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Research Article

Holy be the Lay: A Way to Mindfulness Through Christian Poetry

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Abstract

Mindfulness practices have exploded in popularity in public awareness and in therapeutic applications. While mindfulness in a therapeutic context is presented as a secular practice, its primarily Buddhist heritage may make some Christian clients wary of engaging. Research indicates that both reflection (co-creation) on poetry and creation of poetry can be therapeutic, and that both Buddhist and secular/therapeutic mindfulness texts use poetry to convey meaning through key themes of nature, change/impermanence, stages of practice, and acceptance. Taken together poetry offers a pathway to mindfulness, which in this article is applied to the Christian client. Examples are given of: how mindfulness-based practices are in accordance with Christian teachings (e.g., grace theology), that poetic practices already exist in Christian traditions (e.g., Lectio Divina and the Prayer of the Heart), and themes previously identified in Buddhist and secular/therapeutic mindfulness related poetry, are also present in Christian poetry. It is argued that poetry can provide an appropriate and palatable vehicle for introducing Christian clients to mindfulness, which allows for the individual's spirituality to be harnessed as a mediator of the benefits of mindfulness practice.

Keywords

Poetry; spiritual; Christianity; Buddhism; secular mindfulness

1. Holy be the Lay: A Way to Mindfulness through Christian Poetry

Mindfulness based programs (MBPs) are flourishing and adapting to a wide range of health, personal, and work-related concerns [1]. The breadth of programs offered, and the diversity of people introduced to mindfulness indicates that this practice, which primarily originated in Eastern Buddhist traditions, has adapted well to a secular and therapeutic context. A secular presentation may be important for creating acceptance across diverse backgrounds, but that is not to say everyone will be comfortable with the idea of the practice. Moreover, by removing the spiritual aspect from mindfulness programs a potential mediator of the practice's benefits may be diminished [2]. It is the aim of this article to consider these issues in the context of Christianity and to show how poetry could be an appropriate vehicle for bringing the relevance of mindfulness to the Christian practitioner, with "Christian" poetry examples presented that could be used as an adjunct to mindfulness-based interventions.

Regarding the terms used in this article, the term spiritual is used in a broad sense following the definition of Puchalski et al. [3] who views spirituality as the ways people seek and express meaning and purpose as well as their experience of connection (be it to the moment, self, others, nature, or the sacred etc.). Occasional reference to "religion/s" or "religious" is made referring to a domain that contains structured and organised beliefs usually with a societal basis. This allows for a person to identify as being spiritual but not religious, and the possibility that someone is religious but not spiritual. Also acknowledged is that there are many forms of meditation occurring in many different cultural, spiritual, and religious contexts. Likewise, the popular appeal of mindfulness now sees the term appearing in a variety of contexts, with varying uses. However, the focus of this article is on Mindfulness-based programs (MBPs), such as Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) which are based on the Buddhist practice of mindfulness. Therefore, use of the terms mindfulness and meditation are in relation to these MBPs.

1.1 Mindfulness in Therapeutic Research

There has been an increasing interest in mindfulness, both in terms of popular appeal as well as clinical appeal. Although definitions of mindfulness vary, attempts at operationally defining mindfulness have been made including Bishop et al's [4] argument for two components: self-regulation of attention and orientation toward present moment experiences, as well as Shapiro et al's [5] suggested mechanisms of attention, intention, and attitude. A large literature now exists into the therapeutic benefits of mindfulness, including several meta-analyses/systematic reviews that utilized randomized control trial (RCTs) based MBP studies in both clinical and nonclinical settings and groups, such as university students and workplaces [6-10]. These analyses generally show mental health and wellbeing benefits from MBPs compared to passive controls, with smaller effects compared to active controls. These analyses also caution that improvements could be made to future studies in the form of active controls, trained professionals, longer follow-ups, as well as suggesting that MBPs may have specific effects on some common mental health symptoms, but due to the heterogeneity between studies generalization of MBPs effects across settings is not supported [7]. This latter point is congruent with Cooper's (2020) [11] conclusion of their meta-

analysis of mindfulness and empathy in studies of counsellors and psychotherapists. They found no overall altered levels of empathy for Counsellors and Psychotherapists, but caution about generalizing from healthcare professionals or the general population to this group (note that Kreplin et al [12]. found limited prosocial effects in their meta-analysis of mindfulness studies with healthy adults).

While most of the literature suggests mindfulness is therapeutically beneficial (because that is what the research is testing for), a recent and small set of research has focused on the presence of adverse effects in those practicing mindfulness meditation (e.g., [13-18]). While temporary adverse effects seem common, with some participants experiencing functioning in daily life issues, these are comparable to other psychological treatments and not considered objectively harmful [13, 14]. Moreover, for those engaged in mindfulness as a spiritual practice, they saw these negative effects as being part of the challenges that brought about spiritual transformation, so they were accepted as negative, but necessary [17]. There is a small literature emerging on the relationship between MBPs and spiritual experience [2, 19, 20] indicating that spiritual experiences may be a key part of the mechanism that leads to mental health improvements, and this occurs in non-religious presentations of mindfulness, such as MBSR [2]. This may make the practice particularly relevant to those with spiritual and religious backgrounds, such as Christian clients. This is not necessarily surprising given that despite mindfulness being applied in secular health and therapeutic contexts, its foundation lies in Buddhist practice. For example, the founder of MBSR, Kabat-Zinn [21], states that he attempts to teach Dharma (Buddhist teachings) "that underlies the (MBSR) curriculum, but without ever using the word "Dharma" or invoking Buddhist thought or authority" (p. 282).

There are a variety of techniques that can be used for formal mindfulness practice (e.g., meditations involving following the breath, scanning the body, walking or eating mindfully etc.). Essentially, it does not matter what the formal object of the meditation is, as long as it is carried out in a mindful way that consists of sustained attention and being accepting and nonjudgmental of whatever occurs in the mind. Just as Buddhist traditions distinguish between shamatha (calm-abiding) meditation and vipashyana (insight or clear awareness) meditation, the research literature parallels this discrimination with the terms Focused Awareness (FA) and Open Monitoring (OM) meditation. FA practices allow for an object to act as an anchor, so that when the mind wanders, there is a task to come back to (e.g., counting breaths), and as such it is suitable for beginners who need experience in sustaining attention, which leads to a mind that is calmly-abiding [22]. Whereas, OM practice involves no object of focus, and all that occurs to the mind is observed non-judgmentally, providing insight [22]. This is a practice that is introduced after some familiarity with FA has occurred, as without it, the practitioner may do little more than mind wander. However, once FA experience has developed sustained attention, no object is required and the practitioner can rest in the gap between thoughts, while acknowledging, but not following or elaborating on thoughts when they inevitably occur [23]. Hence FA tends to lead to OM. It should be noted that these two practices do overlap and are taught and discussed somewhat differently between different schools of Buddhism, as well as the adaptation to secular health contexts (see [22] for a discussion of these terms and their practice).

1.2 Mindfulness in Buddhist Philosophical Context

The practice of mindfulness seems straightforward being aptly expressed by Kabat-Zinn's [24] often quoted definition: "mindfulness is the awareness that arises from paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non judgmentally" (p 145); and it may superficially seem unrelated to spirituality. However, we must ask the question "what is it that this practice teaches us?" The aim of the practice is not to train to achieve an Olympian level of sustained attention. There is no objective or material goal of the practice. Rather, through the insight of meditation a practitioner comes to a new appreciation of their experiences. So the journey of mindfulness is also the goal [22, 25]. To gain a better understanding of this, we need to acknowledge the philosophy of the practice as presented in Buddhist traditions, where the source of our suffering and sense of dissatisfaction in life (in Pali it is dukkha) is that we mistakenly believe that things (be it objects, people, feelings etc.) are permanent. However, if we examine these things, we find that there is not one single thing that exists independently, for everything is connected and affected by other things, and is therefore subject to change (in Pali it is suññatā often translated as emptiness). Hence, the first noble truth as taught by the historical Buddha is the "Truth of Suffering", which includes four classes of suffering, including "The Suffering of Change" ([26], p. 110). Through combining an analytic understanding with the experience found in mindfulness meditation practices, practitioners relate compassionately to their own and others' experiences, and appreciate life in a different way when accepting to some degree, the inevitability of change in their life. Thus, acceptance here is not "resignation", but rather an active attitude towards mindfulness practice, expressed by Mahathera [27]:

Accept everything that arises: accept your feelings, even the ones you wish you did not have. Accept your experiences, even the ones you hate. Don't condemn yourself for having human flaws and failings. Learn to see all phenomena in the mind as being perfectly natural and understandable. Try to exercise a disinterested acceptance at all times and with respect to everything you experience (p .40).

1.3 Mindfulness and Christian Clients

So given mindfulness practice is based on Buddhist teachings, it could be asked how appropriate it is to use it with Christian clients? Van Gordon et al. [28] have questioned the ethics of the relationship of presenting a secular practice that is so closely related to Buddhism, by raising the question of whether it is misleading to present something Buddhist as being secular, or to present an adapted program as being Buddhist when it deviates from traditional forms. Brown [29] refers to this as code-switching where, depending on the audience, mindfulness is presented as either secular or grounded in Buddhist philosophy. Harrington and Dunne [30] sum up the dilemma of the positioning of mindfulness in terms of the "peculiar circumstances behind the historical emergence" that has led to "therapeutic mindfulness today [sitting] on an unstable knife edge between spirituality and secularism, therapeutics, and popular culture" (p. 630).

Therefore, it is not surprising that people from non-Buddhist religious backgrounds may be wary of mindfulness meditation, and this seems to be born out in the research literature. For example, Russell et al. [31] found that patients with melanoma were more likely to have tried mindfulness-based meditation if they did not hold a religious belief where meditation was commonly practiced, and that in considering barriers to practicing meditation 23% of patients considered prayer to be

their meditation, while 3% saw meditation as being in conflict with their religion. This concern is further evidenced in Palitsky and Kaplan's [32] report where 25% of respondents believed, "prima facie, that mindfulness contains a religious component, and over half believe that it might."

This barrier is concerning given that some research indicates a preference for religious help when seeking mental health treatment. Wang et al. [33] found with a USA based population sample that 25% initially turned to clergy compared to 16.7% who turned to physicians and psychiatrists. Similarly, in New Zealand there was a preference to turn to God or clergy, which was particularly noted for older adults [34]. However, it is possible to tailor and adapt existing therapies to different religious backgrounds. For example, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) has been adapted to include a religious component for religious participants (e.g. [35, 36]). Note that although the primary philosophical foundation of the development of CBT was stoicism, there were also influences of Buddhism, Taoism, and existential philosophical traditions, as well as others [37]. Likewise, MBPs have also been developed to incorporate religion, with a number being tailored to Christian clients (e.g. [38-50]). These Christian MBPs demonstrate that the underpinning philosophy of the mindfulness practice can find parallels in Christian practice and theology, with studies suggesting positive effects (see Garzon et al. [39] for a review). The next section expands on these programs' approaches.

2. Gentle Ways to Address Christian Spirituality in Mindfulness Practices

2.1 Therapeutic Approaches

Christianity and its various traditions have a long history of contemplative and spiritual practices, and the research literature includes a few important examples of how to take an individual's faith into consideration when the Christian client is somewhat resistant to the idea of mindfulness practices. This may be particularly the case for Evangelical and Conservative Christians, with Garzon and Ford [40] pointing out that MBPs leave God out, and Hoover [51] argues that:

Secularized versions of mindfulness in which the non-judgmental component of mindfulness practice may appear to stand in ideological opposition to the idea of moral standards or absolute truth. As a result, Christians may feel the practice of mindfulness might require them to deviate from or dishonor deeply held mainline Christian convictions (p. 247).

Evidence from Ford and Garzon [38] supports these views with research indicating that for evangelical clients Christian mindfulness training led to lower stress and depressions and increased program compliance over standard mindfulness training.

Vandenberghe and Costa Prado [50] who drew on Saint Augustine's notion of illumination (direct awareness beyond reasoning or linguistic elaboration), note that:

In many cases, part of the rationale for proposing mindfulness training will be to promote distancing from dysfunctional beliefs, or to learn not to take one's concepts and rules literally in order to open up to experience. Often this rationale can be linked to the Augustinian tenet that logic and intellectual explanation cannot lead to illumination, but direct experience can. It has its counterpart in the clinical literature that values the intuitive Wise Mind above Reasonable Mind and promotes the self as a transcendent perspective over the conceptual self (p. 596).

They suggest making parallels between mindfulness and grace theology that foster a deeper integration of spirituality with behavior therapy in order to meet Christian clients' needs, which provides several advantages: (1) to better identify relevant existing strengths , (2) mobilise the

client's own spiritual experience as a personal strength in undertaking mindfulness and acceptance work, (3) make religious coping tools better available for therapeutic work, (4) comparing clinical theory to the client's religious views may enhance credibility, while making it easier to understand the therapist's intentions, and (5) may make it easier for secular-minded therapists to overcome their resistance to clients bringing their religious experience into the session. A similar point has been made by Marks and Moriconi [52] who drew on the Ignatian tradition stating, "Finding God in all things may offer a way of developing curiosity about experience, as well as profound appreciation for what it is, while also acknowledging the most deeply held value of devotional life" (p. 425).

Similar themes are also central to the development of Christian Accommodative Mindfulness (CAM) e.g., [38-40, 42]. CAM draws on Knabb et al.'s [45] identification of "humble detachment" as a key Chrstian construct that is associated with decreases in worry and rumination. This flexible ability comprises letting go of preoccupations with inner experiences and self, and pivoting to a more transcendent awareness of God's active and loving presence. This allows for Trammell & Trent's [49] "active surrender" of the healing process to God, which enhances meaning making and multiplies the effectiveness of the therapy. Furthermore, Garzon et al., [39] take Knabb's [44] "outside-in" approach to self-compassion (drawing on God's loving presence), which is contrasted to typical mindfulness programs "inside-out" approach (e.g., self-compassion begins inside with recognising our own individual suffering). Like other approaches to Christian mindfulness, Garzon et al., [39] recognise Hoover's [51] observation that Christian's can agree to be careful of making snap judgments and draw on Grace.

It is with these considerations in mind that CAM has developed into a four-week program with a group protocol detailing four sessions [39]. Session one provides a scriptural meditation and introduces a biblical basis for meditation on scripture, God's character, and God's work in creation. Session two provides breath meditation and understanding of scripture and the breath. Session three provides a body scan meditation and understanding of scripture and the body, and finally session four offers a loving-kindness meditation along with scriptural themes of grace and forgiveness.

3. Poetry as a Therapeutic Approach

A complimentary possibility to these Christian mindfulness-based programs is to use other forms of expression to encourage clients' and therapists' explorations of spirituality in mindfulness practices. In particular, poetry offers a potential method of providing a resource that allows for both exegesis (eliciting critical interpretation) and eisegesis (infusing a text with personal meaning). In the context of mindfulness practice we may wish to place emphasis on eisegesis, although in some disciplines eisegesis is just beginning to be wrestled with [53, 54]. Hence, the act of reading poetry is not just about extracting the poet's literal meaning, but about co-creation between poet and reader [1, 55, 54]. The poet Charles Simic expressed this when he wrote "..no poet can possibly envision the full meaning and eventual fate of one of his metaphors.." [56]. Likewise, in his poem "Introduction to Poetry", Billy Collins ([57], p. 58) states:

"I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore"

Moreover, he laments;

"But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it."

So, while poetry has a long tradition of inspiring self-reflection and proffering guidance, including on religious and spiritual matters, its usefulness to mindfulness practice comes in this act of co-creation or eisegesis, where openness to a poetry's potential can lead to self-revelation. Hence, poets from centuries ago might still offer relevance to a modern reader even when similarities and perspectives may seem far apart, or as Bayley [58] describes poetry, it "…need not be fully understood, as prose has to be, in order to be wholly appreciated" (p. 37).

3.1 Poetry and Reflexive Practice

In considering the potential of poetry to aid mindfulness in a Christian context, there is nothing original in suggesting poetry can provide aid to health-related practices, which secular mindfulness is but one example.

Medicine is a good example to use, as poetry has an established use in medicine workshop environments as a teaching tool with the aim of enhancing empathy towards patients [59]. For example, Boker et al. [60] assessed a literature and medicine elective, where medical students read and discussed poetry and prose, and reported "student understanding of the patient's perspective became more detailed and complex after the intervention. Students were also more likely post-intervention to note ways reading literature could help them cope with training-related stress" (p. 73). Moreover, Ratcliffe [59] found that the feedback from workshops offered in the United Kingdom to National Health Service staff showed "that participants perceived literature in the workshop setting as being more than an enabler of 'empathy'…that reflecting on literature in a group setting is an opportunity to think about their own autonomy, pleasure and creativity" (p. 39). Moreover, patients themselves can directly benefit from the use of poetry, which the Journal of Poetry Therapy (founded in 1988) regularly documents. For example, Tegnér et al. [61] reported improved emotional resilience and lower anxiety in cancer patients taking part in a poetry group intervention, compared to a control group of cancer patients. Even patients with cognitive limitations, such as those experiencing mental health issues, such as schizophrenia or trauma, can benefit from poetry therapy (see [1]). In addition to research on the use of poetry interventions, Sherry Jr and Schouten [54] note that poetry has been published in a number of high quality medical journals, including The Lancet, The Journal of the American Medical Association, and the Annals of Internal Medicine.

3.2 Poetry and Mindfulness

There is a strong relationship between mindfulness and poetry. As described in Kempton [1] there is a long tradition of Buddhist poetry that relates directly to mindfulness in conveying themes of nature, change and impermanence, as well as providing guides to the stages of practice. Similarly, secular/therapeutic mindfulness handbooks and programmes also include poetry that are noted to also contain nature and change as key themes, as well as the theme of acceptance. Kempton [1]

gives a number of these examples of poetry provided in a secular mindfulness context, and notes that they are drawn from poets of a variety of religious, cultural, and political backgrounds. One Christian example given is T. S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton", which is a contemplation on time and change, and is used by Kabat-Zinn [62] in relation to MBSR.

This raises the possibility that poetry may be a beneficial device for uniting a Christian client with mindfulness practice. Further support for this comes from Marks et al.'s [46] mindfulness research on the Christian contemplative practice: "Lectio divina", and Louchakova-Schwartz's [63] research on the poem "The Ladder of the Divine Graces" in relation to the practice of "The Prayer of the Heart".

In introducing Lectio divina's relevance to mindfulness practice, Marks et al. [46] describe it as a practice of "non-elaborative listening to wisdom texts, particularly scriptures" that "is in itself an ancient contemplative practice" (p. 90). Four stages of the practice are described, which have clear parallels with mindfulness-based practices, and are described as follows:

"During lectio, the listener appreciates his or her own responses and perspectives regarding the sense of the passage, without striving to arrive at a definitive meaning. In meditation, the process of making the text one's own continues as the listener hears the text again and considers how the words and the experiences they evoke apply in his or her own life. In oratorio, the listener engages in dialogue regarding the text, with oneself, with God, or with a spiritual advisor. Through oratorio, the listener may identify and even begin engaging in important life activities evoked through the listening experience. Like psychological flexibility or the curiosity dimension of state mindfulness, the important aspect of oratorio is the full engagement in life while in the presence of the thoughts, feelings, and sensations that the reading evokes. Finally, in contemplatio, the listener reflects in silence on the experience, attentively monitoring the ways that he or she has responded to the process of listening" ([46], p. 91).

Where Marks et al. [46] investigated the usefulness of Lectio divina as a mindfulness practice in a secular context with an undergraduate population, Louchakova-Schwartz [63] investigated the stages described in the poem "The Ladder of the Divine Graces" in terms of experience for practitioner's of the "Prayer of the Heart" (otherwise known as the "Jesus prayer"). Here, Louchakova-Schwartz's phenomenological investigation revealed that what might be seen as symbolic in the poetic description of the "Ladder of the Divine Graces", clearly has a basis in physical experience for those who actually in engage in the practice of the "Prayer of the Heart". This compliments existing research on the relationship of prayer to psychological well-being, where McCulloch and Parks-Stamm [64] state that "prayer expands people's psychological perspective, which then improves their emotional management of personal problems" (p. 254). Hence, research supports the idea that poetry may be an appropriate vehicle to introduce Christian clients to mindfulness practices in therapeutic settings.

4. Parallels in Christian Contemplation

In Kempton's [1] comparison of poetry themes presented in both Buddhist and secular/therapeutic mindfulness manuals and guidance, four themes are identified: change/impermanence, nature, stages of practice, and acceptance, with many poems containing a mix of these themes. These poetry themes are used in the context of working through and encouraging progression in terms of session content, such as expanding attention in session 5 of

MBCT and encouraging the guidelines of "Relax" and "Allow" in MBSR [1], as well as discovering that "knowing involves an ongoing process of dissolving our conceptions about how things are as we keep on looking deeply" ([65], p. 195). Providing Christian clients with poetry that invokes similar themes but is Christian inspired, may help to open the door to mindfulness for Christian clients who might otherwise show the reluctance indicated in previous research.

In Mitchell [66], an anthology of sacred poetry is presented from various religions and traditions, as well as across different time points. For example, the anthology starts with The Upanishads (5th-8th? century B.C.E) moving through time, including Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), and ending with Robinson Jeffer (1887-1962). Within the anthology a range of Christian poetry is included starting with The Odes of Solomon (?-606), moving through time, including Dante (1265-1321), George Herbert (1593-1633), and William Blake (1757-1827). The fact that these poets come from divergent theologies and different times is not of concern for Mitchell as he states: "Most of what we call religious poetry is the poetry of longing for God, for the Mother's face, But the poems in *The Enlightened Heart* are poems of fulfilment." ([66], p. xv). In a similar manner we can gather together those poems that offer mindful fulfilment in a Christian context. What follows is an eclectic sample of "Christian" poems that could be used alongside or instead of poems already being presented in mindfulness program sessions with a view to them offering an insight into mindfulness from a process of co-creation and eisegesis, and could inspire creation of new original poetry. Here they are presented in relation to the themes identified by Kempton [1] in mindfulness related poetry.

4.1 Change/Impermanence

Parallels have been made between mindfulness and Christian experiences of grace and illumination. In particular, the introspective concepts of Gnostic kenosis (emptying of self) and Christian theosis (union with God), have parallels with the Buddhist idea of sunyata (all things are without a fixed inherent nature, and are instead all interdependent and subject to change), and the mindful practice that replaces discursive thinking with present moment awareness/acceptance. The Old Testament itself contains verse that speaks to this, as can be seen in Psalm 131 where conceptual thoughts of religion are not equal to experience, for even religious-oriented discursive thoughts can distract from the experience of grace or mindfulness:

> My mind is not noisy with desires, Lord,
> and my heart has satisfied its longing.
> I do not care about religion
> or anything that is not you.
> I have soothed and quieted my soul,
> like a child at its mother's breast.
> My soul is as peaceful as a child
> sleeping in its mother's arms (Psalm 131 as cited in [66] p. 11).

Other writers, such as the German Catholic Priest, Angelus Silesius (1624-1677) point out the spiritual paradox of seeking for God (first verse) and the need to negate the self (verse 2):

> God is a pure no-thing
> concealed in now and here:

the less you reach for him,
the more he will appear (Angelus Silesius as cited in [66] p. 89).

God, whose love and joy
are present everywhere,
can't come to visit you
unless you aren't there (Angelus Silesius as cited in [66] p. 87).

Compared to these abstract verses, the theme of interconnection is made explicit in "Meditation 17" of the Christian metaphysical poet, John Donne (1572-1631):

No man is an island entire of itself; every man
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;
if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe
is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as
well as any manner of thy friends or of thine
own were; any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom
the bell tolls; it tolls for thee (John Donne as cited in [67], para. 3)

4.2 Nature

Nature is also drawn upon to reflect Christian contemplation, as can be seen with the English poet's William Blake (1757-1827), John Clare (1983-1864), and Edward Capern (1819-1894), and the American poet Emily Dickinson (1830-1886). For example, an explicit relationship between God and nature can be seen in the poetry of Edward Capern. Capern was from a Methodist family, and was a supporter of the temperance movement, yet his poetry demonstrates that he saw God in nature as much or maybe more so than in church. He is referred to as the "Postman Poet" as he worked as a postman in the rural area of North Devon, England, and he would compose (often singing) his poems along the miles of his delivery route which he did by foot (often resting on stiles to write along the way). One poem in particular "God in Nature" reflects his experience, starting with mystery in nature, and ending in a prayer to see God in all things:

There is a soul doth underlie
The flower we pass unheeded by;
The fire-drops on the plains of night
Show more divinity than light;
And not a blade of grass we see
But hath its hidden mystery (verse 1).

O Thou, whom winds and waves obey,
Where hast Thou made thy chariot-way?
Oh, whisper from thy throne divine,
And answer me, Thou God benign;
Or teach thy servant, Lord to see

The universe is full of Thee (verse 6), ([68], pp. 19-20).

Such poetry also accords with that of the "The Peasant Poet", John Clare (an Anglican) who in "Nature's Hymn to the Diety" writes:

All nature owns with one accord
The great and universal Lord:
The sun proclaims him through the day,
The moon when daylight drops away,
The very darkness smiles to wear
The stars that show us God is there,
On moonlight seas soft gleams the sky
And 'God is with us' waves reply. ([69], pp. 182-183).

Note that both Capern and Clare were noted for their working-class backgrounds at a time when literacy among their rural peers was of a fairly low standard. The rhyme, the rhythm, and the clear description of nature may well have helped make the content of the poems accessible for their peers to listen and relate to.

Other poets have more ambiguous religious positions, but nevertheless use nature as a device for experiencing spiritual connection. William Blake in his opening to "Auguries of Innocence" uses the varied appearances provided by nature to reflect on eternity, producing a mindful interpretation that if we contemplate things in the present moment, they fill the universe and time:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour ([70] p. 506).

Likewise, Emily Dickinson uses nature as a reflection on both the brain (mind) and God, where the brain holds all the possibilities we see in nature and so is inextricably linked to God:

The Brain — is wider than the Sky —
For — put them side by side —
The one the other will contain
With ease — and You — beside —

The Brain is deeper than the sea —
For — hold them — Blue to Blue —
The one the other will absorb —
As Sponges — Buckets — do —

The Brain is just the weight of God —
For — Heft them — Pound for Pound —
And they will differ — if they do —
As Syllable from Sound — (Emily Dickinson as cited in [66] p. 116).

It is interesting that both Blake and Dickinson have an ambiguous relationship with the religions that they were brought up with, especially the idea of original sin [71, 72], and their poetry tends to speak of spirituality in terms of human nature rather than doctrine. For example, Blake wrote that "The religions of all nations are derived from each nation's different reception of the poetic genius, which is everywhere called the spirit of prophecy. . . . As all men are alike (though infinitely various) so all religions; and as all similars, have one source. The true Man is the source, he being the poetic genius" (as cited in [71], para 1). Perhaps then it is not the religion per se that someone believes in, but their ability to articulate their human experience of spirituality that lends itself well to mindfulness practice, and that an ambiguous position regarding religion allows the reader to dwell, via a process of co-creation, in the paradox of change and impermanence through the imagery of nature. Thomas Merton, the 20th Century poet-monk (a Trappist monk) also used nature in his poetry and on many occasions used the haiku form to express experience (first two examples below), as well as capturing the experience of recognizing the lack of a permanent self (third example):

the song
of an unknown bird
seized by heavenliness

the unconscious wood-
a long moment of perfect
clarity at dawn

I deceive myself
but am not able to catch
myself in the act (Thomas Merton as cited in [73], 17 Haiku found in Thomas Merton's Vow of Conversation).

4.3 Stages of Practice

Some Christian poetry (particularly of the Eastern Orthodox tradition) offers steps to experiencing Grace. This is clearly laid out in Theophanis the Monk's poem "The Ladder of Divine Graces", which appears in the *Philokali* (a compilation of Greek Patristic sources first published in 1792). In this poem, ten steps form the ladder and the poem opens with their description:

The first step is that of purest prayer.
From this there comes a warmth of heart,
And then a strange, a holy energy,
Then tears wrung from the heart, God-given.
Then peace from thoughts of every kind.
From this arises purging of the intellect,
And next the vision of heavenly mysteries.
Unheard-of light is born from this ineffably,
And thence, beyond all telling, the heart's illumination.
Last comes—a step that has no limit
Though compassed in a single line—

Perfection that is endless.
The ladder's lowest step
Prescribes pure prayer alone.
But prayer has many forms:
My discourse would be long
Were I now to speak of them:
And, friend, know that always
Experience teaches one, not words. (Theophanis as cited in [63] p. 54).

Louchakova-Schwartz [63] observed that practitioners of Orthodox introspective prayer (e.g., the prayer of the heart) perceive the ladder's steps as being experiential, whereas non-contemplatives see them as merely symbolic. She suggests that the ladder metaphor is compatible with the stage-like development of psychological processes, enabling the reader to understand and predict psychological processes that have yet to be experienced. This investigation of people's experience of introspective prayer found support for the steps being actual experiences, but noted that "Not all layers appear in one single session, as the mind may become "stationed" in a single condition before the next shift" ([63], p. 66). This is a phenomena somewhat similar to the graded stages of the Buddhist path where most practitioners gradually progress, while other types of practitioner either accomplish stages in parallel or move forwards and backwards, sometimes skipping a stage [22].

4.4 Acceptance

Kempton [1] noted that the theme of acceptance was more explicit in the poetry presented in a secular/therapeutic mindfulness context than found in Buddhist poetry.

This theme of acceptance is also present in Christian poetry, with American theologian Reinhold Neibuhr's (1892-1971) "The Serenity Prayer" being an often quoted example: "Father, give us courage to change what must be altered, serenity to accept what cannot be helped, and the insight to know the one from the other" ([74], para. 2). This prayer has been extensively used in therapeutic contexts such as Alcoholics Anonymous.

Therefore, Christian poetry could help introduce mindfulness to the Christian client, as well as complement the presentation of more secular mindfulness related poetry, as seen in MBCT and MBSR programmes. For example, a poem such as Marie Howe's (raised a Catholic) "The Prayer", can help to unite belief with present moment mindfulness practice:

Everyday I want to speak with you. And everyday something more important
Calls for my attention – the drugstore, the beauty products, the luggage

I need to buy for the trip.
Even now I can hardly sit here

among the falling piles of paper and clothing, the garbage trucks outside
already screeching and banging.

The mystics say you are as close as my breath.
Why do I flee from you?

My days and nights pour through me like complaints
and become a story I forgot to tell.

Help me. Even as I write these words I am planning
to rise from the chair as soon as I finish this sentence ([75], p. 27, Reprinted from The Kingdom of Ordinary Time: Poems by Marie Howe. Copyright (c) 2009, 2008 by Marie Howe. Used with permission of the publisher, W.W. Norton & Company).

5. Conclusions

Poetry, through the process of creation and/or co-creation, offers a pathway to mindfulness for Christian clients that allows for them to include God in their therapeutic path and in their own way. The practice of mindfulness is in accord with Christian tenets such as grace theology (e.g., St. Augustine's notion of illumination and the Ignatian tradition), which as well as offering a palatable way to introduce the practice of mindfulness to Christian clients, also offers the advantage of allowing spirituality to act as a mediator to enhance the benefits of mindfulness practice [2].

Poetry is a particularly appropriate vehicle for connecting a Christian's spiritual experience with mindfulness practice, as poetry is a reflexive and contemplative practice that already has existing practices in Christian traditions (e.g., Lectio Divina and The Prayer of the Heart). Moreover, themes found in Buddhist and secular/therapeutic mindfulness related poetry are also found in Christian poetry, with change/impermanence, nature, stages of practice, and acceptance evident. Given poetry already has a history of application in health care settings, it has the potential to bring relevance, purpose, and meaning to a Christian's mindfulness practice.

5.1 Implications and Future Research

Where Kempton [1] suggested poetry could be used as an adjunct to mindfulness practice, for some Christian clients it may be appropriate to offer poetry instead of formal mindfulness practice or as an adjunct to mindfulness alternatives, such as centering prayer [43]. To summarise the potential applications of poetry in relation to mindfulness practices, we can consider the role of poetry that is read (and co-created), as well as newly created poetry. The reading of existing poetry could be a benefit both prior, during, and after mindfulness practice. As suggested by Thurston [76] in relation to Thomas Merton's poetry, a poem may be adopted as a type of Christian koan to be contemplated before entering a formal mindfulness meditation in order to encourage direct experience. As suggested by the practice of Lectio Divina and the use of scripture in CAM, poetry could also be used as the focus or anchor for the mindfulness practice itself, while Pennington [77] recommends that practitioners should rise gently from the deep prayer of recollection and presence into a more conceptual prayer prior to ending the practice. This more conceptual prayer could take the form of a poem with the potential for the participant to engage in the co-creative practice of its contemplation. Whereas with the creation of new poetry, practitioners could write mindful post-meditation reflections on their experiences allowing them time to move back into concepts by forging their own poems through experimenting with expressing their own non-conceptual experiences of prayer. This latter exercise might also help to bridge the reported side effect of mindfulness where there is interference with daily life functioning (e.g. [13], [14]). Other possibilities

include therapeutic collaboration where group practice could lead to the sharing of individual poetry and/or the co-creation of group collaborative poetry.

Many possibilities exist for how poetry might compliment or offer alternatives to mindfulness practices. However, these suggestions need to be investigated with empirical evidence. Future research could compare the use of Christian poetry to traditional MBPS and/or CAM, as well as examining the value-added benefits of using poetry as an adjunct to mindfulness-based therapies by comparing to treatment-as-usual and an alternative active control. This might illuminate whether such poetry is beneficial and if it is best used as an alternative to formal mindfulness practices, or as a complimentary adjunct. Such research would be able to provide empirical evidence as to whether potential benefits are actualised and should be conducted with participants from Christian and other religious, cultural, and spiritual backgrounds, as well as assessing the use of poetry (e.g., contemplating a poem versus creating a poem, individual versus group etc.). This gap in empirical knowledge is important to fill as clearly the existing research literature indicates that poetry may act to bring about well-being benefits seen with both prayer and mindfulness practices, or in the words of Samuel Taylor Coleridge:

"Holy be the lay,

Which, mourning, soothes the mourner on his way" (Coleridge as cited in [68], p. viii).

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The author did all the research work of this study.

Competing Interests

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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