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Angel Spirituality in the World's Happiest Country: The Attraction of Lorna Byrne among Finnish Women

Abstract:

This article discusses how women in Finland, the happiest country in the world in 2019, use new spiritual services and angels to cope with everyday life. Should not the high living standard and level of happiness decrease spirituality, as Norris and Inglehart suggest? The research material was collected using questionnaires in talks given by Irish mystic Lorna Byrne in Helsinki in 2011 and 2015. For the women studied, angels offer support and bring enchantment to their lives in a way institutionalized religion does not. While the high level of existential security decreases their religiousness, it opens these women up to other alternatives for new spirituality.

Keywords: Lorna Byrne; Finnish women; new spirituality; lived religion; angel belief

## 1. Introduction

Despite the size of the event, the atmosphere in the hall is somehow quiet compared to the noise of the lobby. Lorna Byrne is dressed modestly and speaks in a quiet and peaceful voice. The questions seem familiar; the answers to the audience's questions are diplomatic, cautious. At times, she smiles and says that the space is filled with angels, bright and mighty beings. It is difficult to describe their colors and shapes. The interviewer is a little bit clumsy, speaking when Byrne is speaking and steering the discussion too.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elisa Mikkola, Field Journal, 29 October 2011 (Helsinki). Translation by author.

My article discusses how women in Finland incorporate traditional figures, angels, and angel practices in their new spiritual practices. The article covers their background and the use of diverse spiritual services. The aim is to answer the question of why women in Finland, the world's happiest country, turn to angels in everyday life. I answer the question with the help of quantitative and qualitative data collected during Lorna Byrne's angel events in Helsinki.

The *World Happiness Report* (2019) rated Finland the happiest country in the world in 2019 for the third consecutive year before Denmark, Norway, Iceland, and The Netherlands.<sup>2</sup> One hundred and fifty-six countries are listed according to six wellbeing variables: GDP per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity, and freedom from corruption.<sup>3</sup>

Lorna Byrne, an Irish mystic, has visited Finland five times and lectured on angels to enthusiastic audiences in various locations. In one of the most affluent countries in the world, Finland, angel events draw hundreds of women to listen to a tiny, softly speaking woman who claims to see angels. Somehow, this seems to be in contradiction with the existential security thesis, created by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, which claims that a higher degree of existential security and improved material conditions will lead to a declining religiousness on the macro and micro levels.<sup>4</sup>

Historically, Finland is a dominantly Lutheran society; according to 2018 statistics, 69.7% of the population of 5.52 million people are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF).<sup>5</sup> Despite the high membership rate, the vast majority of Finns are

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<sup>2</sup> Kyu Lee, "Finland Again is the Happiest Country in the World," in: John Helliwell et al. (eds.), *World Happiness Report* (New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2020), 20 March 2019. <https://worldhappiness.report/news/finland-again-is-the-happiest-country-in-the-world/> (accessed 5 April 2019).

<sup>3</sup> John F. Helliwell, Haifang Huang, & Shun Wang, "Changing World Happiness," in: John Helliwell et al. (eds.), *World Happiness Report* (New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2020), 20 March 2019. <https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2019/changing-world-happiness/> (accessed 5 April 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Pippa Norris & Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011 [2004]). <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/sacred-and-secular/056FE6F6775E313545F664F63CC392F3> (accessed 15 December 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Suomen evankelis-luterilainen kirkko, "Seurakunnat tilastoivat työtään." <https://evl.fi/tietoa-kirkosta/tilastotietoa#e9e3cdd3> (accessed 10 July 2019); Tilastokeskus, "Suomen ennakkoväkiluku marraskuun lopussa 5 522 015," 21 December 2018. [http://www.stat.fi/til/vamuu/2018/11/vamuu\\_2018\\_11\\_2018-12-21\\_tie\\_001\\_fi.html](http://www.stat.fi/til/vamuu/2018/11/vamuu_2018_11_2018-12-21_tie_001_fi.html) (accessed 18 January 2019).

moderate believers and are rarely involved in church activities.<sup>6</sup> In spite of the low level of activity, Finns seem to believe in belonging.<sup>7</sup>

New religions and spiritualities have been present in Finland since the late nineteenth century when Theosophy, combining Western and Eastern ideas, arrived in Finland. In the 1960s and the 1970s, Eastern religions and New Age views spread in Finland, and, parallel to the interest in Eastern religions and alternative spirituality, the interest in Charismatic and Neo-charismatic Christianity grew. These new forms of religiosity and their different values and rituals seem to provide a spiritual environment that emotionally and ritually corresponds to women's everyday needs.<sup>8</sup>

According to the *Church Monitor* survey in 2007, 46% of Finns firmly believe in the existence of angels or consider them probable, and, in all age groups, women believe almost twice as much in angels as men.<sup>9</sup> According to the four-year review, from 2012–2015, of the ELCF, 47% of respondents to the Gallup Ecclesiastica survey firmly believe or believe that angels exist.<sup>10</sup> Of the respondents, 34% believe in the existence of Satan and 33% in a Christian God.<sup>11</sup> Angel belief remains steady—angels are doing well.

Angels are a part of the traditional religious imagery in Christmas cards and guardian angel images. Angels are portrayed in art, architecture, and popular culture, and this familiarity facilitates their use in new spirituality as well as commercial exploitation. Angels' advice can be sought by using oracle cards or angel therapists, and they are a part of the entertainment industry. Angels are also part of folk religion and are related to the struggle

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<sup>6</sup> Kimmo Ketola, "Suomalaisten uskonnollisuus," in: idem et al. (eds.), *Uskonto suomalaisten elämässä: Uskonnollinen kasvatus, moraali, onnellisuus ja suvaitsevaisuus kansainvälisessä vertailussa* (Tampere: Yhteiskuntatieteellinen tietokirjasto, 2011), 7–24, at 18, 23.

<sup>7</sup> Kati Niemelä, "'No Longer Believing in Belonging': A Longitudinal Study of Finnish Generation Y from Confirmation Experience to Church-leaving," *Social Compass* 62/2 (2015), 172–186.

<sup>8</sup> Terhi Utriainen, Päivi Salmesvuori, & Helena Kupari, "Introduction: Critical and Creative Turns," in: Terhi Utriainen & Päivi Salmesvuori (eds.), *Finnish Women Making Religion: Between Ancestors and Angels* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1–17, at 7–9.

<sup>9</sup> Finnish Social Science Archive, "FSD2833 Church Monitor 2007."

[https://services.fsd.uta.fi/catalogue/FSD2833?study\\_language=en&lang=en](https://services.fsd.uta.fi/catalogue/FSD2833?study_language=en&lang=en) (accessed 15 December 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Gallup Ecclesiastica is a survey that was conducted by Taloustutkimus from 23 October to 2 November 2015 for the Church Research Center. Participants in the survey included 4,275 Finns age 15–79. Kimmo Ketola et al. (eds.), *Osallistuva luterilaisuus. Suomen evankelis-luterilainen kirkko vuosina 2012–2015: Tutkimus kirkosta ja suomalaisista*. Kirkon tutkimuskeskuksen julkaisuja 125 (Kuopio: Grano Oy, 2016), 263.

<sup>11</sup> Kimmo Ketola, "Luterilainen usko nykyajan Suomessa," in: idem et al. (eds.), *Osallistuva luterilaisuus. Suomen evankelis-luterilainen kirkko vuosina 2012–2015: Tutkimus kirkosta ja suomalaisista*. Kirkon tutkimuskeskuksen julkaisuja 125 (Kuopio: Grano Oy, 2016), 47–87, at 52, 65.

against evil in the home country and abroad.<sup>12</sup> Angels are an interesting subject of research as modern hybrids, border-crossers, and border-markers between traditional and new spirituality.<sup>13</sup>

International angel research is manifold, and, in recent years, angels are studied as part of modern, changing religiousness, e.g., from the point of view of folk religion, in the framework of commercialization and secularization, or in the investigation of the death.<sup>14</sup> In Finland, angels are approached mainly by ethnographic perspectives.<sup>15</sup> Angels appear also in the study of the supernatural and in otherworldly experiences or in research of New Age entrepreneurship.<sup>16</sup> The Church Research Center collects survey data covering the whole population including questions about spirituality. My research combines survey data with ethnographic data and participatory observation in Byrne's events.

In my article, I ask why Finnish women turn to angels in everyday life. I begin with the theoretical background, data, and research material. Next, I introduce Byrne and her events in Finland, followed by the results of the research. In the end, I discuss these in the Finnish context.

## 2. Theoretical Background

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Gardella, *American Angels: Useful Spirits in the Material World* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, "Angels in Norway: Religious Border-crossers and Border-markers," in: Marion Bowman & Ulo Valk (eds.), *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012), 230–245, at 231.

<sup>14</sup> Regarding folk religion, see Scott Draper & Joseph O. Baker, "Angelic Belief as American Folk Religion," *Sociological Forum* 26/3 (2011), 623–643; Terhi Utriainen, "Modernin kansanuskon enkelit," in: Pasi Enges & Kirsi Hänninen (eds.), *Hirvityksiä, haamuja ja henkioppaita: Kirjoituksia uskomusolennoista*. Folkloristiikan julkaisuja 5: Turun yliopisto (Turku: Grano, 2019), 172–197. For commercialization and secularization, see Jeremy R. Carrette & Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2005); Gardella, *American*. Regarding angels in the context of death, see Tony Walter, "Angels, Not Souls: Popular Religion in the Online Mourning of British Celebrity Jade Goody," *Religion* 41/1 (2011), 29–51.

<sup>15</sup> E.g., Terhi Utriainen, "Combining Christianity and New Age Spirituality: Angel Relations in Finland," in: James R. Lewis & Inga B. Tøllefsen (eds.), *Handbook of Nordic New Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 158–172.

<sup>16</sup> Regarding the supernatural, see Jeena Rancken, *Yliluonnollinen kokemus: Tulkinta, merkitys ja vaikutus* (Tampere: Vastapaino, 2017). For research on otherworldly experiences, see Marja-Liisa Honkasalo, et al., *Mielen rajoilla: Arjen kummat kokemukset* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2017). On New Age entrepreneurship, see Katriina Hulkkonen, "Kanavointi ja jakautunut yrittäjäyys: New Age -henkisyiden ja yrittäjäyden yhdistämisen rajat ja mahdollisuudet," *Elore* 24/1 (2017), 1–20.

The Finnish religious landscape has changed since the beginning of the twenty-first century: secularization, privatization, mediatization, and multiculturalism have influenced traditional, institutional religion and created new forms of religion and spirituality. Privatization, selectivity, and the use of spiritual services combine individualistic spirituality with modern consumerism.

The modernization process has changed religion, and the relationship between religiousness, and existential security has been presented as one explanatory factor for the change. Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart's existential security thesis is based on comparative cross-national research on religion, human development, and value-change. They claim that a higher degree of existential security and improved material conditions will lead to declining religiousness on the macro and micro levels.<sup>17</sup>

The existential security thesis has been criticized, e.g., for using only quantitative data and ignoring the positive aspects of religion.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, Norris and Inglehart also state that in secularized and affluent post-industrial societies, where the support for institutionalized religion and religious practices is declining, there is a growing interest in spiritual concerns, and people are turning to private or individualized spirituality and looking for the meaning and the purpose of life.<sup>19</sup>

Franz Höllinger and Johanna Muckenhuber have repeated Norris and Inglehart's study using the results of the World Value Survey (2010–2014). Their results show, as do previous studies, that better living conditions and lower level religiousness have a very strong correlation on a macro level. However, contrary to Norris and Inglehart's results, they conclude that life conditions and threatening experiences only slightly impact individual religiousness. Social and cultural milieus determine individual religiousness more so than difficulties in life, and, based on this, the authors challenge the existential theory on the individual level.<sup>20</sup>

My work is related to the discourse on lived religion, which emphasizes everyday experience and practices, not the theological or institutional contents of faith. Diversification

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<sup>17</sup> Norris & Inglehart, *Sacred*.

<sup>18</sup> For Norris and Inglehart's response to the critique see, "Are High Levels of Existential Security Conducive to Secularization? A Response to Our Critics." in: Stanley D. Brunn (ed.), *The Changing World Religion Map*. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015), 3389-3408. [https://doi:10.1007/978-94-017-9376-6\\_177](https://doi:10.1007/978-94-017-9376-6_177) (accessed 20 December 2019).

<sup>19</sup> Norris & Inglehart, *Sacred*, 74–75.

<sup>20</sup> Franz Höllinger & Johanna Muckenhuber, "Religiousness and Existential Insecurity: A Cross-national Comparative Analysis on the Macro- and Micro-level," *International Sociology* 34/1 (2019), 19–37.

of spirituality and new manifestations are visible both in the fields of institutionalized religion and alternative spirituality.<sup>21</sup> New spirituality offers, especially for women, the opportunity to create new forms of spirituality based on one's own needs and expectations, which institutionalized religion cannot do, from this perspective.<sup>22</sup> Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead call new spirituality a subjective turn, a spiritual revolution, in which one's own inner life and well-being are more important than the demands of institutional religion. New spirituality is thus linked with the new health and well-being culture.<sup>23</sup>

Angel spirituality can be studied as practices of enchantment that is well suited to a modern secular world.<sup>24</sup> Enchantment includes both serious and playful ideas, rituals, and practices that enrich everyday life. One practice of enchantment is portraying an invisible reality.<sup>25</sup> Enchantment is surprising, a little scary, including encountering something unexpected. On the one hand, the encounter is exciting and pleasant, but, on the other hand, it is also uncanny and takes the experiencer out of his/her comfort zone and offers a feeling of fullness and enthusiasm.<sup>26</sup> Enchantment can be associated with the new subjectivization; external authorities are losing their importance, and people are creating their spirituality based on their own experiences, emotions, and opinions.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Nancy T. Ammerman, "Introduction: Observing Religious Modern Lives," in: idem (ed.), *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1–18; Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Penny Edgell, "A Cultural Sociology of Religion: New Directions," *Annual Review of Sociology* 38/1 (2012), 247–265; Leonard Norman Primiano, "Manifestations of the Religious Vernacular: Ambiguity, Power, and Creativity," in: Marion Bowman & Ulo Valk (eds.), *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2014), 382–394.

<sup>22</sup> Linda Woodhead, "Why So Many Women in Holistic Spirituality? A Puzzle Revisited," in: Kieran Flanagan & Peter C. Jupp (eds.), *A Sociology of Spirituality* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 115–125.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Heelas & Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005).

<sup>24</sup> Christopher Partridge, "Occulture and Everyday Enchantment," in: James R. Lewis & Inga B. Tøllefsen (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 315–333; Terhi Utriainen, "Enkeliuskon lumo," in: *Kiistelty usko: Kirkon tutkimuskeskuksen seminaari 10.3.2014 Tampere-talossa*. Kirkon tutkimuskeskuksen verkkojulkaisu 36 (2014), 34–42. <https://evl.fi/documents/1327140/45386794/Kiistelty+usko+36.pdf/d907d054-bd81-da20-cb45-c4e0c4b21809> (accessed 18 October 2018).

<sup>25</sup> Terhi Utriainen, *Enkeleitä työpöydällä: Arjen ja lumon etnografiaa*. Tietolipas 257 (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2017), 253–254.

<sup>26</sup> Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 3–4.

<sup>27</sup> Partridge, "Occulture," 318.

### 3. Data and Research Material

The quantitative data of the article consists of two inquiries conducted for the participants of Byrne's events in Helsinki in 2011 and 2015.<sup>28</sup> In 2015 and 2017, I worked as a volunteer in Helsinki and Jyväskylä, collecting ethnographic material and making participatory observations. As a middle-aged, well-educated woman, I did not stand out from the audience. The qualitative data was completed with the interviews of FreeFlowFactory's representatives.<sup>29</sup>

In 2011, 1,100 people participated in the event in Messukeskus, and 263 participants filled out the questionnaire: 248 women (94.3%) and fifteen men (5.7%). In 2015, 800 people participated in the event in Paasitorni, and 189 answered: 176 women (93.1%) and thirteen men (6.9%). Most of the respondents (93.8%) were female, which indicates that they are more interested in angel spirituality than men are. The response rate on both occasions was nearly 24%, indicating that people were willing to share their experiences. However, the number of male respondents was somewhat lower than their estimated share of the participants.<sup>30</sup> Also, the overall positivity of the answers raises the question of whether the sceptics or participants with more negative attitudes left the questionnaire unanswered as only nine people out of 452 expressed their disappointment with the event.<sup>31</sup>

The questionnaire had a total of twenty-two questions on: (a) background information; (b) spirituality and religion; (c) angel perception and experiences; and (d) reasons for participating in Byrne's event and what they received from the event. The form included information about the aims of the research and the contact information of the researchers. The questionnaire was distributed to the chairs in the hall before the start of the event, so all participants in the event had the opportunity to respond to it at the event, by mail, or by email.

The questionnaire consisted of two types of questions: eight fixed-choice questions, which could be directly coded and used as variables, and fourteen open-ended questions,

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<sup>28</sup> The first inquiry was conducted to provide background information for Terhi Utriainen's ethnography: see Terhi Utriainen, "Angels in Finland," survey (n=263) (Helsinki: Lorna Byrne's event, 29 October 2011). See also Elisa Mikkola, "Angels in Finland," survey (n=189) (Helsinki: Lorna Byrne's event, 7 November 2015).

<sup>29</sup> FreeFlowFactory is the producer of Byrne's events in Finland. See FreeFlowFactory. [www.FreeFlowFactory.com](http://www.FreeFlowFactory.com) (accessed 18 April 2017).

<sup>30</sup> Mikkola, *Field Journal*, 29 October 2011; idem, *Field Journal*, 22 November 2017 (Jyväskylä).

<sup>31</sup> They mentioned minor issues: four said they received nothing new compared to the previous event or books, four complained about the interpretation, and one person (working on mental health services) brought up Byrne's mental health.

which were coded to variables through categorization.<sup>32</sup> In the process, the participants' responses changed from text to numbers, classes, and variables. The coding resembled the material-based content analysis: the material was processed through reduction and grouping, and the concept creation and the material was approached on its own terms.<sup>33</sup>

The questionnaire set limits on the interpretation of the material. At the event, respondents had limited time to think about their answers. The wording of the questions and the examples given may have guided the respondents to answer in a certain way. Grouping and coding open answers is often—especially for difficult-to-perceive things like angel experiences and perceptions—difficult and subjective, and the same answer may fall into a different category at different coding times.

In the preliminary statistical analysis, I examined the connection of background data with other variables to find out which of them would cause differences concerning angel experience, self-image, the use of spiritual services, and participation in the event.<sup>34</sup> Surprisingly, only membership in the religious community explained differences in the participation of spiritual events and self-identification. Anyhow, membership in the religious community caused no differences in angel experience or participation in Byrne's event. None of the other background variables had any explanatory value.

The results of the surveys do not represent all Finns, but they can be compared with other studies with the same type of questions and target groups, e.g., the Gallup Ecclesiastica (2011) and the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) (2018).<sup>35</sup>

#### **4. Byrne's Background and Events in Finland**

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<sup>32</sup> Fixed choice questions include background variables: age, sex, profession, education, marital status, place of residence, membership in the religious community, and a question about self-identity. For some questions, the participants could choose several options, and, consequently, the number of answers (n) and the number of respondents may differ for these questions.

<sup>33</sup> Juliet M. Corbin & Anselm L. Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2008), 65–86.

<sup>34</sup> Statistical analysis was done using SPSS software (version 24.0, 2017), and the  $\chi^2$ -test was used to search for differences.

<sup>35</sup> See, respectively, Kimmo Ketola, *Haastettu kirkko: Suomen evankelis-luterilainen kirkko vuosina 2008–2011*. Kirkon tutkimuskeskuksen julkaisuja 115 (Porvoo: Bookwell Oy, 2012); idem, "Nuorten aikuisten suhde uskontoon muuttuu herkimmin," Raportti ISSP 2018 kyselystä / Kirkon tutkimuskeskuksen 50-vuotisjuhlaseminaari, 13 March 2019. [https://evl.fi/documents/1327140/49652598/issp2018\\_raportti.pdf](https://evl.fi/documents/1327140/49652598/issp2018_raportti.pdf) (accessed 15 March 2019).



Irish Lorna Byrne is one of the internationally well-known women who claims to see and communicate with angels. In addition to Byrne, Doreen Virtue (USA), Diane Cooper (UK), and Maria Zawou (Greece) are working at the crossroads of Christianity and new spirituality.<sup>36</sup> Byrne claims to have seen angels since childhood, other women after crises of life. Their message combines the idea, how, despite human shortcomings, (guardian) angels love people without any reservation. Their books resemble self-help guides that provide advice and empowerment. Famous Finnish women who maintain that they have worked with angels include singer Kirsi Ranto and actor Manuela Bosco, who have shared their own angel experiences with the media.

According to Byrne's website, she was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1953 in a poor working-class family. She communicated with angels before learning to speak, and she was labeled "retarded" due to the lack of interest in her surroundings. When she was a child, angels allegedly told her that one day she would write a book about them, which was highly unlikely due to her dyslexia. In 2003, Byrne began to write her first book with the help of friends, and it was published in May 2008 in the UK and Ireland. *Angels In My Hair* turned out to be an international bestseller.<sup>37</sup> Her books have been translated into thirty languages.<sup>38</sup>

Finnish women's magazines and newspapers have published numerous interviews with Byrne. Otava Publishing Company Ltd., a major Finnish publishing house, published Byrne's books in Finland shortly after their publication in the UK.<sup>39</sup> Byrne's books have also been non-fiction bestsellers in Finland, and, by 2017, they had sold over 150,000 copies.<sup>40</sup>

FreeFlowFactory (FFF), founded by Catarina Degerman and Uma Kangas, has organized five events for Byrne in Finland between 2011 and 2017. In November 2017, the Touch of Angels Tour extended from Helsinki to smaller towns. The event scheduled for March 2020 was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the organizers, the

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<sup>36</sup> Virtue had a vision of Jesus on 7 January 2017, left her New Age beliefs, and converted to Christianity. Doreen Virtue, "About Doreen Virtue." <http://doreenvirtue.com/about/> (accessed 3 December 2018).

<sup>37</sup> Lorna Byrne, "Lorna's Background." <https://lornabyrne.com/about-lorna-byrne/> (assessed 15 December 2018).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., "International Editions." <https://lornabyrne.com/international-editions/> (accessed 10 January 2019).

<sup>39</sup> *Angels in my Hair* (2008)/*Enkeleitä hiuksissani* (2009); *Stairways to Heaven* (2010)/*Portaat taivaaseen* (2011); *A Message of Hope from the Angels* (2012)/*Toivon viesti enkeleiltä* (2012); *Love from Heaven* (2014)/*Taivaallinen rakkaus* (2014); *Angels at My Fingertips* (2017)/*Enkelten kosketus* (2017); *Prayers from the Heart* (2018)/*Rukouksia sydämestä* (2019).

<sup>40</sup> Horisontti, "Enkelit lensivät kirkosta, karkaako kansa perään?." 26 November 2017. <https://areena.yle.fi/audio/1-4247153> (accessed 12 December 2018).

aim was to keep the ticket prices reasonable as Byrne wants everyone to be able to listen to her message.<sup>41</sup>

The structure of the events has been the same throughout the years. At the beginning, the representative of FFF asks Byrne about her background, angel experiences, and books. After the interview, the participants can ask questions, which is followed by Byrne's prayer to archangel Michael. At the end of the event, the participants willing to receive Byrne's blessing line up and wait for their turn. The FFF volunteers are responsible for the practical arrangements of the event.

Byrne's message has remained relatively unchanged from event to event. Her message focuses on loving oneself and others, and she emphasizes the importance of forgiveness. She describes the guardian angels and the unemployed angels, who are helping the guardian angels when needed. Byrne does not teach reincarnation, though she does not completely deny it and says it is rare. Byrne asks why one would want to be born again, as everyone will meet her or his loved ones in heaven.

Byrne describes the participants' guardian angels and repeats how difficult it is to depict them and how she has to smile because angels want to draw her attention and to become portrayed. Angels described by Byrne are not men or women, even though they are human-like, and they are easily approachable through experience or imagination. Byrne makes the extraordinary ordinary by saying she is an ordinary person and wonders why everyone does not see angels. She states:

I've seen angels since childhood. It is common and normal. I can see guardian angels and other angels too. They are a gift of God. Even if you don't believe it, you have an angel. Unemployed angels help; you just have to ask courageously for help with everyday little things.<sup>42</sup>

While discussing angels, Byrne points out the necessity of being active because angels cannot act without being asked. Some respondents to the Angels in Finland survey mentioned the importance of one's own activity in an angel relationship: "[Angels are] beings of light created by God to help us, they act only *on request*, only on love" (4F, retired).<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Catarina Degerman & Uma Kangas, interview, 10 April 2013.

<sup>42</sup> Elisa Mikkola, Field Journal, 22 September 2012 (Helsinki).

<sup>43</sup> Utriainen, "Angels." Number and letter refer to the respondent's identification, F=female, M=male, followed by occupation. Emphasis original.

Byrne's specialty is to see and describe angels, and her angel descriptions create a sense of community, an enchantment that the participants share by asking questions. Communicating with angels and describing them brings the afterlife and the present world together. Byrne describes a reality unseen for others, which turns real when she describes it to them. Byrne's portraits of angels are precise and colorful, and she visualizes both the angels' appearances and messages.

Mother and daughter: Lorna asks their names and describes their angels. The color of the mother's angel is mauve, the clothes are moving, so the sign of the guardian angel can be a gentle breeze the mother can feel. Daughter says her mother knows her angel. Daughter's angel is glowing red, the angel embraces her tightly and says, "well done," you will know now or later what the guardian angel means.<sup>44</sup>

When describing the angels, Byrne brings out other means to experience an angel: a breeze can mean an angel's presence, or the meaning of the angel's message will only be revealed later. The meanings of Byrne's angel descriptions are created in interaction with the audience.

Byrne's events include ritualistic features: the participants can be in touch with mythical angels, quietly channeled by Byrne.<sup>45</sup> Angels are therapeutic: they support and comfort the participants in everyday problems, they create survival experiences, and they release guilt with their unlimited acceptance. The message is thoroughly positive and ethically supportive, and the promise to meet the deceased in heaven combines the past and the future. The participants feel a sense of community while being together, and the event ends with Byrne's blessing.

The chairs have been removed from the stage and people are gathering and waiting for Byrne's blessing. People talk to each other in the hall; their voices quiet down as they go to the queue to the stage. When they arrive on the stage, they are silent. The blessed look like they are concentrating, cheeks red, deep in thought, some smile and give thanks. Some of them look impressed, and some have tears in their eyes.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Mikkola, Field Journal, 22 November 2017.

<sup>45</sup> Gerard Lukken, *Rituals in Abundance: Critical Reflections on the Place, Form, and Identity of Christian Ritual in Our Culture* (Leuven & Dudley: Peeters, 2005).

<sup>46</sup> Elisa Mikkola, Field Journal, 7 November 2015 (Helsinki).

At Byrne's events, the individual and community experiences meet: on the one hand, the participants receive their separate blessings, and, on the other hand, they share the collective enchantment while listening to Byrne's angel descriptions.

## 5. Middle-aged, Well-educated, Middle-class Women

In 2015, my duty as a volunteer was to check the tickets at the hall door and to welcome the participants:

Most of the participants are women; they are coming in pairs or small groups. Men seem to be with women, a couple of them alone. The participants are middle-aged, casually dressed, some young women among them. People come ahead of time, and when the doors open, they move quickly into the hall, and a hum of conversation fills the hall.<sup>47</sup>

Lived religion is gendered, and women participate more actively than men do in different forms of alternative spirituality.<sup>48</sup> The same was also evident in Byrne's events and is in line with previous studies: in the UK, 80% of those working in a holistic environment are middle-aged women; in Estonia and Finland, women are more interested in angel spirituality than men are.<sup>49</sup> Worth noting is that the answers of the male respondents did not differ from women's.

More than half of the respondents were from Helsinki or the surrounding areas. The respondents were born between 1934 and 2000 (fifteen to seventy-nine years old). Over half of the participants belonged to the age group between thirty-five and fifty-four. However, they were younger compared to the attendees at religious services.<sup>50</sup> Compared with the 2011

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> McGuire, *Lived*, 182–183.

<sup>49</sup> Heelas & Woodhead, *The Spiritual*; Marko Uibu, "Creating Meanings and Supportive Networks on the Spiritual Internet Forum 'The Nest of Angels,'" *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 6/2 (2012), 69–86; Utriainen, "Combining," 2015.

<sup>50</sup> Miia Leinonen & Kati Niemelä, *Jumalanpalvelus arjen voimana: Seurakuntalaisten jumalanpalvelusodotukset ja -kokemukset*. Kirkon tutkimuskeskuksen www-julkaisuja 29 (Tampere: Kirkon tutkimuskeskus 2012), 10–11. <https://evl.fi/documents/1327140/45386794/Www->

and 2015 demographic data of Statistics Finland (Tilastokeskus), the respondents were more often married, widowed, or divorced.<sup>51</sup>

According to a Dutch study, mostly middle-aged, well-educated women were found to be interested in new spirituality.<sup>52</sup> Also, in the Angels in Finland surveys, the respondents' educational level was high, and about half of them had a university degree.

When considering their professions, over 20% of the respondents mentioned trade, economics, and administration, e.g., secretaries, assistants, and financial managers. The next largest groups were health-sector professions (e.g., nurses, midwives, and doctors) and education-sector professions (e.g., lecturers, trainers, and teachers), as well as social-sector professions (e.g., social workers, daycare workers, and instructors), each group of which represented just over 10% of the respondents. The number of entrepreneurs and pensioners was just under 10% each.

Only eight people were active in professions related to new spiritual services (e.g., yoga instructors, Trager and energy therapists, and clairvoyants). However, twenty-two respondents stated that they had been studying or doing treatments themselves, so new spiritual services seem to be practiced alongside another job.

Most of the women who participated in Byrne's event were well-educated, married, middle-aged, and were middle-class workers in welfare, health, or education sectors, and they had high existential security.

## **6. Passive Members of Religious Community Who Identify Themselves as Spiritual Persons**

In Finland, membership in the Evangelical Lutheran Church has been part of the national identity and the base for a strong 'folk church.' The situation is changing; the International Social Survey Programme (2018) showed that, for the younger age groups, the importance of

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<sup>51</sup> "Marital Status by Age (1-year) and Sex, 1990–2018."

[http://pxnet2.stat.fi/PXWeb/pxweb/fi/StatFin/StatFin\\_\\_vrm\\_\\_vaerak/statfin\\_vaerak\\_pxt\\_11ry.px/](http://pxnet2.stat.fi/PXWeb/pxweb/fi/StatFin/StatFin__vrm__vaerak/statfin_vaerak_pxt_11ry.px/) (accessed 27 January 2020).

<sup>52</sup> Frans Jespers, "From New Age to New Spiritualities: Secular Sacralizations on the Borders of Religion," in: Ingvild Sælid Gilhus & Steven. J. Sutcliffe (eds.), *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion* (Durham: Acumen, 2013), 197–226, at 210.

belonging to the church has decreased, and more and more people have been questioning their membership.<sup>53</sup>

More participants of Byrne's event were members of the religious community in 2015 than in 2011, which is in contradiction with the downward trend of belonging to the religious community.<sup>54</sup> In 2015, 80.9% of the respondents belonged to the ELCF compared with 72.9% of Finns in total.

About one-third of the respondents (n=141) were from Helsinki, where the membership in the religious community is the lowest in Finland, and only 55.5% of the population belonged to the ELCF in 2015.<sup>55</sup> New spiritual events have seemed to also interest members of the ELCF as 77.3% of the respondents from Helsinki were Lutherans.

The questionnaire did not include a question about the level of participation in religious events in terms of activities, but I outlined activities through open answers, and, therefore, the distribution of answers is only indicative. Nearly one-tenth of the respondents (n=359) did not participate in any religious events, and half mainly attended services such as weddings, funerals, church concerts, or seasonal ceremonies. The answers are in line with changes in Finnish religiousness, which shows a decrease in institutional religious practice: 7% attend religious events more often than once a month, and 10% do not participate at all. For most Finns, church attendance is limited to church festivals, and they are moderate and infrequently participating believers.<sup>56</sup>

The non-members of the institutional church attended new spiritual events nearly three times more (32.3%) than the members (13.9%), and between the groups was a statistically significant difference.<sup>57</sup> “[I have participated in] every possible event, angel, reiki, new age, spirituality, labyrinth meditation, healing, shamanism, drumming circles, channeling, etc. I organize those events myself too” (567F, entrepreneur).<sup>58</sup> The participants of Byrne's events have shown interest in both religious and new spiritual activities. However, as expected, the non-members were more likely to participate in new spiritual events, which

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<sup>53</sup> Ketola, “Nuorten.”

<sup>54</sup> Total answers n=452, with both years combined: the Evangelical Lutheran Church (n=345), the Orthodox Church (n=9), the Pentecostal Church (n=2), the Christian community (n=1), the Catholic Church (n=1), the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (n=1), Buddhist (n=1), not member of any religious community (n=87), non-respondents (n=5).

<sup>55</sup> Helsingin seurakuntayhtymä, “Vuositilasto 2015.” [https://www.helsinginseurakunnat.fi/material/attachments/keskusrekisteri/vuositolastot/D5xnpWHwv/Vuositolasto\\_2015.pdf](https://www.helsinginseurakunnat.fi/material/attachments/keskusrekisteri/vuositolastot/D5xnpWHwv/Vuositolasto_2015.pdf) (accessed 13 July 2016).

<sup>56</sup> Ketola, “Suomalaisten,” 18, 23.

<sup>57</sup>  $\chi^2$  25,146, df 4 and  $p < 0,001$  \*\*\*.

<sup>58</sup> Mikkola, “Angels.”

has allowed more space for women's active and creative practices and roles compared to traditional Lutheran services.<sup>59</sup>

The respondents were asked to choose from ten different identity categories that described them best, and they could prioritize the options if they wanted to.<sup>60</sup> Very significant statistical differences indicated how the members and the non-members of the religious community identify themselves differently.<sup>61</sup> As expected, the religious community members described themselves as Christians (24.8%) or religious (6.9%), but only 15.3% of non-members selected these options.

However, the most important identity category in both groups was the spiritual person, which 32.9% of the members and 33.6% of the non-members chose. Of the non-members of the religious community, 14.8% described themselves as humanists compared to just 8.9% of the religious community members. The New Age option was mentioned by 6.0% of the members and 6.3% of the non-members, who even mentioned mystic (9.0%) and esoteric (6.7%) more often.

Out of 444 respondents, 338 prioritized the categories. The spiritual person was ranked first most often by the members and the non-members of the religious community. Only five respondents mentioned New Age as their first option, and fewer references were given to pagan, shaman, and esoteric. Respondents seemed more comfortable mentioning rather unusual categories after identifying with more familiar alternatives.

The ISSP (2018) showed that especially the younger Finnish women (the age group of fifteen to thirty-four) defined themselves as spiritual people and not as followers of a religion.<sup>62</sup> And the same was true of the middle-age women of the Angels in Finland surveys.

## 7. Seekers Combining Services and Looking for Help and Support

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<sup>59</sup> Cf. Terhi Utriainen et al., "Materialities, Bodies and Practices in Lived Religion," in: Peter Nynäs, Ruth Illman, & Tuomas Martikainen (eds.), *On the Outskirts of 'the Church'—Diversities, Fluidities and New Spaces of Religion in Finland* (Wien: Lit Verlag, 2015), 111–129, at 111.

<sup>60</sup> I.e., Christian, religious, New Age, spiritual, mystic, esoteric, non-religious, pagan, shaman, or other (n=444 respondents, 1052 options).

<sup>61</sup>  $\chi^2 77,49$ , df 9 and  $p < 0,001$  \*\*\*.

<sup>62</sup> Ketola, "Nuorten."

In addition to participating in religious events, the participants in Byrne's events have used diverse spiritual services, e.g., clairvoyant services (20.1%), meditation (19.5%), and reiki (16.5%). One in ten had consulted healers (10.8%) or used angel therapy (10.0%).<sup>63</sup>

Reiki, meditation, energy work, clairvoyant, incarnation therapy, astrology. I participate in spiritual lectures, courses (from courses on shamanism to the Art of Living, the Journey, mindfulness, angels, astrodance, etc. You name it [369F, business coach]).<sup>64</sup>

The number of services used was the same in both years. Almost a quarter of the respondents (n=351) had used only one service and two out of five had used two or three services. Although the non-members of the religious community used the services slightly more often, both groups used the same services.

The respondents were asked via open-ended questions to explain what they were seeking in spiritual services (n=490, 355 respondents) and what they felt they were receiving (n=573, 330 respondents). The respondents were looking for positive support and help, strength, support for decision-making, well-being, balance, spiritual growth, and contact with the spiritual world. In both years, the respondents received, to a large extent, what they were looking for from these spiritual services.

One-third of the respondents (33.6%) received comfort, hope, support, and information for their choices: "They [spiritual services] help in life; to solve uncertain issues, they provide resources to solve issues related to one's own life, to get in touch with God and experience unity with the universe" (114F, equality coordinator).<sup>65</sup>

Spiritual services gave the respondents (24.8%) feelings of balance, well-being, and healing: "I have grown spiritually and had help for an incurable disease. I'm more balanced" (380F, special education teacher).<sup>66</sup>

Self-development, empowerment, and better self-confidence were reported by one-fifth (19.7%) of the respondents: "Applied for and received security in decision-making situations and clarity with issues that were difficult to understand" (35F, student).<sup>67</sup> Spiritual

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<sup>63</sup> These options were examples in the question concerning the use of spiritual services. These examples may have guided respondents to answer in a certain way.

<sup>64</sup> Utriainen, "Angels."

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.



growth was also mentioned: “The ability to better understand myself and the universe. Meaningfulness to the absurdity of life. I also feel that I have grown more compassionate, more empathetic, and more spiritual” (302F, project assistant).<sup>68</sup>

Despite the high expectations (15.7%), only 7.5% of the respondents had experienced contact with the spirit world: “The connection to loved ones in the hereafter, strength, help from angels, learned to meditate” (350F, entrepreneur).<sup>69</sup>

Some women interviewed by Professor of Comparative Religion Terhi Utriainen stated that they had turned to new spiritual services because they did not receive help from any public health or social services.<sup>70</sup> Likewise, some of the respondents searched for new spiritual services when experiences with the health service system were negative:

I have received and I can receive [from spiritual services] help to maintain my health and to treat diseases, unlike with the modern medicalized health care system in Finland. The Finnish health care system knows how to plaster your leg or to operate when needed, and it works well. However, the system does not see the person as a whole and does not guide the maintenance of health. The system provides chemical drugs to eliminate the symptoms alone. Complementary therapies and, e.g., the importance of nutrition in maintaining health are underestimated in Finland, unlike in other parts of Europe and the world [344F, professional].<sup>71</sup>

Some respondents said they had learned about new spiritual services at work: “I meet people who have been comforted by these services” (103F, crisis counselor).<sup>72</sup> Another respondent said she participated in Byrne’s event for professional purposes, to learn new methods to face death:

I meet dying people relatively often or people with relatives dying or with serious illness. Dealing with death from different perspectives is of interest and, at the same time, facilitates my work. When you have a calm, positive attitude towards death, it calms the patient [307F, midwife].<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Utriainen, “Enkeliuskon,” 36.

<sup>71</sup> Utriainen, “Angels.”

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

A few respondents had both negative and positive experiences with the use of new spiritual services, and they highlighted the commercial nature of the services:

If it [the service] has been ‘cashing in’ or it is merely a means of earning one’s living, then, in the end, it was just annoying. If the service provider has been genuine and sincere, then I will have experienced the situation/treatment as calming, like a breather. I’m not really looking for a solution to my problems with these services; I believe that I’ll find the answer in myself. However, sometimes it is reassuring to be either in the company of something spiritual/positive or to get such care/advice [314F, entrepreneur].<sup>74</sup>

Some respondents stated that they had not sought spiritual services: “I was growing up, not seeking [spiritual services]. There have been all sorts of services available since my childhood. Anyhow, at that time we did not speak aloud about them” (550F, service manager).<sup>75</sup>

The respondents manifested their use of new spiritual services in many ways; they are seekers following a wide range of paths and combining various traditions. Studying religious beliefs and practices of women, Janet Eccles states that their spirituality is not theistic or holistic but a continuum where women can have different manners of being spiritual.<sup>76</sup> The respondents to the Angels in Finland survey were also searching and combining various spiritual services in the search for help and support.

## **8. Angels Protect and Comfort**

As far as I know I have not seen angels. I think I have experienced their presence in my life, through consolation and support, perhaps guidance, too. I have sought this contact actively [...]. My worldview and the way I deal with the challenges of life,

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Mikkola, “Angels.”

<sup>76</sup> Janet Eccles, “Holistic Switchers: The Spiritual and Value Commitments of a Group of Older Women Church Leavers,” *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* 1/2 (2011), 187–202, at 188–189.

with myself and with other people, have developed accordingly [564F, social worker].<sup>77</sup>

The respondents' angel descriptions (n=686, 381 respondents) differed based on their religious affiliation. The religious community members described angels more traditionally as helpers, comforters, and protectors (34.5%), as well as guardian angels and God's assistants (14.4%). The non-members described the angels as spirit or light beings and energy (39.5%), which is more closely related to newer angel perceptions that have been influenced by Eastern thought. Traditional views of angels as helpers, comforters, and protectors (29.8%) were also present in the non-members' accounts.

The answers reflected diverse images of angels; the respondents combined traditional angels with the diversity of new spiritual views to build their individual spirituality.

In Byrne's events, nearly 80% of the respondents (n=382, both years) had their own angel experiences both within and outside the religious community, and they shared similar experiences.

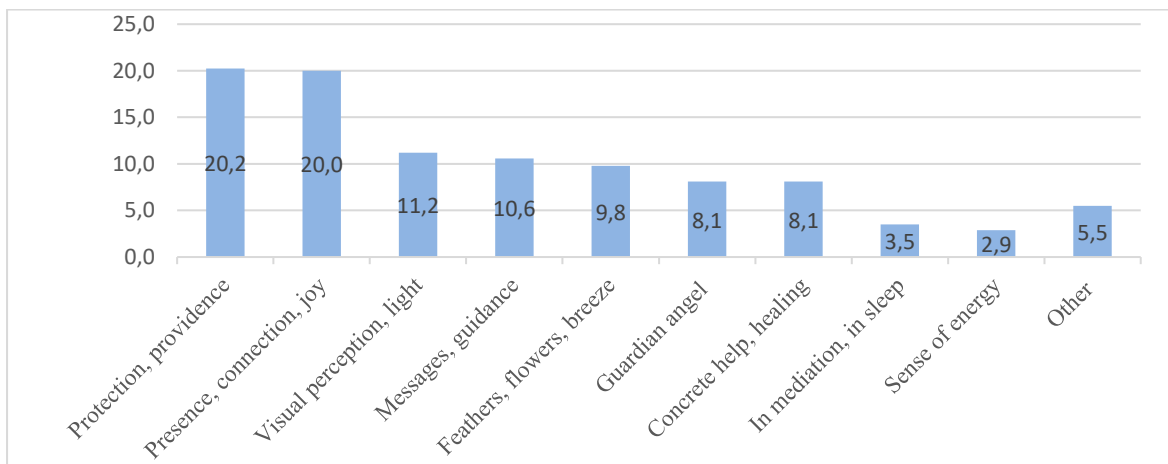


Figure 1: Angel Experience in 2011 and 2015 (n=509, 296 respondents)

Angels were visible, they appeared as light or as a breeze, they made physical contact, they had a fragrance, and they appeared in sleep or meditation.

The respondents (20.2%) received protection, providence, and spiritual help from angels.

<sup>77</sup> Mikkola, "Angels."

I have never seen [angels], but I think I have sensed them and sometimes feel like I get very clear messages from relatives who have already passed away. E.g., one morning when I was in the car, I had a strong feeling that now I should be careful in traffic. I closed my eyes and asked all the angels to drive with me. Twelve hours later, I had a bad crash but survived, with a fright [582F, event producer].<sup>78</sup>

In addition, a little over 8% mentioned a guardian angel experience, so protection seemed to be the most common experience: “A few times the guardian angel has helped to spot dangers” (436M, masseur).<sup>79</sup>

One-fifth of the respondents described feeling an angel’s presence and having a positive and joyful connection with it: “I have met my guardian angel, as well as some of the archangels. They help and advise me a lot. Angels are wonderful and fun, often making me laugh” (486F, entrepreneur).<sup>80</sup>

Angels reportedly provided messages and guidance for over one-tenth of the respondents:

[Angels are] giving signs = feathers in the right places, just when they are needed -> strengthen the belief in the good and soothe the mind. I ask them things, about things that worry me. For example, help with time pressure at work -> relieving or answering + things, and answers have come [530F, teacher].<sup>81</sup>

Angels were also involved in practical issues, and about 8% had received concrete help: “The guardian angel helps in organizing things, dealing with a difficult question, finding a parking space and selling an apartment—in every possible way. The right words and even a sense of humor will be found on request” (492F, bank manager, retired).<sup>82</sup>

The women interviewed by Utriainen described angels as friends and advisors with whom the women could share their problems and worries. The services of angels were also cheaper than counseling and often better suited to the needs and aspirations of women than Lutheran priests or counselors. Communicating with angels brings enchantment, which

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

Utriainen argues is part of ‘momentary religion,’ which is not permanent and established but rather actualizes in certain transient situations.<sup>83</sup>

The respondents described their angel experiences positively: they involved experiences of getting help, advice, or support in difficult situations, but they did not include any Christian concepts, such as sin or perdition, which could be perceived negatively. In Estonia, Marko Uibu followed the participants of the internet forum *The Nest of Angels*. They received support in the community and felt empowered by the network. In their descriptions of angels, the most important and unquestionable feature of angels was benevolence. However, Uibu states that, in Estonia, angels are not visible characters in the church or folk tradition, whereby people can freely conceptualize and create meaning for them based on new spirituality.<sup>84</sup>

The descriptions of angel experiences combined existential, emotional, and therapeutic aspects, and they were often overlapping: “Strength, consolation, inspiration, inner vision, confidence in the purposefulness of life” (97F, kindergarten teacher).<sup>85</sup> Speaking of their angel experiences, the respondents mentioned support and care, friendship and loneliness, self-realization and re-enchantment, and problems of everyday life. They did not have to wait until the afterlife, as the modern angels had been helping in their earthly lives.

## 9. Finnish Women Looking for Peace and a Sense of Community

Two or three years ago, I saw the magazine *Anna* with Lorna’s interview. I understood that the issue was important, and I bought her first book. I especially use the last two books “to help in everyday life.” I definitely wanted to see Lorna live [410F, daycare worker].<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Terhi Utriainen, “Angels, Agency and Emotions: Global Feminine Religion in Finland?” in: Terhi Utriainen & Päivi Salmesvuori (eds.), *Finnish Women Making Religion: Between Ancestors and Angels* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 237–254, at 244, 249; idem, “Ritually Framing Enchantment: Momentary Religion and Everyday Realities,” *Suomen Antropologi* 41/4 (2016), 46–61, at 51.

<sup>84</sup> Uibu, “Creating,” 69–86.

<sup>85</sup> Utriainen, “Angels.”

<sup>86</sup> Mikkola, “Angels.”

The positive image of Byrne and her tolerant message have been well received in the Finnish media, which has contributed to her popularity. The members and the non-members of the religious community shared the same reasons for participating in Byrne's events.

At the end of the event, I ask people if the event met their expectations. Some say they did not know what to expect, but their answers are positive. One woman tells she was at the event organized in Messukeskus (Fair Center), so she knew what to expect and therefore came again.<sup>87</sup>

The year of the survey, the background variables, nor the membership of the religious community influenced the respondents' assessment of the events (n=513, 314 respondents). Byrne's message, personality, and rituals were the most important for the participants, and nearly a third (29.0%) mentioned them.

I was amazed and delighted that there was no American-style hype at the event. Lorna Byrne did not bother the audience with easy tricks. She was a pleasant person—and clearly quite serious. It made me wonder if she was right. Her description of angels also matches my own experiences [364F, graphic designer, editor].<sup>88</sup>

More than a quarter of the respondents felt peace, comfort, and energy: "This was a wonderful opportunity, which brought me a lot of peace of mind. It's a wonderful feeling to sit with people who share the same spirituality. Feel the wonderful energy of love" (503F, financial coordinator).<sup>89</sup>

New spirituality is often thought to be socially dispersed and without a consolidated organization. People gather for courses and weekend meetings. Different groups and loose networks meet at fairs.<sup>90</sup> Yet, Byrne's events have allowed participants to experience a sense of community (11.7%): "[It] is amazing that such a large number of Finns want to develop spirituality, and the group is still growing" (44M, salesman).<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Idem, Field Journal, 22 November 2017.

<sup>88</sup> Utriainen, "Angels."

<sup>89</sup> Mikkola, "Angels."

<sup>90</sup> Jespers, "From New Age," 201; Adam Possamai, "A Profile of New Agers: Social and Spiritual Aspects," *Journal of Sociology* 36/3 (2000), 364–377, at 370.

<sup>91</sup> Utriainen, "Angels."

Byrne's modest habits, the lack of religious fanaticism, and her positive message attracted the participants, and they felt they had received what they had expected. They came to the event with friends or relatives, and they felt a sense of community, sharing feelings of enchantment communally, when Byrne was describing angels. They were also amazed and delighted that so many people were interested in the same thing.

## 10. Discussion

A typical person participating in Byrne's event would be a middle-aged and middle-class woman who lives in the metropolitan area, in a relationship, would belong to the ELCF but not actively involved in its activities, and would identify herself as a spiritual person. She would typically have a university degree and work as an administrative assistant or as a nurse. Likely, she would have experimented with some spiritual services, seen a clairvoyant or Reiki therapist, and would be interested in meditation. Usually, she would come with her friend to Byrne's event and would be interested in alternative spirituality. The participants of Byrne's events resemble the women Utriainen interviewed for her ethnographic research on angels and women's changing religious and spiritual practices, identity, and agency.<sup>92</sup> Utriainen's ethnography and the Angels in Finland surveys seem to be talking about the same women.

The use of new spiritual services does not require a long-term commitment or membership but is demand-driven and situational, such as Byrne's events. The participants of the events share the enchantment that Byrne's detailed descriptions of angels create. The angels described by Byrne are easily approachable by experience or imagination. Angels' endless positivity and support help in ordinary situations, such as finding a parking space as well as receiving comfort in one's stressful working life. Byrne's modest habits, her tolerant message, and the lack of distressing religious concepts draw participants to the event.

Höllinger and Muckenhuber seem to be right in challenging Norris and Inglehart's existential security theory on the individual level. In a wealthy society like Finland, the life conditions only slightly impact individual religiousness, and the social and cultural milieus are a more important determinant.<sup>93</sup> However, Norris and Inglehart's notion that there is a

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<sup>92</sup> Utriainen, "Angels," 240.

<sup>93</sup> Höllinger & Muckenhuber, "Religiousness."

growing interest in spiritual concerns and in the search for the meaning and purpose of life in secularized and affluent post-industrial societies seems to be correct, too.<sup>94</sup> Nevertheless, social security and well-being seem not to answer the meaning-making questions women have in Finland. In the *World Happiness Report*, one of the wellbeing variables is “freedom to make life choices,” and higher living standards open up more possibilities to respond to those choices.<sup>95</sup> The women participating in Byrne’s events use the possibility to choose and combine different features for their spirituality; they can choose to stay at church or turn to new spirituality or be indifferent and stay outside of both. While the high level of existential security may decrease their religiousness, it opens up other alternatives for new spirituality. However, in a consumer society, one can ask how subjective and free this choice can be as women’s lives are structured by politics, media, and popular culture.

In public, some male representatives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church have taken a relatively negative attitude to angels, and angels are more associated with children and Sunday school than with the spiritual life of adults. Pastor and Doctor of Theology Kari Kuula explained in *Kirkkovuositedote (The Liturgical Year Bulletin, 2011)* how angels form a chain of command to God.<sup>96</sup> In this chain, an active angel relationship is not desirable, let alone possible. Archbishop Tapio Luoma, in an article in *Helsingin Sanomat*, Finland’s leading newspaper, calls “angel enthusiasm a form of spin-off Christianity.”<sup>97</sup> He does not see the need to increase angels’ role in the ELCF. The Bishop Emerita of Helsinki Irja Askola is the only one who has spoken about her positive relationship with angels, in the evening newspaper, *Ilta-Sanomat*, in 2013, when she was interviewed together with Jutta Urpilainen, who was at that time the minister of finances.<sup>98</sup> Kuula and Luoma reproduce institutional religious structures, where only the (male) professionals have the right to interpret angels and their meanings. At the same time, they negatively evaluate new spiritual alternatives and angel concepts, which, however, attract a significant proportion of the members of the church. In 2019, over 70% of the personnel of the ELCF were women, but their, possibly

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<sup>94</sup> Norris & Inglehart, *Sacred*, 74–75.

<sup>95</sup> Helliwell, Huang, & Wang, “Changing,” 23.

<sup>96</sup> Kari Kuula, “Mikkelinpäivä: Enkeleillä on kahdet kasvot,” *Kirkkovuositedote* (2011). <http://evl.fi/EVLUutiset.nsf/Documents/20F97EDC1A8F71CFC225791000314D35?OpenDocument&lang=FI>. (accessed 18 December 2012).

<sup>97</sup> Tuija Pallaste, “Tuleva arkkipiispa ei lupaa enkeleille lisää tilaa kirkossa, vaikka ne kiinnostavat suomalaisia yhä enemmän—‘Ei ihminen voi alkaa manipuloiden itse määrittellä, miten enkelit toimivat,’” *Helsingin Sanomat*, 18 April 2018. <https://www.hs.fi/kuukausiliite/art-2000005634859.html> (accessed 19 November 2018). Translation by author.

<sup>98</sup> Suvi Kerttula, “Lajinsa ensimmäiset: Valtionvarainministeri ja piispa ovat ystävykset, jotka rukoilevat toistensa puolesta,” *Ilta-Sanomat*, 21 December 2013, 24–27.



different, views on angels have not been presented in the media.<sup>99</sup> The new interpretations of angels outside the field of institutional religion seem to pose a threat to the religion traditionally defined by men. These middle-aged, well-educated women mentioned above have taken the right to define their own spirituality, nonetheless.

It seems that traditional religious institutions are failing to provide the support needed for the challenges of everyday life for a growing number of women, and they turn to new spirituality and angels for help and support instead. New spirituality presents different values and rituals that correspond to women's emotional and ritual needs in an atmosphere where the individual's self-responsibility for their life is emphasized, and structural problems appear as individual problems. Martin S. Stringer's concept of 'coping religion' well describes women's relationship with angels: it is situational, not systematic, and it gives pragmatic answers to daily problems.<sup>100</sup>

Commerciality, entertainment, and religion meet in the field of popular religion, where lived religion has many manifestations in everyday life and where angels and various angel practices, such as Byrne's events, create enchantment. Today's angels are moving effortlessly through the fields of Christianity and alternative religion and new spirituality, taking features from all of them. Angels are part of the traditional visual world, and their familiarity facilitates commercial exploitation. Changes in the religious field reflect the changes of society. Weakening of old institutions and emergence of new forms of organization, commercialization, and media open up opportunities for reassessing spirituality. It will be interesting to see what the future of angel spirituality will be in Finland and internationally. Will it continue to grow, will it change, or will it fade? It is also possible that, in Finland, the Evangelical Lutheran Church will try to weave angels back into its own story or will re-evaluate the angels of new spirituality.

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<sup>99</sup> Suomen evankelis-luterilainen kirkko, "Kirkko on suuri työnantaja." <https://evl.fi/tietoa-kirkosta/tilastotietoa/henkilosto#9c3af979> (accessed 15 January 2020).

<sup>100</sup> Martin D. Stringer, *Contemporary Western Ethnography and the Definition of Religion* (London: Continuum, 2008), 108.

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