion that the Sámi face today mainly relate to their historical experience of forced assimilation, previous systematic efforts to degrade their indigenous culture and religion, and an enduring general lack of interest on the part of the Finnish state towards their land, language, and culture. The majority of the Sámi are nowadays members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, with many adhering to the conservative revivalist Laestadian movement (Liljakumpu & Wallenius-Korkalo 2019). The *Fulani* pastoralists count among the dominant ethnic groups of Western Africa, and currently number around 300,000 in Ghana where they are designated as a “non-indigenous ethnic group.” The Fulani face multiple forms of both concrete and prejudice-based social exclusion, including denial of citizenship and restrictions on political participation, land ownership, access to healthcare, and education (Setrana 2021; Tonah 2005; Bukari and Schareika 2015). While Ghana is predominantly Christian, the large majority of Fulani self-identify as Muslim, but also face additional ostracism for being associated with the practice of traditional “black magic” *juju*. The *Awajún* people is the second most numerous indigenous people of the Peruvian Amazon and currently number around 70,000. They face significant challenges related to land rights and the maintenance of traditional livelihoods due to environmental degradation resulting from the extractivist politics of the Peruvian state. They are legally recognized and maintain an autonomous government through which they form their own policies for education, health, and welfare. Yet, the Awajún are economically marginalized and have limited access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. While evangelical Protestantism and Catholicism both have a strong foothold among the Awajún, many adhere to the ancestral spirit worship of indigenous Awajún religion (Regan Mainville 2010). The *Santal* tribal people are an ethnic group native to India and Bangladesh and currently number around 2.5 million in West Bengal. The Santals face multiple forms of social exclusion such as limited access to education, healthcare, and economic resources. Depending on region, Santals are either designated as part of the most socio-economically disadvantaged “scheduled tribes” or the most educationally deprived “other backward class.” The polytheist religion Sarna plays a central part in the life of the Santals, but it is yet to be recognized by the Constitution of India and is often looked down upon by higher caste Hindus (Bodding 2001; Guha & Ismail 2015).

LGBTQI+ communities have historically experienced several forms of social exclusion and discrimination. While the situation nowadays differs notably from one cultural context to another (Pew 2020; Equaldex 2022), the social exclusion of LGBTQI+ persons has often been justified on religious grounds, as sexual and gender non-conformity have been deemed incompatible with religious mores (e.g., Whitley 2009; Jones & Cox 2015; van Klinken 2019). LGBTQI+ communities all over the world have consequently often stood in a strenuous relationship to dominant religious establishments in particular. Analyses performed in previous studies conducted

by the RELEX-team confirm that attitudes towards LGBTQI+ persons vary decisively between Finland, Ghana, India, and Peru (Nynäs et al. 2022b, 61). While the results show a clear correlation between heteronormativity and religiosity, they also reveal that religiosity in conjunction with basic values play a crucial determinative role in the forming of attitudes towards LGBTQI+ persons. The research to be conducted in RELEX takes a significant step further by exploring the religious outlooks and values of socially excluded members of LGBTQI+ communities themselves. While a fair amount of research exists on LGBTQI+ and religion in Western contexts, less is known about the situation in most other parts of the world and research combining and comparing several contexts is rare.

In Finland, LGBTQI+ rights are firmly established, with a large portion of the population being positively disposed towards the community. Polarizing tendencies have nevertheless made the broader social inclusion of LGBTQI+ persons the subject of continued public debate. General attitudes have also become gradually more accepting in especially India, but also in Peru. In both countries, however, LGBTQI+ communities have only recently started to gain firmer legal recognition and still face several forms of social exclusion due to homophobic prejudice (including religiously motivated), such as limited access to employment, housing, healthcare, and living with continued threats of violence (Defensoría del Pueblo 2016; 2022; Nyaaya 2022). Ghana provides a starker contrast in that the country is marked by strongly negative attitudes towards LGBTQI+ persons (Anna et al. 2017). Same-sex sexual acts remain illegal and further draconian anti-LGBTQI+ legislation has recently been proposed. The Ghanaian LGBTQI+ community thus faces numerous and severe forms of social exclusion, including legal non-acceptance, continued threats of violence and forced “conversion” therapies, and difficulties in accessing healthcare and housing due to widespread prejudice against them. In addition, negative attitudes towards the community are frequently encouraged by mainstream media and religious and political leaders alike (Human Rights Watch 2020).

Building on previous international research conducted by the RELEX team (e.g., Nynäs et al. 2022a), in relation to each case, we limit our research to young adults (aged 18–29). This allows us to make numerous comparisons with previous already existing extensive datasets on the religious sensibilities of young adults in several additional contexts worldwide (Nynäs et al. 2022a). The life-phase of young adulthood has also been shown to have a highly formative impact on peoples’ religious outlooks and values (e.g., Barry et al. 2010; Moberg et al. 2019), but the potentially decisive impact that the experience of social exclusion can have in this regard remains to be adequately explored. The choice of this cohort is further motivated by its relevance for indicating future societal developments, and for its importance in the development of appropriate future policies aimed at combating social exclusion.

Feasibility and expected results

The feasibility and successful realization of the research to be carried out in RELEX rests on a carefully defined research design and a team of highly skilled researchers with complementary skillsets and expertise.

RELEX starts out by conducting initial *background research* in relation to each case in each country. This, first, includes a general analysis of the dominant discourses that surround each case in each national context as articulated in the official discourse of political and legal establishments, the mass media, and by dominant religious institutions. This is done in order to arrive at a deeper

understanding of the ways in which such dominant discourse works to generate “languages of description and explanation” (Gergen 2009, 48) about the groups focused on as well as the extent to which such discourse becomes *practically materialized* in the form of actual exclusionary practices (e.g. actual restrictions on access to education, healthcare, civic participation). It is also done in order to gain a better understanding of the extent to which dominant discourse “informs those depicted” (Gergen 2009, 51) and how it potentially affects the self-perceptions of the groups focused on (Alemanji et al. 2023). Second, this research phase also includes *ethnographic research* in relation to each case in each country in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of the essentials of each case, to locate and recruit participants, and to establish relations of familiarity and trust between participants and researchers. The ethnographic research also provides knowledge vital for the design, testing, and validation of our new methodological instruments. With regard to the ethnic/indigenous minority- and LGBTQI+ cases, research is conducted in close cooperation with local organizations and NGOs that represent or serve each respective target group (e.g., Knight et al. 2009). For these cases, a combination of relevant ascending sampling methods will be used. These include Time-Location Sampling, which focuses recruitment efforts to particular places (Marpsat & Razafindratsima 2010); Snowball Sampling, which builds on bonds of trust between members (e.g., Berg 1988); and Respondent-Driven Sampling, which makes use of incentives (Heckathorn 1997). Although our work in prisons will necessarily need to be conducted within the limitations placed by the prison authorities of each country, we will nevertheless strive to conduct visits and observations and communicate with inmates as far as possible.

The new mixed-methods framework developed consists of three mutually supporting research instruments that the RELEX-team has worked with extensively in the past. Although the instruments contain quantitative elements that partly employ quantitative procedures of analysis for the purposes of identifying broader patterns and connections, the framework as a whole is *qualitative* in character. The instruments are employed *consecutively* and consist of 1) a short, targeted survey; 2) the Portrait Values Questionnaire or PVQ and; 3) the Faith Q-Sort instrument or FQS (see below). A key objective of RELEX is to develop adapted versions of all three instruments so that they can be successfully employed among people who might only have received limited education, be either semi-literate or illiterate, or have other comprehension difficulties. All instruments will include a limited number of items and will be made available in all relevant languages, employing an easily accessible and comprehensible vocabulary and sentence structure. In addition, all instruments will be further supported by computer-assisted audiovisual aids, which will be essential especially for semi-literate- or illiterate participants (Fort & Méndez 2013; Heinritz et al. 2022). The actual employment of all instruments will always involve linguistically competent local RELEX researchers, who will assist with any technical or other comprehension difficulties.

The survey is conducted first and will consist of select item blocks on “recourses,” “participation,” and “quality of life” derived from the Bristol Social Exclusion Matrix (B-SEM) (Levitas et al. 2007), which continues to be used as a benchmark in large-scale research on social exclusion. These are complemented with a select set of items on levels of trust and religious self-identification previously included in the European Social Survey and World Values Survey. The main purpose of the survey is to a) provide valuable background information on participants’ views on religion and degrees of experienced social exclusion, and b) provide a point of comparison to already existing worldwide B-SEM, ESS, and WWS data.

The Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ) is included at the end of the survey. The PVQ is a widely internationally validated instrument for assessing basic value types, as outlined above (e.g.,

Schwartz 2017). The instrument consists of short descriptions (so-called portrait values) of different individuals that participants are asked to rate their own similarity to. To enhance accessibility, we will employ a 10-item shortened version of the PVQ that focuses only on the ten basic values (as outlined above), but the results of which are fully compatible with the results of the full 57-item PVQ (Lindeman & Verkasalo 2005). The 10-item version is also more suitable for our ambition to enhance the intelligibility and wider applicability of the instrument through audiovisual aids. Analyses of PVQ responses enable us to compare participants' value-orientations- and priorities at both individual and group levels as well as how these relate to their religious outlooks as also measured by the survey and especially the FQS. The initial results from the survey and PVQ will also be used to achieve broader representativeness among a smaller number of participants who will be invited to participate in the FQS.

The Faith Q-Sort (FQS) is based on Q-methodology (e.g., Watts & Stenner 2012) and lies at the center of the framework. It is employed last among a smaller number of participants who have already taken part in the survey and PVQ. The FQS is a qualitative research instrument that utilizes the analytic procedures of quantitative analysis. It is designed for the study of people's viewpoints and attitudes towards a variety of religion-, non-religion-, and worldview-related questions and issues (Wulff 2019). It has been successfully internationally employed and validated by several research projects conducted by RELEX-connected researchers (e.g., Nynäs et al. 2021; 2022a) and is currently available in 13 different languages. When the instrument is applied in practice, participants are presented with a set of statements on a variety of religion-related issues and are asked to rank-order (or "sort") them according to how well the statements reflect their own views. Constructed on the basis of extensive reviews of previous international scholarship in the history-, sociology-, psychology-, and anthropology of religion, taken together, the statements strive to cover the *totality of both relating and conflicting* different viewpoints that people might reasonably hold about religion. This includes viewpoints on religion as a social and cultural phenomenon more generally; involvement with religious communities; religious practices; religious teachings, beliefs, and doctrines; religious experience, and other types of worldview-related questions. Examples of individual statements in the current version of the FQS include "Feels closest to those who share the same faith or outlook," "Becomes more religious or spiritual at times of crisis or need," or "Feels contempt for all religious institutions, ideas and practices."

When conducting the sorting, participants consider all statements at once in direct relation to one another face to face with the researcher. This allows for a natural on-going discussion that provides valuable information about how individual participants interpret and personally relate to the statements, both individually and vis-à-vis one another. The sorting is followed by a brief interview that provides additional knowledge on participants' thoughts of the sorting process. Our previous extensive experiences with the FQS (e.g., Nynäs et al. 2022a; Broo et. al. forthcoming) clearly indicate that the current version of the instrument puts unnecessarily high demands on levels of literacy and language proficiency among participants. This motivates our aim to develop a new and more accessible version that employs an easily understandable language and is also accompanied by audiovisual aids. Analyses of the results from our previous studies (e.g. Nynäs et al. 2022a) will identify the statements that have been least relevant for participants and will help us reduce the total number of statements from 101 to approximately 50.

Whereas each individual completed FQS sorting is essentially unique, through factor analyses of the completed sorts, *shared patterns* of sortings are revealed among particular samples of participants (i.e., the participants of each case in each country). These patterns (factors in the

analyses) can be described as “socially shared viewpoints” on the range of religion-, non-religion-, and worldview-related issues included in the statements. These analyses reveal the most notable similarities and differences that can be found in the religious outlooks of participants of each case in each country. Every shared viewpoint (i.e. factor) generated in every sample then needs to be given a qualitative interpretation that outlines its main characteristics and situates it in its own particular socio-cultural and religious context. Further analyses are then conducted to identify the most both widely shared and differing viewpoints that can be found a) between the three samples in each country (e.g., between the LGBTQI+ community and the Fulani pastoralists in Ghana), and b) between particular samples *across* countries (e.g., between prison inmates in India and Peru). Subsequent broader analyses will then also be able to identify significant similarities, differences, and broader family resemblances in outlooks across *all* samples across all countries.

Work Packages define the process and structure of RELEX. To ensure feasibility and efficient and successful realization, the research to be conducted in RELEX unfolds in relation to the following main schedule and Work Packages:

WP1 (2024): *Initial background research* is conducted by local researchers in relation to all three cases in all four countries. Cooperation is secured with all relevant partner organizations, NGOs, and public authorities. Participants are recruited and relations of trust are established. All ethical evaluations of the research are conducted and detailed ethics-, data management-, and contingency plans are developed. All RELEX researchers are thoroughly instructed in research ethics and sampling practices.

WP2 (2025): *New versions of all research instruments are developed* in all relevant languages, using a double forward-and back translation process conducted by professionals in each language to ensure equivalence of meaning across all languages. All instruments are piloted and validated among participants of each case in each country and revised where needed. Computer-assisted audiovisual aids in all relevant languages are developed for each instrument in direct cooperation with professionals in the area. All RELEX researchers are thoroughly instructed in the employment of all instruments and the technical aspects of their audiovisual aids.

WP3 (2026–27): Two full years are devoted to the *gathering of data* using the new mixed-methods framework in relation to all cases in each of the four countries by local researchers specifically familiar with each context and proficient in all relevant languages. The data is gathered simultaneously one case at the time across all contexts. Progress is continuously coordinated and monitored from ÅAU. We aim to gather up to 100 survey and PVQ responses per case in each country (N=300 per country, total N=1200) and 30 individual FQS sortings per case in each country (N=90 per country, total N=360). Preliminary analyses are continuously conducted as the data from each case comes in.

WP4 (2028): *Combined integrated analyses.* All data is jointly assembled, categorized, and subjected to multiple forms of combined and triangulated analyses (e.g., Nastasi et al. 2010), such as analyses of survey results, Ken-Q factor analyses of the FQS data combined with Multi-Variate Analysis of PVQ responses, and qualitative analyses of ethnographic data and dominant discourse. The data is directly compared with the extensive previous PVQ (N=4964) and FQS (N=650) data gathered by the RELEX team among comparatively much more privileged segments of young adults (Nynäs et al. 2022a). These combined analyses provide us with a fuller picture of the interplay between our participants’ religious outlooks, values, and experiences of social exclusion, allowing us to compare and identify notable points of intersection between our cases both within

and across different national and cultural contexts. All methodological instruments are carefully further evaluated on the basis of the results.

Through its novel approach and new mixed-methods framework, RELEX will generate *results of international and multidisciplinary significance*. Our results will, most directly, provide a wealth of new knowledge and valuable points of comparison for future research on the interplay between religion, values, and social exclusion due to imprisonment, membership of ethnic/indigenous communities, and identification as LGTBQI+ in and across other cultural and national contexts than those explored in RELEX. Beyond this, our results will also provide important points of comparison for future research on the interplay between religion, values, and *other* types of cases of social exclusion worldwide. Lastly, but equally significantly, by highlighting the role of religion and values in processes and experiences of social exclusion on a firm empirical basis, our results will also have great potential to inform and supplement several different types of future scholarship on the “cultural” dimensions of social exclusion and thus provide an impetus for further theoretical development on the multidimensionality of social exclusion more broadly. In order to maximize the potential of our results, the extensive datasets generated will be systematically compiled and made available for future scholarly use in line with FAIR principles, making data findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable (FAIR principles 2023).

Results will be continuously disseminated throughout the research process in the form of a larger number of open access journal articles, three special issues for scientific journals (focusing on each case respectively), and two edited volumes with major international publishers, as well as at international conferences and seminars. In addition, we will thoroughly document the practical lessons learned throughout the research process to provide future research with concrete suggestions for best practices. We also find it important to present results in ways that are accessible to wider audiences and will work in cooperation with relevant local organizations and NGOs in this area. In order to reach back to the socially excluded groups we have worked with and studied, we will produce documentary theatres for online viewing in each country based on the cases, working with professionals in the area. Funding from other sources will secure these unique productions that will bring our results into direct dialogue with the groups we have studied.

The RELEX budget has been crafted to ensure the feasibility of all aspects of the research. The sums budgeted for research costs are based on careful consultation with our co-investigators and partners. The comparatively large sum budgeted for “external services” will be mainly used to pay local researchers in each country. While the total funds applied for amount to slightly over 1.5M, the research to be conducted is nevertheless perfectly realizable with 1,25M.

The research environment and collaboration

The RELEX CoE draws together an interdisciplinary and internationally acclaimed team of researchers with a solid track record of extensive previous cooperation and shared research infrastructures. RELEX is led from the department of the Study of Religions at ÅAU which constitutes a strong and internationally recognized research environment with a particular focus on research on contemporary religious change and pioneering mixed-methods research. The CoE directly aligns with ÅAU's Strategic Minority Research Profile, which provides a further link to ongoing interdisciplinary research on marginalized social and cultural groups, as well as ÅAU's Master's Programme in Social Exclusion, which provides access to several research institutes and networks and voluntary- and third sector collaborators in all countries included.

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CoE Director Prof. Peter Nynäs is an expert in the psychology and sociology of religion (e.g., 2015; 2018; 2021), with special focus on socially marginalized and excluded groups, young adults, and methodological development. He has led several large-scale research projects (see Appendix 4) which have laid the foundations for the mixed-methods approach further developed in RELEX and also published on the management of international projects (Nynäs & Långstedt 2023). Prof. Nynäs is dean of faculty and will use all his research time for the project and work in close cooperation with deputy CoE director Prof. Marcus Moberg who will assume many leadership tasks relating to the practical implementation of the research. Moberg is an expert in mixed-methods qualitative research and discourse analysis in the study of religion and has ample experience of large-scale research project leadership- and management. Nynäs' *Steering Group* will further support the management of the CoE.

The RELEX *Research Team* at ÅAU includes three senior and three postdoctoral researchers. It also includes senior co-investigators (along with their local teams) with national, cultural, linguistic, and case-specific expertise in each country included.

To ensure the highest standards in research and competence in all relevant areas, a *Scientific Advisory Board* has been appointed comprised of internationally acclaimed scholars with complementary expertise.

Last but not least, the communities we research are additional partners for us. RELEX engages in *reciprocal research* (Hugman et. al. 2011), whereby the research process is based on a principle of mutual exchange and serious consideration of how research results can be beneficial for and support the empowerment of participants themselves. To enable this, we will work in close cooperation with third sector organizations, NGOs, and public authorities in all countries that serve or are otherwise relevant for each specific group. Regarding prisons, this includes close cooperation with the correctional authorities of each country and organizations like the Crime Check Foundation NGO in Ghana. Regarding ethnic/indigenous minority groups, we will cooperate with both these groups' own organizations and others that serve these communities, such as the community leaders of the Fulani in Ghana or the Amazonian Center for Anthropology and Practical Application, which maintains close contacts to the Awajún in Peru. With respect to LGBTQI+ communities, cooperation will be established with organizations such as Seta – LGBTI Rights in Finland and the Praytay Gender Trust in Kolkata, India.

Research ethics, risk assessment and exit plan

Research ethics. Research ethics will be given the highest priority in all RELEX research and will be approached as a central *methodological* issue during each research phase. Regular seminars will be held to develop shared guidelines to ensure best practices in full accordance with the guidelines drawn up by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity and Regulation 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council. Ethical clearance will be secured before the research begins. Special attention will be devoted to ensuring that participants are completely informed about the research process as well as any potential risks involved and the steps taken to minimize these. All members of the research team will ensure that participants feel respected and safe at all times and that they are fully aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. In line with our principle of reciprocal research, informed consent is gained as part of an extended relational commitment and is viewed as a *process* rather than an event. Informed consent will always be explained in a concise and easily understandable language that is accompanied by information

about all aspects of the research; contact details to researchers; information on pseudonymization; insurance of the non-connection of the research to any government authorities; the data archiving and storage process; the dissemination of results; and General Data Protection Regulation Act processing of personal data. All participants are assigned an identifier code. At no time do they participate under their own names. The findings will always, to the extent possible, be provided to any participant requesting them and will also be shared with all collaborating organizations and NGOs. Overall, RELEX will consciously aim to achieve equality and diversity in all aspects of the research. The composition of the research team and the group of collaborators includes members of all genders and career stages. To advance career development, junior scholars will be given increasingly demanding responsibilities as the research progresses and inclusive co-authoring principles will be applied. In recruiting, diversity issues will always be taken into account.

Risk assessment. The groundbreaking exploratory and experimental research of RELEX involves several types of acknowledged risks. One principal risk is that the new instruments developed (or some parts of them) will not, despite all efforts, work as well as anticipated. For example, the wording and language used in the instruments might not be perfectly intelligible to all participants in all locations. A related risk has to do with the computer-assisted audiovisual aids not working as well as expected. Both of these risks are mitigated by careful translation processes involving native speakers in each language, the development of audiovisual aids by professionals in the area, and, most crucially, the thorough piloting and validation of each instrument among members of each group of participants in each country. This ensures that any known flaws can be rectified prior to the data gathering process. Another type of risk has to do with gaining access to adequate numbers of participants. To mitigate this risk, we will devote ample time and effort to establish relationships of trust with participants and work in close collaboration with relevant organizations and stakeholders in relation to each case. We will also closely monitor potential political and legal developments that might affect gaining access to participants so that we can adjust our research process accordingly. In case a researcher leaves the team, a replacement with the same skillsets will be recruited.

Exit plan. Through its unique approach RELEX will constitute a leading research center on religion and social exclusion long after the CoE funding period has ended. It will assume a leading role in international joint research initiatives and expand its agenda in e.g. the European Research Area and through Horizon Europe. By default, the members of the RELEX team will apply for additional external funding from the ERC, Academy of Finland, and other foundations throughout the CoE period. Based on the research team's strong track record of securing funding in the past decade, the estimated total sum of this funding is 1.4 million EUR. RELEX will also foster a new generation of researchers with inter-disciplinary and multi-methodological competence that will carry on its legacy in the form of new PhD- and postdoctoral projects.

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