

2019

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Gentle Space-Making: Christian Silent Prayer, Mindfulness, and Kenotic Identity Formation

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Abstract

The practice of mindfulness has reached an unprecedented level of prevalence in the US and the UK, both in terms of widespread popularity and in terms of institutional support and investment. One potential clue to this phenomenon may be found in the nature of the institutional contexts that are increasingly being filled with mindfulness practitioners and seminars: each is deeply embedded in and pervaded by what philosopher Charles Taylor calls the 'modern identity'. This article provides an analysis of mindfulness as a practice of moral formation that challenges these late-modern notions of human agency and identity. It does so by bringing mindfulness into conversation with another contemplative tradition, namely, Christian silent prayer as exemplified in the anonymous fourteenth-century handbook, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. It then situates these two formational practices within the broader social imaginary that dominates late-modern, North Atlantic life, and ventures a few suggestions about the significance of this overlap for Christian ethics, specifically at the end of life.

Keywords

Apophatic prayer, mindfulness, Sarah Coakley, kenosis, end-of-life, healthcare ethics, Charles Taylor

Mindfulness as a Question for Christian Ethics

The practice of mindfulness has reached an unprecedented level of prevalence in the US and the UK, both in terms of widespread popularity and in terms of institutional support and investment. A number of major research universities across the United States now boast prominent Mindfulness Centers. Medical journals regularly publish articles enumerating the

psychiatric,¹ behavioral,² cognitive,³ and physiological⁴ benefits of mindfulness-based interventions. For many, this evidence-based data is enough to justify enshrining mindfulness within medical school curricula and models of patient-centered care.

Important critical questions, however, have been raised about this practice. Some have charged secularized, Western mindfulness with unethical cultural appropriation and romanticizing of Buddhist religious forms.⁵ Others complain that mindfulness promotes radical individualism and ethical quietism.⁶ The most damning critiques characterize the rise of mindfulness as a product of an advanced capitalist society.⁷ This is what Slavoj Žižek meant when he called mindfulness the ‘perfect ideological supplement’ to a neo-liberal order, ‘arguably the most efficient way for us to fully participate in capitalist dynamics while retaining the appearance of mental sanity’.⁸ As in most things, the truth probably lies somewhere between naïve optimism and wholesale rejection.

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1. See, e.g., Stefan G. Hofmann *et al.*, ‘The Effect of Mindfulness-based Therapy on Anxiety and Depression: A Meta-analytic Review’, *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 78 (2010), pp. 169–83; Lizabeth Roemer *et al.*, ‘Efficacy of an Acceptance-based Behavior Therapy for Generalized Anxiety Disorder: Evaluation in a Randomized Controlled Trial’, *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 76 (2008), pp. 1083–1089; John D. Teasdale *et al.*, ‘Prevention of Relapse/Recurrence in Major Depression by Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy’, *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 68 (2000), pp. 615–23.
 2. See, e.g., Sarah Bowen *et al.*, ‘Mindfulness Meditation and Substance Use in an Incarcerated Population’, *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors* 20 (2006), pp. 343–47; Katy Tapper *et al.*, ‘Exploratory Randomised Controlled Trial of a Mindfulness-based Weight Loss Intervention for Women’, *Appetite* 52 (2009), pp. 396–404.
 3. See, e.g., Amishi Jha *et al.*, ‘Mindfulness Training Modifies Subsystems of Attention’, *Cognitive, Affective, & Catherine N. M. Ortner et al.*, ‘Mindfulness Meditation and Reduced Emotional Interference on a Cognitive Task’, *Motivation and Emotion* 31 (2007), pp. 271–83; Heleen A. Slagter *et al.*, ‘Mental Training Affects Distribution of Limited Brain Resources’, *PLoS Biology* 5 (2007), e138.
 4. See, e.g., Paul Grossman *et al.*, ‘Mindfulness Training as an Intervention for Fibromyalgia: Evidence of Postintervention and 3-Year Follow-up Benefits in Well-being’, *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics* 76 (2007), pp. 226–33; Linda E. Carlson *et al.*, ‘One Year Pre-post Intervention Follow-up of Psychological, Immune, Endocrine and Blood Pressure Outcomes of Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) in Breast and Prostate Cancer Outpatients’, *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity* 21 (2007), pp. 1038–49.
 5. See, e.g., Jarni Blakkarly, ‘Appreciation or Appropriation? The Fashionable Corruption of Buddhism in the West’, *ABC Religion & Ethics* (2014), <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2014/08/19/4069992.htm>.
 6. See, e.g., Zack Walsh, ‘A Meta-Critique of Mindfulness Critiques: From McMindfulness to Critical Mindfulness’, in Ronald E. Purser *et al.* (eds), *Handbook of Mindfulness: Culture, Context, and Social Engagement* (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2006). Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, ‘On Some Aspects of Christian Meditation’, Letter to Bishops of the Catholic Church, 15 October 1989, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19891015_meditazione-cristiana_en.html.
 7. See, e.g., Phil Arthington, ‘Mindfulness: A Critical Perspective’, *Community Psychology in Global Perspective* 2.1 (2016), pp. 87–104.
 8. Slavoj Žižek, ‘From Western Marxism to Western Buddhism’, *Cabinet* 2 (2001).

Despite its cultural prominence, Christian ethics has not adequately grappled with this phenomenon. One exception is Warren Kinghorn, who recently urged Christian ethicists to understand ‘mindfulness [as] a moral way of being in the world, and [as] a process of moral formation’.⁹ Kinghorn is not Pollyanish about common expressions of mindfulness. He recognizes ‘in a commoditized, Western therapeutic context, abstracted from the broader ethical commitments of any religious tradition, [emphasizing detachment in mindfulness] can turn some mindfulness practitioners away from the moral demands of charity and justice and toward a more individualistic focus on the mind’s own interpretation of reality’.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Kinghorn maintains, mindfulness is not simply ‘a technique or instrument for reducing stress or improving success in relationships that leaves the self unchanged. It is, rather, a self-constituting, formational practice’. He even goes so far as to call it

a virtue that constructs not a certain kind of experience but rather a certain kind of self ... [and] because it shapes the moral self, mindfulness is a properly ethical and religious concept and practice. As such, it belongs to the ascetical and religious traditions from which it emerged, including Christianity, and not primarily to medicine or psychology. It is appropriate, then, for Christians to attend to the sorts of moral agents that we are becoming when we engage in mindfulness practices.¹¹

While Kinghorn is correct to call mindfulness a practice of moral formation, I believe there is another sense in which it shapes individual moral agency which is not captured in his analysis. Where Kinghorn looks to Thomistic prudence as a theological analogue of mindfulness, this article will look to the tradition of apophatic silent prayer. For it is in the de-centering of the self which occurs in both mindfulness and silent prayer that individuals learn to adopt a posture of receptivity that radically subverts late-modern assumptions about the shape of human agency.

In what follows I want to make three points. First, I will outline the dynamics of moral formation embedded in the practice of Christian silent prayer, primarily through an analysis of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a classic of the apophatic tradition of contemplative prayer. Next, I will suggest a structural similarity between silent prayer and mindfulness practice, and illustrate this similarity both in terms of its deep roots in classical Buddhism and in terms of its more secular relation to cognitive psychology. Finally, I will situate these two formational practices within the broader social imaginary that dominates late-modern, North Atlantic life, and venture a few suggestions about the significance of this overlap for Christian ethics, specifically at the end of life. For the institutional contexts that are increasingly being filled with mindfulness practitioners and seminars (e.g.,

9. Warren Kinghorn, ‘Presence of Mind: Thomistic Prudence and Contemporary Mindfulness Practices’, *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 35.1 (2015), pp. 83–102.

10. Kinghorn, ‘Presence of Mind’, p. 96.

11. Kinghorn, ‘Presence of Mind’, p. 96. In Kinghorn’s interpretation, mindfulness is deeply resonant with a Thomistic account of prudence, the practical virtue that integrates intellect and will, theory and context, individual and communal aims, and ultimate and penultimate goods. For another, Aristotelian account of prudence (*phronesis*) as a form of mindfulness, see Susan F. Parsons, ‘The Practice of Christian Ethics: Mindfulness and Faith’, *Studies in Christian Ethics* 25.4 (2012), pp. 442–53.

hospitals, medical schools, universities and graduate schools, corporations), it seems, are precisely those that are deeply embedded in and pervaded by a cultural logic of selfhood and moral agency that philosopher Charles Taylor calls the ‘modern identity’.

Christian Silent Prayer as Kenotic Formation

In a provocative essay entitled ‘Prayer as the Posture of the Decentered Self’,¹² philosopher Merold Westphal provides a meditation on prayer in terms of the relationship between self-emptying and self-transcendence. The young prophet Samuel responds to the LORD’s prompting, ‘Here I am for you called me. Speak, your servant is listening’. Mary responds to Gabriel, the LORD’s messenger, ‘Here I am, the servant of the LORD. Let it be with me according to your word.’ These prayers are echoed by Jesus in Gethsemane, ‘Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done’, and by the Church throughout time as it repeats the Lord’s Prayer, ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be *your* name. *Your* kingdom come, *your* will be done ... for *yours* are the kingdom, power, and glory forever, amen’. What all this amounts to, according to Westphal, is a recognition that ‘prayer is a deep, quite possibly the deepest decentering of the self, deep enough to begin dismantling or, if you like, deconstructing that burning preoccupation with myself’.¹³ Speaking of the Lord’s Prayer in a recent interview, theologian Sarah Coakley made a similar point: ‘the deeper one goes into [it]’, she says, ‘the more one sees that the seemingly generic requests [Jesus] gives us, like “thy kingdom come”, summon up a whole way of displacing one’s self or waiting for something else to arrive’.¹⁴

Westphal contends that prayer functions on the level of adverbial ethics, in that it ultimately regards the moral agent’s ‘basic posture or fundamental project. It signifies the “how” rather than the “what” of her life, though it is not without a “what”’.¹⁵ It is a practice that shapes both an individual’s self-identity and her posture toward the world, what David Kelsey calls one’s ‘existential how’.¹⁶

12. Merold Westphal, ‘Prayer as the Posture of the Decentered Self’, in Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba (eds), *The Phenomenology of Prayer* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 13–31.

13. Westphal, ‘Prayer as the Posture of the Decentered Self’, p. 15.

14. Sarah Coakley, ‘Prayer as Divine Propulsion: An Interview with Sarah Coakley’, *The Other Journal* 21 (2012), <https://theotherjournal.com/2012/12/20/prayer-as-divine-propulsion-an-interview-with-sarah-coakley/>. Alan Lewis echoes this thought in his reflection on the Lord’s Prayer as a recognition of creaturely dependence: ‘Thus by the very act of prayer for daily bread the priestly, interceding church challenges modernity’s myth of autonomy and self-sufficiency, our promethean belief in our own capacities to satisfy every need with our own resourcefulness and ingenuity, and secure the future for ourselves and our planetary home without a humble recognition of dependence, fragility, and accountability, or any expression of thanksgiving’. See Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 399.

15. Westphal, ‘Prayer as the Posture of the Decentered Self’, p. 21.

16. David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 109.

This process of formation is perhaps best exemplified in the fourteenth-century handbook *The Cloud of Unknowing*. This work was written by an anonymous monk to direct a young novice in the ‘work of contemplation’.¹⁷ The author offers a series of directives for a spiritual practice of apophatic prayer, or, prayer by way of negation (*via negativa*).¹⁸ The main insight of this work can be summed up in the words of St. Denis, quoted by the author: ‘The truly divine knowledge of God is that which is known by unknowing’. This paradoxical statement makes a bit more sense when considered in the context of what Kierkegaard would later call the ‘infinite qualitative distinction’ between God and humanity. Because of this ontological and epistemological gulf, the one who thinks she can reach God through ‘intellectual labor’ is ‘perilously deluded’ (pp. 16–17). There will always be a dark ‘cloud of unknowing’ preventing one from ‘seeing [God] clearly by the light of understanding in reason’. Fortunately, though incomprehensible to the intellect, God is ‘entirely comprehensible’ to the ‘loving power’ within each and every person (p. 13). ‘[I]t is love alone that can reach God in this life, and not knowing’ (p. 27).

The goal of prayer, then, is the cultivation of one’s desire for God and the orientation of one’s will toward God. In order to pray rightly, the novice should ‘[l]ift up [her] heart to God with a humble impulse of love, and have [God alone] as [her] aim’ (p. 10). She should be careful not to fix her attention on any created thing—not even herself or the blessings that God bestows upon her. She should even avoid thinking about God’s character or perfections, which can only imperfectly describe God by way of analogy with created things. She should press down all thoughts of created things beneath a ‘cloud of forgetting’, should ‘step above [each one] stalwartly but lovingly, and with a devout, pleasing, impulsive love strive to pierce that darkness above [her], to smite upon that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love’ (p. 20). If a thought should arise, of any sort, she should say in her heart ‘You have no part to play ... Go down again’ into the cloud of forgetting. This exercise requires no words, but allowing for the difficulty of wordless thought, the author makes a concession:

If you like, you can have this reaching out [to God] wrapped up and enfolded in a single word. So as to have a better grasp of it, take just a little word, of one syllable rather than two, for the shorter it is, the better it is in agreement with this exercise of the spirit. Such a one is the word ‘God’ or the word ‘love’ ... With this word you are to beat upon this cloud and this darkness above you. With this word you are to strike down every kind of thought under the cloud of forgetting (pp. 22–23).

17. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. Emilie Griffin (New York: HarperOne, 2004), p. 4. Hereafter cited in text.

18. Of course, to focus on apophatic prayer is not to suggest that it represents the best or the only viable form of prayer. As Westphal notes, ‘God speaks as silence, to be sure, but prayer cannot grow in a purely apophatic soil if for no other reason than that in such a context no God personal enough to get prayer started by speaking to us is to be found. If we are engaged in prayer rather than yogic meditation, it is the God who speaks in Scripture for whom we listen in the silence and to whom we listen as the silence’ (‘Prayer as the Posture of the Decentered Self’, p. 20).

In her book *Powers and Submissions*,¹⁹ Coakley helpfully unpacks the dynamics of moral agency and identity formation that are embedded within apophatic prayer practices like the one just described. She notes how non-discursive and non-conceptual prayer (what she calls ‘silent prayer’) involve a renunciation of the notion of control, a patient waiting, and a de-centering of the self and its desires in the hope (and expectation) of grace drawing the prayer toward mystical union with the divine.

There are many forms of prayer in the Christian tradition that fit this description—not all of them strictly ‘wordless’. One may think, for example, of the Quaker prayer meeting, the practice of ‘centering prayer’, the charismatic experience of glossolalia, or the Eastern Orthodox Jesus Prayer (‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner’). As with *The Cloud of Unknowing*, each of these practices enacts a form of thought that is non-discursive, and therefore, in some sense passive. For example, as Coakley explains, in reciting the Jesus Prayer, the aim is not necessarily to focus on the meaning of each word, but rather to

use repetitive but mechanical ‘acts’ ... not as the prayer, but as a sort of accompanying ‘drone’ to keep the imagination occupied ... Not only is the imagination thus mechanically stilled, but the ‘drone’ also helps prevent the mind from operating discursively; thus the (empty) intellect is left facing a ‘blank’, with the will gently holding it there.²⁰

According to Coakley, these practices enact a ‘spiritual extension of Christic *kenosis*’ because the one who thus prays must refuse from the outset a grasping, controlling mentality. This ‘involves an ascetical commitment of some subtlety, a regular and willed *practice* of ceding and responding to the divine’.²¹ Coakley calls this ‘gentle space-making’.²² This form of ‘self-emptying’ is not simply an abnegation of the self, but rather, ‘the place of the self’s transformation and expansion into God’.²³

Elsewhere, Graham Ward develops a similar account of *kenosis* from Gregory of Nyssa’s notion of suffering as the ‘wounding of love’.²⁴ Ward argues that a theological emphasis on *kenosis* (emptying) must be balanced in equal measure by the Pauline concept of *plerosis* (filling up). Ward exposit Paul’s use of *pleroo* as a ‘theological reflection of the economics of divine power with respect to embodiment in Christ ... a reflection upon

19. Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

20. Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, p. 45.

21. Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, p. 34.

22. The adjective ‘gentle’ is key, for the encounter which takes place here is ‘not an invitation to be battered; nor is its silence a silencing ... God ... neither shouts nor forces, let alone “obliterates”’ (Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, p. 35). Indeed, Coakley’s treatment of silent prayer in *Powers and Submissions* comprises an extended refutation of important critiques of feminist theologians like Daphne Hampson who suggests, at least ‘for women, the theme of self-emptying and self-abnegation is far from helpful as a [spiritual] paradigm’. See Margaret Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 155.

23. Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, p. 36.

24. See Graham Ward, ‘Suffering and Incarnation’, in Robert Gibbs and Elliot R. Wolfson (eds), *Suffering Religion* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 163–80. The double genitive is intentionally ambiguous.

divinity as it manifests itself in the concrete historicity of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ'.²⁵ There exists an intra-divine 'passion', a love relationship of unity-in-difference and difference-in-unity, between Father, Son and Holy Spirit that involves a continual dynamic of *kenosis* and *plerosis*. There is, therefore, a sense of primordial suffering in God, but (*contra* Moltmann) it is not one that is defined by a rift within the Godhead. 'If *kenosis* and completion, emptying and filling, are not two opposite, but two complementary operations of the divine, like breathing out in order to breathe in, then there is no lack, absence, or vacuum as such'.²⁶ It is an 'economy of that loving which incarnates the very logic of sacrifice as the endless giving (which is also a giving-up, a *kenosis*) and the endless reception (which is also an opening up towards the other in order to be filled)'.²⁷ Ward here unites traditional notions of *agape* and *eros* as two elements of one love relationship—without thereby gendering these notions as masculine and feminine. The human is most fully human in a *kenotic* posture (which mimics God's own) that simultaneously opens itself up to fulfillment and plenitude. It is precisely in the self's *kenotic* and patient silence that it acknowledges its creaturely dependence on the divine. In the practice of silent prayer, the one who prays relates to God as she was created to relate to God, with an awareness and acknowledgement of dependence on God for every breath.

Kenotic Formation in Mindfulness Meditation

At a very basic and general level, mindfulness can be defined as 'a nonjudgmental, curious, and self-compassionate awareness of one's moment-to-moment experience'. One common term for this state is 'bare attention', a term which emphasizes the non-conceptual, non-discursive quality of the state of being mindful. As one author puts it: 'It is not thinking'.²⁸ Or, perhaps more precisely, it is 'not-thinking'. This way of putting it is overly simplistic, but does highlight the fact that mindfulness practices aim to get beyond entrenched patterns of cognition that are based on distorted ideas about the self and the world. According to Bhikkhu Bodhi, the popular understanding of mindfulness as non-discursive 'bare attention' is only helpful if understood as one 'procedural directive for cultivating mindfulness'.²⁹ In the classical Buddhist sense, mindfulness (*sati*) unites two distinct concepts: memory and lucid awareness.³⁰ Here 'memory' does not necessarily

25. Ward, 'Suffering and Incarnation', p. 171.

26. Ward, 'Suffering and Incarnation', p. 173.

27. Ward continues, 'The suffering and sacrifice which is born of and borne by passion is the very risk and labor of love; a love which is profoundly erotic and, to employ a queer theory term, genderfucking. It is a suffering engendered by and vouchsafing difference; first Trinitarian difference, subsequently, ontological difference between the uncreated Godhead and creation, and finally sexual difference as that which pertains most closely to human embodiment' ('Suffering and Incarnation', p. 174).

28. Henepola Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English* (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2002), p. 140.

29. Bhikkhu Bodhi, 'What Does Mindfulness Really Mean? A Canonical Perspective', *Contemporary Buddhism* 12.1 (2011), pp. 19–39, at p. 27.

30. Bodhi elaborates, '*Sati* makes the apprehended object stand forth vividly and distinctly before the mind. When the object being cognized pertains to the past—when it is apprehended as

mean remembering something that occurred in the past, but rather an act of ‘bending back’ upon one’s experiences in the phenomenal field in order to ‘[lift] them out from the twilight zone of unawareness into the light of clear cognition’.³¹ Mindfulness aims not at absence of thought *as such*, but rather as the removal of distorted patterns of thought which obstruct ‘clear comprehension’.

Though practices for cultivating mindfulness are diverse and include ‘yoga, tai chi, and various prayer and chanting exercises’,³² meditation is far and away the most common. Mindfulness meditation has ancient origins, having been included by the Buddha in his noble eightfold path,³³ but was popularized in the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s in a somewhat secularized form (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, or MBSR) by Jon Kabat-Zinn. Hölzel *et al.*³⁴ helpfully outline the main components of mindfulness meditation, mapping how recent neuroscience literature accounts for its effectiveness. According to Hölzel *et al.*, mindfulness meditation simultaneously involves the following components: (1) regulation of one’s attention; (2) awareness of the body and bodily perceptions and sensations; (3) regulation of one’s emotional state, which may include (a) reappraisal of an emotional sensation, and/or (b) a process of exposure, extinction, and reconsolidation (similar to cognitive behavioral therapy, CBT); and, finally, (4) change in perspective on the self.³⁵

To gain a picture of how these elements connect in a meditative practice, consider the following narrative. Susan just finished residency training at a major academic hospital, and has decided to stay on for a year-long fellowship training in hospice and palliative medicine. She has always been interested in helping people who are suffering and believes that this specialization will allow her to make a great, personal impact on the lives of her patients. She is, however, having some difficulty getting used to the difficult process of seeing patients—many of whom she comes to love and respect—pass away. A mentor in the hospital notices that she is struggling to cope and suggests that she take up mindfulness meditation, so she decides to give it a try. Over the course of a few months she learns the basics of mindfulness meditation. She is instructed to begin with a simple practice of intentional breathing exercises. She should sit in a comfortable position, focusing on the rhythm of her breathing, while keeping her attention open to whatever sensations—mental, physical, emotional—arise. At first, it is difficult not to let her mind wander to the list of tasks that she knows she has to complete by the end of the day,

something that was formerly done, perceived, or spoken—its vivid presentation takes the form of memory. When the object is a bodily process like in-and-out breathing or the act of walking back and forth, or when it is a mental event like a feeling or thought, its vivid presentation takes the form of lucid awareness of the present’. Bodhi, ‘What Does Mindfulness Really Mean?’, pp. 25–26.

31. Bodhi, ‘What Does Mindfulness Really Mean?’, p. 25.

32. Matias P. Raski, ‘Mindfulness: What It Is and How It Is Impacting Healthcare’, *UBCMJ* 7.1 (2015), pp. 56–59, at p. 56.

33. See Bodhi, ‘What Does Mindfulness Really Mean?’

34. Britta K. Hölzel *et al.*, ‘How Does Mindfulness Meditation Work? Proposing Mechanisms of Action from a Conceptual and Neural Perspective’, *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 6.6 (2011), pp. 537–59.

35. Hölzel *et al.*, ‘How Does Mindfulness Meditation Work?’, p. 539.

but she finds that the breathing exercises help her keep her mind settled. Her goal, she is taught, is to be aware of internal and external experiences as they come, but not to engage them. Rather, she should simply take note of them, not judging herself or deciding whether to accept or reject the experiences themselves. As she meditates, she notices, for example, that she is suddenly aware of a memory of an event which occurred in her childhood: the death of her maternal grandmother. As the thought arises, she focuses not on the memory itself, but on the way in which it triggers a sense of anxiety and pain within her. She notices that her heartbeat has increased, and that she is carrying tension in her shoulders. These physiological responses, she correctly intuitively signals, signal an underlying emotional response—some mixture of fear and loneliness. She remembers the words of her instructors, and chooses to ‘lean in’ to the feeling, in some sense to ‘coexist’ with it for a little while.³⁶ As she does this, the emotions of fear and loneliness remain, but more as an object for her to observe than as a motivation for her to react. In the highly technical language of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), we might say that ‘the ... mechanisms [of] sustained attention to body awareness ... lead to a situation of exposure, and the third mechanism (regulating for nonreactivity) facilitates response prevention, leading to extinction and reconsolidation’.³⁷ In other words, Susan notes the existence of the bodily sensations related to fear and loneliness, but in the experience, she recalibrates her reactive response pattern. She lets the perceptions and experiences arise and fall away, and in doing so she is sensitized to their transitory nature. After months of mindfulness meditation, she even notices that her sense of self is subtly changing. For example, she no longer subconsciously identifies herself with the emotional and physiological responses that happen to be strongest at the moment.³⁸ In fact, she no longer experiences moments like the one described above in solely self-referential terms. She is simultaneously more aware of self (in terms of identifying present-moment sensations) and less self-aware (in terms of moving beyond the transitory moment and focusing, especially in her professional context, on others rather than self). If pressed, Susan would say that her mindfulness practice has made her more compassionate with herself and others, more deliberate, less reactive, and has given her a sense of control and peace

36. According to Hölzel *et al.*, ‘During mindfulness, practitioners expose themselves to whatever is present in the field of awareness, including external stimuli as well as body sensations and emotional experiences. They let themselves be affected by the experience, refraining from engaging in internal reactivity toward it, and instead bringing acceptance to bodily and affective responses. Practitioners are instructed to meet unpleasant emotions (such as fear, sadness, anger, and aversion) by turning towards them, rather than turning away. Those people who are new to meditation often initially find this process counterintuitive, but many practitioners discover that the unpleasant emotions pass away and a sense of safety or well-being can be experienced in their place’. See ‘How Does Mindfulness Meditation Work?’, p. 545.

37. Hölzel *et al.*, ‘How Does Mindfulness Meditation Work?’, p. 549.

38. Hölzel *et al.* call this process de-identification, or the deconstruction of the self: ‘By closely observing the contents of consciousness, practitioners come to understand that these are in constant change and thus are transient. The mindful, nonjudgmental observation fosters a detachment from identification with the contents of consciousness. This process has been termed “reperceiving” or “decentering” ... and has been described as the development of the “observer perspective”’. See ‘How Does Mindfulness Meditation Work?’, p. 547.

about her inner life. These qualities have immensely improved her capacity to attend to the needs and wants of dying patients and their families.³⁹

While deriving from ancient Buddhist practices, the account of mindfulness I have just provided is inflected in a thoroughly secular key.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, certain elements of Buddhist mindfulness remain central. Most important for our purposes is the connection between meditation and the de-centering of the self.⁴¹ Even for non-Buddhist practitioners, the practice of mindfulness meditation requires one to adopt a posture of open receptivity and even vulnerability. Put in Christian terms, we might be tempted to say that she undergoes a *kenotic* form of *askesis*, in which she withdraws for the purposes of making space for various sensations which might arise. We might loosely describe this form of agency as ‘submission’ to the sensory field. She makes herself, for a time, a receptive participant in the world.

Kenotic Identity in a Hyper-Active World

Let us conclude by making a few observations as to why this comparison is noteworthy for Christian ethics, especially in the context of end-of-life care. It has been widely observed that North Atlantic societies struggle in their approach to death and dying. The difficulties are both cultural, related to ideas and practices that place (or fail to place) death in a meaningful context, and institutional, related to material and economic realities that promote (or fail to promote) flourishing at the end-of-life. These difficulties are reinforced by a complex web of assumptions that permeate the late-modern social imaginary—assumptions about personhood and agency, about dignity and control, about identity and authenticity, and about suffering and meaning.

Charles Taylor has, perhaps, done the most helpful work making these assumptions explicit. He notes three major facets of the modern identity: ‘[first,] inwardness, the sense

39. For an account of mindfulness-based palliative care, see Joan Halifax, *Being with Dying: Cultivating Compassion and Fearlessness in the Presence of Death* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2009).

40. Gil Fronsdal describes the difference between Buddhist and secular mindfulness practices this way: ‘Rather than stressing world-renunciation, [Western lay teachers] stress engagement with, and freedom within the world. Rather than rejecting the body, these Western teachers embrace the body as part of the wholistic [*sic*] field of practice. Rather than stressing ultimate spiritual goals such as full enlightenment, ending the cycles of rebirth, or attaining the various stages of sainthood, many Western teachers tend to stress the immediate benefits of mindfulness and untroubled, equanimous presence in the midst of life’s vicissitudes’. See Gil Fronsdal, ‘Treasures of the Theravada: Recovering the Riches of Our Tradition’, *Inquiring Mind* 12.1 (1995). Here we see a clear confluence of two trends in modern American society: ‘spiritual-but-not-religious’ and the ‘triumph of the therapeutic’.

41. Hölzel *et al.* note, ‘The essence of Buddhist psychology lies in the teaching that there is no such thing as a permanent, unchanging self. Rather, the perception of a self is a product of an ongoing mental process. This perception reoccurs very rapidly in the stream of mental events, leading to the impression that the self is a constant and unchanging entity ... from a Buddhist perspective, identification with the static sense of self is the cause of psychological distress, and disidentification results in less afflictive experience and the freedom to experience a more genuine way of being’. See ‘How Does Mindfulness Meditation Work?’, p. 547.

of ourselves as beings with inner depths, and the connected notion that we are “selves”; second the affirmation of ordinary life which develops from the early modern period; third, the expressivist notion of nature as an inner moral source’.⁴² These facets form the backdrop of the moral imperatives which are felt with particular force in modern culture, and which tend to frame our discussions of end-of-life issues. To make a very long story very short: the first of these tells us to locate freedom in the exercise of the individual will, and correlatively identifies dignity with the exercise of rational autonomy. The second, paired with an emerging notion of universal benevolence, gives rise to a strong moral imperative to reduce suffering and prevent death. Finally, the sense that nature constitutes a moral source tells us that authenticity is discovered in attunement with nature (conceived in highly individualistic terms), and dignity is primarily a matter of self-expression.

These assumptions have real-world consequences. Consider, for example, the two dominant ‘scripts’ that have arisen in reaction to the medicalization of death: hospice and palliative care medicine, on the one hand, and physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia, on the other. Typically, if we desire to avoid death in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU), it seems, we are forced to make our decision between ‘Hospice or Hemlock’.⁴³ These scripts are often presented as if they are polar opposites on a spectrum of end-of-life care, but Michael Banner notes how ‘both are ... equally imbued with notions central to projects of self-expression and preservation of identity, characteristic of late modernity’.⁴⁴ The goal of preserving agency and individuality is shared, but the strategies diverge: ‘Hospice care bids to preserve and maintain the project of the self for as long as possible up until the occurrence of biological death; euthanasia brings death forwards so as to avoid the risk of the death of the self prior to biological death’.⁴⁵ Note how this situation imagines that each participant, from patient or proxy to physician, is responsible for a wide variety of factors traditionally understood to be outside the scope of individual responsibility—from determining the nature and timing of death itself to managing the self as a project in order to uphold and preserve one’s dignity. In various ways physician-assisted suicide (PAS) and hospice care may help us to avoid some of the most dehumanizing effects of the ICU, but neither—when framed according to the logic of the modern social imaginary—delivers us from the perplexities of choice in dying and the sense that we are ill-equipped to manage the responsibility we bear.

Perhaps it should not surprise us, then, to find mindfulness gaining ground in institutional contexts that are deeply pervaded by this cultural logic of hyper-agency.⁴⁶ The

42. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. x. The relationship between this web of assumptions and specifically Christian notions of humanity, meaning, and identity is a complicated one, for many of the features of the modern social imaginary are rooted in Christian theological notions—though now transposed into a largely secular framework and narrative.

43. Cf. Constance E. Putnam, *Hospice or Hemlock?: Searching for Heroic Compassion* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002).

44. Michael Banner, *The Ethics of Everyday Life: Moral Theology, Social Anthropology, and the Imagination of the Human* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 115.

45. Banner, *The Ethics of Everyday Life*, p. 115.

46. As mentioned above, I am aware of critiques of mindfulness as an ideological complement to neoliberal capitalism, merely shaping its practitioners into adaptable workers and ready consumers. These are important critiques. No doubt they have their place. I believe, however, that

problem is especially acute when the modern identity is faced with mortality. We may be able to manage dying, but human beings cannot, ultimately, control death. Most of us implicitly understand that death signals the absolute limit of any human pursuit of control. And yet, in many ways, our collective behavior belies this fact. As Philippe Ariès noted long ago, the modern ‘attitude toward death is defined by the impossible hypothesis of success. That is why it makes no sense’.⁴⁷ The appeal of mindfulness in palliative settings has much to do with how the practice implicitly subverts this attitude. In de-centering the active and controlling self, it serves as a form of *kenotic* identity-formation analogous to the various practices of Christian silent prayer described above. In enacting a receptive posture, both practices disrupt entrenched, non-conscious patterns of agency and behavior.

It need not necessarily concern the Christian that many who practice mindfulness do so without reference to the specifically Christian notion of God or of the spiritual life, at least as regards the endeavor to rethink our common cultural approaches to death and dying. Of course, there is a world of difference between submission to the phenomenal field and submission to the Living Lord, between the recognition of oneself as an illusion and the recognition of oneself as a creature of the Creator God. Structurally, however, the practice of ‘gentle space-making’ enacts and inculcates a form of agency that is fundamentally different from the forms of agency prescribed by the modern social imaginary.⁴⁸ Christian ethics, then, has at least some reason to attend to mindfulness as a secular-spiritual practice, as well as grounds for boldly suggesting that Christian prayer might claim its legitimate place in the institutional contexts where mindfulness currently reigns.

in taking the worst examples of corporatized mindfulness as paradigmatic, they fail to recognize an important fact: mindfulness has aided the expansion of approaches to medicine that challenge the modern healthcare system in important ways. In any case, this article employs a more conciliatory approach.

47. Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 154.

48. There may, however, be some elements that can be critically assessed from the Christian and feminist standpoints. For example, it is not entirely clear how Christians should evaluate the Buddhist notion of ‘no-self’. On the one hand, Christians also recognize the need to dismantle certain assumptions of agency and the self that are endemic to modern Western thought. On the other hand, the Christian notion of *kenosis* follows a pattern of death and resurrection, whereby the one who loses her (old) life does so in the faith that God will raise her to new life. *Kenosis*, as Coakley repeatedly urges, is not to be equated in Christian theological terms with the obliteration or annihilation of the subject, but rather with its existing in a special form of vulnerable self-giving which echoes and invites God’s own special form of vulnerable self-giving. The New Creation, we do well to remember, is a notion that is quite different from nirvana.