

## Contemporary Mindfulness and the Psychospiritual Model of Stillness in the *Philokalia*

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### Abstract

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Mindfulness, integral to ancient Christian spirituality, has in recent decades been secularized and incorporated into contemporary psychotherapies and mental health practice. Yet the Christian approach to mindfulness, grounded in remembrance of God and Christian formation, has quite different goals for patients than secular mindfulness practices. This paper explores the similarities and differences between secular mindfulness, as concretized in the therapeutic model known as Emotion Efficacy Therapy (EET), and spiritual mindfulness expressed in the ancient Christian psychospiritual model described in several texts of the *Philokalia*. This analysis illuminates the limitations of decontextualizing mindfulness from its spiritual and religious origins, including in the lack of formation in many clients and the absence of a realistic moral framework against which clients can mindfully evaluate their thoughts and experiences. Yet, when properly integrated into Christian spirituality and asceticism, mindfulness can lead to the proper integration and healing of the whole person.



The ancient Christian practice of mindfulness is integral to faith, and indeed to human well-being. Part of an ascetic system that originated in early Christian monastic and eremitic communities and has continued up to the present day, mindfulness in the Christian context fosters self-control, the avoidance of sin, and the purification of the intellect, with the aim of

achieving spiritual stillness or *hesychia*, ultimately enabling Christians to become more open to, closer to, and similar to God as they walk the spiritual path to divinization (*theosis*). From the vantage point of contemporary psychology, this ancient Christian process for attaining spiritual stillness can be described as a psychospiritual model, one that relies to a great extent upon the ability of an individual to engage in the practice of mindfulness.

Recent scholarship has shown that the spiritual practice of mindfulness is found in many cultures and world religions, where it is valued for the assistance it affords in managing problems with cognitive, behavioral, and emotional self-regulation.<sup>1</sup> While these mindfulness practices are embedded within specific sociocultural and spiritual/religious contexts, mental health clinicians in secular contexts have begun to recognize their value for enhancing skills in self-monitoring and self-regulation and have adapted the practice of mindfulness for non-religious therapies. Some clinical researchers in the various mental health fields have identified specific religious and spiritual competencies for psychologists, and have pointed both to the clear benefits of religion and spirituality for psychological health and well-being, and to the desire of individuals in treatment to have their religion and/or spirituality incorporated into psychotherapy.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, overwhelmingly, contemporary secular applications of mindfulness have been adapted for clinical practice by separation from, rather than integration with, their original spiritual/religious contexts.<sup>3</sup> This has been the case even though the origins of mindfulness in religious traditions, especially in Buddhism, are usually taken for granted in the professional literature.<sup>4</sup> Thus, while secular mindfulness tends to incorporate many of the features of mindfulness practices found in

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<sup>1</sup> Katherine Thompson and Petra van Vliet, "Critical Reflection on the Ethics of Mindfulness," *Australian Social Work* 71, no. 1 (2018): 123.

<sup>2</sup> Cassandra Vieten et al., "Spiritual and Religious Competencies for Psychologists," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 5, no. 3 (2013): 129.

<sup>3</sup> Thompson and van Vliet, "Critical Reflection on the Ethics of Mindfulness," 123.

<sup>4</sup> Scott R. Bishop et al., "Mindfulness: A Proposed Operational Definition," *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 11, no. 3 (2004): 230–241.

Buddhism and Christianity, it lacks grounding in the concepts, objectives, and ontological framework of these religions. While this secular trend has been criticized in some corners,<sup>5</sup> psychotherapies incorporating secular applications of mindfulness have nevertheless found increasing credibility within the scientific community.<sup>6</sup> Secular mindfulness is considered integral to several highly regarded approaches to psychotherapy, including Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT).<sup>7</sup>

Because of this trend, it is important to distinguish secular mindfulness practices from Christian mindfulness. Despite similar nomenclature, these two approaches have different goals or teleology. Spiritual mindfulness within Christianity, which this paper will refer to as the psychospiritual model, is closely integrated with the ultimate objective of Christianity: salvation in Jesus Christ. Spiritual mindfulness is not a “technique” that can be separated from the ontological claims of its original context. This psychospiritual model helps people develop self-control and manage cognitive, behavioural, and emotional difficulties by addressing more than simply the experience of clinical symptomatology or self-reported dystonic states; the psychospiritual model calls Christians to remembrance of God – *anamnesis* – and healing and reconciliation through full participation in the life of Christ. Spiritual mindfulness is a

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<sup>5</sup> Thompson and van Vliet, “Critical Reflection on the Ethics of Mindfulness,” 123. Thompson and van Vliet refer to this phenomenon as “McMindfulness,” expressing concern that there has been little critical reflection about the origins and use of mindfulness in psychotherapy and a serious lack of studies on how mindfulness affects clients’ values and beliefs. For another critique of contemporary secular mindfulness, see Brandon A. Gaudiano, “Evaluating Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: An Analysis of a Recent Critique,” *International Journal of Behavioral Consultation and Therapy* 7 (2011): 55–67.

<sup>6</sup> Francisco J. Ruiz, “A Review of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) Empirical Evidence: Correlational, Experimental Psychopathology, Component and Outcome Studies,” *International Journal of Psychology and Psychological Therapy* 10 (2010): 125–162.

<sup>7</sup> Naoko Kishita, Yuko Takei, and Ian Stewart, “A Meta-Analysis of Third Wave Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Behavioral Therapies for Older People,” *Geriatric Psychiatry* 32 (2017): 1352–1361.