

Feature Article: JAY001-3

**THE YOGA BOOM:  
A CALL FOR CHRISTIAN DISCERNMENT  
PART 3: TOWARD A COMPREHENSIVE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE**

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**SYNOPSIS**

The yoga boom demands a comprehensive Christian response that includes discerning whether yoga can be compatible with Christianity, detecting any biblically acceptable alternatives to yoga, and determining how Christians should respond to yoga's profound penetration of Western culture. In part two we saw that raja (classical) yoga is incompatible with Christianity. Hatha (physical) yoga is not so overtly religious, but Hinduism lies just beneath its surface and often surfaces in unanticipated ways, and so it is unwise for Christians to practice it. The very structure of yoga is designed to facilitate the goals of Hindu spirituality, and so every attempt by the Christian yoga movement to redeem yoga for Christian use has failed. There are good Christian alternatives to yoga for achieving comparable physical benefits, such as Laurette Willis's PraiseMoves. To prevent the further advance of yoga in secular culture at the expense of Christianity, American Christians need to fight for their First Amendment rights and press for a consistent definition of religion in the public square.

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What is yoga, and what is it doing here? In parts one and two of this series I answered both of those questions. Yoga is a rigorous moral-physical-mental system of disciplines designed to achieve union with Hindu understandings of God or Ultimate Reality. Eastern gurus and yogis came to the West on a mission to seed Western culture with Eastern spirituality, and they met with stunning success once they came upon the approach of offering yoga as a superior means of realizing Western values, such as improved physical health, ability, and appearance. In the United States, yoga is rapidly becoming integrated into such traditionally secular institutions as public education, health care, and the work place. It has been widely embraced by Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants, and over the past several years a Christian yoga movement has been thriving among evangelicals. I At the close of part two I began to outline a comprehensive Christian response to the yoga boom. Such a response first must determine whether yoga can in any sense be compatible with a faithful practice of biblical Christianity, and I demonstrated that at least raja (classical) yoga cannot be. This final installment will answer conclusively the remaining questions: (1) Is hatha yoga religiously neutral? (2) Can yoga be Christianized? (3) Are there any biblically acceptable alternatives to yoga? and (4) What can and should Christians do about yoga's incursion into secular institutions?

**IS HATHA YOGA RELIGIOUSLY NEUTRAL?**

The majority of Christians can be convinced rather easily that raja yoga is incompatible with Christian faith. There is much less consensus when it comes to hatha yoga. Even the most vociferous critic of hatha

yoga hardly can deny that the spiritual harm that comes to a Christian who practices it can sometimes be negligible. No one can deny that yoga imparts physical benefits. Why then bother to make this a discernment issue for Christians? Aren't there more crucial battles for Christian discernment ministries to wage?

To assent that some Christians can practice yoga with little or no spiritual harm is not to assent that all Christians can do so. The reason why yoga looms large as a discernment issue for Christians at this time is because of its pervasive presence and strong appeal in Western culture. If fifty, twenty-five, or even ten percent of Christians would fall into deception and idolatry by practicing yoga, that amounts to a staggering number of spiritual casualties for the body of Christ to sustain. This therefore is not an issue that Christians should gloss over. The Western church really needs to look at the implications of practicing hatha yoga and determine if the spiritual risks involved are worth the physical benefits, especially when alternative forms of stretching exercise are available (see below). Let us look, then, at the reasons for concern and caution.

There are some rather sneaky elements in hatha yoga that help explain why enrolling in the neighborhood yoga class would be a dubious decision for the Christian. First, teachers and students typically greet each other with the Sanskrit *namaste*, which means, "I honor the Divine within you." This is an affirmation of pantheism and therefore a denial of the true God revealed in the Bible. Furthermore, hatha yoga classes typically conclude with "a 10–15 minute relaxation period to relax the body and still the mind."<sup>1</sup> As part of this process students often are given a mantra to repeat in meditation or chanting. Hindu mantras are generally the names of Hindu gods or goddesses. The Christian who thought she (or he) was just concluding her yoga session with a relaxation exercise will be shocked to learn she has invoked a false god and broken the First Commandment. Finally, promoters of raja yoga believe that participation in hatha yoga tends to lead practitioners into raja yoga. I will devote the remainder of this section to explaining my reasons for holding the same view.

### Stairway to Samadhi

Once a person begins to practice yoga, even if only assuming its postures, she becomes a part of the yoga world. She now identifies with other practitioners and friendships are likely to develop. Her sympathies will tend to align with the practice and its practitioners. Such psychological developments naturally occur when someone incorporates a discipline into her lifestyle, and objectivity can suffer as a result. Furthermore, there will not always be clear lines or warning signs separating the physical from the spiritual in yoga, and there will be subtle social and psychological pressures to progress further into the discipline (e.g., to move on to doing chants or meditation).

In an article on how "belonging to a community of like-minded souls is essential to the practice," *Yoga Journal* asked author Sara Powers, "Does community require a shared philosophical frame, or can it just evolve within a group of asana [posture] practitioners?" Powers replies:

It can start wherever you enter the path. Asana seems a likely doorway for the larger community because people from all different backgrounds feel safe doing asana—it doesn't ask them to question their underlying beliefs. *But even so, when people enter the path of yoga they begin to change.* Sometimes this makes them feel lonely because no one else they know is watching their breath and becoming more mindful. Sharing these discoveries with family and friends can be alarming.

And that is where sangha [i.e., community] comes in. I always suggest that all new students begin making friends in yoga class to support one another through *the changes that inevitably take place.* (emphases added)<sup>2</sup>

Engaging in practices that have established spiritual purposes within Hinduism or other Eastern religions can easily lead to confusion and a possible embracing of those concepts on some level. For example, one could come to accept the reality of prana (universal life force), since prana is central even to the theory of hatha yoga. Prana implies and is based on pantheism, so now the Christian has elements of conflicting worldviews in her belief system. Belief in prana would make the concept of chakras (psychic centers in the body) seem much more reasonable, and from there kundalini would not be a large leap. Suddenly, she is a Christian-Hindu syncretist<sup>3</sup> at best.

Recall the words of Svatmarama cited in part one, who introduced his classic text on hatha yoga by describing it as a staircase that will enable the blind masses to ascend to the high pinnacle of raja yoga.<sup>4</sup> One who practices yoga is participating in a system that deliberately was designed to lead participants ultimately to samadhi or union with Brahman, the Hindu deity. When dealing with a practice that is potentially idolatrous, should the Christian have the confidence that she will be able to avoid those elements? How can she be sure that she will always be able to recognize them? Won't there be times when her guard will be down and she won't realize what she's getting into?

Even if the Christian is confident she can avoid moving into raja yoga, does she really want by practicing yoga to send the message that yoga is OK to weaker Christians and nonbelievers? They could be drawn through practicing hatha yoga into the Eastern spirituality that underlies it, even if she is not. This, of course, would violate the principle of love that should lead a Christian to sacrifice something she herself could do without sin if it would tempt a weaker brother or sister to sin (see Rom. 14).

The magazine *Body and Soul* expressed similar optimism that the practice of hatha yoga eventually draws the practitioner into the spiritual heart of yoga:

Operating on the theory that an open body leads to an open heart, yoga starts with a renewal of the body and leads to a rejuvenation of the spirit. The three main aspects of yoga practice—postures, or poses (*asanas*), breath control (*pranayama*), and meditation—make up a gradual focusing inward, body to mind, toward stillness and serenity. According to yoga philosophy, the alteration of purely physical habits—your body awareness, the way you move and breathe—will naturally alter the way you use your mind.”<sup>5</sup>

### **The Spiritual Basis of Asana and Pranayama**

As we saw in part one, the first goal of yoga practice is to still the mind so as to free it from its captivity to the three gunas. Everything in yoga, therefore, including the postures and the breathing exercises, is calculated to “alter the way you use your mind.” The goal is to make the mind more conducive to meditation, altered states of consciousness, mystical experiences, and Eastern philosophy.

According to *Yoga Journal*, if you are practicing hatha yoga you are already practicing meditation in its beginning stages:

You may already feel a sense of peace from your yoga practice. You may feel that you've already attained some of the other meditation benefits described above. There's a good reason for this: In Buddhist terms, asanas are their own type of meditation; to perform difficult postures, you have to focus awareness on your body and breath and relax into the pose. Being mindful of your body as you occupy it is a classic technique prescribed by the Buddha.

In classical yoga, too, meditation and postures go hand-in-hand. “It's actually the same thing,” says [yoga scholar Stephen] Cope. “With postures, you're also training equanimity [composure], and you're training the mind to become focused. You're using the body as the object of that focus.

“You're also training awareness,” he adds. “You're conditioning the mind to scan to see how things shift, to see the ebb and flow of energy in the subtle body. These are the same skills we're training in meditation.”<sup>6</sup>

The postures of yoga are not religiously neutral. All of the classic asanas have spiritual significance. For example, as one journalist reports,

The sun salutation, perhaps the best-known series of asanas, or postures, of hatha yoga—the type most commonly practiced in America—is literally a Hindu ritual.

“Sun salutation was never a hatha yoga tradition,” said Subhas Rampersaud Tiwari, professor of yoga philosophy and meditation at Hindu University of America in Orlando, Fla. “It is a whole series of ritual appreciations to the sun, being thankful for that source of energy.”

To think of it as a mere physical movement is tantamount to “saying that baptism is just an underwater exercise,” said Swami Param of the Classical Yoga Hindu Academy and Dharma Yoga Ashram in Manahawkin, N.J.<sup>7</sup>

It is likewise impossible to get involved with pranayama practice without getting involved substantially—not just indirectly—with Hinduism. Richard Rosen, author of *The Yoga of Breath: A Step-by-*

*Step Guide to Pranayama*, explains that the word *pranayama* combines two Sanskrit words, *prana* and *ayama*: “Prana is the universal life force, a creative power or intelligence that drives everything and everyone along. Often it’s translated as breath, but that’s an oversimplification—breath is only one of the many manifestations of prana. *Ayama* literally means to ‘expand and restrain.’ Pranayama is literally the expansion and restraint of the life force.”<sup>8</sup> Rosen added that “with all our emphasis on asana, it’s easy to imagine that it’s the central practice of Hatha Yoga, but it’s not. Asana is essentially a preparation for pranayama—a means to purify and ripen the body-mind for breathing and meditation.”<sup>9</sup>

As we also saw in part one, the second goal of yoga is to control the flow of prana through the body, so as to raise the kundalini and achieve enlightenment. Pranayama is about achieving this goal: the expansion and restraint of the life force, as Rosen described it. It’s not primarily being done for health reasons, but for a spiritual purpose. Since, as Rosen puts it, “Hatha Yoga consists of two ‘wings,’ asana and pranayama,”<sup>10</sup> it is impossible to participate legitimately in hatha yoga without getting involved with trying to manipulate this universal life force, which is really just another way of describing the Hindu conception of God (Brahman).

It is true that in recent years the yoga boom has produced extremely watered-down versions of yoga that usually are taught and practiced in gyms or fitness centers rather than in yoga studios and include only asanas and not pranayama, meditation, or chanting. It is debatable whether these exercise regimens, such as Beth Shaw’s YogaFit, can truly be called yoga at all.<sup>11</sup> The spiritual risk in participating in these forms of “yoga” may come more from the vanity of pursuing perfect abs or buns of steel than from their extremely loose and distant association with Hinduism. Some of the cautions against a Christian participating in yoga elaborated above would still apply, however, such as the tendency to psychologically identify with the world of yoga once one begins to practice it and the pressure to progress further into the discipline.

### **Truth in Advertising: “Come Study Hinduism”**

As we have seen, many yoga teachers and advocates deliberately cover up the spiritual nature of yoga in order to extend its influence in secular culture, but, on the other hand, there is no shortage of yoga teachers and authorities who openly proclaim it. “‘Why be covert?’” Swami Param asks. “Participants should be invited upfront to ‘come study Hinduism,’ which is what they’re doing when learning hatha yoga.”<sup>12</sup>

Sannyasin Arumugaswami, managing editor of *Hinduism Today*, is refreshingly frank about the subject. As reported by Knight Ridder News Service, he offers astute observations that Christian practitioners of yoga should not overlook: “Hinduism is the soul of yoga ‘based as it is on Hindu Scripture and developed by Hindu sages. Yoga opens up new and more refined states of mind, and to understand them one needs to believe in and understand the Hindu way of looking at God....A Christian trying to adapt these practices will likely disrupt their own Christian beliefs.’”<sup>13</sup>

### **CAN YOGA BE CHRISTIANIZED?**

Susan Bordenkircher, Brooke Boon, and other promoters of “Christian” yoga believe that their approach to yoga is the exception to the rule that Arumugaswami describes. As CRI’s research specialist in Eastern religions for over three decades, I beg to differ. If yoga is inherently unchristian, then no effort to Christianize it can ultimately succeed. Indeed, I noticed several elements in Christian yoga that are properly Hindu and not Christian.

For example, Boon writes, “God calls us to be bold in our walks but reminds us that we are strengthened most when we surrender. Manifesting that principle in our bodies through the physical postures helps us to manifest it in our spiritual and emotional bodies as well.”<sup>14</sup> The idea that human beings have additional bodies besides the physical is foreign to Christianity (the soul is not a “body”), but an important feature in yoga as well as Western occult theory. If you doubt this, simply type “emotional body spiritual body” into the Google search engine on the Internet. Every result will pertain to yoga or occultism.

A more troubling example of this occurs after Boon lists the “eight steps of classical yoga” as taught by Patanjali, with the eighth being “absorption—the realization of the essential nature of the self.”<sup>15</sup> She proceeds to affirm that “yoga is a system of techniques that can be used for a number of goals, from simply managing stress better, learning to relax, and increasing flexibility all the way to becoming more self-aware and acquiring the deepest knowledge of one’s own self in Christ.”<sup>16</sup>

As this series has made quite clear, knowledge of one’s true self is the ultimate goal of classical yoga, as it is in all gnostic systems; but when has it ever been a goal of Christian spirituality? Can Boon “baptize” this yogic quest for self-knowledge by inserting the words “in Christ” or by adding, as she goes on to do, “while consciously seeking a deeper relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ”?<sup>17</sup> Adding Christ into the equation does not make the pursuit of self-knowledge in “Holy Yoga” any more of a Christian practice than adding sprouts to a greasy hamburger makes it health food.

Hindu influence on teachers of Christian yoga is also evident when they transfer the yoga concept of *bodymind*, which is based in pantheism, into Christianity, where it has no basis. In classical yoga this doctrine means that the body and mind compose one substantial entity (see part one). Because of this teaching, not only are the postures of yoga created for the end result of mind control, but it is also believed that the mind or soul cannot reach its potential if the body is beset with weakness. For this reason B. K. S. Iyengar said, when asked by a reporter about his daily five-hour yoga practice at age eighty-six, “My friend, if the body collapses, the mind cannot hold on...I am doing with sheer will power to maintain both body and mind.”<sup>18</sup> Sri K. Pattabhi Jois likewise emphasizes that it is not possible to master the first two limbs of yoga (moral restraint and religious observance) “when the body and sense organs are weak and haunted by obstacles....A person must first take up daily asana practice to make the body strong and healthy....With the body and sense organs thus stabilized, the mind can be steady and controlled.”<sup>19</sup>

We find this same emphasis on bodymind (or bodyspirit, as pioneering Christian yogi Nancy Roth calls it) in Christian yoga teachings. Bordenkircher writes:

As your range of motion decreases, your ability and desire to do certain tasks will likely be affected. Your attitude may be negatively affected. As your weight increases (as is the case for most of us who don’t exercise), your relationships may even suffer as you struggle with self-image and esteem.

Ultimately...the pain and discomfort you may feel in your skin can be the cause of division between you and God. How are you to share the love of Jesus, the peace of God, and the freedom you have through salvation if all you feel is uncomfortable and cranky? Do you exhibit freedom in Christ if you are bound by the limitations and inabilities of your out-of-tune body? If you represent Jesus to the world, what kind of message are you sending: one of brokenness or one of healing?<sup>20</sup>

Bordenkircher is speaking in terms of Christian values and so she no doubt thinks she escapes the influences of Hinduism. What she is teaching, however, is something she likely picked up in a yoga environment, certainly not from a contextual study of the Bible. The Bible does teach that our bodies and souls are interdependent and form a whole and that Christians are temples of the Holy Spirit. It does follow from this that we need to take care of our bodies. It also is true that when our bodies are in poor shape or health it can be more difficult to walk in the Spirit and to serve the Lord effectively. It is not true, however, that our moral decisions are determined by our bodily condition or that Christian sanctification flows from, or depends on, a sound body.

What Bordenkircher is teaching can be refuted in three words: Joni Eareckson Tada. Has not God been glorified over the past four decades as this quadriplegic woman radiates the love, joy, and strength of Christ through the “limitations and inabilities” of her body? Is not the glorification of God the chief end of the Christian life? God refused to remove Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7–8),<sup>21</sup> which many Bible scholars believe was a bodily condition (cf. Gal. 3:14–15), for the express reason that “my grace is sufficient for you, for [My] power is perfected in [your] weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). “Therefore,” Paul said, “I am well content with weaknesses...for Christ’s sake, for when I am weak, then I am strong” (v. 10). Christians are called to be spiritually victorious regardless of the condition of their bodies, and they can do it because the yoga doctrine of bodymind is not true.

## Christian-Hindu Syncretism: Improving on God's Plan?

Bordenkircher proceeds to make her position clear: "I contend that there is no practice like yoga for integrating the mind and body in unity."<sup>22</sup> Are we to infer from this that what God provided in Scripture is inferior to what Indian sages provided in yoga? She would no doubt reply *no*, but what else are we to think when she adds that "what makes the practice unique is the correlation of the mind with the body in order to create health on the inside as well as the outside. To put it simply, the key is the breath. Your breath determines your movement and at the same time acts as the catalyst for a perspective change, a focus shift that results from the stillness and quiet. Add to this an intention for Christ-centered worship, and you have a recipe for wholeness."<sup>23</sup>

Boon makes similar claims: "Yoga can be thought of as a philosophy. It's the idea that by bringing a union of focus between mind and body, while simultaneously making the mind and body stronger and more flexible, we become more authentic people, able to hear God and experience Him in previously impossible ways."<sup>24</sup>

According to its leading promoters, then, Christian yoga unifies the Christian's inner self and thus promotes spiritual growth, something Christian sanctification is supposed to produce. If this is so, it is fair to ask why yoga originates in Eastern religion and is absent in the Bible. Roth, Bordenkircher, and Boon are trying to infuse Hindu concepts and disciplines with Christian meaning. By doing so, they are unmistakably implying that Hindu religious structures are valid, and by merging them with Christian content they not only improve on Hinduism, but also on Christianity. This is religious syncretism, pure and simple.

### The Myth of a Pristine, Pre-Hindu Yoga

To argue that yoga predates Hinduism and therefore is spiritually safe is not tenable, for the following reasons:

1. What makes the promoters of Christian yoga think that pre-Hindu yoga was spiritually safe? The fundamental reason why mixing Hinduism with Christianity is objectionable is because Hinduism is a pagan religion, but so was the Stone Age shamanism practiced in the Indus Valley 5,000 years ago. This argument therefore makes a distinction without a difference.
2. The word "yoga" needs to be more carefully defined, as it is being conveniently subjected to gross equivocation. All we really know about "yoga" in India 5,000 years ago is based on stone seals that depict figures sitting cross-legged in what is presumed to be meditation. We cannot categorically separate this Stone Age shamanic culture from Hinduism, since Hinduism evolved out of it and other indigenous sources. We infer from these figures that yoga existed, but what actually existed besides meditation? There is no evidence that raja or ashtanga yoga, with its eight limbs, existed prior to the second century BC or thereabouts, when Patanjali set it forth in his Yoga Sutras. The stretch postures that Westerners tend to think define yoga do not appear until around the fifteenth century AD in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika. It is therefore meaningless to say that yoga predated Hinduism because what *we* mean by "yoga" clearly developed in a Hindu context.
3. Even if original yoga could be demonstrated to be non-Hindu, Boon explicitly says that Holy Yoga is based on hatha yoga and bhakti yoga,<sup>25</sup> both of which originated in a mature Hinduism.

Boon laments that "Satan has been so effective in co-opting yoga for himself and making Christians scared of it."<sup>26</sup> Oh? Does he also co-opt voodoo, channeling, astrology, LSD, and idol worship? Some practices are inherently idolatrous, occult, and/or spiritually dangerous.

There has rarely been a religious practice that was developed with more rigorous, systematic precision to accomplish the goals that flow from that religion than yoga. As we saw clearly in part one, the whole elaborate, eight-limbed practice of yoga is designed for the purpose of quieting all thoughts so that the practitioner no longer identifies with his (or her) temporal, phenomenal ego and consciously can unite with his supposedly eternal, divine Self. As someone who has experienced this in his pre-Christian past I

can join my testimony to those of thousands of others who maintain that *the practice itself* produces the experience of “cosmic consciousness,” the sense of oneness with the Universe, a new openness to spirit contact, and psychic phenomena.

Altered states of consciousness are the means through which unregenerate people have spiritual experiences, and since these experiences are not through the mediation of Jesus Christ, from the Christian perspective, whatever is being experienced is not the Holy Spirit. Christians, on the other hand, are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and do not need to go “out of their minds” to experience God. They are already in a relationship with Him and if they draw near to Him by faith they will find that He draws near to them (James 4:8; cf. Gal. 3:2).

To argue, therefore, as Boon does,<sup>27</sup> that yoga is a universal practice that is no more exclusively Hindu than prayer is exclusively Christian ignores the critical differences between the two. It is no accident that yoga arose in one specific culture and then spread across the world from there, whereas prayer spontaneously appears in virtually all human cultures throughout history. Prayer is simply talking to God or whatever “higher power” one believes in; yoga is a system of disciplines designed by world-denying (ascetic) mystics to escape maya (illusion) and achieve gnosis (mystical knowledge of their own divinity).

### Is It Good to “Get Out of Our Heads”?

Boon maintains that “Holy Yoga helps us pray by teaching us to cultivate a quiet heart and mind. As Thomas Ryan put it, ‘It invites cerebral Western world people to “get out of their heads.”’ This is crucial in helping us master one of the most important yet neglected aspects of prayer—listening. We cannot hear God speaking to our hearts if our minds are cluttered with requests, worries, and complaints.”<sup>28</sup>

Boon says, “Like all of yoga, the practice of meditation is a gift of God that others have co-opted for their uses and to suit their own ends....Meditation is an exercise in contemplation. It is a silent or contemplative form of prayer in which we focus on God, a specific attribute of God, or a passage of Scripture. We think, pray, then allow our hearts and minds to be open to hearing God’s voice in the silence.”<sup>29</sup>

Boon is profoundly confused on the subject of meditation, and, unfortunately, she is spreading her confusion around. Part of her definition of Christian meditation is correct. It is an active mental process that involves reflecting on the attributes, works, and words of God, but she has bent the definition to include elements of Eastern meditation. She prescribes yogic techniques such as focusing on one’s breathing or visualizing an idyllic scene, a picture of the cross or of Jesus, or a candle. “The idea is to hold that visual in your mind as a point of focus to bring back your attention when your thoughts have wandered,” she says.<sup>30</sup> She endorses the repetition of words as “another means of clearing the mind of distractions, calming the body, and attempting a complete heart-mind-body connection with God.”<sup>31</sup> These are the exact techniques that Eastern gurus such as the late Maharishi Mahesh Yogi of Transcendental Meditation have always taught their disciples as a means of quieting the mind and dealing with distractions.

This merging of two utterly distinct practices is what breeds the confusion. Christian meditation more likely would accompany Bible study than prayer. There is indeed a place for listening in Christian devotions, but it is commonly considered a component of prayer and is not properly called meditation. Boon is right that at times we need to quiet our anxious thoughts and listen to God, but this is an art that Christians have cultivated throughout church history through the sustained *practice* of prayer. An Eastern discipline designed to empty the mind of *all* thought is neither necessary nor helpful to Christian prayer.

Mental disciplines such as those practiced in Eastern meditation are spiritually dangerous even when practiced by Christians—even when they are trying to keep their minds on God, which is hard to do anyway when one is focusing on an activity such as breathing or on an object such as a candle. Mentally focusing on activities or objects until the very concepts of them fade away, which is the standard objective of Eastern meditation, creates a mental void that gives the Devil an opening to influence one’s thoughts.

This is one reason why God's Word never instructs us to use yogic techniques to hear His voice. Again, *such mind-altering techniques are not necessary for someone in whom His Spirit dwells.*

Boon's endorsement of Eastern methods of meditation may stem from something else she has uncritically absorbed from her background in yoga: an exaltation of experience and intuition at the expense of Scripture and reason. She writes that

so much of God is a mystery, existing outside of anything we can understand. People throughout history have devised ways to delve into that mystery, to try to experience it even if they could not grasp it. Instinctually, people have known that there are ways to experience God that defy logic and reason.

We value our minds above all else. If we can think it and know it intellectually, then it must exist. But we have to remind ourselves that God exists far outside this capacity to think. That's why disciplines such as prayer, fasting, and meditation have been developed over the centuries by devoted Christ followers. They take us beyond what we can think into a realm of experience that is of the heart and body and soul. These disciplines draw us closer to God through means that are more mysterious than simply reading the Bible or praying.<sup>32</sup>

Does much of God exist beyond our ability to understand? Yes. Does that mean we leave our understanding behind and trust our feelings to experience God more? No! Boon's prose here contains a subtle denigrating of Bible study and prayer, yet these are the most critical means we have at our disposal to know and experience God. Unlike the God of yoga, who exists beyond the dualities of logic and morality, the God of the Bible is rational and volitional as well as capable of feeling. He created us in His image and He expects us to employ all of our faculties whenever we approach Him. Boon was right to quote Mark 12:30 at the beginning of her book, but she needs to meditate on the fact that Jesus tells us to worship God not only with all of our heart, soul, and strength, but also with all of our mind.

### **Presuming to Be Teachers**

I am taking Boon and Bordenkircher to task for promoting serious error in the body of Christ, but I don't want to convey that they are necessarily wolves in sheep's clothing. They both may be committed Christian women who sincerely believe that they are bringing glory to God and doing a service to His people. The kind of error they are perpetrating is the kind in which any Christian could become ensnared if she (or he) launches into a ministry based on her enthusiasm for some activity before properly submitting it to scrutiny by the body of Christ. Boon is aware of CRI, as she quotes twice from Hank Hanegraaff's *The Prayer of Jesus*. It's too bad she (apparently) didn't consult with a qualified discernment ministry before going public with Holy Yoga, and it's too bad that neither did Bordenkircher, or their publishers.

Boon admits, "I am not a theologian, a pastor, an elder, or even a seminary student...I'm still learning—about Christ as well as about yoga. I hope we can be on this learning journey together."<sup>33</sup> Why then did she take a practice that is extremely controversial and launch a public ministry promoting it just a few years after her conversion? Since yoga is a spiritual practice, yoga teachers naturally assume the role of guru or teacher, especially if they go beyond teaching asanas and expound on spiritual matters, which Christian yoga teachers do. Boone and Bordenkircher are teaching on Christian doctrine, practice, and the spiritual life, despite Scripture's warning, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1 NIV).

Not only that—they are proposing a revolutionary approach to spirituality. As we have seen, what they call "body worship" cannot be substantiated from Scripture. The most they can cite to back such teaching are a few isolated teachers within church history, and that largely from the medieval Catholic mystical period. They do not seem to realize that much of the medieval mystical tradition, including the book *Cloud of Unknowing*, on which Roth relies,<sup>34</sup> was heavily influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, whose sixth-century A.D. writings were infused with the pantheistic Greek philosophy known as Neo-Platonism. Much of Christian mysticism is suspect from an evangelical, biblical perspective, yet Christian yoga authors turn to it again and again to substantiate the Christian nature of their approach to yoga.



Bordenkircher and Boon took Roth's interfaith experiments and the dubious sources she cites, combined those with their own subjective experience of mixing yoga with Christian worship and what they felt the Lord was showing them through it, and launched an international movement. How does the body of Christ respond? In Bordenkircher's case, a respectable evangelical publisher, W Publishing Group, publishes her book, and Max Lucado writes an endorsement! In the postmodern, religiously pluralistic culture in which Christians now live, the need for discernment is at an all-time high, yet the exercise of discernment evident in the church seems to be at an all-time low.

### AN INFORMED CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

The yoga boom is a Trojan horse in which Eastern religion has infiltrated Western secular culture largely under the pretext of a physical exercise regime. Now firmly established, it is working to transform Western society into a postsecular, mystical culture. Furthermore, the Christian subculture is not off limits to the advances of yoga, and its successes on that front have also been stunning. There are many other Eastern and occult spiritual influences besides yoga contributing to this cultural change, but yoga is an essential element and far and away the most influential, as the numbers of its followers and its establishment within the institutions of secular culture indicate.

Will the West one day look like the East? No, there are too many cultural differences for that to occur. Will it look substantially different than it did as a secular culture and previously as a Christian culture? It already does, and it will do so more as the yoga leaven continues to spread.

So far, most Christians have blithely sat by as this invasion has advanced, and if they have done anything at all, it has been to raise the white flag and join the yoga movement themselves. The Christian community needs to wake up and meet this enormous challenge with a measured, thoughtful, and biblically consistent response.

### Finding Biblically Acceptable Alternatives

Despite potential negative physical and psychological effects that were noted in part two, it can hardly be denied that yoga has many physical benefits. It also should be acknowledged that it can be challenging to find the same benefits through some other means. It is not a yearning for apostasy or idolatry that has attracted many Christians to hatha yoga; but if Christians are going to wage a successful counteroffensive to this Hindu missionary thrust in the West, they need to start with themselves and stop practicing yoga. This can be done without giving up the physical benefits of stretch exercises.

There is an intriguing Christian alternative to yoga developed by former yoga teacher/New Ager Laurette Willis, who converted to Christ in 1987. She recalls that in 2001, after working out with a popular exercise diva, she thought, "Wouldn't it be great if there were a kinder, gentler form of exercise without all this jumping around...gentle stretches and strengthening exercises, sort of like yoga, but without the Hindu and New Age influence...?" She proceeded to conceive of "a form of exercise that would move us physically to better health and flexibility while moving us spiritually to praise the Lord...PraiseMoves!" (ellipses in original)<sup>35</sup>

PraiseMoves is designed to approximate all of the benefits associated with yoga, including relaxation and reduction of stress, within a consistently Christian context. I have thoroughly examined PraiseMoves and find nothing spiritually dangerous about it. Its deep-breathing exercises do not resemble any of the spiritually troubling pranayama exercises I have witnessed and researched. Its "Walkin' Wisdom Warm-up" exercises, during which scriptural affirmations or promises are repeated, bear no resemblance to yoga. Its postures all have biblical themes. Some of them are similar to yoga postures ("I've discovered there's not an *infinite* number of ways the human body can move," says Willis<sup>36</sup>), while others are of her own creation, such as the twenty-two that correspond to the Hebrew alphabet. She has not used any traditional yoga postures or gestures that have clear-cut associations with Hinduism, such as the "praying hands" gesture. Her concluding relaxation and meditation time involves laying on one's back and consciously relaxing each part of one's body and then meditating on one or more of the Scriptures that were recited earlier. It does not involve the yogic meditation techniques employed in Christian yoga

such as repeating a word or focusing on an object. The participant is finally encouraged to “fellowship with the Lord. If you have any cares, unconfessed sin, or unforgiveness, now is a good time to get rid of them. Rest in His presence and let Him love you.”<sup>37</sup> The only potential snare I can foresee in PraiseMoves would be if the Christian considered its devotional aspects to be sufficient for, rather than supplemental to, her daily devotions.

Some Christians will not be interested in the complete physical and spiritual package that PraiseMoves offers—they will merely be looking for good stretch exercises. Christian Research Journal contributor Marcia Montenegro cites one such alternative to yoga on her Web site.<sup>38</sup> There are additional alternatives to yoga that do not have Eastern religious or occult connections, including Pilates (when not mixed with yoga), but I am not qualified to speak to their physical efficacy or safety and the interested person should consult with her doctor and do her own research.

### Removing Yoga from Public Institutions

Getting yoga established in the public school system has been the most strategic front in this spiritual invasion. As we have seen, it has already achieved breathtaking success.

Here’s the problem with the defense of yoga’s presence in the public schools that the American Yoga Association (AYA; see part two) offers: *the way religion is being defined lets Eastern pantheistic religions into the schools but keeps Western theistic religions out*. If one were to examine any college textbook on world religions, one would find chapters on Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism included along with Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. One would also find yoga mentioned as a system of salvation developed within Hinduism and utilized in other Eastern religions as well.

It is the height of ignorance or else deliberate deception for the AYA to argue that yoga is not religious because “the core of Yoga’s philosophy is that everything is supplied from within the individual. Thus, there is no dependence on an external figure, either in the sense of a person or god figure, or a religious organization.”<sup>39</sup> As we saw in part one’s examination of the philosophy behind yoga, God is believed to be within the individual, who alone can work out his (or her) own bad karma—it is strictly an autosoteric (i.e., salvation by self effort) system. So, yes, he would look within and not depend on anyone—but what is the yogi looking within and depending on himself for? Salvation! He is seeking salvation from the wheel of rebirth—a decidedly religious concept—and he is seeking union (remember that yoga *means* union) with *God*.

In all probability, if students were taught to use PraiseMoves instead of yoga, similar beneficial effects would be observed and quantified as have been with yoga. But because PraiseMoves includes references to God, Bible verses, and prayer, it would never be allowed in the public schools.

PraiseMoves’ offense would boil down to being an *exoteric* expression of faith; that is, being open and honest about its religious character. Eastern mysticism, on the other hand, is by its very nature *esoteric*; that is, it is secretive about its true nature. Exoteric faiths provide creeds or statements about God and salvation that adherents must *believe and confess*, whereas esoteric faiths provide rites of initiation and methods for achieving the mystical realization of one’s own divinity that adherents must *experience*.

Esoteric traditions typically employ code words so that only initiates will recognize the religious beliefs, practices, and experiences that they reference. Calling meditation “time in” and pranayama “bunny breathing,” as the Yoga Ed. program is doing in schools across the country (see part two), does not in any way eliminate the spiritual purpose and effects of these historically religious practices—nor does any psychological, behavioral, or physical benefits the practices may yield in addition to their spiritual effects.

Imagine if Loretta Willis or one of her certified PraiseMoves instructors argued that the religious elements in PraiseMoves should be overlooked due to its many beneficial physical and psychological effects on children. That argument would be laughed out of the schools and the courtroom, as should the same kind of argument that is now being *accepted* on behalf of yoga. It seems that school administrators and teachers are taking the attitude, “Let’s just eliminate obvious religious trappings and overlook anything deeper because—look at all the good it’s doing!” The only reason they are getting away with

this inconsistent application of logic and the law is that the matter has not been pressed hard and persuasively enough.

Removing yoga from public schools is possible. For example, in early 1982 five concerned parents from the ABC School District in Cerritos, California, enlisted my help in their effort to convince the school board to reverse its decision to allow yoga to be incorporated into the school curriculum. The parents did their homework and made a compelling case to the board, and I added my expert testimony. In response, according to the *Long Beach Press Telegram*, "School Board President Homer Lewis said the program 'bordered on a thin line' between exercise and religion. He also said that since the district has taken such a strong stand on separation of church and state with reference to Western religions, it should 'also take great pains to exclude religions other than those common in this country.'"<sup>40</sup> The board voted four to two to kill the program.

It was satisfying to win that battle, but it is hollow consolation now, as I see that we are losing the war. Government is not only "establishing" yoga in the schools, but it is beginning to do so in other public institutions as well, such as the military,<sup>41</sup> prisons,<sup>42</sup> and the criminal court system.<sup>43</sup> Yet the arguments that prevailed with the ABC School District board remain just as sound today.

We need a comprehensive and consistent definition of religion for use in the public arena. To achieve this we also need an army of concerned, conscientious, and committed citizens who will press this matter from the school boards and other public institutions all the way to the Supreme Court, if necessary. With its present composition, the Supreme Court is probably more disposed to listen to reason on this matter than it has been for a long time, but that could change as current justices retire and are replaced. Now is the time to act.

As for mandatory yoga in the work place, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 would be a particularly useful basis for a Christian's objection. The Equal Employment Opportunities Commission clarifies that the law

prohibits employers from discriminating against individuals because of their religion in hiring, firing, and other terms and conditions of employment....

Mandatory "new age" training programs, designed to improve employee motivation, cooperation or productivity through meditation, yoga, biofeedback or other practices, may conflict with the non-discriminatory provisions of Title VII. Employers must accommodate any employee who gives notice that these programs are inconsistent with the employee's religious beliefs, whether or not the employer believes there is a religious basis for the employee's objection.<sup>44</sup>

A nightmare scenario for Christians in any culture would be to see expressions of their own faith prohibited in public venues while equivalent expressions of other faiths not only are permitted but required. While that nightmare scenario is a reality in large portions of the world (e.g., many of the Arab nations), and is beginning to unfold even in some of the other Western "Christian" nations,<sup>45</sup> in America the number of Christians is large enough, and the legal foundations for religious freedom are firm enough, that it is possible to turn such a trend around. This is why the time is now for Christians to snap out of their complacency and work together to present a comprehensive Christian response.

If Christians themselves succumb to the seductive temptation of yoga, then the crisis we court might not be persecution but rather subversion. The biblical reasons for saying no to yoga were forgotten long ago by the Western world at large. May the tragic day never arrive when it could also be said that they were forgotten by the church.

## NOTES

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26. *Ibid.*, 36.
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