BOOK REVIEW


Mindful meditation is a buzzword most readers of these reviews have probably encountered in the last decade. It conjures up stereotypical images of classrooms, white collar offices, hospital rooms, and exercise studios filled with hard-working individuals sitting cross-legged, eyes closed, breathing deeply while led by an instructor who helps engage their thoughts toward a peaceful and stress-free focus. How did we get here?

Jaime Kucinskas’ The Mindful Elite invites us into the origins, structure, and machinations of the “Buddhist-inspired” mindful meditation or contemplative movement (CM hereafter). Unbeknownst to many, the CM is a concerted and organized social movement of a sort that cuts against the image of a typical social movement. Where movements often seem focused on remediating a social injustice with visible acts of civil disobedience or violent protest, CM has been fairly quiet in its goal of “creat[ing] a humanist society imbued with Buddhist values, ideology and meditation practice” (12). How and when this movement made its way into many middle-class institutions and places of work is the focus of this work.

The book is divided into three parts with three chapters in the first part, two in the last, and the remainder in the middle. The first part includes a brief history of white American encounters with Buddhism from the nineteenth century onward and a first look at the motivations behind the CM as reported by some of the leaders Kucinskas interviewed. The second part covers the institutional breadth of the CM that helped legitimize it for numerous organizations in educational institutions, corporations, and health care. This entailed persuading leaders in these institutions, who then provided resources for training employees, students, and patients in the method of CM and experiencing its perceived benefits.

The remaining chapters examine the praises and criticism of the CM. While some laud the benefits of the CM in the lives of workers, students, and the infirmed, others question the authenticity of the movement’s alleged roots in Buddhism, especially in light of the practice of profiting through and from participation in mindfulness techniques. Can the Dalai Lama endorse this CM and if so, how would he justify doing so when the accumulation of capital stands in opposition to one of the core principles of self-abnegation? Kucinskas also finds that the CM leaders acknowledge somewhat this tension and default toward addressing the needs of the individual at the expense of addressing the systemic issues for which their interventions are needed. For instance, the author notes that wage compression and inordinately long work hours, which many CM practitioners take part in, are a result of a fairly unregulated capitalist economy, which does not align well with the basic principles of most variants of Buddhism.

If there is a critique to make regarding the book it may lie in its less critical engagement of the power dynamics that can pose problems for those who are involved in the organizations where mindfulness is practiced. As with any cultural practice, once established it can become a means of stratifying individuals and groups along racial and/or religious lines. The leadership of the current CM movement in America

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is dominated by wealthy white elites, and it comes as no surprise that their vision of the good tends toward benevolent denigration of Buddhism practiced by Asian and even Asian American people groups. A substantial number of elites and the people they employ, teach, or serve have religious backgrounds that do not necessarily align with the presuppositions of the CM. How do they resolve the potential friction between their exclusivist faiths and the seemingly incongruous practice of mindful meditation? For others, religious infusion—even if termed “spirituality”—is an affront to their nonreligious preference. Taken together, the people managed and employed by the elites of the CM vary widely in their acceptance of religious and spiritual practices in spaces where such expressions and practices are typically deemed irrelevant. Importantly, workers, students, and patients face a dilemma in which those with the power to alter their employment, their classroom standing, and health care require their consent to participate in practices they may find objectionable. *The Mindful Elite* does not address this, but raises these questions for further investigation.

*The Mindful Elite* is an excellent work, a central text for the study of contemporary spirituality. Advanced undergraduates and graduate students will find much to glean from this in learning more about how social movements are studied, how the movements themselves gain legitimacy, and how they retain their influence over the course of years. Kucinskas’ work invites readers to reflect on how their daily experiences and vernacular language are rife with connections to religious and spiritually inspired movements that captured the imaginations of the middle and upper classes in other eras; think about “Kellogg” foods, “graham crackers,” “don’t drink the Kool-Aid,” and now “being mindful.” *The Mindful Elite* stands as the key investigation of the CM and builds our knowledge base of how such movements impact the lives of millions.

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