

Textual Erasures of Religion: The Power of Books to Redefine Yoga and Mindfulness Meditation as Secular Wellness Practices in North American Public Schools

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Volume 6, Number 2, Spring 2015

Livre et religion
Religion and the Book

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1032713ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1032713ar>

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Publisher(s)

Groupe de recherches et d'études sur le livre au Québec

ISSN

1920-602X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Brown, C. G. (2015). Textual Erasures of Religion: The Power of Books to Redefine Yoga and Mindfulness Meditation as Secular Wellness Practices in North American Public Schools. *Mémoires du livre / Studies in Book Culture*, 6(2). <https://doi.org/10.7202/1032713ar>

Article abstract

This essay argues that books, broadly defined to include print and internet publications, played a crucial role in the cultural mainstreaming, including adoption by public schools, of non-Christian religious practices such as yoga and meditation. Promotional books, tactically and ironically, played on the textual bias of Christianity, and especially Protestantism, to re-brand practices borrowed from religious traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, as scientific techniques for exercise and stress-reduction, thereby reintegrating religion into public education. The essay begins with a brief history of religion in U.S. and Canadian public education, explains the textual bias of North American assumptions about religion, and analyzes how twentieth-century promoters of practice-centered religions tactically wielded books to increase public acceptance of non-Christian religious practices. The essay focuses on two twenty-first-century examples of religion-based, textually mediated public-school curricula: the Sonima Foundation's Health and Wellness program of Ashtanga yoga and The Hawn Foundation's MindUP program of mindfulness meditation.

TEXTUAL ERASURES OF RELIGION: The Power of Books to Redefine Yoga and Mindfulness Meditation as Secular Wellness Practices in North American Public Schools

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that books, broadly defined to include print and internet publications, played a crucial role in the cultural mainstreaming, including adoption by public schools, of non-Christian religious practices such as yoga and meditation. Promotional books, tactically and ironically, played on the textual bias of Christianity, and especially Protestantism, to re-brand practices borrowed from religious traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, as scientific techniques for exercise and stress-reduction, thereby reintegrating religion into public education. The essay begins with a brief history of religion in U.S. and Canadian public education, explains the textual bias of North American assumptions about religion, and analyzes how twentieth-century promoters of practice-centered religions tactically wielded books to increase public acceptance of non-Christian religious practices. The essay focuses on two twenty-first-century examples of religion-based, textually mediated public-school curricula: the Sonima Foundation's Health and Wellness program of Ashtanga yoga and The Hawn Foundation's MindUP program of mindfulness meditation.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans le présent article, nous soutenons que les livres (que nous définirons comme incluant à la fois les publications imprimées et numériques), notamment par leur incorporation au programme d'écoles publiques, ont joué un rôle fondamental dans la normalisation culturelle de pratiques religieuses d'origine non chrétienne comme le yoga et la méditation. De manière stratégique mais non moins ironique, des ouvrages promotionnels ont su profiter du préjugé favorable envers l'écrit observé au sein du christianisme (et plus particulièrement dans le protestantisme) pour conférer une nouvelle image à des pratiques empruntées à d'autres traditions

religieuses telles l'hindouisme et le bouddhisme, et désormais présentées comme des techniques scientifiques d'exercice et de réduction du stress. La religion se trouve alors réintégrée au système public d'éducation. Nous brossons d'abord un bref historique de la place de la religion à l'école publique aux États-Unis et au Canada; expliquons en quoi consiste le parti pris textuel qui teinte la réflexion en matière de religion en Amérique du Nord; puis analysons la manière dont les promoteurs de religions axées sur la pratique se sont servis des livres, au xx^e siècle, pour favoriser l'acceptation de pratiques religieuses non chrétiennes par le grand public. Nous nous attardons à deux cas, pour le xxi^e siècle, de programmes scolaires publics où la religion se fait présente par l'entremise des textes : le programme de santé et bien-être par l'entremise du yoga ashtanga de la Sonima Foundation, et le programme MindUP de la Hawn Foundation, qui préconise la méditation de pleine conscience.

North Americans founded public schools to promote a Christian, dominantly Protestant and word-centered, understanding of religion. Twentieth-century courts in the United States and Canada ruled that public schools, as agents of the state, should not teach religious practices such as prayer and Bible reading. Nevertheless, in recent decades a growing number of public schools in both countries have introduced yoga and mindfulness meditation for their “secular” benefits, even though these practices are closely connected, both historically and today, with religious traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Western metaphysical spirituality. This essay argues that books, broadly defined to include print and internet publications, played a crucial role in this cultural transformation. Promotional books, tactically and ironically, played on the textual bias of Protestantism to re-brand practice-centered religions as scientific techniques for exercise and stress-reduction, thereby reintegrating religion into public education.

To make this argument, the essay begins with a brief history of religion in public education, explains the textual bias of North American assumptions about religion, and analyzes how promoters of practice-centered religions—as well as those who want to borrow practices from other religions—tactically wielded books. The essay illustrates the reintegration of religion into public education by focusing on two examples of influential twenty-first-century published curricula: the Sonima Foundation's Health and Wellness program of Ashtanga yoga and The Hawn Foundation's MindUP program of mindfulness meditation.

Religion and Public Education in North American History

Historians of North American public education often trace its genesis to the Massachusetts School Act of 1647, informally called “The Old Deluder Act.” The law expressed fear that the “old deluder, Satan,” tried to “keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures,” and so every township had to appoint a teacher or open a grammar school, funded by parents or the “inhabitants in general,” to teach children to read the Bible. The first New England schools relied on textbooks imported from England. The English printer Benjamin Harris fled the rule of Catholic James II for Boston in 1686, and soon thereafter republished a textbook he had printed in England, *The Protestant Tutor*, re-titled *The New England Primer*, with the first edition appearing by 1690. As other communities followed New England’s model in establishing common schools, many adopted *The New England Primer*. The textbook interweaves reading lessons with Protestant Christian doctrine, including selections from the King James Bible, catechisms, and Christian aphorisms, such as “In Adam’s fall / We sinned all,” and “The idle Fool / Is whipt at school.”¹

The U.S. Constitution formally disestablished religion at the federal level with the First Amendment (1791), stipulating that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Massachusetts was the last state to follow suit in 1833. Nevertheless, public schools across the United States continued to adopt Protestant-influenced curricula and to instruct children in devotional reading of the King James Bible and prayer, which educators perceived as instilling “non-sectarian” or “universal” moral values.²

In the mid-twentieth century, the U.S. Supreme Court scrutinized the promotion of Christianity through public schools, where compulsory attendance and the impressionability of children heighten the risks of religious establishment. The 1947 case of *Everson v. Board of Education* upheld a New Jersey law that used tax money to reimburse parents for busing students to Catholic as well as public schools; the Court simultaneously rejected the constitutionality of giving tax dollars to religious schools, since “neither a state nor the Federal Government . . . can pass laws which aid one religion, aid all religions, or prefer one religion over another.” In the

landmark ruling of *Engel v. Vitale* (1962), the Supreme Court found that even “denominationally neutral,” “voluntary” public-school-sponsored prayer violates the establishment clause. In *School District of Abington Township v. Schempp* (1963), the Court ruled against school-sponsored Bible reading: reasoning that public schools must provide a “secular education,” imparting “needed temporal knowledge,” while maintaining a “strict and lofty neutrality as to religion.” Subsequent courts prohibited prayer at graduation ceremonies, *Lee v. Weisman* (1992), and student-led prayer at football games, *Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe* (2000).³

As of 2015, the Supreme Court has not heard a school yoga or meditation case. But, in *Malnak v. Yogi* (1979), the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit found that teaching Transcendental Meditation in public schools violates the establishment clause. A concurring opinion by Judge Arlin Adams infers that “if a Roman Catholic is barred from receiving aid from the government, so too should be a Transcendental Meditator.” The *Malnak* ruling notwithstanding, in 2015, a California appellate court upheld a school Health and Wellness program of Ashtanga yoga, despite the trial court’s finding that “yoga is religious”—a case that this essay will return to in due course.⁴

Canada’s history of religion and education differs in important respects from that of the United States. In seventeenth-century New France, Jesuit missionaries established schools to teach Catholicism and French culture. Following the British Conquest of 1759–1760, Anglican schools emerged, gradually however due to sparse settlement and lack of interest. Nineteenth-century Canadian school promoters rejected U.S. textbooks, instead importing *Irish Readers* that taught Christian doctrine and moral values, while avoiding controversies between Catholics and Protestants.⁵

Canada’s Constitution Act of 1867 made the state responsible for using public funds to support multiple denominational religious schools and non-sectarian public schools. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) protects “freedom of conscience and religion,” but Canada has no equivalent to the U.S. establishment clause. Nevertheless, in *Zylberg v. Sudbury Board of Education* (1988), the Ontario Court of Appeal ruled that school prayer violates the Charter, because it coerces religious practice by those who disagree with the prayers. The British Columbia Public Schools

Act (1872) permitted use of the Lord's Prayer; a 1944 revision made Bible reading and recitation of the Lord's Prayer mandatory. In *Russow v. British Columbia* (1989), the British Columbia Supreme Court found these laws to violate the Charter. The British Columbia School Act (1996) requires that "all schools and Provincial schools must be conducted on strictly secular and non-sectarian principles." In 2005, Quebec passed a law replacing denominational religious education with a "secular" course in "Ethics and Religious Culture." Quebec requires school boards to hire "spiritual animators" to provide "religion neutral" "spiritual care and guidance"—instruction that includes meditating to "enter into" the "universe of celebrations and rituals" of Aboriginal and Asian cultures.⁶

Borrowing, or "entering into," another culture's traditions may not always be a benign project, as postcolonial theory suggests.⁷ The recent push to integrate yoga and mindfulness meditation into public schools has been dominated by Euro-Americans who use printed texts to extricate "techniques" from, in their words, the "cultural baggage" of Asian religions. Promoters promise to enforce disciplines of self-regulation on at-risk youth, many of them African American or Latino, whose "acting out" constitutes a perceived threat to the safety of the reformers' own children. Promotional videos embedded in websites typically feature schools with large minority populations transformed by yoga and/or mindfulness into oases of non-stressful academic achievement, peace, kindness, and optimism. The British Mindfulness in Schools Project website un-self-consciously describes mindfulness as "enjoyable and civilizing, for pupils and staff."⁸

Schools greet yoga and meditation programs with enthusiasm because of a perceived educational crisis that bans on prayer and Bible reading seemed only to exacerbate. In the United States, religious disestablishment coincided with Civil Rights-era desegregation, the Immigration Act of 1965's removal of restrictions based on national origins, and accelerating urbanization. Many observers blamed these social developments for a seeming epidemic of poor academic performance, bullying, violence, stress, obesity, sex, and drugs, challenges from which Canadian schools have scarcely been immune. Mounting social problems created market demand for constitutionally permissible programs that provide increasingly diverse student populations with the moral and ethical character that educators once inculcated through Christian texts and practices.⁹

Recognizing and Misrecognizing Religion

Christianity, especially in its Protestant forms, is a text-centered religion. The ideal of the “priesthood of all believers”—that every person has a right and responsibility to read the Bible—spread across Europe in the sixteenth century through the Protestant Reformation, Johannes Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press, and new travel technologies. Soon Christians were printing and disseminating not only Bibles, but a great many other texts calculated to use the Word, and a multiplication of godly words, to sanctify the world.¹⁰

Nineteenth-century missionaries introduced yoga and meditation to European and North American audiences as evidence of “heathen” “superstition” and need of the gospel. An early twentieth-century news headline, from the *New York American* (1910), illustrates the persistence of this view: “Police Break in on Weird Hindu Rites: Girls and Men Mystics Cease Strange Dance as ‘Priest’ is Arrested.” As Westerners designated newly encountered religions as “Hinduism” or “Buddhism,” they worried about the apparent doctrinal deficiency of these traditions. Christians identified “true religion” as requiring orthodox beliefs and verbal proclamation of the gospel that Jesus is the saviour of the world. In support of this conviction, Christians have often quoted Bible verses such as Romans 10:9 KJV: “That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.” North American Christians have tended to view practices as “religious” when, and only when, verbal explanations frame them as serving religious purposes. Thus, consuming bread and grape juice is a snack, except when verbally identified as the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper. Dipping under water is taking a bath, unless doing so is called baptism.¹¹

North American Christians have tended to read their textual bias onto other religions, placing more emphasis on “sacred texts” of other traditions than many participants place upon them. Christians, and those whose ideas of “religion” have been shaped by a Christian-dominated culture, have been prone to misunderstand practice-oriented, embodied religious traditions in which practice is itself essential to expressing and instilling religious devotion. For many Hindus and Buddhists who understand knowledge of

the sacred to be experiential, rather than merely intellectual, religious significance exists directly in the doing, not secondarily in believing or saying something while performing bodily or mental practices. In the religious origins of yoga and meditation, body and spirit are not separable categories but aspects of each other, and bodily practices are envisioned as achieving both physical and spiritual goals.¹²

To simplify, many of India's yoga traditions share a religious purpose: attaining human salvation, variously defined as release from a suffering existence and the cycle of death and rebirth; union with ultimate reality; realizing the true Self, which is divine; or spending eternity in relationship with the divine. Similarly, in many Buddhist traditions the ultimate purpose of right mindfulness, practiced alongside other aspects of the eightfold path, is to end suffering by extinguishing attachments, thus leading to freedom from the effects of karma and reincarnation, or entrance into a transcendent state of enlightenment or nirvana.¹³

Those who teach, or promote through print, practices such as yoga or mindfulness meditation may not provide verbal explanations that sound religious to untrained North American ears. There are often two reasons for this omission in a North American cultural context. First, promoters presume that the practice itself, rather than the verbal framing, achieves religious goals such as yoking with the divine or enlightenment; therefore verbal proclamation of beliefs is unnecessary. Second, proponents understand that they must avoid language that sounds like non-Christian religion if they want to win a broader audience and avoid legal challenges.

Books promoting yoga and meditation often make tactical use of the Christian tendencies to define religion in terms of doctrine and thus fail to recognize as “religious” nonverbal uses of bodily practices to cultivate direct experience of the sacred. Promotional books use speech acts to deny that practices are religious and to re-define them as secular, scientifically-validated techniques for achieving health and “universal” spirituality.¹⁴ The final section of this essay gestures toward a theory to explain—without invoking an essentialist view that yoga and mindfulness are inherently religious—how instruction in these practices may instill religious beliefs despite the replacement of religious-sounding with secular-sounding language.

Publishing Yoga for American Audiences

The earliest known written references to yoga are in what people today identify as Hindu texts. The *Upanishads* (c. 800–400 B.C.E.) and *Bhagavad Gita* (c. 200 B.C.E.–200 C.E.) describe yoga as meditative disciplines used to withdraw one’s senses from the world to yoke with the Divine, or *Brahman*. The *Yoga Sutras*, attributed to the Indian sage Patanjali (c. 200 B.C.E.–200 C.E.), and often honoured today as defining “classical” or “Ashtanga” yoga, prescribe eight limbs: moral restraint (*yama*), ethical observance/self-purification (*niyamas*), posture (*asana*), focused breathing (*pranayama*), withdrawal of the mind from the senses/calming the mind (*pratyahara*), concentration/attention (*dharana*), meditation (*dhyana*), and bliss/absorption into the Universal/union with *Brahman* (*samadhi*). Over a period of several hundred years, Hindu, Buddhist, and other (especially Jain) religious texts elaborated yoga theory and practice.¹⁵

Yoga arrived in America in 1805, when William Emerson, father of Ralph Waldo Emerson, published an English translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*. The younger Emerson, who read widely in Hindu texts, wielded his literary influence to raise sympathetic awareness of Hinduism among American intellectuals. Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau described his experiments with yoga in his now-classic *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods* (1854).¹⁶

The World Parliament of Religions of 1893, hosted in Chicago, Illinois, marked a milestone for the favourable reception of “Eastern religions” in North America. The Indian Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) won a sympathetic audience by framing Hinduism and yoga as “science,” loosely defined as spiritual practice that produces observable results. Adopting biological language, he compared *kundalini* serpent energy to “nerve force,” described *chakras*, or spiritual energy vortexes, as nerve “plexuses,” and asserted that the “pineal gland” in the brain is home to the god Shiva. Nine volumes of Vivekananda’s written works, mostly compilations of his numerous public lectures, are still available today; a 4000-page Kindle edition runs \$4.99. Embracing Vivekananda’s strategy of framing yoga as “science,” the Indian-born Hindu Paramhansa Yogananda (1893–1952) published a best seller: *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946). Vivekananda taught that “Yoga is a system of scientific methods for reuniting the soul with the

Spirit.” Although this understanding of science contrasts with how conventional scientists use the term, a growing number of Americans began to imagine yoga as scientific—and perhaps more compatible with modern science than Christianity.¹⁷

Over the course of the twentieth century, a widening stream of books promoted yoga as a scientific technique for enhancing physical health and beauty. Eugenie Peterson, born in Latvia to Swedish and Russian parents, took the name Indra Devi after studying yoga with the renowned guru Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (1888–1989) in India. Opening a yoga studio in Hollywood, California, Devi attracted celebrities as she framed yoga as healthful postures and breathing in her book *Forever Young, Forever Healthy: Simplified Yoga for Modern Living* (1953). Devi’s first book avoided giving religious offence by remaining silent about yoga’s implicitly pre-modern spiritual purposes. By contrast, Devi’s second book—written after demonstrations of yoga’s physical benefits overcame initial resistance—introduced yoga’s spiritual aspects. In *Yoga for Americans* (1959), Devi explained that yoga postures and breathing raise *kundalini* energy, or “Serpent power,” through the “chakra system,” bringing the yogi to the “highest goal,” as “his individual consciousness unites with Universal Consciousness, and he enters a state of ultimate bliss, called *Samadhi*.” Many subsequent popularizers adopted a similar approach: beginning with yoga’s physical benefits and later introducing its spiritual purposes.¹⁸

Newspapers raised sympathetic interest in yoga during the counterculture of the 1960s—notably, covering the Beatles’ pilgrimage to India in 1968 to learn yoga and Transcendental Meditation in hopes of curbing their drug addiction. Television shows demystified yoga by allowing Americans to watch—and follow along—with posture and breathing techniques promoted as exercise. In 1961, a Los Angeles TV station introduced *Yoga and You* with Virginia Denison and *Yoga for Health* with Richard Hittleman. Cincinnati’s public television station aired *Hatha Yoga* with Liliás Folan in 1974; within months, 124 other PBS stations had picked up the broadcast.¹⁹

Yoga Journal commenced publication in 1975, with the explicit goal of convincing American readers that yoga “wasn’t weird” or “voodoo.” At the time, only about three percent of Americans practiced yoga—by contrast to the 7 percent—or 22 million Americans—who did so by 2012. The first

issue of *Yoga Journal* sold scarcely three hundred copies. The subscription list grew to 55,000 by 1990 and 350,000 by 2007. The journal won an expanding clientele by foregrounding the physiological benefits of yoga while alluding more subtly to spirituality. In typical fashion, a 2011 article offers instructions on performing the “eagle” pose (*garudasana*). Physically, the pose “stretches and broadens the area between the shoulder blades, releasing upper-back tension and opening the back of the heart. It also stretches your shoulders, ankles, hips, and wrists.” The author also explains that the pose takes its name from Garuda, a “mythical bird in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions” that carried the god Vishnu. Thus, the “inner work of the pose” is to “open to the notion that you can find balance even when you are all twisted up.” The terms “inner” and “balance” gesture delicately toward the spiritual goals of yoga.²⁰

Christian authors and publishing houses played an important role in overcoming religious resistance to yoga, given the high percentages of North Americans who identify as Christian—66% of Canadians and 71% of U.S. adults. Denominational publishers lent religious authority to Christian yoga books, while Christian trade presses reached large audiences. Such texts assuaged Christian worries that yoga may be idolatrous while developing a distinctive market niche.²¹

The Catholic Paulist Press legitimized Father Thomas Ryan’s book, *Prayer of Heart and Body: Meditation and Yoga as Christian Spiritual Practice* (1994), and companion DVD, *Yoga Prayer: An Embodied Christian Spiritual Practice* (2005). The texts reframe yoga practices using Christian devotional language. In Ryan’s rendering, “for centuries, yoga has been used to prepare the body for meditation and communion with the divine.” The text remains silent about differences between how Hindus and Christians envision the generic term “divine.” He instead invites Christians to “imagine what it would feel like to pray with your whole body.” The text implies that yoga prayer can be directed toward the Christian God as easily as other deities, such as the sun god *Surya*—the object of *Surya Namaskara*, or Sun Salutations, as envisioned by the sequence’s developer Krishnamacharya. The text invokes Christian concepts such as salvation, transfiguration, and glorification, but redefines them to argue that “salvation doesn’t mean getting out of this skin, but rather being transfigured and glorified in it.”²²

A monastic order of the Episcopal Church, Society of Saint John the Evangelist, published Episcopal priest Nancy Roth's *An Invitation to Christian Yoga* (2001). The text Christianizes yoga by relabeling poses and mantras: rewriting "Salute to the *Sun*" as "Salute to the *Son*," and advising recitation of the Lord's Prayer during the practice. The physical gesture of prostration remains unchanged, while an act of verbal substitution exchanges objects of devotion.²³

A Christian trade press, Thomas Nelson, published Susan Bordenkircher's *Yoga for Christians* (2006). The text redefines the purpose of yoga breathing (*pranayama*) from facilitating the flow of *prana*, universal, life-force energy, to "breathing in the Holy Spirit." Through a speech act, the goal of performing yoga postures becomes "worship of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ." In like fashion, Time Warner's Faith Words published Brook Boone's *Holy Yoga: Exercise for the Christian Body and Soul* (2007). The text "Christianizes" concepts found in religious yoga traditions by reframing them as aspects of "God's truth in creation"—without substantively changing these ideas, for instance that humans are "energetic beings" whose vitality accumulates at "chakras," and that there is a universal "vibrational frequency" with the sound "Om."²⁴

Many Christians tend to assume that one's belief, or "intention," determines whether a practice is religious or what kind of religion it expresses. If someone engages in a practice intending it to be Christian, then it is by definition Christian. The evangelical emphasis on personal testimony makes it hard to refute the experiential claim that practices bring one into closer relationship with Christ. Thus, Boone summarily dismisses the charge of one critic that Holy Yoga is "Satanic" by asserting that "my own experience has taught me that this view is not the truth." In one chapter, "Answering the Objections," Boone closes off further discussion by declaring her evangelical identity: "remember that in Holy Yoga, the answer to practically every question is two words: Jesus Christ." Claiming devotion to Jesus is the ultimate evangelical argument stopper.²⁵

Not all Christians find such linguistic maneuvers persuasive. In 2007, the Southern Baptist Convention, in response to criticisms, removed Bordenkircher's and Boone's books from its Lifeway online bookstore. Such resistance notwithstanding, the ranks of Christian yogis are growing. A 1998

survey found that the overwhelming majority of American yoga practitioners were urban, college-educated, baby-boomer, non-Christian women. Just ten years later, a 2007 *Christianity Today* survey revealed that two percent of those “more active” in church used yoga to “grow spiritually,” compared with four percent of those “less active” in church.²⁶

Editing Religion out of an Ashtanga Yoga Curriculum

Relatively few Christian parents or churches have objected to the growing trend of integrating yoga into public-school curricula. Christian parents did, however, file suit when, in 2012, the Jois Foundation awarded the Encinitas Union School District in San Diego, California a \$533,720 grant to introduce a yoga program district-wide. The terms of the grant—an unpublished, written document that parents requested under California’s Freedom of Information Act—required that EUSD’s “comprehensive Yoga Instruction” have the “core foundation” of “Ashtanga yoga,” taught by instructors “trained” and “certified” by the Jois Foundation.²⁷

Billionaire hedge funders Paul and Sonia Tudor Jones founded the Jois Foundation in 2011 to honour Sonia’s recently deceased Ashtanga yoga guru, Krishna Pattabhi Jois (1915–2009), and to “spread the gospel of Ashtanga throughout the country and even internationally.” Jois, the developer of modern Ashtanga yoga, traced Ashtanga’s lineage to the eight-limbed yoga of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*, and ultimately to the god Shiva, as the first teacher of Ashtanga. In published interviews easily accessible on the internet, Jois explained that the goal of all Ashtanga yoga is *samadhi*: “The reason we do yoga is to become one with God and to realize Him in our hearts. You can lecture, you can talk about God, but when you practice correctly, you come to experience God inside.” Ashtanga emphasizes postures (*asanas*) and breathing (*pranayama*) as paths for achieving union with *Brahman*. Jois taught that although *asanas* have the “appearance” of an “external and physical discipline,” if anyone practices correctly, “the love of God will develop . . . whether they want it or not.” Ashtanga always begins with Sun Salutations (*Surya Namaskara*), which Jois described as “the ultimate salutation to the sun god,” Surya, and an easier way “to pray to the sun god” than recitation of Vedic chants. Ashtanga ends with lotus and corpse (*savasana*) poses, symbolic of religious enlightenment.²⁸

The Encinitas Union School District piloted its Ashtanga yoga program in 2011–12, and took it district-wide the following year. EUSD and Jois Foundation representatives partnered in developing a written curriculum, titled “On the Mat,” which EUSD posted on the district website in November 2012. The curriculum—which uses Taoist yin-yang symbols in place of bullet points—alludes to each of Ashtanga’s eight limbs, features pictures of children performing Sun Salutations and sitting in lotus position, provides guided meditation scripts, and articulates the goal of bringing the “inner spirit of each child to the surface.” As parents (many of them Christians, but also some Hindus and atheists) complained, and eventually filed suit, EUSD progressively edited out elements of the written curriculum: removing Sanskrit names for poses, yin/yang symbols, and overtly religious language, and adding secular-sounding character quotations. The revised curriculum, prepared for trial in May 2013, and then posted on the EUSD website, is linguistically stripped down to avoid the easiest grounds for objection; gone, for instance, are the guided meditation scripts and references to children’s “inner spirit,” but the curriculum still teaches Ashtanga’s core practices, such as Sun Salutations, lotus, focused breathing, and meditation.²⁹

EUSD also produced a promotional video that they entered into evidence at trial. The video opens with “Eddie Stern, Health and Wellness Project Manager – New York” explaining in religion-neutral language that “the position that we hold our body in affects our mind.” The caption introducing Stern omits mentioning that Stern, who lives in New York City, directs a combined Ganesh Temple and Ashtanga yoga studio dedicated by Stern’s guru, Pattabhi Jois. In videotaped and printed interviews of Stern downloadable from websites, he describes learning from Jois that “in order to have a healthy and successful yoga discipline there needs to be a balance between the physical and the spiritual” and one must “love to worship Ganesh and all the other gods.” The EUSD promotional video omits religious-sounding descriptions of yoga, but features children performing Sun Salutations and, cued by a meditation bell, closing their eyes to meditate while sitting in lotus and forming circles with their fingers (*jnanamudra*) that symbolize subordination of the individual spirit by the Universal Spirit.³⁰

The judge ruled that “yoga,” including “Ashtanga” yoga, “is religious,” and noted that he found EUSD’s “partnership” with the Jois Foundation

“troublesome.” Nevertheless, he allowed EUSD’s yoga program to continue, since the revised written curriculum did not explicitly advance or inhibit religion. In April 2015, an appellate court upheld the trial court decision. The Encinitas yoga trial taught Ashtanga promoters how to revise print and internet publications to avoid constitutional challenges. Early versions of the Jois Foundation website made the religious goals of yoga transparent. Once the program was litigated, the website changed in two phases. First, its host replaced religious language with the space-holder: “OUR WEBSITE IS UNDERWAY.” Later, it reinvented the website with a religiously clean public face.³¹

During the trial, one particular blog post, written by yoga-promoter Carol Horton, called attention to the failure of the Jois Foundation web presence to assuage concerns that it was promoting religion. The post, “Yoga Train Wreck in Encinitas: Or, What’s UP with the Jois Foundation??,” on the blog *Think Body Electric* (June 1, 2013), generated a modest 111 Facebook “likes” and 19 comments, but more importantly caught the attention of participants on both sides of the Encinitas case. The post offers a close reading of the Jois Foundation website, from the perspective of someone who wants to make yoga “more available in institutions such as schools, hospitals, and prisons.” When she heard of the lawsuit, Horton, like many other observers, “started looking for information on the Jois Foundation online. I expected to find material explaining precisely how and why the Foundation’s grant-making program differed from Jois Yoga’s overall commitment to Ashtanga.” What she found instead is that the Jois Yoga website is “full of what can only be described as religiously-inflected spiritual language,” with no disclaimers separating the Jois Foundation from Ashtanga’s religious agenda. For instance, the “Philosophy” page explains that the purpose of Sun Salutations is “to pray to the sun god.” After expressing frustration, Horton offers advice to those who would use internet publications to promote yoga for public schools: “How about a robust website that explains the philosophy behind the yoga in public schools grant-making program in depth? . . . How about a resource page of studies assessing the positive benefits of yoga for kids? How about a stated commitment to respecting the diverse religious commitments of a multicultural society, along with a detailed account of why yoga is well-suited to being adapted to all faith traditions – and none?”³²

Ashtanga promoters heeded Horton's advice. They distanced the Jois Foundation from Jois Yoga by taking the name Sonima Foundation—after Ashtanga aficionadas and Jois Yoga co-managers *Sonia* Tudor Jones and *Salima* Ruffin. The reinvented Sonima Foundation website avoids religious-sounding language. For the reader familiar with its history, the site acknowledges its lineage by stating that it was “founded in 2011”—the year the Jois Foundation was founded and two years before its renaming. The homepage declares that the “Sonima Health and Wellness curriculum provides children with skills that have been shown to minimize stress, lower incidences of bullying and violence, and improve school attendance and academic performance.” The site advertises the use of “best practices in health and wellness, including yoga based exercises; mindfulness practices; and nutrition education.” The site makes no reference to Jois Yoga, Ashtanga yoga, or Ashtanga's founder Pattabhi Jois—though the Jois Yoga website still has a link to “Foundation” that redirects to the Sonima website. As of April 2015, Sonima had expanded into 55 public schools in four states, with further expansion planned.³³

Publishing Mindfulness

There are numerous parallels between the mainstreaming of yoga and mindfulness meditation in America. At the 1893 World Parliament of Religions, the Japanese monk Soyen Shaku (1860–1919) framed Zen Buddhist meditation as “science.” Soyen's student, D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966), published twenty English-language books that selectively rendered the essence of Zen as unmediated encounter with reality “in exact agreement with the doctrines of modern science” and severable from “superstitious” aspects of Buddhism. The Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh (1926–) published more than 100 books, forty of them in English. The Trappist monk Thomas Merton's (1915–1968) best-selling autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948), popularized the idea of using Zen Buddhist meditation to revitalize Christian spirituality. These publicists were so successful in using tactical linguistic choices to make Zen sound appealing that by the late twentieth century, book titles beginning with the phrase *Zen and the Art of* append a countless variety of objects, such as golf, cooking, knitting, and gardening.³⁴

The popularization of mindfulness, one among several approaches to Buddhist meditation, is relatively recent, and can be traced in large part to one of Nhất Hạnh's Euro-American disciples, Jon Kabat-Zinn (1944–). A professor of medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, Kabat-Zinn founded the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society, and developed the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program. On a spiritual retreat at the Buddhist Insight Meditation Society in 1979, Kabat-Zinn had a flash of intuition for how to “take the heart of something as meaningful, as sacred if you will, as Buddha-dharma and bring it into the world in a way that doesn't dilute, profane or distort it, but at the same time is not locked into a culturally and tradition-bound framework that would make it absolutely impenetrable to the vast majority of people.” During a 1990 meeting, the Dalai Lama approved Kabat-Zinn's strategy of modifying vocabulary to make mindfulness acceptable to non-Buddhists.³⁵

In the Buddhist lineage followed by Kabat-Zinn, life is suffering, and the source of suffering is attachment. Practicing right mindfulness, the seventh aspect of the eightfold path of awakening, relieves suffering. Cultivating non-judgmental awareness of present thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations detaches the mind from pursuing desires or avoiding dislikes and dispels the “illusion” that one is a unique “self.” One becomes more empathetic and compassionate toward others by realizing that oneself and every “self” is part of the same universal Buddha nature.³⁶

Kabat-Zinn acknowledges the Buddhist origins of mindfulness in his published work, though at the same time his books reframe mindfulness as a technique that anyone can practice. *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness* (1990) greeted the public under a major trade imprint, Bantam Books, in order to make the “path of mindfulness accessible to mainstream Americans so that it would not feel Buddhist or mystical so much as sensible.” The book's introduction affirms that “it is no accident that mindfulness comes out of Buddhism, which has as its overriding concerns the relief of suffering and the dispelling of illusions.” Insisting in the early pages that “you don't have to be a Buddhist to practice” mindfulness, by the end of the book, Kabat-Zinn nevertheless reveals his advice to MBSR graduates: they need to find an ongoing meditation group such as an Insight Meditation Society, an organization that

Kabat-Zinn describes as having “a slightly Buddhist orientation.” Between the 1990s and 2010s, Kabat-Zinn reduced his public references to Buddhism in favour of vaunted scientific benefits, but when it came time to issue a revised and updated edition of *Full Catastrophe Living* in 2013, he chose not to replace Buddhist with scientific language. As he explains in the introduction to the revised edition, “I didn’t want the tail of the exploding scientific evidence for the efficacy of mindfulness and how it might exert its effects to wag the dog of the interior adventure.” Indeed, the revised edition has a preface written by the Buddhist monk Nhất Hạnh and copyrighted by the United Buddhist Church.³⁷

Many leaders in today’s mindfulness in schools movement trace their introduction to mindfulness to Kabat-Zinn. This is true of Congressman Tim Ryan, author of *A Mindful Nation: How a Simple Practice Can Help Us Reduce Stress, Improve Performance, and Recapture the American Spirit* (2012). Ryan boasts that he directed \$1 million in federal funds to introduce “secular” mindfulness into public schools in his district, and he urges readers to write to their representatives asking for mindfulness training at state-funded schools.³⁸

Assertions that public-school mindfulness programs are wholly “secular” beg the question of what it means to secularize mindfulness. Promotional texts such as Ryan’s employ one or more of six linguistic tactics: 1. Authors self-censor, carefully avoiding the terms Buddhism, religion, spirituality, or meditation. 2. Texts insist that mindfulness has been secularized, without defining the terms religion or secularity, explaining how mindfulness has been secularized, or exploring the corollary that a secularized practice presumably started off religious. 3. Texts deny that mindfulness is Buddhist, New Age, or religious, or at least unique to Buddhism. Some authors find it useful to concede that Buddhists have practiced mindfulness for millennia. This acknowledgement serves a two-fold function of, first, authenticating mindfulness as an empirically-validated practice, and, second, communicating that modern mindfulness has been unmoored from ancient religious associations. 4. Texts signal that mindfulness advocates are aware of, and undeserving of, the criticism that mindfulness is backdoor Buddhism. Analogies characterize such worries as irrational: misperceiving mindfulness as making one Buddhist is akin to worrying that eating pizza will make one Italian or drinking coffee will make one Ethiopian. In

addition to making fears of religious contamination seem ridiculous—the bugbears of xenophobic Christians—such analogizing further serves to associate Buddhism with foreign ethnicity and implies that Americanized mindfulness is self-evidently free from Buddhist religious connotations. 5. Texts categorize mindfulness as a scientific technique rather than a religious ritual by alluding to a mountain of scientific evidence—most prestigiously functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies showing that practice changes brain structure and function. 6. Texts assert that mindfulness cultivates universal moral and ethical virtues, such as compassion and generosity, and can therefore be practiced by Christians, Jews, Muslims, and atheists without religious conflict. These general patterns can be illustrated by focusing on one published mindfulness curriculum: MindUP.³⁹

Scripting MindUP as Neuroscience

Goldie Hawn’s 2005 autobiography, *A Lotus Grows in the Mud*, published by the trade press Putnam, gestures toward her decades-long practice of Buddhist meditation. In published interviews, Hawn says she has been meditating since 1972 and received a personalized mantra from the Dalai Lama. She founded the Hawn Foundation in 2005 while living in Vancouver, BC in order to promote mindfulness meditation in public schools across Canada, the United States, and globally. The Hawn Foundation’s “signature” educational program is MindUP.⁴⁰

An award-winning actress and movie producer, Hawn is skilled in what linguists term “code-switching” and sociologists call “frontstage/backstage” behavior—moving back and forth between vocabularies of multiple cultures to meet the expectations of different audiences. A video posted on the Buddhist Dalai Lama Center for Peace-Education website depicts Hawn speaking for the Center’s 2013 Heart-Mind Conference. In her speech, Hawn says that MindUP “all started” with “His Holiness” and the Dalai Lama Center; she developed a written curriculum in order to introduce Buddhist “contemplative practice” into the classroom “under a different name.” Hawn calls the MindUP curriculum a “script” written for audiences averse to Buddhism and wary of religion’s intrusion into public schools, yet hungry for moral revitalization: “I’m a producer, I’m gonna put this show on the road . . . and I got the script written, and I call it a script because it is, it’s one step of how the story gets told.” The MindUP “script” tells the story

that Buddhist mindfulness meditation is really “secular” neuroscience. The script replaces the terms “Buddhism” and “meditation” with “neuroscience” and “Core Practice” to denote the thrice-daily practice of mindfulness meditation in the classroom.⁴¹

The Hawn Foundation partnered with Scholastic books to publish *The MindUP Curriculum* in 2011. There are three volumes, all essentially similar in content, but tailored to the specific contexts of K–2, 3–5, and 6–8 grade classrooms. The textbooks exemplify what anthropologists term “bricolage”; they are a collection of cultural symbols and rituals loosely interwoven to produce a patchwork. The Hawn Foundation hired educators, neuroscientists, and psychologists to work with Buddhist meditators in constructing the curriculum. MindUP textbook sections alternate among contributions by each group—with the word “mindfulness” scattered liberally throughout. The textbooks consist in large part of simplified (and not always accurate) lessons in brain anatomy (“reflective, thinking prefrontal cortex” = good, “reflexive, reactive amygdala” = bad) and exhortations to be kind to others (pause for a moment before hitting another kid back), oneself (if you actually try your vegetables you might like them) and the earth (recycle instead of littering). Much of this content has nothing to do with meditation or mindfulness.⁴²

The MindUP curriculum insists that its unique benefits derive from its two distinctive features. First, “The MindUP Core Practice is the signature daily routine of the MindUP program.” The Core Practice of “deep belly breathing and attentive listening,” that is mindfulness meditation, is done three-times a day every school day. Cued by a resonant sound to begin and end practice, students focus attention on their breath and cultivate “non-judgmental awareness” of passing thoughts and emotions. This Core Practice, the curriculum promises, habituates children to respond to experiences in a mindful way that develops moral and ethical virtues of “empathy, compassion, patience, and generosity.” If the Core Practice of mindfulness is reducible to paying attention while breathing deeply, it is unclear how it makes one virtuous.⁴³

But the curriculum insists on a second point: “To get the full benefit of MindUP lessons, children will need to know a specific vocabulary.” What vocabulary word is repeated multiple times every lesson? Mindfulness. As

the curriculum unfolds, the term mindfulness carries both more and less weight than implied by the initial definition of “deep belly breathing and attentive listening.” Repetition of the term communicates that mindfulness—circularly defined as the opposite of “unmindfulness”—is the key to any positive attitude or behaviour. Lessons encourage students to think of role models who act in mindful ways—the custodian who picks up trash, a doctor who keeps calm in emergencies, or an imaginary dinosaur who eats its broccoli rather than spitting it out—though none of these role models may ever have used MindUP’s Core Practice. Defining mindfulness as synonymous with virtue makes it seem urgent that children cultivate mindfulness rather than unmindfulness. How do they do this? By engaging in the Core Practice every chance they get. Frequent repetition of the term mindfulness also points children to how they can “deepen” their practice; Googling the term mindfulness yields explicitly Buddhist hits.⁴⁴

Internet articles and podcasts directed toward Buddhists boast that “secular” mindfulness is “stealth Buddhism.” One podcast interview of Buddhist and “secular” mindfulness teacher Trudy Goodman of Insight LA in California and posted on BuddhistGeeks.com is even titled “Stealth Buddhism,” and concludes with both Goodman and her interviewers, Vincent and Emily Horn, laughing audibly at their success in promoting “crypto-Buddhism” in government-funded schools and hospitals. The British Mindfulness in Schools Project website includes a booklist prefaced by a note that “mindfulness can be presented as an entirely secular practice or as a more ‘spiritual’ one,” and specifies that several books listed are “more ‘Buddhist.’” The website also links to explicitly Buddhist mindfulness resources, such as Jack Kornfield’s Insight Meditation Center in Massachusetts and Spirit Rock Meditation Center in California.⁴⁵

Following links from The Hawn Foundation website also leads to Buddhism. The website includes a “Science Research Advisory Board” page that, as of April 2015, lists exactly one board member: Kimberly Schonert-Reichl, Associate Professor of Human Development Learning and Culture and Special Education at the University of British Columbia. This page links to biographical sketches describing Schonert-Reichl as a “long-time partner with the Dalai Lama Center for Peace-Education” and to videos of Schonert-Reichel reassuring Buddhist audiences that “secularized”

classroom mindfulness effectively advances “Buddhist Contemplative Care.”⁴⁶

One might expect such readily available textual evidence of Buddhist ties to give school administrators pause in adopting mindfulness programs, despite their secular packaging. This does not appear to be the case. Rather, school administrators who need resources to address a perceived educational crisis appear willing to overlook Buddhist language, as long as it is in outside sources and not written into the curriculum itself. One school administrator responded to allegations that MindUP promotes Buddhism by insisting that the published curriculum is “completely secular in every way. The secular curriculum does not mention any faith based lesson, information, or entity whatsoever.” This response reflects a Protestant-biased definition that equates “religion” with “faith,” verbal “information,” and worship of a divine “entity,”—but fails to recognize that religion can be expressed and instilled through practices as well as words, and that religion does not require belief in a supernatural entity.⁴⁷

Religion and Science in North American Print Culture

In a global information age, it is relatively easy for interested parties to find printed materials that survey the full spectrum of perspectives on practices such as yoga and mindfulness. It does not take much detective work to discover when promoters of a program select secular language for one audience and religious language for another. As one “secular” mindfulness teacher admitted, “we can’t hide” the Buddhist roots, since novices “only need to Google ‘mindfulness’ to find out!” The results of scientific research can also be Googled (though there are often pay walls for those without a university affiliation), and some studies significantly qualify the bullet-pointed lists of “scientifically validated” benefits featured in promotional texts. For instance, meta-analyses note that most clinical studies of yoga and meditation lack active control groups (and thus, apparent results may be an artifact of placebo or nonspecific effects); other interventions, such as aerobic exercise, and relaxation through music, produce the same benefits; and yoga and mindfulness meditation have adverse side effects, some of them severe.⁴⁸

Certain promoters of yoga and mindfulness in public schools appear to be motivated as much by religious goals as by scientific evidence of efficacy in achieving secular health benefits. Indeed, systematic survey research confirms the perception that yoga and mindfulness practice instills spirituality even when linguistically re-framed as secular activities. A 2014 national study found that 62% of yoga students and 85% of teachers changed their primary reason for practice over time. Typically, the primary motive switched from exercise and stress relief to spirituality. A 2011 survey found that most participants in a secular eight-week mindfulness class enrolled wanting improved health or stress management. By the end of the class, 54% reported that the course had deepened their spirituality. The study concludes, moreover, that mental health benefits of secular mindfulness can be attributed to increases in daily spiritual experiences.⁴⁹

These findings do not explain how participating in secularized versions of religious practices can induce spirituality, and a full theory lies beyond the scope of this essay. Such a theory need not assume an essentialist definition of religion (for instance, the analytically flat view that secularization inevitably fails because yoga and mindfulness are “inherently” religious). In brief, such a theory might draw upon research on sense perceptions, especially tactility, in fields such as religious studies, semiotics, phenomenology, ritual and performance studies, art and architecture history, anthropology, psychology, neuroscience, and machine learning. This research suggests that physical sensations, such as those that accompany yoga and meditation, can act on a pre-cognitive, pre-verbal, affective level to shape dispositions, including religious ones.⁵⁰ Practitioners may, for instance, equate pleasurable bodily sensations with the overall goodness of the religious system they credit with producing positive experiences.⁵¹

Although scholars once predicted that modern science would displace religion, newer theories suggest how the religious and the secular may be mutually constructed.⁵² Advocates of yoga and mindfulness often use scientific language to persuade novices to expect benefits, while also signifying religious systems by retaining the terms yoga and mindfulness; drawing insight from semiotics, this might be described as synecdoche, a rhetorical trope in which a part, for instance a key term, signifies the whole, in this case a religious worldview.⁵³ Perception results from a combination of stimuli and hypotheses, such as the hypothesis that yoga or mindfulness

is beneficial—physically and possibly also spiritually. People tend to look for evidence that confirms, rather than disconfirms hypotheses, in this case leading initiates to seek sensory evidence that yoga or mindfulness is beneficial.⁵⁴ Perceiving benefits, they infer causation and assign credit not only to the technique and its scientific rationale, but also to the religious systems signified, thereby interpretively jumping over secular linguistic frames in a quest to go deeper than the written curriculum in exploring yoga or mindfulness.⁵⁵

Because sensory experiences constitute a primary epistemology, they urgently demand to be accommodated by people's religious views to avoid cognitive dissonance.⁵⁶ Individuals who perceive direct sensory experiences of ultimate reality are particularly open to adopting new religious beliefs that explain, legitimize, and give meaning to their experiences. In this way, religious systems may offer interpretive lenses for bodily practices, and subsequent sensory experiences can be perceived as confirming the associated religious worldviews. Thus, the interaction of religious frameworks and direct sensory experiences can powerfully shape religious perceptions and may induce religious combinations or transformations in worldviews.

Yet it appears that individuals and school administrators interested in experimenting with yoga or mindfulness are willing to read selectively, overlooking texts that fail to support, or exhibit the religious dimensions of, the practices they want to use. It may even be the case that the abundance of easily accessible and cheap print and internet information facilitates the pluralizing processes by which individuals choose decontextualized commodities from multiple cultural systems and combine them to fit personal preferences and social conditions. Thus, the religious work done by books must be understood within its larger social, cultural, and political contexts.

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