

“The Conspiracy of Silence”: Teaching Mindfulness in Poland

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Abstract. *Meditation, one of the most ancient forms of religious practice, appears to be undergoing a late modern revival. One of the key expressions of this contemplative turn has emerged in the current popularity of mindfulness - a form of meditation originally derived from the Buddhist Theravada tradition. Following the groundwork laid by the global expansion of yoga, meditation is thus widely considered to represent the latest ripple in the easternisation of the West. This article seeks to offer a renewed examination of this subject by presenting the first qualitative study of mindfulness in Poland. Drawing on interviews with leading practitioners in the Polish public landscape, we present evidence showing that mindfulness denotes a much more spiritual form of practice than typically assumed. These findings call us to offer a fresh look into the increasingly complex ways in which our existing categories of religion, spirituality, and now the secular are currently being played out in relatively overlooked parts of the European continent.*

Keywords: *meditation, mindfulness, spirituality, mindfulness teacher, catholic.*

Introduction

Meditation, one of the most ancient forms of religious practice, appears to be undergoing a late modern revival (Campbell 2007; Samuel 2015; Wilson 2014). As expressed by one of the interviewees of this study, mindfulness meditation is often portrayed as a way of “living your life consciously.” This pragmatic conceptualisation echoes the common view that mindfulness depicts a purely secular pursuit of self-help and improved wellbeing. Closer inspection of the ways in which respondents talk about and make sense of their identity and role as teachers of mindfulness however suggests that the picture may be more complicated.

The vast majority of scholarly research into the recent popularity of mindfulness meditation in the West focuses on its medical efficacy (Baer 2014; Black 2012; Ergas 2014; Sun 2014). Notwithstanding the continued significance of this area of research however, we continue to remain in the dark when it comes to the wider meaning and significance ascribed to mindfulness by practitioners themselves on the ground. This paper seeks to present an opening into this relatively overlooked domain of the seemingly global mindfulness movement by looking more closely at the meanings ascribed to mindfulness by its teachers and the ways in which they identify themselves and their practice as a whole.

Poland is no stranger to the mindfulness milieu, holding a surprisingly vibrant and well-established level of involvement by professional institutions, teachers, and advocacy groups. Jon Kabat-Zinn, the modern architect of the contemporary mindfulness movement, was hosted by the Polish Mindfulness Association in Warsaw in 2009. This led to a growing popularity in mindfulness practice accompanied by increasing attempts at greater institutionalisation for wider national provision. Though entering the field relatively later than its leading European neighbours including Germany, Britain, Spain, and the Netherlands, Poland is nevertheless equally home to a popular and growing milieu of mainstream local interest in mindfulness practice and its many applications in various sectors of society (Sutcliffe, Gilhus 2014, 5).

This paper aims to shed light on the evolution of the secular/religious nexus within this relatively overlooked region of the European continent by focusing in particular on the ways in which Polish mindfulness teachers identify, talk about, and make sense of their mindfulness practice. In other words, rather than re-examining the well-trodden literature on the psycho-physical associations of mindfulness as such (Barker 2014; Kabat-Zinn 1982; Kuyken et al. 2008; Teasdale et al. 2000), it documents the ways in which mindfulness teachers ascribe meaning to their practice as a whole. The significance of such meaning-making is as follows. First, it allows us to gain a better understanding of the sociological make-up of this novel cohort of practitioners - key figures of this movement as a whole whose relative power and influence continues to be overlooked in empirical studies so far. Second, it offers a more grounded perspective into some of the key debates concerning the contemporary mindfulness, most notably its relationship to Buddhism (Gombrich, Obeyesekere 1988; Samuel 2015; Sharf 2015). Last but not least, it presents us with a timely contemporary case study of the extent to which mindfulness can be said to denote a secular or religious practice, and the wider implications of such shifts to more general debates on secularisation (Brown 2007; McMahan 2008; Moore 1995; Taylor 2007).

A whole spectrum of mindfulness practitioners currently operate in Poland, ranging from the highly committed to purely casual practitioners. Teachers however continue to represent a pivotal role within this milieu insofar as they mark the principal sources and channels of power and influence in the field as a whole. A deeper understanding of this cohort thus allows one to gain a better understanding of both its current sociological make-up as well as the potential future projections of this field more generally.

The Polish Mindfulness Society currently estimates that there are 59 qualified mindfulness teachers affiliated with the leading national organisation (2016). This study in particular draws on personal interviews with 15 of its most active members. These include founders and directors of the leading mindfulness initiatives in the country, private teachers who provide one-on-one and group sessions, as well as those who implement mindfulness as part of wider initiatives such as schools and businesses. On the whole, with 49 out of the total of 59 qualified teachers being women, the Polish mindfulness milieu is represented by a strongly female-led group. This ratio is equally mirrored in the sample population in which only two men were recommended by leading figures in the field as among the most active teachers in the country. The vast majority of respondents were practically fluent in English and came from a middle-class and highly educated backgrounds. Their proficiency in the English language meant that the interviews could be conducted via video calls, analysed, and included in the study verbatim (Lo Iacono 2016). Due to a number of scheduling difficulties, some of the interviews were followed up in writing to ensure accuracy in their responses. In the final analysis, only three out of a total 15 responses had to be translated from Polish into English.

As the following discussion will seek to illustrate in greater detail, initial, surface-level articulations of mindfulness practice closely echo its original ethos as put forward by Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994, 2003, 2011). That is, a strictly secular form of practice that is held to have no religious association. Talking to mindfulness teachers more directly however reveals a much more complicated picture with significant implications for both our conception of this milieu as well as our existing categories of secular and religious as a whole.

In what follows, we begin first by presenting the Catholic context of Poland and outlining the current institutional structure of the provision of mindfulness in the country. This is followed by a closer engagement with the principal subjects of this study in an effort to gain a better understanding of the ways in which they make sense of their own teaching and personal practice. The final sections offer a comparative assessment of the milieux

of mindfulness and spirituality more generally before concluding with the implications of these findings for the sociology of religion more generally.

Mindfulness and the Church

Poland is a predominantly Catholic country with over 87% of Poles claiming to be Catholic (GUS 2015, 196). Yet at the same time, regular mass participation and those claiming to follow the Church's teaching "by the book" have been dropping steadily over the years (CBOS 2015a, 9, 2015b, 10; Mariański 2011, 37), a process that has been accompanied by the emergence of new forms of religiosity both within and outside of the Catholic Church (Kołodziejska 2014). The dominance of the Roman Catholic Church in the Polish religious landscape, coupled with the Southeast Asian heritage of mindfulness meditation thus mean that any conversation about mindfulness inevitably starts with the subject of Buddhism. Indeed, respondents are quick to point out that it was mainly following the Dalai Lama's official visit to the country in 2008 that a growing interest has emerged in both Buddhism as a whole and meditation in particular.

The practice of meditation in Poland as such however has a longer history. A number of initiatives that have been in place more historically are widely recognised by mindfulness teachers themselves as having helped prepare the ground for the recent uptake of mindfulness. Most notable amongst these is the Lubin monastery situated in the Western part of the country. Established in the 11th century, the monastery continues to house a Benedictine Order rooted in the Catholic tradition and is widely known for its rich relationship with the Buddhist Kannon Sangha in Warsaw. One of its most notable monks, Father Jan Bereza is widely recognised as the first person to have initiated mindfulness-inspired Christian meditation sessions in 1988. As such, the monastery continues to represent the leading institutional illustration of the interchange in the Polish landscape between Christian and Buddhist approaches to meditation.

Despite the fact that similar meditation retreats and support groups currently take place on various other church grounds however, respondents claim that the practice of meditation continues to evoke mistrust by the public as a whole. Given the historic attempts at integrating meditation within the Christian tradition, respondents thus share a sense of disappointment regarding the unrealised potential of a more effective collaboration within the Polish landscape. Indeed, given the lack of official statements by the Polish Catholic Church concerning mindfulness in particular or meditation

more in general, it remains difficult to determine the exact position of the Christian establishment towards the subject. Given this vacuum, respondents claim that the public perception of mindfulness remains suspicious and cynical as illustrated in the following account:

“In terms of the church, for me and mindfulness teachers, things are very dangerous because the Catholic Church is very closed. Even during services, priests sometimes say very openly that yoga is dangerous to people, and that they should be afraid of it because it is connected with dangerous energies that are not from God. And because most people don't know what is yoga, they believe that. This is also the case with meditation. I have a few difficult conversations with Catholic people about meditation. Even when they are educated, they say it is very dangerous.”

Indeed, a number of respondents claim that even in those instances where groups succeed in organising sessions on various church premises, they soon get shut down once the church becomes aware of the fact that their main focus is on the practice of mindfulness. As expressed more forcefully by one of the respondents, “this country thinks that Harry Potter is the devil, and yoga, NLP, and mindfulness are the works of Satan.” The general belief among teachers is that this stems primarily from the fact that the Catholic Church regards spirituality as its monopoly, and that a significant part of the problem lies in the popular conception of mindfulness as an essentially Buddhist form of practice. In an effort to distance themselves from such controversies, teachers are thus keen to distinguish between the mindfulness on the one hand and Buddhism on the other, and thereby present mindfulness as a category in its own right. As put more optimistically by one of the respondents, “all we can hope for is that it is only a matter of time before people accept mindfulness meditation like yoga.”

Institutionalisation

Małgorzata Jakubczak is widely recognised as the first qualified Polish teacher of mindfulness. She graduated from the faculty of education at the University of Warsaw and spent many years working at the Ministry of Education's Centre for Psychological and Pedagogical Study. She first became interested in mindfulness after attending a personal development retreat in Auschwitz where she met Linda Lehrhaupt, founder and director of the German Institute of Mindfulness Based Approaches. Following her introduction into the study of mindfulness, she decided to take on further

training which in 2009 led to her becoming the first certified Polish teacher of Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction [MBSR]. In light of the growing interest in mindfulness over the following years, she decided to establish the Polish Institute of Mindfulness (Polim), becoming the first institution to provide mindfulness courses and teacher training programmes in the Polish language. Though the board of Polim is currently made up of five mindfulness teachers, Małgorzata remains the key figure in the day-to-day operations of the institute as a whole.

Though Polim represents the first institution providing mindfulness training, there also exists a second network which plays an increasingly significant role within the Polish milieu as a whole. Named the Polish Association of MBSR and MBCT [mindfulness-based cognitive therapy], this latter organisation effectively represents a splinter group of the former and is widely constituted by recent graduates of the original IMA-Polim network. Though in operation for many years, the official registration of this latter association has only recently been accepted by the state, a delay claimed to have been caused more as a result of the inefficiencies of the state bureaucracy than any internal difficulties within the group itself. It is currently led by its president Mirka Białobrzaska and it aims to differentiate itself from the former by operating on a more independent platform and striving to offer a more nationally driven organisation that is less influenced by Polim's parent organisation based in Germany.

The leaders of both networks remain determined to professionalise mindfulness in Poland by continuing to develop and expand their respective groups further. When asked to compare the Polish milieu to other European and American settings, both lead figures point out that they feel “jealous” and “envious” of the fact that the field of mindfulness has reached stronger levels of organisation and integration elsewhere, and share a general sense of enthusiastic conviction that Poland too is moving in a similar direction. In line with such ambitions, there are currently attempts within the network as a whole to introduce a standard code of ethics and conduct to serve as a guideline for both teachers and consumers in the marketplace.

Interestingly, many of the 59 officially certified mindfulness teachers in Poland are closely associated with both of the leading organisations in the country. On the whole however, in spite of the aforementioned initiatives on the ground, the majority of teachers who form the core informants of the present study generally express the view that the institutional provision of mindfulness in Poland suffers from a lack of clarity and consistency. When asked about the difference between the two groups for instance, respondents are often unable to clarify the distinction and tend to refer to both groups interchangeably. As expressed by one of the interview subjects, “I don't really know

what they stand for apart from the fact that they don't want to associate with one another.” Indeed, despite their own affiliation, a number of respondents express reservations about the true benefits of such initiatives for the industry as a whole, challenging their lack of ability in taking effective decisions, and claiming priority of individual practice over institutional organisation.

Nevertheless, despite the relative lack of effectively consolidated institutions, teachers do not necessarily consider these as limitations to their own personal provision of mindfulness to the public. Regardless of the structural make-up of the industry, respondents thus prefer to place greater emphasis on individual standards of teaching and practice, stressing that the relationship between the teacher and the student remains the single most important factor in how the profession will evolve in the future. With that in mind, the following sections turn from the institutional setting of mindfulness in the public landscape of Poland towards a greater focus on the nature of engagement by its principal teachers in terms of their teaching and personal practice on the ground.

Mindfulness Teachers

The vast majority of the respondents interviewed were employed in the sectors of health and well-being including qualified therapists, psychologists, and coaching experts. Roughly half claimed to be involved in teaching mindfulness full-time while the other half were engaged alongside other primary occupations including the aforementioned professions as well as teaching, lecturing, charity work, and managing a private business. The average number of yearly students taught by those claiming to teach full-time was around 80 (ranging from 35 to over 100 students per annum). Though part-time teachers naturally recorded lower figures, some nevertheless claimed to have managed 50-60 students in any given year in the past.

Regardless of their level of employment however, respondents expressed a shared concern over the difficulty of earning a living through teaching mindfulness alone. Though many part-time teachers expressed a willingness to prioritise mindfulness over other professional commitments, the financial risks of a freelance career thus prevented them from committing themselves fully to their aspirations. Notably, respondents at all levels of involvement preferred to justify their practice in terms of a vocation rather than a means of income. As articulated by the following interviewee, this was often expressed via an ethos of selflessness whereby mindfulness was said to have chosen them rather than the other way around:

“I’m an introvert so when [my friend] first suggested to me that I might think about becoming a mindfulness teacher, it never occurred to me that I could lead a group of people. Even to this day, talking to a group of people is not natural to me. I prefer one on ones. But the practice comes out of me, and it seems the least I can do is to allow the practice to work.”

In identifying mindfulness as something that “comes out of me” and the associated conviction that “the least I can do is to allow the practice to work,” this excerpt offers a key insight into the fundamental nature of how mindfulness is perceived by its principal purveyors. In order to better understand this core message however, we must first take a step back and begin by looking more carefully at the ways in which practitioners define mindfulness in their own words.

Thus, when asked about how they might explain to an outsider what mindfulness actually stands for, respondents typically provide the following standard opening. Mindfulness is said to mark “the practice of directing one’s attention to sensations available in the present moment, such as one’s breathing, the feelings emanating from one’s body, sounds, or guided instructions.” This state of mindful awareness is held to mark a certain level of “personal competence resulting from the practice of meditation and training of the mind.” If successful, this is said to “allow one to freely feel the world with all our senses, enjoy the food, smell the air, listen carefully, look at our surroundings with fresh, scrutinising eyes, stop for a moment and admire the beauty of a butterfly found by a child on a sidewalk.” Respondents are quick to stress that mindfulness practice can be very challenging and may require dedicated long-term practice, not least due to the fact that it calls for a significant re-evaluation of deeply habitual modes of thinking and action. Yet in the end, successful practice is held to hold the capacity to “change our view of the world, thereby changing the functioning of it too.” Taken as a whole, initial opening depictions of mindfulness thus follow its standard secular conception as bare attention and the positive benefits that are held to be associated with such states of being.

This however only captures the surface level of the mindfulness phenomenon. In other words, it is worth keeping in mind that the discourse of mindfulness only offers half the story, particularly that part which is put forward to ‘outsiders’. In order to delve deeper into their personal understanding of mindfulness, respondents were thus subsequently asked to expand on what they considered to be the single most important quality for becoming a good mindfulness teacher. Here, their responses were nearly unanimous in stressing the importance of individual formal practice over and above particular forms of pedagogy or knowledge of meditation as such. The following two accounts offer more detailed insights into the ways in

which respondents prioritised these rituals over and above other elements of their teaching practice:

“Formal practice is indispensable. Yes, I can feel the soap bubbles when I’m washing the dishes, and even when I was a child, I think I was always, even though not systematically, more aware and conscious of what was happening around me. So yes, it’s true that some of it is instinctive, and some of it we can work into our lives. But it doesn’t have the same power of intent. To me working on practising myself is absolutely at the base of it all.”

“In my opinion formal practice is absolutely necessary. I try to take daily formal practice. I held a group every week we meet and practice meditation for two hours. Sitting meditation, walking, and body scan. One after the other. This is very powerful. And my friends tell me that half an hour is good, but two hours is excellent. And they have energy and power over the coming days. If you didn’t have formal practice, you can’t be mindful everyday.”

Thus, apart from anything else, regular routines of daily meditation are widely held to mark a cornerstone of both personal engagement and continued professional development. While admitting that one can engage in moments of mindfulness throughout the day, these are held to lack “the power of intent” involved in more formal modes of practice. To the extent that one respondent went as far as to exclaim that “if you don’t practice yourself as a teacher, you cheat your students.”

To complicate matters however, respondents frequently warned against the dangers of becoming overly focused on mindfulness as a mere technique, and in so doing, overlooking the true depth and wider significance of its ethos as a whole. Frequent warnings thus included statements such as “we mustn’t get too attached to the ladder, mindfulness is only a tool.” Another respondent clarified that “nothing really happens in mindfulness practice. In fact, the expectation that something must happen actually blocks us from experiencing it.” Concerns were thus expressed repeatedly over the fetishizing of meditation, stressing that mindfulness amounted to more than a mere technique for sitting still and calming the mind. At its core, this position essentially alluded to the widely held conviction that regardless of the particular package in which its practice may be delivered, mindfulness was effectively held to represent a universal quality and state of being in its own right. The following account provides a more detailed picture of this overall understanding:

“If you’re really practising, you won’t stay with the particular technique alone. We’re like gardeners of our own nature, and this is part of our nature. and if we consistently provide our nature through mindfulness practice, which is essentially weeding, we are giving nature a chance to flower. If we provide the necessary conditions, it will emerge out of us sooner or later.”

These accounts thus help to highlight a fundamental assumption that runs through the many ways in which respondents seek to articulate their understanding of mindfulness. Closely in line with the discursive construction of mindfulness according to the Kabat-Zinn tradition, their articulations were thus based on the ontological assumption that mindfulness represents a sui generis category in its own right. That is to say, mindfulness as pertaining to a core essence that cannot be reduced to either lower or higher categories. Despite eschewing more conventional monikers of a religious or spiritual nature at first sight, closer scrutiny thus revealed that respondents nevertheless drew on deeply sacred and universal conceptions of mindfulness in their attempts to do full justice to their involvement.

In effect, it was this sui generis notion of mindfulness that underpinned respondents’ claim that their involvement went beyond the relatively more formal settings of individual practice or group lessons, and formed part and parcel of their very sense of self and influenced their everyday lives as a whole. In fact, one of the respondents openly stated that this influence was so fundamental that it made little sense to “simply call it a hobby, profession, or even a way of life. Mindfulness is everything to me, so I cannot simply say it’s very important or little important.” Another interviewee alluded to the significance of what she called “unofficial mindfulness practice,” that is, the practice “that benefits me the most in my life, like conscious noticing of breath, or the fact that my body feels exhausted, and being able to feel myself as deeply as I can, even when I’m talking to other people in the store.”

This in the end was followed by numerous accounts by respondents of the ways in which mindfulness was said to influence their everyday lives as a whole. To illustrate:

“I’m interested in mindfulness practice for my own wellbeing. I find that the more regularly I practice, the more contact I maintain with what I may call my higher self. I can see that practice evolves us. We cannot practice without being changed by the practice. So I think anyone has really practised for any time you can feel it in the way they come across, there is a different kind of presence for want of a better word.”

Again and again, respondents drew on mindfulness as representing a core quality that allowed them to be more closely aligned with their “higher self”, “true potential”, or “who I really am”. Closer engagement with mindfulness was thereby held to lead to wider benefits in one’s life beyond the immediate provision of greater wellbeing. To clarify further, the following respondent sought to articulate this logic in more detail with respect to the impact that mindfulness practice had on his teaching career:

“[Mindfulness] has opened a door in my teaching career. After 12 years, I hit a wall with teaching English literature and composition. Young people are becoming less book literate as they become more computer literate. Attention spans are decreasing. They grow bored easily and don’t sleep well. Their body language is horrible. It’s not a stretch to say they are addicted or are developing addictive personalities. They need more health, period – mental and physical. There is nothing I can do as a teacher to help my students’ academics and character that is more valuable than mindfulness. So mindfulness is a great opportunity for schools. It just makes sense.”

Spirituality

This in the end led to a critical component of their self-identity as mindfulness teachers unanswered. Thus, when asked more directly about whether they would consider themselves to be religious or not, the overall picture became much more blurred than suggested by their initial responses above. Despite the fact that all but two of the respondents claimed to have been baptised Catholic at an early age, not a single person considered themselves to be Catholic. More surprisingly perhaps, neither did any of the respondents claim to be Buddhist. Only one person mentioned membership of a Buddhist sangha and to have taken part in dokusan [private meeting held with a Buddhist master]. Though again, this person also did not want to be considered a Buddhist on the grounds that “this would constitute the taking of vows which I’m not prepared to do.”

This however was not suggestive of a general secularist stance. Thus, when asked at the end of these discussions as to whether they might be more comfortable with the label ‘spiritual, but not religious’, the answers were nearly unanimous: “Definitely”, “100%”, or reiterating more typical expressions of this cohort as a whole:

“I’m not a religious person but I believe in God. I mean I believe that there is some sense of a guiding principle of our world. The more I practice and the more fields of healing I’m exposed to, the less I’m inclined to identify with religion. I would say that my path is spiritual.”

Closer scrutiny thus revealed that this underlying stance did not merely represent an auxiliary form of ad hoc identity merely revealing itself when pressed on the issue, but rather one that was explicitly put forward as lying at the very core of mindfulness practice itself. As illustrated more clearly by one of the respondents, “spiritual work, or body-mind work, is hard, and if the practitioner does not discover it for him or herself, it won’t be pursued with any meaningful commitment.” Similarly, another respondent voiced her scepticism regarding the view of mindfulness drawing books as denoting genuine forms of practice: “If this is your only mindfulness practice, that’s McMindfulness. It may be connected with it but it’s definitely not enough. Mindfulness is much more than that.”

Tellingly, only one respondent expressed unease with the label of spirituality on the grounds that she “[disliked] to be called a spiritual person due to the pejorative connotations of the term associated with religion.” On the whole however, interviewees’ responses pointed to a significant correlation between mindfulness on the one hand and the wider culture of self-spirituality on the other. As the interviews progressed, the surface layer of secular mindfulness thus gradually gave way to a much more sacred and holistic conception of the underlying ethos of practice and identity. In facilitating greater personal awareness, mindfulness was thereby held to facilitate a similar path of healing and living in closer contact with universal principles that were explicitly conceived in spiritual terms.

In sum, closer scrutiny thus reveals that mindfulness teachers espouse many of the characteristic traits that are typically associated with the subjective turn of the spiritual milieu (Heelas, Woodhead 2005; Aupers, Houtman 2006). The following account in particular offers an unambiguous sense of overlap between these two forms of identity:

“I find less boundaries within oneself and amongst people when speaking of spiritual matters, but quite a few boundaries when speaking of religion. It’s about not having boundaries for me.”

This however is not to suggest a perfect fit between the cohorts of mindfulness and spirituality. As evidenced by their initial remarks, not only do respondents prioritise the secular idiom of mindfulness over and above the spiritual, but their performative practice falls markedly short of the more

expressive mode of identity that forms the trademark of the spiritual milieu as a whole. Last but not least, their conceptions of mindfulness eschew the much more traditional associations with so-called spiritual phenomena such as the soul, energy, or divine beings and powers. In either case, the extent to which mindfulness teachers can be said to hold spiritual capital depends on closer ethnographic study of the relationship between practical and knowledgeable mastery within the milieu as a whole (Arat 2016).

This rather signals a two-tiered dynamic at play by practitioners on the ground. Not only is mindfulness conceived as more than a simple cognitive technique, but it is also taken as lying at the very core of the religious and spiritual subject. Once again, it is this very notion of mindfulness as a *sui generis* essence that underlines its depiction as marking a whole way of being that influences one's everyday life and allows one to experience “what it means to be truly human” (Kabat-Zinn 2010, 2012).

This essentialist conception of mindfulness became especially pronounced when respondents were asked to position mindfulness within Buddhism as a whole. One of the interviewees effectively echoed the view shared by most in stating that Kabat-Zinn had done a “fabulous job of taking mindfulness out of Buddhism and making it worldview neutral, giving us a chance to experience what it means to be a Zen Buddhist monk.” The success of Kabat-Zinn was thus seen to lie in his ability to condense Buddhist meditation into a form of mindfulness practice that no longer required either a religious framework nor an authority figure to dictate right and wrong conduct as a whole. It was this conception that underscored the general position amongst teachers that “so long as one is able to tap into mindfulness this way, then I guess the religious argument becomes formalistic.” As articulated in more detail throughout the discussion above, respondents thus felt that there was little further need to expand on the Buddhist tradition in particular, or religion more generally, given that the practice of mindfulness was believed to speak for itself.

In fact, many admitted that they felt a close affinity with one of the leading Buddhist figures of the mindfulness milieu, Thit Nhat Hhan (1987). A number of respondents even claimed to have visited Plum village, the monastic community founded in Bordeaux, widely regarded as the leading international example of a community based on the principles of mindfulness practice today. Even though some stated to have felt a certain sense of unease at first about the clearly visible Buddhist structure around which the community is organised, they were soon able to “overcome these prejudices which were really our own, and realise what was really happening here.” Thus, after becoming more familiar with its principal leader and the overall dynamics of the community, respondents claimed that Thit Nhat

Hhan rarely considered himself to be a Buddhist, and that the success of Plum Village lay in its ability to separate the core of mindfulness from all that is culture and religion specific. So much so that a number of respondents shared a general sense of distrust against any suggestion that Buddhist might hold a more direct and authentic access to mindfulness. As summed up in the following account:

“I think it’s probably a good thing that we have these debates, but they leave me cold to be honest. To me they’re missing the point. I think when you touch the practice you know the practice. And if you care about the practice then regardless of your perspective, to me that’s what matters.”

In other words, mindfulness is effectively held by its teachers to supersede even Buddhism itself, let alone other religious claims towards attaining its essence. Closely echoing the ethos of self-spirituality more generally, traditional religions are thus seen as secondary rules and forms of beliefs, while the shorthand of mindfulness practice is believed to offer access to the very core essence that held to lie within each and every religious tradition.

This in the end leaves a crucial dynamic of the mindfulness milieu unanswered. Given this unique balancing act of simultaneously identifying with a deeply sacred ontology on the one hand and delivering it purely as a secular heuristic on the other, how do mindfulness teachers present their practice to their students and clients in public? In the final analysis, it is precisely at this juncture that one of the most critical elements of the contemporary mindfulness profession becomes most evident. Thus, having explicitly identified themselves as espousing deeply held spiritual positions, one of the respondents offered the following clarification with regard to the actual dissemination of mindfulness in practice:

“I’m very practical and I don’t mention the spiritual issues. I teach them how to observe their mind, and how to feel and deal with their emotions. How to live their life more consciously and wisely, so there is no space for spiritual questions.”

In other words, respondents were deliberately pursuing highly pragmatic approaches to their teaching that focus exclusively on the secular heuristics of mindfulness including assisting their students throughout their implementations. Yet at the same time, closely echoing Hall’s (2014) original findings regarding the Polish spiritual milieu more generically, these findings also illustrate that practitioners were open and willing to embed their spiritual discourses according to shifting contextual settings. While notions of

spirituality were widely recognised as playing an important role within their personal work, one of the interviewees thus confessed that “[she] only happened to go into aspects of spirituality if [she had] a conscious person on the other side.” Another recalled an exchange that took place during training:

“Well, I once said to my teacher, ‘learning mindfulness clearly leads us towards spirituality’, and she said ‘yes, it does, but we don’t say that because it puts people off’. So I don’t call myself spiritual, but I firmly feel that mindfulness and spirituality have a lot of common identity.”

In the final analysis, the following account arguably offered the most telling expression of these dynamics, stating that “I think there is kind of a conspiracy of silence around spirituality and mindfulness.” Responses thus clearly pointed towards significant strategic heuristic at play within the dissemination of mindfulness in practice. Though motivated by a spiritual outlook, teachers deliberately avoided the subject in order to avoid the risks of alienating clients or indeed causing distractions from the meditation practice to be pursued.

In an effort to do justice to their evasive strategies, respondents in turn stressed that their seeming dishonesty was merely the outcome of the continued suspicion of the general public towards mindfulness. To illustrate, part-time teachers of mindfulness in particular were especially prone to raise concerns about some of their experiences in trying to introduce mindfulness within other professional settings. One of the respondents for instance who worked as a full-time school teacher spoke of significant obstacles he had to overcome before successfully introducing mindfulness as a selective option for his students. The school’s Vice Principal had raised concerns of the Buddhist pretext of mindfulness meditation, claiming that it represented a form of Buddhist prayer and led to the danger of indoctrinating students into Buddhism. Following a trail run which included the Vice Principal among students however, the teacher was able to regain trust from the rest of the school’s management team by repeatedly assuring them that the provision of mindfulness was distinct from Buddhism, and that it could be applied equally by those with a Christian or indeed nonreligious convictions.

More indirectly, another part-time teacher who worked as a manager of her own small business which included six members of staff, expressed reservations about openly sharing her involvement in mindfulness with her colleagues in her workplace:

“I’m trying to be more mindful at my work and manage mindfully. But it’s not a good idea to give mindfulness courses to your employees.”

I wouldn't like to change the roles. I'm a manager and an employer, and if I say anything about mindfulness, it might be difficult. Maybe they would be afraid of saying something. And if they think I'm a Buddhist priest or something, I may lose trust in the workplace."

In effect, their strategic approach towards teaching mindfulness purely on secular grounds as opposed to more spiritual ones was less the result of their secular conceptions of mindfulness as such, and more the critical perception of mindfulness by the public as a whole.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to present an opening into the relatively overlooked domain of the so-called mindfulness movement by looking more closely at the ways in which Polish mindfulness teachers identify, talk about, and make sense of their mindfulness practice as a whole. Mindfulness meditation continues to be depicted as a purely secular pursuit of self-help and improving wellbeing. Closer inspection of the ways in which mindfulness teachers talk about and make sense of their position and motivations however suggests that the picture may be more complicated than appears at first sight, calling us to look beyond concerns over medical efficacy alone and place greater emphasis on the postsecular hack of mindfulness (Arat 2017).

Based on a closer scrutiny of the sociological make-up of this novel cohort of practitioners, this study has presented a fresh perspective on key debates concerning the contemporary mindfulness movement and its relationship to Buddhism. This in the end raises significant questions over the extent to which it can be said to denote a secular or religious practice, and the wider implications of such shifts to secularisation debates as a whole.

In sum, the cohort of mindfulness teachers in Poland represents a strongly female-led group with a predominantly middle-class and highly educated background. At first sight, initial articulations of mindfulness practice by its principal proponents closely echo its original ethos as put forward by Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994, 2003, 2011). That is, a strictly secular form of practice with no religious associations. Talking to mindfulness teachers more directly however has led to the emergence of a much more complicated picture.

Above all, mindfulness is widely regarded as a vocation rather than a profession, a form of engagement that is widely considered to "emerge out of them". More specifically, while teachers were found to place special importance on regular formal practice, mindfulness was widely envisioned

as representing more than a mere technology. Interviewees thus repeatedly emphasised a *sui generis* formulation of mindfulness, stressing throughout that it represented an inherently sacred category that could not be reduced to either lower or higher categories. In the end, it was this very conception of mindfulness that underscored their claims that it influenced their identities as a whole, within and outside of performing mindfulness sessions. In the final analysis, mindfulness teachers were thus found to espouse deeply spiritual motivations for their practice. They unanimously expressed a close affinity with being spiritual but not religious, and more significantly perhaps, claimed that mindfulness superseded even Buddhism itself.

Despite this underlying stance however, the ways in which respondents engaged with mindfulness in public highlighted a deliberately strategic stance that prioritised the secular, pragmatic elements of meditation over and above more deeply felt spiritual convictions. When pressed further, this was expressed as resulting from the Catholic context of the Polish public sphere including continued suspicions within popular conceptions of mindfulness as being essentially Buddhist in nature.

This study thus raises a number of critical questions regarding the study of mindfulness in particular and the sociology of religion and spirituality more generally. At first sight, the presumed level of public mistrust within Polish society as a whole could be identified as a critical factor in subjects' deliberate attempts at emphasising the practical and cognitive elements of mindfulness practice over and above the spiritual motivations that underpin their engagement more personally. Validating this claim however calls for further comparative studies of mindfulness in other settings including Catholic and non-Catholic contexts, as well as those where Buddhism is more deeply entrenched in the public imagination.

Poland remains a relative newcomer to the mindfulness scene. With less than 60 registered teachers in the country today, it remains to be seen whether the present 'conspiracy of silence' over the spiritual ethos of mindfulness will endure or be superseded by a more explicitly spiritual make-up as more and more people enter the market in the future.

Moreover, it remains to be tested to what extent the present picture can be said to be representative of the milieu as a whole, including other non-registered teachers as well as the wider range of practitioners who may engage in regular forms of mindfulness meditation without going as far as to becoming teachers. Alternatively, to what extent might there be a factional split between consumers and suppliers of mindfulness in the marketplace? Regardless of the particular make-up of the Polish landscape however, these findings call for a significant re-appraisal of our existing formulation of mindfulness practice.

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KOŁODZIEJSKA MARTA

Tylos sąmokslas: sąmoningumo mokymai Lenkijoje

Santrauka

Meditacija yra viena iš seniausių religinės praktikos formų, išgyvenanti atgimimą, kuriam impulsą Budizmo theravada tradicija. Išpopuliarėjusi joga ir meditacija atspindi Vakarų visuomenių rytietiškumo (Easternization) tendencijas. Šiame straipsnyje siekiama prisidėti prie minėtų tendencijų tyrimų ir pateikti pirmąjį kokybinį lenkų, dalyvaujančių sąmoningumo mokymuose tyrimą. Remdamiesi interviu su pagrindiniais Lenkijos viešosios erdvės praktikais, pateikiame įrodymus, patvirtinančius, jog sąmoningumo mokymai turi labiau dvasinę formą nei buvo manyta iki šiol. Tokie tyrimo rezultatai skatina naujai pažvelgti į vis sudėtingesnius ryšius, kuriais mūsų esamos religijos, dvasingumo ir sekuliarumo kategorijos yra susijusios vis dar mažai ištirtoje Europos žemyno dalyje.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: meditacija, sąmoningumas, dvasingumas, sąmoningumo mokymai, katalikas, religija Lenkijoje.