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Mindfulness, Yoga and Schools: An Opportunity or a Problem?

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The debate on the use of Mindfulness and Yoga in Catholic schools has raised the issue of Catholic attitudes to non-Christian religions. Having origins in non-Christian religions do these practices carry spiritual connotations which may not be compatible with Christian practices or teaching? This issue can seem bizarre to teachers of Mindfulness and Yoga who, on the whole, don't see their practices as religious. Certainly in schools they are usually taught as a mental-physical calming exercises to encourage pupils to pay attention, and not generally regarded as spiritual. So, from the beginning, the two sides of the debate don't agree on what they are talking about. There are initial questions both sides need to ask before considering the value (or non-value) of these practices in Catholic schools: On the Mindfulness/Yoga side the question is whether a practice can shed the religious culture from which it emerged? Certainly Mindfulness and Yoga have managed to adapt themselves to the secular world and are taught outside of their original religious context. On the Christian/Catholic side the question is whether it is the ancient religious traditions that are the problem, or the secular adaptations? Or maybe there is no problem. Is interest in these practices rather an opportunity and a wake up call for Christians to recover their own contemplative tradition?

MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness has its origin in Buddhism, even those like Jon Kabat-Zinn who teach it purely as a therapeutic practice admit that it is from Buddhists like Thich Nhat Hanh that the practice first came to the West. Yet most Mindfulness teaching today has taken off its Buddhist robes. It is used clinically with Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and more generally as a practice for stress relief; in schools to cultivate attention and calmness. In all these contexts what is

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taught are practices of ‘being in the present moment’, letting go of anxious or restless thoughts, re-integrating the mind with the body. The means is usually an open monitoring of bodily sensations, thoughts as they pass through the mind, without identifying with them, or simply the breathing. Relinking the mind with the body in simple awareness exercises helps the person unhook from anxious thinking about the future or repetitive thinking from the past. This is part of Buddhist practice - but only part. There is a whole spectrum of moral and cognitive training which makes Buddhism much more than stress relief. The aim of Buddhist mindfulness is insight into the interdependence of all phenomena that arise, so that we are taken beyond any sense of ourselves as the centre of the universe. Whether mindfulness practiced only as self-awareness can get to this depth of self-transcendence is doubtful, unless further guidance in that tradition is given.

YOGA

It is the same with Yoga. There is no doubt that Yoga has its origin in the moral, religious and meditative practices of India, and yet only a fraction of this is presented in what we commonly know as Yoga in the West. The physical exercises of hatha yoga, practiced as they are for their benefits to the body and the mind, are but one of the eight ‘limbs’ of Patanjali’s classic Indian text on the yogic life written around 350 C.E. The aim of *asanas* or physical exercises, for Patanjali, is to calm the mind so that we can realise, in meditation, that we are not our bodies or our minds. The ultimate aim is to distil or ‘extract’ the spiritual essence of who we really are from the body-mind sheath. Like with Mindfulness, the full practice of the tradition is not used in the secular version, especially not in schools, only that which has immediate physical and mental benefits. The accusation of ‘false Gods’ doesn’t apply easily to Mindfulness or Yoga (the only ‘false God’ the epistles of the New Testament speak of is ‘the love of money’). Buddhism is a meditative wisdom tradition which does not speak of God or Gods at all (Buddha is not a God). Yoga, especially in its Hatha form practiced in the west, is a limb of Patanjali’s teaching who was renowned in his time for taking ‘Gods’ out of spiritual practice, making it much more D.I.Y. These two practices do not involve contacting ‘spirits’ and should not at all be confused with the occult. They are wisdom traditions of Asia.

SCHOOLS

Now if we turn to the Christian/Catholic side, certainly the idea that if something is not of Christian origin then it cannot be taught in Church schools can’t hold water as the majority of the curriculum

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(and sports) are not of Christian origin. However, Religious Education in Irish Primary schools centres on the Christian/Catholic tradition; if the aim is to give a formation in the predominant religious culture of our land then it is understandable one wouldn't want to introduce 'different' influences. One wouldn't teach Maths during an Irish language class, and, as Mindfulness and Yoga have links to distinctive religions they wouldn't be taught in specifically Catholic/Christian education. However, in Irish Secondary Schools Religious Studies includes study of non-Christian religions, so one assumes these practices have a right there.

In reality it seems Mindfulness (and, to a lesser extent, Yoga) are used by teachers who find them beneficial in calming and recollecting their class. These are, as yet, a small proportion of teachers (more often in Secondary than Primary schools) and few would say they are using these Mindfulness and Yoga in a religious sense. There is evidence that they can help pupils with Attention Deficiency (an increasing problem in the Social Media age). Focusing on sense awareness helps unhook pupils from multiple distractions and leads to better attention to the learning task at hand. Conscious physical stretching helps integrate mind and body so they work better together, as a whole. Moreover, these practices of mental and physical health have come out of non-European cultures with whom we have much more contact today than in the past, so they teach us that we are part of a bigger world heritage.

OPPORTUNITY NOT THREAT

Since the Second Vatican Council Catholic Christians, "while witnessing to their own faith and way of life" are urged to "acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture" (*Nostra Aetate*, section 2). This Council, ratified by over 2,400 bishops, affirms that, "The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in [non-Christian] religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all people" (Ibid). If a tree is to be judged by its fruits then Mindfulness and Yoga have, on many accounts, proved to be life-giving and helpful. Catholics have reason to hold them in "high regard." The question remains whether these practices – good in themselves – are replacing Christian prayer practices in schools. The Rosary has not been used in Religious Education classes for some time now, so it is not Mindfulness that has squeezed it out. Rather the interest in Mindfulness could prompt Catholic schools

to tap into Christian practices of contemplative prayer which have proved popular and accessible to children. This was the emphasis of the booklet produced by the Irish Bishop's Conference in November 2018, *A Reflection on Mindfulness: Rediscovering the Christian Tradition of Meditation and Contemplation*. The booklet makes the right distinction that "Mindfulness [in its secular presentation] is not prayer but it is a context in which prayer can occur. It is a paradox that while mindfulness can open the door to contemplative prayer, faith and surrender to God also lead to mindfulness" (p. 17). The Bishop's Conference concludes that the interest in Mindfulness is an *opportunity* for Catholics to recover their own distinctive tradition.

Indeed, the practice of Christian Meditation in Australia, for example, is part of every Catholic school in some dioceses and taken up voluntarily in others. Christian Meditation Ireland offer a free in-service to schools in Ireland since November 2012 and, over the last 7 years, 210 primary schools have joined the project, introducing meditation on a whole-school basis to about 50,000 children. A Second Level Module is now also run, both pioneered by Dr. Noel Keating author of *Meditation with Children: A Resource for Teachers and Parents* (Veritas 2017). The marvel of practices like Christian Meditation is that it is adaptable to the multi-cultural context of today's education. It can be taught in an inclusive way to children from all religious backgrounds and none, without in any way diminishing the Christian understanding of the practice – thereby making it very suitable for the multicultural composition of most Irish classrooms. All the children in a class can sit together in silence in focused-attention meditation - children of a faith tradition can practice it from the intention of that tradition – e.g. in the Christian tradition to be still in mind and body in God's presence, open to a grace-filled experience - while those who are not affiliated with any faith tradition can practice it from a secular mind-set with a focus on its practical benefits. As secular practices Mindfulness and Yoga are attractive as schools have a large proportion of children who are not brought up as Catholics and, increasingly, a proportion from other faiths. There is a need for a practice which everyone can join in. However, Christian's have their 'own brand' and, though it does not mean taking others off the shelf, we may find this home-grown tradition fits most naturally especially as a 'whole school exercise', or in Religious Education.

The limitations of Mindfulness and Yoga is not so much their origins in Oriental culture but their assimilation as simply psycho-physical exercises in the West. Mindfulness and Yoga can bring the mind and body in harmony but, without the full religious traditions from which they come, they do not necessarily take us beyond

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the narrow horizon of a materialistic view of the world. Body awareness is good, but it is not necessarily a spiritual practice. We must remember it is not non-Christian religions which are going to displace Christian practice in schools (or other public forums in Ireland) it is secularism. The Catholic Church could encourage Mindfulness and Yoga to reconnect with their roots and not denigrate the more spiritual aspects of these practices. Most of all, those who work for the wellbeing and good of pupils in school must work together, and not be in competition with each other. There is nothing that promotes secularism more than religions fighting, and there is nothing that helps spirituality more than religions finding common ground. For Catholics mindfulness and yoga can be practiced as *preparatory* for prayer, to calm the body and mind so one can be still so as to be aware of the deeper presence of God within and among us. Christians are called to be generous in their appreciation of others and, with discernment, recognise good in practices that may be different from those we are used to. As educators we also need to meet pupils where they are: so if Mindfulness has proved helpful then why not find our own tradition of contemplation? It is an opportunity to do what the Second Vatican Council asked, “to create in every country the possibility of expressing the message of Christ in terms suitable to the times and to foster vital contact and exchange between the Church and different cultures” (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes*, 44).

There was a time in the early Church when there was a debate (led by Marcion) as to whether the Hebrew scriptures (‘the Old Testament’) were valid for Christians as they do not explicitly speak of Jesus. The conclusion, as we know, was yes, it wasn’t a question of replacing the Jewish religion but of continuing to learn from a ‘non-Christian’ religion things that helped Christians in their own practice and understanding. God guided the Jewish people and revealed things which are still of benefit to Christians. One assumes God – who wants all people to be saved - was with all the people of the world, loving and guiding them to wisdom and to practices that led them to life? If there is one way, one truth and one life, as Christians believe, surely ways that are truthful and life-giving that have their origins in other cultures and religions are compatible with Christ who is “the light which enlightens all people coming into the world” (*John* 1:9). Are we really to believe that that light left no fruit in cultures other than western Christianity? Could we not, as Christians, learn from the people of non-Christian faiths as we once did from the witness of the Jewish tradition? Mindfulness and Yoga even in their secular varieties may have their own gifts. God can also work through the

secular world; ideals like tolerance, religious freedom and human rights, do not seem to have come through religion (but rather in spite of it). We could learn, for example, the value of the body as the place where God is present. “Did you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who dwells in you,” as St. Paul writes (1 *Corinthians* 6:19). The secular world can remind us to be at ease in that Temple.

Yoga and the Christian Life. In truth, as a practising Christian, my yoga practice nowadays is enriched by the realisation that it is a means for me to immerse myself in the wonders of God’s creation, his life-giving Word, his unconditional love and his supreme healing power. By virtue of engaging body, breath, senses, mind and spirit in a balanced and unified way, yoga helps us to pay more attention to the words of our prayers and biblical passages and to experience a deeper sense of their meaning and our commitment to them.

– CHRISTINE PICKERING, *Maranatha Yoga*, (Dublin: Columba Books) p.22.