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**Article:**

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*Prescribing the Dharma: Psychotherapists, Buddhist Traditions, and Defining Religion*,  
by Ira Helderman, Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press,  
2019, 314 pp., US\$90.00 (hb), US\$29.95 (pb), ISBN 978-1-4696-4851-4 (hb), ISBN  
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In the opening of his meticulously researched book, Ira Helderman introduces the reader to 'Sylvia'. She is a composite character and represents a typical, yet challenging client that might grace the offices of any number of psychotherapists in North America. Sylvia is important because of her entrenched and intervention-resistant depression – the difficulty psychotherapists have found in employing effective and appropriate clinical interventions. Helderman explains that he came across clients like 'Sylvia' in his own psychotherapy practice and that his primary interest is helping them move beyond pain and suffering, to some form of adaptive resolution. It is this driver, the concern with alleviating suffering, which sparked Helderman's academic interest in understanding how psychotherapists have worked with Buddhist teachings and practices as a potential resource and led to the research which underpins this important and foundational book.

Certain Buddhist-inspired mental wellbeing interventions, particularly centred around mindfulness, are pervasive in contemporary society and are

employed variously across hospitals, schools, prisons, and workplaces. As Helderman highlights, this 'proliferation' of interest in mindfulness-based therapies (3) is the cultural backdrop for his work and provides the impetus for his investigation into the way psychotherapists have engaged this trend. Although this book is perfectly timed to investigate a growing phenomenon, what Helderman finds is more complex than might be assumed. The central premise of his research is that psychotherapists' relationship with Buddhism as a resource can be divided into a six-part typology: Therapising, Filtering, Translating, Personalising, Adopting, Integrating. This complex typology provides the organising structure for the book. Ultimately, Helderman does two things in this text. Firstly, he investigates deeply and carefully the historical and contemporary relationships that psychotherapists have with Buddhism as they interpret it, including key figures such as Freud, Fromm, and Jung. Secondly, and perhaps more significantly for scholars situated within the broader study of religion, the author unpicks what this long-standing interest means for the ways we perceive and navigate the boundaries between religion, the secular, science, and medicine.

In the first substantive chapter, Helderman places front-and-centre the investigation of terms, including 'religion', 'science', 'Buddhism', 'secularisation', and 'medicine' and the impact of various understandings of these and how they are 'policed' by psychotherapists. From the start, he highlights "how much is at stake in questions of definition" (25), a perspective that is often shared within

good religious studies scholarship. For psychologists, what is 'at stake', according to Helderman, is the further entrenchment of suffering, rather than its alleviation. What emerges as very important from this chapter is that psychotherapists are far from passive recipients of understandings of Buddhism, but they have a key role to play in the ways it is defined, and engaged with, in wider society.

In chapter two, Helderman introduces the first part of his typology, 'therapising religion'. Throughout the book, he weaves historical analysis with case studies and ethnographic observation, particularly of selected psychotherapy conferences, which emerge as fascinating field sites. Although the author is clear that the facets of his typology are not intended to be rigid or dogmatic, a 'therapising religion' approach would see a practitioner using psychotherapeutic terms and models (e.g. what makes individuals turn to religion in times of crisis) to understand religious experience (55). Helderman's second approach, 'filtering religion' (chapter three), sees certain psychotherapists reading Buddhism and Buddhist practice through the lens of psychology. The result is, as Helderman explains, that "The lessons of the Buddha thus cease to be superstition or dogma and are revealed to be the world's 'first psychology', a scientific discipline" (83). This is a superbly written chapter, which traces how Buddhism came to be perceived as scientific, rational, and atheistic and the impact that this has on cultures and sub-cultures, including the psychotherapeutic.

The third typological strand, 'translating religion', explores how Buddhism is made palatable for psychotherapists, specifically through the use of biomedical vocabulary (115). Here (chapter four), Helderman focuses on the history of therapeutic mindfulness, particularly the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction practices popularised by John Kabat-Zinn. Although this chapter is a careful investigation of the parameters of words and concepts, the reader is reminded by the author that behind this academic investigation lie real people – and real pain. In what is otherwise a book that does not seek to rush to judgement of any position, Helderman here appears critical of those who seek to medicalise Buddhist practices, yet at the same time appeal to the historical religious lineage from which these practices emerged, in order to appeal to authenticity. By doing this, he argues, "they create a fundamentally unstable relationship between what is religious and what is not" (124). This is, perhaps, exposing Helderman's own practice perspective, although this is not made explicit.

In his fourth typographical strand (chapter five), 'personalising religion', Helderman focuses specifically on psychotherapist Erich Fromm (1900–1980), who respected Buddhist teachings, and learnt from them in his personal life, but ultimately kept them consciously separate from therapeutic intervention. Helderman investigates how this separation occurred as well as its potential impact. The final two strands, 'adopting religion' (chapter six) and 'integrating religion' (chapter seven) see psychotherapists challenging 'imagined boundaries'

between therapy and religion. To “adopt religion” means “openly taking up Buddhist teachings” (179) and to integrate religion means blending the teachings together with psychotherapeutic and biomedical approaches.

As Helderma highlights, these six approaches do not always seem that distinctive to the reader, but looking at this in such a careful way, he demonstrates the complexity and variety inherent in the relationships between therapy, therapists, and religion through both a contemporary and an historical lens. While this complexity is compelling and could be inclusive, this book centres on communities and individuals in the United States. There is certainly more work that needs to be done to investigate how this applies beyond these geographical and cultural borders and assumptions should not be made about wider applicability of this model or cultural trajectory. However, I was left curious as to whether Helderma’s typology could actually be adapted and applied beyond psychotherapy, to other instances of religion engaging in public, for example, social workers, health-care professionals, policy makers, and those within other governmental bodies. This would be a helpful addition to the existing approaches to understanding religion and public social welfare more broadly.

Although Helderma highlights at the beginning of the book that he is a practising psychotherapist, which is also mentioned at other points, his own practice and approach are not key features of the text. I understand why this is the case; it might lead to prioritising one perspective over another, when the

intention is to examine the full panoply of approaches. Yet, as a reader, I was left wondering what the author's own perspective is, drawn from his day-to-day therapy practice. This is not a major criticism of the book, but leaving this question open is an omission that inspired some curiosity, particularly around the impact of Helderman's own position regarding Buddhist teachings on his theoretical conclusions.

In the acknowledgements, Helderman states that "this book was created out of relationships" (vii) and this rings true from the analysis. It is a book that bridges in an impressive way disciplines, traditions, practitioners, history, and the contemporary. It is about psychotherapy and psychotherapists, but it is not solely about them. Its important contribution lies in highlighting the finely granulated ways in which our own understanding of the religious and the secular affects our daily lives, the decisions we make, and the approaches we hold dear. This book should be used to understand the history and contemporary world of the psychotherapist, but it should also be widely employed to explore and teach about the ongoing importance and impact of definitions in the study of religion.

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