

Project Description

TEEMU PAUHA / 25.5.2025

The project "Exploring the Contested Constructions of Sense of Safety in Religious Spaces" (CoCo), funded by the Research Council Finland (2023-2027) and hosted at the University of Helsinki's Faculty of Theology (PI: Prof. Anne Birgitta Pessi), investigates how the sense of safety is constructed and contested within religious spaces. This research underscores that the sense of safety is both an emotional state and a physical experience influenced by the environments people inhabit. It also highlights how religious spaces serve as both physical locations and symbols of community identity, belonging, and sometimes conflict.

The theoretical framework of CoCo goes beyond traditional politics of belonging to encompass everyday, embodied, and spatial politics of belonging, enhanced by recognition theory. This theory scrutinizes how social acknowledgment or its absence can affect feelings of security and belonging, which is particularly pertinent in religious settings marked by clear distinctions between 'us' and 'them'. By integrating politics of belonging with recognition theory, the project aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how religious spaces are used to negotiate identity, belonging, and safety.

The project's empirical research comprises four case studies in distinct religious contexts: Jewish ritual baths in Northern Europe, LGBTIQ+ Muslims in Europe, art and spirituality in the Finnish Lutheran context, and new church buildings in the Finnish capital region. These cases explore how religious spaces can simultaneously be places of security and insecurity, inclusion and exclusion.

My subproject focuses on LGBTIQ+ Muslims in Europe, examining the interplay of Islamophobia, anti-Muslim racism, and internal community dynamics concerning sexual and gender diversity. This research not only addresses societal challenges and exclusivity in traditional mosque spaces but also identifies and analyzes physical spaces, like inclusive mosques, and virtual spaces facilitated by social media, where LGBTIQ+ Muslims find safety and community.

Data collection for this subproject began in Finland in spring 2025, utilizing online questionnaires, interviews, and participant observation within LGBTIQ+ Muslim communities. Following this, a three-month research visit to Berlin was initiated in summer 2025 to continue data collection at an LGBTIQ+-inclusive mosque. This additional data collection complements the information gathered in Finland, where no such mosques are currently operating.

For more information, visit the project's website: <https://blogs.helsinki.fi/coco-research/the-project/>