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**THE YOGA BOOM:
A CALL FOR CHRISTIAN DISCERNMENT
PART TWO: YOGA IN ITS CONTEMPORARY WESTERN CONTEXT**

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SYNOPSIS

The character of yoga in the West has largely been determined by the men who brought it here from the East. The late Swamis Vivekananda, Yogananda, Muktananda, and Satchidananda all played pivotal roles in exposing Western culture to yoga. Today the leading yogis all teach distinctive styles of hatha yoga: B. K. S. Iyengar created *Iyengar yoga*; Sri K. Pattabhi Jois brought *ashtanga yoga*, from which *power yoga* has been derived, to the West; and Bikram Choudhury introduced *Bikram* or *hot yoga*.

Yoga has moved over the past two decades from the periphery to the mainstream of Western culture. It is now established in the curricula of many American public schools; it is being taught to preschool-age children; it has become one of the West's preferred physical fitness regimens; it is being offered to, and sometimes mandated for, employees by a host of major corporations; its alleged health benefits have been the subject of much scientific research and it is now prescribed for a number of physical and psychological problems; and it has long been embraced by many mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics for its spiritual as well as physical benefits and is now likewise being embraced by many evangelicals.

Raja yoga, which is the classical form of yoga, is incompatible with Christianity. It is designed to fulfill non-Christian mystical objectives, it tends to engage the participant in idolatry, and it has spiritually dangerous connections to the occult.

In part one of this three-part series we examined yoga as it has developed in its native India, including its meaning, purpose, doctrines, and major forms. We saw that yoga is historically rooted in Hinduism and was developed as a method for achieving mystical union¹ with Hindu conceptions of Ultimate Reality or God. Other mystical religious traditions likewise use it for the same purpose.

Today in the West, however, many practice yoga merely as a form of physical exercise, with no thought of religion. Those who believe that it can be spiritually beneficial usually hold that it is compatible with any religion, and some have even written books promoting its use among evangelical Christians (see below). In this installment we will examine the forms yoga has taken in the West and begin to address the all-important question: "Is yoga, or can it be, religiously neutral and therefore compatible with Christianity?"

SOME MAJOR YOGIS IN THE WEST

The character of yoga in the West has largely been shaped by the men who exported it here from the East. Their personalities, the personalities of their own gurus who sent them here, the general character of their religious traditions, and the manner in which they adapted and packaged those traditions for

consumption in the West all have contributed greatly to the yoga culture that is now thriving in the United States, the European Union states, Canada, Australia, and other non-Eastern industrialized countries. Space constraints will permit only a brief survey of some of the major players and the distinctive yoga styles they introduced.

Dead Swamis Society

There was a mere trickle of gurus emigrating to the West through much of the twentieth century, but after President Lyndon Johnson signed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the trickle became a flood. This was just in time for gurus to capitalize on an awakening interest in Eastern spirituality especially among baby boomers. Many of the most important gurus are no longer on the scene, but the movements they established live on.

The person most responsible for introducing yoga to the West was Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), a personal disciple of the revered Hindu saint, Sri Ramakrishna. In 1893 Vivekananda won over many liberal religionists who had gathered at the Chicago World's Fair for the first World's Parliament of Religions, and he subsequently expanded that following by lecturing on raja yoga (the classical form of yoga) across the country. Many of his followers began to practice yoga, and out of that the Vedanta Societies, the first Hindu fellowships to be established in the West, were born.

Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952) was the second major emissary of Hinduism and yoga to the West. Yogananda followed in the trail blazed by Vivekananda: first dazzling attendees and attracting disciples at the 1920 International Congress of Religious Liberals in Boston, then building on that following by lecturing from city to city, and finally establishing a base of operation for his own Hindu tradition on American soil: the Self-Realization Fellowship, headquartered in Los Angeles.² Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* has served as a primer on yoga and Eastern philosophy for millions of Westerners. Yogananda taught **kriya yoga**, an esoteric form of raja yoga known as the "yoga of ritual action." It is said to accelerate spiritual growth and to produce ecstatic experiences because of its manipulation of prana (vital force), which it accomplishes chiefly through pranayama (breath control—see part one) and the use of the mind to direct prana around the spinal cord.

Swami Muktananda (1908–1982) initiated the siddha yoga movement, which teaches **kundalini yoga**. He was famous for the *shaktipat*, or touch of power, in which the kundalini energy is believed to be transmitted from guru to disciple through physical contact, with overwhelming spiritual, psychological, and physical effects. Muktananda's teaching is summed up as "*Honor your Self, Worship your Self, Meditate on your Self, God dwells within you as you.*"³ He was immersed in major scandals toward the end of his life because of alleged sexual exploitation of his female disciples.⁴

Swami Satchidananda (1914–2002), founder of the Integral Yoga Institute and the Yogaville ashram in central Virginia, first gained renown for his opening address at the 1969 Woodstock rock festival. His **integral yoga** approach calls for the integration of yoga philosophy into every area of life and culture. He was a promoter of the unity of all faiths and was highly revered and influential in the yoga and New Age worlds, but he too was entangled in scandal because of allegations of sexually exploiting some of his female disciples.⁵

B. K. S. Iyengar/Iyengar Yoga

Arguably the most respected and influential teacher of hatha yoga, **B. K. S. Iyengar** (b. 1918) continues to astonish people with his supple demonstrations of difficult yoga poses. Iyengar has systematized over two hundred classic asanas (postures—see part one) and fourteen types of pranayama and has developed props to make the postures accessible even to people who lack the strength or agility to achieve them on their own. The intention is for such students to develop such strength eventually, as Iyengar did when he overcame his childhood afflictions of malaria, typhoid, and tuberculosis through yoga practice. *Iyengar yoga* emphasizes both proper alignment and length of time in holding a pose. There are 180 Iyengar Institutes around the world administered by certified trainers who first must complete anywhere from two to more than ten years of rigorous training.

Superstar yoga instructor **Rodney Yee** of Oakland, California (known for his numerous instructional videos, headliner status at yoga conferences, and strong promotion by Oprah Winfrey⁶) started as an Iyengar yoga teacher. He now combines the Iyengar style with one of his own creation.

Sri K. Pattabhi Jois/Ashtanga or Power Yoga

Like Iyengar, **Sri K. Pattabhi Jois** (b. 1915) was a disciple of S. T. Krishnamacharya in Mysore, India. He continues to teach yoga at his Ashtanga Yoga Research Center in Mysore. A quarter of a century ago Jois brought *ashtanga yoga* to America and it has become extremely popular and influential. Ashtanga yoga has been promoted heavily by such celebrities as Gwyneth Paltrow, Sting, and Madonna.

Ashtanga (which literally refers to Patanjali's eight limbs of yoga and is used both as a general term for raja yoga and as a term for this particular style) is a systematic and regimented style of yoga that employs *vinyasa* (a synchronization of movement and breathing) in such a way as to create a flowing pattern from one asana to the next; during this process, blood temperature rises and the body's perspiration releases impurities.

Ashtanga yoga is sometimes called *power yoga*, although the term *power yoga* is also associated with a distinct derivative of ashtanga:

Power yoga is a general term used in the West to describe a vigorous, fitness-based approach to vinyasa-style yoga. Most power yoga is closely modeled on the Ashtanga style of practice. The term "power yoga" came into common usage in the mid 1990s, when several yoga teachers were looking for a way to make Ashtanga yoga more accessible to western students. Unlike Ashtanga, power yoga does not follow a set series of poses. Therefore, any power yoga class can vary widely from the next. What they have in common is an emphasis on strength and flexibility. The advent of power yoga heralded yoga's current popularity, as people began to see yoga as a way to work out. Power yoga brought yoga into the gyms of America.⁷

The most famous teacher of power yoga is **Baron Baptiste**, whose yoga studios in Massachusetts are the largest in the country. Baptiste is well known through his books, instructional videos, and numerous television appearances, including the *Transform Your Life with Baron Baptiste* program that public television stations air during pledge drives.

Bikram Choudhury/Bikram or Hot Yoga

Based in Los Angeles, former weightlifter **Bikram Choudhury** (b. 1946) calls himself the "Guru of the Stars."⁸ (Shirley MacLaine, Raquel Welsh, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and John McEnroe have been among his students.) Choudhury, who originally was sent to America to teach yoga by his guru, Bishnu Ghosh (the brother of Paramahansa Yogananda), opened his first studio in Beverly Hills in 1973. Today there are well over four hundred independently owned and operated Bikram Yoga studios worldwide and three thousand teachers, who were certified by Bikram's Yoga College of India, which is based in Los Angeles.

Bikram yoga is also known as *hot yoga* because of its ninety-minute workouts involving twenty-six postures and two breathing exercises performed in a room that's heated to 105 degrees or more. He calls it a "torture chamber," and perhaps because it is so physically punishing it is more attractive to men than any other yoga style (about forty percent of hot yoga practitioners are male). Just as with power yoga, there are yoga teachers advertising "hot yoga" who are not affiliated with Choudhury and not teaching his specific pose sequence, but are teaching yoga under sweltering conditions.

Choudhury has been a lightning rod for controversy for numerous reasons, including the following: (1) his hot yoga has been criticized as unsafe for people in poor physical condition;⁹ (2) he has franchised his yoga schools and copyrighted his yoga posture sequence and other "brand" distinctives and threatened legal action against those who use them without certification;¹⁰ (3) he lives in Beverly Hills, wears Rolex watches, owns dozens of classic cars, including Rolls Royces, and in other respects does not fit the ascetic profile of an Indian yogi; (4) he is an outrageous braggadocio (e.g., "I'm beyond Superman"¹¹); and (5) he's been involved in sexual scandals with some of his female pupils. "What happens when they say they will commit suicide unless you sleep with them?" he says. "What am I supposed to do? Sometimes having an affair is the only way to save someone's life."¹²

PENETRATION INTO WESTERN CULTURE

In part one I began by affirming that yoga has moved in status over the past two decades from fringe fad to cultural mainstream. It is now virtually impossible for any person to avoid encountering and taking a position on it.

The number of Americans presently practicing yoga is commonly estimated to be eighteen million, which is likely an extrapolation based on the fact that in 2004 the figure was at sixteen and one-half million, according to a Harris poll commissioned by the leading yoga magazine, *Yoga Journal*.¹³ This is up from one million in 1978, when I did my original research on yoga. More than seventy-five percent of yoga practitioners are women. The same survey revealed that “Americans spent \$2.95 billion on yoga classes, yoga related products like clothing, books and mats, and on yoga retreats and vacations.”¹⁴ Yoga has become such a booming business, with neighborhood yoga studios being bought out by budding yoga franchises, that yoga purists lament the commercialization of a spiritual tradition, dubbing it “McYoga.”¹⁵ *Yoga Journal*'s readership is over one million,¹⁶ a staggeringly high figure for a niche magazine.

Yoga in the Schools

The prevailing interpretation of the Second Amendment's establishment clause as enjoining a strict separation of church and state has resulted in a complete ban of such Christian activities as Bible reading, prayer, and gospel preaching as part of American public school programs. With the religious nature of yoga made clear in part one of this series, it should therefore be a cause for concern to Christians that over the past decade public schools across the country increasingly have been incorporating yoga into school activities.

In 2002, the *New York Times* reported that at seven San Francisco public schools “with more on the way—the ‘yoga break’ has taken its place beside typical school rituals like recess and the Pledge of Allegiance....” The schools had trained teachers so that yoga could be included not only in physical education but in the regular classroom as well. Furthermore, “in Seattle, 15 of 97 public schools have yoga as a warm-up in gym class, and it is an elective for high school students....” The *Times* also reported that a Los Angeles “nonprofit group called Yoga Inside...sponsors classes in 31 states, many in schools in poor urban neighborhoods.” Lastly, “the Accelerated School in South Central Los Angeles, an acclaimed public charter school, introduced yoga classes for all students last year.”¹⁷

A couple of years later, Fox News did a story on tensions that were developing over the incorporation of yoga into the Aspen Elementary School curriculum in Colorado. Steve Woodrow, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Aspen, and other parents of children in the school “complained to the school board, claiming it was a clear violation of the separation of church and state. ‘If you study yoga its roots clearly are within Hinduism,’ Woodrow said.... Even some of the most basic yoga terms, he claims, may cause elementary school students to bring up questions that have answers based in Eastern religious philosophies.”¹⁸ Fox News reported that the American Yoga Association (AYA) and the school disagreed. It quoted from the AYA's Web site, which states:

Yoga is not a religion. It has no creed or fixed set of beliefs, nor is there a prescribed godlike figure to be worshipped in a particular manner. Religions for the most part seem to be based upon the belief in and worship of things (God or godlike figures) that exist outside oneself. 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.

The common belief that Yoga derives from Hinduism is a misconception. Yoga actually predates Hinduism by many centuries.¹⁹

Interestingly, a yogi at a yoga Web site where the Fox News article is posted made the following candid admission in a forum for responses to the article:

In all honesty, I agree with this guy that Yoga is a religious system. One can try to get around that by saying its just exercise, but really its not. In India it is definitely religious, and in the U.S. it certainly is “New Age”. Its a bit like legalizing marijuana. That alone might not be a big deal, but it leads people down a certain path to harder drugs. So start out with the soft sell of yoga as exercise,

and you plant the seed of diverting the child towards certain religious systems. While I may not personally be offended, I can certainly see how a religious Christian would object.²⁰

Three years later, in 2007, Steve Woodrow and other concerned parents not only in Aspen but across the country were losing the battle. Tara Guber, the creator of the “Yoga Ed.” program that was implemented in Aspen, simply took the overtly Hindu language out of the program while keeping everything else intact, and the strategy worked. As the Associated Press reported:

Guber crafted a new curriculum that eliminated chanting and translated Sanskrit into kid-friendly English. Yogic panting became “bunny breathing,” and “meditation” became “time in.”

“I stripped every piece of anything that anyone could vaguely construe as spiritual or religious out of the program,” Guber said.

Now, more than 100 schools in 26 states have adopted Guber’s “Yoga Ed.” program and more than 300 physical education instructors have been trained in it.

Countless other public and private schools from California to Massachusetts— including the Aspen school where Guber clashed with parents—are teaching yoga.²¹

For Children before and beyond the Schools

The push to teach yoga to the young is not limited to the schools or to school-age children. Yoga studios across the country have been adding kids’ yoga to their schedules, and several booming businesses have popped up,²² such as Marsha Wenig’s YogaKids International based in Michigan City, Indiana,²³ Jody Komitor’s Next Generation Yoga on Manhattan’s Upper West Side,²⁴ and Helen Gerabedian’s Itsy Bitsy Yoga in Marlboro, Massachusetts.²⁵

The stated plan is to teach preschoolers hatha yoga at first and thus pique their interest in yoga, and then when they’re older teach them how to meditate and the philosophy behind it all. All of this is spelled out in Jody Komitor and Eve Adamson’s *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Yoga with Kids*. The book claims yoga is “spiritual” but not “religious” and is therefore compatible with all religions, but then proceeds to teach about the eight limbs of yoga, karma, prana, chakras, and other doctrines unique to the religion of Hinduism.²⁶

In Sports and Physical Fitness

Yoga has become one of America’s most popular exercise regimens for staying fit. Seventy-five percent of health clubs in the United States offer yoga classes.²⁷ Athletes are also increasingly using yoga to limber up for other sports, such as golf.

Furthermore, yoga asana competitions, which have long been held in India, are becoming increasingly popular in America. Bikram Choudhury has established regional and international Bishnu Charan Ghosh Cup championships and he is also leading a campaign to have competitive yoga included in the Olympics.

In the Workplace

It is becoming increasingly common for major corporations to provide yoga for their employees as a means of reducing stress and promoting general health. Entrepreneurial yoga teachers have formed businesses to service this market. One such company, Yoga at Work, states on its Web site, “Join a rapidly growing list of major companies like Nike, HBO, Apple, Forbes, General Electric, PepsiCo and Chase Manhattan that rely on yoga to keep their employees healthy, happy, focused, fully engaged in their work.”²⁸

According to a blog entry titled “Mandatory Yoga at Work” by law professor Paul Secunda, the *National Law Journal* reports that “employers are increasingly mandating that employees have healthy lifestyles, or face repercussions. Mandatory wellness programs are popping up everywhere, lawyers say, requiring everything from cholesterol screening to weight-loss plans and yoga classes. Several employers are starting to reward employees with extra cash for meeting certain company health goals. Others are fining those who refuse to take part in programs.”²⁹

In Health Care and Medical Research

A 1990 study showed that yoga combined with other healthy practices was effective in treating arterial blockage. In recent years further research of yoga has yielded some tentatively positive results for relieving carpal tunnel syndrome, asthma and other pulmonary conditions, substance abuse, depression, anxiety, insomnia, multiple sclerosis, lower back pain, and obesity. Further claims have been made for yoga's beneficial effects in preventing or managing numerous additional afflictions. It is becoming increasingly common for mainstream physicians and psychiatrists to prescribe or recommend yoga as therapy, and for hospitals and physical therapists to incorporate it in their treatment regimens.³⁰

There are some proven health benefits to yoga practice, but most of those claims have only anecdotal support; thus, they should not be magnified out of proportion. Further, the press has noted a "surge of muscle and ligament sprains, disk injuries, and cartilage tears," "mild to moderate sprains of the knees, shoulder, neck, or back," and "soft-tissue and joint injuries" associated with yoga, with some of the injuries sustained being quite serious.³¹

A *New York Times* article raises the question whether yoga's negative effects may at times outweigh its positive ones: "'The extreme range of motion yoga develops does not necessarily have an advantage, and it may be counterproductive,' said Dr. Shirley Sahrman, a professor of physical therapy at the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis. Like dancers, practitioners of yoga cultivate overly flexible spines, which often cause problems in resting posture. 'In my business,' Dr. Sahrman said, 'I have more problems with people who have excessive mobility than limited mobility.'"³²

Yoga's effect on behavior is not always positive, either. At Ringerike Prison in Oslo, Norway, a trial yoga program was stopped after some prisoners became more aggressive and agitated, while others developed sleeping problems. "[The warden] said that deep breathing exercises could make the inmates more dangerous, by unblocking their psychological barriers."³³

In the Church

At 7:30 a.m. every Saturday for the past eleven years, a Yoga Ministry is held for members of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago (the church Senator Barak Obama attended for two decades).³⁴ Yoga has been embraced as an edifying practice in many Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant churches since the 1970s. For example, the late George A. Mahoney SJ, who authored several books on Catholic spirituality, wrote in 1976:

The ultimate worth of any technique must be measured by the fruit produced. Hence no Christian ought to condemn out of hand any technique, be it yoga, the use of music and prayer, chants, Silva Mind Control, Arica, T.M., or whatever unless for that person it has not been a help but a definite hindrance to prayer. A technique has no meaning unless we ask the question: "How is it being used? What are the fruits that come from such use? Does it help us or others pray with greater consciousness, beyond the habitual superficial level of controlled discursive prayer?"³⁵

Acceptance of yoga as both spiritually and physically beneficial has surfaced in evangelical churches only over the past five to six years.³⁶ This new movement should be differentiated from the unquantifiable but probably large number of evangelicals who for many years have practiced hatha yoga merely for its physical benefits, either believing that it is religiously neutral or confident that they can withstand its Eastern religious influences. The latter would only describe what they practice as yoga, while the former claim to be practicing "Christian yoga" or some other equivalent term.

In 2005 *Time* magazine described this trend as "a fast-growing movement that seeks to retool the 5,000-year-old practice of yoga to fit Christ's teachings. From Phoenix, Ariz., to Pittsburgh, Pa., from Grand Rapids, Mich., to New York City, hundreds of Christian yoga classes are in session. A national association of Christian yoga teachers was started in July, and a slew of books and videos are about to hit the market."³⁷

Those books and videos have since been published. The most significant titles are *Yoga for Christians* by Susan Bordenkircher (W Publishing Group, 2006) and *Holy Yoga* by Brooke Boon (Faith Words, 2007). Bordenkircher, who previously had taught power yoga as a Christian, created her Outstretched in

Worship classes, which combine yoga with Christian faith, in 2001. She developed a video ministry the following year. Boon had previously been a yoga teacher and, after her conversion to Christ in 2001, she immediately began to weave her new faith into her yoga practice through insights she attributes to the Lord. She has built Holy Yoga into “a worldwide ministry that includes classes, teacher training, and audiovisual resources....”³⁸

Both Bordenkircher and Boon acknowledge their profound indebtedness to Nancy Roth, author of *An Invitation to Christian Yoga* (Seabury Books, 1989). Roth is an Episcopal priest with “an ecumenical ministry in spirituality.”³⁹ She clarifies that “while my own journey has been greatly enriched by the wisdom of other traditions, most notably the mystical traditions of the east such as the one in which yoga was born, my particular way is the Christian way.”⁴⁰

Roth explains how this Christian approach to yoga first developed: “The period of relaxation and visualization at the end of class became for me a doorway into prayer. It did not matter that we had chanted ‘Om’ or that the exercises had Hindu names....The One I encountered, as I lay on the gym floor with my body relaxed and my mind and spirit attentive, was the God I knew in Christ Jesus.”⁴¹ She concluded that “there needed to be a new Christian asceticism that respected the integration of body and mind and reflected both the newest research in psychology and physiology and the wisdom of other, even more ancient spiritual traditions.”⁴²

Roth’s words appear to reflect an inclusivist theology that is common in mainline churches such as the Episcopal church. Inclusivism holds that salvation is through Jesus Christ alone, but Christ’s salvation can extend even to those who do not consciously believe in Him, imparting to them gifts of grace or spiritual riches that can benefit those of other faiths, including Christians.⁴³ Bordenkircher and Boon seem to be evangelical and more theologically conservative than Roth, but Roth’s interfaith exploration and synthesis of East and West laid the conceptual and practical foundations for Christian yoga, and the marks of her influence are evident throughout the movement.

After becoming accustomed to arguing that yoga is inherently a spiritual practice and that Christians run a spiritual risk in taking classes at the local yoga studio, I was surprised to find that Bordenkircher and especially Boon agree with me.⁴⁴ Where they differ from Christian critics of yoga such as me is in their belief that yoga can be redeemed and made a holy practice to the Lord. They maintain this, furthermore, without revamping yoga into something essentially different than what we find in the Eastern varieties: there are the same postures, breathing exercises, and—to a significant extent—meditation techniques.

What makes their versions of yoga Christian? For all advocates of Christian yoga the answer is the same: *intent*. They are worshipping the Triune God of the Bible throughout the practice, offering their bodies to Him as a “living and holy sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1). The background music has Christian rather than Hindu associations, although it is similarly conducive to meditation. They have given several of the standard asanas Christian significance, renaming some of them (e.g., for Roth, the Sun Salutation becomes the Son Salutation). They associate pranayama with the Holy Spirit (since Spirit is derived from the Hebrew word for breath) or with the creative power of God. Instead of using the names of Hindu gods as mantras in their meditation practice they repeat short Bible verses, biblically based positive affirmations, or chants from Christian mystical traditions. Their belief is that as long as yoga is practiced as “body prayer” to the living God, with the mind constantly focused on Him, the Christian runs no risk of committing idolatry and the Devil has no room to move.

The kind of meditation practiced in the Christian yoga movement is called centering prayer or contemplative prayer, which has its roots in Catholic mysticism but is also practiced by mainline Protestants and is rising in popularity among “emerging church” and other evangelicals. Roth writes that “it involves a paradox: the paradox that attention to the inmost self is attention to God....focusing the mind and the heart in the practice of meditations is a means of exploration both of our own nature and of the mystery of God.”⁴⁷

Thus far in this series we have surveyed yoga both in its original Eastern and in its contemporary Western contexts. We are now prepared, in the remainder of this installment and in all of part three, to begin formulating a comprehensive Christian response. If we as Christians find ourselves in a culture in which

yoga is becoming institutionalized, we must first determine whether yoga in any form—from classic raja yoga to Westernized hatha yoga to novel “Christian yoga”—can be truly compatible with Christian faith.

IS RAJA YOGA RELIGIOUSLY NEUTRAL?

The problem with George Mahoney’s position quoted above is his assumption that raja yoga can be used for Christian purposes just as effectively as for pantheistic Hindu or other Eastern mystical purposes. The Hindu understanding of God is fundamentally different than the Christian one, and yoga was developed to achieve oneness with the *Hindu* God—a God that is impersonal and does not engage in thoughts, conversation, or relationships but exists in a state of pure awareness. The Hindu concept of *oneness* with God is also radically different than the Christian one, since it involves mystically realizing that one *is* God. To achieve such union with *this* God one must achieve a state of pure awareness that excludes thoughts, conversations, and relationships. Yoga systematically achieves this by ultimately emptying the mind of thought, which leads to a loss of the subject-object distinction so that the meditator now feels “one with the Universe,” which in pantheism means “one with God.” The discipline of yoga was developed to enable the practitioner to realize Hindu beliefs experientially, and such experiences at times can be quite powerful and convincing (which is why yogis who were sent here to promote Hindu spirituality commonly are more than happy to accept yoga students who have no initial interest in spirituality).

Christian spirituality, by stark contrast, seeks a oneness of will and not of being with a personal God who thinks, converses, and has relationships. Christian meditation therefore involves an active rather than a passive mental state. Meditation according to the Bible is filled with content, such as the works, Word, and attributes of God (see, e.g., Ps. 1:2; 63:6; 77:12; 119:15, 27, 148; 145:5). It never creates a mental void, into which spiritual forces that are not of God can rush—as does yoga. The two forms of meditation could not be more different, seeking, as they do, such radically different conceptions of union with such radically different conceptions of God.

The Idolatry Entanglement

Another problem with Christians practicing raja yoga is its complicated involvement with idolatry. Not only is one seeking union with the impersonal Brahman of Hinduism, but the mantras one is given to repeat in meditation are usually the names of Hindu gods. Furthermore, the practice of *puja*, which is ritualized worship of Hindu gods or gurus, is often intermixed in raja yoga and is not always easy for the novice to detect.

Some professing Christians see no reason for concern, however, such as defrocked Catholic priest turned Episcopal priest Matthew Fox, as *Yoga Journal* reports:

But what if the religious people in your life won’t let you sidestep the doctrinal controversies (for instance, the propriety of chanting a Hindu deity’s name)? [Matthew] Fox sees no problem with challenging them back: “...If there’s been too much God-talk in our brains, then other names, whether it be Brahma, Shiva, Shakti, what have you, can add to our repertoire. It’s not a subtraction. If our God is so fragile that He or She is threatened by new names then we ought to look at that.”⁴⁸

This is an amazing thing for an ordained Christian minister to say. Has he read the Scriptures of his own religion? God’s First Commandment was, “You shall have no other gods before me.” His Second Commandment was, “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me” (Exod. 20:3–5). Throughout the Old Testament the emphasis remained the same, with Yahweh visiting severe judgments upon the Israelites when they invoked the names of other gods (see, e.g., Deut. 18:20; Judges 10:14; Zech. 13:2). The New Testament takes a similarly unfavorable view of idolatry (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 6:9–10; 1 John 5:21; Rev. 22:14–15).

The God of the Bible has made it quite clear that He does not identify with the gods of other religions or receive their worship as His worship. Fox may feel qualified to psychoanalyze God’s dislike of idolatry, but

I'd say that as the Creator and Sustainer of the human race the Lord has good reason to be displeased when we deny Him and disobey His law and instead worship and serve gods of our own creation. The "jealousy" that non-Christians so often belittle simply means that God wants a relationship with us. That's good news.

The Occult Connection

The further we delve into the world of yoga, the clearer it becomes that it overlaps with the world of the occult ⁴⁹ at several points. The concept of a psychic force (prana) coursing through psychic centers (chakras) in the body, and the attempt to manipulate that flow, is essentially occult, and, from a biblical standpoint, spiritually dangerous. It is dangerous because whenever one attempts to engage a spiritual force other than the Holy Spirit one opens oneself up to demonic influences.

It should go without saying that attempting to arouse the serpentine kundalini energy believed to be sleeping at the base of one's spine is both occult and dangerous. Our look at kundalini yoga revealed something that is generally true of yoga practice: it can involve both wanted and unwanted contact with spirits, which are believed to range from departed humans and demons to demigods and deities. As for tantra yoga, we've seen that everything about it is occult in nature, and its practice at times can involve the most extreme forms of occultism.

Surprise! Raja Yoga Is Hinduism

In an unguarded moment, when its concern was to argue for the superiority of yoga for psychotherapy over Freudian psychoanalysis rather than to maintain yoga's compatibility with all religions, *Yoga Journal* revealed the thoroughly Hindu philosophy behind the practice of yoga:

From the yogic perspective, all human beings are "born divine" and each human being has at core a soul (*atman*) that dwells eternally in the changeless, infinite, all-pervading reality (*brahman*). In Patanjali's classic statement of this view, *tat tvam asi* (thou art that),⁵⁰ we already are that which we seek. We are God in disguise. We are already inherently perfect, and we have the potential in each moment to wake up to this true, awake, and enlightened nature.

This is a far cry from the struggles of ego, id, and superego suggested by Freud. In the sophisticated psychology of yoga, *avidya*, or ignorance of our true nature, is the central problem of the human self and the source of all suffering. In other words, we've simply forgotten who we are. We've forgotten that we're the fantastic dance of energy and consciousness, the divine play (*lila*) of being and becoming. And what is the source of this alienation? Not sin nor wrongdoing nor psychopathology of any kind. We're simply misidentified.⁵¹

The article proceeds to argue that Western culture is terribly haunted by the psychological effects of Calvinist doctrines that human nature is depraved and that God is ontologically separate from human beings. Our attempt to destroy the dark side of our nature, which the author believes was carried over from religion to psychotherapy, is fragmenting our psyches, but yoga offers the solution. It teaches that we are in fact "saturated with the divine" and therefore we need to embrace our dark side as well as our light. "This is known as the 'unitive' rather than the 'separative' approach to spiritual and psychological growth. The radical notion in the unitive view is that there is nothing at all dangerous hidden in the basement of our unconscious."⁵²

In other words, if the Christian practices yogic meditation and becomes a full-fledged raja yogi he will be cured of his Christianity. Who needs a Savior God if we ourselves are "saturated with the divine" rather than saturated with sin? A radically different diagnosis of the human problem (ignorance rather than sin) results in a radically different solution (embracing ourselves rather than embracing a transcendent God and His gift of salvation).

We have yet to answer conclusively the 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 such places as public schools and the workplace? These will all be the focus of the third and final installment in this series.

NOTES

1. Mystical union means an experiential realization of one's already existing (according to the belief system) ontological union with Ultimate Reality. Under this common definition, it does not apply to Christian or other theistic religious systems.
2. See Elliot Miller, "Swami Yogananda and the Self-Realization Fellowship: A Successful Hindu Countermission to the West," *Christian Research Journal* 22, 2 (1999): 32–41, <http://www.equip.org/DS213>.
3. SYDA Foundation, "Swami Muktananda," Siddha Yoga Meditation, <http://www.muktananda.com.au/muktananda.htm>.
4. See William Rodamor, "The Secret Life of Swami Muktananda," LSY, <http://www.leavingsiddhayoga.net/secret.htm>.
5. See Geoffrey D. Falk, *Stripping the Gurus: Sex, Violence, Abuse and Enlightenment* (e-book: Million Monkeys Press, 2007), chap. 7, <http://www.strippingthegurus.com/>.
6. Yee was featured prominently on an episode of the *Oprah Winfrey Show* devoted to yoga, June 29, 2001.
7. Ann Pizer, "Power Yoga," About.com: Yoga, <http://yoga.about.com/od/poweryoga/a/power.htm>.
8. Paul Keegan, "Yogis Behaving Badly," *Business2 Magazine*, September 2002, <http://www.rickross.com/reference/general/general478.html>.
9. See Lorraine Kreahling, "When Does Flexible Start to Mean Harmful? 'Hot' Yoga Draws Fire," *New York Times*, March 30, 2004, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9905EFDE1F30F933A05750C0A9629C8B63&scp=1&sq=yoga+Lorraine+Kreahling>.
10. See Douglas LeBlanc, "Putting a Patent on YOGA," *Christian Research Journal* 31, 2 (2008): 41–42.
11. Keegan.
12. Ibid.
13. "The Yoga Journal Story," Yoga Journal, <http://www.yogajournal.com/global/34>.
14. Susan Moran, "Meditate on This: Yoga Is Big Business," *New York Times*, December 28, 2006, available at Yoga Journal, http://www.yjevents.com/yjevents/images/NY_Times_Yoga_Business_28dec06.pdf.
15. Hilary E. MacGregor, "Assuming the Profit Position," *Los Angeles Times*, September 10, 2004, available at Yoga Works, About Us, Press, <http://www.yogaworks.com/about/assets/LATimes092004.pdf>.
16. "The Yoga Journal Story."
17. Patricia Leigh Brown, "Latest Way to Cut Grade School Stress: Yoga," *New York Times*, March 24, 2002, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9500E1DC173BF937A15750C0A9649C8B63&n=Top/Reference/Times%20Topics/People/B/Brown,%20Patricia%20Leigh>.
18. "Yoga Causes Tension in Public Schools," FOXNEWS.COM, Oct. 1, 2004 (no longer online; copy on file).
19. American Yoga Association, "Yoga and Religion," General Yoga Information, AYA, <http://www.americanyogaassociation.org/general.html#YogaandReligion>.
20. Guaracandra, "Yoga Causes Tension for Public Schools," Audarya Fellowship, Main Forum, World Review, <http://www.indiadinvine.org/audarya/world-review/30762-yoga-causes-tension-public-schools.html>.
21. Rachel Conrad, "Yoga Stretches into Public Schools," January 28, 2007, FOXNEWS.COM, <http://www.foxnews.com/wires/2007Jan28/0,4670,FitnessYogainSchools,00.html>.
22. "Yoga Craze Spills over to Preschools," CNN Student News, July 25, 2003, <http://www.cnn.com/2003/EDUCATION/07/25/offbeat.yoga.ap/index.html>.
23. See <http://www.yogakids.com/>.
24. See <http://www.nextgenerationyoga.com/>.
25. See <http://www.itsybitsyyoga.com/>.
26. See Jodi B. Komitor, M.A., and Eve Adamson, "Part 2: Growing with the Tree of Yoga," in *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Yoga with Kids* (Indianapolis: Alpha Books, 2000), 43–84.
27. Richard Corliss, "The Power of Yoga," *Time*, April 23, 2001, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,999731,00.html>.
28. "Stress Management Is Smart Business," Yoga at Work, QuikPage, <http://www.yogaatwork.qpg.com/>.
29. Paul M. Secunda, "Mandatory Yoga at Work," Workplace Prof Blog, November 26, 2007, Law Professor Blogs, http://lawprofessors.typepad.com/laborprof_blog/2007/11/mandatory-yoga.html.
30. Carol Krucoff, "No Longer a Stretch: Yoga as Healing Tool," *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 2000, S3–4. Yogis all over the country are providing such service to mainstream health facilities; see, e.g., <http://www.lifeasyoga.com/about-robyn.html>.
31. Alice Dembner, "Stretching Has Its Limits," *Boston Globe*, January 8, 2003, <http://www.religionnewsblog.com/1869/stretching-has-its-limits>. See also Carolyn Kleiner, "Mind-Body Fitness," *U.S. News and World Report*, May 13, 2002, 54.
32. Kreahling.
33. The Associated Press, "Yoga Stirs Tempers in Norway Prison," WCCO TV, CBS Broadcasting, <http://wcco.com/watercooler/Yoga.Temper.Water.2.256227.html>.
34. Maureen Jenkins, "Taking God to the Mat," *Chicago Sun-Times*, July 30, 2004 (no longer online; copy on file).
35. George A. Mahoney, *Inward Stillness* (Denville, NJ: Dimensions Books, 1976), 227.
36. See, e.g., Karen Garloch, "Yoga Gaining Popularity with Christians," *The Billings Gazette*, February 22, 2003, <http://www.billingsgazette.com/index.php?display=rednews/2003/02/22/build/life/val-40-yoga.inc>.
37. Lisa Takeuchi Cullen, "Stretching for Jesus," *Time*, September 5, 2005, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1098937,00.html>.
38. Brooke Boon, *Holy Yoga: Exercise for the Christian Body and Soul* (New York: Faith Words, 2007), xi.
39. Nancy Roth, *An Invitation to Christian Yoga* (New York: Seabury Books, 1989), back cover.
40. Ibid., xvi.
41. Ibid., 1.
42. Ibid., 2.

43. See Ronald H. Nash, "Is Belief in Jesus Necessary? The Answer to Religious Inclusivism," *Christian Research Journal* 27, 3 (2004): 22–30, <http://www.equip.org/JAJ772>.
44. Roth, on the other hand, sees no problem with a Christian practicing yoga in an ashram where God is called by another name, as long as the Christian is worshipping Christ. (Roth, 12.)
45. On this see Agnieszka Tennant, "Yes to Yoga: Can a Christian Breathe Air That Has Been Offered to Idols?" *ChristianityToday.com*, May 2005, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/mayweb-only/42.0b.html>.
46. Roth, 85. I will be writing a feature article for the *Christian Research Journal* on contemplative prayer in the next year or so.
47. *Ibid.*, 85–86.
48. Alan Reeder, "Reconcilable Differences," *Yoga Journal*, March/April, 2001, 84, <http://www.yogajournal.com/views/284.cfm>.
49. The occult consists of biblically forbidden attempts to contact and/or utilize supernatural or paranormal beings, power, and information through such means as divination, magic, and spiritism (see, e.g., Deut. 18:9–14).
50. The author here wrongly attributes this classic saying to Patanjali. It actually first occurred in the eighth century BC Hindu scripture, the Chandogya Upanishad, pt. 6, chap. 8, v. 7.
51. Stephen Cote, "Standing Psychotherapy on Its Head," *Yoga Journal*, May/June 2001, 104.
52. *Ibid.*, 105.