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2020

## Debating Yoga and Mindfulness in Public Schools: Reforming Secular Education or Reestablishing Religion? (Book Review)

Kathleen Van Tol

Dordt University, [kathleen.vantol@dordt.edu](mailto:kathleen.vantol@dordt.edu)

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### Recommended Citation

Van Tol, K. (2020). Debating Yoga and Mindfulness in Public Schools: Reforming Secular Education or Reestablishing Religion? (Book Review). *International Journal of Christianity and Education*, 24 (2), 220. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056997119888152>

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## Debating Yoga and Mindfulness in Public Schools: Reforming Secular Education or Reestablishing Religion? (Book Review)

### Abstract

Reviewed Title: *Debating Yoga and Mindfulness in Public Schools: Reforming Secular Education or Reestablishing Religion?* by Candy Gunther Brown. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019. 441 pp. ISBN: 9781469648477.

### Keywords

book review, Debating Yoga and Mindfulness in Public Schools, reforming, secular, education, religion, Candy Gunther Brown

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International Journal of Christianity & Education

2020, Vol. 24(2) 220–221

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DOI: 10.1177/2056997119888152

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Candy Gunther Brown, *Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019, \$34.95 pbk, ISBN 9781469648484, 441 pp.*

Yoga and mindfulness are hot topics in public education in America right now. Though the general public might be aware that these practices have their roots in the spiritual traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism, most people reasonably assume that only secular versions of these activities are taught in public schools. However, Candy Gunther Brown, in her book *Debating Yoga and Mindfulness in Public Schools*, makes the case that it is difficult to disconnect the practices of yoga and mindfulness from their spiritual roots, and that acceptance of these activities in our schools could result in the establishment of religion in public education.

Brown, professor of religious studies at Indiana University, has served as an expert witness in four legal challenges to the integration of yoga and mindfulness in schools. Her book provides a detailed analysis of the question of whether these practices can be truly separated from their spiritual origins. By examining legal precedent, trial documents, interviews, and public records, Brown painstakingly builds her case one step at a time. The book is organized around three main objectives. First, Brown describes the elements of various yoga and meditation programs. Then, she considers the legal decisions and controversies surrounding these particular programs. Finally, she provides her conclusions and recommendations with regard to whether each of these programs should have a place in public education.

Advocates of yoga and mindfulness point to the physical and emotional benefits as a justification for including these programs in public schools. Brown provides information from studies which show that the scientific evidence for these programs is not as strong as proponents might claim nor is it as unique to yoga and mindfulness as advocates might wish. She also details studies which show similar brain benefits from a variety of behaviors including participating in aerobic activity, taking a nap, or simply from eating a healthy lunch. In addition, she identifies potential adverse reactions that can result from participation in yoga and mindfulness activities. In her experience, schools rarely disclose these risks.

One of the more alarming risks that Brown identifies is the potential for participants to experience a change to their own religious beliefs and spiritual

practices. This is particularly concerning as these programs are advertised as being fully secular in nature. She argues that marketing yoga and mindfulness as secular, science-based programs can serve to both mask and strengthen their spiritual effects. Participants who would choose not to participate in these programs if they were identified as religious are more likely to participate when told the religious elements have been removed. Brown found that it was common for yoga teachers to explain that many “start yoga for physical reasons and then gradually discover deeper spiritual meanings” (p. 271). She theorizes that the sensory experiences inherent in the activities, which are then interpreted through the world view communicated by the teacher, influence the spiritual beliefs of the practitioner.

In the same way, mindfulness can be depicted as a secular program; however, Brown systematically demonstrates that the mindfulness programs that she examined are “infused at every level—concept, structure, teacher training, and graduate resource—with systematic instruction in Buddhist-derived assumptions, values, and practices” (p. 187). She feels that it is this very effort to reframe public-school mindfulness programs as fully secular that gives these programs even greater opportunity to inculcate religious beliefs and practices in the participants. Brown not only argues that activities such as yoga and mindfulness cannot be separated from their spiritual roots, she also posits that “secularly framed programs may be more efficacious than overtly religious programs in promoting religion” (p. 40).

It is common knowledge that public schools are prohibited from endorsing religion. However, proponents of the integration of yoga and mindfulness into public schools have framed these practices as fully secular programs with clear health benefits for students. As such, students are not presented the opportunity to opt out of these activities based on specifically religious grounds. However, Brown builds a comprehensive case that these programs amount to the establishment of religion in public schools; therefore, she advocates that schools use an opt-in rather than an opt-out model for implementation in order to better facilitate informed consent for student participation. I have included a very limited representation of Brown’s arguments here. If you are looking for a thorough analysis of this topic, this is the book for you. Brown has extensively researched all facets of this topic and lays the evidence out for readers in a manner that is clear and easy to follow.

**Kathleen VanTol**

*Education, Dordt University, Sioux Center, Iowa, USA*

*Email: Kathleen.vantol@dordt.edu*