# Is yoga religious? Spiritual roots of a physical practice: Spiritual roots of a physical practice

by John N. Sheveland in the June 14, 2011 issue

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Who owns yoga? That unexpected question arose last year when the Hindu American Foundation identified what it views as two serious misconceptions about yoga that are widespread in the West.

The first misconception is that yoga is only about physical exercise. Most people in the West have been exposed to only one aspect of yoga, namely, the performance of asanas or postures. This asana-heavy version of yoga ignores central moral and mental dimensions of a holistic practice of mind, body and spirit, rendering yoga scarcely distinguishable from other regimens designed to stretch and strengthen muscles.

The second misconception is that yoga can be dissociated from Hinduism. Yoga appropriators are largely to blame for this dissociation. Indeed, HAF believes that those who peddle a de-Hinduized brand of yoga have benefited financially from their marketing ploy.

On this matter one must tread lightly, for it is no coincidence that a HAF statement of concern points to the "discrimination and hate" Hindus face because of their religious identity, as well as to the embarrassment they suffer from exotic caricatures of the tradition in terms of "caste, cows and curry." A prime directive of HAF is to shed light on any form of prejudice against Hindus or Hinduism, an admirable aim that cannot be fully appreciated apart from the history of multiple colonial incursions into India, both political and religious (Mughal Empire and Islam, the British Raj and evangelical missionaries). Nor can it be understood apart from the current political climate of India in which communal traditions are in tension with a secular government seeking to guarantee representation for all of its citizens.

The campaign that HAF initiated, called Take Back Yoga, sparked two curious responses. One was from the difficult-to-categorize New Age author Deepak Chopra. He pushed back at HAF, saying it exaggerated the Hindu dimensions of yoga and seemed to express a naive and ahistorical view of that tradition. In a blog exchange with HAF cofounder Aseem Shukla, Chopra said yoga is linked to a philosophical system such as Advaita or the Sanatana Dharma that existed prior to classical Hinduism.

The exchange revealed an internal conflict among diaspora Indians over the markers of religious identity. Chopra's own religious interests are more in the realm of "consciousness" or "spirituality" than in Hindu practice. He suggested that "the rise of Hinduism as a religion came centuries after the foundation of yoga in consciousness and consciousness alone. Religious rites and the worship of gods has always been seen as being in service to a higher cause, knowing the self." Indeed, for Chopra, the very term *Hinduism* seems to conjure up narrowness of communal

identity and a tribal deity, both of which he finds inconsistent with the pluralistic intellectual traditions of India, which loosely coalesce under the umbrella of Sanatana Dharma.

Shukla, for his part, somewhat anachronistically conflates Hindu practice with Sanatana Dharma—a move that is certainly possible in the life of faith but inconsistent with the historical record. In any case, Shukla insisted that any who popularize, benefit from or practice yoga need to acknowledge its place in Hinduism. Chopra viewed this concern as the reflex urge of those wishing to consolidate a beleaguered Hindu identity, one that too quickly passes over the spiritual or mystical insight that is at the center of whatever counts as Hindu.

The other curious response came from a Christian theologian. Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, condemned yoga and "Eastern meditation" in a way that echoed the uninformed condemnations of Indian religions—especially Hinduism—that were typical among evangelical missionaries to India in the 19th century. That tragic story has been told recently in William Dalrymple's *The Last Mughal.* Despite his own negative presuppositions about Hinduism and the amorphous "East," Mohler enthusiastically took up HAF's cause, affirming that yoga is inextricably linked with Hindu beliefs.

Mohler argued that Christians cannot develop a yoga practice without disregarding the biblical witness, risking their souls and being compromised by yoga's hypersexuality. (The latter claim is an irresponsible statement about yoga that exemplifies the HAF's justified sensitivity over how Hinduism is depicted in mainstream society.) The only source for understanding yoga that Mohler seemed to be working with was a recent study of yoga's cultural history in America by journalist Stefanie Syman titled *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America.*

Furthermore, Mohler seems to be working with a "container" theory of religious identity: one either fits religiously into this container or that—either Hindu or Christian, either biblically based or meditation-based. He thinks that any dabbling in another container must represent a contradiction.

Such an approach would shut down religious dialogue before it begins. It would be more promising to allow the dialogue between traditions to take place. As it happens, Mohler offered no evidence to support his principle of contradiction, and many Christians attest to how yoga practices have deepened their Christian faith.

Can a Christian honestly and faithfully develop a yoga practice if yoga indeed has Hindu roots? (We might add that it also has Jain and Buddhist roots.) On this question, we can learn from the Roman Catholic Church and the archbishop of Canterbury, both of which advocate "dialogues of religious experience."

In such dialogues committed Christians share their practices with people of other religious traditions, share in the practices of those other traditions and are attentive to experiences of shared space, worship and prayer. Such experiences tend to generate questions. How does yogic breath control and regulation (*pranayama*) influence my ability to pray, to contemplate God or to receive the Eucharist? Many Christians have found that breathing exercises quiet the mind and allow one to focus more pointedly on the experience of prayer or worship, opening them to perceive the presence of God more fully. So too, breath control and regulation can render me more mindful, more responsible at the Lord's Table, more present to the body of Christ in our midst, of which we all are part.

Might yoga's holistic spirituality and ethic likewise render me more conscious of my eucharistic responsibilities in daily life and not only at the Lord's Table, so that I learn a set of moral standards from the vocabulary of yoga that show me how to translate the language of worship into morally responsible action in the world? Many times we fail to see the connection between what happens at the Lord's Table—the reconciliation of all members in the body of Christ—and social ethics, public policy or the life of action. Yoga's preference is for holistic living: it calls for mind, body and action to mutually support and explain each other. So too for Christians; worship that doesn't lead to ethical action fails to be worship, just as love of God that doesn't produce a spontaneous love of neighbor fails to be love.

Might asanas (postural yoga) influence a Christian's understanding of herself as a physical body created in the image and likeness of God and thus an object of unutterable dignity, held in being and redeemed by God? Might my performance of postural yoga contribute new meaning to Paul's claim in 1 Corinthians that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit? Might postural yoga, with its well-documented physical and mental benefits, help me to better understand my stewardship responsibilities to my own body—which Paul says is not my own—and to other bodies in creation? Even though HAF contends that Westerners focus too much on asanas, it is nonetheless true that attentive respect for the body and for its health and vitality can help Christians develop resources in their own traditions on dignity, incarnation and consummation. So too, the effect of asanas on the mind can

demonstrate to Christians what they already know to be true, namely, that body and spirit are one.

Surely a physical practice that respects both body and mind merits the attention of Christians seeking greater respect and stewardship of the bodies of creation. The Indian virtue of equanimity can and should help me to realize that once I have a deeper respect for the dignity of my own body, the dignity of others becomes that much more evident.

The "how" of such influence is surely the domain of individual discernment. But that Christians can find support in yoga for their own discipleship surprises nobody acquainted with yogic practices.

The dialogue of religious experience occurs from a position of commitment to one's own tradition, not from laxity or heterodoxy, and it demonstrates just how real the fruit of curiosity and charity can be. It also demonstrates how unsatisfactory simple identity markers can be for those able to cross over and back again profitably and faithfully.

Arguably, Christians who are most committed to their own tradition are the ones able to share in and learn from the practices of other traditions without fearing the loss of identity. These Christians are often able to look confidently beyond the church to what God has done and continues to do among non-Christians. No mere speculation, this confidence is born out of their experience of what God has done and continues to do within creation, including within religions.

A further question confronts those who wish to comment on Christian participation in yoga without participating themselves or becoming conversant with the broader philosophical and religious terrain on which yoga rests. Understanding is the fruit of concrete and open encounter. Moral speech about the other is best when we speak and act in the presence of the other, having heard the other and shared space with the other, and found shared causes if not compatible practices as well.

In his volume on anthropology in *Church Dogmatics,* Karl Barth outlined an edifying vision of what it means to encounter another person. For Barth, real encounter consists of a set of reciprocal activities and dispositions. It requires mutual vision, seeing the other and being seen by the other, peering into another's heart and mind and in the openness which allows me to be peered into without hindrance. It requires mutual speech and hearing, in which the other person's self-declaration

becomes for me an event which must happen for my own sake, since "I" am relationally constituted as an "I-Thou." Real encounter means mutual assistance, or solidarity. Action is human to the extent that it gives and receives assistance, that it comes from one who eschews isolation in favor of intimacy and assistance, and is inhuman in the rejection of these. This is precisely the humanity that Barth believes to have been disclosed in the real humanity of Jesus Christ. Real encounter, finally, means engaging in the above activities with gladness, for they reflect the impulses of one's own heart and help to create authentic community (*koinonia*).

In a recent issue of *Commonweal* magazine, New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson argues that the Abrahamic faith traditions have become increasingly imperiled by a trend toward identifying religious belief with external or what he calls "exoteric" markers at the expense of their spiritual, mystical, or "esoteric" substance. More significant than so-called clashes between religious traditions, Johnson believes, are the clashes occurring *within* traditions between the exoteric and esoteric versions of each.

Exoteric markers of identity highlight external expressions of religion, particularly as these contribute to an explicit social or political vision that serves as the criterion for orthodoxy. The esoteric markers of identity locate the core of religious belief in spiritual or mystical experience. As mystical, the esoteric experience of God cannot be reduced to exoteric markers, for it remains irreducibly personal and ineffable. Johnson's lament is that religions have lost the appropriate balance between the exoteric and esoteric versions, rendering belief disturbingly void of mysticism and little more than "dry bones." What is needed is a balance between the mystical and the political, the visible markings of orthodoxy and the internal depth of the heart's experience.

In light of this framework, we might observe in yoga a remarkable example of the holistic vision. For yoga, especially the multireligious form of yoga bequeathed to us in the second-century compilation of aphorisms on yoga practice by Patanjali, seeks in its *Ashtanga* or eight-limbed approach an impressively holistic life, life as interdependent and reciprocal as the growth of limbs on a tree or any other body.

Classic yoga texts, like Patanjali's collection of yoga sutras, display a remarkable vision of holistic living. They present an eight-limbed path with which many Christians have profitably encountered. It consists of moral restraint toward the environment (*yama*), personal observances (*niyama*), physical postures (*asana*),

breathing techniques to still the mind (*pranayama*), the inwardness of ascetic restraint of senses (*pratyahara*), concentration and the ability to focus the mind ( *dharana*), meditation insight (*dhyana*) and absorption into a transcendent consciousness beyond conventional dualities (*samadhi*). Each of these eight limbs is to be cultivated simultaneously, in mutual support of each other.

Surely Christians can give and receive wisdom on these matters. Whatever form the debate about yoga takes, let it rest on the foundation of real encounter and the reciprocity of dialogue.