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The naked truth: mindfulness and the purification of religion

Liza Cortois, Stef Aupers, and Dick Houtman

ABSTRACT

To arrive at an understanding of what drives the much debated spiritual turn in Western Europe, we study the spiritual trajectories and identifications of mindfulness practitioners in the formerly predominantly Roman Catholic context of Flanders in Belgium. Fifteen semi-structured interviews addressed their religious and spiritual biographical trajectories as well as the symbolic boundaries they draw with adjacent religious and spiritual groups. We find marked evidence of a process of 'religious purification', which unfolds as a critique of the formal and external aspects of both religion (organisations, dogmas, ritual) and spirituality (woolly and frivolous New Age word games). To validate and justify, alternatively, the 'pure' and 'grounded' spirituality that results, those concerned consistently invoke the authority of science.

Introduction

While the secularisation thesis has been a popular orthodoxy in post-World War II sociology (Berger 1967), many an academic observer of the Western European religious landscape has by now pointed to a 'religious change' rather than a 'religious decline' (Heelas et al. 2005). In particular, scholars indicate that 'religion' finds itself increasingly overgrown by 'spirituality' (e.g. Huss 2014; Streib and Hood 2011). While spirituality has often been depicted as a fragmented phenomenon (Bruce 2002), historically and anthropologically inclined literature has done much to point out its cultural coherence and its indebtedness to Western esotericism (Campbell 1978; Hammer 2001; Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996). Its key tenet, especially in the variety of 'New Age' teachings, is the insistence that institutional features of religion like organisations, dogmas, and rituals constitute alienating side issues that stand in the way of a personally meaningful connection to the sacred (Heelas 1996, 18–19). Spirituality has now been adopted by the Western cultural mainstream, as can, for instance, be seen from the popularity of practices like mindfulness (Brown 2015; Wilson 2014) and other therapies in complementary and alternative medicine that entail a marked medicalisation of spirituality (e.g. Barker 2014; Raaphorst and Houtman 2016).

However, most of the research on 'the spiritual turn' is rather descriptive in its approach. James Herrick, for example, states that spirituality—or, as he calls it, "the New Religious Synthesis"—"has now successfully colonized Western religious consciousness" (Herrick 2003, 15). Steven Sutcliffe and Ingvild Gilhus likewise underscore the contemporary

CONTACT Liza Cortois ✉ Liza.Cortois@kuleuven.be

centrality of spirituality (Sutcliffe and Gilhus 2014; see also Possamai 2000; Bloch 1998; Sutcliffe 2003; Kemp 2003). However, these scholars do not explain why and how this turn to spirituality has occurred. 'Religion giving way to spirituality' is doubtlessly related to the general cultural 'subjective turn' and to the appeal in an individualist society of endowing the deeper layers of the self with the divine, referred to as 'self-spirituality' (Heelas et al. 2005; Taylor 1991). Yet this broad analysis begs the further question of the concrete motives that inform the shift to spirituality. Therefore, in this article, we address the motives that lead to spirituality and how they relate to other religious or spiritual practices and institutions.

Previous research has shown that the majority of clients tend to join spiritual courses primarily because of utilitarian motives or in order to solve daily discomforts (Park et al. 2016, 890–892). This is why we chose to focus on spiritual practitioners rather than their clients. We expect these spiritual 'virtuosos' to embrace spirituality for the longer term and with a higher level of self-reflexive understanding of the practice and their choice of it. We are primarily interested in the way these practitioners' spiritual trajectories exemplify more general processes of religious change from a formerly traditional religious context to spirituality. Therefore, we conducted our study in a context that was still predominantly Catholic only half a century ago: Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium. More specifically, we studied the motives and the resulting trajectories of mindfulness trainers, mainly because considerable media attention, extensive research, and bookshops offering a range of mindfulness self-help manuals suggest that this is one of the most popular manifestations of contemporary spirituality. In the analysis of this case, we do not find evidence of a 'religious consumption *à la carte*' that stays at the surface, but instead we find a quest for deep, 'pure', and universal spiritual truth. As we will further explain, a remarkably coherent cultural logic that aims at purified spirituality underlies the motives of practitioners to get involved with mindfulness.

Religious change: the case of mindfulness in a formerly traditional Catholic setting

A wide range of aspects of everyday life has been approached through the spiritual lens of mindfulness: mindful eating, mindful parenting, mindful sports, mindful birthing, mindful communication, the mindful way through depression, etc. The list is long and keeps growing. A survey by the American government found that, in 2009, Americans spent about US$4.2 billion on mindfulness-related practices and products (Wilson 2014, 2). Its appeal is not limited to private individuals, but extends to corporations aiming to improve the well-being and productivity of their employees, to schools fostering the psychological health of their students, and to organisations in the social services sector supporting and empowering the less fortunate.

Western esotericism, mysticism, and related spiritual movements have always sought inspiration from Eastern religions (Campbell 2007; Mellor 1991; Prebish and Baumann 2002). Mindfulness, for example, has Buddhist roots. Its name derives from the Pali word *sati*, a term that became commonplace in Western Buddhist circles in the second half of the twentieth century. *Sati* constitutes the seventh step in the 'noble eightfold path' of Buddhism and consists of a form of meditation that foregrounds attention to and awareness of bodily sensations, thoughts, and feelings (Maex 2011, 168–169). The key figure who brought *sati* to the West is Jon Kabat-Zinn, an American professor of medicine at the University of

Massachusetts (Kabat-Zinn 1990, 2005, 2011). Describing mindfulness as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn 1990, 4), Kabat-Zinn transformed it into the eight-week programme of *Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction* (MBSR), aimed at reducing illness-induced stress among chronically ill patients. Elaborating on Kabat-Zinn's work and adding insights about negative thinking from cognitive therapy, psychiatrists John Teasdale, Zindel Segal, and Mark Williams then developed *Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy* (MBCT) at the University of Oxford (Teasdale, Segal, and Williams 1995; Segal, Williams, and Teasdale 2002), designed specifically to prevent relapse in patients suffering from depression (Fennell and Segal 2011). The contemporary mindfulness field in Flanders is more or less divided between representatives of the MBSR and MBCT programmes. We have made sure to incorporate representatives from both streams in our sample, as we explain in more detail below.

Data and method

We conducted a qualitative study because we wanted to analyse the biographies, narratives, definitions, and meanings that mindfulness trainers attribute to their practice in rich empirical detail. We composed our 'theoretical' (or 'strategic') sample of mindfulness trainers (e.g. Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2006) through a combination of initially maximum variation sampling and subsequently snowball sampling (Patton 1990). With regard to the first sampling technique, we relied on contact information on web sites related to MBSR and MBCT schools in Flanders, the Flemish professional association for mindfulness trainers, healthcare organisations that make use of mindfulness, and less prominent trainers who work in private settings.

We made sure to select respondents from each of these initial channels and subsequently asked them for further points of reference in the field so that we could also reach trainers who were less visible but nonetheless part of the organic social network (Noy 2008). When asked what particular kinds of trainers we were looking for, we indicated that we were interested in the widest possible range of professional fields. This resulted in a sample of trainers that included psychotherapists, doctors, physiotherapists, and teachers, active in the business milieu, in the context of a university, and in the social services sector. Only one of the contacted trainers refused to be interviewed, which left us with a sample of 15 trainers: 4 men and 11 women, who varied in age between 31 and 66 years. We conducted semi-structured interviews (2 through Skype, the other 13 face-to-face) that ranged in length from 60 to 180 minutes. The interviews were conducted in the period November 2014 to April 2015.

The resulting data were analysed with the help of the software programme NVivo, following a largely inductive logic. After the first four interviews, we roughly coded the initial material in order to be able to redirect the subsequent interviews where necessary. After the collection of all the data, we divided the material according to the topics that were discussed during the interviews. Within each of these we started with open, line-to-line-coding, then developed a codebook that we completed and adjusted multiple times *a posteriori*. Based on resemblances between the trainers, we merged some of the codes in the axial coding phase, which resulted in a coding tree with hierarchical distinctions between child and parent nodes. Finally, on the basis of both memos written throughout the whole process and meticulous deliberation in the selective coding phase, we arrived

at a coherent perspective (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Silverman 2013). We use pseudonyms in what follows to protect the anonymity of our interlocutors, but we do mention the profession they last practised and their age.

'The spirit, not the letter': beyond religious institutions

'It stiffens': moving beyond Roman Catholicism

The religious biographies of our respondents are generally dynamic and characterised by a high degree of reflexivity. The large majority was raised in Catholic families, with practices such as church attendance and praying defining their upbringing. All but two went through a phase of critical detachment later, eventually no longer identifying as Catholic. The detachment from Catholicism does, however, not mean that they have become hostile towards it: they recognize its significance for others, accept its core values, and can identify with its central spiritual message as well as with that of Christianity in general.

Even though none of them is particularly negative about Catholicism, or religion in general, critical observations about its dogmatic and doctrinal manifestations and about its power over believers are recurrent themes in the interviews. Annemie refers in this context to "the letter of religion": the formalised, externalised, and prescribed rules, dogmas, and ethical rules that threaten to displace "the spirit of religion". The following quotes illustrate this critical distinction between letter and spirit, form and content:

> I think [religion is] wonderful for other people, but not for me. I have had bad experiences as a child with the Catholic Church. And those dogmas … I cannot relate to them. (Helene, physical therapist, 64, 26 March 2015)

> Religion, for me, has more to do with how you mould it into a rigid form. […] On the other hand, we need forms and forms have to do with institutionalisation, which is, I think, typically human, but if you institutionalise something, then it also stiffens. And for me religion implies this gesture of petrification. […] If people start with something, they inevitably make rules, and the danger is that it petrifies partially, of course. (Anna, lecturer, 54, 26 November 2014)

> I'm very much inspired by Christianity, but it's mostly the spirituality behind it. So the dogma thing, that can't arouse my interest, but the spirit of those [religious movements] I find very beautiful. (Annemie, doctor, 51, 28 March 2015)

> Their point of view towards divorced people, gay people, all the abuse in the church, in fact, the closer you look at it, the more you notice that it's an institute of power. But that is the same in the case of Islam, Protestantism, etc. […] From the moment people lay their hands on it, it becomes an institute of power and then it's ruined. (Catherine, social worker, 54, 2 April 2015)

> With all due respect, but religion is always a restriction in my opinion. Religion forms a frame, a grip on reality [which] is always limiting in a sense. (Sophie, copy writer, 46, 31 March 2015)

Strong discontents about the petrification of religion in religious forms or institutions and about stark traditional and hierarchical understandings of the church characterise the discourse of the mindfulness instructors. Power and strict ethical dogmas are felt to distract from the underlying spiritual message that is in itself accepted as worthwhile and valuable. Here we observe a marked continuity with the anti-institutionalism of New Age—suspicion and rejection of all sorts of external and ritual forms that serves to redirect attention to the personal experience or 'inner-spirituality' (Aupers and Houtman 2006; Heelas 1996; Houtman forthcoming).

'The Buddha was not a Buddhist'

Many of our interlocutors became involved in the Buddhist milieu after they had moved away from the Catholicism they had grown up with. Those concerned all practised Zen meditation as participants (rather than as teachers) or still do so as an extension of their mindfulness training, but they were never involved in any non-Buddhist spiritual courses. They had (or still have) close connections to the Buddhist milieu alongside their active roles as mindfulness trainers. Nonetheless, their stances towards Buddhism are very similar to the ones discussed above with regard to Catholicism. Again, they reject outward forms, rules, dogmas, and rituals as allegedly not belonging to the heart, or core, of Buddhism. This is why they admire Buddhist monks like Thich Nhat Hanh who preach a 'practical Buddhism' that consists of no more than its mind-set and that is thus compatible with every kind of religion:

> Thich Nhat Hanh […] says you don't have to be a Buddhist, but you can adopt the Buddhist attitude to life. And you don't have to walk around with a bald head or with an orange robe, that is not necessary. (Annemie, doctor, 51, 28 March 2015)

Annemie continues in this vein when she tells us about her trip to Sri Lanka and the customs and traditions she observed in the local Buddhist community:

> The monks have to beg for their food, and if they did not get their food before 12 pm, tough luck, then they would not eat for the rest of the day. […] And then I think, that's again the form, the religious form of Buddhism. While I have always been more interested in the spirit of the belief. (Annemie, doctor, 51, 28 March 2015)

Similar to what we have seen above about Catholicism, Annemie thus criticises the ritual and traditional side of Buddhism (orange dress, shaved head, begging for food) as merely superficial form and understands its spirituality as its valuable authentic core. Brenda holds a similar point of view and also criticises monastic gender inequality:

> Buddhism has very beautiful values, unbelievably vast wisdom, but in the end … a woman can't teach in that context. Now it's starting to change, but you don't have any female lamas, you know. You have nuns, but lamas? A lama has never been a woman so far. (Brenda, writer, 59, 4 April 2015)

Some trainers defend these anti-institutional understandings of Buddhist rituals, traditions, and dogmas by pointing out that the Buddha did not want to be a God or a prophet—that he was just an ordinary person who wanted to bring the people wisdom and spirituality, certainly not a constraining new religion that stands in people's way:

> It's not necessary to give it the name [of religion]. In that sense, it's about rules of conduct and the Buddha maybe never intended this as a religion. The Buddha was someone like me and you. He went from place to place. People speak about the Buddha as a doctor, as a psychotherapist, as a coach, as a teacher. Eventually it became a religion, but maybe he never intended it this way. I think the whole institutionalisation, that has not been the original plan. (Nicolas, teacher, 51, 14 April 2015)

> I always say: the Buddha was not a Buddhist. […] The Buddha just had his teachings and later on, they placed them more in the context of a structure and suddenly this was called Buddhism. And Buddhism as a structure has advantages and disadvantages. The advantages are that certain essences are preserved throughout the ages. The disadvantages are that some streams became very dogmatic and lost touch with the core teachings of the Buddha. (Steven, doctor, 46, 27 February 2015)

Informed by considerations like these, the mindfulness trainers in our study make sure to downplay all Buddhist doctrines, rituals, and symbols in their training. For example, the first training Nicolas himself followed was given in a markedly 'secular' setting and, while his trainer introduced traditional tools like the meditation pillow or meditation bench, he made sure to point out that he actually favoured meditating on a plain chair:

> My initial training with trainer [name] was in a very neutral room, no Buddha sculptures, no aphorisms, no lotus flowers were present. The only thing he had was a small singing bowl, meditation pillows, and the small benches, because he wanted to show people: 'These are the traditional seating options.' But he always promoted regular chairs, which is typical for his style. He said: 'The intelligence of the group is linked to the number of chairs used.' (Nicolas, teacher, 51, 14 April 2015)

In this quote it becomes apparent that Nicolas declines the importance of Buddhist religious symbols or rituals. Instead, the 'naked' practice of meditating on a chair without the Buddhist ornaments goes to the heart of the practice, which is internal, not external. In fact, he implies that the quality of 'bare' meditation on a chair is better than meditation on an allegedly 'authentic' meditation bench, because one cannot lose oneself in uncomfortable external matters, which distract from the core business: bare attention.

'Free-floating New Age' and 'grounded spirituality'

New Age: lost in language games

The mindfulness trainers in this study do not only reject Catholic and Buddhist traditions, rituals, and dogmas, but they also approach spirituality of the New Age variety with suspicion and even outright emotional rejection. New Age discourse is incessantly described as 'vague', 'mumbo jumbo', 'woolly', 'ungrounded' or 'free-floating' and the symbolic boundary between New Age and mindfulness is drawn over and over again in the interviews. Concerning Catholicism and Buddhism, pre-defined form, ritual, and dogma are seen as alienating people from 'true' spirituality, while the alleged vagueness and indecisiveness of New Age are said to distract people from it.

In fact, our interlocutors reproach New Agers for their common use of metaphors, symbols, poems, and parables, which interestingly aims to facilitate the process of breaking away from belief, opening up to spiritual experience, and getting closer to the spiritual truth (Hanegraaff 1996, 38). In the eyes of the mindfulness trainers, the lavishly decorated language games in New Age have precisely the opposite result, however. When asked to elucidate the recurring accusations of 'vagueness', Nicolas uses the notion of 'the ten thousand things' (a Chinese way of expressing the boundless multiplicity of reality) as an example, pointing out how baroque language may well be appealing from an aesthetic point of view, yet becomes a burden when one tries to grasp the reality behind the metaphor:

> If you give me an explanation about 'the ten thousand things', to me that sounds vague. I cannot grasp that, you know. If you use the words in a meditational guidance: 'the heart shines like an inner sun…', then I immediately drop out. (Nicolas, teacher, 51, 14 April 2015)

For our interlocutors, poetic New Age language is thus vague and misleading and misses the exactness needed to gain unmediated access to spiritual reality. Brenda also feels that such language games "veil the truth", because aesthetically pleasing New Age vocabularies

misrepresent reality as more beautiful than it actually is and dismiss its hard and ugly dimensions:

> New Age has the connotation of not being grounded and veiling the truth. It was flower power, making everything more beautiful than it was in reality, while mindfulness is the objective and hard work on yourself. (Brenda, writer, 59, 4 April 2015)

Brenda's sentiment is in line with Western Buddhist attitudes towards New Age. Especially representatives of Zen Buddhism identify the latter with 'idealisations' and 'false comfort', instead associating authentic practices of meditation with 'serious hard work' and 'realism' (Cush 1996, 205). From this perspective, New Age is understood as dwelling upon vague and overly optimistic myths and narratives that alienate people from 'true' spirituality:

> In New Age you also have meditations [which] take you to another condition. And in that condition, you experience pleasant feelings, but you do not work with your fundamental patterns. You don't address your irritation, your grief or the obstacles you experience. That is a bit of a pity for those forms of meditation, apart from the fact that they can be pleasant. But for me … I call that woolly, because it is not in touch with reality. (Steven, doctor, 46, 27 February 2015)

While Steven is more positive about the potentially beneficial effects of New Age, he shares Brenda's concern that it loses contact with reality and veils the truth. The satisfaction that can be derived from New Age meditations obscures real problems by hiding them behind overly optimistic representations of reality.

Mindfulness as 'grounded spirituality'

The rejection of the dogmatic aspects of Christianity, the ritualised forms of Buddhism, and the misleading myths and metaphors of New Age goes hand in hand with a defence of mindfulness as entailing a superior, 'purer' form of spirituality. Indeed, the notion of 'spirituality' does not evoke the same aversion as the labels 'religion' and 'New Age' among our interlocutors. They understand mindfulness as utterly spiritual and characterise it consistently with terms like 'grounded' or 'down to earth', as exemplified by Marianne: "According to me, mindfulness is very earthly spirituality, not something vague, but very grounded spirituality" (psychotherapist, 66, 2 March 2015). Although the trainers say they do not always explicitly portray mindfulness to their course participants as a quintessential *spiritual* teaching, they do emphasise that it has had a huge effect on their personal lives and that they refuse to see it as a mere technique. For them, it constitutes a spiritual outlook on life, a philosophy of life that has radically changed their points of view:

> Applying those skills in daily life, that's for me that attitude to life that I find very important. There, but that's also very personal, we touch upon the spiritual aspect for me. (Annemie, doctor, 51, 28 March 2015)

The trainers emphasise again and again that, unlike the rigid forms of traditional religion and the spiritual language games of New Age that only alienate people from the core of spirituality, mindfulness has nothing to do with outward forms. They understand it as embodying a 'pure' spirituality situated beyond dogmas, rituals, and words. More than that: they see it as capturing the universal nature of religion, the underlying essence on which all religions are founded. Understanding religions, traditions, and mythical narratives as failed and historically contingent attempts to capture this universal essence, they are seen

as ultimately prioritising form over substance. This is very much in line with the central characteristic of 'perennialism' that Paul Heelas attributes to New Age spirituality (Heelas 1996, 27–28), yet with the difference that the search for a universal spiritual truth in mindfulness also goes beyond the tradition of New Age. The alleged universal nature of the spirituality present in mindfulness is a recurrent theme in the interviews. Chiara, for example, recounted how she had observed that mindfulness represented a universal and age-old wisdom during her anthropological research in various countries and cultures:

> I also did research in Mexico among the Indians, they were also mindful. […] The more spiritual aspects of mindfulness appear in all great cultures. Look back to Europe, the Greeks, the Celts, the druids: 'Know thyself.' (Chiara, entrepreneur, 62, 27 March 2015)

Sophie considers a non-judgmental attitude the basis of every religion, because it constitutes the universal outlook that every religion promotes as well as the expression of tolerance for religious diversity:

> I suppose that mindfulness is the universal idea that 'embraces' almost all religions. So every religion is completely fine, under whatever form. But if you look from a more universal point of view, from a more general perspective, then you arrive indeed at that non-judgmental awareness of 'okay, this is this religion, that is that religion, they are all perfectly fine.' (Sophie, copy writer, 46, 31 March 2015)

Finally, Catherine, a social worker in the multicultural context of a big city, construes mindfulness as a technique of meditation that inevitably confronts people with universal spiritual questions through constant self-observation rather than as an imposed spiritual point of view. The participants in her course come from multiple cultural and religious backgrounds and she recounts how this is precisely what enables her to experience the potential of mindfulness as a unifying spiritual approach:

> The search for meaning in human beings is universal. Based on your culture, there are certain formulations that are given to this search. But finally, if you go to the essence, we arrive at universal values which you can reach via mindfulness. Via mindfulness you arrive at your own sense-searching questions and struggles. I also experienced that it was a free ticket for people to talk again about spirituality, without having to convert to this religion or another. (Catherine, social worker, 54, 2 April 2015)

The role of science: legitimating the 'pure' spirituality of mindfulness

The trainers in our study claim that mindfulness captures a pure and universal form of spirituality that is unpolluted by religious organisations, dogmas, rituals, and wordy poetics. This implies that these things can no longer be invoked to justify mindfulness-related practices. It is striking to observe how our interlocutors instead consistently invoke science to do this justificatory work: they do not conceive of science and spirituality as incompatible, but rather understand the former as validating and justifying the latter. This tendency is consistent with widespread understandings of mindfulness as a strictly scientific technique (e.g. Harris 2014) and of Buddhism anticipating the scientific outlook of modern psychology even before it flourished in the West. The scientific understanding of mindfulness has meanwhile not only sparked an enormous number of research-based articles about its effectiveness for preventing stress, anxiety, and depression (Chiesa and Serretti 2011; Eisendrath, Chartier, and McLane 2011; Teasdale, Segal, and Williams 1995,

2003) and for improving physical health (Cassidy et al. 2012), but has also informed its incorporation in neurological research (Davidson et al. 2003).

Findings from these scientific studies, our respondents argue, accurately prove the validity and value of mindfulness and in fact also support their claim that it captures a universal spiritual truth:

> Because of their meditations, Buddhists were far ahead of us in the understanding of the human psyche. They observed their own mind actually before we discovered psychology. [Buddhism] was a good breeding ground to build further upon for our Western psychology […] these are very universal ideas that Buddhists already knew for a longer time than we did. (Catherine, social worker, 54, 2 April 2015)

Catherine points out how a universal spiritual truth that once went under the mask of religion has been adopted by scientific psychology in the modern Western context. For our interlocutors, this development makes all the difference, because it has enabled mindfulness to become truly 'grounded' and thus very different from the vague, speculative, and unproven metaphors of New Age:

> The scientific research makes sure it is something grounded [which] has roots in the ground like a tree and that tree cannot be sustained without those roots. New Age seems to me like a tree without roots that started to fly. Mindfulness is absolutely not that. (Sophie, copy writer, 46, 31 March 2015)

The trainers in our study experience no tension between the spiritual meaning they find in mindfulness and the research findings that prove its efficacy. They recognize the value of spiritual and scientific points of view alongside each other and perceive the two as complementary. Previous research into the spirituality of academics in the natural and social sciences has observed a similar attempt to reconcile personal spiritual intuitions and scientific activity, instead of sacrificing one for the other (Ecklund and Scheitle 2007; Ecklund and Long 2011). Our well-educated, yet not academically involved mindfulness trainers similarly argue for the compatibility of both perspectives:

> I think it is wonderful that this has all been researched. It is not placebo stuff or mumbo jumbo. Because, I think, that is our critical attitude of today and I'm completely supportive of that, which brings us back to the subject of spirituality. Do you know Mansuk Patel? Well, he once said: understanding without compassion is cruelty, that's why we have to be compassionate in mindfulness. However, compassion without understanding is naïve. (Helene, physical therapist, 64, 26 March 2015)

Helene here argues that scientific understanding and emotional-spiritual compassion are merely two sides of the same coin: without validating scientific research, mindfulness would end up being mere naïve superstition. Again and again, our interlocutors point out the role of science in proving the validity of spiritual claims about reality. Eric, for instance, advocates an understanding of mindfulness as a modern religious practice, pointing out how odd it actually is that we have held on to a model of religion which involves a transcendent God for such a long period of time. He sees mindfulness as a corollary of modern society, where science has become the ultimate basis of truth, so that mindfulness constitutes the quintessential type of spirituality for our times:

> Religion has always adapted to the society in which it appears. So, a supernatural God, that is the pre-French Revolution idea of a head of state: the Sun king who is exalted above all laws and who has privileges and [is portrayed as] a God that is exalted above the laws of nature and performs miracles, who can intervene at random in the laws of nature. […] What is in our

time the highest power? The highest truth? Science. Science is organising religion now. (Eric, psychiatrist, 58, 24 February 2015)

For our respondents, in short, science and spirituality are not incompatible, but complementary and they go hand in hand. This can also be demonstrated with a quote from Anna, who links findings from brain research to practices of opening up to one's spiritual side. She points out how the achievement of balance between the two brain halves through mindfulness training provides evidence for spiritual balance:

I would say that, if you bring mindfulness into your life and keep applying it, applying it, applying it … then it really turns into a way of life. Otherwise, it cannot be that your right brain half, your intuitive brain half is developing more and comes to be in balance with your rational brain half, that the bridge between the two hemispheres becomes stronger and that you are more open for your spiritual self. (Anna, lecturer, 54, 26 November 2014)

Scientific research is, however, not only understood to provide rational proof and legitimacy for mindfulness in general, but also more specifically for one's personal spiritual experiences. Even though it is obviously their own experiences with mindfulness that convinced the trainers in our study of its value and meaning in the first place, they understand research findings to support rationally what they intuitively already knew. "It proves what I feel", one of them said, which indicates that it is not the supportive research findings as such that amaze and surprise her, but rather the fact that science can actually prove the validity of her personal experiences:

I think the neurological research is fascinating because it gives me the experience: 'Oh! I already knew!' For me, that tells me more about our science than about mindfulness. I have already known for a long time that it works. And now I think: 'Wow! Our science can do a lot, it can even measure that.' (Maria, teacher, 58, 24 April 2015)

Scientific authority is accepted in so far as it is in line with familiar experience or, as Kim Knibbe formulates it on the basis of her study of alternative spirituality, "objective reality and subjective reality *jibe* instead of being at war" (Knibbe 2007, 137, emphasis added). For Lize, too, scientific research findings are of secondary importance, her personal experiences constitute the decisive and overriding factor:

I completely support all the scientific research. But for myself, I'm not really fascinated by the scientific attention, and I don't really follow these events closely. For me, the most important thing is how I benefit from it. And in my experience, it brought me a lot in all those years. So I don't really need the scientific research to believe in the blessings of mindfulness. (Lize, researcher, 31, 13 April 2015)

Conclusion and discussion: mindfulness and the purification of religion

We have studied the spiritual turn in the West by focusing on how and why contemporary practitioners of mindfulness in Flanders have ended up identifying with spirituality rather than with religion. Clearly, the appeal of mindfulness resides for them in its alleged status as a 'superior', 'pure', and 'grounded' form of spirituality that does away with the external, institutional, and formal aspects of religion. This can already be observed in the practitioners' biographies: born and raised in the Roman Catholic tradition, most of them started scrutinising its dogmas, rituals, and outer forms later in life and embarked on a quest for spiritual purity. Moreover, they extend their critique of overly 'externalised' Catholicism to more spiritually inclined types of religion like Buddhism and New Age. The former is

criticised because of its ritualised side issues and the latter for its tendency to lose itself in a woolly, mumbo jumbo poetics that only serves to obscure the essence of spirituality. They thus arrive at an allegedly pure and universal type of spirituality that is unpolluted by organisations, dogmas, ritual, and wordy language games—a type of spirituality that can in effect no longer be justified by means of those poetic language games either, so that science is instead invoked as an alternative source of validation. Given their quest for a 'universal', 'real', 'unpolluted', and 'grounded' spirituality, the position of the mindfulness trainers cannot be characterised as 'secular' nor can their biographies be characterised as indicating a process of 'secularisation'. Indeed, they firmly reject the notion that spirituality is incompatible with science—a notion that is central to modern self-understandings and widely understood as a principal driver of processes of secularisation. They moreover do not simply fail to reject the notion of incompatibility, but even go so far as to consider science as delivering proof for the ultimate truth of mindfulness. Rather than a process of secularisation, what we discern here is a process of religious purification: a quest for an eternal, universal, and solidly grounded religious truth, situated beyond what are seen as flawed religious institutions and traditions (Roeland et al. 2010).

This finding raises questions about the wider applicability of the notion of religious purification, both as a cultural–historical process and as a characterisation of the dynamics of the contemporary religious field. Both appear quite promising. Firstly, the biographies of the mindfulness trainers appear to exemplify a continuation and further radicalisation of a cultural–historical process of purification that took off in the aftermath of the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s and came to full bloom in the 1980s with the maturation of the New Age movement. Like the mindfulness trainers studied in the present article, New Age advocates were after all also typically deeply dissatisfied with the formalities and dogmatism of traditional religion and searched for 'real', unmediated spirituality outside the churches rather than adopting a secular identity (e.g. Rose 2006; Van Otterloo, Houtman, and Aupers 2012). Clearly, the longing for unmediated spiritual experience and the doctrine of perennialism that comes with it—the belief in a universal spiritual essence that underlies all existing religious traditions (e.g. Campbell 1978; Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996)—also testifies to a marked desire to purify religion by sidestepping its formalities and externalities. Obviously, we may go even further back in time to 1875, when Madame Blavatsky founded modern Theosophy, which aimed for the comparative study of all of the world's religions in order to uncover their underlying universal spiritual truth (Hanegraaff 1996, 448). The rise and mass appeal of mindfulness thus appear to be the most recent and radicalised wave in an ongoing longer-term process of religious purification. In its relentless quest for purity, mindfulness after all deconstructs not only Christian religion, but also Buddhism and New Age, two religious traditions typically embraced by those who criticise Christianity for foregrounding institutional, doctrinal, and ritual issues and for lacking in spirituality.

Secondly, religious purification may also be useful for explaining the social dynamics in the contemporary religious field. Driven by sincere longings for 'real' religion and 'pure' sacrality (Houtman forthcoming), it is markedly less frivolous than the process of religious privatisation, conceived as the expansion of a 'market of ultimate significance' in which spiritual consumers shop for strictly personal meaning according to strictly personal taste (Luckmann 1967, 114). The quest for spiritual purity is after all informed by a clear and morally charged distinction between 'good religion' (unmediated, non-institutionalised, 'pure') and 'bad religion' (mediated, institutionalised, 'polluted'). Indeed, as we have seen,

mindfulness trainers distinguish themselves from other positions in the contemporary religious field (Christianity, Buddhism, New Age) by underscoring the purity of their worldview.[1] Thus, religious purification does indeed entail a display of symbolic capital and a quest for cultural distinction (Bourdieu 1984; see also Thornton 1995). This suggests that the quest for spiritual purity provides the contemporary religious field with precisely the type of shared cultural logic that it has so often been denied since Thomas Luckmann's classic account of religious privatisation (Luckmann 1967; see also Aupers and Houtman 2006; Knibbe 2007).

All this raises many important questions for future research, pertaining not only to the role of ideals of religious purity in setting mindfulness and New Age apart from other religious movements and traditions, but also to the way these ideals provide today's spiritual milieus with more cultural coherence than typically acknowledged.

Note

1. Research shows that other religions traditions such as Salafi Islam and Evangelicalism also show this coherent logic of purification when rephrased by the younger and cosmopolitan generations (Roeland et al. 2010). With regard to what exactly guides people to choosing one of these purified traditions, further research has to be conducted.

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Notes on contributors

Liza Cortois is a PhD student at the Centre for Sociological Research, "Theory, Culture and Religion", at the University of Leuven in Belgium. Currently, she works on a project about the socialisation in individualistic cultures in diverse societal fields. Here, she combines a theoretically informed approach with qualitative methods such as text analysis, participant observation, and in-depth interviews. One of the cases she studies in detail is the mindfulness sub-culture.

Stef Aupers is Professor of Media Culture at the Institute for Media Studies at the University of Leuven in Belgium. He has published widely on the mediatisation of religion, spirituality, and conspiracy culture in Western society.

Dick Houtman is Professor of Sociology of Culture and Religion at the University of Leuven in Belgium. His principal research interest is cultural change in the West since the 1960s and he regularly publishes about religion in journals like *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, and *Social Compass*. His latest books about religion are *Things: Religion and*

the Question of Materiality (edited with Birgit Meyer, 2012) and *Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital* (edited with Stef Aupers, 2010).

CORRESPONDENCE: Liza Cortois, University of Leuven, Parkstraat 45, Box 3601, 3000 Leuven, Belgium.

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