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PEDAGOGICAL ROUNDTABLE

Contemplative Pedagogy: Experiments and Reflections

This roundtable grew out of the 2017 meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA), for which Karen Enriquez organized a panel on the topic of contemplative pedagogy for the Buddhist-Christian Studies Group. As part of that session, Maureen Walsh and Anita Houck presented early versions of two of the essays that follow. That session inspired some members of the College Theology Society to organize a pedagogical lunch on the topic of contemplative pedagogies for the 2018 CTS convention. Given the significant interest shown by CTS members, and the longstanding commitment to pedagogy in the CTS and Horizons*, further conversation led to the idea of publishing a roundtable focused on contemplative approaches in Catholic institutions. The authors are grateful to Elena Procario-Foley for her support and guidance.*

Keywords: contemplative pedagogy (CP), meditation, mindfulness, spiritual exercises, practices

I. The Perils and Promises of McMindfulness: On Doing Contemplative Pedagogy Badly

In 2011, a roundtable in *Teaching Theology and Religion* explained that "Contemplative Pedagogy is a new and sometimes controversial pedagogical practice."[1] In 2019, CP, as it is often known, is no longer new; teachers from many disciplines have experimented with various forms of the approach, which, as Fran Grace defines it, "cultivates inner awareness through first-person investigations,[2] often called 'contemplative practices,'" which "range

[1] Tom Coburn et al., "Contemplative Pedagogy: Frequently Asked Questions," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 14, no. 2 (2011): 167–74, at 167.

[2] The distinction between first- and third-person learning is common in CP. Daniel P. Barbezat and Mirabai Bush provide a helpful explanation, based on the work of Harold Roth: "For Roth, one of the shortcomings of higher education is that it remains

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widely: silent sitting meditation, compassion practices, walking meditation, deep listening, mindfulness, … nature observation, self-inquiry, and many others."[3] Yet CP continues to inspire controversy, most often for appropriating practices grounded in religious traditions. If we use contemplative techniques to facilitate student learning, reduce students' anxiety, develop students' skills for concentration, or perhaps even respond to student interests, we face the question of whether we are showing disrespect to the traditions in which these techniques originated and falling victim to what Jon Paul Sydnor has called "economism," that is, "the reduction of all things to their economic value."[4] Because many approaches in CP derive from Buddhism, these questions are especially fraught for those of us who teach religion and theology but are not scholars or practitioners of Buddhism.

In deciding whether and how to use CP, a good place to start is in the most basic concerns of pedagogy: the needs of our students, our own competencies as instructors, and the goals of our curriculum.

Whom are we teaching?

Barbara Walvoord may be the best known, but she is surely not the only, researcher to name the reality that students and faculty disagree on what students need. In Walvoord's reading of "the great divide," faculty and students share an appreciation for gaining information and understanding about religions, but students also seek spiritual growth, while faculty prioritize critical thinking.[5] In addition, students often express limited interest in courses that do not have direct relevance to their professional plans. Especially given

heavily biased toward 'third-person learning.' Students learn how to analyze, memorize, and quantify subjects as objects—as something 'out there,' separate from themselves. At the same time, the subjectivity of the knower is all but ignored. One of the values of contemplative pedagogy is that it tries to bridge this rift between the knower and the known by bridging the gap between more traditional, objective study and what Roth calls 'critical first-person learning.' 'First person' means that students engage directly with the practices being studied, and 'critical' means that students are not asked to believe anything but instead to evaluate their own experience with openness and discernment." Daniel P. Barbezat and Mirabai Bush, *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning*, The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014), 105.

[3] Fran Grace, "Learning as a Path, Not a Goal: Contemplative Pedagogy—Its Principles and Practices," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 14, no. 2 (2011): 99–124, at 99.

[4] Jon Paul Sydnor, "Teaching World Religions through Film," in *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom: Hybrid Identities, Negotiated Boundaries*, eds. Mara Brecht and Reid B. Locklin (New York: Routledge, 2016), 205–18, at 214.

[5] Barbara E. Walvoord, *Teaching and Learning in College Introductory Religion Courses* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), see especially 6, 15–18.

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the diversity of student needs, interests, and abilities—differences made all the more visible by troubling difficulties in climate at many of our institutions—and the frequent pressure to design courses that will attract students, instructors have to make difficult decisions about how to use the mere 37.5 hours of class time they have with students in a typical semester.

Despite those differences, one widely shared concern has inspired considerable interest in CP: an apparent epidemic of anxiety among college students. The 2018 National College Health Assessment (NCHA) survey reported that, in the past year, 22.3 percent of undergraduates had been "diagnosed or treated by a professional" for anxiety, 64.3 percent said that they "felt overwhelming anxiety,"[6] and 28.1 percent believed anxiety had a specific and measurable negative effect on their academic work.[7] Because anxiety can physiologically block students' ability to learn, it is likely affecting classrooms in ways faculty are not fully aware of.[8]

Proponents of CP (along with other researchers on meditation[9]) suggest that contemplative practices like mindfulness, meditation, and self-reflection may be effective in reducing stress and anxiety.[10] But there are reasons to be cautious. In one of the central texts in CP, Daniel P. Barbezat and Mirabai

[6] American College Health Association: National College Health Assessment, "Undergraduate Student Reference Group Executive Summary, Spring 2018," 2018, 14–15, https://www.acha.org/NCHA/ACHA-NCHA_Data/Publications_and_Reports/NCHA/Data/Reports_ACHA-NCHAIIc.aspx.

[7] American College Health Association: National College Health Assessment, "Undergraduate Student Reference Group Data Report, Spring 2018," 2018, 48, https://www.acha.org/NCHA/ACHA-NCHA_Data/Publications_and_Reports/NCHA/Data/Reports_ACHA-NCHAIIc.aspx.

[8] I am grateful to Catherine M. Pittman and Lisa M. Karle for leading a faculty-development session on these issues at Saint Mary's College; see their *Rewire Your Anxious Brain: How to Use the Neuroscience of Fear to End Anxiety, Panic, and Worry* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 2015).

[9] See, for instance, the review of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), a nonreligious meditative technique developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, in P. Grossman et al., "Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and Health Benefits: A Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* 57 (2004): 35–43; and Nasrin Falsafi, "A Randomized Controlled Trial of Mindfulness Versus Yoga: Effects on Depression and/or Anxiety in College Students," *Journal of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association* 22, no. 6 (November 2016): 483–97.

[10] See, for instance, Arthur Zajonc, "Contemplative Pedagogy: A Quiet Revolution in Higher Education," in *Contemplative Studies in Higher Education*, eds. Linda A. Sanders and Catherine Wehlburg, New Directions for Teaching and Learning 134 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013), 83–94, at 84; Alexander W. Astin, Jennifer A. Lindholm, and Helen S. Astin, *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011); and Shauna L. Shapiro, Kirk Warren Brown, and John A. Astin, "Toward the Integration of Meditation into Higher Education: A Review

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Bush note that practices like closing the eyes and keeping silent may even exacerbate anxiety for some students, especially those who have experienced trauma, those who already feel silenced—including students of color, women, and LGBTQ students—and those with religious backgrounds that may see meditation as "a path for potential demonic possession."[11]

At the conference session from which this roundtable grew, the liveliest discussion arose around G. K. Chesterton's maxim that "If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly." The point, as I understood it, was that meditative practices are worth doing, and so are worth teaching, despite professors' worries about religious appropriation or student anxiety. Meditation is surely worth doing badly so long as "badly" simply means, as Chesterton apparently intended, "not-yet-well."[12] After all, what most students count as meditating badly is simply meditating without focus, meditating with a wandering mind—in other words, meditating; and one of the most satisfying aspects of introducing CP is seeing students become familiar with monkey mind, learn they can keep coming back to focus, and discover their minds can become quieter and more attentive—and understand that they are in good company as they struggle and grow. But if we respect not only the cautions of CP practitioners like Barbezat and Bush, but also the long history of religious traditions that teach the power of silence and spirit, we also recognize that there can be such a thing as teaching meditation badly: namely, presenting meditation in ways that can be unnecessarily harmful. It may be that not every student in this age of anxiety can safely access contemplative practices in the context of a class alone, without additional direction or counseling. If goals like reducing anxiety and enhancing learning are what we are after, we may be able to accomplish that in ways that do not require students to enter silence and be present to (perhaps literally) their own demons.

Who is the teacher?

A related consideration in discerning whether or how to use CP is the competence of the instructor. Proponents of CP suggest instructors need to be able to contextualize thoroughly the practices they introduce students to.

of Research," The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, 2008, http://www.contemplativemind.org/archives/830.

[11] Barbezat and Bush, *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education*, 73–74.

[12] Chesterton explained that he intended the line "in defence of hobbies and amateurs and general duffers," among whom he included himself. As an article from the American Chesterton Society puts it nicely: "The line … is not an excuse for poor efforts. It is perhaps an excuse for poor results." ACS [American Chesterton Society], "A Thing Worth Doing," The American Chesterton Society, https://www.chesterton.org/a-thing-worth-doing/.

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Thus Louis Komjathy urges instructors to avoid "'cafeteria-' or 'buffet-style courses' that employ spiritual wine-tasting and tourism. One must be vigilant not to reduce contemplative practice to technique, with the corresponding idea that, for example, *Zazen* stripped of an informing Zen Buddhist worldview remains 'Buddhist meditation.'"[13] CP advocates also note that the competence faculty need is not only scholarly but experiential. The Contemplative Pedagogy Network, based at the University of Essex, argues that "It is imperative that if we are to bring contemplative pedagogy into the classroom that we have some knowledge of our own internal lives and the beauty and fear that can arise from deepening self-awareness."[14] We may not need to be Saint Teresa herself to lead students in a breathing exercise before a quiz, but, as the Network insists, "It would be irresponsible to encourage students into deeper self-awareness if we have not started to explore this ourselves." In her essay later in this roundtable, Maureen Walsh explores cowardice—more likely a self-aware prudence—that speaks to the legitimacy of this concern.

Finally, instructors benefit from knowing something about contemplative pedagogy itself. If I had not read Barbezat and Bush's cautions before my class's first experience of mindfulness practice, I would not have been prepared when a couple students expressed serious discomfort with even two or three minutes of silence, nor would I have been able to offer suggestions for adapting the practice while they developed their capacity for contemplation.

What is the course trying to accomplish?

A third factor to consider is curriculum, or what our courses intend to do. An increasing body of research suggests that contemplative practices like meditation and self-reflection correlate with goals that higher education, perhaps especially Catholic higher education, is right to embrace, among them "interpersonal skills," "emotional balance," "self-rated ability to get along with other races and cultures," "strengthened commitment to promoting racial understanding," "cognitive performance," and empathy.[15] Findings like these are promising and suggest that courses in any discipline can benefit from CP. This argument is not new; many CP advocates quote

[13] Coburn et al., "Contemplative Pedagogy," 172.

[14] That said, the network does not exclude the inexperienced, but instead defines itself as "a place where people are able to provide support to each other—where those with less experience of contemplative pathways, either personally or in the classroom, can learn from those with more." "What Is Contemplative Pedagogy?," Contemplative Pedagogy Network, 2018, https://contemplativepedagogynetwork.com/what-is-contemplative-pedagogy/.

[15] Astin, Lindholm, and Astin, *Cultivating the Spirit*, 148–50.

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luminaries such as William James, whose 1890 *The Principles of Psychology* proposes that "the faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character and will. … An education which should improve this faculty would be *the* education *par excellence*."[16]

In considering the goals of our curricula, we need to grapple with the concern mentioned earlier, that many CP approaches derive from Buddhism (less often, another religious tradition) and are appropriated—used by people without scholarly or experiential competence in that tradition for purposes beyond those intended by the tradition. Lauren Cassani Davis, in a helpful 2015 review in *The Atlantic*, notes that many condemn such decontextualized practices as "McMindfulness."[17] In a provocative piece called "Beyond McMindfulness," Zen teacher David Loy and management professor and ordained Korean Taego Order Buddhist teacher Ron Purser go further, explicitly linking such practices to economism: "While a stripped-down, secularized technique—what some critics are now calling 'McMindfulness'—may make it more palatable to the corporate world, decontextualizing mindfulness from its original liberative and transformative purpose, as well as its foundation in social ethics, amounts to a Faustian bargain. Rather than applying mindfulness as a means to awaken individuals and organizations from the unwholesome roots of greed, ill will and delusion, it is usually being refashioned into a banal, therapeutic, self-help technique that can actually reinforce those roots."[18]

Purser and Loy insist not only that we raise the scholarly question of what practices are for (a concern the next essays in this roundtable address carefully), but that we use the practices for just those purposes. But not all CP advocates go this far. Judith Brown of Naropa University argues that it is important to be clear about "what we are doing when we introduce meditation into the college classroom. We are not introducing religious practices; we are developing new teaching pedagogies. We are not creating little Buddhists, Hassidim, Sufis, Daoists, or Trappists."[19] Yet, although the instructor's goals may not be those of the traditional practitioner, they need to be respectful:

[16] William James, *The Principles of Psychology* [1890]; see Christopher D. Greene, *Classics in the History of Psychology*, 424, italics in original, http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/James/Principles/prin11.htm.

[17] Lauren Cassani Davis, "When Mindfulness Meets the Classroom," *The Atlantic*, August 31, 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/08/mindfulness-education-schools-meditation/402469/.

[18] Ron Purser and David Loy, "Beyond McMindfulness," *Huffpost*, August 31, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ron-purser/beyond-mcmindfulness_b_3519289.html.

[19] Judith Simmer-Brown, "Training the Heart Responsibly: Ethical Considerations in Contemplative Teaching," in *Meditation and the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy*

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"While we are not teaching religious practice per se in the classroom, many of our pedagogies are informed by these practices, and it is important that we respect the milieus in which they were developed."[20] To present the practices without the appropriate honesty and humility is to do CP with culpable badness.

In contrast, it may be possible to use secular practices, if they are accurately presented as such. A primary example is mindfulness, which Arthur Zajonc calls "surely the most widely used classroom contemplative practice." It typically consists of being nonjudgmentally aware of the present moment, often by focusing on the breath. Zajonc identifies mindfulness as "a Western invention, although based in the contemplative traditions of Asia."[21] Similarly, Barbezat and Bush write that "Mindfulness as taught in the classroom is a secular activity. It is a basic human capacity," though also present in distinctive forms in different religious traditions.[22] Presenting such background may be one way to introduce the benefits of CP without misinforming students about what constitutes religious practice.

Three Good Ways to Use CP Badly

From these considerations, we might identify three potentially viable approaches to CP. In the first, which we might call contextualized, competent scholars can teach religious practices as a way of helping students learn about religion. In some cases, faculty may invite—though never compel—students to use the practices for the religious ends for which they were intended, as when Brian Robinette introduces students in a Catholic institution to Christian spiritual exercises. In other courses, instructors may make it explicit that students cannot access the original intent of the practice, but can learn something more limited, but still valuable, from what Maureen Walsh calls "going through the motions" or "play-acting."

In a second approach, which we might call Jamesian, faculty with sufficient experience in mindfulness practices might teach them to students for functional ends such as anxiety reduction, enhanced learning, and greater capacity for concentration. We would expect this approach in courses outside departments of religious studies and theology, where many practitioners of CP do their work. But it also suits religion and theology professors who seek, to paraphrase Simmer-Brown, not to teach religious practice per se

for Religious Studies, eds. Judith Simmer-Brown and Fran Grace (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 107–20, at 110.

[20] Simmer-Brown, "Training the Heart Responsibly," 113–14.

[21] Zajonc, "Contemplative Pedagogy," 84.

[22] Barbezat and Bush, *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education*, 96–97.

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but to do a better job of teaching whatever they teach. In the religion classroom, such practices need to be contextualized like any other practice, for instance, explicitly identified as secular and perhaps associated with a particular school of thought. In short, the instructor may embrace McMindfulness as meditation worth doing badly. This is the approach I use most often in my introductory course, which leads frequently stressed first-year students through a fast-paced introduction to comparative theology. The course rarely leaves time for the contextualization needed for the first approach, so I introduce a simple, nonreligious practice from Barbezat and Bush, presenting their explanation of its secular nature.[23] Students seem to understand the practice is not in itself religious and express appreciation for learning a method to address anxiety and enhance concentration.

A third, hybrid approach makes use of the practical, largely secular skills of approach two, but with some of the religious-learning goals of approach one. This is the approach I take in another course that fulfills a general education requirement, Spirituality and Comedy. The course integrates both secular mindfulness practices and contextualized Christian and interfaith practices, which students adapt to their own religious stances and tolerance for silence.[24] The goal is not spiritual growth per se (making "little Buddhists" or "little Trappists"), though some students report such growth. Instead, the practices aim at both anxiety reduction and scholarly learning: students' own experiences (what CP proponents, such as Fran Grace earlier in this article, often identify as "first-person investigations") shed light on themes also taught through "third-person investigations" such as reading scholarly essays on spirituality.[25]

In using both the second (Jamesian) and third (hybrid) approaches, I have been consistently struck by CP's efficacy. Almost unanimously, students' journals recount significant and immediate reductions in anxiety, stress, and feelings of depression, even from short sessions of just three to five minutes, even in the first week of class. In addition, meditative practices used in the third (hybrid) approach have led even students who see themselves as nonreligious to articulate meaningful insights into important issues in spirituality, among them community, asceticism, *lo cotidiano* (the everyday, understood as the locus for spirituality), pluralism, and sacred texts. So, for the study of

[23] Barbezat and Bush present the practice in ibid., 97.

[24] One of the course texts is *The Book of Joy*, which includes techniques recommended by two of the authors, the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu, and provides some context for these practices. The Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, and Douglas Carlton Abrams, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2016).

[25] See note 2 for more on this distinction.

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spirituality at least, contemplative practices seem to be powerful means of learning. At the same time, I have encountered something of what Purser and Loy call the Faustian bargain of McMindfulness: students find that practicing makes them feel better, so they come to assume that the purpose of practice is feeling better. This is one of my failures and points to the need to contextualize more effectively the practices I introduce.

In the end, my efforts at CP remind me how susceptible any spiritual life is to the twin temptations of novelty and nostalgia. Novelty was the stronger pull for many of my students, who seemed eager to try new practices, the newer (and more Buddhist) the better. Nostalgia sometimes tempted me, when I remembered—no doubt with naïveté—the days when anxiety was less of a burden, visible and invisible, in the lives of my students, the dynamics of the classroom, and the spirit of the age. But most of life is lived in the middle, in the hard and often monotonous work of committed spiritual discipline, where dryness, plateaus, and mistakes are part of the deal. I think my students and I all found our places in that middle space, at times frustrated, at times bored, at times satisfied in progress and glad for good company. Teaching, too, knows the dual temptation to rush to the new or retreat to the familiar. Like any other pedagogical approach, CP is not a panacea, nor is it just a new gadget. Like any spiritual work, using CP responsibly takes commitment, risk, care, and constant evaluation; doubts and mistakes are part of the deal. But so, I have found, are surprise and delight, as practice helps students question their overly settled understandings of religion and spirituality and discover their gifts for attentiveness and quiet.

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II. Flipping the Classroom Inside-Out: A Systematic Theologian Discovers Contemplative Pedagogy

Hitting a Brick Wall

Shortly after receiving tenure in 2009, I hit a brick wall. Having poured so much energy into the tenure process, which included a large-scale book

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