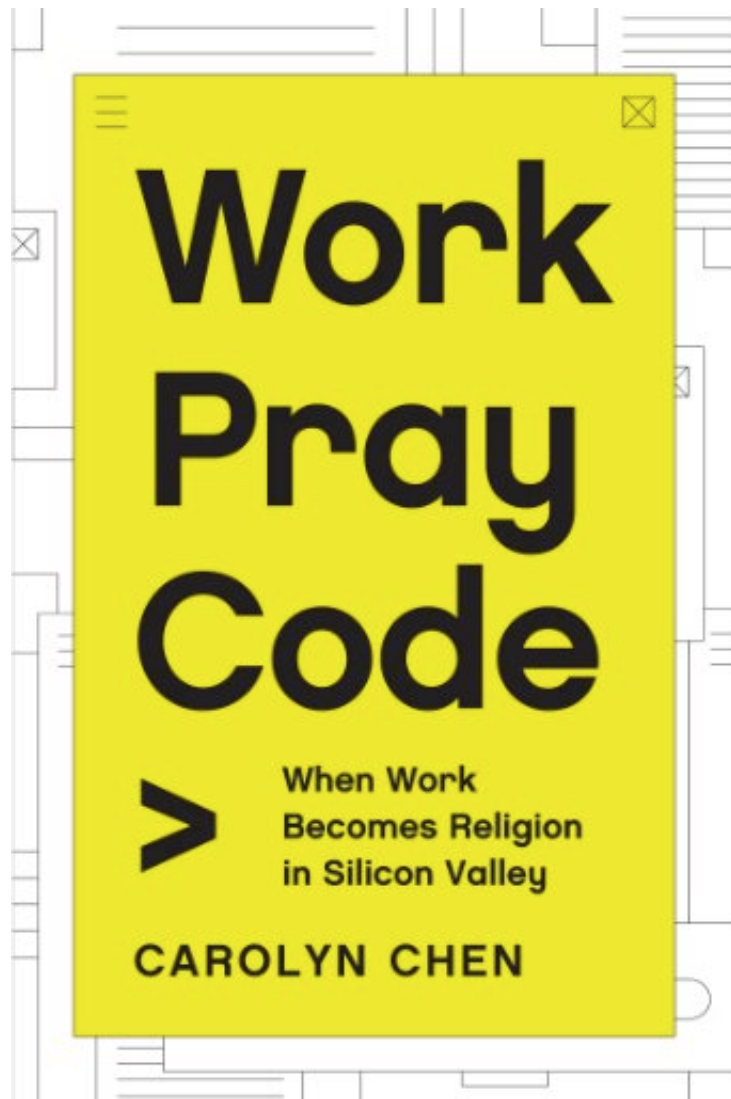


When work becomes your religion, nothing else matters

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Credit: Princeton University Press

In a country that has seen a steep decline in religious practice, what do we consider as sacred? How do we express our spiritual beliefs? And what is replacing traditional places of worship?

Carolyn Chen found the answer to those questions talking to tech workers in the Bay Area.

"Silicon Valley is one of the least religious places in America. I thought it would be a place devoid of religion and spirituality. But it is actually one of the most religious places I'd ever been," said Chen, a UC Berkeley professor and co-director of the Berkeley Center for the Study of Religion. "Work is sacred to tech workers. Their companies and startups are the faith communities that spiritually form them and direct their devotion, giving them meaning, purpose and belonging in life."

Over a five-year period, Chen delved into the Bay Area technology world and spent time with companies connecting with Silicon Valley executives, engineers and leaders. She interviewed over 100 tech workers and often socialized with them in tech trends like trance dance, mindful meditation, ice baths, diets and fasting.

Her recent book, "Work Pray Code: When Work Becomes a Religion in Silicon Valley," which she will discuss Sept. 30 as part of the UC Berkeley Social Science Matrix series, chronicles that journey and explores how tech companies have created an environment that aims to provide employees with everything they need, from food to transportation and day care.

Even more significant, tech companies have taken on the spiritual care of their employees, giving them a sense of meaning, belonging and purpose by appropriating religion—in effect, making the workplace, and focusing on productivity, their workers' religion.

"These workers are not only well-compensated, but devoted and very fulfilled because their companies provide for material, social and spiritual resources that others don't have," Chen said. "But there's a [social cost](#) to this: Tech workers' privatized wholeness contributes to public brokenness."

Berkeley News spoke with Chen recently about the potential for this [work culture](#) to spread beyond the tech world and how this can contribute to a continued decline in civic engagement.

Berkeley News: You have researched the impact of religion on different communities throughout the years, from Taiwanese immigrants to second-generation Latinx Americans. What made you decide to turn your lens toward Silicon Valley?

Carolyn Chen: One of the most significant trends in American religion today is the rise of "religious nones"—those who do not claim a religious affiliation. This group is particularly prominent in coastal metropolitan areas, such as the Bay Area. I was really interested in studying how religion manifests in secular spaces.

So, I began by studying people who practice yoga because it's a religiously inspired practice, but perceived as being secular. Many yoga practitioners identify as "spiritual, but not religious."

So, when I asked them about yoga, they would say to me, "Oh, I practice yoga after a long day of work to help me destress, to release my tension. It makes me a better nurse, or doctor or lawyer." You can fill in the blank with whatever profession they had.

As I learned more and more about how and why they practiced yoga, it

became clear to me that what I had thought was sacred or religious, which would be yoga, here, actually wasn't. Instead, I discovered that work was sacred.

But what makes something sacred?

Nothing is inherently sacred. We make something sacred when we sacrifice, submit and surrender to it.

The people I studied made work sacred because they sacrificed, submitted and surrendered to it. They were willing to undergo headaches, deal with insomnia, stress, anxiety and broken family relationships, for their work. It was the work that was sacred, and yoga was a therapeutic practice that helped them recover so that they could go back to work and become better workers.

How has the meaning of work changed over the years, and where does this drive to become better workers come from?

It comes from a fundamental shift in the meaning and place of work in the lives of American professionals that started about 40 years ago.

In the 1950s, the typical white-collar worker was white and male, and working 9 to 5. He worked so that he could build his life outside of work. And he built his life in his bowling league, his rotary club, his faith community and so forth.

But the tech workers that I studied spent so much time at work that they built their lives in and through work instead of outside of work.

The tendency to find fulfillment through work that I witnessed in Silicon

Valley is the product of late 20th century shifts in our economy and society. These shifts have affected all Americans and not just tech workers.

In response to global capitalism in the 1970s and '80s, American firms started demanding more time and energy from their high-skilled workers so that professionals started working more hours. At the same time that work became more demanding for professionals, it also became more giving—and this is the part of the story of work that often gets left out. Work became more rewarding and fulfilling for professionals. Companies strategically curated cultures where their high-skilled workers could find meaning, belonging and community in order to get the most out of them.

This expansion of work in professionals' lives coincided with the general decline in civic participation in the late 20th century—the decline in those spaces outside of work where Americans had once found belonging and meaning. The decrease in religious affiliation and participation today is part of that larger trend.

In my book, I argue that workplaces have become the new "faith communities" of Silicon Valley. It's through work that tech workers find identity, meaning and belonging—the social and spiritual needs that Americans once turned to their religions to fulfill. This creates a particular kind of ecosystem where the members of that society worship a theocracy of work.

In a capitalist economy, ultimately driven by the bottom line, how does this "theocracy of work" translate to profit for these companies?

In a knowledge-based industry like tech, a company's most valuable asset

is their human capital. And more specifically, the interiority of the human worker—their knowledge and skills. So, one of the most important questions for management is, "How do you grow the value of your human capital?" Well, one way you do it is by increasing the skills of the labor force. Another way you do it is by cultivating the interior spirit of your workers so that they are in line with the goals, the purpose and the mission of the company.

Today's tech companies really understand this. As some say, "Meaning is the new money." I call this shift the "spiritual turn in management."

Is this shift in the workplace secluded solely to the tech industry in Silicon Valley?

I argue that work is replacing religion in Silicon Valley, and I think Silicon Valley is a harbinger of things to come.

Silicon Valley is a more extreme example of trends that are being set in motion in other knowledge industry hubs—places like Cambridge, Portland and/or Seattle and other metropolitan areas that have a high concentration of knowledge industries attracting professionals.

Companies are giving professionals a sense of identity, belonging, meaning, purpose and transcendence, things that many Americans used to get through religion. Companies are also taking on the spiritual care of their elite employees because they see spirituality as a competitive advantage.

Tech companies teach their employees spiritual practices, like mindfulness and meditation, and they often bring in spiritual and religious leaders to give inspirational talks.

Work replacing religion isn't just a Silicon Valley thing. Most Fortune

500 companies have a mission, a code of ethics, an origin story and even a charismatic leader—some of the basic elements of religious organizations.

Many companies and their workers now use words like passion, authenticity, mission, purpose, joy to describe work, words that we once reserved for non-economic institutions, like families and faith communities that we'd give our unconditional love and loyalty to.

These emotions and experiences are now a part of work.

What does that do? It makes workers direct the kind of loyalty and devotion that they would to their families and faith communities to the companies they work for.

But how do these companies sustain that type of loyalty?

In our popular discourse, we usually talk of work as being extractive. It's something that takes from us. But this doesn't reflect the reality of many professionals—that work is attractive because it meets their social and spiritual needs.

The reality for many professionals today is that it takes a whole lot from you, but it also gives a whole lot to you.

So, if you were to talk to any professional today in America, they'd say it's really important to have a job that gives them meaning. This was not an expectation that a worker might have 50 or 60 years ago. It was more about being able to support your family in a job with good working conditions and having some time to rest outside of the workplace.

But the tech workers I studied told me that it was hard to find

community outside of work.

And instead, companies are meeting their material, physical, social and spiritual needs.

In pre-pandemic times, tech companies had social clubs, gyms, cafeterias, transportation, laundry services, day care and more. Most tech companies also have executive coaches for their senior leaders that teach spiritual practices which help workers align the deepest parts of themselves with the mission of the company.

So, now they get their material, physical, social and spiritual needs met, all within the boundaries and folds of the company. This builds a bond, a dependency, between the company and worker that translates to loyalty.

Whether we like it or not, tech companies provide the most efficient solution to living a meaningful life in Silicon Valley today.

Is that a good or bad thing that work takes care of all of your needs?

A lot of people ask me, "Isn't there something weird about this? Are these tech workers really fulfilled?" And "Why aren't you more critical of them?"

Yes, there is definitely something off about this. But I ask people as busy as we all are with work and life, "What if someone cooked all your meals? What if someone did your laundry? What if someone even organized your [social events](#) and gave you a set of friends and organized these experiences to help you feel like your life was meaningful and fulfilling?"

Well, I think that what tech companies offer to their workers is exactly

what many professionals want and need. Given the extreme demands of work for many of us, we would all live better lives if we had these resources.

So, when these workers say they are living more fulfilling lives because of this, I take their word for it.

I guess you can't fault someone for wanting these things in any workplace they dedicate their time to. But what about the system? Are there negative, adverse effects to what this does to our society and work culture?

Yes. What I'm critical of is the system. Most tech works are simply adapting to the system.

In the book, I refer to Silicon Valley as "techtopia," an engineered society where work is the highest form of fulfillment. It's an ecosystem where all of a society's material, social and spiritual rewards are concentrated in the institution of work. In techtopia, the workplace is like a huge powerful magnet that attracts all of the time, energy and devotion of the community to a point where all the other social institutions have grown weak and small, in comparison.

So, these institutions are our families, our [faith communities](#), our neighborhood associations, and so on. They've all become small and weak, and the only way that they can get a share of the time and energy and devotion from the community is to service the tech industry.

So, for example, a Zen priest in Silicon Valley told me that he started teaching meditation in [tech companies](#) because the members of his zendo were so busy with work that they no longer had time to attend

services.

But at the company, the priest had to change how he taught meditation. It became a productivity practice, and he had to cut the ethical teachings.

How does "techtopia" impact civic and political participation?

The attractive force of work pulls people's attention and energy away from the public.

Public officials in Silicon Valley complained to me about the political apathy of tech workers . They become disengaged from the public sphere because the company provides everything they need—in effect, monopolizing all their time, energy and devotion.

Tech workers may be living meaningful and fulfilling lives because of their work, but there's a social cost. Techtopias create privatized wholeness at the cost of public brokenness. And this contributes to the economic polarization and social inequality that we are witnessing in many knowledge industry hubs like the Bay Area.

For so many people, work worship is so taken-for-granted—it's the air we breathe and the waters we swim in.

My hope is that in naming this ecosystem of devotion, we can collectively ask what the role and meaning of work should be in a flourishing society for all and then begin building the social institutions and traditions to support it.

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

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