

Meaningful Margins: Christianity and Alternative Spiritual Meditation and Healing Practices at the Interface between Margins and Mainstreams

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1 Background and significance

1.1. Significance of research project in relation to current knowledge, research-based starting points

This project investigates the present-day relationship between Christianity and various alternative healing- and meditation practices in Finland in light of a novel “margins-mainstream” heuristic. The late-modern era has witnessed a range of highly notable transformations in the Christian field on a worldwide scale. As the societal and cultural influence of traditional institutional Christianity continues to wane, independent non-denominational “seeker sensitive” churches continue to proliferate and thrive (e.g. Bender et al. 2012; Bialecki 2017). These developments have been at the center of the international scholarship on the changing character of Christian life and practice during the past five or so decades (Ammerman 2013; Hunt 2016). In addition to these developments, however, a wide range of alternative understandings that often significantly expand on the conventional boundaries of the “Christian” have also continued to form, proliferate, and mutate in the “margins” of contracting institutional Christian “mainstreams.” These “margins” consist of a multitude of often informally or weakly organized sites of eclectic religious/spiritual exploration that have largely remained unmarked by the presence of institutional and more firmly organized religious actors. One of the most significant among these sites is the field of *alternative spiritual healing- and meditation practices* (henceforth referred to as ASHM).

ASHMs have become increasingly established throughout the West following the wider proliferation of various types of so-called “holistic” spiritualities since the mid-1960s, mainly sourced by ideas and practices derived from Asian religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism, especially as mediated through Theosophy and the so-called “New Age” (e.g. Hanegraaff 1998; Kemp & Lewis 2007). Previous scholarship has also noted the presence and visibility of *Christian ideas and notions* in the field (e.g. in the form of angels or alternative interpretations of the figure of Jesus, see e.g. Utriainen 2017) and the creation of “Christianized” variants of e.g. mindfulness and yoga (e.g. Lüddeckens & Schrimp 2018; Kalvig 2017; Brown 2013; Klassen 2005; Plank et al. 2023; Moberg & Ramstedt 2023). These types of more direct Christian engagements with ASHMs have typically occurred “on the institutional margins or in non-mainstream segments” of Christian communities (Lüddeckens & Schrimp 2018: 13) and also involved the forming of particular strategies to reconcile core Christian beliefs with other notions prevalent in the broader field of ASHMs, such as the channeling of “energies,” belief in reincarnation, and reliance on intuition rather than “external” religious/spiritual authority (e.g. Versteeg 2007; Brown 2018; Hulkkonen 2021).

In a deliberate effort to expand on and advance the state of art of research in the area, this project approaches **the field of ASHM as an important contemporary site of Christian religious rethinking and renewal**. Thus, rather than simply approaching the field of ASHMs as a site where Christian beliefs are present or where Christian beliefs may enter into conversation with various non-Christian notions and practices, we approach it as a site where people engage in the cultivation of

distinctively new, innovative, eclectic, often un-orthodox, and sometimes provocative, understandings of the “Christian,” what the Christian “is,” what it “can be,” and how it can be practiced.

In order to bring the negotiations over the particular character of the “Christian” that unfold in these types of contexts into clearer focus, we investigate the various new and alternative meanings that people attach to the “Christian” both within and in relation to the broader field of ASMH through the lens of a **“mainstream-margins” heuristic**. Following previous research by Versteeg (2007: 101), in this view, the “marginal” “represents a set of ideas and practices that are peripheral to the doctrinal agreements that form the basis of the orthodox Christian tradition,” that “often has a distant relationship to Church authorities,” and thereby constitutes “a space where people start questioning the given and sometimes create something new out of it.” The “mainstream” and the “marginal” are therefore not approached at emic categories, but rather as dialectically related broader *modes of classification* that people, depending on their respective positions in relation to these phenomena, typically employ to determine and justify what should be regarded as “common” and “uncommon,” “orthodox” and “un-orthodox,” or “proper” and “improper” forms of Christian belief and practice. Particular notions of “mainstream” Christian practice are therefore likely to be constructed on the basis of some particular notion of its “marginal” others, whereas “marginal” perspectives will, in turn, likely be constructed in some kind of relation or contradistinction to some particular perception of a hegemonic “mainstream.”

Any firmly empirically grounded study building on this type of “margins-mainstreams” dialectic needs to be pursued with attention to particular broader national, social, cultural, and not least religious context. While building directly on the findings of previous international research in the area (e.g. Plank et al. 2023; Lüddeckens & Schrimp 2018), we focus our **empirical investigation on the context of Finland** where the interplay between Christianity and the sphere of ASHMs has been visible for some time already but not yet been investigated in any greater detail. Such a focus is further justified by several more recent developments in the Finnish religio-cultural landscape. During the past two to three decades, Finland has become increasingly religiously diverse with influences from tourism, migration, and especially the transformation of the field of communications granting easy access to global religious and spiritual flows and trends (e.g. Nynäs et al. 2015). “Mainstream” institutional Lutheranism has continued to decline rapidly, while the portion of the Finnish population who declare no religious affiliation has now reached 32 percent (e.g. Salomäki et al. 2024). In addition, the past couple of decades have also witnessed the proliferation and popularization of a wide array of ASHMs throughout Finnish society and culture (Ketola 2020; Salomäki et al. 2024), the significance (as well as challenges) of which have also been openly acknowledged by the dominant Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (henceforth ELCF). There are now ample grounds for presuming that the Finnish field of ASHM has developed into a vibrant environment of religious/spiritual exploration that is having a notable impact on the religious/spiritual sensibilities of increasing numbers of Finns regardless of their religious affiliation (or non-affiliation).

Through approaching the contemporary field of ASHM in Finland an **increasingly central environment for the creative re-interpretation of Christian thought and practice**, this project aims to fill an important research lacuna that would open up several new avenues of future research into how the contemporary field of ASHM has come to constitute an increasingly important environment where Christian beliefs and practices can be re-thought and reconstituted in ways that often challenge the predilections of the received institutional Lutheran Christian “mainstream.” Gaining an adequate and firmly empirically grounded understanding of the current situation is key to an understanding of how the interplay between Christianity and ASHMs will develop in the future,

how the “margins” and “mainstreams” of the “Christian” – and by extension the entire Finnish religious field – will be constituted, and through what kinds of processes the field of religion transforms.

1.2. Research questions and/or hypotheses

Gaining a fuller picture of the wider range of new and innovative understandings of the “Christian” and its practice that are currently being cultivated throughout and in relation to the broader field of ASHM requires us to view the “Christian” as an *open-ended category* (see Opas 2017), the precise meaning of which will always be continuously discursively constructed across particular interactional, relational, and communal settings, whether it be in the broader field of ASMHs or in institutional Christian settings. In operationalizing our novel “mainstream-margins” heuristic, this project is governed by the following four closely related **research aims**:

- 1) To identify the most significant understandings of the “Christian” that have and are currently being cultivated in the *broader field of ASHM* and how these are discursively framed and understood in Finnish alternative spiritual media.
- 2) To investigate the more recent but increasingly visible entry of ASHM practices *into the institutional ELCF* in the form of “Christianized” versions of mindfulness and yoga and how these are discursively framed and understood in Finnish ELCF-connected media.
- 3) To ethnographically explore how various combinations of Christianity and ASMHs are currently formed, enacted, and made meaningful *among people who engage in them*, both in the broader field of ASMHs *and* in the institutional Christian setting of the ELCF.
- 4) To empirically explore and map potential *connections, points of overlap*, and both national and transnational *flows of interdiscursive influence* between how the combination of Christianity and ASMHs are constructed and practiced *across* the broader field of ASHM and the institutional ELCF sphere.

Through these aims combined, the project will, first, generate new knowledge about what make ASMHs in Finland (and more widely) such an important resource and site for the forming of alternative understandings of the “Christian” and Christian practice that either expressly or implicitly cut against the grain of a received (and perceived) Christian “mainstream.” Second, the project will produce new knowledge on the still “marginal” but increasingly prevalent position of ASMHs in a particular “mainstream” institutional Christian setting. This development has been noted in research in other national contexts (e.g. Plank et. al 2023) but still remains to be explored in detail in a Finnish context (cf. Moberg & Ramstedt 2023). Lastly, third, the project will be the first to explore potential overlaps and flows of interdiscursive influence (in terms of structures, ideas, actors, participants, and practices) in how combinations between Christianity and ASMHs are constructed, made sense of, and actually practiced *across* the broader field of ASMHs and the institutional ELCF sphere. Our research will thus produce a wealth of new empirical knowledge that will enable us to assess whether the cultivation of new understandings of the “Christian” in relation to ASMHs is reflective of an ongoing more general *re-alignment* in the respective significance of and boundaries between the “mainstream” and the “marginal” in contemporary Christian and, more broadly, religious/spiritual life in present-day Finland. In relation to all four aims, we will also consider the potential implications of our results on ongoing *changes in hierarchy- and authority structures* in the religious/spiritual field, and especially as it relates to *layperson-officeholder relationships* and the *gendered aspects* of the practice of ASMHs in the institutional Christian setting of the ELCF.

In order to delimit an area that is practically manageable for detailed empirical research, we center our investigation on the cultivation of new understandings of the “Christian” and Christian

practice in relation to **four more specific cases in the broader field of ASHM**, all of which enjoy wider popularity in Finland and remain recurrently discussed across various types of religious/spiritual media. On the healing-side, the cases include *reiki* and a set of *natural cure methods*. On the meditation side, the cases investigated include *yoga* and *mindfulness*. All these cases (see section 3.1.) provide rich contexts in which to explore the ways in which people currently negotiate, re-define, and expand on Christianity's boundaries and experiential dimensions in direct relation to diverse internationally spread bodily-spiritual currents.

In order to realize our aims on a firm empirical basis, we employ a ***discourse-practice focused methodological approach*** based on the three-dimensional discourse analytic framework of Fairclough (e.g. 2010) as further developed by Moberg (2020; 2022) for the study of religion specifically. At its core, this framework is based on the view that "linguistic phenomena are social phenomena of a special sort, and social phenomena are (in part) linguistic phenomena" (Fairclough 2015: 56). In this perspective, while discourses are primarily expressed, articulated, and communicated through the medium of language and other semiotic forms, they also become varyingly *operationalized* or "put into practice"; *enacted* in particular ways of acting, communicating, and interacting; *inculcated* in particular identities and "ways of being"; and tangibly *materialized* in the form of actual places and spaces (Moberg 2022: 2). While discourse informs practice, practice also includes multiple non-discursive elements which cannot be reduced to discourse. We thus devote equal attention to discursive constructions of the combination of Christianity and ASHMs and the new understandings of the "Christian" and Christian practice that emerge from these *and* the actual "putting into practice" and enactment of these understandings and practices.

Our research consequently unfolds on the closely interrelated levels of *discourse* and *practice* (see section 3.1). The primary objective of our research on the *level of discourse* is to map the wider range of empirically identifiable ways in which the combination of Christianity and ASHMs are currently discursively constructed in relation to all four cases explored. The project's examination on the *level of practice*, in turn, explores how such combinations and the understandings of the "Christian" that emerge from them are enacted in actual practice and how they are understood by creators, providers, and practitioners themselves.

2 Impact

2.1. Outcomes and impact within academia

The project's scientific impact is generated, first, through investigating religious (Christian) renewal and rethinking within a field that is conventionally understood to be governed by non-Christian ideas. By investigating the current interplay between Christianity and holistic spirituality in the form of ASHMs, the project significantly expands the scope of existing research on religious, and especially Christian, transformation and change. Whereas previous research has mainly focused on one-way impacts – for example investigating the ever-broadening array of notions and practices subsumed under the label alternative spirituality – our project focuses on the *co-constitution* of alternative and institutional, or "marginal" and "mainstream," religious spheres.

Second, viewing the various new and alternative meanings that people attach to the "Christian" in the broader field of ASHMs through the lens of a "mainstream-margins" heuristic, the project offers novel perspectives on how the negotiations over the proper character of the "Christian" unfold in actual practice. Combining this with an investigation of the position of ASHMs in a particular institutional Christian setting also generates new knowledge about people's practices of defining Christianity and so contributes to the scholarship on people's negotiations over Christian orthodoxy (e.g. Handman & Opas 2019; Opas 2017).

Third, the project generates innovative methodological and theoretical ways for studying the intertwinement of Christianity and other spiritual traditions and currents. The research will provide a theoretically motivated model that combines discursive and ethnographic approaches for the empirical study of currently unfolding transformations and hybridizations in the religious/ spiritual field in a particular national context. The findings and new knowledge thus generated will be of great value for future research on similar developments on an international level. This is especially since the project will also produce completely new knowledge on potential connections, points of overlap, and flows of interdiscursive influence in how the combination of ASHMs and Christianity is constructed and made meaningful *across* the broader field of ASHMs and the institutional sphere of the ELCF (in terms of structures, ideas, actors, participants, and practices).

Fourth, the project sheds light on the thus far understudied question on what makes ASHMs into such an important site and recourse for the cultivation and dissemination of new understandings of the “Christian” and Christian practice. Although previous research (see above) has correctly identified ASHMs as central for the domestication and incorporation of novel spiritual and religious ideas and practices into people’s religious/spiritual lives more broadly, the reasons behind this centrality remain to be studied in more detail and also to be more properly explained. The results of this research thus significantly advance our understanding of the interplay between religion/spirituality and the health- and wellbeing sector more broadly and are likely to be widely applicable in research on the co-constitution of Christianity and other spiritual traditions not only in Finland but on a broader European or even international scale as well. Fifth, through long-term cooperation with the Church Institute for Research and Advanced Training, the consortium will also help to build better future instruments for measuring lived religion and religious change.

2.2. Effects and impact beyond academia

The rapid pace at which changes in the religious and spiritual landscape in Finland and Europe at large have been occurring in past decades has been widely noted in research. The religious/spiritual field has become increasingly complex and diverse. Spiritual practices such as meditation techniques are increasingly being adopted into Christianity while new spiritual traditions in turn draw on Christian imagery and thinking. This interweaving of previously more clearly demarcated religious and spiritual traditions is also reflected in public debates on religion and spirituality as it relates to, for example, people’s personal lives, the workplace, education, and healthcare. In the current situation, it is very important to systematically examine these processes in order to improve our understanding of contemporary and ongoing transformations of religious and spiritual traditions and the forming of religious diversity. In public discourse, new and old, “mainstream” and “marginal,” religious and spiritual traditions are often unduly set in opposition to one another. The knowledge produced by the consortium has the potential to nuance these debates through rigorous ethnographic and discursive research. The project’s results have the potential to inform policy formulation and practices, especially regarding how individuals are treated in healthcare settings and how religious education is structured in schools. The consortium provides important insights into the mechanisms driving religious change, highlighting the dynamic and co-constitutive nature of religions and spiritual traditions.

3 Implementation

3.1. Work plan and schedule

The project is planned to be carried out in four years (1.9.2025–31.8.2029). It constitutes a consortium partnership between the department for the Study of Religion at the University of Turku (UTU) and the department for the Study of Religions at Åbo Akademi University (ÅAU, also based

in Turku), thus creating fruitful synergy between UTU expertise on ethnography, vernacular Christianity and new religiosity, and ÅAU expertise in the empirical discursive study of religion, mixed-methods approaches, the mapping of religious/spiritual “scenes”, and contemporary religious change.

The **cases for studying the co-constitution of margins and mainstreams** in the field of ASHM have been carefully selected on the basis of their popularity in Finland and in order for them to provide us with a wide coverage of different healing and meditation practices that include a variety of approaches to cognition, embodiment, and affectivity, and attract practitioners with different backgrounds and motivations. Our aim is to devote equal attention to how Christianity is combined with each of these practices in both the broader field of ASHMs and the institutional ELCF sphere, including exploring potential areas of overlap between these. Therefore, we have selected the cases so that two of them (reiki and natural cures) presently remain most commonly practiced in the broader field of ASMHs, whereas the other two (yoga and mindfulness) have become increasingly established within the institutional Christian setting of the ELCF as well.

Healing, case 1, reiki: Reiki is a widely popular healing practice with Japanese origins. Reiki healing occurs through the channeling of reiki energy, which is considered as an intentional agent that distributes its healing power through the mediation of Reiki Masters. The concept of reiki energy and reiki symbols may for some practitioners intertwine with their interpretations and experiences of the work of the Christian Holy Spirit and other Christian symbolism and thus open up for re-interpretations of the “Christian”. In this case study, we conduct ethnographic research both in reiki weekend courses and reiki healing rooms, which abound in Finland (e.g. <https://www.reikiry.fi/>). We also investigate whether reiki practices can be found within the contexts of the ELCF.

Healing, case 2, natural cures: Natural cure methods are usually provided by natural cure centers and include e.g. different herbal treatments, intuitive massages, and crystal healing methods. The healing power of these methods is attributed to different spiritual sources, including agents and forces common in Finnish folk tradition and Asian spiritual traditions as well as traditionally Christian ones such as angels or Jesus. Natural cure center customers often try and use various treatments available at a given center. In this case study, we conduct ethnographic research in several natural cure centers in Finland. We also investigate whether natural cure practices can be found within the contexts of the ELCF.

Meditation, case 3, yoga: Yoga has gained a strong foothold and become very popular in Finland, taking many forms and being practiced with different motivations. In recent years, it also been gradually adopted by some sectors of the ELCF as a Christian practice, which has generated a heated discussion on its relationship to Christianity. In this case study, we conduct ethnographic research in yoga courses and classes representing different schools of yoga to generate understanding also of the conditions making up a terrain suitable for re-interpretations of the “Christian” in these settings. The service providers in whose courses and events ethnographic research will be carried out include both Christian (e.g. hiljaintila.fi) and non-Christian actors (e.g. joogaliitto.fi). In addition, ethnographic research is also carried out in relation to the practice of the ELCF-connected Christian form of yoga, the “Yoga of Silence,” in several parishes.

Meditation, case 4, mindfulness: Similar to yoga, mindfulness practices aim at alleviating pain caused by negative emotions accumulated in the body. Like yoga, it has its roots in Asian religious traditions (especially Buddhism), although the “non-religious” variant of mindfulness that is most widespread in Western countries was developed by Professor Jon Kabat-Zinn in Massachusetts approximately 40 years ago. Mindfulness practices have spread across the different sectors of Finnish society, ranging from workplaces and schools to many alternative spiritual contexts. Its connections to different spiritual and non-spiritual meditation practices are relatively blurred. In this case

study, we conduct ethnographic research at mindfulness retreats and training events organised for mindfulness teachers, for example, by Center for Mindfulness (<https://mindfulness.fi/>) as well ethnographic research of the practice of mindfulness within several parishes of the ELCF.

Work packages

The research conducted in this project is organized into **four work packages** (WPs). Researchers from both Åbo Akademi University (ÅAU) and the University of Turku (UTU) engage collaboratively across all research activities, but the consortium also utilizes the particular expertise of both partners. Specifically, WP1 is predominantly led by ÅAU researchers who are experts in discursive methodology, while WP2 is primarily managed by UTU researchers specialized in ethnographic research. Researchers from both UTU and ÅAU jointly contribute to WPs 3-4. All WPs are executed in a partly overlapping manner, forming interrelated sub-projects that produce complementary data.

WP1: Charting the order of discourse (2025-27)

WP1 examines how the combinations of Christianity with our cases of ASHMs and the particular understandings of the “Christian” that emerge through them are *discursively constructed* in both the broader Finnish alternative spiritual milieu and the Christian institutional sphere respectively. The main objective is to chart the contours and content of the current *order of discourse* in both spheres. In order to achieve this, WP1 maps the *totality* of (both approving and disapproving, supporting and contrasting) identifiable individual discourses that can be found on the combination of Christianity and yoga, mindfulness, reiki, and natural cures across *two main types of related but distinct forms of media*: “mainstream” ELCF-connected media and “marginal” alternative spiritual media (see section 3.2). The content of these media is also explored over a longer period of time, beginning (when available) already in the early 1970s, which previous research has identified as a watershed with regard to the increased popularity of ASHMs in Finland (Sohlberg 2022: 266). Across both types of media, this allows us to identify notable broader *discursive formations*, i.e. particular discursive repertoires, frames of reference, and ways of talking that have developed and solidified over a longer period of time and worked to shape how the combination of Christianity with our chosen cases of ASHMs have been framed in the past and how they are currently understood. This also allows us to identify the extent to which these combinations have been framed as either “marginal” or “mainstream” across these two types of media over a longer period of time, including potential notable discursive shifts in that regard. Preparatory work for WP1 has already been conducted as part of the smaller research project *Christian Cultural Memory in the Margins* (mar 2022-mar 25) led by professor Moberg, but a broader discursive mapping of a broader range of these types of media has not been conducted.

Milestone: When the order of discourse of the alternative spiritual and institutional ELCF spheres has been determined and central discursive formations in the field have been identified and preliminarily analyzed the project has reached one of its four main milestones (M1).

Main deliverables: Two refereed journal articles on the main findings of WP1.

WP2: Exploring the level of practice (2025-28)

Connecting directly to, as well as overlapping with, the discursive mapping and analysis conducted in WP1, WP2 consists of conducting extensive ethnographic research among people who are variously practically involved in the combination of Christianity and ASHMs and who engage in the cultivation of new understandings of the “Christian” in relation to each case explored (yoga, mindfulness, reiki, and natural cures). The broader alternative ASHM sphere and institutional ELCF sphere are explored in equal measure. As a crucial complement to our analyses of the discursive construction that unfolds throughout relevant media, WP2 therefore explores the particular forms that the

cultivation of new understandings of the “Christian” and Christian practice take in relation to each case in *actual, vernacular practice* (Valk & Bowman 2012). WP2 thus investigates how Christianity is reinterpreted in direct relation to ASHMs in bodily and performative actions and practices. Ethnographic research is conducted among people who create, provide, and take part in the practices included in our case studies, using standard ethnographic methods – participant observation and individual and focus group interviews – combined with different visual and sensory ethnographic methods to explore the kinesthetic, affective, and aesthetic aspects of the practices explored. The broader field of ASHMs and the ELCF sphere are explored in equal measure. Special attention is devoted to potential connections and overlaps between these respective spheres, which provides essential information for the research conducted in WP3.

Milestone: When ethnographic data in relation to all cases in both the broader field of ASHMs and the institutional ELCF sphere has been gathered, assembled, coded, and preliminarily analyzed, the project has reached another milestone (M2).

Main deliverables: Two refereed journal articles on the findings of WP2.

WP3: Exploring connections, overlaps, and wider flows of interdiscursive influence (2026-28)

WP3 is explorative in character and directly builds and expands on the research conducted in WP1 and especially WP2. It investigates whether any notable connections, areas of overlap, and flows of interdiscursive influence can be identified *between* and *across* the broader field of ASHMs and the institutional ELCF sphere when it comes to the combination of Christianity with ASHMs. This is achieved by utilizing the methodological framework of *scene* as previously developed for the study of religion by Moberg and Ramstedt (Moberg & Ramstedt 2015; Ramstedt 2018). When a particular religious/spiritual environment is viewed as a scene, it is approached as a particularly structured and discursively constructed environment that brings together people who share an interest in a certain set of religious/spiritual ideas and practices. A scene is therefore an environment that is *recognizable as such* by its own members and hence has some degree of “self-consciousness” (Kahn-Harris 2007, 101). Based on the data gathered in WPs 1 and 2 coupled with an additional mapping of networks and relevant actors WP3 thus investigates *whether there exists an identifiable scene centered around the combination of Christianity with ASHMs* and how it is *structured and constructed*. Whereas investigating the structure of this scene entails identifying and mapping the ways and means by which it is practically sustained and reproduced as a more clearly delineated space, investigating the construction of this scene, in turn, entails identifying the principal means of discursive construction and meaning-making practices that go on within it.

Milestone: When the data has been analyzed from the perspective of scenes, and a potential scene or scenes combining Christianity with ASHMs has been identified, the project has reached its third milestone (M3).

Main deliverables: Two refereed journal articles on the findings of WP3.

WP4: Analysis and innovation

WP4 focuses on consolidation of the data and data analysis. The researchers responsible for the case studies will conduct the initial analysis of the data generated for each on both the level of discourse and level of practice. The whole research team will then, in different combinations, engage in joint analyses of the studied cases to form a broader and more nuanced understanding of the role of margins in the re-framing and re-configuring of Christianity and Christian practices, and the possible variations within and between them. Based on the project’s empirical data, WP4 also generates understanding on the underlying reasons for the centrality of ASHMs as a site where Christianity gets rethought and renewed as well as of the potential implications of this rethinking for conventional Christian hierarchy- and authority structures and “mainstream” Christian thought.

The analysis will be conducted through a combination of discursive and ethnographic research approaches. WP4 will lead to the production of the project's scientific innovations.

Milestone: When all data has been gathered, assembled and jointly analyzed, the project has reached its final milestone (M4).

Main deliverables: A special issue of an international peer-review journal reporting on the joint findings, and a proposal for a larger EU-funded international research project.

Schedule

The project will run for four years, from September 2025 to August 2029. As illustrated by the following chart, the WPs will extend throughout the four-year period. This is to ensure the efficient running of the project, within which issues such as data formation and analysis, mobility, research collaboration, and deliverables have been fully taken into account.

TASK	9-12/2025	1-6/2026	7-12/2026	1-6/2027	7-12/2027	1-6/2028	7-12/2028	1-8/2029
Ethics & coding principles								
WP1, discourse	M1							
WP2, practice							M2	
WP3, connections		M3						
WP4, analysis & innovation				M4				
Mobility			Tartu Lancaster	Karlstad				
Main events organised	Launching event				Mid-way seminar		Event for wider public	Closing seminar
Main deliverables	Website, blog, ethics/coding plan		Articles 1 and 2	Article 3	Article 4	Articles 5 and 6	Journal issue	PhD dissertation EU plan

3.2. Research data and material, methods, and research environment

In order to realize stated aims and objectives, the project draws on several complementary types of data: text data (print media and online), interview data, and data gathered by means of ethnographic research methods. The text-data consists of the content of central both print and online mainstream Christian and alternative spiritual media outlets since the year 1970 (when available). On the mainstream Christian side, these outlets include the country's largest Christian weekly *Kotimaa* (Homeland, est. 1905) along with its extensive online forum Kotimaa24, the ELCFs largest membership magazine *Kirkko ja kaupunki* (Church and the City, est. 1942) along with its online news page, and the online ELCF news outlet *Seurakuntalainen* (Parishioner, est. 2010). On the alternative spiritual side, the outlets include the country's four largest alternative spirituality and health- and wellbeing-focused magazines *Minä olen* (I Am, est. 1996), *Voi hyvin* (Be Well, est. 1986), *Ultra* (est. 1972) along with its webpage and forum, and *Sielun Peili* (Mirror of the Soul, est. 2008). Combined, the content of these both print and online outlets over a longer period of time produce an extensive corpus of textual data, some parts of which have already undergone a general screening (see section 3.1). The scenic mapping of WP3 also produces an additional body of data, including online data produced outside of Finland.

An extensive body of new empirical data is also gathered among living subjects engaged in various types of activities in relation to the ASHM cases explored by means of ethnographic research. This

includes data generated by means of interviews, focus group interviews, and participant observation, as well as visual and sensory methods, such as photo elicitation and sensory interviews (Pink 2015; van den Scott 2018). Through such data we greatly complement the textual data of WP1 and generate data of high significance for WP3. In order to achieve a sufficient degree of saturation and diversity among research participants (e.g. in terms of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic position), interviews will be conducted with up to 30 people (including creators, organizers, and participants) in relation to each case, covering both the broader field of ASHMs and the ELCF sphere. Up to a total of 120 people will thus be interviewed. Participant observation will also be conducted at a variety of events related to each case.

The media dataset generated as part of WP1 will be screened using various tools for automated text mining, natural language processing, and web scraping methods (Rogel-Salazar 2020). With the help of previously developed Python programming language libraries, we gather a keyword search-based text dataset on the content of the chosen media over a longer period of time. On the basis of this screening, particularly notable texts will be identified and subjected to detailed, qualitative discourse analysis. The results of WP3 will also undergo discourse analysis, with a particular emphasis on flows of interdiscursive influence. The discourse analytic framework employed is based on the framework of Fairclough (e.g. 2010) and combines the analysis of *text* (i.e. written and spoken language itself), *practices* (i.e. the production, distribution, and interpretation of texts), and *socio-cultural practices* (i.e. situating the texts within a wider societal and cultural context). This is directly combined with a careful consideration and analysis of the particular ways that re-configured understandings of the “Christian” in relation to the cases explored are realized, carried out, and enacted in actual practice. The interviews, observations, and visual research data (such as body mapping) from WP2 will be analyzed through employing a multifaceted methodology, integrating discourse analysis, content analysis, and (visual) semiotic analysis (Engler & Stausberg 2022; Jokela-Pancini 2021). This approach is used to explore how Christianity, as vernacular practice, is reinterpreted corporeally, performatively and discursively within the selected cases, as well as to study the emergence of novel interpretations of Christianity potentially produced through these actions.

3.3. Risk assessment and alternative implementation strategies:

In most respects, the practical realization of the research to be conducted involves only a smaller degree of manageable risk. The table below outlines principal types of recognized potential risks and the means by which they will be managed and mitigated.

Risk	Level	Mitigation	Solution
Discrepancy between the theoretical margins-mainstreams heuristic and empirical results	Medium	Continuous refinement of the theoretical approach	Regular project meetings to discuss theory and methodology
Failure to process the large data set completely	Low	Careful scheduling, establishment of joint coding principles, and adequate expertise in team	Priority plan settled at the start of the project
Local impediments to fieldwork mobility, networks, and events	Medium	Continuous re-evaluation and alternative implementation strategies for fieldwork, mobility, and events	Flexible and individual decisions two months ahead of each milestone.
Insufficient access to relevant categories of participants	Medium	Building on previously established connections to the field, securing feedback, sharing results	Communication and interaction plan settled at the start of the project

3.4. Project personnel and their project-relevant key merits

Senior lecturer, Docent **Minna Opas** will lead the consortium at UTU. Opas is a specialist on vernacular religion, the anthropology of Christianity, vulnerable peoples, and ethnographic methodology (Opas & Haapalainen 2017; Handman & Opas 2019), and the director of Centre for the Study of Christian Cultures. She has led several national and international research projects focusing on Christianity and vulnerable peoples (see CV for details). The proposed project aligns directly with her main research interests and previous research on local level definitions and interpretations of Christianity. She has wide experience in research leadership and generation of societal impact of research. In the consortium, she leads and participates in carrying out ethnographic research conducted in the project and is responsible for the overall management of the project for the part of UTU. Professor **Marcus Moberg** will function as deputy-leader of the consortium at ÅAU. Moberg is a leading scholar in the discursive study of religion, and also specializes in contemporary processes of religious change and the relationship between religion and media (e.g. Moberg 2020; 2022). He has both led and held key positions in several large-scale research projects (see CV for details) and has extensive experience of multi- and mixed method research. Moberg also functions as the leader of the smaller project *Christian Cultural Memory in the Margins* (mar 2023-mar 25), where some important preparatory work for the proposed project has already been conducted. Moberg's main tasks include aiding in the management of the project as a whole, leading ÅAU's part in the consortium, and both overseeing and participating in the discourse analytic research to be conducted.

The project employs **three postdoctoral researchers** with relevant and complementary expertise in the area of the project. The team is further complemented by three senior researchers who act in a largely advisory capacity. The **doctoral student** position connecting directly to the project will be established at the Study of Religions at ÅAU. A promising applicant with suitable interests and skills will be recruited and be employed for the whole duration of the project. The doctoral student will participate in all aspects of the research and conduct independent dissertation research related to WP1 and WP2, which potentially also will open new directions for research. The doctoral position includes a research visit to Karlstad University in Sweden for the duration of a few months.

In a deliberate effort to actively advance career development, postdoctoral scholars will be assigned senior mentors and given increasingly demanding tasks as the research progresses, including taking leading responsibility for parts of the research to be conducted and larger roles in the dissemination of results, both through assuming leading authorship of project-related publications and presenting results at academic conferences and seminars. The doctoral researcher employed will be supervised at ÅAU but will benefit from the professional advice of the entire research team. The postdoctoral and doctoral researchers will also actively participate in the teaching and supervision at their respective departments. The project will also hold regular meetings on research ethics, the dissemination of results, and organize writing retreats, all of which provide younger researchers with opportunities to learn from the more experienced scholars in the project.

3.5. Research environment and added value of consortium

The consortium draws together an internationally acclaimed team of researchers with a long and solid track record of previous cooperation and shared research infrastructures and networks. The research profiles of the consortium partners complement each other in important ways. As a result, the consortium is capable of successfully carrying out the proposed methodologically diverse project. The department for the Study of Religion at UTU has established itself as a leading research unit in ethnographic research on vernacular and folk religion, esotericism, and alternative

spirituality. UTU also hosts the *Centre for the Study of Christian Cultures (CSCC)*, an interdisciplinary research center focusing on the study of diverse forms of Christianity. The department for the Study of Religions at ÅAU likewise constitutes a strong research environment with a solid track record in research on contemporary processes of religious change and methodological innovation, especially in relation to study of discourses and use of interview data. The consortium is also directly supported by the ÅAU-connected *Donner Institute for Research into Religion and Culture* and the *Inez and Julius Polin Institute for Theological Research*, both of which provide additional tangible resources. The shared research infrastructure created through the consortium and strengthened by the above-mentioned local actors in the field of the study of religion in Turku provides valuable additional resources in terms of possibilities for complementary research funding, unique library resources, facilities and tangible assistance with consortium-related meetings, symposia, and events, as well as a vibrant environment for broader research synergy, debate, and constructive critique. In comparison to both parties working alone, the consortium also allows greater possibilities for researcher training, attracting visiting researchers, and for developing Turku into an important Nordic and international “hub of research” in the field of the study of religion. The research interests of the consortium also directly align with UTUs strategic priority area, Cultural Memory and Social Change, and ÅAUs Strategic Minority Research Profile which provide further links to ongoing interdisciplinary research on cultural change and marginalized social and cultural groups.

3.6. Collaborators

The project involves collaboration with a group of internationally recognized scholars forming the consortium’s scientific advisory board and chosen on the basis of their expertise in the anthropology of Christianity, contemporary and new religiosity, and relevant methodological questions. The board will meet 1-2 times per year and during the project’s main events.

3.7. Responsible science

Research ethics: Ethical issues will be accorded high consideration in all aspects of the research in full accordance with the guidelines drawn up by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity. All members of the research team will ensure that research participants feel respected and safe at all times. As a rule, interviews will be conducted by members of the research team in places chosen by the participants. Each participant will receive an informed consent form in a concise and easily understandable language that includes basic information about the research, contact details to researchers, information on the pseudonymization of all names, details about the archiving process, the dissemination of results, and GDPR compliant processing of personal data. Researchers will ensure that participants are fully aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. The findings will be provided to any individual participant requesting them. The project as such does not require ethical clearance. Should it be required for certain portions of the research (e.g. specific groups of research participants), clearance will be secured before the research begins. Shared guidelines to ensure best practices will be developed at the outset of the project.

Equality and nondiscrimination: The consortium will consciously aim to achieve equality and non-discrimination in all aspects of its research. The composition of the research team and the group of collaborators includes members of various genders and career stages. The consortium will hold regular meetings for the whole research staff and provide authorship to all consortium members who have made a contribution to any of its publications. In recruiting, diversity issues will be taken into account. In the data gathering process, the consortium will strive to achieve as much diversity as possible with regard to gender, ethnicity, age, and social and cultural backgrounds.

Open science: The results of the project will be disseminated in the form of **refereed journal articles** in fields of the sociology and anthropology of religion, alternative spirituality, religion, health-

and wellbeing, and religion and media. They will also be presented in a **special issue** of a relevant international journal. Overall, the results will be presented in **10-12** individually and co-authored research articles. The project will also produce a doctoral dissertation in the Study of Religions at ÅAU. In addition, results will also be presented in **3-4 Finnish-language publications** intended for the general public. The project will also produce its own **webpage** and a **research blog** to disseminate information on the findings and progress of the ongoing project. It will organize project launching-, mid-way, and closing **seminars** to which relevant both national and international scholarly partners will be invited. An **event** towards the end of the project will also be organized **for the wider public**.

The consortium will promote open publishing, open data and open learning, following *FAIR principles* of data use in research as closely as possible (<https://www.go-fair.org/fair-principles/>) through making data both findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable. All consortium publications will be open access (either green or gold, and in full accordance with Plan S) and be deposited in open access publication repositories. All data will be gathered, managed, archived, and stored in full compliance with the guiding principles of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity and GDPR. The Consortium will adhere to principles of fair reproduction of copyrighted material for scientific purposes as guaranteed by the Finnish Copyright Act. All data will be stored at the sites of research, both on securely stored external hard drives and on the UTU and ÅAU file systems and secure cloud servers. Only researchers and research assistants employed by the consortium will have access to the data. After the completion of the research, the main body of the ethnographic data will be stored at the Archive of the School of History, Culture and Arts Studies (HKTL Archive), UTU. All metadata, and links to storage locations of the datasets will be available through the Research.fi network.

Sustainable development objectives: The consortium will specifically promote the following goals: a sustainable society and local communities; an equal and sustainable work-culture within the consortium; equal prospects for wellbeing; and a participatory society for citizens. Since the research to be conducted is closely linked to identity and recognition, the consortium can promote a non-discriminatory and participatory society for citizens by affording space and visibility to previously marginal, sometimes stigmatized, and less visible understandings of the Christian. The results can inform policymaking intended to promote equal prospects for citizens with various relations to majority Christianity and to facilitate a more participatory, just, and equal society. A specific strategic fit is found with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals "Reduced Inequalities" and "Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions," as well as with the goals "Equal Prospects for Wellbeing" and "A Participatory Society for All" in the recent governmental strategy *The Finland We Want by 2050*.

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