

We need to talk about Mindfulness: The changing face of religion and the secular in the public sphere

*Over the last few years, the UK has emerged as one of the leading fronts in the global mindfulness movement. While this success is typically identified in strictly nonreligious terms, **Alp Arat** argues that it is sociologically lazy to classify such trends on purely secular grounds. Instead, he claims that the popularity of mindfulness meditation now raises important questions about the future of religious belief, practice, and identity in the public sphere, and points towards novel developments within the trajectory of the secular itself.*



Mindfulness meditation at the World Economic Forum in Davos. Flickr, World Economic Forum

Meditation – one of the most ancient forms of religious ritual known to humanity – has recently emerged as a surprisingly ubiquitous form of practice in contemporary western society. From its earliest roots in the eastern traditions of Vedanta and Buddhism to its popularisation at the turn of the century by the spiritual-but-not-religious, its latest incarnation in the form of mindfulness meditation now constitutes arguably the single most emblematic expression of this oft-quoted silent revolution.

First popularised in its current format by Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1979, the mindfulness technique is commonly **defined as** ‘paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally’. This somewhat clunky definition however is masked by the significant level of cross-sectional coherence of the vast mindfulness milieu today. Moreover, while the majority of popular and scholarly interest in the field remains focused on questions of efficacy for the purposes of health and wellbeing, there is now a growing trend towards more novel applications of mindfulness in the sectors of education, business, and criminal justice for the purposes of improved creativity, productivity, and governance to name but a few.

The UK in particular is now widely considered as the leading front of the global mindfulness movement by virtue of the unrivalled institutional framework through which numerous applications are being rolled out across British public life. These include the government-led **Mindfulness**

Initiative and the Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group; official recommendations by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and provisions through various NHS Trusts; as well as a growing number of leading research and training centres on mindfulness including at Oxford, Bangor, and Sussex universities. Given its growing international clout, representatives of the UK Mindfulness Initiative now rub shoulders with the likes of Elon Musk and the UN Secretary General at events such as the World Government Summit, and lead the way in working more closely with foreign governments to develop similar initiatives across the world.

Seen in this light, we already talk a great deal about mindfulness. After all it is worth reminding ourselves of how impossible it seemed only a decade ago that something as esoteric, non-rational and traditionally religious as the practice of silent meditation could one day become so deeply entrenched within British society. One might therefore be forgiven for assuming that the current ubiquity of mindfulness has reached saturation point and that there is little of substance left to add to the discussion.

Such a stance however overlooks a wider debate that is starting to emerge within more specialist circles concerning the current success of mindfulness. In short, this debate is typically framed by the following two extreme positions: On the one hand are the proponents of the McMindfulness thesis who claim that contemporary mindfulness is best identified as a phenomenon that has become fully privatised, instrumentalised, and hollowed out by the logic of late modern capitalism. At the other extreme, defenders of the so-called Trojan horse argument suggest that regardless of its particular co-options today, the practice and state of meditation forever holds an inherent potential for radical forms of personal and social emancipation. In many respects, this debate now rests on a much more fundamental issue that is rarely addressed as fully and explicitly as the growing currency of mindfulness might suggest; and that is the extent to which mindfulness meditation is best understood as a religious or a secular phenomenon.

From the outset, it is certainly the case that debates over its Buddhist roots already form part and parcel of the existing discourse around mindfulness. Yet more often than not, it is this very framing around Buddhism alone that restricts a much wider and arguably more significant discussion around the question of religion tout court. To put it more bluntly, asking whether mindfulness is Buddhist or not is now akin to past questions around whether the spiritual-but-not-religious were believers in God. Such conventional formulations are further complicated by the fact that Christian and Muslim traditions themselves are now finding their own segues into mindfulness practices. In other words, the issue now transcends particular traditions as such and raises the following important questions around modern expressions of religious practice and identity as a whole.

First and foremost, from a standard sociological standpoint, we continue to remain in the dark when it comes to who the principal leaders, teachers, and advocates of mindfulness today in fact are, including whether they identify with religious, spiritual, agnostic, or atheistic worldviews, or are simply indifferent to the question of religion altogether. Nor do we have much of an understanding of how and for what purposes millions of people around the world engage in mindfulness practices in their everyday lives, and to what extent these can be said to encapsulate religious forms of practice and identity or not.

Secondly, at a more systemic level, we also need to ask ourselves what the implications of the growing standardisation of mindfulness in the sectors of health, education, and business will be for the future of religion in the public sphere. Will mindfulness crowd-out more conventional forms of religious provision and engagement in the secular public sphere, or will it lead to religions piggy-backing on mindfulness platforms to gain easier access to hitherto restricted domains of secular social life?

Taken as a whole, how do we read these developments in light of wider debates around secularisation and its myriad late-modern permutations? Does mindfulness amount to (yet another expression of) the return of religion to the public sphere, or does it in fact signal a revitalisation of the hard secularisation thesis whereby all things religious are secularised within the public sphere?



Throughout such deliberations, we would also do well to take heed of Taylor's definitive assessment of our present secular age by focusing our efforts less on expressions of modern belief than the conditions on which they rest today. In other words, could it be that we are witnessing instead the start of a much more fundamental modification of the very building block of modernity – the secular – whereby an immanent secular presence is now capable of carving out its very own access to a universal transcendent **without any recourse to religion, let alone spirituality?**

This in the end takes us back to one of Kabat-Zinn's **original remarks** about his vision for the future of mindfulness, when he states that 'it has never been about MBSR [Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction] for its own sake. It has always been about the M. And the M is a very big M'. Given the issues at stake for religion in the public sphere, we'd do well to pay closer attention to how big this M may truly be after all.

About the author



Dr Alp Arat is a sociologist of religion and member of committee at the British Sociological Association's Sociology of Religion study group. His research focuses on secularisation and postsecular theory with a particular interest in contemporary practices of meditation.

Note: This piece gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Religion and the Public Sphere blog, or of the London School

of Economics.

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