



Mindfulness and Secularity

Mindfulness practice is gaining a prominent place within society – in medicine, mental health and education. While this movement has largely been heralded by political and medical leaders^{1,2} occasional concerns have been raised about the secularity of mindfulness. Critics, for example, have suggested that mindfulness represents a disguised attempt to establish religion within the secular sphere. They highlight the fact that mindfulness practices have been articulated within eastern religious traditions, notably particular sects of Buddhism.

Mindful Schools wishes to state our unequivocal commitment to a thoroughly secular approach to mindfulness practice. We are steadfastly committed to integrating mindfulness in education in a way that neither advances nor inhibits the religious beliefs (or lack of beliefs) of our students. In order to clarify this commitment, we must first answer the question, “What does it mean to be *secular*?” Simply having a precedent within a religious tradition cannot disqualify an idea or practice from being secular. For example, the values of generosity and compassion are deeply embedded across world religions but this fact is never cited as a cause to curtail the role of generosity and compassion in secular life.

Instead, we highlight three characteristics of secularity embodied by the mindfulness movement: (1) *Rejection of the notion that some texts or ideas have special, protected status* (2) *Openness to revision based on the evidence emerging from other secular discourses such as science or philosophy* and (3) *The primary aim is not a set of beliefs but the enactment of practices that potentiate well-being.*

Religious traditions typically celebrate particular books or ideas and afford those ideas special epistemic status. Followers of religion often ascribe distinctive authority to the sanctified books of their tradition, and the claims of such texts are not evaluated according the same standards as other knowledge claims. In contrast, we fully reject the notion that books or ideas relating to mindfulness stand above scrutiny. When a claim is made about mindfulness, proponents must be fully willing to submit those claims to rigorous (often scientific) evaluation. There is absolutely no deference for claims based on tradition or some supposed authoritative text.

Mindfulness is a secular discourse insofar as it remains radically open to revision based on emerging evidence. Mindfulness makes claims that are explicitly empirical – claims about the nature of well-being, human distress and flourishing. Many of these claims are best evaluated by scientific methods. Should studies provide evidence that challenges the claims of mindfulness, then it is incumbent on

¹ Ryan, T. (2012). *A Mindful Nation: How a simple practice can help us reduce stress, improve performance, and recapture the American spirit*. Hay House, Inc.

² Goyal, M., Singh, S., Sibinga, E. M., Gould, N. F., Rowland-Seymour, A., Sharma, R., ... & Ranasinghe, P. D. (2014). Meditation programs for psychological stress and well-being: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *JAMA Internal Medicine*, 174, 357-368.



mindfulness teachers and researchers to be responsive to those challenges. Such challenges have already emerged within the empirical literature and there is greater appreciation of the limitations of mindfulness practice.³

Lastly, mindfulness is secular insofar as its central aim is not to instill a particular set of beliefs, but to support introspective practices that attenuate distress and potentiate well-being. The advanced practitioner of mindfulness is not a person who assertively declares metaphysical truths, but a person who has cultivated her attention in such a way that she struggles less, has more joy and engages others with greater interpersonal skill.

How does the law determine if a public governmental program is secular? One of the prevailing legal standards for assessing the separation of church and state is known as the “Lemon test.” In the 1971 case, *Lemon v. Kurtzman*,⁴ the United States Supreme Court adopted a three-pronged ‘test’ to determine if a particular governmental (or public educational) program infringes on the rights granted by the First Amendment. The First Amendment grants that the government will take no action to establish a religion. The court ruled that for a program to be constitutional, (1) the program must have a secular purpose, (2) the program’s primary effect must not advance or inhibit religion and (3) the program must not entangle the government with religion.

Mindfulness in schools meets the requirements of the “Lemon Test.” The purpose of mindfulness programs is completely secular: potentiate well-being. The primary effect of mindfulness in schools is unrelated to the advancement or inhibition of religion. Notably, mindfulness and other meditative techniques are widely practiced by individuals across a broad range of religious traditions, including the religiously unaffiliated.⁵ This fact testifies to the compatibility of mindfulness practice with a wide range of beliefs – religious or atheistic. On the third prong of the Lemon test, we find no evidence that mindfulness programs entangle the government with religious traditions or authorities.

Given the secular nature of mindfulness, we are unsurprised that leaders recommend its integration into a range of secular institutions including medicine,⁶ mental health,⁷ education⁸ and even more broadly to enhance societal functioning.⁹

³ Schooler, J. W., Mrazek, M. D., Franklin, M. S., Baird, B., Mooneyham, B. W., Zedelius, C., & Broadway, J. M. (2014). The middle way: Finding the balance between mindfulness and mind-wandering. *The Psychology of Learning and Motivation*, 60, 1-33.

⁴ *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971) 403 U.S. 602.

⁵ Pew Research Center (2014). Religious Landscape Study. <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/frequency-of-meditation/#beliefs-and-practices>

⁶ Ludwig, D. S., & Kabat-Zinn, J. (2008). Mindfulness in medicine. *JAMA*, 300, 1350-1352.

⁷ Hofmann, S. G., Sawyer, A. T., Witt, A. A., & Oh, D. (2010). The effect of mindfulness-based therapy on anxiety and depression: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology*, 78, 169-183.

⁸ Zenner, C., Herrleben-Kurz, S., & Walach, H. (2014). Mindfulness-based interventions in schools—a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Frontiers in psychology*, 5, 1-20.

⁹ Mindful Nation UK. Report by the Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group. <http://thefmindfulnessinitiative.org.uk>