



Review of *Work pray code: when Work Becomes Religion in Silicon Valley* by Carolyn Chen, 2022

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What happens when work replaces religion? Chen’s *Work Pray Code* is about what happens when individuals lose their religion and instead, find it at work. Chen argues that work simultaneously displaces and absorbs religion, and oftentimes, even conscripts religion into its service to make work more productive and companies more profitable. *Work Pray Code* is a timely book that illuminates a trend many sociologists, social scientists, and scholars of religion may have overlooked: for a number of Americans, particularly highly skilled professionals, work has become their new religion. Drawing on over a hundred interviews conducted between 2013 and 2017 in Silicon Valley with engineers, designers, founders, venture capitalists, and service providers (i.e. executive coaches, meditation and mindfulness teachers, yoga instructors, Buddhist priests), Chen captures and tells the stories of men and women who “found the sacred in a secular valley.”

Chen argues in *Work Pray Code* that in addition to a significant increase in demands at work, many modern highly-skilled American professionals turn to work to find belonging, identity, meaning, and purpose (13). In times past, churches, synagogues, mosques, temples and other houses of worship were often the primary source of community, belonging, identity, and purpose, these are now being replaced by companies that seek to fulfill all these needs. However, religion has not altogether disappeared. Chen identifies a trend she calls the secular diffusion of religion, which is especially pronounced for religions like Buddhism and Hinduism, whose practices are being repackaged for business and therapeutic use (16). While Chen’s data and fieldwork is based in Silicon Valley, she suggests through her findings in *Work Pray Code* that it is not just tech workers who are “finding their souls” at work, but also many highly-skilled Americans who find similar fulfilment and meaning at work.

Work Pray Code is an important and rare contribution to scholarship at the intersection of religion and work. Much of the existing scholarship on work and occupa-

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tions tends to sideline religion, whereas religion scholars tend to only discuss work in the context of a religious congregation or local religious body. While Chen initially began this project in the Bay Area intending to focus more on studying religion through “religious things” but quickly realized that in order to understand religion in a place like Silicon Valley, she would have to look beyond religious places like churches, temples, synagogues, yoga studios and meditation centers. For many of the individuals in this book who shared their own stories and experiences, even if they did not use the word “sacred” to describe their work, many were willing to devote themselves to work in a way that sacrificed their rest, physical and mental well-being, and their family life. Yoga, which used to be a form of religious worship in Hinduism, is now how people restore and heal themselves to fully devote themselves again to work (214).

Work Pray Code reflects a Silicon Valley demographic that is majority male, White, and Asian. In terms of religious demographics, a vast majority of interviewees were not religious, but among those who were, the majority of these respondents were Protestant and Buddhist. Much of the analysis and comparisons between work and religion in the first part of the book centers around Christian faith, and while Chen did include anecdotes and examples from people of other faith groups in the first part of the book, there were far fewer examples of those who belonged to non-Christian faith groups. The latter half of the book highlighted how religion is adopted into companies to serve the company’s bottom line. In this vein, Buddhist mindfulness and meditation practices are secularized for work in a way in order to promote better productivity.

Given the time frame in which the book’s fieldwork took place, it may be relevant for future scholarship to take into account how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected and even shifted the above trends. *Work Pray Code* argues that because work has now taken the place of religious and civic life for many Americans, the desire to restore “work-life balance” is less relevant, but in fact, for a number of Americans, the pandemic forced many to reevaluate the meaning and role of work in their lives, including the time spent with other important social institutions Chen mentions, like family. In the conclusion, Chen alludes to the pandemic and recognizes that the future of work is uncertain in a time of great transition. Workplaces that once offered community are now going fully remote. This begs the question, what will community look like outside of a physical workplace in a post-pandemic world? Leading voices in Silicon Valley have suggested that the future of community may not only be remote, but also digital. How this evolves remains to be seen.

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