Mindfulness” seems to be everywhere in American culture these days. According to PubMed, a division of the US National Library of Medicine and the National Institute of Health, peer-reviewed publications with the word “mindfulness” in the title have increased from less than fifty in the year 2000 to four hundred forty in 2013. The number jumps to over six hundred if one also includes the words “yoga” or “meditation” in the titles.1 Time magazine’s cover story for January 23, 2014, was titled “The Mindful Revolution.” The article recounts the rapid growth of interest in mindfulness in the few past decades, especially as it has become part of mainstream medicine and health science. Much of this growth can be credited to the prolific work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, emeritus founding director of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, and the creator of the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Program (MBSR). The basic principles of MBSR are borrowed primarily from Buddhism but stripped of any metaphysical claims in order to be more easily accessible to all participants. In fact, one graduate of the MBSR program, Congressman Tim Ryan of Ohio—not your typical hippy-mediator type, but rather a Midwestern boy from an Irish-Italian Catholic family and former football quarterback—was so transformed by his experience that he published a book, A Mindful Nation.2 He also leads mindfulness meditation sessions on Capitol Hill with congressmen and women and their staffers, and has introduced legislation to increase funding to incorporate mindfulness practices into public schools. All of this suggests that American culture is currently fascinated with the benefits of mindfulness meditation, on both the popular and academic levels.

Mindfulness is a very simple concept, and yet its role within different spiritual disciplines is varied. The Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Naht Hanh describes mindfulness as “keeping one’s consciousness alive to the present reality,”3 and Kabat-Zinn provides a concise summary as “the intentional cultivation of nonjudgmental moment-to-moment awareness.”4 From these simple descriptions, it is easy to see

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1 See https://contemplativemind.wordpress.com/peer-reviewed-research-mindfulness-meditation-contemplative-practice/.
3 Thich Naht Hanh, The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation, trans. by Mobi Ho (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 11. This book is a classic in the mindfulness literature, and I believe is one of the most simple and accessible introductions to mindfulness available in the English language.
how mindfulness is a practice that can be cultivated by anyone. It may be practiced on its own or integrated into a more specific spiritual discipline. Therefore, when I refer to mindfulness practices I am referring to a broad range of disciplines and exercises aimed at cultivating awareness of one’s internal and/or external environment and experience, such as MBSR, most forms of yoga, or insight meditation (or vipassana, as it is called in the Buddhist tradition), to name just a few of the most popular modalities. For the purposes of this essay I will refer to the various manifestations of this phenomenon in contemporary American culture as the “mindfulness movement.”

I want to suggest that pastoral leaders take this phenomenon seriously, and that this mindfulness movement presents a gift, an opportunity, and a challenge to the Church, to theologians, and to pastoral leaders. In what follows I will suggest three distinct ways for pastoral leaders to engage, dialogue with, and respond to those involved in the movement. First, I think Christians have something important to learn from this cultural movement. The lessons gleaned from recent multidisciplinary research on mindfulness may be helpfully integrated into theological reflection and pastoral care. Second, I also believe that we as Christians have something important to contribute to the mindfulness movement. Third, and related to the previous point, we need to consider the challenges facing those who want to engage in this cultural dialogue. I suggest that if the mindfulness movement is to continue to have a positive influence on individuals and contemporary culture, it needs to remain accountable to the spiritual traditions within which these practices have been nurtured for millennia.

Mindfulness as a Gift

First, I believe that Christians have something to learn by examining our culture’s fascination with mindfulness. The mindfulness movement has tethered itself closely to, and in many cases has evolved directly from, the scientific and the health and wellness communities (including medical doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, and neuroscientists). There have been hundreds of rigorous scientific studies conducted that demonstrate that mindfulness practices are effective at relieving perceived stress levels, lowering cortisol (the stress hormone that can have severe negative long-term health implications), lowering blood pressure, dealing with diabetes, improving the lives of those with depression and anxiety disorders, and many additional positive mental and physical health factors. Richard Davidson at the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Center for Investigating Healthy Minds has done impressive work documenting the effects of mindfulness and compassion meditation with regard to the neuroplasticity of the brain. His work demonstrates how even short periods of formal mindfulness practice and compassion training can alter the neural substrates and physical structures of the brain in ways that support mental and physical well-being, happiness, and attunement to the suffering of others, and may dispose persons toward compassionate action.

The movement has also helped to move meditation into the mainstream. Mindfulness is no longer associated primarily with hippies in communes and an anti-establishment ethos. Major corporations such as General Mills, Target, Cargill, the Mayo Clinic, and even the United States Army and Air Force are using mindfulness practices

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5 Although it is more common in academic contexts to refer to “Contemplative Studies,” I am using the phrase “mindfulness movement” in this article because I am engaging this phenomenon less as an academic discipline—although this is interesting in its own right—and more as a cultural movement that has significant implications for theology and pastoral ministry.


to train their leaders. The Dalai Lama has stated that the next great advancement in human consciousness toward compassion will come from combining ancient meditation practices with modern science. While the final outcome of this convergence is unknown, there does seem to be a cultural shift in consciousness toward a genuine desire to learn more about the human mind and heart through mindfulness and meditation.

The gift offered to the Church by the mindfulness movement is that it has provided conclusive, rigorous, and scientific evidence that mindfulness practices seem to contribute to a healthier, happier, more productive and meaningful life. Such claims are supported by the results of both qualitative and quantitative research measurements. As a result, people are curious. Some of these people are those who may not be particularly interested in religion in general, such as the vast majority of young people whom the sociologist Christian Smith describes as those whose basic response to religion is indifference—or “whatever.” In my experience teaching undergraduate students at a Catholic, liberal arts university, I find that many of my students—even those who profess to be Christian—are just as likely, if not more likely, to regularly attend a yoga studio as they are to attend church services. I believe that one of our aims as teachers and pastors is to help such persons to understand how embodied contemplative practices like yoga or mindfulness meditation may support Christian identity and practice, rather than be understood as an alternative or a health-boosting addendum to Christian faith.

Opportunities for Dialogue and Mutual Enrichment

There are many opportunities and possibilities that the mindfulness movement makes possible for church leaders. Americans’ fascination with mindfulness has opened up a window within our culture into basic human questions about the meaning and purpose of life, especially the meaning of suffering vis-à-vis the quest for happiness. And, to varying degrees of acknowledgement, it draws upon ancient religious and spiritual traditions to do so. Curiosity about mindfulness opens an opportunity for dialogue about the role of mindfulness in the spiritual life. As pastoral ministers know well, major life events such as experiences of birth, suffering, death, and loss may lead persons into the kind of questions about faith and spirituality that may also pave the way toward deeper conversion. Mindfulness has presented itself as a compassionate but largely secular way of responding to stress and suffering. Christians have something to add to this discussion, and I will explore these contributions below. Finally, the mindfulness movement challenges Christians to look to the roots of our own tradition to understand the role of mindfulness practices in the life of the Church.

In order to engage in the cultural dialogue that the mindfulness movement makes available to Christians we will first need to look to the roots of the contemplative tradition in Christianity and become reacquainted with these roots. The current manifestations of the mindfulness movement have drawn mostly upon Eastern practices—especially Buddhism and yoga—as their primary sources of wisdom. Unfortunately, the contributions of the Western philosophical tradition and the Christian tradition in particular to notions of mindfulness remain mostly unrecognized and are largely unknown. For example, Western philosophy is indebted to Socrates’ admonition that the

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8 See for example the list of clients who have participated in training workshops offered by the Institute for Mindful Leadership (http://institutefor-mindfulleadership.org/clients/).


10 In Edwin Friedman’s classic book on leadership for congregational leaders, From Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue (New York: Guilford Press, 2011), he claims that the rituals surrounding major life events such as birth, death, marriage, divorce, etc., present the most favorable conditions for pastors to help congregants integrate religious meaning and significance into their lives (see especially Chapter 7, “A Family Approach to Life-Cycle Ceremonies,” 162-192).

11 See Jacob Holsinger Sherman, “On the Emerging Field of Contemplative Studies and its Relationship to the Study of Spirituality,” Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality 14, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 216. In another recent example, Jaweed Kaleem highlights the growth of contemplative studies programs
unexamined life is not worth living; and the Aristotelian-Thomistic affirmation of the necessity of prudence or practical wisdom for authentic human flourishing seems to demand a high degree of self-knowledge and cognitive regulation of emotions, such as mindfulness has been shown to support. But even more importantly, many of the great Christian mystics and theologians through the centuries have practiced something akin to mindfulness as part of their prayer lives.

One might respond that Jesus didn't meditate or teach his disciples to meditate, at least not in the sense that, say, Gautama Buddha did. However, there are many biblical examples of those who engaged in some kind of silent, contemplative prayer that involve something analogous to mindfulness. Elijah encountered God in a cave through the “sound of sheer silence” (1 Kgs 19:12). Jesus taught his disciples that “whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Mt 6:6). These biblical examples suggest that silently paying attention to one's internal rhythm and to the divine presence form an integral part of biblical conceptions of prayer.

If we search in the post-biblical period of the Church, Augustine famously searches for the traces of God’s presence in the caverns of his memory throughout his Confessions, recounting the many ways in which forgetfulness (that is, mindlessness) of God’s presence resulted in his own needless suffering and longing for greater truth. And yet, he opines “I should not exist if I were not in you, from whom are all things.” For Augustine, God is “most hidden yet intimately present” in every moment of time. In the narrative arc of Augustine’s life in the Confessions it is not God who changes, but Augustine himself who mindfully awakens to the divine presence that was there guiding him all along. His example remains a classic witness to the transformative power of mindfully awakening to the divine presence and the movements of God’s grace in the spiritual life.

Perhaps the most significant place to look for the role of mindfulness in the Christian tradition is among the desert mothers and fathers of the third and fourth centuries. Evagrius Ponticus, a Greek-speaking monk and theologian of the fourth century, describes with great detail the eight logismoi—those pesky, intruding thoughts that disrupt the attempt to foster prayer without ceasing (see 1 Thes 5:17). According to Evagrius such thoughts are the principal root of all human vices and suffering. In his Praktikos he provides down-to-earth advice to his fellow monks for how to recognize these eight logismoi, and how to wisely and prayerfully deal with them so that one does not become distracted from continual contemplation of the soul’s radical dependence upon God in each moment.

Evagrius’s eight logismoi were transported into the Western theological tradition through John Cassian, the fourth- and fifth-century monk and theologian who studied with the great desert masters and wrote about their spiritual

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practices in his *Institutes* and *Conferences*.\textsuperscript{15} Through Cassian’s treatment of Evagrius’s *logismoi*, these distracting thoughts were eventually revised and renumbered into what we now know as the seven deadly sins.\textsuperscript{16}

This history and genealogy is not well known among Western Christians, and the same could be said for the mystical tradition of Christianity as a whole. But practices that support and sustain mindfulness—in particular, watchfulness of oneself and one’s thoughts coupled with mindfulness of God’s presence in each moment, particularly through reading and memorizing Scripture—are foundational Christian practices that support the development of faith. I could continue with a long list of theological and spiritual writers such as Brother Lawrence’s *The Practice of the Presence of God*, Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline*,\textsuperscript{17} John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, the anonymous fourteenth-century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Thomas Merton, Constance FitzGerald, and many others who provide rich material for supporting the role of mindfulness in the Christian contemplative journey.

Accessing the wisdom from the depths of our tradition reminds us that we as Christians also have something essential to contribute to the contemporary dialogue regarding mindfulness. In the Christian tradition, mindfulness is not an end itself. Rather, it is a tool for cultivating a deeper awareness of and relationship with the Triune God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and attested to by Scripture. In other words, mindfulness is a stepping stone or a tool on the path of contemplation and transformation. In Christian theology, contemplation is something that can be tasted in this life, as a gift of grace, but can only be fully perfected in the life to come. As St. Paul describes it, “now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face” (1 Cor 13:12). Mindfulness—if coupled with the intention to seek God—can help to clear the fog from the mirror so that one may begin to see the divine presence in this life, in this body, in the here and now.

One of the components of mindfulness and meditation that the Christian tradition may add to this dialogue in American culture is the distinction between active and passive forms of contemplation.\textsuperscript{18} Mindfulness may be understood as congruent with the active modalities of contemplation in the Christian tradition. Active contemplation refers to those forms of asceticism or spiritual discipline that a person can perform through his or her natural human capacities. There is no need for special gifts of the Spirit to engage in these kinds of active contemplation. Through a combination of intentional effort, such as focus upon the breath, physical posture, Scripture, or a sacred word, one can achieve an astonishing amount of focus and calm within the mind-body field of consciousness.\textsuperscript{19}

In the Christian tradition, these forms of active contemplation are understood as preparation for deeper, more receptive, levels of contemplation. They remove the barriers—most frequently these are unhealthy attachments, addictions, habitual thought patterns, or emotional reactivity to certain persons or situations—in the body, mind, and soul that impede a deeper receptivity to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In passive contemplation, on the other hand, one is simply open to, assents to, and gratefully receives the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the healing presence of Christ in each moment. While no one can earn or control the movements of the Spirit, mindfulness practices

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\textsuperscript{15} Cassian’s treatment of the eight principal vices in Books Five through Twelve of his *Institutes* is dependent upon the work of Evagrius (see especially *Institutes*, 10.I.2, which seems to be a direct reference to Evagrius’s association of the “noonday demon” [Ps 91:6] with the vice of *acedia*). English translation by Boniface Ramsey, O.P., is available in *John Cassian: The Institutes* (New York: Newman Press, 2000).


\textsuperscript{17} Foster’s book is particularly interesting because it indicates interest in ancient contemplative practices among evangelical Christians, some of whom have historically been suspicious of contemplative forms of prayer. Mark Galli writes in “A Life Formed in the Spirit” (*Christianity Today* 52, no. 9 (Sept. 2008): 41-45) that “[Foster’s] book, arguably more than any other, introduced evangelicals not only to the disciplines, but also to the wealth of spiritual formation writing from the medieval and ancient church” (41).

\textsuperscript{18} Thomas Merton provides an accessible overview of this distinction in *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2003), 57-79.

\textsuperscript{19} Martin Laird, O.S.A., provides a very practical and helpful overview of the role of embodied practices such as focus on the breath and physical posture in Christian contemplative prayer. See Chapters Two and Three of *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
can help one to notice and respond to the promptings of grace. When God gently tugs at the heart, a mindfully attuned person is much more likely to hear, listen, and respond.

Christians will therefore respond to those in the mindfulness movement that even as we gratefully recognize the many benefits of mindfulness, we remain cognizant that this not the whole story. As Amy Julia Becker writes, “we have something to offer. We have a name for that ancient wisdom. We have a face for that divine spark.”20 That name and face is Jesus Christ. For the Christian, mindfulness practices serve a deeper purpose—that is, the ultimate goal of knowing and loving God in the person of Jesus Christ and the transformation of the human person toward “the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph 4:13).21

**Challenges to Dialogue and Mutual Enrichment**

There is another level of inquiry that Christians might legitimately ask in dialogue with our fellow mindful humans. This line of questioning considers whether something essential is lost when practices like mindfulness that have been sustained for thousands of years within religious and spiritual traditions are considered and practiced outside of those traditions? As I see it, there are two potential pitfalls of the mindfulness movement as it currently exists. First, there is the risk of fad. By distancing itself from the spiritual traditions within which mindfulness has existed for millennia, and by tethering itself more closely to the health and wellness movement, the mindfulness movement may become subject to the short attention span of late modern culture and its fetish for the newest quick fix. In other words, will the movement itself remain sustainable on its own secular or medical terms, once removed from the deeper metaphysical and theological traditions that have guided those who developed these methods over the course of millennia? Only time will answer this question. However, I believe that if the current movement is to survive it must be more self-conscious and honest about its indebtedness to the ancient traditions from which it has developed.22

Another potential risk emerges as a result of failing to adequately recognized the spiritual and religious roots of our fascination with mindfulness in contemporary American culture. While curiosity about the health benefits of mindfulness may open some persons to deeper questions pertaining to spirituality and religious traditions, such curiosity paradoxically may also encourage people to stop at the level of physical or mental health without exploring the deeper forms of contemplation that are upheld in the Christian tradition and other traditions. One challenge for those of us involved in theological reflection and pastoral ministry is to engage the mindfulness movement in creative ways that reveal the depths of the Christian tradition to people involved in some kind of mindfulness practice.

For example, Christians hope for eternal salvation in contemplation of the essence of the Triune God. But Christian tradition upholds this as a possibility that exists within a particular worldview—we call it faith—and set of disciplined practices, such as participation in the liturgy and the sacramental life of the Church. These entail intel-

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21 In a short and accessible article on “Christian Mindfulness,” Ernie Larkin, O.Carm., suggests three mindfulness practices that have been particularly upheld in the Christian contemplative tradition. These are: “recollection, the practice of the presence of God, and the sacrament of the present moment.” Recollection entails the quietness and stillness of the mind cultivated by what Merton calls active contemplation. The practice of the presence of God involves cultivating awareness of God’s presence in all of one’s activities. Finally, the sacrament of the present moment involves the practice of offering one’s self and one’s experience to God. This article is reprinted in *Contemplative Prayer for Today: Christian Meditation* (Singapore: Medio Media, 2001), 130-48. It is also available online at http://carmelnet.org/larkin/larkin017.pdf - accessed November 14, 2014.

22 Sherman draws similar conclusions when he writes that if “this leads us to study contemplative practices that seem extravagant, ritualized, or even superstitious to Enlightenment or neuroscientific eyes, then so much the worse for the neuroscientists. Human lives, even contemplative lives—do not often sit still enough for electrodes” (“On the Emerging Field,” 225).
llectual, moral, and spiritual commitment to a tradition of discipline and to a particular community, the Church. Mindfulness practices are not intended to replace such disciplines, but they may enhance one’s experience and appreciation of liturgy, sacraments, and prayer. Pastoral leaders will need to demonstrate how to connect secular modalities of mindfulness to the spiritual lives of those whom we serve.

Another risk is that mindfulness may become another middle- to upper-class commodity. The eight-week MBSR class is not cheap, nor are the fees to join a yoga studio. The Institute for Mindful Leadership provides workshops and retreats to corporate executives who can afford to pay large sums to visit exotic locations around the world in order to learn mindfulness. What happens to a spiritual practice when it becomes something that can be purchased in order to improve one’s physical, mental, or spiritual health, or to increase productivity or a corporation’s bottom line? There is an inherent issue of justice involved in the way in which certain members of society have privileged access to its costly benefits. Unfortunately, for the time being the benefits of mindfulness, just as the benefits of our health care system as a whole, are reaped primarily by those who have the financial means to access it. Bringing biblical notions of justice and the Church’s tradition of social thought to bear upon this movement seems essential if it is to benefit humanity as whole. Religiously affiliated schools and parishes can offer free or inexpensive workshops in order to introduce Christians to these practices in an environment that is geared toward the nurturing of faith and spiritual growth. And groups such as Contemplative Outreach are dedicated to teaching contemplation to persons in prison and to other underserved populations. Future research and pastoral ministry would benefit from more creative thought about how to make the benefits of these practices more widely known and available, and to support communities where contemplation is taught and practiced.²³

When it comes to integrating mindfulness in the Christian tradition Pope Benedict XVI provides helpful comments with regard to some of the challenges to practicing meditation within the Christian tradition. In his 1989 “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation,” (then–Cardinal Ratzinger) wrote that Christian meditation must avoid the heretical tendencies of what he calls “Pseudognosticism” and “Messalianism.”²⁴ Pseudognosticism denigrates the goodness of created matter, and of the human body in particular, and considers the purpose of contemplation to be an escape from the material world. Messalianism focuses on the ecstatic psychological components of prayer as proof that one is advancing toward God.

Messalianistic tendencies may be particularly tempting in American culture where mindfulness practices are presented as the solution to a wide panoply of emotional, psychological, and physical modes of suffering. A messalianistic approach to mindfulness focuses exclusively on positive subjective experiences as proof of the value of one’s practice and/or the quality of one’s relationship with God. It also fails to note—as John of the Cross highlighted particularly well in the sixteenth century²⁵—that advancing on the journey toward God may involve moments of ecstatic delight but also may lead one into the dark night of the soul and a sense of feeling abandoned by God. Therefore, in contrast to Pseudognosticism, Christian contemplative prayer entails an affirmation of the goodness of creation and of the human body. And in contrast to Messalianism, it fosters faithfulness to God even in the midst of great personal suffering or in the absence of spiritual consolation.

²³ Contemplative Outreach, Ltd. (www.contemplativeoutreach.org) and the Worldwide Community for Christian Meditation (www.wccm.org) have done an excellent job of making these resources available and training facilitators who can conduct presentations and workshops in parishes or schools.
These aspects of Christian mindfulness and contemplation further suggest that a Gospel-inspired form of mindfulness leads one to embrace suffering—in oneself and in others. As individual persons progress in their practice, ongoing struggles may be difficult to reconcile with the claims that mindfulness increases health, happiness, and a deeper sense purpose. This may inadvertently foster a kind of cognitive dissonance in one’s practice, and unfortunately may lead one to abandon the practice right when great progress is being made in the spiritual life. The wisdom from the Christian contemplative tradition, the support of the Church community, and the guidance of a pastor or a qualified spiritual director are necessary in order to navigate ongoing growth in one’s practice.

**Conclusion**

Benedict continues that this “does not mean that genuine practices of meditation which come from the Christian East and from the great non-Christian religions, which prove attractive to the [person] of today who is divided or disoriented, cannot constitute a suitable means of helping the person who prays to come before God with an interior peace, even in the midst of external pressures.”

Thus, there is something natural about Christians who are drawn to yoga studios or MBSR classes. Mindfulness speaks to an often unarticulated and implicit desire for greater harmony and order amidst the many distractions and anxieties of our late modern culture. There is a tremendous pastoral opportunity—perhaps even a duty—for those who work in the Church to help Christians and others who are drawn to mindfulness practices to understand how these practices fit into the daily lives of all baptized Christians. This indicates that there is a great need for people to understand the place of mindfulness within the Church’s tradition of contemplative prayer, so that people may cultivate a practice of prayer and meditation that is truly salutary—for body, mind, and spirit, and for the building up of the body of Christ (See Eph 4:12).

Therefore, mindfulness and contemplative practices must be presented as something beautiful that speaks to a universal component of the human spirit. It must offer a reflection of what it means to be a beloved, loving, embodied, compassionate human being conformed to the image of Christ, and transformed by the Spirit of God. In light of the emphasis in American culture on feeling good, it is particularly pertinent that Christian leaders bear our imperfections and sufferings and those of others with patience and love. Christian mindfulness and contemplation will only be appealing if those who practice it model deeper compassion and solidarity with the whole human family and all creation in concrete and public ways. Ecclesial movements such as Focolare, Sant’Egidio, the Catholic Worker Movement, Communion and Liberation, and others, are particularly well-situated to offer a vision of what it means to live out the fruits of contemplation and prayer in the late modern world. It remains up to all of us as baptized Christians to capitalize on people’s curiosity about mindfulness and to work with others of good will in order to harness this cultural phenomenon to work for the good of all people, of creation, and of the Church.

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26 “Letter to the Bishops.”