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The Appropriation of Mindfulness in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland

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Mindfulness has gained increasing popularity across Western societies over the past couple of decades, although mainly in forms that have been stripped of all religious content. During this period, the practice has also attracted the interest of mainstream Christian churches, which has precipitated the development of distinctively 'Christian' forms of mindfulness. Based on a critical discussion of the concept of appropriation in the sphere of religion, this article explores the particular logic whereby mindfulness has been appropriated within the particular ecclesiastical context of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) in light of debates in church-connected media and the content of two Finnish BA theses on pastoral care that argue for the adoption of the practice. In light of this data, the article illustrates how ELCF discourse on mindfulness has been marked by four closely interlinked requirements for the appropriation of the practice: 1. that the practice has already been thoroughly stripped of any overt religious content; 2. that it has become sufficiently scientifically validated; 3. that there is wider social and cultural interest in the practice; 4. and that the practice does not stand in opposition to the teachings of the church.

Introduction

The past three to four decades have witnessed continued institutional Christian decline (e.g. McLeod 2007) and a widespread 'un-churching' (e.g. Fuller 2001) or 'de-Christianization' (e.g. Brown and Lynch 2012: 338) of Western populations. These

developments have, to a significant degree, been further propelled by the increasing prevalence and popularity of highly individualized so-called alternative holistic spiritualities. As has been explored by numerous scholars, while holistic spiritualities come in a myriad of different forms, they are, perhaps above all, characterized by their emphasis on *well-being* or, more specifically, the holistic well-being of 'mind, body, and spirit' (e.g. Heelas 2008; Oake 2021: 2). Various types of practices prevalent in the broader holistic milieu have also made their way into and developed into an integral part of a constantly expanding broader Western culture of well-being and self-development. These include internationally disseminated 'Eastern' meditation practices such as yoga and mindfulness, which, although their roots lie in particular religious traditions (Hinduism and Buddhism respectively), now come in a large variety of Westernized, both 'religious'/'spiritual' and 'non-religious' forms. But in spite of efforts to construct 'religiously neutral' versions of these practices, their origins in particular religious frameworks nevertheless remain debated (e.g. Brown 2015, 2016, 2018; Borup 2020).

The individualistic ethos that holistic spiritualities reflect (and further promote)

poses a challenge for many traditional majority Christian churches, which have been struggling to make their activities and provisions stand out amidst an ever-expanding array of religious/spiritual options and lifestyle choices (e.g. Moberg 2017). This is certainly the case with the Nordic Lutheran churches, all of which have been experiencing progressive decline on virtually all fronts ever since the late 1970s (e.g. Furseth 2018). In order to counter this trend, the Nordic churches have all striven in various ways to reconfigure and more closely align their established activities, practices and provisions with prevailing cultural sensibilities. Since these efforts have involved various types of engagements with broader cultural trends, including in the area of holistic spiritualities and well-being, they also actualize questions relating to the much-debated concept of cultural appropriation.

This article has three closely interconnected aims. First, it provides a general critical discussion of the heuristic value, analytical utility and applicability of the concept of cultural appropriation in the area of religion, and more specifically in relation to cases where *Protestant Christian* communities/groups engage in the appropriation of 'Eastern' meditation practices that are either directly connected to, or that otherwise remain associated with, *non-Christian* religious/spiritual traditions or frameworks. Second, focusing on the case of mindfulness, the article explores the principal logic that continues to govern Protestant Christians' appropriation of mindfulness, as well as various efforts to create 'Christianized' versions of the practice. Third, the article explores more recent efforts at appropriating mindfulness and the creation of Christianized variants of the practice within the particular national and ecclesiastical context of the Evangelical

Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF). In this, we limit our focus to the principal ways in which the potential appropriation of mindfulness in ELCF settings has been *justified* and legitimized over roughly the past fifteen years in light of two closely related bodies of data: 1. debates on mindfulness in ELCF-connected media, and 2. the content of two Finnish BA theses in the field of diaconal work written during the same time period that each argue for the appropriation of mindfulness in ELCF settings. Written at Finnish vocational universities of applied sciences to conclude four years of study, these BA theses make up the assignments that afford students the diploma that renders them formally qualified to function as ELCF deacons and social workers. To be clear, our focus in this article therefore lies firmly on *discursive justifications* for the potential broader appropriation of mindfulness in ELCF settings. The actual, concrete practice or 'doing' of mindfulness in ELCF settings (to the limited extent that it already occurs) therefore falls outside the purview of this article.

More broadly, our analysis also aims to highlight how the justifications provided for the potential appropriation of mindfulness in ELCF settings appears to follow a certain general ELCF-specific 'justification logic' that in part reflects previous Protestant Christian efforts to appropriate practices such as mindfulness on a transnational level, but in part also the specific national and ecclesiastical context of the ELCF. In highlighting this logic, the article also underlines the importance of paying due attention to the specifics of national and ecclesiastical context whenever these types of appropriations are considered.

Religion and the concept of cultural appropriation

At its most general, the term ‘cultural appropriation’ refers to the extraction of elements from one cultural system of meaning and their integration into another (cf. Bucar 2022: 200). In its lexical definition, to ‘appropriate’ means to ‘take exclusive possession of’ something, ‘to set [something] apart for or assign to a particular purpose or use,’ or ‘to take or make use of [something] without authority or right’ (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). It is mainly the last of these meanings that informs current debates on cultural appropriation, the main part of which is decidedly normative in character. When considering the potential heuristic and *analytical* value of the concept of cultural appropriation, however, it is important to acknowledge at the outset that cultural appropriation can take multiple forms, including ‘ownership,’ ‘theft,’ ‘borrowing,’ ‘sharing,’ ‘belonging,’ ‘identification’ and ‘self-realization’ (Strathern 2011: 27, 29; cf. Bucar 2022: 4–8; Matthes 2016: 345–6). Cultural appropriation therefore needs to be understood as a *context-specific* concept: ‘the professional or disciplinary context [legal, artistic, commercial, religious, etc.] in which appropriation is discussed determines what counts as appropriation, how it is defined, and the harm it causes’ (Bucar 2022: 5). Debates and disputes about cultural appropriation consequently tend to revolve around questions such as *what* is being appropriated *from who, by who, how, why,* and with *what consequences* in terms of the potential harm and/or offence caused.

When it comes to the question of agents and intent, ethical questions may (and indeed often do) arise when representatives of dominant cultures or privileged segments of society ‘take possession of,’ or co-opt, or outright steal the cultural

content, property or heritage of minority, marginalized or disadvantaged groups (Young 2005: 141; Matthes 2016: 346–7). Such instances tend to become especially fraught when commercial interests and issues relating to both material and non-material property rights are involved. As discussed by Jørn Borup (2020: 229–30), in comparison to the appropriation of other types of cultural content or property (e.g. styles or aesthetics), the appropriation of *religious* notions, beliefs and practices is ‘often designated as a specifically “profound offence”’ (Young 2005), and especially when it involves the appropriation of the religious beliefs and practices of vulnerable and marginalized groups. As Conrad G. Brunk and James O. Young (2009: 93) point out, this is why ‘The appropriation of religious beliefs and practices, with the possible exception of the appropriation of human remains, is the most contested form of appropriation from Indigenous people’ (cf. Welch 2002: 21). But indigenous contexts aside, we need to recognize that appropriation of religious beliefs and practices occurs across the religious spectrum. This is why Liz Bucar (2022: 2–4), whose research has mainly focused on various instances of the appropriation of elements from more internationally established and comparatively less marginalized religious contexts, argues that a general distinction can be made between ‘religious borrowing’ and ‘religious appropriation,’ reserving the latter only for cases that can be shown to cause some type of ‘explicit harm’ (pp. 2–4).

Although a detailed discussion of how to approach and assess the potential harm and/or offence caused by particular instances of the appropriation of religious beliefs and practices would fall beyond the scope of this article, it is nonetheless worth questioning whether the degree of harm and/or offence caused can adequately

function as the *sole*, or even primary, criterion for determining when a religious belief or practice is *appropriated* rather than, say, 'borrowed', 'copied' or 'imitated'. Besides, whereas 'borrowing' (lexically, at least) implies that whatever is taken will eventually be returned, 'appropriation' implies taking full possession of something and making it one's own. And whereas the religious beliefs and practices of many indigenous peoples can often quite confidently be traced to particular indigenous settings, this is not as easily done with internationally disseminated religious frameworks and traditions such as, for example, Buddhism or Taoism, or practices such as yoga or mindfulness (e.g. Borup 2020). In these latter types of cases, the problem of 'ownership' and of *representation* becomes particularly acute: 'Who has, takes, or is ascribed the authority to represent a given religious tradition, and by which claims and criteria?' (Borup 2020: 231; cf. King 1999). This problem is certainly felt in broader debates about the cultural appropriation of mindfulness as well (e.g. Purser 2019).

Notwithstanding the complicated nature of these issues, we would maintain that any determination as to what constitutes appropriation proper in the area of religion requires us to take multiple factors into account *in addition to* the potential harm and/or offence caused. Not least, we would argue that the question of *intent* should be viewed as equally significant. Does a particular agent take possession of some form of cultural property or practice *fully aware* of the fact that 'ownership' (if that can be determined) of the practice lies with someone else? Does a particular agent strive to *change* or *alter* the character of the property or practice taken possession of to suit their own purposes? We would argue that affirmative answers to questions such as these are just as indicative of appropriation

proper as the potential harm and/or offence caused.

Cultural appropriation in the area of religion has received a fair amount of previous scholarly attention (that is, if we limit our discussion to previous scholarship that has explicitly employed that concept). This scholarship can generally be divided into two main types. The first type has concentrated on instances of what we could term 'appropriation *of* religion', whereby the ideas, teachings, practices, rituals, aesthetics, and so on, of some particular religious community or religious tradition are co-opted by some type of 'outsider', 'not expressly religious', and usually commercial actor, such as popular artists, marketers or representatives of the self-help or fashion industries. The larger part of this scholarship has focused either on the appropriation of beliefs and practices associated with internationally disseminated 'Eastern' religious traditions, most notably Buddhism, or the religious beliefs and practices of various indigenous peoples (e.g. Carrette and King 2005; Heelas 2008; Borup 2020; Bucar 2022).

A second type of scholarship has instead concentrated on what we could term 'appropriation of religion *into* religion', whereby the religious beliefs, practices, symbols and so on of some particular religious group, community or religious tradition become appropriated by adherents of *another* religious group or community. Here, we are therefore dealing with cases where various types of *religious actors* engage in the appropriation of religious beliefs and practices *other* than their own already established ones. Again, most previous scholarship in this area has focused on the appropriation of indigenous religious beliefs and practices by adherents of various types of alternative spirituality or neo-paganism (e.g. Brunk and Young 2009;

Nicholas and Wylie 2009; Welch 2002). But in addition to this, as we shall continue to discuss below, there are also plenty of cases where more firmly established and organized religious communities and entities have engaged in such appropriations as well. The appropriation of mindfulness by Protestant Christians provides a particularly illustrative case in point.

The appropriation of mindfulness in Protestant Christian settings

The term ‘mindfulness’ derives from the Buddhist term *sati* in the Pāli language and is generally used to refer to specific sets of practices aimed at achieving a ‘state of mind’ characterized by full awareness of the present moment, the awareness of distractions, and the absence of judgement (e.g. Husgafvel 2020: 48). While mindfulness is part of an over 2500-year-old tradition of Buddhist meditation and everyday practices grounded in Buddhist doctrines (pp. 48–9), it also appears in a wide array of Western adaptations that typically frame it as an essentially ‘non-religious’ technique that can, among many other things, be used for the purposes of clinical therapy, rehabilitation, stress reduction, education or the treatment of various mental and physical conditions and ailments (e.g. Purser *et al.* 2016). There are, however, no generally agreed-upon ‘rules’ as to what mindfulness should consist of and how it should be practised. Rather, the actual practice of Western mindfulness can occur in a variety of different ways and can be undertaken either alone or in a group led by a mindfulness instructor. Mindfulness sessions can also differ in their form and main focus and might, for example, centre on breathing and letting the mind wander freely, on fixing practitioners’ minds on feelings of joy and happiness, or be oriented towards stress and pain relief (see e.g. mindful.org).

The single most widely known of all Western ‘non-religious’ forms of mindfulness is called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). This programme, which is mainly based on Buddhist Vipassanā and Zen techniques, was created by the American professor emeritus of molecular biology Jon Kabat-Zinn (b. 1944) in the late 1970s. It was originally developed and tested at the Medical School of the University of Massachusetts among patients suffering from chronic pain and stress and eventually gained international popularity following the publication of Kabat-Zinn’s *Full Catastrophe Living* in 1990 (Frisk 2012: 49–50). Although Kabat-Zinn (2005: 29) argued that virtually anything can constitute a form of mindfulness provided that it is practised with the right mindset, like many other meditation techniques derived from Asian religious traditions, MBSR also emphasizes the importance of becoming aware of one’s bodily sensations and breathing.

It is notable that, since its inception, MBSR was expressly framed as a ‘non-religious’ form of mindfulness that would be suitable for Westerners regardless of their religious commitments and sensibilities. Consequently, MBSR also operates with a distinctively scientific rather than religious language. Kabat-Zinn described his thinking in developing the technique as follows:

I did not shy away from explicitly stating its Buddhist origins. However, from the beginning of MBSR, I bent over backward to structure it and find ways to speak about it that avoided as much as possible the risk of it being seen as Buddhist, ‘New Age,’ ‘Eastern Mysticism’ or just plain ‘flakey.’ (Kabat-Zinn 2011: 282)

As comes across clearly in this quotation, in developing MBSR, Kabat-Zinn actively strove to disassociate it not only from Buddhism, but also to strip it of any other ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ connotations. However, as discussed in detail by Candy G. Brown (2016: 90; cf. Brown 2015: 17; Borup 2020: 230–3), in spite of continuous efforts on the part of Kabat-Zinn and many other proponents of ‘non-religious’ mindfulness to actively dissociate the practice from any Buddhist or more generally ‘religious’/‘spiritual’ content, the fact remains that ‘the term mindfulness ... does double-duty – opening onto a comprehensive Buddhist worldview and way of life even when introduced as a mere therapeutic technique’ (Brown 2016: 90).

Whether mindfulness should be regarded a ‘religious’, ‘non-religious’ or ‘secular’ practice is not a question that can be conclusively resolved in any meaningful way. Nor is it, we would maintain, the task of scholarship to make any such attempts. Rather, ‘religion’/‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ need to be approached and understood as dialectically related and mutually constitutive discursive tools of classification (e.g. Moberg 2022: 71). Scholarship should consequently focus on analysing the continuous struggles of meaning that revolve around either the supposed ‘religious’, ‘non-religious’ or ‘secular’ status of mindfulness and the particular arguments marshalled in favour of each view. Arguments in favour of viewing mindfulness as a ‘non-religious’, ‘secular’ practice have nevertheless become widespread and particularly prone to highlight the (ostensible) *universality* of the practice, or that ‘mindfulness cultivates universal virtues, such as compassion, and can be practised by Christians, Jews, Muslims and atheists *without religious conflict*’ (Brown 2016: 77, emphasis added). This is why it is not uncommon for people

who argue for the appropriation of mindfulness into Christian settings to also support this view.

Nowadays it is not only ‘spiritual seekers’ and people who identify as ‘spiritual but not religious’ who engage with holistic spiritualities. Substantial numbers of people who self-identify as exclusively Christian do so as well (e.g. Brown 2014). Previous scholarship in this area has especially focused on the particular strategies that Christians who engage in such practices tend to employ as part of their efforts to reconcile their Christian beliefs and commitments with various non-Christian notions prevalent in broader holistic milieu as well as those that still remain associated with internationally widespread practices such as yoga and mindfulness (e.g. Versteeg 2006; Klassen 2011; Brown 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2018; Utraiainen 2017; Timbers and Hollenberger 2022). Overall, these strategies have mirrored a particular type of ‘appropriation logic’ that evangelical Protestants developed and refined already in the 1960s (for more detailed discussions, see Smith 1999; Hendershot 2004; Brown 2013, 2018). Rather than adopting an adversarial stance towards contemporaneous prevailing (counter- and popular) cultural trends, evangelicals instead set out to actively *emulate* these as part of a broader effort to ‘redeem’ them from *within* (Clark 2005: 32) while simultaneously providing Christian audiences with ‘safer’ and more ‘wholesome’ alternatives. Beginning with popular music, these efforts were soon extended far beyond the sphere of popular youth culture into areas such as well-being and fitness, eventually generating an extensive and independent evangelical well-being and ‘devotional fitness’ industry (e.g. Radermacher 2017).

These earlier evangelical engagements with broader cultural trends can usefully be

approached through the lens of appropriation (rather than, say, ‘borrowing’) in that they were always rooted in a *theologically justified* and explicit intent to *co-opt* ‘secular’ cultural forms and to *convert* (i.e. to ‘Christianize’) them for Christian use without much consideration of who these cultural forms might be considered to ‘belong’ to or be the ‘property’ of (cf. Hendershot 2004: 28; Brown 2018). The influence of this particular ‘appropriation logic’ would also come to extend far beyond the evangelical sphere proper. As ‘mainstream’ and ‘high-church’ types of Protestant Christian churches (including the ELCF) eventually started to catch up with broader (popular) cultural developments in the late 1990s for fear of losing touch with younger generations, they typically tended to resort to the same ‘appropriation logic’ that evangelicals had already refined decades earlier (e.g. Moberg 2018).

Protestant Christians’ efforts to appropriate mindfulness since the mid-1990s have also largely followed this same, already firmly established, appropriation logic, albeit with a few added key elements. For example, a repeated emphasis on the ‘neutrality’ of cultural forms and the importance of genuine Christian *intention* has remained central. Or as Brown (2015: 11) puts it, ‘Many Christians tend to assume that one’s belief, or “intention,” determines whether a practice is religious or what kind of religion it expresses.’ But unlike the appropriation of popular music, computer games or aerobics, the appropriation of a practice such as mindfulness has required additional forms of justification, given its historical and enduring connections to a *non-Christian*, Buddhist religious framework (for a discussion of the similar case of Christians and yoga, see Brown 2018).

As briefly noted above, one principal way of justifying the appropriation of

mindfulness in Christian settings has been to highlight its ‘non-religious’ and ‘universal’ character. In what reflects an increasingly widespread more general type of strategy to reconcile central Christian beliefs with the variety of non-Christian notions that inform many holistic spirituality and meditation practices, the ostensibly ‘non-religious’ nature of mindfulness is further reinforced through a repeated emphasis on its (perceived) *scientifically* proven physical and mental-health benefits (e.g. Brown 2014, 2015, 2019). This ‘scientification’ of mindfulness serves to further ‘secularize’ the practice, to ‘cleanse’ it, as it were, from its previous non-Christian religious/spiritual connections and connotations, thus making its integration into a Christian framework possible. Indeed, the notion that mindfulness constitutes a ‘non-religious’ and widely scientifically validated practice has been fundamental to a large variety of distinctively ‘Christianized’ variants of the practice that have been developed since the mid-1990s, many of which have also found their ways into long-established Christian ecclesiastical settings or served to inspire the creation of yet new community-specific Christian variants (e.g. Klassen 2005; Lüddeckens and Schrimpf 2018; Gilhus 2012; Kalvig 2017; Brown 2018). Typically outlined in books, examples include *Faith Postures: Cultivating Christian Mindfulness* (Sprink 2009), *Mindfulness and Christian Spirituality: Making Space for God* (Stead 2017), or *Christ-Centred Mindfulness: Connection to Self and God* (Thompson 2019).

Like their previous engagements with broader cultural trends as discussed above, Protestant Christians’ efforts to strip mindfulness of all ‘religious’/‘spiritual’ content in order to then be able to infuse it with ‘Christian’ content can clearly be argued to constitute appropriation proper in that

these efforts have not only involved a very deliberate and theologically justified ‘taking possession of’ mindfulness, but also a direct *altering* of it to suit specifically Christian purposes. The intent, therefore, has often not been to simply ‘borrow’, but to deliberately *co-opt* the practice and then *convert* it for Christian use. Simply representing mindfulness as a ‘non-religious’ and scientifically validated practice does not, however, by and of itself amount to a ‘Christianization’ of the practice (but is rather a precondition for it). The actual ‘Christianization’ of the practice occurs through a set of additional means. The most central among these include what Brown refers to as ‘linguistic substitution’ (Brown 2018: 661; cf. Brown 2015: 6), whereby central mindfulness-related terminology is given a ‘Christian’ flavour through the adding of Christian idiomatic qualifiers such as ‘Christ-centred’, ‘devotional’ or ‘faith-based’ to mark out the practice as recognizably ‘Christian’. As Brown points out (with particular reference to the Christianization of yoga), such linguistic substitution serves ‘first, to mark *an intention to repurpose a practice for Christian uses* and, second, to market a product to Christian consumers’ (Brown 2018: 669, emphasis added). Moreover, the Christianization process typically also involves a Christian idiomatic reframing of central aspects of the actual practice or ‘doing’ of mindfulness. For example, rather than ‘just’ being oriented towards attaining a peaceful and compassionate state of mind, the goal of Christian mindfulness might be presented as being oriented towards achieving a state of transcendence and deeper awareness of and/or personal connection to God. Likewise, meditation upon the practitioner’s breath might be reframed in terms of the practitioner’s meditation upon scripture, mindfulness

sessions might include Christian prayers or the reading of particular Bible verses, and so on (e.g. Brown 2019: 183).

Christian variants of mindfulness have received quite a substantial amount of scholarly attention. This scholarship has, however, been highly varied in its focus. While the ‘Christianization’ of the practice as outlined above has not received that much attention (although Brown 2018 on the ‘Christianization’ of yoga largely applies to mindfulness as well), there are plenty of studies in the area of mental health and clinical psychology that have explored, and also directly argued in favour of, *adapting* mindfulness to the mental-health treatment and therapy of people who adhere to Christian beliefs (e.g. Symington and Symington 2012; Frederick and White 2015; Garzon and Ford 2016; Jones *et al.* 2021). Indeed, as many of these studies have provided their own *clinical* and *therapeutic* justifications as to why forms of mindfulness specifically adapted for Christians *should* be created, they have often (perhaps inadvertently) come very close to presenting their own particular arguments for (other types of) ‘Christianized’ versions of the practice.

Efforts at appropriating mindfulness in the ELCF: logic and justifications

Mindfulness started to become increasingly popular in Finland around the turn of the new millennium. The nutritionist Leena Pennanen, who had studied MBSR in Germany under the direct instruction of Kabat-Zinn, was central to its wider initial popularization (mindfulness.fi). As explored in detail by Ville Husgafvel (2020), the growing popularity of mindfulness in Finland since the early 2000s is reflected in the proliferation of Finnish-language books on the subject along with mindfulness-related blogs, social-media groups

and smartphone apps, as well as recurrent reporting on the practice throughout the mainstream media. As Husgafvel further points out, the popularity of mindfulness across many ‘non-religious’ social and cultural domains (e.g. healthcare, education, the workplace) is mainly attributable to the large number of scientific studies that have now been conducted on its positive health effects, coupled with the fact that the practice is typically communicated and discussed using scientific language and terminology (p. 47).

It is nevertheless only during the past decade or so that efforts to appropriate mindfulness in ELCF settings have become more visible. Overall, these efforts have followed, and continue to follow, a certain ELCF-specific logic that has centred on four closely interlinked and *particular* types of justifications for the appropriation of the practice. These justifications are typically presented in a mutually supporting *combination* with one another and can arguably also be conceived of as ‘requirements’ or ‘preconditions’ that have to be met in order for the appropriation of mindfulness to be viable in ELCF-settings.

First, it has been of essential importance to frame the practice as ‘non-religious’ and ‘universally’ beneficial. Second, there has been a repeated emphasis on the *scientific legitimacy* of the practice. These types of justifications thus directly mirror the types of justifications that Protestant Christians have resorted to as part of their efforts to argue for the appropriation of mindfulness in the past (e.g. Brown 2014; Klassen 2011). The third type of justification, however, has been much more specific to the particular context of Finland and the ELCF as it has centred on highlighting the wide popularity that mindfulness enjoys *across Finnish society and culture at large*, including its proliferation across social institutional

domains such as education, healthcare and business. This particular type of justification is directly related to the enduring ‘folk-church’ ethos of the ELCF, whereby the church expressly strives to maintain what it often describes as a clear ‘presence’ in all areas of social and cultural life that Finnish people in general appear to find important. The fourth, and arguably most significant, type of justification has centred on framing mindfulness as compatible (or at least as not being incompatible) with the core, firmly Lutheran teachings and traditions of the ELCF. It is in relation to this type of justification that various arguments for the *conversion* of the practice to suit ELCF-specific needs have surfaced and efforts been made to create ‘Christianized’ versions of mindfulness that reflect the particular social and cultural position and theological posture of the ELCF.

Mindfulness in ELCF-connected media

In what follows, we proceed to consider how the main justifications outlined above can be identified in light of ELCF media discourse on mindfulness over roughly the past fifteen years. The examples discussed below were found as part of a general mindfulness-focused content analysis of the following ELCF connected media during the years 2009–22: the online version of the newspaper *Kirkko ja kaupunki* (Church and City, the country’s largest ELCF parish paper, both print and online, distributed to church members in the Helsinki metropolitan area), *Diakonia* (a magazine focusing on ELCF diaconal work), and *Kirkkomme Lähetys* (Our Church’s Mission, the official magazine of the ELCF’s Centre for Mission). The content analysis was followed by a qualitative analysis of a smaller set of examples to identify recurring tropes and patterns in ELCF discourse on mindfulness (e.g. Moberg 2022).

The central observation that emerged from our screening and analysis of ELCF media coverage of mindfulness is that it remains marked by a repeated emphasis on the *combination* of the four types of justifications outlined above (as opposed to any other types of justifications that could conceivably be made). These justifications tend not, however, to be emphasized in equal measure. Often, the supposed ‘religiously neutral’ and scientifically validated nature of the practice is simply noted as if these issues were already resolved and thus in no need of any further explanation or elaboration. The same applies to the issue of the wider social and cultural popularity of the practice, which is also repeatedly noted but not necessarily elaborated on in any greater detail. But these three types of justifications nevertheless tend to *precede* (and thus to provide further foundations for) justifications related to theological compatibility, which are nearly always discussed in more detail. In the following, we shall also primarily focus on theological compatibility-related arguments.

Debates on mindfulness in Finnish ELCF-connected media started to intensify following a widely publicized seminar organized by the Church Council (the highest governing body of the ELCF) in Helsinki on February of 2014 under the title ‘Mindfulness is arriving (already arrived) – is the church aware?’ The seminar focused especially on the compatibility of mindfulness with the teachings of the church. Since then, a particularly distinctive trait of ELCF media reporting on mindfulness has been its strong reliance on a certain group of people who could be called ‘ELCF mindfulness experts’. These are ELCF-affiliated people who hold (or have previously held) positions of some authority in the church, who have long argued for the benefits of mindfulness, and who continue to function

as central voices in ongoing debates on the wider appropriation of the practice in ELCF-settings.

The person most frequently interviewed and quoted is Pekka Y. Hiltunen, who has previously worked as an expert on inter-religious dialogue for the Church Council and, since his retirement in 2016, has also functioned as a retreat guide, spiritual counsellor and organizer of ecumenical meditation events. Commenting on the ‘Mindfulness is arriving’ seminar in a 2014 interview for *Kirkko ja kaupunki*, Hiltunen emphasized how the widespread popularity of mindfulness provided one of the main reasons for organizing the seminar in the first place. He went on to state that another important reason was to arrive at some clarity about the question of whether mindfulness should be regarded as a Buddhist practice or not (Ranta 2014).

An earlier text about mindfulness in *Kirkkomme Lähetys* (2013/14), written by Hiltunen himself, opened by stating that numerous scientific studies have been conducted on the benefits of the practice, noting, among other things, that mindfulness has been commonly utilized in training among top athletes, the rehabilitation of prisoners, and the treatment of various addictions. He added that Western adaptations of practices such as mindfulness (along with yoga) are typically completely dislocated and separated from their original religious/spiritual contexts. Having said that, he nevertheless went on to stress the importance of being aware of the kind of mindfulness one is practising:

If the technique, on the other hand, offers answers to fundamental existential questions, then it is already a worldview. A worldview provides answers to questions about what divinity is, what a human being is and

what the world is, and what foundational faults there are in our current ways of life and how to fix these faults.¹ (Hiltunen 2013: 14)

Here, Hiltunen is acknowledging that meditation practices *may* indeed come with their own particular worldview and that this *can* be the case with some forms of mindfulness as well. Hence, it is important to carefully evaluate any ‘worldview’-related aspects of any particular form of the practice.

In yet another 2016 interview for *Kirkko ja kaupunki* entitled ‘Meditation does not save, but is still recommended, says Pekka Y. Hiltunen,’² Hiltunen further elaborated on this theme, arguing that different types of meditation, mindfulness included, can be reconfigured to suit Christian contexts and purposes. As he stated:

What Christianity brings to meditation is that the purpose is not to pursue perfection, enlightenment or even improvement. The goal is to come to terms with oneself, to, in the words of Luther, increase an awareness of sin and grace.³ (Pörsti 2016)

- 1 Finnish original: ‘Jos tekniikka sen sijaan tarjoaa vastauksia olemassaolon peruskysymyksiin, se on jo maailmankatsomus. Maailmankatsomus vastaa kysymyksiin siitä, mitä ovat jumaluus, ihminen ja maailma, mitä perustavaa vikaa on nykyisessä elämänmuodossamme ja mikä on ratkaisu vian korjaamiseksi.’
- 2 Finnish original: ‘Meditointi ei pelasta, mutta kannattaa silti, sanoo Pekka Y. Hiltunen.’
- 3 Finnish original: ‘Kristillisyyys tuo meditaatioon sen, että tarkoituksena ei ole tavoitella täydellisyyttä, valaistumista tai edes kehittymistä. Tavoitteena on tulla sinuiksi itsensä kanssa, Lutherin sanoin lisätä synnin ja armon tuntoa.’

Here, we see a clear articulation of the view that non-Christian forms of meditation, mindfulness included, can be framed within a Christian (or more specifically Lutheran) idiom. In this perspective, mindfulness, along with other forms of meditation, largely take the form of a ‘neutral’ means that can be used to aid conventional Christian, and in this case more specifically *Lutheran*, forms of contemplation and edification. Even though this does not amount to an argument for the outright ‘Christianization’ of the practice, it nevertheless emphasizes the importance of Christian *intent* and viewing the practice through a Lutheran lens (cf. Brown 2015: 11). As such, it provides crucial discursive groundwork for potential future efforts to create a distinctively ‘Christianized’ version of the practice for ELCF use.

Apart from Hiltunen, ELCF media coverage on mindfulness also frequently features interviews with the priest and mindfulness teacher Miia Moisio (formerly Leinonen). In a 2014 article in *Diakonia* entitled ‘What should the Church think about mindfulness?’⁴ that was based on interviews with several ELCF mindfulness experts, Moisio highlighted how the popularity of the practice had grown in a number of fields, such as psychiatry, trauma therapy work, and so on, and that numerous scientific studies have shown it to relieve pain and to help people recover from depression, eating disorders and substance abuse (Unkuri 2014: 20). This, again, illustrates how people who argue for the appropriation of the practice typically emphasize its scientific validity. In addition, Moisio also articulated her view on the relationship between mindfulness and Buddhism,

- 4 Finnish original: ‘Mitä kirkon tulisi ajatella mindfulnessista?’

stating that ‘The roots of mindfulness lie in Zen Buddhist meditation, but it has been stripped of all references to religion, so the practice is non-religious’ (p. 20). Here, then, we see another explicit claim of the inherently ‘non-religious’ nature of the practice.

Another article about mindfulness and Miia Moisio in *Kirkko ja kaupunki* entitled ‘Silence is an opportunity’⁵ went on to state that

In past years, mindfulness has become quite a fashion phenomenon. Literature is available by the shelf-full, courses attract those interested, and the method is used by many therapists. Moisio believes that mindfulness has come to stay.⁶

On a more personal note, in this article Moisio also recounted how her own practice of mindfulness has fundamentally changed her relationship to God: ‘I have certainly been religious since I was fifteen, but now I have become spiritual.⁷ God, Christ and Mother Mary are real to me in a completely different way’⁸ (Halonen 2016). This pro-

vides yet another example of how proponents of the appropriation of mindfulness argue that it can be articulated through a Christian idiom and directly support a distinctively Christian type of spirituality. Like Hiltunen’s views as discussed above, here, too, mindfulness is largely framed as a ‘neutral’ technique that can be used to aid, and indeed also to enhance, already established forms of Christian practice and edification. Although Moisio, like Hiltunen, stops short of arguing for the creation of a distinctively ‘Christianized’ version of the practice, she nevertheless clearly highlights how it can be approached through a Christian lens.

A third expert frequently interviewed and quoted in ELCF media coverage of mindfulness is theologian and post-doctoral researcher Ari Ojell, who has previously worked at the Church Council as an expert on theology and ecumenism. He often serves as an ELCF authority when it comes to how mindfulness should be understood and practised in a specifically Lutheran Christian context. For example, when interviewed for the ‘What should the Church think about mindfulness?’ article in *Diakonia* (2/2014), Ojell argued that mindfulness can very well be practised by Christians, provided that the practice is framed in the right way. As he states: ‘In a theological sense, mindfulness becomes problematic if it is used to seek answers to deep personal religious-existential questions’⁹ (Unkuri 2014: 21). But, as he went on to argue, while mindfulness does not by and of itself provide answers to such

minusta on tullut hengellinen. Jumala, Kristus ja äiti-Maria ovat minulle ihan toisella tavalla todellisia.’

- 5 Finnish original: ‘Hiljaisuus on mahdollisuus.’
- 6 Finnish original: ‘Mindfulness on muuttaman viime vuoden aikana nousut melkoiseksi muoti-ilmiöksi. Kirjallisuutta on tarjolla hyllymetreittäin, kurssit vetävät kiinnostuneita ja menetelmää käyttävät apunaan myös monet terapeutit. Moisio uskoo, että mindfulness on tullut jäädäkseen.’
- 7 The Finnish words ‘hengellinen’ and ‘henkinen’ both translate as ‘spiritual’. However, the former is mainly used to refer to Christian forms of spirituality, whereas the latter is mainly used to refer to what is commonly regarded as ‘alternative spirituality’. Notably, Moisio uses the former rather than the latter.
- 8 Finnish original: ‘Olen ollut kyllä uskova vainen 15-vuotiaasta saakka, mutta nyt

- 9 Finnish original: ‘Teologisessa mielessä mindfulness muuttuu ongelmalliseksi, jos sillä haetaan vastauksia henkilön syviin uskonnollis-eksistenttisiin kysymyksiin.’

questions, it can nevertheless be of much help in bringing calm and peace and to enhance acceptance of oneself. In this context, mindfulness might even function as an initial step in exploring Christian faith:

In a Christian sense, a person sees themselves in the same light in which God sees them every moment. The method can therefore be used as a spiritual means to arrive at an inner meeting place with a merciful God. From here, the real spiritual journey can begin.¹⁰ (Unkuri 2014: 21)

This argument about integrating mindfulness as part of a distinctively Christian life bears many similarities to the arguments presented by Hiltunen and Moisio above. Here, mindfulness is framed as something that, so to speak, can aid in ‘preparing’ an individual for what is framed as the ‘real’ (i.e. Christian) religious journey (Unkuri 2014: 21). Indeed, in a manner similar to both Hiltunen and Moisio above, Ojell seems to argue that Christianity is able to add purpose and deeper meaning to a technique that, albeit highly useful, is not able to provide these on its own. This, then, provides yet another type of discursive groundwork for potential future efforts at a firmer ‘Christianization’ of the practice.

As the above excerpts from ELCF media coverage on mindfulness illustrate, ELCF mindfulness experts frequently interviewed about the practice repeatedly highlight its ‘non-religious’ character, the fact

10 Finnish original: ‘Kristillisesti ajateltuna henkilö näkee itsensä siinä valossa, jossa Jumala hänet joka hetki näkee. Menetelmää voidaan siis käyttää henkisenä keinona saapua ihmisen sisäiseen kohtaamispaikkaan armollisen Jumalan kanssa. Tästä voi alkaa varsinainen hengellinen matka.’

that it has been widely scientifically validated, and that the practice enjoys wide popularity across Finnish society and culture as a whole (even though none of these justifications are evident in the quotations provided above). While they differ somewhat when it comes to how they approach the question of whether mindfulness should be regarded as theologically compatible with the teachings of the church, they still all provide examples of how the practice could complement and aid already established Christian practice. And while they rarely make explicit calls for the creation of distinctively ‘Christianized’ versions of the practice, they nevertheless provide an important discursive groundwork for the potential future creation of ELCF-adapted versions. But there is also clearly a sense in which framing mindfulness as providing a ‘complement’ to already established ELCF practices could be viewed as a form of ‘semi-Christianization’ of the practice. This is because, although no specific arguments are made for *particular* ways of ‘Christianizing’ the practice, there is nevertheless a repeated emphasis on the necessity to view the practice through the prism of Lutheran Christianity.

Mindfulness in Finnish BA theses in diaconal work

The most detailed arguments in favour of the potential and actual appropriation of mindfulness in ELCF settings, including the explicit creation of ‘Christianized’ versions of the practice, can be found in BA theses in diaconal work. These theses were found through the database Diak-Finna of the Diaconia University of Applied Sciences. To date, altogether fifteen BA theses have been written at the university that deal with mindfulness and its practical applications in one way or another. Among these, five were written with a specialization

in social services and diaconal work while the remaining eleven were written in other fields of specialization. On the basis of the content of the five theses in the former category, we singled out two that provide particularly detailed arguments (one more intellectually and the other more practically oriented) on how to approach the practice of mindfulness in ELCF settings and convert it for ELCF-specific needs, authored by Tuuli Laitinen (2009) and Fiinu Seppä (2014) respectively.

Laitinen's thesis (2009) 'Mindfulnessmenetelmä sosiaali- ja kirkon alan työntekijöiden työssä jaksamisen tukena' (The method of mindfulness in supporting well-being at work among Church employees) was one of the first to focus on the case of mindfulness in its particular field. It mainly provides an analysis of already existing mindfulness practices and their potential integration into ELCF-settings. Data were gathered by interviewing three mindfulness instructors as well as through the distribution of a questionnaire handed out to fourteen people who had participated in a mindfulness workshop at their workplace. The people surveyed consisted of social workers, psychiatric nurses, diaconal nurses and medical doctors. On the basis of these results, Laitinen sets out to further explore the potential of mindfulness to aid the work of various types of ELCF employees specifically.

In her description of mindfulness, Laitinen notes its 'Zen Buddhist origins' but then immediately points out that such teachings are absent in contemporary forms of mindfulness, which lack any spiritual or religious aspects or elements (Laitinen 2009: 14). Having discussed Kabat-Zinn's development of a 'non-religious' form of mindfulness, she goes on to devote a couple of pages to highlighting how the benefits of the practice have been

proved by numerous scientific studies (pp. 19–20). She also emphasizes it is widely established throughout Finnish society and culture, noting, for example, that the word 'mindfulness' has become part of colloquial Finnish vocabulary (p. 11). Her thesis thus explicitly speaks to three of the main justifications outlined above: the practice is framed as inherently 'non-religious'; its wide scientific validation is discussed in detail; and its popularity and establishment across Finnish society and culture as a whole is emphasized. Theological compatibility-related questions are, however, mainly evaded by framing mindfulness as a 'religiously neutral' technique that can be used to supplement already established and elaborated forms of Christian meditation and contemplation. Like ELCF mindfulness experts in ELCF media as discussed above, Laitinen therefore mainly limits herself to arguing that mindfulness can aid and supplement already established Christian forms of meditation, contemplation and prayer (p. 32). But as noted above, there is clearly a sense in which such arguments can be viewed as a type of 'semi-Christianization' of the practice in that such arguments tend to emphasize the importance of approaching mindfulness through a Christian (and more specifically Lutheran) lens.

The aim of Seppä's thesis (2014) 'Tietöisen läsnäolon opas kirkon työntekijöille' (A guide to mindfulness for church employees) is, as the title suggests, to develop a practical guide and actual manual for how mindfulness can be applied within a Christian, and more specifically ELCF-related, framework. A pilot version of the manual was handed out to a test group of seven church employees, who tried it out for themselves as part of their pastoral care. On the basis of the feedback received from the test group, Seppä created her final

version of the manual, which forms the last part of her thesis.

The Buddhist roots of mindfulness are discussed at several points in the thesis. For example, in the English-language abstract Seppä writes that ‘Mindfulness is based on Buddhism, but nowadays it is also used as a method in psychotherapy without any religiousness’. Referring to Kabat-Zinn, she then goes on to argue that mindfulness does not force any ideology upon its practitioner (Seppä 2014: 4, 9–10). She is therefore careful to frame mindfulness as a technique that has become firmly separated from its originally Buddhist context, that it is to be regarded as a completely ‘non-religious’ practice, and that her own practical manual is specifically developed for the use of mindfulness in distinctively Christian settings (p. 30). The fact that mindfulness is framed as not including any religious content of its own therefore makes it theologically compatible with Christian life and practice. Indeed, the ‘non-religious’ nature of the practice is presented as a crucial *pre-condition* for its appropriation and *conversion* for Christian use. In addition to the ‘religion aspect’, the scientific validity of mindfulness, its widespread employment in areas such as healthcare and therapy, and its popularity across Finnish society and culture as a whole are also highlighted at several points in the thesis (pp. 5, 16).

Like previous efforts to ‘Christianize’ mindfulness as discussed above, in Seppä’s model, the practice is expressly infused with a recognizably Christian verbal and visual repertoire. For example, it includes a selection of Bible passages, psalms and Christian music deemed suitable for Christian mindfulness sessions (Seppä 2014: 43–6). In addition, it also includes a particular breathing exercise during which the instructor should read the following passage to participants:

I breathe in the love of God.
I am present in this moment.
This moment is unique.
I am in front of God as myself.¹¹
(Seppä 2014: 31)

By being framed within a particular and recognizable Christian idiom, the purpose of this exercise is thus to prime practitioners to engage in the exercise with a certain mindset and to view it as part of distinctively Christian practice.

In addition to breathing, Seppä’s manual also includes an additional exercise of mindful eating, which Kabat-Zinn also promoted in ‘non-religious’ form. Mindful eating exercises exist in many different varieties and have been developed for various purposes, both clinical and personal (e.g. Albers 2010; Warren *et al.* 2017). This exercise is likewise explicitly framed within a Christian idiom. When doing the exercise, participants are supposed to slowly eat a biscuit while simultaneously contemplating God’s creation. The following text, it is proposed, should be read out loud to participants:

God has created the world that is full of different smells and tastes. He has also given us senses with which we can perceive the world around us and enjoy it here and now.¹² (Seppä 2014: 35)

11 Finnish original: ‘Hengitän sisään Jumalan rakkautta. Olen läsnä tässä hetkessä. Tämä hetki on ainutkertainen. Olen Jumalan edessä omana itsenäni.’

12 Finnish original: ‘Jumala on luonut maailman, joka on täynnä erilaisia tuoksuja ja makuja. Hän on myös antanut meille aistit, joilla voimme havainnoida ympäröivää maailmaa ja nauttia siitä tässä ja nyt.’

In sum, the two BA theses discussed above both draw on all four of the particular types of justifications that are also typically marshalled in favour of appropriating mindfulness in ELCF-connected media, as outlined above: the practice is explicitly framed as ‘non-religious’ (and expressly dissociated from Buddhism); its scientific validity is emphasized; and its wide popularity across Finnish society and culture is underlined. While Laitinen’s thesis is primarily aimed at arguing for the compatibility between mindfulness and the core theological teachings of the ELCF, Seppäs’ thesis also outlines several specific ways in which mindfulness can be *converted* for distinctively Christian use, thus providing an explicit argument in favour of the direct ‘Christianization’ of the practice in ELCF-settings.

Concluding remarks

This article has considered how the concept of ‘appropriation’ can be understood and applied in religion-related contexts in light of previous efforts aimed at the appropriation of mindfulness among Protestant Christians, with a special focus on the specific ecclesiastical context of the ELCF. As illustrated by the content of ELCF media coverage and two BA theses in diaconal work, ELCF debates on mindfulness are marked by a repeated emphasis on four particular types of justification for the appropriation of the practice. Although these justifications differ in relative importance, they typically figure in direct *combination* with one another. This *particular* combination of justifications has become established to such an extent that it has largely come to govern ELCF debates on mindfulness more generally.

As our discussion shows, both ELCF media ‘mindfulness experts’ and the authors of the BA theses typically frame

mindfulness as a ‘religiously neutral’ and widely scientifically validated technique that enjoys wide popularity across Finnish society and culture as a whole, and that can be used to aid and enhance already established Christian, and more specifically Lutheran, practice. In a type of argument frequently made by ELCF mindfulness experts in ELCF media, Christianity *adds* deeper meaning to the practice, which is otherwise frequently framed as being devoid of any particular meaning on its own. Other arguments, most notably those presented in the two BA theses discussed, take a significant step further in that they argue for the compatibility of mindfulness with the already established practices of the ELCF or strive to create distinctively Christian forms of mindfulness. In both cases, the practice is explicitly framed and understood through a Christian lens.

Does ‘appropriation’ provide the most heuristically suitable term for conceptualizing and understanding previous and ongoing efforts at ‘taking possession of’ mindfulness within the ELCF? As noted above, when determining whether something should be regarded as constituting appropriation proper (as opposed to e.g. ‘borrowing’), we always need to consider a combination of multiple factors (i.e. *what* is being appropriated from *who*, by *who*, *how*, *why*, and with *what consequences*).

In the case of the ELCF and mindfulness, the ‘what’ consists of an internationally established, increasingly malleable, and ostensibly ‘religiously neutral’ meditation practice with roots in Buddhism. The ‘who’ consists of people who hold, have previously held, or will likely hold various types of formal positions in the ELCF and who thus participate in ELCF debates on mindfulness as representatives of that particular religious entity rather than as individuals. As to the question of ‘how’, people

who argue in favour of ‘taking possession’ of mindfulness typically justify it by highlighting its ‘religiously neutral’ character, scientifically proven benefits, wide popularity across Finnish society and culture as a whole, and compatibility with the core teachings of Protestant Christianity, and more specifically the Lutheranism of the ELCF. These justifications are typically connected with arguments that either emphasize the ways in which mindfulness can augment already established ELCF practices (ELCF media) or how the practice can be directly *converted* for Christian, and more specifically ELCF-related, use (BA theses, especially Seppä). The ‘why’ question is somewhat more complicated. On the one hand, the wide popularity of mindfulness across Finnish society and culture provides additional ELCF-specific arguments for the appropriation of this *particular* practice (as opposed to some other form of meditation). But on the other hand, those who argue in favour of the practice obviously genuinely believe that it can actually provide a valuable complement to already established ELCF practices in the areas of pastoral care, youth work, edification, and so on.

Lastly, as to the question of consequences and the potential offence and/or harm caused, there is no denying that ELCF debates on mindfulness are marked by a near-total absence of any ethical considerations relating to whether the practice should be seen as the property of Eastern or Buddhist cultures and/or interlinked with their traditions. The main concern is *not* whether the appropriation of mindfulness might cause harm or offence to other cultures (or anyone else for that matter), but rather whether its appropriation might either work to erode or augment the ELCF’s *own* religious teachings, practices and traditions. Having said this, we also need to recognize that people who argue for the

appropriation of the practice within the ELCF would probably resist viewing their efforts in such a light. They might, for example, instead argue that, since mindfulness has already become so widely appropriated for ‘non-religious’ use across so many areas of social and cultural life, the practice has long since ceased to be the ‘property’ of anyone in particular. Even so, considering the near-total lack of consideration of any potential offence and/or harm caused, coupled with a repeated emphasis on viewing the practice through a Christian lens (including, in some cases, the direct conversion of the practice to suit Christian needs), we would argue that ‘appropriation’ provides a heuristically sound way of approaching the growing presence of mindfulness in ELCF settings over roughly the past decade. We would consequently also argue that the case of mindfulness and the ELCF provides an illustrative example of what we have labelled ‘appropriation of religion *into* religion’ within the context of a particular ecclesiastical and religious-organizational setting.

By identifying and illustrating the particular ‘justification logic’ that has governed efforts to appropriate mindfulness in ELCF settings, this article has provided future scholarship on similar developments in other national and ecclesiastical settings with a point of comparison. Future research will need to determine the extent to which this particular logic can also be found elsewhere or whether it is specific to the ELCF. To the extent that a similar logic can indeed be found elsewhere, future research could usefully also explore whether it also applies to efforts to appropriate other types or ‘Eastern’ meditation practices, such as, most notably, yoga. ■

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