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Mindful of a Profit? A Critical Analysis of Meditation Apps in the Context of Neoliberalism and Western
Constructions of Religion.

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AHSS Summer Research
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Introduction:

In 1994, U. K. native Andy Puddicombe travelled to Asia to learn about Buddhism. Puddicombe studied under many Buddhist teachers, living in monasteries in India, Nepal, Thailand and several other countries. He eventually became a fully ordained monk in the Karma Kagyu Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. The lifestyle of a Buddhist monk is, of course, extremely different from the average day-to-day of most modern westerners. When living as a monk, one generally agrees to precepts to promote non-attachment, such as celibacy, eating only that which is offered, and living without money. When he completed his monastic commitment in 2004, Puddicombe returned to the UK, and eventually created the Headspace app, teaching the meditation techniques he learned while in Asia, without ever personally crediting any of his Buddhist teachers. Headspace is now estimated to be worth \$250 million. And far from his days living without money, Puddicombe's estimated worth is now \$40 million. Prior to Puddicombe's time as a monk, most westerners still viewed Buddhist meditation as something "new agey," or a little out there. But as Puddicombe learned, if you don't mention Buddhism, meditation becomes a practical, catch-all solution for any and all problems in western modernity. The result: today's billion dollar industry for meditation and mindfulness.

In 1979, meditation entered the field of Western medicine through Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) courses, created to help patients deal with the stress and pain of cancer and other serious illnesses. Since the creation of MBSR, mindfulness meditation has become an important tool for psychologists and doctors, and mindfulness meditation has spread beyond the medical field, becoming a popular lifestyle tool for individuals coping with the stress of everyday life. Smartphone applications for meditation gained popularity in the 2010's, as apps like Headspace and Calm began offering introductions to meditation and mindfulness for anyone, anywhere, advertising reduced stress and anxiety, greater feelings of happiness, improved focus and productivity. It was no longer necessary to join a Buddhist group, or to learn to meditate in a medical setting. The 1.2 billion dollar

mindfulness industry¹ became more lucrative than ever before, with apps making tens of millions of dollars yearly.² Meditation has quickly become normalized in the west; over just the last five years, the rate of meditators in the United States has tripled, and is expected to soon surpass the number of Americans who practice yoga.³

But how much are the users of meditation apps told about the roots of these meditation practices they are adopting? The creators of these apps assure users that although meditation practices may come from religious traditions, they have been secularized, and are now practical tools, compatible with any lifestyle. If so, then why is so much work done within these apps to rework the language around meditation, and to obscure the Buddhist and Asian roots of mindfulness? This prompts the question: what is necessary, and is it entirely possible, to make a religious practice into a secular one? Through analysis of three popular meditation apps (Headspace, Calm, Insight Timer), this paper will examine how meditation apps deliberately minimize their Buddhist origins in order to economize mental health and happiness. Further, applying Brent Nongbri's conceptualization of religion to these apps will illustrate the artificial nature between divisions of the religious and secular. Through this analysis, I will argue that there is a need for alternative ways of considering what constitutes the religious and the secular, given the complex, but often oversimplified, meanings that these Christian-centric terms have taken on in western modernity.

Brent Nongbri: Modern Conceptions of Religion

In *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*, Brent Nongbri argues that religion is a modern, European social construct. Nongbri outlines the general assumptions around the concept of religion: that it is a part of human experience across time and cultures, and though different world

¹ Potkewitz, Hilary. 2018. "Headspace Vs. Calm: The Meditation Battle that's Anything but Zen; A Pair of Apps Preach Relaxation to Millions of Customers--but Still Badly Want to Beat each Other." Wall Street Journal (Online), Dec 15. <http://ezproxy.ups.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/2156512812?accountid=1627>.

² Ibid.

³ Potkewitz, "Headspace Vs. Calm: The Meditation Battle that's Anything but Zen; A Pair of Apps Preach Relaxation to Millions of Customers--but Still Badly Want to Beat each Other," 2.

religions may vary, they all share certain definitive qualities that make them identifiable as something called “religion.”⁴ In the last forty years, however, scholars from various fields have found that there is no comparable term to ‘religion’ in any ancient language. Nongbri explains,

[Scholars] have noted that terms and concepts corresponding to religion do not appear in the literature of non-Western cultures *until after those cultures first encountered European Christians*.⁵ They have pointed out that the names of supposedly venerable old religions can often be traced back to the recent past (“Hinduism,” for example, to 1787 and “Buddhism,” to 1801). And when the names do derive from ancient words, we find that the early occurrences of those words are best understood as verbal activities rather than conceptual entities; thus the Greek term *ioudaismos* was not “the religion of Judaism,” but the activity of Judaizing... the Arabic *islam* was not “the religion of Islam,” but “submitting to authority.”⁶

The concept of religion was a European invention, and thus as Europeans travelled and colonized, they began to look for equivalents to “religion” in other cultures, coining terms such as Hinduism and Buddhism. While the practices of Hinduism and Buddhism have been happening for thousands of years, they were not classified as “religions” until European influence. Similarly, the terms *ioudaismos* and *islam* illustrate that the traditions of Islam and Judaism did not emerge as “religions” in the sense that the word is understood today.

Based on this historical lack of a concept of religion as we define it today, Nongbri argues that “the idea of religion as a sphere of life separate from politics, economics, and science is a recent development in European history, one that has been projected outward in space and backwards in time with the result that religion appears now to be a natural and necessary part of our world.”⁷ Essentially, this idea of religion was naturalized to such a degree that it was projected from Europe onto other cultures, and even onto the past. This naturalization has led to the modern conceptualization of religion as something inherent to human societies. Nongbri builds on anthropologist Talal Asad, who argues that

⁴ Nongbri, Brent. *Before religion: A history of a modern concept*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013. 1-2.

⁵ Italics are mine.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Nongbri, Brent. *Before religion: A history of a modern concept*. 7.

religion must be a modern concept given its link “to its Siamese twin, “secularism.”⁸ Nongbri states, “It is this simultaneous birth of religion and secularism that merits attention. That said, I want to stress I am not interested in the so-called secularization thesis... Instead, one of the problems this book addresses is how we have come to talk about “secular versus religious” at all.”⁹ Both Asad and Nongbri are interested in the connection between what is considered secular and religious and the way that these ideas have been constructed.

When referring to the “modern conception of religion,” Nongbri is neither contrasting this with an ancient conception nor allying himself with any particular definition of religion. Instead, he refers to the term’s dominant and varying usage in the United States--as something that resembles Protestant Christianity.¹⁰ He discusses many scholars’ definitions of religion, including Bruce Lincoln’s. Lincoln critiqued earlier definitions of religion, such as Clifford Geertz’s, as being too focused on Christianity, and thus not inclusive of “things one intuitively wants to call ‘religion’—Catholicism and Islam for instance.”¹¹ Nongbri identifies the importance of this intuition; the challenge of defining religion is that “such definitions will always be subject to that impulse to be consistent with everyday speech.”¹² In other words, such definitions must always fit our intuitive ideas of religion, otherwise they are considered insufficient. Rather than falling into this pitfall of defining religion, Nongbri uses a “less technical and more pragmatic approach,”¹³ identifying religion not through a definition but through its general usage:

Because of the pervasive use of the word “religion” in the cultures of the modern Western world (the “we” here), we already intuitively know what “religion” is before we even try to define it: ***religion is anything that sufficiently resembles modern Protestant Christianity.***¹⁴ Such a definition might be seen as crass, simplistic, ethnocentric, Christianocentric, and even a bit flippant; it is all these things, but it is also highly accurate in reflecting the uses of the term in modern languages.¹⁵

⁸ Nongbri, Brent. *Before religion: A history of a modern concept*. 4.

⁹ Nongbri, Brent. *Before religion: A history of a modern concept*. 4-5.

¹⁰ Nongbri, Brent. *Before religion: A history of a modern concept*. 16.

¹¹ Nongbri, Brent. *Before religion: A history of a modern concept*. 17.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Italics are mine.

¹⁵ Nongbri, Brent. *Before religion: A history of a modern concept*. 18.

The intuition that informs westerners' internal definitions of religion is simply a comparison to Protestant Christianity. Within western modernity, if a tradition has enough similarities to the practices and beliefs of Protestant Christianity, then it is generally deemed a religion.

Applications to Buddhism and the Meditation Market:

Nongbri's argument informs many discussions about the religious and secular, especially as those discussions pertain to the secularization of Buddhist meditation. The perception of Buddhism as a philosophy, not a religion, has aided the secularization of meditation. This common perception is a result of the history of Buddhism's migration into western culture.

Buddhism gained a foothold in the West particularly through intentional juxtaposition with Protestant Christianity. In order to contrast with Christianity, Buddhism was presented as a tradition without dogma or doctrine, as a tradition more compatible with western science and Enlightenment values than Protestant Christianity. Thus, Buddhism provided an alternative for many westerners who were questioning Christian beliefs and assumptions.¹⁶ Buddhist meditation can be considered secular as a result of this specific cultural location that it now occupies in the west. Comparatively, few practices or rituals from any Abrahamic tradition are divorced from the faith in the same way. Early translators of the Buddhist canon, the Transcendentalists, Buddhists like D. T. Suzuki, and psychologists like Carl Jung, presented a Buddhism to the west that contrasted Protestant Christianity. Thus, it seemed far more secular than other religions. It is because of this history that westerners are more inclined to view meditation as secular. David McMahan describes this history as the development of Buddhist modernism.

Background: Buddhist Modernism

David McMahan argues that what most Americans and Europeans consider Buddhism is actually what he coins "Buddhist modernism," or new "forms of Buddhism that have emerged out of an

¹⁶ McMahan, David L. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. Chapter 3.

engagement with the dominant cultural and intellectual forces of modernity.”¹⁷ McMahan defines Buddhist modernism as a hybrid tradition between traditional forms of Asian Buddhism and western influences such as the European Enlightenment, Romanticism, and transcendentalism.¹⁸ Through this engagement with western modernity, Buddhism has been detraditionalized, demythologized, psychologized, and most recently, shaped to fit the needs of modern western consumers. McMahan traces the creation of this novel form of Buddhism through the history of its migration to the west.

One of the most important ways that Buddhism migrated (and adapted) to Europe and North America was through the translation of the Buddhist canon, which exemplifies the way that Buddhism has been molded to fit western values. In more traditional forms of Buddhism, the canon was traditionally used for the purpose of aiding authorized teachers in formal Buddhist settings. McMahan explains why the significance of this act: “The translation of canonical texts into western languages is not just a linguistic translation; it is also a cultural transformation, or rather the establishment of a new, unprecedented textual practice in a new Buddhist culture shaping itself to the textual practice of modernity.”¹⁹ Today, popular reading is one of the most common ways individuals learn about Buddhism in the west.²⁰ Because there is no precedent for laypersons reading these texts in traditional Buddhist cultures, the act of translating these texts in itself constitutes a shift in the cultural location of the Buddhist canon.

McMahan also illustrates how the linguistic choices of early translators shaped the way Buddhism came to be understood by English-speakers. One significant example is the translation of the sanskrit term *bodhi*:

¹⁷ McMahan, David L. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. Introduction 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ McMahan, David L. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. Introduction. 14.

²⁰ Note: This does not just apply to the Buddhist canon itself, but to many other popular reading books that have drawn on Buddhism for western needs. A simple search for “Zen and” will produce thousands of results on a variety of topics in any American library or bookstore. A few notable titles include: “Zen as F*ck” by Monica Sweeney, “Secrets of the Zen Business Warrior: 7 Steps to Grow Your Business...” by Laurence G. Boldt, “Zen Computer” and “Zen Sex: The Way of Making Love” both written by Philip T. Sudo.

The translation of one of Buddhism's central terms, *bodhi* provides another example. It literally means "awakening" and describes the Buddha's highest attainment under the bodhi tree. The most common English translation, "enlightenment," invokes, however, a complex of meanings tied to the ideas, values, and sensibilities of the European Enlightenment: reason, empirical observation, suspicion of authority, freedom of thought, and so on. Early translators, moreover, consciously forged this link. Buddhist studies pioneer Thomas W. Rhys Davids (1843-1922) first translated *bodhi* as "Enlightenment" and explicitly compared the Buddha with the philosophers of the European Enlightenment.²¹

This example illustrates how the link between Buddhism (as it is understood in the west) and the values of the European Enlightenment was intentionally created. This association is significant, because it has changed the way that Buddhism is understood in western culture, compared to traditional forms of Buddhism in Asia. By drawing these types of comparisons between content of the Buddhist canon, and western culture, a new form of Buddhism emerged: one that was detraditionalized, demythologized, and eventually psychologized.

Detraditionalization:

Detraditionalization refers to the shift of religious authority away from religious institutions and toward the individual.²² One's personal experience, investigation, and subjectivity becomes the most important part of the religious experience. McMahan illustrates how the focus on the individual fits into the dominant cultural norms of western modernity: "Detraditionalization embodies the modernist tendency to elevate reason, experience, and intuition over tradition and to assert the freedom to reject, adopt, or reinterpret traditional beliefs and practices on the basis of individual elevation. Religion becomes more individualized, privatized, and a matter of choice..."²³ Detraditionalization of Buddhism is evident today through the tendency to view meditation as a mode of self-inquiry, to be done alone, whereas in traditional Buddhist cultures, meditation is often practiced within a community, or *sangha*. McMahan explains, "numerous ethnographic and historical studies suggest that Buddhism—even

²¹ McMahan, David L. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. Introduction. 15.

²² McMahan, David L. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. Chapter 2. 21.

²³ *Ibid.*

Buddhist meditation—has always been a communal as well as individual endeavor. There are strong bonds of support within the sangha, which is itself embedded in the wider community of laity.”²⁴ This detraditionalization paved the way for Buddhist meditation to move outside the temple, into a medical setting for individual inquiry, and eventually into the homes and smartphones of non-Buddhists.

Demythologization:

Demythologization is another key factor that has made Buddhism palatable to westerners.

McMahan describes demythologization as:

... the process of attempting to extract—or more accurately, to reconstruct—meanings that will be viable within the context of modern worldviews from teachings embedded in ancient worldviews. In order to transpose such themes into a modern key, elements that are incompatible with modernity are relegated to “myth” and shorn of literal truth-value.²⁵

Because many early Orientalists and scholars of Buddhism viewed Buddhist teachings in contrast to the mythological Christian Bible, they often considered “real” Buddhism as that which denied the mystical. One example is C. T. Strauss, an early Buddhist sympathizer who argued that “genuine Buddhism is the reverse of mystical, rejects miracles, is founded on reality, and refuses to speculate about the absolute and other so called first causes.”²⁶ This analysis makes a somewhat arbitrary claim about what “true” Buddhism is, and clearly privileges some forms of Buddhism over others. Such categorizations of “genuine Buddhism,” however, has persisted.

Today, many teachings of that are understood literally in more traditional forms of Buddhism are understood as metaphors or analogies for real-world problems in Buddhist modernism. One example that McMahan analyzes is the Wheel of Rebirth, or *samsara*, which is often depicted artistically, showing the different realms of rebirth containing various forms of life; there are gods, jealous gods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and different hells. A traditional Buddhist interpretation views artistic depictions of *samsara* as representations of the reality of rebirth—a reminder to work toward diminishing the ego in

²⁴ McMahan, David L. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. Chapter 7. 11.

²⁵ McMahan, David L. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. Chapter 2. 22.

²⁶ McMahan, David L. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. Chapter 2. 28.

order to attain Nirvana, escaping the suffering of *samsara* altogether. However, modernist interpretations, such as Chogyam Trumpa's²⁷, view the different realms as representing various states of mind, such as anger, passion, and paranoia. According to McMahan, "the presentation of their significance as primarily or even exclusively psychological is uniquely modern. Such reinterpretation... is characteristic of the transformations of certain strains of Buddhism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."²⁸ These types of modern interpretations present very different ideas forms of Buddhism, and specifically change the way that death and rebirth are understood. Furthermore, relegating these teachings to metaphor paves the way for them to be left out altogether, as they often are in secular Buddhist settings, or in meditation apps.

These modernist interpretations also influence the way Buddhism is practiced. Consider a traditional ritual like the *Kanromon*, in which food is placed out to feed the hungry ghosts of lower realms. These hungry ghosts are considered to be real, tangible fixtures of this world, a fate into which one could be reborn, if not careful. Rōshi Bernie Glassman, an American Zen teacher, has reinterpreted the hungry ghosts to symbolize the disadvantaged in society. Glassman has

re-created the ritual for feeding hungry ghosts to reflect the idea that whether or not such spirits inhabit other realms, they are first and foremost both ourselves and society's disadvantaged. One of his activist innovations is known as the "street retreat," in which Zen practitioners live on the streets with the homeless for a period of time without money, food, or provisions in order to erase the illusion of separation between the privileged and the underprivileged, the self and others."²⁹

The differences between a ritual like the *kanromon* and the "street retreat" demonstrate the profound differences affected by demythologization. The demythologizing of Buddhism has lent way to a more worldly religion, in which the focus is less on afterlife or rebirth, but on fixtures of this current life. This is another feature that makes Buddhism seem less "religious," as it less closely resembles the common Christian faith in the afterlife.

²⁷ McMahan, David L. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. Chapter 2. 23. (Trumpa is "one of the most influential and westernized Tibetan Buddhist teachers in North America.")

²⁸ McMahan, David L. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. Chapter 2. 25.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Psychologization:

Early Buddhist scholars in the west often viewed Buddhism as compatible with western psychology, forging a connection that has important implications for the role of meditation. McMahan writes, “the articulation of Buddhism in terms of analytic psychology became one of the most powerful and enduring psychological reconfigurations of the dharma and one of the chief engines of demythologization.”³⁰ This “articulation” was done by scholars like Carl Jung, who interpreted the different realms to symbolize the collective unconscious.³¹ Many other psychologists and scholars, including Giuseppe Tucci and Huston Smith, interpreted Tibetan Buddhism similarly. McMahan explains that westerners were hesitant to show interest in Tibetan Buddhism, because of the deities represented in this tradition. Due to the deep-rooted ideology of Christian monotheism and Enlightenment rationalism, Tibetan Buddhism was seen as “demonic and idolatrous or backward and superstitious.”³² It was not until interpretations of these deities as internal states (such as moods or attitudes) were popularized, that westerners became interested in the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. This demythologization of Tibetan, as well as Zen Buddhism, led to their interpretations as psychologically sound philosophies, rather than “religions,” which were assumed to be incompatible with scientific inquiry. Many psychologists took interest in the possibility of using meditation as a therapeutic technique. But it was not until the late 1970’s that Buddhist meditation truly took hold in modern psychology.

Roots of Mindfulness as Stress Reduction -- Jon Kabat-Zinn

The turning point for meditation entering the medical field, and for the way it has come to be commodified, was in 1979 when American professor emeritus of medicine Jon Kabat-Zinn introduced Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction courses (MBSR) at the University of Massachusetts.³³ The purpose

³⁰ McMahan, David L. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. Chapter 2. 32.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² McMahan, David L. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. Chapter 2. 33.

³³ The exact year is dated differently by different sources -- but most agree on 1979 as the year that MBSR began as a program offered at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. (Hickey, Patricio).

behind MBSR courses was to help people with chronic illness and cancer use mindfulness to help deal with pain. MBSR programs are eight-weeks long, during which participants attend weekly two-and-a-half hour classes, and complete homework assignments which include daily meditation and yoga, as well as journaling about their stressful experiences.³⁴

MBSR has been extremely popular; it was estimated in 2015 that there were over 1000 instructors teaching over 7000 MBSR programs in over thirty countries.³⁵ Kabat-Zinn's Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Healthcare, and Society estimates that tens of thousands of people have completed MBSR programs.³⁶ And far more individuals have been influenced by Kabat-Zinn's medicalization of mindfulness, through therapeutic protocols derived from MBSR, such as Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, which is used to treat depression, as well as Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, used to treat Borderline Personality Disorder.³⁷ These are just a few examples of medical techniques that have been adapted from MBSR, or from research done on MBSR.

Kabat-Zinn brought meditation into the mainstream through these courses, creating the precedent for the way that meditation is commodified today. For pragmatic reasons, MBSR courses intentionally conceal the Buddhist and Hindu roots of the meditation practices they teach. MBSR is considered secular; otherwise it would not be able to be implemented medically. But it is worth noting that Kabat-Zinn did not learn meditation in the secular way that he teaches it. He trained as a Dharma teacher under Korean Zen master Seung Sahn. Though the program is considered secular, looking into the framework of MBSR many have noted that it includes rephrased versions of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths as well as the Eightfold Path.³⁸

³⁴ Hickey, Wakoh Shannon. "Meditation as medicine: A critique." *CrossCurrents* 60, no. 2 (2010): 169.

³⁵ Brown, Candy Gunther. "Can "Secular" Mindfulness Be Separated from Religion?." In *Handbook of Mindfulness*, pp. 79. Springer, Cham, 2016.

³⁶ Hickey. "Meditation as Medicine: A Critique." 169.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Brown. "Can "Secular" Mindfulness Be Separated from Religion?" 79.

Despite this, MBSR is still viewed as secular enough to be implemented in hundreds of medical settings around the world, and has been cited by both legal and policy analysts as secular and lacking any religious or spiritual teachings.³⁹ In “Meditation as Medicine: A Critique,” Wakoh Shannon Hickey explains,

When he [Kabat-Zinn] began to develop MBSR in 1971, he anticipated that doctors and scientists, as well as many patients, would resist a program explicitly grounded in a particular religious tradition, especially a foreign one... So it is understandable that Kabat-Zinn’s rhetoric has carefully distanced MBSR from Buddhist or Hindu teachings that regard meditation and yoga as religious disciplines.⁴⁰

Thus, Kabat-Zinn worked to make sure that MBSR would not seem religious or foreign, so that the program would not be rejected due to ethnocentrism and religious skepticism. In order to accomplish this, he made careful linguistic choices to disguise the religious roots of the program. C. G. Brown explains,

In the early years, Kabat-Zinn “bent over backward” (in his words) to select vocabulary that prevented both patients and hospital staff from recognizing MBSR as the “essence of the Buddha’s teachings” ... Over time, as scientific publications (which Kabat-Zinn pioneered in publishing) lent credibility to mindfulness, he felt it was safe to begin to “articulate its origins and its essence” to health professionals, yet “not so much to its patients,” whom he has intentionally continued to leave uninformed about the “dharma that underlies the curriculum” (2011).⁴¹

As mindfulness became more respected in western scientific communities (due to the psychologization of Buddhist meditation), Kabat-Zinn was able to discuss these religious origins with other medical professionals. However, the popularization of mindfulness meditation in general society had not occurred, and thus Kabat-Zinn continued to obscure the “dharma,” of Buddhist teachings behind MBSR.

Today, Kabat-Zinn is clear about the roots of MBSR. In 2011, he called MBSR “is the movement of the dharma into the mainstream of society.”⁴² In 2015, Kabat-Zinn also stated, “what is practiced in Buddhist monasteries is essentially no different from what is taught in MBSR.”⁴³ Pragmatically, it is clear that

³⁹ Brown. “Can “Secular” Mindfulness Be Separated from Religion?” 78.

⁴⁰ Hickey. “Meditation as Medicine: A Critique.” 171.

⁴¹ Brown “Can “Secular” Mindfulness Be Separated from Religion?” 79-80.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

without Kabat-Zinn's careful linguistic choices, the vast amount of research on mindfulness would not exist today. But his initial approach did set a precedent for others to teach "Buddhist meditation (without the Buddhism)"⁴⁴ in the same way. Considering that MBSR courses are focused on explicitly Buddhist teachings (although it is not disclosed to patients), it seems faulty to categorize them as secular, and it is somewhat surprising that they have been able to pass as non-religious for so long. However, invoking Nongbri, MBSR courses bear little to no resemblance to Protestant Christianity, and thus are not intuitively viewed as religious by the average modern westerner.

Kabat-Zinn's legacy lies not only in the popularization of mindfulness practices in the medical field, but also in the specific way that he promoted meditation as secular, and distanced the practice from Buddhist teachings. I argue that Zinn's legacy plays out clearly today in meditation apps; the only significant differences are the shift toward multimedia and technology, and the move from a medical setting to a commercial one.

Biomorality, Neoliberalism, and the Economization of Mental Health:

This commercial setting could be anything from an urban meditation center to the Google Play store. And wherever things are bought and sold in modernity, the logic of neoliberalism is present. While neoliberalism is generally considered an economic philosophy, scholars such as political theorist Wendy Brown consider it to be something broader in scope. Brown describes neoliberalism as "an order of normative reason that, when it becomes ascendant, takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life."⁴⁵ Brown argues that neoliberalism extends to all parts of life, and specifies that to economize does not necessarily mean to monetize:

Importantly, such economization may not always involve monetization. That is we may (and neoliberalism interpellates us as subjects who do) think and act like contemporary

⁴⁴ Hickey. "Meditation as Medicine: A Critique." 171.

⁴⁵ Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution*. Mit Press, 2015. 30.

market subjects where monetary wealth generation is not the immediate issue, for example in approaching one's education, health, fitness, family life, or neighborhood.⁴⁶

So to approach any of these non-economic parts of life with the attitude of a market actor is now the expectation. The attitude of such a market actor can look like a lot of different things: cost-benefit analyses of going to the gym versus staying home to watch TV or a busy CEO taking time out of a workday to meditate. Whatever it may be, these actions demonstrate how the neoliberal ideology has seeped into every part of life, even those that are seemingly unrelated to money.

Considering meditation apps within this conceptualization of neoliberalism demonstrates their role in the economization of mental health and happiness. In *Mindfulness: A Critical Perspective*, Phil Arthington contextualizes the current popularity of mindfulness "as a product of advanced capitalist society."⁴⁷ Invoking the concept of biomorality, Arthington claims that mindfulness is reinforcing the logic of neoliberalism by promoting the idea of committing oneself to constant self-improvement (or as Brown might say, self-investment). Arthington discusses the way that mindfulness is used today as a tool for self-improvement, and how this fits into a broader pattern of behavior under capitalism:

One aspect of the social construction of health under capitalism has been the way that it has developed moral connotations by virtue of the attribution of health to the ideal neoliberal agent: accordingly, to be 'unhealthy' is a reflection of one's poor character. This *bio-morality*,⁴⁸ which leads individuals to seek self-expression through the pursuit of health by methods such as dieting, gym membership, and activity-tracking using wearable technology, for instance, represents a key means by which the operation of power through self-discipline described by Foucault (1988b) takes place: in a society which celebrates the strong, independent and autonomous individual, health becomes both naturalised and idealised and so individuals are naturally inclined to construct themselves as 'better' people.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Brown, Wendy. Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution. 31.

⁴⁷ Arthington, Phil. "Mindfulness: A critical perspective." *Community Psychology in Global Perspective* 2, no. 1 (2016): 87.

⁴⁸ Italics are mine.

⁴⁹ Arthington, Phil. "Mindfulness: A critical perspective." 97.

Arthington argues that capitalism has constructed an idea of ‘health’ that implies moral values for individuals. Because the ideology of capitalism is one of meritocracy, one’s health is presumed to rely on their own hard work and dedication; thus we assume that if one is unhealthy, it must be a result of their own laziness or poor character. This value judgement is referred to as bio-morality, and it is evident in today’s technologically-driven society through the popularity of items such as the Fit-Bit, smartphone health-trackers, Apple and Samsung watches, and streak counts on meditation apps. What these technologies all have in common is the underlying neoliberal ideology that autonomous individuals can and must take care of their own health.

Arthington explains that health is not only viewed as one’s physical fitness, “but extends to what is constructed as a healthy mind, healthy relationships and a healthy balance of pleasure and responsibility.”⁵⁰ This is where meditation practices come into play. Meditation apps all promise to improve one’s mental health, whether it be through better sleep, less stress, or increased compassion. And to optimize that process, Headspace, Calm, and Insight Timer all include streak counts, tracking one’s daily meditations in a manner reminiscent of Snapchat streaks.

Ellen Gamerman discusses the effects of these streak counting features in the Wall Street Journal article: “Competitive About Your Meditation? Relax, Everyone Else is Too; As hard-chargers descend on the ancient practice, they are changing the quest for Inner Peace.” Gamerman describes “driven spiritual voyagers,” such as 42-year-old performance coach Alan Stein Jr. and 29-year-old San Francisco tech entrepreneur Michael Merchant, both working hard to maintain their streaks.⁵¹ At the time of the article publication, Stein Jr. was on his 324th day of his Headspace meditation streak. Despite his frequent travel and time-zone changes, Stein was determined to keep his streak:

On a recent work trip to Atlanta, he remembered to meditate only just after the clock struck midnight. Worried he’d blown his record, he closed his eyes and quickly tried to

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Gamerman, Ellen. "Competitive about Your Meditation? Relax, Everyone Else is Too; as Hard-Chargers Descend on the Ancient Practice, they are Tweaking the Quest for Inner Peace." *Wall Street Journal (Online)*, Jun 12, 2018. <http://ezproxy.ups.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/2053377200?accountid=1627>.

meditate on the hotel bed for just ten minutes. “The whole time I’m just waiting for the 10 minutes to be over to see if my streak was alive.”⁵²

Luckily, the Headspace app features a short grace-period, saving Stein’s streak. Not quite as lucky, was Michael Merchant, who used the goal-tracking service Beeminder, (a website which allows users to track data for their goals) to make meditation into a daily habit. To help foster accountability, Beeminder charges the user a “pledge” every time they forget to do their goal. Pledges start low, and gradually build. Merchant used the site to practice daily meditation, but “felt so much shame” when he repeatedly failed to practice, resulting in the loss of \$810. While he could have logged false data to keep the money, Merchant stated “It’s weird to admit, but it was kind of cathartic... I’ve paid for my screw-up, literally.”⁵³ The experiences of Merchant and Stein reflect how the ideology of bio-morality is embedded in these streak counts. Both users were both committed to meditation as a self-improvement exercise, but they both felt deep shame at the idea of messing up. There is a clear moral value attached to their meditation practice due to the logic of bio-morality: “to be ‘unhealthy’ is a reflection of one’s poor character,” and thus to forget meditating for one day warrants shame.⁵⁴

The mindfulness industry profits off of the ideology of bio-morality, and more broadly, that of neoliberalism and capitalism. Using mindfulness or meditation as a way to focus on the individual and invest in oneself represents one competing ideology at play here, and it is clearly not that of meditation’s Buddhist roots. Though Puddicombe states the Headspace streak was inspired by accountability exercises he practiced while training in a Tibetan monastery, Associate Professor of Chinese religions at the University of Michigan Benjamin Brose states otherwise: “I’m fairly certain that there is no precedent for this in traditional Buddhist practice... Many monks meditate every day for decades, and I have never

⁵² Gamerman, Ellen. "Competitive about Your Meditation? Relax, Everyone Else is Too; as Hard-Chargers Descend on the Ancient Practice, they are Tweaking the Quest for Inner Peace." 1.

⁵³ Gamerman, Ellen. "Competitive about Your Meditation? Relax, Everyone Else is Too; as Hard-Chargers Descend on the Ancient Practice, they are Tweaking the Quest for Inner Peace." 2.

⁵⁴ Arthington, Phil. "Mindfulness: A critical perspective." 97.

heard of anyone keeping track.”⁵⁵ It seems much more likely that these streaks were inspired by products of western society, given their parallels in other social media apps, and their overall neoliberal approach to meditation.

The same ideas of bio-morality are echoed by a participant in a sociological study done on the Headspace app, titled *Mindfulness, Self, and Society: Toward a Sociological Critique of Mindfulness-Based Interventions* by Spencer Aaron Huesken. Huesken interviewed six participants between the ages of 20-29 about their experiences using Headspace, and their overall impression of mindfulness. Participant one works in education, and explains that he had been exposed to mindfulness as a tool to teach students:

it’s a sense of getting students to practice mindfulness as a skill... to have them better engaged in class, to have more social and emotional literacy, and to understand themselves as people better, it has these tags to it... so i can kind of see you know... ‘oh your just not mindful enough... like you haven’t quite reached it... or like.. o damn this person is so mindful... like you’re a level 9 and I’m a level 7... if you think about it... it gives way for say people who start to use this app, who are in a certain class.. to look at other people and be like... YOU could access this app, YOU could use this app, YOU can gain these skills, and now it’s your fault that you are in the situation you are in, because you could just do these things, like use headspace like me, and like... actually have some ambition... Fuck I can just hear the narrative already start to construct... like... ‘well what do you do every day after your job... I use headspace.. so that I can be in the right mode, so that I can be productive and do things.. and I EARN my social position because I do the things that get me here.⁵⁶

The narrative that Participant one is predicting exemplifies the values of biomorality, and the economization of mental health, as well as social and emotional literacy. Because capitalism has assigned a moral value to health, and celebrates the autonomous individual, the idea that there are now easily accessible market products to improve one’s mental health further shifts the burden to the individual to practice these “healthy behaviors.” Thus if one’s mental health is poor, or they are lacking in social or

⁵⁵ Gamerman, Ellen. "Competitive about Your Meditation? Relax, Everyone Else is Too; as Hard-Chargers Descend on the Ancient Practice, they are Tweaking the Quest for Inner Peace." 2.

⁵⁶ Huesken, Spencer. “Mindfulness, Self, and Society: Toward a Sociological Critique of Mindfulness- Based Interventions,” 2019. <https://qspace.library.queensu.ca/handle/1974/26156>. 91-92.

emotional literacy, then the logic of neoliberalism would deem it as their own fault, because as Brown states, “(neoliberalism interpellates us as subjects who do) think and act like contemporary market subjects,”⁵⁷ meaning that we should consume the market products available to us in order to address our health problems.

In order for this economization of mental health to take place, for these apps to become financially successful, their developers have taken a careful approach to the way that the meditation practice is presented. Through analysis of three popular meditation apps (Headspace, Calm, and Insight Timer), I will show how meditation apps, by in large, follow in the legacy of the western mindfulness trend, attempting to strip Buddhist meditation from its religious roots in order to best economize the mental health and happiness of their users.

App Analysis:

The framework of a meditation app is quite simple. These apps don’t do anything that could be considered technologically advanced or innovative; they are largely just digital spaces for audio files to inhabit. The audio is the only actual content of the app; so theoretically, an app is unnecessary to access this audio. The files could theoretically just be sent to users and downloaded as MP3s. However, as the mindfulness industry continues to grow, it becomes more important for businesses’ specific brands of mindfulness to stand out from the crowd.⁵⁸ The location of a smartphone app allows for unique design and branding choices. And most importantly for this branding, the format of an app allows for the incorporation of images. In *Mindful America*, Jeff Wilson notes that “the marketing of mindfulness is complicated by the difficulty of its visual depiction. How do you sell something that can’t be drawn or photographed? ... The only recourse is to be indirect. Ads have to imply values that are connected to mindfulness, such as peace, harmony, concentration, happiness, health, and so on.”⁵⁹ This applies not only

⁵⁷ Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos*. 30.

⁵⁸ Wilson, Jeff. *Mindful America: Meditation and the mutual transformation of Buddhism and American culture*. Oxford University Press, 2014. 147.

⁵⁹ Wilson, Jeff. *Mindful America*. 152.

to ads, but also to the design choices within meditation apps, considering that the layout of the app has to “sell” the meditations within it. These apps are free to download, but charge for subscriptions for full access within the app. Because each of these apps are in direct economic competition as a result of selling very similar products, each app must brand itself competitively, and that branding often serves to disguise the Buddhist roots of its product.

Headspace: The first app I researched was Headspace, one of the first meditation apps to gain popularity and brand-recognition.

Founding:

Headspace was founded in 2010 by Andy Puddicombe and Rich Pierson. Puddicombe grew up in Bristol, UK, where he lived until the age of 22. At this point, Puddicombe was pursuing a degree in sports science when several close friends of his died in a tragic car accident. To deal with his grief, Puddicombe left university, and travelled to Asia to study meditation. He became a Buddhist monk, and studied in India, Nepal, Myanmar, Thailand, Australia and Russia, eventually becoming a fully ordained Tibetan Buddhist monk in the Karma Kagyu Lineage in India, in the Himalayas.⁶⁰ After completing his monastic commitment (living as a monk for ten years), Puddicombe came back to the UK and began to teach meditation. The Headspace website explains:

To demystify the mystical, Andy set up a meditation consultancy and began working with politicians, athletes (that sports science background finally came in handy), and business leaders. That’s when Andy met Rich Pierson, who needed help dealing with the stress of the advertising world. Before long, Andy and Rich were skill-swapping meditation for business advice. That’s when Headspace was born.⁶¹

Pierson’s background in business development, when combined with Puddicombe’s knowledge of meditation, created the foundation necessary to launch Headspace in 2010. It began as an events

⁶⁰ It was difficult to find the specific tradition in which Puddicombe was ordained, as Headspace does not list this information. This was taken from Andy Puddicombe’s LinkedIn education section.

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/andypuddicombe/>.

⁶¹ “Guided Meditation for Everybody - About Headspace.” Headspace. Accessed August 20, 2019. <https://www.headspace.com/about-us>.

company, but participants wanted to be able to meditate on their own, which is how the idea for an app was started.⁶²

The app launched in 2012 and grew quickly, with a second version released in 2014. Headspace now employs over 200 people from its offices in Santa Monica, San Francisco, and London.⁶³ In 2017, Headspace hired Ross Hoffman as their new chief business officer, away from Twitter, where he was in charge of global content partnerships.⁶⁴

App Layout:

The Headspace app is structured similarly to most social media apps, with “Home,” “Explore,” “Sleep,” and “Profile” options on the bottom of the screen. The app is free to download, and offers a basics course for free, with ten days of ten-minute meditations to “learn the fundamentals of meditation and mindfulness.”⁶⁵ To access the other meditations on the app, users must subscribe, choosing between different payment plans. There is a \$12.99/month option, or if one chooses to commit to a year-long subscription, that amount is discounted to \$9.99/month. Headspace also offers the Headspace Family Plan, as well as a heavily discounted Headspace Student Plan. Headspace also offers Headspace for Work, a larger service for business owners to offer employees,⁶⁶ as well as a free option for K-12 educators.⁶⁷

Home takes the user to a feed with meditation packs they have been working on, as well as “Everybody Headspace” (a ‘group meditation’), “Recommended for you” meditations, and recently viewed. In Explore, one can search for a particular meditation, or look under the different categories. These include: “Featured,” “Meditation Timers and Basics,” “Stress and Anxiety,” “Falling Asleep and

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Potkewitz, Hilary. “Headspace vs. Calm: The Meditation Battle That’s Anything but Zen; A Pair of Apps Preach Relaxation to Millions of Customers--but Still Badly Want to Beat Each Other.” *Wall Street Journal (Online)*; New York, N.Y. December 15, 2018, sec. Life.

⁶⁴ Potkewitz, Hilary. “Headspace vs. Calm.” 2.

⁶⁵ Headspace Inc. “Headspace.” Version 3.62.0.

⁶⁶ “Happier people. Healthier business.” Headspace. Accessed August 2019. <https://www.headspace.com/work>

⁶⁷ “Meditation made simple.” Headspace. Accessed August 2019. <https://www.headspace.com/subscriptions>

Waking up,” “Performance Mindset (NBA),”⁶⁸ “Personal Growth,” “Work and productivity,” “Life Challenges,” “Sports,” “Physical Health,” “Day to day exercises,” “Students,” “Kids,” and “Helpful Tips and Support.”⁶⁹ The Headspace app uses brightly colored animations to illustrate ideas and concepts of meditation. The Sleep section offers “Sleepcasts,” which are “unique audio experiences. Subtly different every night.”⁷⁰

The app uses gamification to guide meditators through learning new skills. Each meditation pack is made up of various levels, each of which which include 10 meditations. Once all ten meditations are completed, the user unlocks the next level. Under the profile section, you can view “My stats,” which tracks one’s total time meditated, sessions completed, average duration of meditation, and run streak, and “My Journey,” which shows all meditations completed. You can also add “buddies.”

From an aesthetic perspective, the bright colors of the animated graphics add a feeling of levity and playfulness to the app. Almost all of the images are animated faces of animals or vaguely human-like figures. The app definitely has one cohesive image, further codified through its advertisements and emojis.⁷¹

Role of Buddhism:

Users will not find the word “Buddhism” within the Headspace app. Though the brand claims authenticity through co-founder Andy Puddicombe’s ten years as a Buddhist monk, the app does not mention the origin of its meditation practices. The closest thing that I found while using the app for a few

⁶⁸ Headspace has a partnership deal with the NBA, which includes the WNBA and the G League. All of the athletes are given free subscriptions to the Headspace app, in exchange for, NBA members creating Headspace content (Mullin). The Wall Street Journal calls the partnership, “an attempt to take meditation out of the realm of chanting and incense and into the familiar, everyday territory of the basketball court.”

(Mullin, Benjamin. “Meditation App Headspace Inks Content Partnership with NBA.” The Wall Street Journal. Dow Jones & Company, March 20, 2018.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/meditation-app-headspace-inks-content-partnership-with-nba-1521556200>.)

⁶⁹ Headspace Inc. “Headspace.” Version 3.62.0.

⁷⁰ Headspace Inc. “Headspace.” Version 3.62.0.

⁷¹ If Headspace is downloaded on an iPhone, then Headspace-specific emojis appear in the messages app. Headspace emojis stay in the characteristic Headspace animated style, complete with phrases of Puddicombe’s teachings, such as, “Remember the blue sky.”

weeks was a video under the “Daily Headspace,” a section with changing content each day. This video, titled “Why We Meditate,” was the only video I have seen showing a person, instead of an animation, on the entire app. The video features Andy Puddicombe, standing in Death Valley, California. This video is probably the only space on the Headspace app that discusses, or at least alludes to, the origins of the practice. Andy reflects on his experience in Death Valley, and the origins of Headspace:

Sitting by that volcano, it struck me that the exercises we use on Headspace, all the teachings actually, they're older than that volcano, they're older than 2000 years, they go back maybe more than 2500 years. We get so many questions, in at headspace, asking ‘Where did Andy do his training?’ and ‘Where did the techniques come from?’ and ‘What are the teachings based on?’ and I think it’s really important, it’s a great question, and it’s really important, because it’s not like, you know I made these up (laughs), this was a really big part of my life, for many many years. I trained with really really wise teachers... The particular tradition I trained in the Tibetan school, it’s often called the oral tradition. And the idea is that every single teaching is passed down from teacher to student, in person. So you can’t even practice the teaching, you can’t just learn it from a book, and then just practice it, in order to even get the instructions and the materials you need to practice it, you have to go and sit with a teacher and have that exchange.⁷²

Many of Puddicombe’s comments in this video seem to refer to Buddhism, without ever saying the word itself. Most scholars agree on 2500 years as the approximate age of Buddhism, but dating specific meditation practices would likely be more challenging. Puddicombe then calls “this” a “really big of [his] life for many years,” referring (indirectly) to his monastic life as a Buddhist. While acknowledging that he “did not make these up,” Puddicombe refers to the “Tibetan school,”⁷³ within which he was trained, again not mentioning that this was a religious organization, a school of Tibetan Buddhism.

Puddicombe then goes on to make a common move in the secular mindfulness industry -- claiming that mindfulness meditation is a universal practice.

Sure, there’s all the science now, that shows us how it works, maybe why it works, but for me the exciting thing is really where it comes from, and how it feels right now, in this moment. When you sit down to meditate, even on those days when it might be

⁷² Headspace Inc. “Headspace.” Version 3.62.0.

⁷³ Note: Within Tibetan Buddhism there are four main schools: Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya and Gelug. Tibetan Buddhism is a diverse tradition, practiced not only in Tibet but also in the Himalayas, of Chinese Central Asia, Southern Siberian regions such as Tuva, Mongolia, as well as in western countries. (Powers, John. Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism. Shambhala, 2007.)

challenging, you know you're part of something bigger, and it's okay. And I think the beauty of meditation is that because meditation transcends, sure there's teaching around it, there's culture around it, but *because the meditation transcends any particular faith, religion, culture,*⁷⁴ it's able to adapt in this way. And now that it's come to the west, now we find ourselves using it on our phones. Again, the delivery might be different, the language might be different, but the essence is fundamentally the same.⁷⁵

Puddicombe argues that meditation transcends any culture, faith, teachings, or religion (note that he does not specify what cultures, faiths, or religions those might be), though without explaining how or why. Now that meditation has come to the west (again, noting that it is not specified from where), "we find ourselves"⁷⁶ using it via paid smartphone apps. Puddicombe then claims that despite the difference in technology and language, the "essence" of the practice is still the same. Despite all of the changes he has noted, Puddicombe still views a core nature to the practice of meditation, one that apparently is unchanged by thousands of years or the cultural differences between premodern Tibetan monks and western individuals paying \$12.99 per month to use Headspace on their smartphones.

This claim has been made by many different figures in the mindfulness movement, echoing statements made by Jon Kabat-Zinn. Scholars on mindfulness have considered this claim from different angles. Z. Walsh notes that "representing mindfulness as universal allows for it to be shaped by an enormous diversity of possible representations recontextualized in the dominant ideology of the new culture."⁷⁷ This analysis is apt, considering the way that mindfulness has shaped itself to the ideologies of the west, such as neoliberalism, rugged individualism, and Enlightenment values like objectivity, research, and empirical evidence.

The issue of secularizing meditation reveals another side to this claim. In the article, *Can Secular Mindfulness Be Separated from Religion*, Candy Gunther Brown addresses a similar claim by Jon

⁷⁴ Italics are mine.

⁷⁵ Headspace Inc. "Headspace." Version 3.62.0.

⁷⁶ This passive tense strikes me as an interesting choice, for someone who was a pioneer in creating this market.

⁷⁷ Walsh, Zack. "A meta-critique of mindfulness critiques: From McMindfulness to critical mindfulness." In *Handbook of mindfulness*, pp. 153-166. Springer, Cham, 2016. 160.

Kabat-Zinn, who claimed that the dharma was a universal teaching. Brown quotes Jeff Wilson, who states, “Dharma is itself a religious term, and even to define it as a universal thing is a theological statement” (2015).⁷⁸ Puddicombe’s statement could be interpreted similarly -- if meditation is a practice from the Buddhist tradition, which Puddicombe seems to admit in calling it over 2500 years old, then to call it universal or “transcendent,” is inherently a theological statement. Though the cultural location of Buddhism makes the average westerner more inclined to view meditation as a secular act despite its religious roots, the average modern person would be unlikely to accept anything similar from another religion. For example, if a priest were to state that praying to Jesus was a universal practice for all people, one that transcended Christianity, most people would see that as a religious statement.

Puddicombe also claims to be less interested in the science showing the effectiveness of meditation, despite the fact that these research statistics are Headspace’s main way of marketing itself. According to Headspace’s “Science” page on their website, “Science has been an integral part of the Headspace business since day one... There are over 2,000 meditation apps out there, but Headspace is one of the only ones committed to advancing the field of mindfulness meditation through clinically-validated research on our product. We are currently in progress on research studies with large national institutions that could be among the largest mindfulness meditation trials ever conducted.”⁷⁹

Advertisement and Marketing:

Since beginning this research, and making several headspace-related google queries, I now get a plethora of social media advertisements for meditation apps, especially Headspace. One ad that Headspace has been using via Instagram advertisements that users will “feel 16% happier” or 14% less stressed in just 10 days.”⁸⁰ Headspace has recently begun to expand their social media

⁷⁸ Brown, Candy Gunther. "Can “Secular” Mindfulness Be Separated from Religion?." In *Handbook of Mindfulness*, pp. 75-94. Springer, Cham, 2016. 88.

⁷⁹ “Scientific Rigor.” Headspace. Accessed August 2019. <https://www.headspace.com/science>

⁸⁰ Quote pulled from Headspace advertisements via Instagram. A note: While there is background on how exactly happiness is quantified neatly into a numerical figure such as 16, I have to wonder if this ad is targeted toward another (competing) meditation app, named 10% Happier.

marketing, and it is not limited to these direct advertisements. They have made deals with many Instagram “influencers,” mainly to promote the Headspace family plan. Headspace targeted “Mid-tier influencers in areas such as lifestyle, health, and wellness.”⁸¹ targeting almost 3 million followers of the desired demographic. Each of the sponsored accounts is highly curated, and filled with sponsored posts for other businesses such as Disney, Amazon, Uber, DSW, Walmart. Again, this type of advertising reinforces Headspace’s branding, and helps it to stand out from other competing apps. The Instagram and web advertisements that use Headspace’s characteristic animated images help to curate the light, happy idea of meditation that the app espouses.

Future Plans:

Over the last few years, Headspace has shifted their attention from app development, to something bigger in scope. Headspace Inc. is now an online or digital healthcare company.⁸² Potkewitz explains: “Headspace Health division is currently seeking Food and Drug Administration approval to become the first prescription meditation app for certain chronic illnesses. FDA approval would pave the way for Headspace programs to be covered by health insurance.”⁸³ The implications of the medicalization of a smartphone app are beyond the scope of this paper, but this example does clearly illustrate that the app platform for meditation is becoming more accepted and widespread.

Calm -- Founding:

Calm was co-founded by Michael Acton Smith and Alex Tew, who have backgrounds in online gaming and advertising.⁸⁴ Though Smith and Tew are the founders, the face (or more aptly, voice) of the app is Tamara Levitt, the head of mindfulness content at Calm.⁸⁵ Levitt’s role has been critical for the

⁸¹ “Case Study: Headspace Marketing Meditates With Instagram Influencers.” Mediakix, August 7, 2019. <https://mediakix.com/blog/headspace-influencer-marketing-case-study-instagram/>.

⁸² “Andy Puddicombe.” Andy Puddicombe | LeWeb’14 Paris. Accessed July 21, 2019. <https://web.archive.org/web/20140319163301/http://paris.leweb.co/participants/speakers/andy-puddicombe>.

⁸³ Potkewitz, Hilary. “Headspace vs. Calm.” 3.

⁸⁴ Potkewitz, Hilary. “Headspace vs. Calm.” 1.

⁸⁵ Cornell, Camilla. “Toronto Entrepreneur Finds a New Voice in a Meditation App.” The Globe and Mail, Sep 03, 2018. <http://ezproxy.ups.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.ups.edu:2443/docview/2098607902?accountid=1627>.

success of Calm: “since she joined the team, subscriptions have grown from 22,500 to 1 million.”⁸⁶

Despite the growth of content on the app, Levitt still voices almost every meditation. The app was released in 2012, the same year as Headspace. Though Headspace dominated the meditation app industry for years, Calm was named App of the Year by Apple in 2017, and then overtook Headspace for the #1 in the Health and Fitness category. Headspace is now #15. Calm’s “about” page boasts:

We're the #1 app for Sleep, Meditation and Relaxation, with over 50 million downloads and over 700,000 5-star reviews. We're honored to be an Apple BEST OF 2018 award winner, Apple's App of the Year 2017, Google Play Editor's Choice 2018, and to be named by the Center for Humane Technology as "the world's happiest app".⁸⁷

Since surpassing Headspace in downloads, the two companies have been in direct competition.

"Headspace launched two years before us, and now we're neck and neck," says Dun Wang, Calm's chief product and growth officer. According to Smith, the two companies “are in mindful competition with each other.”⁸⁸

Layout:

Opening the app, the first loading screen tells the user to “take a deep breath.”⁸⁹ Calm then opens up into the Home screen, which features a nature scene (customizable by the user) and the Daily Calm, a meditation that updates each day. On the bottom, there are options for each of the five pages: Home, Sleep, which features a library of sleep stories (including a bedtime story told by Mathew Mconnoughaey and Bob Ross ASMR), Meditate (a library of guided meditations), Music (which features peaceful songs and ambient sounds), and More, which has links to Calm Masterclass, Calm Body,⁹⁰ Breathe, Scenes, and Profile. Very little of this content is available for free, shown through a small lock on each meditation

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ “Welcome to Calm.” Calm. Accessed August 2019. <https://www.calm.com/blog/about>.

⁸⁸ Potkewitz, Hilary. “Headspace vs. Calm.” 1.

⁸⁹ Calm.com, Inc. “Calm.” Version. 4.1.1. <https://www.apple.com/ca/ios/app-store/>.
<https://www.calm.com/freetrial/plans>.

⁹⁰ Calm Body is another very interesting section of the app -- it features short videos linking breath with stretches -- what most people would call yoga. This example feels familiar to the way the term Buddhism is often carefully avoided. (Calm.com, Inc. “Calm.” Version. 4.1.1. <https://www.apple.com/ca/ios/app-store/>.
<https://www.calm.com/freetrial/plans>.)

pack. Calm offers a 7-day free trial, and then charges \$59.99/year for Calm Premium, which unlocks all of the meditations and other features. Users can also buy “Calm For Life” for \$399.99.⁹¹

The Daily Calm seems to be one of the most compelling features for subscribed users⁹² -- it is a daily meditation, focusing on different topics, always guided by Levitt. The Daily Calm is generally about ten minutes long, with themes such as “Mindful Eating” (July 2) or “Boketto” (non-doing) (July 3). After listening to the meditation, users are prompted to schedule a “Mindfulness reminder” notification for a specific time of day. The Mindfulness reminder will “improve sleep, enhance focus, and boost your quality of life by practicing mindfulness daily.”⁹³ If the user opts out of setting the mindfulness timer, a window pops up which asks: “Are you sure? It’s hard to set aside time for yourself in this world without a little help.”⁹⁴

Role of Buddhism:

Users also will not find any mention of Buddhism within Calm. This app engages in many of the linguistic tactics outlined by Candy Gunther Brown in the article, *Can “Secular” Mindfulness Be Separated from Religion*. Calm does not mention Buddhism, but will often use Buddhist phrases or concepts, even words in Japanese or Sanskrit, to exoticize the app, or build authenticity. Neither of the founders have studied Buddhism, and Tamara Levitt’s background in meditation began in a clinical setting, a program not unlike MBSR. Since then, Levitt has studied “Mindfulness meditation, Vipassana/Insight, Shambhala, Zen, and Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist teachings.”⁹⁵ Levitt also states, “I’m grateful to Pema Chodron, S.N. Goenka, Thich Nhat Hanh and Anne Lamott for guiding my

⁹¹ “Choose Plan.” Calm. Accessed August 2019. <https://www.calm.com/freetrial/plans>

⁹² Beard, Catherine. “Why Calm Is My Favorite Meditation App.” The Blissful Mind, February 22, 2019. <https://theblissfulmind.com/2017/04/17/calm-app-review/>.

⁹³ Calm.com, Inc. “Calm.” Version. 4.1.1. <https://www.apple.com/ca/ios/app-store/>.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ “My Story.” Calm. Accessed August 2019. <https://www.tamaralevitt.com/calm/>

path.”⁹⁶ While almost all of those teachers listed are ordained Buddhists, none of the app’s meditations are labeled as Buddhist, nor is Buddhism acknowledged in any significant way.

Insight Timer: Insight Timer is another meditation app rising in popularity, though with a very different approach than Headspace and Calm. Insight Timer readily admits its ties to religion, but still outwardly distances itself from Buddhism.

Layout:

Insight Timer has four main pages: home, favorites, search, and profile. The Home page shows a world map indicating how many users around the world are currently meditating on Insight Timer. There are options to use the timer (one of Insight Timer’s characteristic features), “Guided meditations,” “Sleep meditations,” “Music,” “Courses,” “Daily Insight,” “Kids,” “Beginners,” and “Talks.”⁹⁷ The timer feature allows users to time their own (non-guided) meditations, customizing the duration, adding interval bells and ending bells (with options of different bell sounds such as Basu, Kangsê, Sakya, which are all types of Tibetan singing bowls), as well as ambient sounds, such as “Deep Om,” “Zen Guitar,” “Eternal Stream,” and “Raindrops.” The favorites page shows the user’s recently played meditations, as well as “My Bookmarks,” “My teachers,” “My Downloads,” “My Courses,” and “Member Plus,”⁹⁸ which advertises the subscription option. The search page has a basic search function, but also shows options for meditation genres, such as “Learn to meditate,” “Coping with Anxiety,” “Improving Relationships,” and “Boosting Self-Esteem.”⁹⁹ The profile shows the user’s total days meditated, number of consecutive days meditated, total minutes meditated, and “milestones,” such as meditating at least 14 days in a row. There are also social media-esque options, such as viewing one’s “Public Profile,” “Messages,” “Friends,” “Groups,” “Activity,” and another ad for the “Member Plus” option.¹⁰⁰ The app also tracks users’

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Insight Network Inc. “Insight Timer.” Version 15.0.2.729. <https://insighttimer.app.link/>.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

progress, showing detailed data in graphs and charts, over days, weeks, months, or All (time since the user first downloaded the app).

Compared to the revenue and popularity of apps like Headspace and Calm, Insight Timer seems to be a much smaller player in the meditation industry, with Calm currently the #1 most downloaded app in the Health and Fitness category, Headspace at #15, while Insight Timer is only #51. But Insight Network CEO Chris Plowman encourages customers to look at a different statistic: minutes meditated. “More time is spent on Insight Timer than on all other meditation apps, combined,” according to the app’s page in the Apple app store. In a 2017 Medium article titled, “There’s an elephant in the meditation room,” Plowman explains, “you might be surprised to learn that when Headspace tweeted a record 186,000 hours of meditation in a single June 2017 week, our community meditated for 350,000 hours in the same week.”¹⁰¹ But despite these statistics, and because Insight Timer is committed to keeping the app free, Insight Timer has been far less financially successful than Headspace or Calm. Plowman addresses the challenge of the meditation industry:

meditation and money aren’t obvious bedfellows. But the science has caught up and so consumers have caught on. And where you find consumers, you find capitalists — first as entrepreneurs, then as companies, then as investors — the ritual is as old as meditation itself.... How do you build a profitable company when you’re committed to a free product which costs millions of dollars a year to run. And how do you to [sic] talk about things like ‘monetization’ when you’re trying to build a quiet place of contemplation?¹⁰²

To address this issue, the developers kept the app free to download, giving users free access to all of its guided meditations (over 12,000) and timers without ads,¹⁰³ while also rolling out three payment options in 2017: users could choose between different subscriptions for \$2.99/month (revenue split 50/50 between instructors and Insight Timer)¹⁰⁴ -- giving them access to different features, but no new meditations. That

¹⁰¹ Timer, Insight. “There’s an Elephant in the Meditation Room.” Medium. Insight Timer, August 27, 2018. <https://medium.com/insighttimer/theres-an-elephant-in-the-meditation-room-854696eb0967>.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Timer, Insight. “A New Insight Timer to Make Contemplating, Curating and Connecting Easier than Ever.” Medium. Insight Timer, June 3, 2019. <https://medium.com/insighttimer/a-simpler-insight-timer-to-make-contemplating-curating-and-connecting-easier-than-ever-29b72626a95b>.

price has since gone up to \$9.99/month, or \$59.99/year, with half of the business' income still going toward the teachers. While this price is similar to a Calm or Headspace subscription, it is worth noting that Insight Timer still has far more free content, available without a subscription, than either Calm or Headspace. There are also paid Insight Courses that one can pay \$6.99 to rent, and an option to donate to meditation teachers -- who will receive 85%, with the other 15% going to Insight Timer.

Branding and Image:

Insight timer has a very different branding approach from both Headspace and Calm. Rather than focusing on a characteristic image, or having one key figure guide the meditations like Andy Puddicombe or Tamara Levitt, Insight timer features a variety of different types of meditation, led by different teachers. The app store description of Insight Timer advertises some of its most notable meditation teachers: “Tara Brach, founder of Insight Meditation Community of Washington, Mark Williams, Emeritus Professor at Oxford University, Jack Kornfield, Dartmouth... Joseph Goldstein of Columbia, Sam Harris. Stanford; author, philosopher, neuroscientist... Gil Fronsdal, Ph.D. at Stanford University,”¹⁰⁵ and the list goes on, featuring only two religious figures (toward the bottom). The obvious favoring of academics and members of scientific communities fits the pattern of how mindfulness has been branded in the west.

Role of Buddhism/Religion:

The app does feature meditations from different “traditions,” which it defines as “recognized systems of beliefs, including formal religions and spiritual practices, which often require an element of faith. Meditation stemming from these origins circle around one or multiple gods or a spiritual being.”¹⁰⁶ Some of the traditions listed are: Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaisms, Kabbalah, Shamanism, Sufism, Taoism, and Vedic.¹⁰⁷ Like the “traditions” section, there is

¹⁰⁵ Insight Network Inc. “Insight Timer.” Version 15.0.2.729. <https://insighttimer.app.link/>.

¹⁰⁶ Insight Network Inc. “Insight Timer.” (“Traditions “section). Version 15.0.2.729. <https://insighttimer.app.link/>. <https://insighttimer.com/>.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

another page for “Science and Secular” based meditations. These are described as such: “Science is the systematic knowledge of the physical or material world gained through observation and experimentation. Secular in nature, meditations that stem from science deal directly with the natural world and are based purely on fact.”¹⁰⁸ Other such pages are Neuroscience, Concepts, Nondualism, Visualization, Sport-Science, and Sleep. Rather than allowing the user to choose a meditation based on the benefits they would like, the model of Headspace and Calm, Insight Timer allows the user to choose the specific approach they would like to take toward meditation. While it is more upfront about the religious roots of meditation than Headspace or Calm, Insight Timer still seems to promote its secular meditations over religious ones. Additionally, adding all of these other religions still serves to distance meditation from Buddhism, invoking the idea of meditation as a “universal” practice in a manner similar to Kabat-Zinn and Puddicombe. The sections like “Science” and “Concepts” also fail to acknowledge that though the approach to meditation may be scientific, the original roots of the practice are still not “secular in nature.”

Meditation Apps: Secular or Religious?

So are these apps religious or secular? Certainly the practice of meditation stems from the Buddhist religion. However, these apps call themselves secular, and most of their users also consider their meditation practice to be secular. Is a religious practice secular simply if the practitioner believes that it is? The reason for this cognitive dissonance is that religion is socially constructed. The notion of religion was constructed by Europeans to describe Christianity, and then projected onto other cultures and time periods.¹⁰⁹ Jeff Wilson addresses this same question in *Mindful America*:

Is mindfulness religion, and is the mindfulness movement a religious movement? The answer, I argue, is “sometimes.” Religion is not a phenomenon that exists neutrally in the world -- it is a label applied variously by different people and by the same people at different times. This is true of its alleged opposite, “the secular,” as well.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Insight Network Inc. “Insight Timer.” (“Science and Secular” section). Version 15.0.2.729. <https://insighttimer.app.link/>. <https://insighttimer.com/>.

¹⁰⁹ Nongbri, Brent. *Before religion: A history of a modern concept*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013.

¹¹⁰ Wilson, Jeff. “Mindful America.” 9.

Because religion is not a natural phenomena, i. e. it is a socially constructed, and thus, culturally specific, idea, it is not a simple yes or no answer. Wilson continues,

Likewise, terms such as “scientific,” “superstitious,” “traditional,” “modern,” and so on are not mere statements of fact. The approach of *Mindful America* assumes such labels to be more than dry descriptors -- they are markers of value employed strategically by agents in ways that reveal further patterns of value and preference. Thus when an author speaks of the scientific, nonreligious practice of mindfulness, he or she is not stating a fact; he or she is making an argument, one impacted by such variables such as race, education, cultural background, professional training, intended audience, and more. The same is true for the author who insists on the religious, Buddhist, or other nature of mindfulness.¹¹¹

Applying Wilson’s analysis to meditation apps illustrates that the claims made by app developers that meditation is scientific or secular are not true or false, but rather specific arguments made in an attempt to bring in more meditators. When apps like Headspace, Calm, and Insight Timer market meditation as a non-religious, practical thing to do that improves one’s productivity and state of mind, this marketing serves to bring in those who are skeptical of religion, highly educated western professionals. Likewise, when Insight Timer boasts its meditations of various religious traditions, or Headspace claims authenticity through Puddicombe’s life as a monk, it serves to bring in a more religiously inclined, spiritual, or new age-sympathetic demographic. These are not statements of fact, but rather, they are marketing techniques.

Wilson continues to discuss ways in which mindfulness meditation practice could be considered religious:

We might consider this a secular religion, one devoid of the supernatural and the afterlife, yet operating as a deep well of values, life orientation, and utopian vision. This secular mindful religion can be married to a specific religious tradition such as Buddhism (as in the case of Chade-Meng Tang)¹¹² or Christianity (as in the case of Tim Ryan, a devout Roman Catholic),¹¹³ and it can also operate on its own as a free-standing system.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Chade-Meng Tang was a Buddhist and Google employee who introduced meditation into the company.

¹¹³ Tim Ryan is a current democratic presidential candidate and author of “A Mindful Nation: How a Simple Practice Can Help Us Reduce Stress, Improve Performance, and Recapture the American Spirit.”

¹¹⁴ Wilson, Jeff. *Mindful America*. 185.

This characterization of mindfulness as a secular religion is at once paradoxical and apt. Mindfulness could be considered secular because of the lack of Gods, magic, or theodicy in general, but that it could also be considered religious due to its insistence on specific values, and vision for the future.

The classification of these distinct sets of features reflects Nongbri's approach to defining religion; he argues that the term religion refers to "anything that sufficiently resembles modern Protestant Christianity."¹¹⁵ Mindfulness today may not resemble Christianity closely enough to be labeled as religion, but how closely does it resemble Buddhism? It is worth considering that many devout Buddhists practice their religion every day without worshipping a God or believing in an afterlife. Considering the constructed nature of religion, asking if meditation apps are Buddhist might be a better question than asking if they are religious. Wilson writes:

As we've seen, religion and values are down-played by authors to garner larger audiences -- but in many cases the reason that they want an audience in the first case is because they are convinced that mindfulness and other elements derived from Buddhism have a real ability to alleviate suffering (the goal of religious Buddhism).¹¹⁶

Essentially, meditation apps frame this Buddhist practice (meditation) with its embedded values, as scientific and practical in order to seem secular, and thus attract more people to download and pay for these apps. But if these apps are made with the goal of reducing suffering, and individuals are meditating to try to ease the suffering of themselves and those around them, then that seems to embody the values of Buddhism. They may have a very different appearance than traditional forms of Buddhism, but these apps exemplify the values of Buddhist modernism. Because the goal of Buddhism does not entirely resemble the goals of Christianity -- God's salvation in an eternal afterlife -- this goal does not fit the social construction of religion, and thus it is not always seen as a religious goal.

This should remind us that the concept of religion, because it was created to describe European Christianity, is inherently Eurocentric. Thus, the projecting concept of religion onto other cultures often

¹¹⁵ Nongbri, Brent. *Before religion: A history of a modern concept*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013. 18.

¹¹⁶ Wilson, Jeff. *Mindful America*. 161

makes it harder to fully understand them. It leads to app developers not giving credit to their Buddhist teachers, while making millions off of their teachings. It has created a billion dollar industry that has profited off of obscuring its cultural and religious roots, and billions of western meditators who have little to no knowledge of these roots. And, this has led to a distortion of Buddhist values wherein meditation is now used to reinforce the logic of neoliberalism, and mindfulness is implemented in powerful corporations and institutions such as the U. S. military.¹¹⁷ Studying this has led me to argue that there is a need for alternative ways of considering what constitutes the religious and the secular; ways that work to deconstruct and problematize the culturally specific idea of religion as it exists today.

¹¹⁷ Richtel, Matt. "The Latest in Military Strategy: Mindfulness." The New York Times. The New York Times, April 5, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/05/health/military-mindfulness-training.html>.

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