

Son Salutations

Christian Yoga in the United States, 1989-2014

by

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ABSTRACT

This work examines the spectrum of Christian attitudes toward yoga as demonstrative of contemporary religious imagination in recent United States history. With the booming commodification of yoga as exercise, the physical and mental elements of yoga practice are made safely secular by disassociation from their ostensible religious roots. Commonly deployed phrases, "Yoga is not a religion," or even, "Yoga is a science," open a broad invitation. But the very need for this clarification illustrates yoga's place in the United States as a borderline signifier for spirituality. Vocal concern by both Christians and Hindus demonstrates the tension between perceptions of yoga as a secular commodity and yoga as religiously beget. Alternatively embracing and rejecting yoga's religious history, Christian yoga practitioners reframe and rejoin yoga postures and breathing into their lives of faith. Some proponents name their practice Christian Yoga.

Christian Yoga flourishes as part of contemporary religious and spiritual discourse and practice in books, instructional DVDs, websites and studios throughout the United States. Christian Yoga proponents, professional and lay theologians alike, highlight the diversity of American attitudes toward and understanding of yoga and the heterogeneity of Christianity. For religious studies scholars, Christian Yoga advocates and detractors provide an opportune focal point for inquiry into the evolution of spiritual practice, the dynamics of tradition, experience and authority, and the dialectic nature of evolving cultural attitudes in a religiously plural and complex secular environment.

DEDICATION

To Andrea and Connor, life demonstrated,
and to Maieta, my first yoga teacher, for a life of practice.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

“It is the perception of incongruity that gives rise to thought.” Jonathan Z. Smith thus paraphrases Paul Ricour in *Map is not Territory*.¹ This has been precisely my experience in researching Christian Yoga. Casual mention of the topic might spur a passionate testimonial or scathing critique, but most often people seem genuinely perplexed. I have learned not to assume I know the direction of their leaning, or the assumptions underlying their furrowed brows, even when I think I know basically where they are coming from: progressive Christian, yoga teacher, clergy, lay person, professor ... armchair critics, all. While I have let go of trying to guess which line of reasoning will follow, I have come to see the puzzled in two camps: the “hows” and the “whys.” What follows perplexity is often an unfolding commentary on yoga, Christianity, religious life, history and adaptation.

“How is Christian Yoga possible?” say those who associate yoga directly with religion (be that to Hinduism or Buddhism, specifically, or vaguely to New Age practices – accuracy is not to be presumed). The Hindu American Foundation falls into this group, as does Albert Mohler, the vocal Baptist anti-yoga-for-Christians campaigner. So do many Christians who regularly participate in yoga classes. Christians practicing yoga in secular or not-so-secular studios while also maintaining their Christian faith and devotion are sometimes the most puzzled, asking both the “how” and the “why” as they have personally maintained a boundary or separation between their yoga and Christian habits. Or, they may not have contemplated “how” because they truly did not see any incongruity and therefore are quick to follow “how” with “why”?

¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 294.

“Why” Christian Yoga, for the yoga-practicing Christian may emphasize the “Christian” (Why Christian yoga?) This group does not perceive a conflict and so has no need to resolve it. To these, it seems like much to-do over nothing. Others, who may not have exposure to yoga or may have been adamantly opposed to it as Christians, emphasize the “yoga” (Why Christian yoga?) Given the vast array of Christian disciplines and traditions, why venture into this questionable territory at all?

Irrespective of how many people would ask “how” and “why” Christian Yoga, there is no question it has emerged and shows signs of continued growth. The Holy Yoga website directory in March 2014 listed 661 trained instructors in forty-four states and ten countries; Yahweh Yoga leadership cites over five hundred trained teachers.² Proponents publish books, lead classes in studios, churches and community centers, hold retreats, and train others to teach in turn. The result is not just the accidental or occasional bumping up of yoga against Christianity, but explicitly and intentionally, marketed and defended, proper-noun-ed Christian Yoga.³

Journalists, theologians and recently some religious studies scholars have taken note. As detailed in Chapter 3, since the 1980s U.S. Christian theologians Douglas Groothuis, Albert Mohler and Mark Driscoll have made periodic headlines by denouncing Christian Yoga pointedly, often naming the teachers and authors featured in Chapter 4 as particularly errant. Yoga historian Elizabeth De Michelis gives a nod to “a number of attempted rapprochements with the church type”

² “Holy Yoga - Connect With Christ | Christian Yoga,” accessed March 8, 2014, <http://www.hollyyoga.net/>. Directory is no longer available on the site, count based on e-mail addresses in file downloaded and saved by author. Deanna Smothers (Yahweh Yoga co-founder) telephone interview by author, March 5, 2014.

³ See bibliography section, “Christian Yoga Internet Sources” for an illustrative list of internet resources related to Christian Yoga teacher training programs, studios, and classes.

footnoting "various Christian attempts at assimilation of (Modern) Yoga forms."⁴

Candy Gunther Brown dedicates a full descriptive chapter to Christian Yoga to illustrate her thesis that religious foundations of alternative health practices are being concealed from the public in *The Healing Gods: Complementary and Alternative Medicine in Christian America*.⁵ Andrea Jain examines the parallel consternations articulated by the Hindu American Foundation and the Christian objectors to Christian practice of yoga, and footnotes a reference to Jean-Marie Déchanet, Anthony Randazzo and Agnieszka Tennant, whom she characterizes as spokespeople of "various systems of 'Christian yoga.'"⁶

Christian Yoga Variations

Some Christian practice of yoga is subtle and understated, emerging from pockets of Christians in mainstream denominations that weave the yoga practices of meditation and postures into traditions of contemplative prayer and spiritual disciplines. Father Thomas Ryan, a key figure in this group and typical thereof, does not use the phrase Christian Yoga (though he does reference the work of Déchanet and Roth, who do). Ryan's work emphasizes yoga as prayer and the valuation of the body in Christian theology. His DVD teaches yoga posture sequences choreographed to music and Biblical verse.⁷ Episcopal priest Nancy Roth's soft narrating voice on the

⁴ Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Western Esotericism* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2005), 33. This brief footnote lists such attempts in ostensibly reverse chronological order, but begins with "Déchanet (1993)" when his work was done primarily in the 1950s, followed by Abhishiktananda (1984), de Mello (1984) and Slade (1973).

⁵ Candy Gunther Brown, *The Healing Gods: Complementary and Alternative Medicine in Christian America*, 1 edition (Oxford University Press, USA, 2013).

⁶ Andrea R. Jain, "Who Is to Say Modern Yoga Practitioners Have It All Wrong? On Hindu Origins and Yogaphobia," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82, no. 2 (June 2014): 434-435.

⁷ Thomas Ryan, *Prayer of Heart and Body: Meditation and Yoga as Christian Spiritual Practice* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995). Thomas Ryan, Paulist Productions, and

DVD that comes with her Christian Yoga book, virtually whispers, "Relax into this. All is well." Both authors note the Christian tradition of Hesychasm, which, as Roth defines it, "taught that bodily tranquility helped to produce spiritual tranquility."⁸ This relatively understated lineage seems coherent with *Christian Yoga* (originally published under the title *La Voie Du Silence* in 1956) by French Benedictine Jean-Marie Déchanet whom both Ryan and Roth reference.⁹ These Christians draw on yoga seamlessly as part of the modern panoply of spiritual opportunity in the vein of American liberal theology as in Schmidt's telling, "a deepened and diversified spirituality was part of modernity's promise."¹⁰

Christian Yoga, clearly labeled as such, emerges particularly in contexts that would not be characterized as liberal. (I contend this is a phenomenon in itself and the primary subject of this work.) The emphasis from an Evangelical standpoint is on the value of yoga as a way of deepening the personal relationship with Jesus. The approach loses the trappings of an interfaith project and assumes a traditionalist stance toward both Christianity and yoga (though which yoga tradition is to be adhered to varies considerably). There is sometimes a slightly different aesthetic, not surprisingly given the well-established differences in worship and prayer styles of Christian denominations. The energy and verve of the narrator of the Holy Yoga

Sounds True (Firm), *Yoga Prayer an Embodied Christian Spiritual Practice*, DVD, (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2004.)

⁸ Nancy Roth, *An Invitation to Christian Yoga*, (New York, NY: Church Publishing Inc., 2005), 10 and accompanying CD.

⁹ Jean-Marie Déchanet, *La Voie Du Silence L'Experience D'Un Moine, Suivie De Note Sur La Prière Du Coeur*, 1956 and 1959 eds. (Desclée De Brouwer, n.d.). Jean-Marie Déchanet, *Christian Yoga*, trans. Roland Hindmarsh (New York: Harper & Row, 1960).

¹⁰ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006, 11.

workout reflects a great deal of enthusiasm for both the postures and the scriptures she recites.

In Christian Yoga spaces, both real and virtual, no observer would mistake the Christian context. On the *Christoga* DVD, Janice Turner (actress of “Northern Exposure” TV fame) surrounds herself with candles and crosses and the yoga sequences are interspersed with close-ups of Janice softly reading Bible verses. In the Yahweh Yoga studio crosses and scripture quotes abound: on walls, mats, blocks, t-shirts and altar. The music rings with Christian lyrics, sometimes directly Biblical and alternatively filled with statements of love and devotion to Christ. Little room is left for ambiguity. The intention that infuses the space and the practice with Christianity is materially audible and visible.¹¹

Response to Concerns

Is yoga dangerous? Christian Yoga books and websites regularly address this question. With varying urgency and severity, the answer is often, “Yes,” even from some who continue to practice. Acknowledging the danger, or at least the worry, allows the Christian Yoga advocate to instruct in how to circumvent potential pitfalls. Worried about opening up to demonic forces? Use scripture first to purify your intentions. Concerned about worshipping idols? Focus your heart on Christ. Worried about chanting “Om”? Self-indulgent naval gazing? God-denying emptiness? Draw the line: stop short of the religious element or technique that is not separable from its religious origins. Choose and tread carefully.

This dialectic response to other Christian objections is the cornerstone of what I define in this project as “Christian Yoga”: intentional baptism as such by its

¹¹ Alin Buan, *Christoga: Christian Yoga*, DVD, Faith in Fitness (Westlake Entertainment, 2007). Brooke Boon, *Holy Yoga: Exercise for the Christian Body and Soul*, DVD (New York: FaithWords, 2007). Field notes from visit to Yahweh Yoga studio, 6PM class taught by Deanna Smothers, Chandler, AZ, October 26, 2010.

teachers and practitioners for the purpose of assuaging Christian concerns. This underlying mission to educate and dissipate concern results in written and verbal artifacts and is prime for study. Little is taken for granted: rituals are explained, delineated and renamed with a deliberate clarity that only emerges in dialogue with doubt - a response to either the internal or external critics. As the Christian Yoga advocate defends, so she defines.

Christian Yoga in the United States emerges in a cultural environment where many Christians practice yoga and many Christians do not practice yoga. Some on each side are thoughtful and intentional about their position and others may not see there is even a question. The possibility of all these combinations is the mark of the contemporary cultural landscape. In such a plural landscape, there can be both "no question" and deep questions. Some ask, "Why?" thinking the whole exercise silly and unnecessary while others wonder, "How?" things as seemingly incongruous as Christianity and yoga would come to be connected. These questions illuminate pervasive tensions at the juncture of modernity, secularity, tradition and spirituality.

This study focuses on Christian Yoga, or practice by those who make their opinions about yoga and Christianity most explicit. These articulated definitions yield fruitful insights, cast as a lens toward the less crystallized category of Christians practicing yoga, and even more broadly opening glimpses at the capacious category that is Christianity. What makes these minority voices interesting is the way their reflections echo struggles that play out for many in the more often invisible daily decision making (the "lived religion" domain): struggles about purity of faith and practice; struggles with tradition in the face of pluralism; struggles with guilt of consumption, globalization and appropriation (the post-colonial psyche); struggles

with ennui and stale rituals; struggles with experience gluttony in the face of a vast multiplicity of choices.¹²

Definitions

A scholarly analysis of Christian Yoga might be expected to articulate a few key definitions, foremost, “What is Christian and what is yoga?” To begin with definition, however, would require the researcher to either take a position on these terms or, minimally, to establish a working definition with respect to each. Even the latter strategy risks implying centrality or consensus and undercutting the emic perspective of the Christian Yoga practitioner, central to this research project. I am unwilling to provide such an illusory foundation until the Christians in this story explain what it is they mean by each term. I will foreshadow: they are not of one mind on either question.

For similar reasons, I use variants on the terms *religion* and *spirituality* as I hear them used in conversation, and specifically as deployed by the informants in this study: religion being something with history and structure, spirituality being a less dogmatic means of attaining traditionally religious ends. This distinction undoubtedly suggests the bad religion vs. good religion binary that some religious studies scholars find unpalatable. However, I find this an unavoidable trope. It is precisely this normative spectrum (religion as bad and spirituality as good) that Christians and yoga practitioners in general repeatedly deploy in conversation, particularly with respect to assimilation and authentication of their yoga practice.

From the Christian perspective, both formal and informal discussions about Christians and yoga focus primarily on how much religious “stuff” is or is not

¹² The term “experience gluttony” and its framing in the context of spiritual seeking in 1960s and 1970s America, as well as an analysis of the questions being asked by “seekers” in those decades comes from Harvey Cox, *Turning East: The Promise and Peril of the New Orientalism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977).

intrinsically part of yoga, and, if some religion is enmeshed, how much of it can and should be extricated. Sometimes this extrication sounds like demystification entirely, emphasizing health and bodily wellness, and sometimes it is precisely a shift toward the less dogmatic yet potentially transformative spiritual end of the religious-spiritual spectrum. For some, extricating the religious stuff makes what is left “not yoga.” As for Christian Yoga practitioners, they frequently underscore that not just parts or a piece of yoga, but something integral and wholly “yoga” remains in their practice. Succinctly put, “100% Jesus, 100% yoga.”¹³

For the sake of analysis, consider three touch points along the spectrum of yoga’s religiosity, where Christians may choose to take a stand: yoga is not religion, yoga is religion, and yoga is spiritual (implying not a singular religion, locked by tradition, but a practice that can lead to religious kinds of experiences and possibilities). If yoga is not religion, then it easily falls in the diverse library of activities a Christian encounters in the world, primarily under fitness and health headings. If yoga is religion or deeply affiliated with one or more religions, then Christians with an inclination toward interfaith dialogue may choose to engage as they would in an interfaith activity, from conversation meant to improve understanding, to mutual participation, to adoption and combination of practices.

For most of the yoga practitioners in my story a third paradigm dominates: yoga is not a religion but it does maintain some religious or spiritual valence. Where yoga is perceived as entirely physical or inexorably tied to a specific religious tradition, there is less room for debate. The third placement, more ambiguously in

¹³ *100% Yoga, 100% Jesus, Holy Yoga*, October 11, 2011, accessed October 11, 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AuY-sljvKWs&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

the secular-spiritual plane, is undoubtedly the source of the most ebullient debate and interpretation: yoga not as religion but ripe with spiritual potential.¹⁴

Many Christians embrace yoga under the simultaneously emergent trends in the United States toward physical fitness centered yoga and alternatively psychological or spiritually focused meditative practices. Others whose encounter with yoga is tied to experiences with Hindu and Buddhist traditions write a slightly different chapter in the yoga-Christian encounter, exemplified by the life and writing of the interfaith pillar, Bede Griffiths. Griffiths, who directly influences Thomas Ryan, is followed by Thomas Matus, author of *Yoga and the Jesus Prayer Tradition: An Experiment in Faith* (1984), Wayne Teasdale, most recently author of *The Mystic Heart: Discovering A Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions* (1999), Russell Paul, musician and author of *The Yoga of Sound: Tapping the Hidden Power of Music and Chant* (2006), Anthony Randazzo whose *Beatitudes, Christ and the Practice of*

¹⁴ Numerous court cases in recent decades both in the United States and in India illustrate the contested questions of yoga's origins and essence. Most contemporaneously and relevant to the question of religiosity, the Encinitas, CA, schools were sued by parents concerned over the incorporation of yoga curriculum in the elementary school program. The court asked explicitly whether yoga was religious and, despite answering that basically it is, ruled in favor of the district keeping the curriculum largely as it stood. There was an emphasis on language in this particular case as seemingly the fact the poses were renamed was part of what made them acceptable. "Yoga Not Teaching Religion In Encinitas Schools, California Judge Rules, Appeal Expected," *Huffington Post*, July 1, 2013, accessed October 11, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/01/yoga-school-religion-_n_3530347.html. For comments on this case from two authors also vocal on Christian Yoga, see the following two sources. Arguing the court misread the religiosity of the yoga program, particularly given the financial involvement of the Jois Foundation, see Candy Gunther Brown, who served as plaintiffs' expert, "Why Encinitas Public School Yoga Promotes 'Religion'," *Psychology Today*, July 10, 2013, accessed December 15, 2013, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/testing-prayer/201307/why-encinitas-public-school-yoga-promotes-religion>. Mark Singleton, a scholar on modern yoga whose recent work argues an alternative genealogy (not strictly Hindu) of postural yoga practice, served as witness for the defense in this case. Concurring with the defense, a Christian advocating for the practice of yoga, arguing for the non-religiosity of the yoga in schools, see Renee Aukeman Prymus, "The Case Against Yoga: Sedlock v. Baird," *Imperfectly Whole: Yoga & Christianity*, accessed October 11, 2014, <http://reeneprymus.com/case-yoga-sedlock-baird/>.

Yoga (2006) includes a forward by Thomas Ryan, and Cyprian Consiglio who hosts Christian Yoga retreats including some stretching and postural work but emphasizing meditative, contemplative practices and chanting.

Research focused on these who see Christianity and yoga through an interfaith lens (several identify themselves as combining Christianity and Hinduism, following a way of Christian *Sannyasa*) would be equal to the subject of this project in wealth of characters, with extensive cross-continental influence and theological complexity. However, these interfaith authors do not attract the same attention of vocal mainstream detractors and journalists. In the many-forked history of yoga, these interfaith practitioners, emphasizing Eastern Orthodox and Hesychastic traditions and the Tantric religious roots of yoga, forge a different path than the Evangelical proponents of Christian Yoga.¹⁵

Polyhistoricity

Multiple U.S. narratives feature yoga in their telling: the histories of fitness, bodily as well as psychological wellness, cultural and intercontinental exchange, religion and spirituality. Accordingly, yoga may be lumped into a list of Eastern inheritances: as part of alternative medicine, or along with or under the umbrella of Hinduism, Buddhism, or just “Indian religion.” In both scholarly and popular writing, yoga is also a requisite mention in enumerating the activities of New Age practitioners, sometimes in a semi-denominational subcategorization of practitioners

¹⁵ Bede Griffiths, *Bede Griffiths: Essential Writings*, Modern Spiritual Masters (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), Anthony Randazzo and Madelana Ferrara-Mattheis, *Beatitudes, Christ, and the Practice of Yoga: A Sacred Log on Land and Sea* (Totowa, NJ: Resurrection Press/Catholic Book Pub., 2006), Thomas Matus, *Yoga and the Jesus Prayer Tradition: An Experiment in Faith* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), Wayne Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions* (Novato, Calif: New World Library, 1999), Russill Paul, *The Yoga of Sound: Tapping the Hidden Power of Music and Chant*, 1 PAP/COM edition (Novato, CA; Enfield: New World Library, 2006, Cyprian Consiglio, *Prayer in the Cave of the Heart: The Universal Call to Contemplation*, First edition (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), Cyprian Consiglio workshop handouts from 2012 California retreat, in possession of author.

(of New Age Religion, of Transcendental Meditation, of Yoga) and sometimes as one example of a New Age practice (meditation, chanting, yoga). All these characterizations are traceable historically, and none trump the others in accuracy or singularity of explanation.

Yoga is richly colored (some Christians would say tainted) by its history, however incompletely written or understood. Yoga is colored by its connection to Hinduism specifically or with Eastern religion more broadly (sometimes conveniently conflated with whatever the author finds the most contradictory or offensive therein). Its association with New Age practitioners in recent decades influences perceptions of yoga, but this “foray” also serves as evidence that yoga is not precisely or purely religious. There is precedence for appropriation and this underscores the perception that yoga as a practice can be transferred and made useful in a different belief space.

Despite the muddy waters around questions of yoga’s origin and purpose, ultimately this is not a contestation of facts. Most of the facts cited by pastors and theologians are as much correct as those found in any history of yoga (though not all facts are presented with equal weight, and the idea that some may be debatable and contested by equally informed sources frequently remains unmentioned).¹⁶ The battle is not over facts but over their implications. In some aspects, the debates echo the culture war already familiar to U.S. scholars, between a fundamentalist, tradition-reifying position, and a progressive, adapting theology. Positioning objections as antisyncretic does not cleanly fit the narrative, though, because the

¹⁶ This reasonable accuracy does not necessarily extend to every Christian Yoga website. Some contain absolute inaccuracies, but these are in the minority. Those who have invested in authorship and leadership in this area have considerably more research than your average American yoga consumer in part due to the necessity of addressing other Christians’ concerns.

Christian Yoga proponents themselves claim what they are doing is not syncretism but preserves, fully pure, both yoga and Christianity.

Meanwhile, the mainstream popularity of work by writer-practitioners such as Stephanie Syman's *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America* (2010), Philip Goldberg's *American Veda: From Emerson and the Beatles to Yoga and Meditation* (2010), and William Broad's *The Science of Yoga* (2012) and media coverage surrounding these publications continue to simultaneously mold public perceptions of yoga.¹⁷ Equally influential and perhaps more pervasive, particularly in urban areas, are the myriad yoga studios and their many teachers, as well as now ubiquitous products both directly and indirectly related to the practice of yoga, ranging from workout mats to tea (Yogi brand being the most obvious).

Should any reader be tempted to disparage the perceptions of yoga I present in this work, I would share one brief academic fable. In 2009 when I began to investigate Christian Yoga, Mark Singleton had not published his history of modern postural yoga. (It was published January 20, 2010.) Singleton challenged the standing narrative of yoga's history by complicating the heritage of the now commonplace physical posture practice with European gymnastic traditions and the post-colonial, Indian nationalist politics and their implications in the development of a fitness regimen by the YMCA in India that drew upon and reshaped local yoga practices. His work quickly became one of the defining sources in the academic study of yoga, as if these historic nuances are self-evident. I am not sufficiently enmeshed in the academic study of yoga to speculate as to how long this latest turn will persist,

¹⁷ Stefanie Syman, *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), Philip Goldberg, *American Veda: From Emerson and the Beatles to Yoga and Meditation : How Indian Spirituality Changed the West* (New York: Harmony Books, 2010), William J. Broad, *The Science of Yoga: The Risks and the Rewards*, 1 edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012). Syman's work in particular became the launching point for renewed criticism of yoga from evangelicals.

or whether Singleton's conclusions will endure, but I surmise that yoga's history is not yet finalized. (Any religious studies scholar knows the same is true for Christianity, especially as pertains to the contemporary landscape.) Academic efforts to understand modern yoga will continue.¹⁸ The following chapter highlights a few of the myriad paths by which yoga has become part of the panoply of U.S. fitness and spiritual practices, and a pervasive presence in the cultural lexicon.

Structure and Terminology

I grappled with whether to tell this story as it unfolds for most yoga practitioners or as a more readable and historically satisfying narrative with a chronological genealogy and tightly bound categories. The idea of a temporally linear genealogy is particularly challenged by this research, as many of the yoga practitioners in this story knew little of the history of yoga when they undertook their practice. Impressions preceded understanding. Some, particularly those confronted with a need to defend a position or desire to educate others, embarked subsequently on self-directed research to fill in background and details as best they could when parts of said background and details remain contested. In this sense, the origins and history of yoga belong at the end of the story. Rather than grapple with a mimetic dramatization of this anomaly, I have chosen to speak briefly to the predominant yoga narratives in Chapter 2 to provide the reader with relevant context in advance. My emphasis therein on popular notions, imagery and conceptions is an intentional concession to the ahistorical manner with which most practitioners first encounter yoga as a now pervasive cultural presence.

¹⁸ Modern yoga is a term coined by De Michelis and used academically to distinguish research focused on the contemporary "global, international" yoga phenomenon, distinct from research of yoga's Asian "roots, history, culture and philosophy." "Modern Yoga Research," accessed December 7, 2013, <http://modernyogaresearch.org>. This site, managed by De Michelis, and Singleton, whose works are drawn upon in this project, as well as Suzanne Newcombe, includes several bibliographies among other resources relevant to the study of yoga.

To the question of categories, I hope despite my choice to organize this work along typological lines with tidily complementary titles such as “Christians Practicing Yoga” and “Christians Not Practicing Yoga” the reader will hold these categories as an unreified framework for thoughtful consideration. These categories fail to represent a number of Christians. In addition to Christians thoughtfully practicing yoga, and those vocalizing their objections to yoga, certainly a good number of Christians have unformulated or ambivalent opinions. No comprehensive study to date reveals how many Christians do or do not practice yoga, and such an undertaking falls outside the scope of my endeavor. The following chapters do not voice every Christian position and my categories do not hold up without fail to even the individual counterexamples of my own informants. My hope is only that these categories provide constructive entry to the messy milieu they suggest.

Chapter 2, “Christians Practicing Yoga,” in addition to providing some cultural context, highlights the voices of Christians who intentionally make yoga part of their Christian journey. Chapter 3, “Christians Not Practicing Yoga,” highlights some vigorous objections lobbied against Christians who practice yoga, including some alternatives that seem to mirror yoga fitness practices. Chapter 4, “Christian Yoga”, returns to Christians practicing yoga, but whose integration of yoga into their faith life is characterized as a recast form of yoga itself, rather than simply a personal synthesis thereof or engagement in parallel practices. Surveying across these chapters, the believers and practitioners featured in each share and contest tenets and behaviors with those in other categories, and the encapsulated comparative study that unfolds tells a textured tale of Christianity in the United States as much as a tale about yoga.

Primary Sources and Participant Identification

This research draws on the books and websites of contemporary authors and teachers who self-identify as Christians practicing yoga, and more particularly on the subset of those who label their practice as Christian Yoga, explicitly. The earliest artifact representative of contemporary trends in this area is Nancy Roth's *An Invitation to Christian Yoga*, first published in 1989. *Prayer of the Heart and Body: Meditation and Yoga as Christian Spiritual Practice* by Thomas Ryan follows in 1995 and is arguably one of the most influential contributions to the Christian yoga conversation to date, and certainly the most expansive on theological topics.¹⁹ Both Roth and Ryan are frequently cited in the resources that follow, and are spoken of highly for their personal mentoring and leadership.

The subsequent decade yielded a surge of publications: *Yoga for Christians: A Christ-Centered Approach to Physical and Spiritual Health* (2006) by Susan Bordenkircher, *Holy Yoga: Exercise for the Christian Body and Soul* (2007) by Brooke Boon, and *Christian Yoga: Restoration for Body and Soul* (2007) coauthored by Jennifer Zach, Deanna Smothers and Courtney Chalfant (these last two, founders of the Yahweh Yoga studio and teacher training program). Most of these authors or their organizations maintain an Internet presence and those pages as well as other sites identified by searches for "Christian" and "yoga" keywords, provide additional primary source content for analysis.²⁰

¹⁹ Nancy Roth, *A New Christian Yoga* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1989), reprinted subsequently as *An Invitation to Christian Yoga* (New York, NY: Church Publishing Inc., 2005), Thomas Ryan, *Prayer of Heart and Body: Meditation and Yoga as Christian Spiritual Practice* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995). Roth, Ryan and several subsequent authors refer to the predating 1950s work of Benedictine French monk, Jean-Marie Déchanet, but his and other early to mid-century works emerged in different contexts and are less directly influential than they are drawn upon as legitimizing.

²⁰ Susan Bordenkircher, *Yoga for Christians: A Christ-Centered Approach to Physical and Spiritual Health* (Nashville, TN: W Pub. Group, 2006), Brooke Boon, *Holy Yoga:*

Phone interviews and e-mail exchanges with Christian Yoga teachers and students supplement the published texts. Some informants participated on condition of anonymity and others, leaders in the public conversation, agreed to be identified on behalf of their brands and organizations (the latter primarily Christian Yoga authors, and leaders of teacher training or curriculum programs). In order to clearly make this distinction without disrupting the narratives themselves, names that have been changed are italicized.

In a qualitative project such as this one, knowledge gained far exceeds what can be encapsulated in a singular thesis. The expert interviews underscore, enrich and at times complicate (and even contradict) the published material. The ethnographic data gathered from unpublished practitioners enhances understanding of the diversity within and patterns throughout the Christian Yoga practicing body. Through these conversations I maintain a deep appreciation of both the unique and shared nature of the path navigated by each informant, teacher and student. I am as informed by the puzzles that remain as by the patterns that emerge from this work.

Exercise for the Christian Body and Soul (New York: FaithWords, 2007), Jennifer Zach, DeAnna Smothers, and Courtney Chalfant, *Christian Yoga: Restoration for Body and Soul* (Poughkeepsie, NY: Hudson House, 2007). For listing of Internet resources consulted, see bibliography section, "Christian Yoga Internet Sources."

CHAPTER 2

CHRISTIANS PRACTICING YOGA

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you which you have from God? ... Therefore, glorify God in your body. (1 Cor 6:19, 20)

– “Christians Practicing Yoga: Yoga from a Christian Perspective” website banner

The Yoga Encounter

Yoga in the United States is flourishing and increasingly diverse. As it proliferates, the potential for many U.S. Christians to have some encounter with yoga increases in proportion. Measure it by the dollar figure of the commercial enterprises or the familiarity with which products and websites promote using the language of “yogis” and “namasté” and the conclusion remains the same. Yoga in its many flavors and variations is a ubiquitous resource for exercise, stress relief, and mind-body connection in studios, books, magazines and schools. Yoga has become common fare.²¹

In the United States today, yoga may denote a stylized set of physical exercises (certainly this meaning is reflected in the *Yoga Journal* survey cited above), a philosophical system, or more generally connote a New Age flavored, disciplined and spiritual way of life. By even one of these definitions, yoga’s history is complex, embroiled with political strategies, personal foils, and philosophical debates. From its introduction to the United States, yoga advocates and teachers managed yoga’s

²¹ *Yoga Journal* conducted “Yoga in America” surveys in 2008 and 2012, reporting an increase in those four years from 15.8 million yoga practitioners to 20.4 million, or 8.7 percent of adults. The same study claims that of non-practitioners, 44.4 percent of Americans are interested in trying yoga. Data were collected by Sports Marketing Surveys USA. “New Study Finds More Than 20 Million Yogis in U.S.,” *Namaste: The YJ Blog*, December 5, 2012, accessed June 2, 2014, <http://blogs.yogajournal.com/yogabuzz/2012/12/new-study-find-more-than-20-million-yogis-in-u-s.html>.

palatability against a background of the Christian-nation mythos and Christians have participated, at times materially, in the polymorphous recounting of yoga's history.²²

On the one hand then, it is no surprise a small but growing group of Christians has gathered every few years for the past decade to compare notes on the part yoga plays in their lives, or that the Internet brims with pages about what it means to be Christian and practice yoga.²³ On the other hand, given that much of the yoga boom is under secular banners of health and fitness, the surprise may be that these Christians find it necessary and compelling to speak of yoga in terms of their faith at all. These seemingly contradictory surprises reconcile easily in light of the meandering, tangled path that is yoga-history in the United States.

Yoga as Polymorphous

Out of the complexity of history, two primary images of yoga currently dominate public perception. The first, more recently expanded but arguably prominent, is that yoga is a physical fitness practice, albeit with austere and spiritual roots it jettisoned successfully and irrevocably as it settled into the U.S. secular landscape. The representative images of this perception are rooms full of practitioners on colorful mats, mostly lean and all flexible, vigorously taking on downward dog or one of the standing warrior poses. The warrior-fitness image is

²² Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Western Esotericism* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2005). Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). For an understanding of popularized perceptions of yoga and related influences, see Stefanie Syman, *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010) and Philip Goldberg, *American Veda: From Emerson and the Beatles to Yoga and Meditation : How Indian Spirituality Changed the West* (New York: Harmony Books, 2010).

²³ Tom Ryan, "About Us," "Christians Practicing Yoga | Yoga from a Christian Perspective," accessed June 1, 2014, <http://www.christianspracticingyoga.com/wp/about-us/>. See bibliography section, "Christian Yoga Internet Sources," for a sampling of the diverse Internet representation of these conversations.

bolstered by the economic force of marketing yoga classes (and the many different schools with competing proprietary styles), clothing, magazines, associations, and mats, blocks, straps and other accoutrements of a mainstream, largely Americanized yoga practice.

An equally commonplace visual representation of yoga is a person sitting serenely in the lotus pose, perfectly representing the second common thread of yoga identification: with meditation and, by association, with self-assured peace.²⁴ Yoga has become virtually synonymous with stress-free serenity: the image of a person sitting in the lotus position has become marketing shorthand for selling everything from tea to luxury vehicles, with the subtext being that peace is within reach. Both the “warrior” and the “lotus-sitter” images have somewhat independent histories, inextricably crossing paths, but more clearly traced individually.

The lineage of physical, posture-based yoga as it is commonly offered and consumed today is far more difficult to trace than its pervasiveness is to observe. Early introductions of yoga to the West minimized the posture practice as unpalatable in face of the dominant stereotypes of the austere, superstition-ridden “yogi.” Often marked by the late nineteenth century appearance of Vivekananda at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago through Eliade’s treatise in 1969, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, there seemed to be little doubt well into the twentieth century: Yoga was from the Orient, the East, specifically from India and its provenance was Eastern religion. Physicality, when emphasized, evoked circus acts (extreme or supernatural abilities) or tantric practices designed primarily for the purpose of achieving altered spiritual states, the body’s alignment and wellness as homologous with cosmic harmony. Vivekananda in particular and strategically

²⁴ In a telling example of the way images inform understanding, a friend (not a yoga practitioner or Buddhist) explained to me that she thought yoga was Buddhist because the Buddha is always pictured in lotus pose, itself the quintessential image for yoga.

steered clear of the austere images of contortionist yogis. Proponents distanced themselves from physicality in order to make yoga more palatable, differentiating as that did from shortsighted stereotypes of esthetic extremism or tantric deviance.²⁵

In recent decades, a new story emerges that still pulls the religious and physical apart, now to lend coherence to the renewed embrace of the posture-based practices. In *A History of Modern Yoga* (2004) De Michelis develops a typology for contemporary yoga practices, split twice from Vivekenanda's *Raja Yoga* (1896), figured as the source of all modern branches. First she distinguishes Modern Psychosomatic Yoga (MPsY) from Modern Denominational Yoga (MDY), primarily along lines of how individualized the practice tends to be, where MDY emphasizes doctrine and guru authority while MPsY is more privatized. From the MPsY branch, another split occurs between Modern Postural Yoga (MPY) and Modern Meditational Yoga (MMY).²⁶

Mark Singleton's *Yoga Body, The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (2010) argues an even more marked distinction between these branches, such that modern postural yoga's relationship to *āsana* practice is "one of radical innovation and experimentation" rather than of direct and unbroken lineage, and certainly not traceable to Vivekenanda's posture-denying strategies. Singleton challenges De Michelis' treatment of Modern Yoga as a singular category as conceptually useful but misleading as it may unduly obfuscate the extent to which historical threads

²⁵ Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, 2nd ed, Bollingen Series 56, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969). Singleton, *Yoga Body*.

²⁶ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 188. The visual diagram of her typology is also available as the definition for Modern Yoga in Routledge online Encyclopedia of Hinduism. *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, s.v. "Yoga, Modern," Routledge Religion Online, Taylor & Francis, 2008, accessed May 6, 2012, http://www.routledgeonline.com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/religion/Book.aspx?id=w169_w169bdiv11922.

diverge.²⁷ Physical postures gradually resurge in the 20th century as Mark Singleton describes, by way of cross-continental influence from European gymnastics (including an extensive spiritual dimension thereof), the Indian nationalist movement, and the Indian YMCA's development of fitness programs, all under the direct influence of New Thought teaching and all keen to identify techniques for development of the human potential, including the subtle energies approachable through disciplined body practices.²⁸ Singleton emphasizes the importance of the 20th century visual capabilities in forming modern yoga as it is perceived, today.²⁹ The

²⁷ Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 33,18. For a slightly different typology and more detailed history of specifically denominational and meditational yoga in America, see Lola Williamson, *Transcendent in America: Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements as New Religion*, The New and Alternative Religions Series (New York: New York University Press, 2010). Of particular interest are Williamson's histories of Paramahansa Yogananda's legacy, the Self-Realization Fellowship, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (of Beatles fame) and his Transcendental Meditation movement, and Siddha Yoga, founded by Swami Muktananda as three exemplars of what she labels Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements (HIMM). These movements are characteristically tied to a guru or lineage of gurus, seek to attain enlightenment often through meditation, and draw upon heavily Americanized neo-Hindu worldviews. Notably, Williamson found that "most adherents of HIMMs do not view their particular group as Hindu" though they may point to what are considered more ancient sources in Indian or Vedic traditions, circumventing negative Orientalist associations with Tantra. Williamson, *Transcendent in America*, 14.

²⁸ Singleton, *Yoga Body*, "The New Thought Yogis," 129-139. The influence of New Thought philosophy did not immediately translate into embrace of the *asana* practice, but evolved in that direction through introduction of more palatable practices of hygiene, gymnastics and bodybuilding. Singleton writes of New Thought influenced turn of the century work by Ramacharaka, that "calisthenics are emphatically *not* identified as *asanas* is important as it suggests both a recognition of the need for physical exercise in modern *hatha yoga* and the ongoing distrust of the core techniques of the yogins." Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 131.

²⁹ Singleton, *Yoga Body*, "The Medium and the Message: Visual Reproduction and the Asana Revival," 163-174. The recent Smithsonian exhibit, "Yoga: The Art of Transformation," highlights the evolution of the visual depiction of yoga and yogis through distinct historic phases including depictions from 16th-17th century India, largely depicting devotional scenes and yogis as musicians, 18th-20th century transnational images, including Fakir yogis on beds of nails and in circus acts, and a third "modern" phase that opens with a 1907 history of fakirs by German Richard Schmidt, copiously illustrated with eighty-seven depictions of individual *asanas*, and culminating with a 1938 digital archive of T. Krishnamacharya teaching *asanas*.

publication of Iyengar's *Light on Yoga* in 1966, with its meticulous and comprehensive focus on the physical postures, ushered in what De Michelis calls the popularization period for Modern Yoga (spanning from the 1950s to mid 1970s) and gave particular energy to Modern Postural Yoga with its "impressive standards of completeness regarding range of postural variation and performance proficiency."³⁰

The meditative strands of yoga in the U.S. trace back to the same stirrings by Vivekenanda and the Theosophists, Christian Scientists and New Thought advocates. Despite the distancing from its most austere practices, a good number of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Americans remained fascinated by the transformational and even occult possibilities of yoga (postural or otherwise). The early century embrace of yoga by those such as Pierre Bernard and Blanche DeVries and the scandals that ensued, seen through the lens of the pervasive fitness model seem to be a diversion or a distraction, when in fact they may simply fall under a different historical thread. This lineage picks up in the 1960s with the immigration opportunity for more Eastern teachers, and in the 1970s becomes publically recognizable with the dedication of public figures such as The Beatles to gurus. The 1960s and 1970s interest in meditative yoga and Eastern religious thought (what Albanese characterizes as "Metaphysical Asia") are represented by Esalen in Big Sur, CA, and Paramahansa Yogananda's Self-Realization Fellowship, both with continued legacies well into the twenty-first century.³¹

Smithsonian Institution, "Yoga: The Art of Transformation | Catalogue," accessed October 12, 2014, <http://www.asia.si.edu/support/yoga/catalogue-preview.asp>.

³⁰ De Michele, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 191, 198-199.

³¹ Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 368-372. See also Philip Goldberg, *American Veda: From Emerson and the Beatles to Yoga and Meditation: How Indian Spirituality Changed the West* (New York: Harmony Books, 2010). Goldberg, authoritative in his own emic perspective as a long-time yoga

Yoga came to American awareness in waves, sometimes with emphasis on meditative and some times physical aspects, but nearly always including an experiential dimension – a personal experience.³² Interest in Patanjali's Yoga Sutra and the Yoga Praditikpa seem to be increasing, perhaps due to push from popular author-practitioners like Syman and Goldberg who want to recapture yoga's spiritual strength as a reaction to the booming fitness popularity, and perhaps due to the explosion of yoga teacher training schools, many including some Hindu philosophical content.³³ When Goldberg extols the influence of Vedantic (or neo-Vedantic) philosophy as a gift from the East, he risks obfuscating the bidirectional influences of early century New Thought teaching on those very gurus who would turn to teach Americans about Eastern spirituality. In the United States, liberal theology and secular conceptions of pluralism influence the reification of universalism and perennialism as much as any unilateral inheritance from the East.

Yoga and the New Age Movement

Tom Wolfe named the "Third Great Awakening" as having "built up from more diverse and exotic sources than the first two, from therapeutic movements as well as overtly religious movements, from hippies and students of 'psi phenomenon' and

practitioner, writes from a strongly pro-Eastern ("mystic East") perspective, emphasizing the positive possibilities of embracing Vedantic philosophies.

³² This is somewhat in contrast to the largely textual way Buddhism entered the United States as initially "more intellectual than practical in nature", but dovetails with the shift in the 1960s and 1970s toward aspects of "meditation, chanting and retreat." Patricia Farmer Smith, "Languages of the Heart and Mind: Self-Narrative as Discourse in the Work of Sylvia Boorstein" (master's thesis, Arizona State University, 2000), 23-24. The experiential dimension of yoga's history becomes important as we turn to examine individual Christian yoga narratives.

³³ Yoga Alliance requires its registered teacher training schools provide curriculum that includes 30 hours of "yoga philosophy, lifestyle and ethics" for the 200-hour standard program. "200 Hour Standards for Yoga Teacher Training," Yoga Alliance, accessed September 28, 2014, <http://www.yogaalliance.org/Credentialing/Standards/200-HourStandards>.

Flying Saucerites as well as from charismatic Christians.” Enabled by middle-class prosperity, the boomer generation indulged in this “new alchemical dream” ... “changing one’s own personality – remaking, restudying, and doting on it,” an initially psychological ambition that turned, by the early 1970s, into a religious or mystical ambition.³⁴ Schulman characterizes the seventies similarly, and highlights, along with Wolfe, the role of Esalen in fostering human potential, New Age and related conversations.³⁵ Yoga in particular gained popularity as a technique for self-improvement and realization through the workshops at Esalen. There, both body and spiritual wellness come together as “Esalen understood the human potential to reside in the enlightened body-self.”³⁶

Yoga is linked to the New Age movement somewhat by association and timing, more than shared lineage. Nonetheless, both critics and advocates must contend with this chapter of yoga's U.S. history. The baggage yoga picked up along the way includes association with New Age's perceived lack of theological mooring (in any textual sense). That some yoga practitioners are surprised to hear yoga linked to something as religiously hefty as Hinduism is not so much a discontinuity, as an outcome of a different evolutionary thread. Recognizing India and Hinduism as having significant defining roles in the birthing and evolution of yoga, to deny the more recent New Age association is to ignore yoga’s formative teenage years in the United States.

³⁴ Tom Wolfe, *The Purple Decades: A Reader* (Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1982), 277, 290.

³⁵ Schulman, Bruce J. *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (2001), on religion see chapter three, “Plugging In’: Seeking and Finding in the Seventies.”

³⁶ Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 372.

Whether yoga is the heir to or one co-conspirator in America's New Age experimentation, many judge it (positively and negatively) on the same slippery slope as psychedelic drug use. Ken Wilber differentiates between states of consciousness and stages of spiritual development and blames a failure to make this differentiation for many of the pitfalls of the boomer generation. By failing to recognize that an altered state of mind did not equate to a shift to a new plane of spiritual consciousness, devices such as drugs and meditation techniques that systematically move bodies and minds into new or different states are thought to be also systematically (or, as a yoga teacher might deploy the phrase, "scientifically") means of attaining a higher or better plane of existence. Momentary transcendence passes as enlightenment; transient enlightenment is confused with transcendence.³⁷

Meditation as a Mainstream Practice

Two trends, both unfolding concurrently with the New Age tide described above, converged to make meditation itself (independent of yoga) a mainstream cultural phenomenon: one psychological and the other religious, with predictable interplay between the two. With stress increasingly characterized as a real and substantive health risk, anything to mitigate stress becomes a medical necessity. Meditation provides a therapeutic counterbalance to the frenzy and pressures of modern life.³⁸ Meanwhile, psychologists teach that it is desirable to seek wholeness and authenticity. When Western individuals seek wholeness, against a backdrop of deeply engrained ideas of East/West dichotomies, is it any surprise they end up

³⁷ Ken Wilber, *Integral Spirituality: A Startling New Role for Religion in the Modern and Postmodern World* (Boston, MA: Integral Books, 2007).

³⁸ Candy Gunther Brown, *The Healing Gods: Complementary and Alternative Medicine in Christian America*, 1st edition (Oxford University Press, USA, 2013). This work includes an entire chapter on yoga, focusing particularly on Christian Yoga, seemingly in an attempt to illustrate what can go wrong when practitioners conceal the religious roots of a healing practice.

looking for their “Eastern side”? The spiritual “turn East” of the postwar United States continues to gain traction as Buddhist, Hindu and semi-secular, psychological meditation practices become part of the mainstream vernacular, often under the banner of “spirituality,” characterized by Albanese as the “New New Age” where a new spirituality unfolds “innocuously and underlabeled,” and where “meditation became a property that even mainstream churches promoted.”³⁹ Indeed, arguably in response to both the psychological and “Eastern” turns, Christians have revived their own mystic and contemplative traditions.⁴⁰

The Body in Christian Practice

Despite periodic ebbs and flows in the emphasis of church leaders and theologians on the body as part of the Christian existence (and the vocal protests against neglect are often in the books promoting a change in that emphasis), Christians do have the incarnation to grapple with. Philosopher Charles Taylor remarks, “Christianity, as the faith of the Incarnate God, is denying something essential to itself as long as it remains wedded to forms which excarnate.”⁴¹ Paulist priest, Thomas Ryan, whose significance to Christians and yoga practice features in pages to follow, claims that while Christians have not emphasized the body in practice, they have the highest of all body-theologies due to the central place of

³⁹ Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 513.

⁴⁰ Joseph D. Driskill, *Protestant Spiritual Exercises: Theology, History, and Practice* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Pub, 1999), William Johnston, *Arise My Love--: Mysticism for a New Era* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), and Wayne Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions* (Novato, Calif: New World Library, 1999). Mysticism and wellbeing, in either Christian or Indian contexts, have not always been conflated so much as they are for spiritual seekers today. Mysticism has been (and by some still is) perceived as dangerous, whether inside or outside the tradition. On this point, Driskill is most cautious where Johnston and Teasdale embrace the more democratic view of mysticism, accessible (and inviting) to all.

⁴¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 771.

incarnation and resurrection of the body and are “in the awkward position of trying to affirm the goodness of creation without ever having delighted in human bodiliness.”⁴² Ryan aims to reverse this trend not entirely but certainly in part through embrace of yoga.⁴³ Christians have plenty of Biblical fodder about caring for and nurturing the body (and Christian Yoga proponents make generous use of these instances, as Chapter 4 describes). Adding to any theological justifications, Christians exist in a cultural milieu where health and physical wellbeing are extolled as virtues and, “American culture’s own purportedly secular doctrine of the perfectible body is deeply indebted to currents that have perceived the body as essential for pushing the soul along the path to redemption.”⁴⁴

Not Religion but Spirituality

Contrary to the difficulty in articulating what yoga is, there seems to be relatively popular (at least mainstream) consensus about what yoga is not: Yoga is not a religion. Many an introduction to yoga (books and classes) begins with this outright disclaimer. *Yoga is not a religion*; or, dropping the “a” for subtly different emphasis, *yoga is not religion*. In the same breath one often hears, “yoga means union,” or, “yoga is a science” (with the seeming implication that it is relatively innocuous and aligned with secular pursuits). This emphasis may be suspect given the market incentives, but the message seems to be delivered genuinely by many

⁴² Ryan, *Prayer of Heart and Body*, 7.

⁴³ Ryan, *Prayer of Heart and Body*. Thomas Ryan, ed. *Reclaiming the Body in Christian Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004). Both works make reference to the draw Eastern religions (and specifically yoga) have upon young people, and the disappointment they have in the church for not properly teaching them about the role of the body in spirituality.

⁴⁴ Ruth Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2004), 240.

yoga teachers who emphasize that with yoga there is nothing to believe, and therefore nothing to be incompatible with established beliefs.⁴⁵

Despite this frequent disassociation with religion, per say, yoga occupies a place somewhere along a spectrum of religiosity or spiritual practice, and significantly more so for people of faith. In December 2009 the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life published a study entitled "Eastern, New Age Beliefs Widespread: Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths" based on the Religion and Public Life Survey. In this survey, Pew asked Americans whether they think of yoga as a spiritual practice. Just 23% of the overall population answered in the affirmative, but significantly, the percentage of Christians answering "yes" varied by denomination from 27% of Catholics (one of the highest results other than "Liberals" at 39%) to 18% of Protestants. Within Protestants, White Evangelicals came in with the lowest percentage at 12% (only 7% if attending church weekly) and White mainline churches tracked close to the overall average at 23%. (Black Protestants answered "yes" 20% of the time.)⁴⁶

From practicing yoga in a number of mainstream studio settings for the past ten years, I have both experienced and heard other practitioners' reactions to the variation in levels of explicit or implicit religious or spiritual content in a yoga class. Students choose studios, classes and individuals teachers based on finding a match they are comfortable with. I heard the Sunday evening Kundalini class at a generally secular studio referred to as the "weird yoga." Some want no explicit spiritual

⁴⁵ Variations on these themes abound in the Christian yoga interviews and testimonials to be highlighted in subsequent chapters. In that context, these claims may seem to have a particular agenda, but I assert I have heard the same phrases repeatedly in numerous secular classes (all in Phoenix, AZ within the past 10 years).

⁴⁶ Joseph Liu, "Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, December 9, 2009, <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/12/09/many-americans-mix-multiple-faiths/>.

content whatsoever. Their best bets are the fitness gyms, devoid of anything but mirrors and fitness equipment, where many classes are “power” classes, and tend to be more physically demanding and less likely to include chanting or life lessons. I have heard others quip they do not care for a class with “no spiritual side.”⁴⁷

Popular authors and long-time yoga practitioners Stephanie Syman and Philip Goldberg echo this sentiment as they each bemoan the loss of an important essence when yoga is seen as only physical, while William Broad (also a practitioner) hopes that yoga will move to a new stage of scientific, evidence-based development, leaving the possibility of a means of transcendence as an inconsequential sidebar.⁴⁸ Yoga studio standard fare includes references to values: blessings, peace, harmony, and love, setting a tone not quite purely secular, at least not to the exclusion of a spiritual possibility (at the very least they tap into what William Connolly terms the “visceral register” of modern secularity).⁴⁹

Yoga wields a valence of spiritually transformative power. Regardless of the true origin of the practice at hand, Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* (ca. 150-200 CE) is frequently referenced to authenticate yoga’s spiritual credibility, being appropriately

⁴⁷ Field notes by author, Metta Yoga, Arcadia studio, Phoenix, AZ, March 13, 2014.

⁴⁸ Stefanie Syman, *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), Philip Goldberg, *American Veda: From Emerson and the Beatles to Yoga and Meditation : How Indian Spirituality Changed the West* (New York: Harmony Books, 2010), William J. Broad, *The Science of Yoga: The Risks and the Rewards*, 1 edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012). Each of these well-researched books contributes to the shaping of yoga’s American history in the telling, while none fully acknowledge the constructed nature of yoga history. For an extensive treatment of such constructivism, including critique of the Orientalist intellectual tradition of focusing on texts and philosophy rather than oral traditions and bodily practice, see Joseph S. Alter, *Yoga in Modern India: The Body between Science and Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁴⁹ William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

ancient and therefore authoritative, but not too heavily dogmatic.⁵⁰ The eight limbs of yoga Patanjali outlines include ethical guidelines and moral disciplines, and aspire for transformation of the mind in its highest sense. In *Yoga Journal's* 2012 article about yoga and religion, Patanjali's ancient text and Bhakti yoga are used as examples where yoga may preserve some remnant of religiosity.⁵¹

However, Patanjali's Sutra does not look anything like a page from *Yoga Journal* or any of the U.S. yoga books since Iyengar published *Light on Yoga* (1969).⁵² Goldberg notes how surprised most yoga practitioners would be to know how sparse and secondary the physical poses are in the "classical yoga" texts.⁵³ There are no pictures at all, and no postures (*āsanas*) described, though *āsana* is cited as one of the eight yoga paths.⁵⁴ The later Hatha Yoga Pradipitka (15th century), also sometimes invoked as a "yoga text" does include text descriptions of fifteen *āsanas*, expanding on Patanjali's Sutra.⁵⁵ *Hatha yoga* is commonly used to generally denote the physical posture practice, or a generally classical physical yoga (in contrast to the contemporary branded traditions of postural yoga such as Bikram or Ashtanga Yoga).

⁵⁰ Feuerstein dates Patanjali to the second century B.C. and the Yoga Sutra itself to the third century A.D., citing confusion between Patanjali, grammarian, and the author "in probability not identical." Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga-Sutra of Patañjali: A New Translation and Commentary* (Rochester, Vt.; New York: Inner Traditions, 1989), 3.

⁵¹ Andrea Ferretti, "Beyond Belief," *Yoga Journal*, no. 243 (December 2011): 84.

⁵² B. K. S. Iyengar, *Light on Yoga: Yoga Dipika*, Rev. [pbk.] ed (New York: Schocken Books, 1979).

⁵³ Goldberg, *American Veda*, 197.

⁵⁴ The word *āsana* means "seat" or posture, and is used pervasively in contemporary yoga classes, usually in calling out the specific name of a posture as in *bhujanāsana* (*bhujan* meaning serpent, this is usually translated as Cobra pose). In *Light on Yoga* (ed. 1979, first ed. 1966), Iyengar also defines *asana* as "The third stage of yoga."

⁵⁵ Vivian Worthington, *A History of Yoga* (London ; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 130.

Yoga and Religion

The U.S. imagination muddles the spiritual lineage of yoga. The strong distinction made above between the image of yoga as meditation and yoga as exercise is only intended to highlight one of the prevalent binaries; either image or both may hold meaning for any particular person. In fact, as should be clear by now, both images are historically co-determined, echoing and mirroring each other, developmentally. Accordingly, many Americans unconsciously blend traditions, borrowing from the historical threads they happen to know most about, and glossing over the complexity, especially if it does not serve the argument at hand.⁵⁶ Not surprisingly, the question arises whether yoga is compatible with religion.

In 2001 and 2011 *Yoga Journal* ran articles broadly tackling the compatibility question, titled, respectively, "Reconcilable Differences" and "Beyond Belief," the 2011 issue's cover featuring the teaser, "yoga and religion: can you practice both?" Not surprisingly given the context and timing, in these articles yoga is framed as beneficial, especially with respect to health, but both articles acknowledge that yoga practice for Christians, Jews, and Muslims may raise some valid questions. The 2001 article does recognize a risk of syncretism, but distinguishes the risk of not delving deeply into one tradition by attempting to embrace too many divergent beliefs or

⁵⁶ Yoga's history is no less convoluted outside the United States. Joseph Alter, in *The Body between Science and Philosophy: Yoga in Modern India* (2004), identifies many parallel confusions and confluences between the physiological and philosophical goals of yoga. To some extent, the nature of the homologous practice of aligning body, subtle body and cosmos, presuming some connection between these multiple planes of existence is by definition paradoxical and naturally resistant to categorization. The politically and economically motivated characters in yoga's post 19th-century history cross continents as well, so that a complete understanding of yoga's history in America necessarily draws on the complexity of its history in India. Singleton encapsulates this dynamic by referring to transnational or Anglophonic yoga. Joseph S. Alter, *Yoga in Modern India: The Body between Science and Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004) and Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

communities, from the benefits of employing yoga “as a borrowed practice.” In the more recent article, David Frawley, founder and director of the American Institute of Vedic Studies in Santa Fe, NM, deploys spirituality as the third way in typical contemporary fashion: “Yoga has a number of levels and dimensions: yoga asana, pranayama, yoga meditation to clear the mind – even an atheist can do those. These practices don’t necessarily have a religious connotation, but they do have a spiritual connotation.”⁵⁷

Christians Practice Yoga

Christians do practice yoga. Many Christians practice yoga in studios and fitness centers. Some Christians practice yoga without any consideration of possible conflict or convergence between their Christianity and yoga. Some Christians practice yoga in their church buildings, led by pastors or lay people with yoga teacher training. All of these people, though they are difficult to count or even identify, are the “Christians practicing yoga” subjects of this chapter. Many of these practitioners are among those particularly perplexed by anything called “Christian Yoga”, the intentional, combinatorial practice explored in detail in Chapter 4. Some of these Christians practicing yoga are picking up a long line of dialog on the topic of yoga and Christian faith. Book titles, prefaces and website “about” pages highlight this encounter and exchange in phrases such as: “yoga and Jesus”, “yoga for Christians”, “yoga and or as prayer”. Rather than a comprehensive history of yoga and Christianity, both having scope and multiplicity of trajectories beyond the scope of this project, I present these contemporary markers as a framework for both the counter movement of Christian resistance to yoga (subject of Chapter 3) and the Christian Yoga response described in Chapter 4.

⁵⁷ Alan Reder, “Reconcilable Differences,” *Yoga Journal*, no. 159 (April 4, 2001): 78. Ferretti, “Beyond Belief”: 82-101.

Christianity and yoga in the United States intersect in three salient ways: in attitudes toward the body, specifically around health and fitness, in threads of interfaith dialog, and in theological and praxis conversations about meditation and contemplation. Intersecting within each of these vectors are contextual threads of the secular and pseudo-secular: the persistent question of what it means to be Christian, depending upon the operational model in play, in a secular nation, in a Christian nation, in a plural-tolerant nation or simultaneously in all of these. If yoga is “just physical” then it could be Christianized, easily, but why would one bother? If yoga is “mystical” then it is either dangerous or powerful (potentially both). Yoga in the U.S. exhibits a multi-valenced complexity that makes it easily mistaken for one or the other of these caricatures, perhaps exemplified by the competitive yoga contests on the one hand and the levitating guru on the other. Yoga retains transformative power in all models.

The yoga practiced by Christians who seek its transformational benefits is typically not strictly sought for body sculpting benefits, but also those more psycho-spiritual or holistic. Admittedly, the pre-processing, Westernization may already have been done in the secular sphere. The more “science and medicine” get behind the value of yoga, the easier it is to separate the stress relief from the spiritual dimension. The popularization of *hatha* yoga in recent decades, posture-centric as it is, eschewing the more esoteric practices, made for a palatable transition. Yoga as practiced by Christians, by way of the secular detour it took to shed some of its emphasis on deep interiority, is already something of a Westernized version of itself.

Mirroring the theoretical types of encounter, at a personal level yoga may play a number of different roles in the life of the Christian. Choice of setting would seem significant: a practitioner entering class at a mainstream fitness center probably expects to reap fitness benefits; a practitioner who attends class at a

church might logically be in pursuit of a spiritual encounter as well. But these are not unambiguous: Christians encounter God at the gym and fitness in the church sanctuary.⁵⁸ As with many products and services Americans consume, including in their spiritual and religion lives, choices abound and motivations are complex: price (most classes held in church settings are free or subject to a free-will donation), convenience of time and location, class content, style of the practice and teacher, and the influence of friends may all be weighed into the choice of a studio or specific class.⁵⁹ In these day-to-day selections, the operative perceptions of yoga prevail, including of its very malleability.

The Question Has Come Up Before

In his 1956 book, *La Voie du Silence*, French Benedictine Fr. Jean-Marie Déchanet seems to see his work as the humble beginning of a larger project. “Christianiser le Yoga, tel Yoga? Non! Faire servir a la vie chrétienne certaine disciplines Yogiques.”⁶⁰ He stops short of any claim to have created a synthesis of yoga and Christianity, though he outlines in great detail the postural and breathing practices he recommends for the devout Christian. In the 1960 English translation

⁵⁸ Here lived religion is the operative theoretical model where focus is on practices as dialogical and co-formative with beliefs. People practice yoga for a multiplicity of reasons, and the part it plays in their lives is interesting to religious studies scholars to the extent they put it into a position of significance themselves (secondarily of import is whether that significance is labeled as spiritual or religious).

⁵⁹ The idea that Americans, beginning with the boomer generation, operate within a “spiritual marketplace” is well established, starting with Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*, 1st ed (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993). Other statements in this paragraph are based on my own observations as a yoga practitioner since 2003 and member of several communities of faith and spiritual practice. The selection of studio based on location and price came up several times in talking to those specifically interviewed as part of this project about why they attend Yahweh Yoga, a Christian Yoga studio in Chandler, AZ. Bordenkircher told me her studio in Georgia also draws students who “are not even Christian” because they like her style.

⁶⁰ Déchanet, *La Voie du Silence*, 5.

(English translations are titled *Christian Yoga* rather than literally “the voice of silence”) he points out that there is another “Christian Yoga that people are dreaming of” but that he is starting with the first step, the exposition of the bodily yoga practice as a Christian might adopt it.

Déchanet refers to Carl Jung’s 1949 work, *Le Yoga et L’Occident*, where Jung wrote that the yoga of the East would not be suitable for consumption by the West, without serious psychological risk.⁶¹ The Christian may borrow some of the physical and even psychological tools of an Eastern yoga, but to press deeper, especially toward the experiences of the presence of God, is risky and not to be undertaken except by a masterful “guru chrétien.” Déchanet quotes another layperson, M. Léon Noel, who suggests that with proper evolution, even multiple Christian yogas could evolve.⁶² The word yoga begins to imply something like a full and rich discipline of both the body and the mind, in pursuit of both physical and mental openness to God’s contemplative graces, and is less specifically a fixed tradition.⁶³

Déchanet leaves it to others in the Christian West to “work out a Yoga” that would meet the full needs of the Western soul. Instead, his “modest aim was primarily practical.”⁶⁴ This establishes a tone echoed still by Christian yoga practitioners who feel they are capable of making lay adaptations palatable and constructive to the yoga-practicing Christian. This malleability is justified largely by focusing on *hatha* yoga (although breath work, which would be more accurately characterized as *prānāyāma* yoga is often included as particularly resonant with

⁶¹ Jean-Marie Déchanet, *Yoga chrétien en dix leçons* (Abbaye de Saint-Andre, Pâques: Desclée De Brouwer, 1964), 9.

⁶² Déchanet, *Yoga chrétien*, 10.

⁶³ This use of yoga to mean discipline or path, very generally, is still common.

⁶⁴ Déchanet, *Christian Yoga*, 9.

Christian imagery and inseparable from, or at least equally important as, the posture practice).

Interfaith Influence

In contrast to the casual American propensity to modify and combine practices with little theological commitment, Fr. Bede Griffiths embodied the deepest type of interfaith engagement between Christianity and Hinduism. This Catholic monk turned Indian ashram leader set a high bar for inter-cultural compassionate co-existence with his ability to navigate the Indian spiritual landscape as a Christian monk without seeming to abuse or compromise. Following in this tradition, two authors stand out as being particularly aligned with the common themes of Christians in conversation about yoga. Thomas Matus authored *Yoga and the Jesus Prayer Tradition*, a detailed examination of Eastern Orthodoxy (the Jesus prayer), the experience of Christian mystic, Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022), and Hindu and Buddhist tantric traditions. Despite the somewhat more intensely mystical tenor of this work, his synthesis stands out in how carefully it highlights the centrality of intention: "When we talk about a Christian use of yoga, we mean a penetration into the depths of yogic practice within a life-context where faith is the starting-point and the motive force." He continues, "If I start from faith, and if, along the way, I make use of some form of spiritual discipline like yoga, the result must be in harmony with my point of departure ... For the Christian, this means that Jesus Christ becomes the model both of the spiritual journey and of its goal."

A second exemplar in this line, Fr. Anthony Randuzzo and Madelana Ferrara-Mattheis' *Beatitudes, Christ, and the Practice of Yoga*, combines personal story telling with theological musing, and includes fold-out pages of illustrated yoga postures side-by-side with scripture quotes of the beatitudes (from both Matthew and Luke), with instructions similar to a lectio divina practice, to read each Beatitude

aloud, then repeat it silently while resting in the pose. It would seem these authors might substantially influence the Christian Yoga described in Chapter 4, though in reality they are rarely cited. Their emphasis tends to be weighted toward the contemplative, meditative benefits of yoga (even if postures are used to initially achieve stillness of body or mind). They do not seem particularly aware of or interested in countering criticisms or objections. They do continue to influence a liberal religious conversation about interfaith opportunities, emphasizing universalism and contemplation, but generally constitute a distinct branch in the yoga-Christian evolutionary tree.⁶⁵

Father Thomas Ryan

Thomas Ryan illustrates the exception to the rule, rooted unequivocally in the interfaith lineage but broadly influencing Christian yoga practice. Ryan's *Prayer of Heart and Body: Meditation and Yoga as Christian Spiritual Practice* (1995) artfully distills many of the theological inclinations of a Christian who embraces the practice of yoga. Ryan is a leader in the Catholic interfaith movement, director of the Office for Ecumenical & Interfaith Relations of the North American Paulist Center in Washington, D.C. He describes his own yoga journey beginning with a trip to India in 1991 and a meeting with Bede Griffiths, the monk-yogi and quintessential representation of a fully immersed integrative journey. Ryan's writing exudes a sense of continuous movement, and builds on the "promise" side of Harvey Cox's title *Turning East: The Promise and Peril of the New Orientalism*. "There is new spirituality emerging, combining the wisdom of the East and West."⁶⁶ Ryan advises

⁶⁵ Thomas Matus, *Yoga and the Jesus Prayer Tradition: An Experiment in Faith* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), 154. Anthony Randazzo and Madelana Ferrara-Mattheis, *Beatitudes, Christ, and the Practice of Yoga: A Sacred Log on Land and Sea* (Totowa, NJ: Resurrection Press/Catholic Book Pub., 2006), insert.

⁶⁶ Ryan, *Prayer of Heart and Body*, 42.

church leaders that, as a consequence of the age, in the search for “deeper meaning and sustenance” people will learn of the mystery, “if not from us in Christian practice, then from others who will happily teach them according to their own methods.”⁶⁷

Yoga by Christians

Two characteristics of yoga prevail in the narratives of Christians who have intentionally incorporated some form of *hatha* yoga into their Christian practices: bodily wellness and mental stillness as Godly virtues. Correspondingly, the most frequently quoted scripture passages are those relating to the goodness of the body and importance of spending quiet time with God. First Corinthians 6:19,20 illustrates the first of these principles, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the holy spirit within you, which you have from God and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price therefore glorify [praise, or honor] God in your body,” and Psalms 46:10, the second, “Be still and know that I am God.”⁶⁸ These threads mirror the two commonplace perceptions of yoga as a tool for fitness or body care, and as a stress-relieving, calming practice, making one better able to listen for God. These are aspirations consistent with the thread in yoga’s religiously grounded origin story that ties posture practice to preparation for meditation (some of the most ancient texts and images, predating Patanjali or systematized *hatha* yoga) and is loosely resonant with the thread of bodily restraint (philosophical nuance notwithstanding). Each of these themes legitimately belongs to yoga’s history but falls short as a definitive representation of what yoga is.

⁶⁷ Ryan, *Prayer of Heart and Body*, 61. Thomas Ryan, “About Us,” “Christians Practicing Yoga | Yoga from a Christian Perspective,” accessed June 1, 2014, <http://www.christianspracticingyoga.com/wp/about-us/>.

⁶⁸ New Revised Standard Version.

Numerous yoga metaphors resonate well for Christians. Christian yoga proponents often draw on imagery of breath as life, connecting to the central role of *prānāyāma* (controlled or extended breath) practice in many yoga programs.⁶⁹ Second, and undoubtedly influenced by the Eastern homologies of body and cosmos that have influenced many threads of holistic thought, use of the body as expressive vehicle, metaphors of body and other aspects of life: “Check the body’s alignment. Our body weight is centered over the earth. You, ‘bodyspirit,’ are centered in God.”⁷⁰ Practitioners frequently define yoga simply as “union” and Christian teachers draw in many ways on this concept to speak of uniting with God, a defensible Christian theological promise.

Ultimately, though, neither origins nor easily transmuted imagery suffice. “What makes a particular practice Christian is not its source, but its intent.”⁷¹ This emphasis on intentionality at the center of the Christian practice is pervasive in the Christians practicing yoga community as well as among Christian Yoga proponents. Tilden Edwards, author of the forward to Roth’s work in 1989, is an Episcopal priest and longtime director of the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation. His work expresses attitudes that underlie much of the American openness toward spiritual practices. Zach quotes from Edward’s forward to Roth, “What makes a particular practice Christian is not its source, but its intent.” Referring not strictly to yoga, but more generally to spiritual practices from a variety of traditions, he says, “The practices themselves are largely neutral. They can be used to escape or to embrace

⁶⁹ Iyengar defines *prānāyāma* as “Rhythmic control of breath” and the fourth stage of yoga. Iyengar, *Light on Yoga*, 21.

⁷⁰ Roth, *An Invitation to Christian Yoga*, 80.

⁷¹ Tilden Edwards in forward to Roth, *A New Christian Yoga* (1989), 2, and (2005), xii. Also cited by Smothers, and Chalfant, *Christian Yoga*, 51.

life in God.”⁷² In 1994, Edwards writes specifically of “asanas in hatha yoga” that were “often taught in the West simply as a secular form of relaxation and physical fitness,” but “if our intent is opening to God through them, they can have a powerful capacity to help us drop beneath the surface scatteredness (sic) and tension to a prayerful presence.”⁷³

Lived Pluralism

Many of the Christians practicing yoga accede that yoga has “traditional” or “classic” roots connected to India and Eastern religion, but is essentially comprised of postural and breath practices that can be extracted from those roots without doing damage to their physical and spiritual efficacy. Some may perceive the origin as nothing more specific than “Eastern” or Indian. Others, if they have given it some thought or reading, may understand there are connections to Hinduism and Buddhism (the former more often associated with the physical practice, the latter with a general inheritance of meditation). Practitioners casually employ the terms “traditional” and “classic” and when pressed may be connect these to Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra*.⁷⁴ In other words, many Christians who practice yoga know there is something borrowed or inherited about their practice.⁷⁵

Yoga teachers foster class environments where students can take what they need, where students will feel safe and not imposed upon. I hear many yoga

⁷² Roth, *A New Christian Yoga* (1989), 1-3. Tilden Edwards, *Spiritual Director, Spiritual Companion: Guide to Tending the Soul* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 78.

⁷³ Tilden Edwards, *Living in the Presence: Spiritual Exercises to Open Your Life to the Awareness of God*, 1st HarperCollins pbk. ed (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 20.

⁷⁴ De Michelis distinguishes Classical Yoga (specifically of Patanjali) from more generally classical yoga for “all types of yoga current before the second half of the eighteenth century, including Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* and related commentaries. De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 37-38.

⁷⁵ Telephone and e-mail interviews conducted by author, September 2010 through March 2014.

teachers say, "take what works for you, leave the rest." This phrase is most often invoked after a bit of wisdom, an aphorism, an intention or suggested meditation comes into the conversation.⁷⁶ "Take what works" leads to the question: what does it mean for a spiritual or religious practice to "work"? What is the desired goal and what are the means by which the success is tested? In *Protestant Spiritual Exercises*, Driskill warns against assuming a practice that "works," meaning it inspires or triggers an emotional response in one person, is necessarily going to be equally effective for everyone.⁷⁷ But transmission and transmutation continues. Some do not see this as anything more than consumption of a global product. Perhaps this attitude begs an indictment of globalization, consumerism, colonialism, or Christian hubris. Or perhaps it is cause for celebration of diversity and pluralism. These are the very same tensions at the intersection of the academic conversation about comparative study, pluralism, and religious tolerance.

The conversation around Christianity and yoga includes elements reworked tirelessly in the Religious Studies academy as discovery, insight, and historical correction but in the broader milieu are taken as cultural givens. The East fascinates many Americans. Spirituality intrigues and by "spirituality" Americans do not always mean religion and sometimes they mean *not* religion. Yoga holds a deep attraction. Americans deploy their religiosity, inherited or blended, with verve for independence of thought and an emphasis on personal experiential resonance. Religion, or, to

⁷⁶ This taps into the perception of Hinduism (or generally Eastern religion) as polytheistic and the common non sequitur that this allows for more latitude in contrast to Christianity where there is one God and one way to salvation. There is a parallel pragmatism conveyed with respect to the postures themselves to do what your body needs, listen to your body, and not stretch beyond your limits. Some of this comes out of an ethical prescriptive to ensure students are not injured through overexertion, overstretching or improper alignment.

⁷⁷ Joseph D. Driskill, *Protestant Spiritual Exercises: Theology, History, and Practice* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Pub, 1999), 55-56.

deploy the phrase that has come to mean religion worth studying, "lived religion", for each person manifests as a complicated mix of cultural exposures, personal dispositions, resource availability, and deployment of and submission to power and authority. If there are social and institutional patterns that emerge, these are a result of the confluence of multiple individual practitioners who have come together for a shared experience or common purpose.

The American myth of the Far East runs in two strains, influenced by colonial and post-colonial dynamics. Hinduism (as well as Islam, Buddhism, India, or references to the East or Far East) evokes, to the post-colonial mind, a set of images and perceptions, some attractive (and perseverating the myth of the mystic East) and others repelling (and serving to fuel prejudice and misunderstanding). On the one hand, Americans are fascinated by the mystic East, fueled by a desire to find the balance of yin to Western yang to put it in Eastern romanticized terms, or to cast it in Jungian psychological terms, a desire to embrace the shadow side, that which is not scientific and rational and male-typed, but intuitive and feeling and female-typed. Much of the "Eastern turn" can be attributed to this set of perceptions.⁷⁸

The second Orientalist attitude (and of course one fuels the other) is that Eastern culture and people are less evolved, pagan, or barbaric.⁷⁹ This comes

⁷⁸ On the mirrored construction of the West, counter to the Orientalist East, specifically in subordination of what is conceived as "poetic', 'mystical', irrational, uncivilized and feminine" see Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and "The Mystic East,"* First Paperback Edition (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), 3. Schulman emphasizes the role of the New Age movement in comingling psychology and spirituality. Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies the Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2002), 96-97. For a descriptive account of the characteristics and narratives of this turn, see Harvey Cox, *Turning East: The Promise and Peril of the New Orientalism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977).

⁷⁹ For the seminal work on this topic, generally, see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Princeton, NJ: Vintage, 1979). For a discussion specific to the Indian context, including yoga, see chapter four, "Orientalism and Indian religions" in Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion*.

through in some American yoga practitioners' mentions of India, with nominal, condescending gratitude, as a birthing and holding place for yoga, the implication being that Christianity or the West will mature and perfect it, completing the story. This attitude is not new but continues to hold traction.⁸⁰

In its media toolkit, intended to debunk "common omissions and oversights in media coverage of Hinduism," the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) cites "Hindus are polytheistic" as the number one misrepresentation of Hinduism.⁸¹ Aside from monotheistic dogmatic critiques, to the American mind polytheism can sound very accepting: if you have many gods, then how hard could it be to add another to the pantheon (Jesus, for example). Perhaps a corollary is that practices are also less "locked into" one line of reasoning, one particular god. For those who have even a little knowledge of Hinduism in practice, it may even more concretely exemplify (in the American mind) pluralism because it is practiced "locally" (which to Americans would probably mean "individually", without understanding those local practices to be deeply rooted in history and tradition).

In general, the myth of affable universalism pervades the American relationship to Hinduism, rooted in simplifications and misunderstandings as well as pragmatic, well-meaning deployments. Williamson speaks of Hinduism's campaign to be the global face of religious universalism as a political maneuver by India's savvy intelligencia noting not all simplifications are unintended.⁸² In 2011 a Hindu American Foundation representative at the American Academy of Religion annual conference

⁸⁰ Telephone and e-mail interviews conducted by author, September 2010 through March 2014.

⁸¹ HAF. "Media Toolkit," *Hindu American Foundation (HAF)*, accessed October 12, 2014, http://www.hafsite.org/resources/media_toolkit.

⁸² Williamson, *Transcendent in America*, 14.

handed me a laminated business card titled "Hinduism 2 Go." On the back, six concepts are defined including "Pluralism: Hindus acknowledge the existence of multiple paths to the Supreme Reality of God."⁸³

With an admittedly journalistic and participatory slant, Phillip Goldberg describes the love affair of Americans with yoga and, as his primary thesis, with the Vedantic philosophy often paired with it. Goldberg represents a highly educated but uncritical embrace of the mystic East, with philosophical details sufficient to give the entire narrative an air of credibility and scholarship. As the writing of yoga history unfolds in popular culture, this book epitomizes the mainstream story: yoga came to the United States from India through a complicated series of twist and turns, but what it brought is essentially good and most importantly, good from a secular-spiritual perspective (i.e., freed from religious trappings, but replete with what Goldberg calls "philosophical" values that are – what a coincidence! – quintessentially American.)⁸⁴

There is a lot of lip service given to "respecting yoga's roots" (case in point, the Hindu American Foundation's campaign to "take back yoga") without much specificity.⁸⁵ What does it mean to honor yoga's roots? I would advocate for accuracy, at a minimum, but even that is easier said than done. Before launching on

⁸³ "Hinduism 2 Go," Hindu American Foundation, card in possession of author, received in San Francisco, CA, November 20, 2011.

⁸⁴ I am not convinced that the "drift toward personalized, experiential spirituality and freely chosen affiliations" is, as Goldberg parenthetically suggests, "a decidedly Vedantic route." Goldberg, *American Veda*, 24. Kripal, Schmidt and Albanese would each suggest decidedly more complex and less textually uniform sources of these American propensities, influenced from a wide array of Eastern traditions. See Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, Schmidt, *Restless Souls* and Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, 1 edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁸⁵ HAF, "TakeYogaBack," *Hindu American Foundation (HAF)*, accessed December 29, 2013, <http://www.hafsite.org/media/pr/takeyogaback>.

this research adventure, I would have easily accepted the claim that “yoga is a technique” or even “yoga is a science” (with my own understanding that science here is intended to mean a system, or structured set of practices with a predictable outcome, not something to be taught in the physical or natural science departments of the university). I understood there were undoubtedly foreign origins because I appreciated the Sanskrit names for the postures, but nothing in my introductory yoga classes made me think I might be desecrating someone else’s tradition.

Yoga carries baggage, no doubt, but some of that baggage serves it well. Its physicality resonates with the American fixation on health and wellness, its widespread commodification and variation providing a flavor for nearly anyone who can afford it to partake of its benefits, and its residual enchantment from contact with some ancient origin leaving partakers with something better than exercise alone, perhaps even a taste of transcendence on the tongue. The ambiguity (in common perception) of yoga origins means variations on the history of yoga can be deployed for the purpose at hand. For example, if yoga predates Hinduism it is “older than religion” and belongs in the public domain (“nobody owns yoga”). If the physical practice (*hatha*, postural yoga) is a quintessentially modern phenomenon (Singleton’s book may be referenced with little specificity) therefore yoga, as practiced now in the United States, owes little debt or connection to Hinduism. This, of course, is what those affiliated with the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) object to so vehemently.⁸⁶ Assuredly yoga represents many things to many people and Christians grapple with this multiplicity.

⁸⁶ This ambiguity seems only to apply broadly, as few individuals seem to have any doubts. Nearly everyone I spoke to officially and unofficially on this topic was adamant about what yoga is, and especially about whether it is religious or not. This individual ability to achieve certainty in the face of complexity – certainty in the face of pervasive disagreement – is one of the most telling cultural observations out of this work. Neither the pluralism of the U.S. nor the imaginative bricolage so widely undertaken individually seems to have tempered opinions.

Christians Practicing Yoga Organization

The “Christians Practicing Yoga” (CPY) organization, according to their website has a fourfold mission: intra-denominational networking and sharing of ideas and experiences, acknowledging the appropriateness of spiritual practice “in and through a body”, supporting the traditional connection in yoga between posture and meditation, and inviting those outside the Christian faith into dialog.⁸⁷ Established organically by initial invitation to attendees of Thomas Ryan’s “Prayer of Heart and Body” workshops for a gathering in 2001, the group convened for six retreats in the years since and boasts a robust website and Facebook community. This organization stops short of calling their common practice “Christian Yoga” opting instead for “Christians practicing yoga” which I have borrowed as the titular theme for this chapter.⁸⁸ In 2003 the topic was subject of internal discussion, as Ryan documents the divergent choices made by those in the community at large:

We recognized that ‘Christian yoga’ is a descriptive phrase that raises more questions than it answers, and runs the risk of creating the impression that we are co-opting yoga and retro-fitting it in Christian terms, failing to respect its own integrity on its own terms. To avoid such an impression, many in our network choose not to describe their teaching and classes as “Christian yoga”, while others, recognizing its liability, continue to use it for lack of something better. The terminological ambiguities make clear that a concise language is not there yet enabling Christians who practice yoga to convey to others that what they are doing is integral to their life of faith and not outside of it.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ “Our Mission,” “Christians Practicing Yoga | Yoga from a Christian Perspective,” accessed April 5, 2014, <http://christianspracticingyoga.com/wp/our-mission/>.

⁸⁸ The “Christians Practicing Yoga” site accounts of retreats include references to Holy Yoga-trained teachers in attendance, and many Holy Yoga and Yahweh Yoga teachers, Christian Yoga practitioners featured in Chapter 4, are active in the “Christians Practicing Yoga” Facebook group and in direct contact with each other. In other words, the structure and categorization I have adopted for descriptive purposes should not be interpreted to imply closed categories or lack of exchange. On the contrary, Christians practicing yoga and Christian Yoga practitioners are influencing and transforming each other.

⁸⁹ Tom Ryan, “About Us,” “Christians Practicing Yoga | Yoga from a Christian Perspective,” accessed June 1, 2014, <http://www.christianspracticingyoga.com/wp/about-us/>.

Christians Practicing Yoga Summary

While the Christians Practicing Yoga (CPY) organization conveniently illustrates the ongoing conversation about Christianity and yoga, most of the American Christians who practice yoga do not affiliate even loosely with a group; they simply “do yoga.” (And of course, many American Christians have no interest or inclination to practice yoga in any form.) Those who do practice yoga as something “integral to their life of faith,” much like those affiliated with CPY have glimpsed some possibility in the yoga practice beyond just exercise, and they see that possibility as consistent with their Christian path. In response to public criticism of Christians practicing yoga, they defend themselves as “faithful Christians who use Eastern traditions to strengthen our prayer lives.”⁹⁰

Claims about the relationship of yoga to Christianity resonate with the best arguments for comparative religious studies: that understanding a foreign practice creates a deeper experience, a more complete and self-reflective understanding of one’s own tradition. Many Christians practicing yoga simply say it makes them better people: healthier, calmer, less anxious individuals defensibly honoring God by honoring the body and the life He created.⁹¹ Christian leaders and lay people testify

⁹⁰ “Where the ‘Amen’ Meets the ‘Om’ - Not Strictly Spiritual | Not Strictly Spiritual,” accessed February 9, 2014, <http://www.notstrictlyspiritual.com/2012/06/where-the-amen-meets-the-om/>.

⁹¹ “I experienced more clarity in thought; I felt more self-assured and was more self-directed.” Randazzo and Ferrara-Mattheis, *Beatitudes, Christ, and the Practice of Yoga*, 15. “Besides keeping me flexible and balanced, yoga keeps me centered and at peace. It definitely keeps me in the present moment.” “Graduate Story: Marie Powers | Yahweh Yoga,” accessed January 3, 2014, <http://yahwehyoga.com/tribal-talk/graduate-story-marie-powers/>.

that practicing yoga leads them to deeper relationships with Christ and to being better Christians.⁹²

The following chapter reviews testimony from those who make a different assessment of yoga as Christians. Despite the secularization of modern yoga, despite the availability in the marketplace of yoga devoid of any spiritual or religious trappings, despite the contemporary malleability of the word yoga itself, there are Christians who emphatically do not practice yoga under any condition. I now turn to their arguments.

⁹² "Becoming one in God was Christ's goal and it is the yogic goal par excellence." Randazzo and Ferrara-Mattheis, *Beatitudes, Christ, and the Practice of Yoga*, 17. "I will show you how to use the practices of yoga to facilitate your walk with Christ." Andrea J. Vidrine, *Jesus, Yoga, and the Way of Happiness* (Centennial, CO: Lifevest Publishing, 2006), 5. "My relationship with God has become more intimate through my practice of Christian yoga." "Graduate Story: Dawn Jones | Yahweh Yoga," accessed January 3, 2014, <http://yahwehyoga.com/tribal-talk/graduate-story-dawn-jones/>.

CHAPTER 3

CHRISTIANS NOT PRACTICING YOGA

Yoga – a ‘happy’ movement of HEALTH? – or an unholy movement from HELL?
-- Dave Hunt, *Yoga and the Body of Christ*

The front cover of Dave Hunt’s *Yoga and the Body of Christ* (2006) poses the seemingly open question, “What position should Christians hold?” On the back cover, an either-or question foreshadows the answer that lies within: “Yoga – a ‘happy’ movement of HEALTH? – or an unholy movement from HELL?” A shadowy image of an uncoiled snake suggests that “happy” is probably not the answer. Hunt exemplifies the counter voice to those heard in the preceding chapter. He speaks for Christians who are emphatically *not* practicing yoga and prosaically discouraging other Christians from doing so. They are more than Christians simply choosing not to practice yoga out of disinterest or arbitrary choice. They speak out with strong objections and emphatic warnings. The snake is not the only appeal to visceral concerns: Christians speaking out against the practice (by Christians) of yoga point to dangers of idolatry, worship of and possession by demons or the anti-Christ, heathenism, psychotic states and eternal damnation, all as consequences of yoga practice.⁹³

Despite the secularization of yoga and precisely because of its popularization, certain church authorities and self-appointed Internet campaigners admonish Christians to heed the dangers of yoga (alternatively and sometimes both) as a New Age or Hindu religious practice. These assertions of authority and regulation create ripples of fear and concern. While not a majority voice within the mainstream of yoga practitioners, somewhat by definition, the narrative of fear persists. The voice is zealous and sufficiently resonant with other historical warnings to Christians not to

⁹³ Dave Hunt, *Yoga and the Body of Christ* (Bend, OR: Berean Call, 2006), cover.

veer from the straight and narrow path. The instillers of doubt bear only the slightest burden of proof: the consequences of error are painted as sufficiently dire that even a hint of doubt can suffice to change a person's course.

Just outside a small Midwestern town, *Anna*, a Baptist pastor's daughter, recently gave up teaching yoga at the nearby community college. She learned yoga at massage school as part of the kinesiology curriculum. For years she taught yoga classes in a local hospital, and even during her first of two semesters teaching at the community college, classes went really well and were "full of Christian women." Her second semester at the college, a confrontation with a student changed her mind.

This student, who had been in the military, stationed "on the coast," approached her demanding meditation that "took him inside," something he had experienced previously and was expecting again. Prompted by this encounter, *Anna* thought about the roots of yoga and concluded that, although she herself continues to practice yoga at home, she "does not want to lead fellow Christians astray." Rather than take that chance, she gives up a portion of her potential livelihood, turning down repeated requests to teach. When pressed about her sources for the new realization about yoga, she simply says she learned "the Sankrit names and that they stood for other things" in her original training, but had for some time chosen "not to go that route with it." She also mentions remembering as a child that yoga was "New Age" and "taboo." After her student began asking questions, she decided that teaching publicly was too much of a risk.⁹⁴ *Anna's* reticence is reflective of the deep and continuing traction in some Christian communities of the Christian writing and opinions articulated in this chapter.

⁹⁴ *Anna* telephone interview by author, March 5, 2014.

Voices of Recent Controversy

Albert Mohler, Jr., president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and currently editor in chief of *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, garnered mainstream media and Internet publicity in 2010 with his thoughts about yoga, foremost being that Christians who practice yoga “are kidding themselves.” He sets out in his blog and podcast to correct the record, particularly on the historical roots of yoga, which he claims “cannot be fully extricated from [yoga’s] spiritual roots in Hinduism and Buddhism.” His primary evidence is drawn from Stephanie Syman’s articulation of this same position in *The Subtle Body*, her then just published history of yoga in the United States. Syman’s thesis, which Mohler correctly cites, that “yoga has augured a truly post-Christian, spiritually polyglot country” is perhaps overstated (one could easily argue the appeal of yoga is a symptom, not an auguring force) but taps precisely into Evangelical angst about the loss of the Christian nation.⁹⁵ Since 2010, the media has widely cited Mohler’s opinion (The New York Times, Huffington Post, The Christian Century) as one authoritative Christian view on yoga.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ “About Dr. R. Albert Mohler Jr.,” *AlbertMohler.com*, accessed October 12, 2014, <http://www.albertmohler.com/about/>. Albert Mohler, “The Subtle Body — Should Christians Practice Yoga?,” *AlbertMohler.com*, accessed March 9, 2014, <http://www.albertmohler.com/2010/09/20/the-subtle-body-should-christians-practice-yoga/>. Syman is a yoga practitioner herself and an advocate for recapturing the spiritual essence of yoga, not at all seeming to want to discourage practice. Mohler’s quote is from Stefanie Syman, *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 9. Syman expresses her sense of loss by saying, “Where you promote a very secular yoga, you lose sight of some of its greatest potential.” Ferretti, “Beyond Belief”: 85 (inset).

⁹⁶ Albert Mohler, Southern Baptist Leader, On Yoga: Not Christianity,” Huffington Post, accessed March 23, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/10/07/albert-mohler-southern-ba_n_753797.html. Lizette Alvarez, “STRETCH; Stretching and Bending With a Holy Twist,” *The New York Times*, November 28, 2010, accessed December 1, 2013, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html>. Coverage in The Christian Century was critical of Mohler’s position. John N. Sheveland, “Is Yoga Religious? Spiritual Roots of a Physical Practice,” *The Christian Century*, June 6, 2011, accessed December 28, 2013, <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2011-05/yoga-religious>.

In the decades preceding Mohler's publicity, two other theologians – Douglas Groothuis and Elliot Miller – articulated similar Christian anti-yoga themes.⁹⁷ In fact, in the midst of the 2010 fracas Mohler stirred after the publication of Stephanie Syman's history of yoga, Mohler interviewed both her and Groothuis, Professor of Philosophy at Denver Seminary, author of *Unmasking the New Age* (1986) and frequent commentator on Christianity and yoga. Mohler quotes Groothuis: "All forms of yoga involve occult assumptions."⁹⁸ Similarly, Elliot Miller authored a dense and expansive treatise titled "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment" (2008) available on the Christian Research Institute website as a three part, 32-page article with the following telling subtitles: "Yoga in its original eastern context," "Yoga in its contemporary western context" and "Toward a comprehensive Christian response."

Miller speaks to the "classical yoga" in the first part describing the work of Patanjali, the eight limbs of yoga, an overview of Hindu and Vedantic philosophy, the concept of chakras, as well as Jnana, Karma, Bhakti, Karma, Raja, Tantra and Hatha Yoga. In the second part, he turns to the New Age associations including direct criticism of Christians promoting Christian Yoga, and in the third to the need for a Bible-based, unified Christian response to the "Trojan horse of Hinduism." The call is for Christians to fight primarily for "their First Amendment Rights and press for a

⁹⁷ Andrea Jain proposes the descriptor "yogaphobic" for the position taken by these Christians. While I respect her work and the scholarly epistemology she suggests for this term, I find use of the suffix "phobic" connotes an incoherence I do not find in the content of this chapter. While certainly yoga has been commodified, the degree to which it is a religiously neutral practice is contested. Implying those who find yoga most religiously charged to be irrational does not seem productive, even as they exhibit an essentializing view of Hinduism that can and should be challenged. Andrea R. Jain, "Who Is to Say Modern Yoga Practitioners Have It All Wrong? On Hindu Origins and Yogaphobia," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82, no. 2 (June 2014): 427–71.

⁹⁸ Albert Mohler, "The Meaning of Yoga: A Conversation with Stephanie Syman and Doug Groothuis," podcast, *AlbertMohler.com*, (September 20, 2010), accessed March 9, 2014, <http://www.albertmohler.com/2010/09/20/the-meaning-of-yoga-a-conversation-with-stephanie-syman-and-dough-groothuis/>.

consistent definition of religion in the public square." Miller's article is complex and nuanced, including a sophisticated explanation of variations within Hinduism and the complexities of yoga's history, including the debate about whether it predates or post-dates Hinduism. (To Miller this is inconsequential to his verdict, because either origin story conflicts with the singularity of the Christian path.) Overall, the presumptive tone is that Christians who know all the facts about yoga will come easily to Miller's conclusions.⁹⁹

The tone of Miller's article is not so different, in fact, from work by yoga and Eastern philosophy students such as Syman and Goldberg, both popular writers on yoga who valorize a lingering spiritual core. Miller writes, "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."¹⁰⁰ Other than rejecting the embedded spiritual value that Goldberg and Syman extol on the basis that it is not Christian, the overall tracing of the yoga movement in the United States is quite similar, and Miller absolutely concurs there is spiritual content at stake.

⁹⁹ Miller specifically calls out Brooke Boon and Susan Bordenkircher in one of the earliest public reactions to Christian Yoga. He is particularly expansive and pointed in his critique of Christian Yoga, claiming "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." Elliot Miller, "Part 1: Yoga in Its Original Eastern Context," *Christian Research Journal*, The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, volume 31, no. 2 (2008), accessed February 21, 2014, <http://www.equip.org/PDF/JAY001-1.pdf>. Elliot Miller, "Part 2: Yoga in Its Contemporary Western Context," *Christian Research Journal*, The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, volume 31, no. 3 (2008), accessed February 21, 2014, <http://www.equip.org/PDF/JAY001-2.pdf>. Elliot Miller, "Part 3: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Response," *Christian Research Journal*, The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, volume 31, no. 4 (2008), accessed February 21, 2014, <http://www.equip.org/PDF/JAY001-3.pdf>.

¹⁰⁰ Miller, "Part 3: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Response."

Catholic Voices

In 2014, Fr. Ezra Sullivan posted a three-part series to the “Catholic Spiritual Direction” blog, “What is Yoga? A Catholic Perspective” underscoring many of the same points made by Miller years before: yoga is unquestionably more than physical exercise and though people may begin to practice yoga for fitness purposes, their practice leaves them vulnerable to “diminishment of Christian belief.” Part two features colorful images of Kali, Durga, Vishnu and Shiva, characterized without particular specificity as “Hindu gods” and “pagan statuary.” Sullivan articulates a common concern (and an assertion by some avid yoga practitioners) that many people start a practice of yoga “for physical reasons but stick with it for spiritual reasons,” or, put differently, “many people experience yoga as a gateway to a spirituality disconnected from Christ.”¹⁰¹

Michelle Arnold writes a more circumspect article for *Catholic Answers Magazine*, where she separates the physical postures that hold no inherent power from the “highly problematic” risks inherent in “use of yoga as a spiritual path.” Although some concerns are noted about the postures themselves, as practitioners may mistake physiological effects for spiritual graces, her primary concerns are irreconcilable philosophical conflicts of monism, Gnosticism, and reification of prayer as a technique over a gift from God. Arnold acknowledges the overreaching claims of yoga as a Hindu conspiracy are not helpful and “show a lack of regard for non-Christian Eastern religions that the church does not share,” contradicting the spirit of

¹⁰¹ Ezra Sullivan, “What Is Yoga? A Catholic Perspective (Part III),” May 7, 2014, accessed June 8, 2014, <http://spiritualdirection.com/blog/2014/05/07/are-yoga-gods-divine-manifestation-a-catholic-perspective-part-iii>. Ezra Sullivan, “What Is Yoga? A Catholic Perspective (Part II),” February 19, 2014, accessed June 8, 2014, <http://spiritualdirection.com/blog/2014/02/19/are-yoga-gods-divine-manifestation-a-catholic-perspective-part-ii>. Ezra Sullivan, “Yoga - A Catholic Perspective (Part I of Series),” January 1, 2014, accessed June 8, 2014, <http://spiritualdirection.com/blog/2014/01/29/what-is-yoga-catholic-perspective-part-i>.

Some Aspects of Christian Meditation, authored in 1989 by then Cardinal Prefect Joseph Ratzinger, that acknowledges the value, including of meditation techniques, from “great non-Christian religions.”¹⁰²

Ostensibly the source of central ruling on questions facing Catholics, *Some Aspects of Christian Meditation* as well as the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* from 1965 are subject to interpretation and wielded equally by objectors and yoga practitioners, with varying emphases. Arnold cites *Aspects* “suitable means” statement to temper what she bemoans as “wildly overreaching Catholic critiques,” including those of Fr. Gabriele Amorth, exorcist notable for saying Harry Potter and yoga are evil. Others wield *Aspects* strictly as a warning of the “risk of degenerating into a cult of the body.” The passage found under “Psychological-Corporal Methods,” VI.27, does not mention yoga¹⁰³ but rather the Hesychast anchorites and the Jesus Prayer, going on to say, “To live out in one’s prayer the full awareness of one’s body as a symbol is even more difficult: it can degenerate into a cult of the body and can lead surreptitiously to considering all bodily sensations as spiritual experiences.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Michelle Arnold, “The Trouble with Yoga,” *The Trouble with Yoga | Catholic Answers*, accessed October 11, 2013, <http://www.catholic.com/magazine/articles/the-trouble-with-yoga>. Cardinal Prefect Joseph Ratzinger, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation,” October 15, 1989, accessed January 4, 2014, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19891015_meditazione-cristiana_en.html.

¹⁰³ Yoga is listed in the first endnote to the document as one of the “‘eastern methods’ ... inspired by Hinduism and Buddhism” along with “Zen,” and “Transcendental Meditation.”

¹⁰⁴ Cardinal Prefect Joseph Ratzinger, “Letter to the Bishops.” Pope Paul VI, “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” October 28, 1965, accessed January 4, 2014, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html. Notably, to the questions of Hindu identity addressed elsewhere in this work, this statement in 1965 synthesizes the Hindu pursuit as “through ascetical practices or profound meditation or a flight to God with

Themes in the Objections

Christians who object to other Christians' participation in yoga typically start from the premise that yoga is inseparable from its very religious origins. Mark Driscoll of Mars Hill Church in Seattle makes his definition clear: "yoga is a religious philosophy that is in direct opposition to Christianity."¹⁰⁵ Most often the origin in question (being ignored by errant Christian yogis) is said to be Hinduism or, sometimes more generally, Eastern religions.¹⁰⁶ A derivative objection claims that yoga, especially the popularized and religiously sanitized versions gaining commercial popularity, is the surreptitious tactic of a Hindu conversion campaign.¹⁰⁷ In 1983, Allan demonstrates the concern with an interesting turn, rather vaguely recounting the history of yoga's infiltration into Buddhism (which he grants tolerable given similarity of world-view and "ultimate aims") as well as into Islam by way of

love and trust," touching upon the bodily, meditative and devotional dimension of Hinduism roughly parallel to bifurcations in the perception of yoga. Thomas Ryan, subject of other sections of this work, asserts both these documents support his project to use yoga in support of Christian prayer, as he feels assured he has complied with the requirement to "take from [ways great religions have sought union with God] what is useful so long as the Christian conception of prayer, its logic and requirements are never obscured." Ryan, *Prayer of Heart and Body*, 149.

¹⁰⁵ Mark Driscoll, "Christian Yoga? It's a Stretch | Pastor Mark," *Christian Yoga? It's a Stretch | Pastor Mark*, November 2, 2011, accessed August 26, 2013, <http://pastormark.tv/2011/11/02/christian-yoga-its-a-stretch>. Driscoll's post draws heavily on Elliot Miller's 2008 series, "The Yoga Boom."

¹⁰⁶ Rarely are Buddhism, Sikhism or Jainism cited as connected to the religious tradition of yoga by detractors. In this sense the "Take Back Yoga" campaign by the HAF seems to be successfully congealing an association to Hinduism. I suspect this will not permanently undercut the pervasive and easy association of the meditative aspects of yoga with Buddhism, as noted in Chapter 2, though this is probably more a function of stereotypes of Buddhism than understanding of yoga's history.

¹⁰⁷ Hunt collapses the New Age Movement gurus of the 1950s and 1960s (Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Baba Muktananda, Yogananda, Yogi Bhanjan) and – anachronistically – Vivikenanda with the Vishva Hindu Parishad Vedantic agenda together under the heading "A Massive Missionary Endeavor." Hunt, *Yoga and the Body of Christ*, 12-14. This claim is mirrored by those who object to Christian Yoga as an entrée for evangelism to Hindus (as recounted to me by Senarighi). Cindy Senarighi, telephone interview by author, March 6, 2014.

the “mystics on the fringe ... called Sufis, to whom yoga practices are an acceptable part of faith.”¹⁰⁸

A second theological objection may be in contradiction to the inexorably-Hindu argument: It collapses yoga into the morass of American New Age spiritual seeking (not entirely an inaccurate categorization, consistent with the popular mythology of yoga as part of youth culture and Eastern turn of the 1960s as described in previous chapters). There are complex genealogical relationships between Eastern religions and New Age proclivities but to collapse yoga into a practice under the New Age umbrella would seem to contradict theological argument number one, that yoga cannot be mutated into something other than its pure Hindu source. Hunt cites Ken Wilbur, philosopher and founder of the Integral Institute, to invoke the New Age indictment by association. Matrisciana’s video productions heavily feature psychedelic colors, blurring in and out of human forms floating in space, visually invoking what could be characterized in hippie vernacular as “a trip.”¹⁰⁹ Which is more objectionable, association with Hinduism or New Age? To Christian objectors, it does not matter: the combination seems to only compound the danger.

Charles Taylor articulates the paradigm of a modern bounded self in contrast to a porous pre-modern self, in an environment eschewing enchantment. This disenchantment (which Taylor term’s “modern”) materializes unevenly and inconsistently. The Christian Evangelical stands as permeable as the New Age believer, both in counter reaction to post-Enlightenment demythologizing. While the

¹⁰⁸ John Allan, *Yoga: A Christian Analysis* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1983), 38-43.

¹⁰⁹ Hunt, *Yoga and the Body of Christ*, 69, 125. Caryl Matrisciana, *Yoga Uncoiled From East to West*, DVD (Caryl Productions, n.d), also available on YouTube, December 2, 2011, accessed October 13, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TWI1ieDz_B4.

descriptors differ, and attribution of power is contested between these groups (specifically whether forces primarily of good or of evil are in play), the sense of receptivity and boundlessness is strikingly parallel. Hunt leaves no question, "The Bible declares that we are not alone in the universe but that in addition to mankind, there are angels, demons, Satan and God."¹¹⁰ In this view, conceptually including multi-dimensional existence and energetic fluidity, the body is particularly permeable, and objectors acknowledge yoga as a path toward opening the physical to other dimensions of reality.¹¹¹

The body may be vulnerable, but even more relevant to the Evangelical concern, the infiltration by the demonic is imperceptible, and yoga is an insidious doorway. Miller cites *Yoga Journal* (and could have cited many yoga teachers) saying, "If you are practicing *hatha* yoga you are already practicing meditation in its beginning stages." In fact, the "sense of peace" is a sign that benefits of meditation have already begun to come. Miller attributes the power of the postures to their "spiritual significance."¹¹² The less threatening something seems on its surface, the more wary the Christian should be. This message prevails in Caryl Mastrisciana's work, including the DVD production, fully available on YouTube, "Yoga Uncoiled from East to West." Claiming insider perspective from her years growing up in India, Mastrisciana's call is for vigilance in the face of grave danger as she is featured on

¹¹⁰ Hunt, *Yoga and the Body of Christ*, 51.

¹¹¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 539. Taylor argues the movement toward a bounded self, or "buffered identity" is accompanied by interiorization, which would seem to manifest strongly for the individuals in this conversation, despite their sense of vulnerability to exterior forces.

¹¹² Miller, "Part 1: Yoga in Its Original Eastern Context."

Christian talk shows as an author, filmmaker and “expert in Eastern religions.”¹¹³ Johanna Michaelson’s work, *The Beautiful Side of Evil*, underscores the complementary idea that the seemingly miraculous results of “occult technologies” only lull one into complacency, increasing the Christian’s vulnerability to the anti-Christ who will, with similarly misrepresenting tactics, claim to be God.¹¹⁴

Another theme in the work of those campaigning against Christians practicing yoga criticizes the use of the “science” to describe yoga, presumably because the religion-science duality would not allow yoga to inhabit both sides of this post-Enlightenment binary, thus bolstering the “yoga is religion” side of the binary. Introductory yoga classes commonly include the pronouncement, “yoga is a science,” seemingly employed to differentiate yoga from less time-tested or methodological practices.¹¹⁵ This may be rooted in a continued attempt to rationalize and Americanize a practice that carries New Age residuals. Alternatively, this invocation of science might represent a short-cut presentation of B.K.S. Iyengar’s epistemological claim. In the introduction to *Light on Yoga* he speaks of the separation of arts and sciences from religion as an ongoing process, ostensibly to justify his own inclusion of mythological stories. “It is only very recently in India that

¹¹³ Caryl Matrisciana “Escaping From Hinduism,” Lamb and Lion Ministries, “Christ in Prophecy,” 2012, accessed June 8, 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BXuoFZ-CCqk&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

¹¹⁴ Johanna Michaelson and Hal Lindsey, *The Beautiful Side of Evil* (Eugene, Or: Harvest House Publishers, 1982); salient themes can be found in a recorded lecture, *The Beautiful Side of Evil - Johanna Michaelson*, Feb. 5, 2012, accessed June 8, 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K6Qy1j2LBmU&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

¹¹⁵ I pressed one of my first yoga teachers in 2004 for what she meant, after hearing her say repeatedly, “Yoga is a science.” She explained that yoga is scientific in that it is a time proven system. When I must have still appeared skeptical she continued, adding that when performed methodologically, the yoga science produces known outcomes. From these explanations, I surmised what she meant by science is “methodological” or “systematic” and this interpretation has been consistently validated ever since, including in its use by those interviewed for this research.

these arts and sciences have begun to be emancipated from the Divine [...] I consider it important as well as interesting that the reader should know the origin of asanas, and I have, therefore, included legends handed down by practicing yogis and sages.” The effect of these statements, following a complete paragraph about how his book focuses on the techniques of *asanas*, serves indirectly to suggest the independence of the techniques from the myths.¹¹⁶ Hunt does not accept “science” on these grounds, claiming nothing about yoga is verified by means “acceptable to Western science” and quickly returning to reiteration of the religious nature of the tradition.¹¹⁷ In a somewhat weaker argument, Hunt also criticizes yoga guru worship implying, because yoga sources its knowledge to a line of gurus, that this alone (by virtue of no “scientists” being in said lineage) proves it is unscientific.¹¹⁸

Despite some breakdowns of rigor and visceral appeals, many of the objections raised above are reasonable presuming they are intended for Christians who accept the underlying worldview. Theologians such as Miller and Groothius articulate accurate representations of at least some perspectives on the history of yoga. Hunt’s book includes retelling of stories of lost faith, psychological breakdown, and involuntary physical reactions echoed in work by those with different theological and academic assessments of their implications. For example, Stephanie Grof’s Spiritual Emergencies Network, established to address psychological crises prompted by any variety of metaphysical experiments, figures in both Hunt and Kripal with

¹¹⁶ Iyengar, *Light on Yoga*, 14. See Chapter 2 of this paper for comment on the significance of Iyengar’s *Light on Yoga* in the development of Modern Yoga, particularly the postural practice.

¹¹⁷ For perspective, see William J. Broad, *The Science of Yoga: The Risks and the Rewards*, 1 edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012). Broad finds that while some common claims have been refuted in medical studies (such as the idea that yoga increases the amount of oxygen in the bloodstream), other studies have found significant physiological impacts of the practice. Generally, much about yoga remains as yet unproven by medical standards.

¹¹⁸ Hunt, *Yoga and the Body of Christ*, 73-74, 82.

different normative tones but the same underlying message: powerful forces are at work in these ventures. Hunt is critical of those who succumb to Kundalini energies (or, in a sense, even to those who succumb to the metaphor); Thomas Ryan cites at length from the work of Philip St. Romain, a Catholic criticized by Hunt for his embrace of the Kundalini metaphors (following his own spontaneous ecstatic experiences).¹¹⁹

However, despite some parallels between the telling of these histories, little recognition is given in Hunt's book or in other yoga-debunking narratives to the polyvalence of the term yoga itself, the possibility of its change over time or in different contexts, or the imaginative deployment that might highlight the flexibility and malleability of language itself (not to mention the potential malleability of religion itself). The immutability of Christianity is one argument for the "falseness" of Christian Yoga, as Hunt proclaims, "This faith was 'once [for all] delivered to the saints,' and believers everywhere and at all times are exhorted to 'earnestly contend' for it (Jude 3). It is therefore dishonest to introduce some new element ... and call it 'Christian.'"¹²⁰

Christian yoga critics often use the image of the serpent as a particularly visceral appeal. In a poetic move to distinguish Christianity from all other religions, Hunt in particular emphasizes the unique role of the serpent as the enemy in contrast to any religions that honor the serpent (not at all subtly implying this as one more piece of evidence those traditions are quite mistaken, contradicting the Bible as they do). In these arguments, there is no distinction between types of yoga, whether

¹¹⁹ Ibid. Kripal, *Esalen*. Ryan, *Prayer of Heart and Body*, 169-177.

¹²⁰ Hunt, *Yoga and the Body of Christ*, 23.

or not there is an emphasis on, or use of images of, Kundalini. By association, yoga (of any ilk) puts the practitioner in contact with the serpent and the serpent is evil.¹²¹

Individual testimonials such as those by TheVigilantChristian (YouTube channel name and title of this person's series of videos) are easily found, referring to Kundalini experiences and practices in particular as demonstrable dangers. "Do you want to be waking up the serpent that's going to make you think you're a god? It's absolutely demonic." This same YouTube preacher criticizes specifically *The Yoga of Jesus* (displaying the cover of Paramahansa Yogananda's book without attribution) and *shaktipat* (guru energy transfer practices). Echoing Matrisciana, Groothius and Hunt, this truly vigilant Christian describes Christian Yoga as a relatively recent development, and not simply misguided but a definitive sign of the end times as it is "creeping into our churches" specifically "because we are approaching the day of the second coming. The enemy has infiltrated the church, masquerading as something positive."¹²²

Surprising Allies

In 2010, the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) launched its campaign to save yoga. The "Take Back Yoga" campaign lends voice to the origins objection explained above, making adamant claims of the inexorable religious and specifically Hindu origins of Yoga. The primary objections by the HAF to "Christian Yoga" (and to a certain extent to Christians practicing yoga even without so naming it) resonate with all the voices above and are referenced specifically by Mohler and Hunt. Mohler invokes the HAF as agreeing with his premise that yoga is Hinduism. (Other authors

¹²¹ Ibid., 95-121.

¹²² *Yoga Is a Satanic Spiritual Practice BEWARE!!! X Yoga Instructor Speaks Out!!!*, 2012, accessed March 9, 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKwEkXcmEUQ&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

in this same spirit quote “Hindu authorities”, primarily professors.)¹²³ The more deeply yoga is rooted in Hinduism, the more inappropriate when Christians “appropriate it.” The HAF campaign is not aimed at Christians who practice yoga, but rather at all appropriation of yoga, particularly for commercial gain. Christian yoga teachers and promoters are subject to criticism from both inside and outside their religious institutions.

Christian Alternatives to Yoga

If Christians cannot, in good faith, practice yoga, how do those who hold this position claim a Christian might pursue some of the health benefits – stress relief and flexibility, especially – to which yoga seems to have cornered the market? Some very generally direct the faithful Christian to other kinds of exercise, including very generally to stretching, for which no religiously rooted program is necessary. Others refer Christians to alternatives developed specifically to fill this gap.

“Christian alternatives to yoga” rather obviously draw from modern postural yoga, profiting by association with yoga’s popularity as a fitness and stress-relief program, yet claiming not to be yoga and even, in one case, to operate “without Eastern influences.”¹²⁴ Laurette Willis, of PraiseMoves and Laura Monica, of WholyFit each tell of personal journeys in and successfully out from under the influence of New Age practices. Each markets a series of DVDs, training curriculum and certification process for teachers of their method. PraiseMoves materials boast numerous benefits including improved circulation, enhanced energy levels, increased flexibility, weight loss, stress reduction, help in rehabilitation of injuries, bone health

¹²³ Albert Mohler, “Help from Hindu Quarters — The New York Times on ‘Take Back Yoga,’” *AlbertMohler.com*, accessed October 14, 2014, <http://www.albertmohler.com/2010/11/29/help-from-hindu-quarters-the-new-york-times-on-take-back-yoga>.

¹²⁴ Laurette Willis and Josh Atkinson, *PraiseMoves* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2006), back cover.

and help with menopause. HolyFit exercises are workouts “good for body, mind and spirit.” A third program, Pietra Fitness, teaches “‘Stretching and Strengthening Classes’ featuring Christian prayer and meditation in the Catholic tradition” and retreads the arguments common to all three: that these alternative programs are definitively not yoga and (perhaps even more adamantly) not “Christian Yoga.”¹²⁵

The “alternatives” proponents are adamantly “anti-syncretic,” rejecting yoga on the basis of its religious roots but without any high degree of deference to said religious depth or tradition. Setting aside the dubious claim that they have developed their yoga-like programs without influence, they embrace the deep religiosity of yoga as a means of rejecting it, while making frequent allusions to New Age evils, thus undercutting any deference to the culture of India or religious depth of a Hindu. Much like Hunt, these yoga critics seem to waffle between a view of yoga as very religious, and of yoga as a vacuous tool of New Age spirituality.

Some “alternatives” appear to be little more than renaming. In the PraiseMoves DVD accompanying pamphlet poses are renamed with Biblical phrases (“tent,” “scroll,” “vine.”) Only two poses retain animal names (though not their Sanskrit equivalents): the dove and the eagle.¹²⁶ This would not seem to satisfy objectors such as Hunt, who claim this is precisely what the Hindu purveyors of yoga

¹²⁵ “HolyFit Is NOT Christian Yoga - Christian Fitness System | WHOLYFIT: Christian Fitness, An Alternative to Yoga and Tai Chi,” accessed February 22, 2014, http://www.wholyfit.com/christian_alternative_to_yoga/not_christian_yoga. Laurette Willis, “Why a Christian ALTERNATIVE to Yoga?,” *Praise Moves. Online at: Http://praisemoves. Com/about-Us/why-a-Christian-Alternative-to-Yoga*, accessed September 27, 2012, <http://www.praisemoves.com/calt.pdf>. “P. F. Is Not Yoga | Pietra Fitness,” accessed October 14, 2014, <http://pietrafitness.com/p-f-not-yoga/>.

¹²⁶ The yogic naming of poses after animals is criticized as being idolatrous, pantheistic or polytheistic. Laurette Willis and Josh Atkinson, *PraiseMoves* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2006), insert, 5-13.

did to infiltrate the secular sphere with their spiritual agenda, i.e. “just changed the labels.”¹²⁷

When I ask Christian yoga practitioners about PraiseMoves or WhollyFit, they are well acquainted with these alternatives, and their answer is emphatic: The exercise practiced by Christians as an “alternative” is still yoga (“Just look at the poses!”)¹²⁸ Most contemporary usage would acknowledge the postures as the *least* controversially “yoga” part of “yoga.” In the introduction to her video Laurette Willis claims the reason some of the postures look like yoga is because “there are only so many ways to move the human body.” While this may be true, and PraiseMoves includes some introductory warm-ups that resemble a 1980s aerobic workout more than a yoga sequence, there are distinctive patterns in the PraiseMoves video that not only echo *hatha* yoga postures but also their common sequencing. The claim on the DVD cover that the contents are an alternative “without Eastern influences” would be difficult to substantiate to anyone familiar with a yoga class in the style of Iyengar, Bikram or Ashtanga (i.e., any “yoga flow” class). The WhollyFit page titled “WhollyFit is NOT Christian Yoga” acknowledges the physical similarity, saying, “No one is legally bound to call exercise ‘yoga’ – even if it looks like yoga.”¹²⁹ It does, undoubtedly.

Based on the care Willis takes to explain why some of the poses may appear to be yoga poses, I take her to be speaking of a yoga alternative against a yoga that is something more than simply a postural practice. The posture, the literal shape taken by the body, may look like yoga but it was not developed in that heritage and

¹²⁷ Hunt, *Yoga and the Body of Christ*, 110, specifically criticizing Maharishi for renaming elements of his Transcendental Meditation program in 1974. For a more recent critique of “just renaming,” see Brown’s reactions to Encinitas School District court case, noted in Chapter 2.

¹²⁸ Sarah, telephone interview by author, October 22, 2010.

¹²⁹ Willis and Atkinson, *PraiseMoves*.

resemblances that remain are coincidental or, perhaps more accurately, reminiscent of yoga only in their universality and are thereby innocuous.¹³⁰ For Willis the “yoga” (taking the definition of most Christians practicing yoga, who typically emphasize the bodily practice) once imbued with Christian intentions, is no longer yoga. The weight of the term yoga bends toward the spiritual and non-bodily practices, leaving the Christian and her body to its only-human natural movements.

Saving Which Christians?

The individuals and publishers featured in this chapter share a characteristic mission to debunk myths and save Christians from foils, both worldly and demonic. The Berean Call, founded by Dave Hunt (1926-2013), exists to “ALERT believers in Christ to unbiblical teachings” and “EXHORT believers to give greater heed to biblical discernment and truth regarding teachings and practices being currently promoted in the church” (emphasis in the original), imploring the church to trust “the Scriptures as the only rules.”¹³¹ Mastrisciana’s production company, Caryl Productions, proclaims on its website her mission to “help discern the perilous times in which we live.”¹³² Chris Lawson, general editor and staff writer for the Spiritual Research Network, has “spent more than twenty years researching, informing and warning of

¹³⁰ Several Christian Yoga practitioners assured me of the natural universality of the postures by citing the fact that dogs and cats naturally stretch in these same ways. Telephone and e-mail interviews conducted by author, September 2010 through March 2014.

¹³¹ Hunt, *Yoga and the Body of Christ*, back cover and 176.

¹³² Caryl Productions, “About Caryl Productions,” accessed October 13, 2014, <http://caryl.tv.com/homepage/about-caryl>.

the dangers of cults, the occult and mysticism based spirituality."¹³³ Perhaps not surprisingly these defenders of the faith find something to defend against.¹³⁴

The anti-yoga voices speak for their Christianity, not for all Christians. Of course, underlying this "othering" of Christians-not-like-us is the implication that those Christians are not real Christians. Dave Hunt characterizes "charismatics, both Catholic and Protestant" as having fallen prey to the same delusion as those who, through illicit drug use or yoga or subjecting themselves to the powers of a guru, awaken the evil Kundalini spirit.¹³⁵ Catholic writer Arnold points out that "especially ... Protestant Fundamentalists such as Dave Hunt" should not be relied upon for arguments against yoga given their "approaches to Christianity often differ significantly from mainstream Catholic approaches."¹³⁶ The anonymously authored allaboutspirituality.org and allaboutgod.org reflect similar themes disparaging "emerging church" and "followers of Christ."¹³⁷ Mystics in general, and apophatic traditions in particular, are suspect. "So many Eastern mystics claim that divine realities are utterly beyond words, thought, and personality."¹³⁸ The campaigners

¹³³ Chris Lawson, "Chris Lawson," *Spiritual Research Network*, accessed March 9, 2014, <http://www.spiritualresearchnetwork.com/chris-lawson/>.

¹³⁴ Contrast the purpose statement made by O'Brian's publisher, Arkana, a paperback imprint of Penguin Books, "devoted to books that contribute towards our understanding of ourselves and our place in the universe." Justin O'Brien, *Christianity and Yoga: A Meeting of Mystic Paths* (New York, N.Y.: Arkana, 1989), back cover.

¹³⁵ Hunt, *Yoga and the Body of Christ*, 144.

¹³⁶ Michelle Arnold, "The Trouble with Yoga."

¹³⁷ This last phrase was used by one of my interviewees, who explained that it is a way of differentiating herself from the Mohler-style Christians, illustrating that all sides are inclined to distinguish themselves carefully.

¹³⁸ Douglas Groothuis, "Dangerous Meditations," *ChristianityToday.com*, November 1, 2004, accessed October 13, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/november/10.78.html>.

against Christians practicing yoga deny the Christian apophatic tradition entirely and some are hostile toward, without much distinction, mystics, Pietists, Pentecostals, Catholics, Mormons and the emerging church movement. This attitude builds upon the argument that yoga, ostensibly about pursuit of some degree of metaphysical or mental emptiness, is also dangerous, now as a subset of dangerous meditative practices rather than a directly contradictory religious paradigm.¹³⁹

Christians Not Practicing Yoga Summary

Admittedly, I do not attempt to give equal voice to the objectors cited in this chapter, nor do I claim the sample opinions expressed here are comprehensive (they are not) or cohesive (they are not). In constraint of the scope of this project I did not conduct interviews with the proponents of the views described in this chapter, nor attempt to precisely trace their theological and organizational affiliations.

Undoubtedly I have glossed over some theological nuance and complexity in this short summary by limiting my sources to easily accessible, public material, including numerous websites and videos. While it may be fruitful to pursue an analysis of the historical trends that lead these particular Christians to the conclusion that Christians should not practice yoga, I am more interested at present in the echoes of these arguments as heard in the following chapter. I do maintain that an inquisitive Christian today, asking herself whether yoga is compatible with her faith, will in high likelihood conduct the same Internet searches and therefore come up against precisely the voices I highlight here. My claim is only this: these voices pervade the public forum and persistently influence the public conversation.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Hunt, *Yoga and the Body of Christ*, 148-150. Hunt is suspicious of psychology in general, seemingly based on its promise of transformation by means other than godly. The influence of Eastern mysticism on that field is thus doubly troubling.

¹⁴⁰ During the formative stages of this project, I mentioned one of the authors I had been reading for this chapter. My friend, herself an ordained pastor, commented that she had been reading some of his work lately, and it seemed, "Everything outside his

In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor paints a picture of a modern milieu of unlimited and unrestrained possibilities. Religious belief and practice in an age of disbelief would seem to mean unrestricted, ecstatic freedom to follow some naturally unfolding individual path. Lack of constraint, however, may also breed anxiety and indecision, leaving the individual susceptible to more arbitrary deployment of authority.¹⁴¹ The voices described in this chapter, warning Christians of the dangers of yoga, certainly wax authoritative. Some, having personally experienced the ostensible perils of New Age practices, deploy personal testimonies to authenticate their claims. Some hold sway by their theological training and power positions; others speak from the fringes with nothing but their fervor and access to the democratizing power of social media, but articulate warnings with a depth of consequence that, once given ear, must be assuaged. A good number come from the Evangelical spheres, or from individuals with unidentified affiliations to any mainstream denomination, but self-identified as “Bible-based.”¹⁴² A few identify as

comfort zone is demonic.” But to be fair, many of the reactions to this project itself have fallen in this same category, sometimes with more or less “meat” on the demonic bones, with the common presumption that there are definitively right and wrong answers, and the wrong answer may be dangerous. In an “us and them” posture, whatever the other does goes a little too far (or not far enough). Regardless of where our boundaries are drawn, the judgment evoked when another aligns along even slightly different boundaries is often unequivocal. Sometimes its delivery is nuanced, perhaps with no more than a raised eyebrow; sometimes it takes on the fervor of the opinions reviewed in this chapter.

¹⁴¹ See also Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *Modernity, Pluralism and the Crisis of Meaning: The Orientation of Modern Man* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Foundation Publishers, 1995).

¹⁴² Evangelical falls short as a category, failing to capture, for instance, the difference between Dave Hunt and Mark Driscoll, both adamantly opposed to Christians practicing yoga, but the latter also making the “not recommended” list of the Spiritual Research Network because of his affiliation with “centering prayer, church growth, contemplative spirituality, emerging church, labyrinth, mysticism, purpose driven” agendas. Bud Press, “Master List of Authors and Books Not Recommended,” Spiritual Research Network, updated April 27, 2010, accessed October 13, 2014, <http://www.spiritual-research-network.com/masterlist.html>.

Catholic and seem to assume their audience is primarily Catholic as well. Despite this presumption, the processing of these messages does not seem to isolate along denominational boundaries.

Without exception the Christians I spoke to who lead or participate actively in the conversation about Christians practicing yoga are aware of the arguments raised in this chapter. Lutherans, Methodists, and Bible-based independents named or alluded to Mohler specifically, as his 2010 repartée with Holy Yoga founder Brooke Boon was a particularly congealing moment in recent memory for arguments on both sides.¹⁴³ I contend these voices, small as they may be in numbers, are sufficient to provoke a reciprocal, defensive response, particularly by those whose love for both yoga and their Christian life is compelling. These vigilant and broadly circulating Christian arguments are answered by “capital C – capital Y”, Christian Yoga.

¹⁴³ Cindy Senarighi, telephone interview by author, March 6, 2014. Details of Boon’s response to Mohler were available on the Holy Yoga website earlier in the course of this research, but are no longer posted.

CHAPTER 4

CHRISTIAN YOGA

Each of the concerns [about Christians practicing yoga] is rooted in the truth of Scripture and may well apply to traditional Eastern yoga, yet because of the uniqueness of Christ-centered yoga, these concerns are not applicable here.

-- Brooke Boon, *Holy Yoga*

This chapter describes “Christian Yoga” from 1989 to 2014 in the voices of its leaders, published authors, teacher training school and studio founders, practitioners and surrounding media publicity. Previous chapters established that yoga infuses the cultural milieu and that Christians in both their secular and spiritual lives encounter yoga and respond in varying ways, some embracing and some resistant. Although far short of a comprehensive history of yoga, this project frames the cultural background of valued pluralism and secular-religious narratives around yoga itself, and attends to the countering voice of stalwart Christian tradition, such that the range of Christian attitudes, both by those who do and do not practice, emerges as coherent with the equally variant perceptions of both yoga and Christianity. Against such a background, this chapter describes books and schools, the material manifestations of Christian Yoga, and reviews the common tropes used by Christian Yoga leaders to authenticate their practice as Christian and, in varying degrees, as yoga.¹⁴⁴ Christian Yoga may strike the uninformed initially as dissonant but this

¹⁴⁴ The primary published sources representing Christian Yoga for this project span from 1989 to 2007 as follows: Nancy Roth, *A New Christian Yoga* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1989), subsequently reprinted as *An Invitation to Christian Yoga* in 2001 and 2005; Thomas Ryan, *Prayer of Heart and Body: Meditation and Yoga as Christian Spiritual Practice* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995); Susan Bordenkircher, *Yoga for Christians: A Christ-Centered Approach to Physical and Spiritual Health* (Nashville, TN: W Pub. Group, 2006); Brooke Boon, *Holy Yoga: Exercise for the Christian Body and Soul* (New York: FaithWords, 2007); and Jennifer Zach, DeAnna Smothers, and Courtney Chalfant, *Christian Yoga: Restoration for Body and Soul* (Poughkeepsie, NY: Hudson House, 2007). In addition, I conducted interviews with Brooke Boon and Jo Ann Bauer (Holy Yoga, AZ), Deanna Smothers (Yahweh Yoga, AZ), Susan Bordenkircher (Outstretched in Worship, GA), Rev. Cindy Senarighi (Yogadevotion, MN), and Dayna Gelinias (New Day Yoga, GA). Additional ethnographic data were collected by e-mail and telephone interview with trainees

chapter establishes the phenomenon as utterly harmonious with existing cultural chords.

Nancy Roth's *An Invitation to Christian Yoga* (1989) marks the beginning of the contemporary episode in the development of Christian Yoga.¹⁴⁵ Roth is an Episcopal priest with "an ecumenical ministry in spirituality."¹⁴⁶ Roth's own experience with yoga occurred in a secular setting, and the movement appealed to her as a dancer. Her experience of Christ in the prayerful time at the end of class led her to think "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."¹⁴⁷ Thomas Ryan's *Prayer of Heart and Body: Meditation as Christian Spiritual Practice* followed in 1995. A Paulist priest active in the interfaith movement, Ryan provides pivotal leadership in the encouragement of Christians toward yoga practice, as noted in Chapter 2, and his 2004 edited volume, *Reclaiming the Body in Christian Spirituality*, is drawn upon heavily in subsequent works in this lineage.

from multiple Christian Yoga teacher training programs, on condition of anonymity. Names that have been changed are italicized.

¹⁴⁵ As with any selected marker of an episode of history, some threads stretch back before this marker. Specifically, the Christian Yoga curriculum provided by Barbara Moeller and colleagues at the Lady of Lourdes Wellness Center most probably predates Roth's work, though direct influence has not been identified. Lady of Lourdes is a catholic health system sponsored by the Franciscan Sisters of Allegany, New York, established in 1979 "to develop and offer a wellness program to its employees and the community," with "an emphasis on the spiritual component of wellness." Lourdes Wellness Center, "About Us: Our History", accessed March 15, 2014, <http://www.lourdeswellnesscenter.org/about/>. The existence of this yoga training in 2004 (thus presumably established between 1979 and 2004) was significant in the evolution of Yahweh Yoga founder Deanna Smothers' practice. Deanna Smothers, telephone interview by author, March 5, 2014.

¹⁴⁶ Roth, *An Invitation to Christian Yoga*, back cover.

¹⁴⁷ Roth, *A New Christian Yoga*, 11.

In 2006 and 2007, lay Christian leaders and yoga teachers published three books: *Holy Yoga* (Brooke Boon), *Christian Yoga* (DeAnna Smothers and Courtney Chalfant, cofounders of Yahweh Yoga with Jennifer Zach, spiritual director and teacher) and *Yoga for Christians* (Susan Bordenkircher, founder of Outstretched in Worship). The Holy Yoga enterprise established concurrent with Boon's book publication, offers a teacher training program (blending online and onsite modules in Arizona), offers training in specialty areas such as senior yoga, kids yoga and healing touch, and a series of DVDs. Yahweh Yoga in Chandler, AZ, operates a Christian studio with yoga and Zumba classes, complemented by an extensive teacher training program, raw food nutrition classes and DVD series. Outstretched in Worship began as a DVD production based on classes offered in a Methodist church in Fairhope, AL. After the DVD's popularity gained media attention, W Publishing Group approached the program's founder, Susan Bordenkircher, to write her book. She recently opened a studio for primarily Christ-based yoga classes.

Bordenkircher and Boon both refer to Roth and Ryan in their published work and acknowledge their personal indebtedness.¹⁴⁸ The Yahweh Yoga group's book references Roth and Bordenkircher (see Figure 1). While referencing the works of Roth and Ryan, the 2006 and 2007 books are notably devoid of reference to the lineage of Christian and Hindu interfaith work noted in Chapter 2. Ryan remains the subtle thread weaving interfaith proclivities and an appreciation of the Eastern Orthodox traditions into the fabric of contemporary Christian Yoga.¹⁴⁹ Whereas both

¹⁴⁸ Bordenkircher and Boon each acknowledge personal encouragement that had been provided by Ryan and Roth in the beginning stages of their ministries. Brooke Boon, telephone interview by author, March 7, 2014. Susan Bordenkircher, telephone interview by author, February 27, 2014

¹⁴⁹ Admittedly this is an artifact of the definition I have employed for Christian Yoga itself. Alternatively, these embracers of the Hesychastic tradition could be included under an umbrella of Christian Yoga, creating then two markedly distinct subgroups.

Ryan and Roth address theological questions about why Christians should and can practice yoga, acknowledging there are such questions, in each of the three more recent volumes the objections are tackled directly as points to be refuted and concerns to be assuaged.

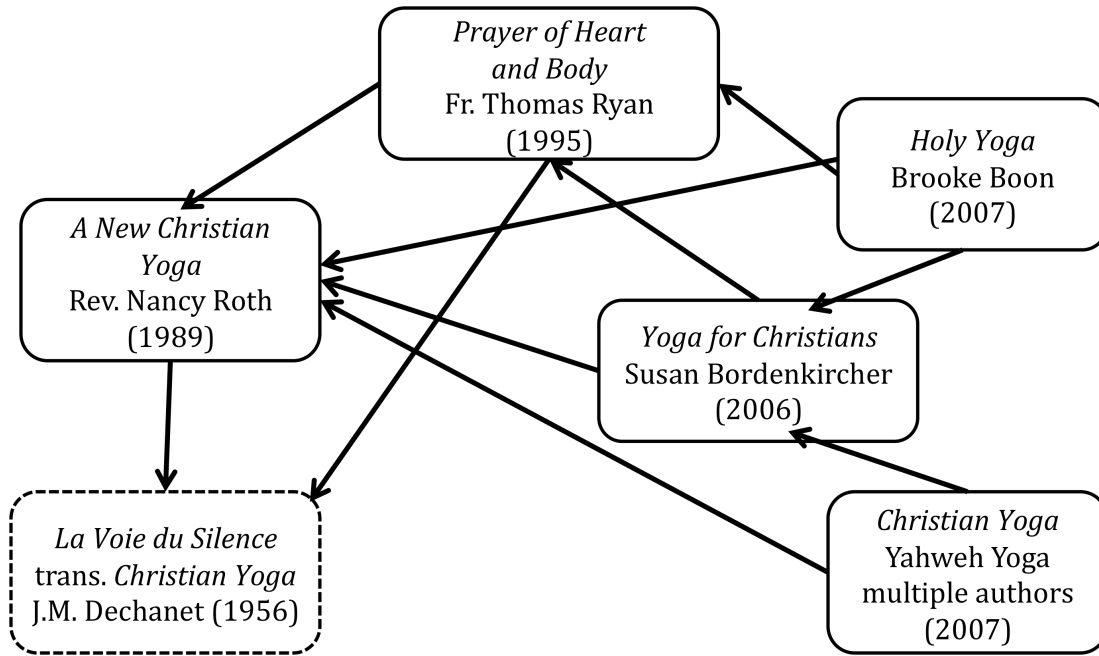


Figure 1. Primary Christian Yoga Publications

Teacher Training

In addition to the published works listed above, teacher training programs increasingly influence the propagation of Christian Yoga thought and practice. (See Table 1, following.) Holy Yoga offers teacher training as its primary mission, with a combination of online learning and in-person retreats in Arizona, with training starting twice each year. The Yahweh Yoga studio in Chandler, AZ, delivers its teacher training entirely in person to multiple annual cohorts. Rev. Cindy Senarighi, a pastor serving a Minnesota congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), developed Yogadevotion, a model that relies on teachers who are otherwise trained in their yoga practice but want to teach in keeping with their

Christian faith. Senarighi asks Yogadevotion teachers to attend at least one of her classes and a monthly continuing education session to understand her sequencing, style and theology and distributes a weekly devotion by e-mail to those in the Yogadevotion network for use in their respective classes.

Table 1. Christian Yoga Teacher Training Programs¹⁵⁰

| Teacher-Training Program | Number of Teachers Trained | Founded |
|---|--|--|
| Lourdes Institute of Wholistic Studies (Collingswood, NJ) | 6-, 12- and 30-hour Christian Yoga training classes as part of 200- and 300-level teacher training curriculum, Registered Yoga School with Yoga Alliance (RYS) (numbers n/a) | Barbara Moeller, coordinator of yoga programs (n.d.) |
| Yogadevotion (MN) | 10 active instructors and 5 on call. Teachers previously certified through other training programs receive weekly devotions via e-mail and attend monthly continuing education | 1999 Cindy Senarighi |
| Holy Yoga, 501c(3) (Scottsdale, AZ) | 850+ graduates from 200-level program, offering 95-, 225- and 500-level teacher training | 2003 Brooke Boon |
| New Day Yoga (Kennesaw, GA) | 65 trained instructors including current cohort, both 200- and 500-level (RYS); 60 12-hour program graduates | 2003 Dayna Gelinias |
| Yahweh Yoga (Chandler, AZ) | 500+ trained instructors, 200- and 500-level (RYS and E-RYT) as well as online non-registered 70 and 100-level programs | 2005 Deanna Smothers and Courtney Chafant |

¹⁵⁰ Lourdes Wellness Center, "About Us: Our History," accessed March 15, 2014, <http://www.lourdeswellnesscenter.org/about/>. Lourdes Institute of Wholistic Studies, "300 Hour Yoga Teacher Training Program" *Online at: http://lourdeswellnesscenter.org/wholistic-studies/*, accessed October 13, 2014, http://lourdeswellnesscenter.org/wholistic-studies/documents/2014_LIWS-YTT300.pdf. Brooke Boon and Jo Ann Bauer (Holy Yoga), telephone interview by author, March 7, 2014. Cindy Senarighi (Yogadevotion), telephone interview by author, March 6, 2014. Dayna Gelinias (New Day Yoga), telephone interview by author, March 15, 2014. Deanna Smothers (Yahweh Yoga), telephone interview by author, March 5, 2014. Counts reported in interviews were validated by listings compiled from web sources, in possession of the author.

Since its creation in 1999, the Yoga Alliance registry has become the mark of credibility for yoga teacher training in the United States. In a recent redesign of their website, a long list of “styles” was replaced by a short list of eight “types of yoga”: Flow Yoga, Fitness Yoga, Hot/Heated Yoga, Therapeutic Yoga, Alignment-Oriented Yoga, Spiritually-Oriented Yoga, Gentle Yoga and Specialty Yoga. Yahweh Yoga, a Yoga Alliance Registered School, lists all of these types in their profile (notable because one might assume spiritually-oriented yoga to mean traditionally infused with Eastern religion – not the interpretation, clearly).¹⁵¹ Previous to the consolidation of styles, although there was no “Christian Yoga” style listing, both Holy Yoga and Yahweh Yoga appeared, along with the commonly marketed physical styles of Ashtanga and Bikram, the intriguing monikers of “Authentic” and “Classical” yoga and the general categories the alliance itself listed as the “common styles of yoga” such as gentle yoga, yoga flows, power yoga, fitness yoga, specialty yoga, spiritually oriented yoga, and therapeutic yoga.

In 2011 Holy Yoga leaders discontinued registration with the Alliance because their Bible study hours did not count toward contact hours, though they claim “training not only meets, but exceeds, the standards established by the Yoga Alliance.”¹⁵² (The “Holy Yoga” listing as a Yoga Alliance style was most likely a residual from pre 2011 affiliation.) Being listed as a Yoga Alliance style allowed an inquirer to search for teachers and schools with this designation. In 2012, a search of the teacher registry for Holy Yoga style and Yahweh Yoga style teachers yielded

¹⁵¹ Yoga Alliance, “Search the Yoga Alliance Registry,” accessed May 11, 2014, www.yogaalliance.org/yogaregistry.

¹⁵² Holy Yoga, “225-Hour Instructor Training,” accessed October 13, 2014, <http://holyyoga.net/become-an-instructor/225>. Smothers contests this, never citing Holy Yoga by name, but telling me adamantly that the Yoga Alliance is amenable to her program’s curriculum and “certainly does not prohibit Biblical content.” Deanna Smothers (Yahweh Yoga), telephone interview by author, March 5, 2014.

two and seventy results, respectively (Kripalu and Ashtanga styles yielded 551 and 958 names, while the very general Hatha style yielded 15,920 matches).¹⁵³

In addition to the teacher certification options offered by Yahweh Yoga, New Day Yoga and Holy Yoga, and the optional Christian Yoga components of the yoga teacher training available at the Lourdes Center, some schools and studios offer lower-commitment opportunities for learning about the Christian-styled practices. Several of the Christian Yoga and Christian-affiliated yoga studios provide workshops and retreats beyond the opportunity for week-to-week yoga classes. "Prayer of Heart and Body" (these, led by Thomas Ryan, congealed into the Christians Practicing Yoga organization) and other retreats are listed under on the Christians Practicing Yoga calendar.¹⁵⁴ New Day Yoga in Georgia offers a one day program, "Introduction to Yoga from a Christian Perspective," designed for either existing yoga teachers wanting to "integrate their Christian faith" or anyone else who has been practicing yoga for over a year and wants to learn about the following, all "from a Christian perspective": Biblical discernment, using yoga to enhance Christian faith and disciplines, the five components of the human being, Patanjali's eightfold path, the Chakra, and teaching yoga to others.¹⁵⁵

Ownership Claims

As commercial ventures, all of the above schools and affiliated DVD-based fitness program series, including many smaller Christian yoga ventures not described

¹⁵³ Graduates of the teacher-training programs are only listed on the Yoga Alliance site if they choose to register and pay an application fee ranging from \$25 to \$95 and annual dues of \$55 (for U.S., Canada and Mexico, higher fees for international registrants).

¹⁵⁴ Christians Practicing Yoga, "Upcoming Events," accessed October 13, 2014, <http://christianspracticingyoga.com/wp/for-teachers-practitioners/upcoming-events/>.

¹⁵⁵ New Day Yoga, "Introduction to Yoga from a Christian Perspective", accessed February 22, 2014, http://www.newdayyoga.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9&Itemid=43.

here, are fastidiously trademarked and registered.¹⁵⁶ Proponents deploy these brands to identify the programs themselves, as well as to market related products from yoga mats to t-shirts. In the background, controversy over the ownership of yoga proliferates and the stakes mount in this multi-million dollar industry, prompting “high-profile legal battles.”¹⁵⁷ The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) continues its campaign for the rightful credit for yoga to be given to the Hindus while teacher training programs such as those described above assert their legal branding rights. Teachers trained in these programs may only use the brand as allowed by the teaching authority, and materials handed out by these teachers in their classes, regardless of locale, are characterized by specific loyalty to at least the brand (and in some cases the brand purveyor herself).¹⁵⁸ Of course, in order to circumvent challenges to said ownership, the underlying yoga itself must inhabit the public domain, as practitioners underscored repeatedly: nobody owns yoga.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ In addition to schools and brands already described, Christian Yoga DVDs and classes are offered by the following, as way of illustration: YogaXoga (www.yogaxoga.com) having trademarked the phrase “Demystified Yoga,” “Christoga” (seemingly a one-shot DVD endeavor by television star Janice Turner), Atoning Yoga (www.atoningyoga.com), Soul Stretch (www.soulstretch.org), and Yoga 4 You (www.doyoga4your.com). Holy Yoga or Yahweh Yoga trained teachers established the last three of these. Scanning the teacher-training directories yields many more links to individual trained teachers’ websites as well. Some have not established full Christian Yoga businesses but are offering specialized classes in secular studios or private lessons. See bibliography section “Christian Yoga Internet Resources.”

¹⁵⁷ Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

¹⁵⁸ Proprietors of the Christian alternatives to yoga described in Chapter 3 take similar care regarding legal ownership of brand and curriculum and certification of teachers.

¹⁵⁹ Field notes from visit to Yahweh Yoga studio, 6PM class taught by Deanna Smothers, Chandler, AZ, October 26, 2010.

Distinguishing Features of Christian Yoga

As described in Chapter 2, Christians encounter and respond to yoga in myriad ways. One of these is by making the yoga Christian: Christian Yoga books, classes, studios, practitioners, teachers and teacher training schools proliferate. The Yahweh Yoga website once featured a t-shirt proclaiming, "Jesus is my guru."¹⁶⁰ Some are more or less troubled by the implication that the yoga itself is changed by its Christian moniker ("when a Christian drinks milk it does not make it Christian milk").¹⁶¹ At the same time, these theologian-practitioners adamantly assert the yoga they practice is fully Christian: 100% yoga and 100% Jesus is their paradox embracing claim underscoring a commitment to integrity of both the yoga and the Christianity.¹⁶² Of course, this is precisely the locus of the debate as well as the crux of the Christian Yoga claim.

In order to distinguish the subject matter of this chapter from that of Chapter 2, I will enumerate some characteristics I assign as markers of Christian Yoga. The most obvious, of course, is the use of the phrase "Christian Yoga" itself, punctuated by the newly modified, capitalized "Yoga." Admittedly, use of this phrase continues to evolve. Though Smothers proudly proclaims her Yahweh Yoga studio as the "first Christian studio in America" and she co-authored a book titled *Christian Yoga: Restoration for Body and Soul*, she now refers to her classes and curriculum as

¹⁶⁰ This reference to Jesus as guru suggests those non-posture-based threads of yoga's history and plays with some of the more alienating reputational challenges yoga encounters (gurus and scandals going hand-in-hand all too frequently). Of course, this same image may be worn with very different intentions.

¹⁶¹ Susan Bordenkircher, telephone interview by author, February 27, 2014.

¹⁶² Holy Yoga, "Become an instructor," accessed June 15, 2014, <http://www.hollyyoga.net/become-an-instructor>. "100% Yoga, 100% Jesus," *GodTube*, accessed October 15, 2014, <http://www.godtube.com/watch/?v=F0E90CNU>.

Christian-style yoga.¹⁶³ Susan Bordenkircher expresses a similar sentiment, saying she does not like to call it “Christian yoga” so much as “yoga in a Christ-centered environment” and was grateful the publishers of her book chose the title *Yoga for Christians: A Christ-Centered Approach to Physical and Spiritual Health* rather than use the phrase Christian Yoga.¹⁶⁴ Cindy Senarighi speaks of not wanting to prescribe what Christian Yoga should be: for some worship, for others prayer, and for others simply silence in the presence of God.¹⁶⁵

Still, Elliott Miller characterized Bordenkircher as a leader in Christian Yoga in his 2008 articles, as did Mohler in 2010. Caryl Matrisciana, whose work appears in Chapter 3, used video of Senarighi teaching a yoga class (filmed without Senarighi’s understanding of its intended purpose) as the exemplar of what is wrong with Christian yoga in a particularly vitriolic DVD. Still, it seems unlikely these critics would be any less pointed if they understood the nuance these teachers convey, given their absolute claim that Christians should entirely avoid the practice of yoga. Their direct chastisement of yoga practicing Christians, unfair as it may be, exemplifies the dialog I suggest defines this evolving space.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Deanna Smothers, telephone interview by author, March 5, 2014. Recall how this draws on the previous use of “style” by the Yoga Alliance. This is tactfully employed to underscore credibility: Smothers told me “Christian” is a style of yoga much like “Bikram” or “Ashtanga” are (well-established) styles.

¹⁶⁴ Susan Bordenkircher, telephone interview by author, February 27, 2014.

¹⁶⁵ Cindy Senarighi, telephone interview by author, March 6, 2014.

¹⁶⁶ Miller cites from and critiques Bordenkircher, Boon, and Roth as well as a “Yoga Ministry ... held for members of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago (the church Senator Barak (sic) Obama attended for two decades). Elliot Miller, “Part 2: Yoga in Its Contemporary Western Context,” *Christian Research Journal*, The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, volume 31, no. 3 (2008), accessed February 21, 2014, <http://www.equip.org/PDF/JAY001-2.pdf>. Senarighi is featured teaching a class in Caryl Matrisciana, *Yoga Uncoiled From East to West*, DVD (Caryl Productions, n.d), also available on YouTube, December 2, 2011, accessed October 13, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TWIlieDz_B4.

Bordenkircher and Senarighi fit genealogically in this Christian Yoga category despite their avoidance of the outright label in part due to their engagement by critics, but also because they align themselves with Boon, Smothers, and each other (each simultaneously asserting her unique style). Christian Yoga leaders recognize themselves as peers, significantly countercultural and publically criticized as part of a Christian Yoga movement. Many are exercise or health professionals who feel called by God to a ministry explicitly about bringing yoga to Christians (or Christians to yoga). They express passionately that Christians should have access to the benefits of yoga: physical, mental and spiritual (notice they embrace a relatively broad spectrum of what yoga has come to be, including its meditative and spiritual benefits). They often describe a personal discovery or revelation and a desire to share that with others as part of their specific purpose or calling. They formalize their practices and, as described above, invest considerable resources in teaching and training program development in their own style.

Experiencing Christian Yoga

As noted in Chapter 2, Christians who practice yoga describe the experience of yoga holistically as physical, emotional and spiritual. (The phrase “body, mind and spirit” echoes throughout texts and conversations.) Foremost, they describe yoga as an experience. In speaking of yoga, Christians regularly refer to rigorous workouts, sweating, and being surprised at the physicality and exhaustion. They also refer to feelings or states of joy, peace, relaxation and restoration. Says Borkenkircher, “This is just so faith filled ... it just expands that because you are so quiet, you are so still, you are so able to listen to God.”¹⁶⁷ Illustrating how Christians may acknowledge they are interpreting those sensations through a Christian lens (in strictly Christian

¹⁶⁷ Telephone and e-mail interviews conducted by author, September 2010 through March 2014. Susan Bordenkircher, telephone interview by author, February 27, 2014.

terms or in more abstract, metaphorical language), Senarighi says, "I felt this overwhelming sense of joy and presence and as a Christian that . . . for me that was just the presence of God."¹⁶⁸ Roth explains how a Christian approach to yoga first evolved for herself out of a similar realization: "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."¹⁶⁹

The spiritual experience that undergirds personal conviction, providing a deep sense of bestowed goodness, is more than just an individual emotive process: it is self-determined and self-determining. The individuality of this experience seems to be particularly important as narratives emphasize the process of discovery and the lack of previous bias or knowledge, i.e.: "I thought I invented this [yoga with Christian intention.]" They underscore a lack of previous knowledge: "I was a fish out of water, no idea what I was doing," and "I had never heard of ____."¹⁷⁰ Chronologically Ryan book and Roth's multiple editions preceded hers (not to mention Déchanet and many of the interfaith body of work), but Bordenkircher says it was only after she developed the *Outstretched in Worship* yoga program in her Methodist church and its accompanying DVD garnered some press coverage that people like Thomas Ryan reached out in support, "And then I realized it was not just

¹⁶⁸ Cindy Senarighi, telephone interview by author, March 6, 2014.

¹⁶⁹ Roth, *A New Christian Yoga*, 9.

¹⁷⁰ Susan Bordenkircher, telephone interview by author, February 27, 2014. Telephone and e-mail interviews conducted by author, September 2010 through March 2014.

me."¹⁷¹ Senarighi's evolution was similar. She developed Yogadevotion in 1999 and connected with Ryan and Bordenkircher for support only after her program was featured in *Time* magazine and *Yoga Journal*, and negative reactions emerged.¹⁷² Ryan, introducing his choreography of the "salute to the sun" movements with the Lord's Prayer notes, "I had come to this on my own and have been teaching it to people the last few years. When I discovered it similarly illustrated in Rev. Roth's book, I was surprised and pleased to know others have been working in the same way with yoga postures and Christian prayer."¹⁷³

After the initial, pure encounter, validation may come from external sources, including the concomitant experiences of others – or from beyond. After AP coverage of her DVD release made her story public, Bordenkircher recounts people saying to her, "I have been doing this," or "I have been wanting to do this," or "this is what I felt God needing me to do." She describes this as "a lot of common threads of a lot of us having the same leading . . . that was validation."¹⁷⁴ To Christian Yoga leaders, these callings and inclinations are much more than individual predilections: they are

¹⁷¹ Susan Bordenkircher, telephone interview by author, February 27, 2014. Many of the narrative elements in the stories I was told resonated with the ethnographic data collected by Courtney Bender as she describes "experiential authority and religious individualism . . . co-created." This is particularly true of the attention given to sequence (i.e., I did not know before) and authentication by isolation from social or cultural influence (i.e., I did not learn this from someone else). With Bender I "take the narrative patterns as a sign that they are participants within particular theological and cultural frameworks" and Christian yoga stories underscore that "experiential authority and religious individualism are co-created." Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 58-59.

¹⁷² Cindy Senarighi, telephone interview by author, March 6, 2014.

¹⁷³ Thomas Ryan, *Prayer of Heart and Body: Meditation and Yoga as Christian Spiritual Practice* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 153.

¹⁷⁴ Susan Bordenkircher, telephone interview by author, February 27, 2014.

conclusions drawn through dialog with God.¹⁷⁵ Senarighi speaks of asking God throughout seminary to make clear to her whether he wished her to drop one or the other path as she navigated “the world of yoga and faith at the same time.” (He did not.) Brooke Boon tells of asking God whether he wanted her to pursue yoga after her coming to Christ. (He did.)¹⁷⁶ In addition to these compelling divine calls to leadership, several Christian Yoga certified teachers used the word “testimonial” to describe the story they were willing to share with me. Christian Yoga has touched these individuals in testimonial-worthy ways.¹⁷⁷

Christian Yoga practitioners draw authority from a broad array of personal credentials. As such, these spokespeople illustrate the democratization of spiritual authority in the complex secular-spiritual milieu. Thomas Ryan is a Paulist Priest, clearly regarded as a leader within the movement, including pastorally and theologically. Nancy Roth is an Episcopal priest, and Cindy Senarighi is an ordained ELCA pastor. Notably, none of these claim to speak “for the church” while at the same time expressing hopes for the (presumably catholic and universal) church, particularly that she would attend to people’s needs. Senarighi also draws credibility from her status as a nurse. Others similarly draw on their depth of experience as

¹⁷⁵ See previous footnote, Bender, *The New Metaphysicals*. I am also informed by work on the ways people interact in material ways with the transcendent, see T. M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012) and Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, N.J.; Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2006).

¹⁷⁶ Cindy Senarighi, telephone interview by author, March 6, 2014. Brooke Boon, telephone interview by author, March 7, 2014.

¹⁷⁷ Telephone and e-mail interviews conducted by author, September 2010 through March 2014. While most of these testimonials demonstrated significant vulnerability, at one point in 2010 the word seemed to have spread of my project among the Holy Yoga teacher network (confessed in one e-mail) and subsequently I received two responses using only the scriptures listed on the Holy Yoga website as responses to public criticism, demonstrating what must have been some concern about my intentions.

fitness instructors, longtime yoga practitioners, or school teachers (skilled in creating curriculum and conveying complex concepts). Much as the unmediated, unsolicited experience is privileged, sometimes the legitimacy of the Christian yoga teacher's call is placed soundly in her own *lack* of formal qualification, thus weighting the authenticity of faith. Boon writes, "I am not a theologian, a pastor, an elder, or even a seminary student. I have been re-created in the Lord and have a deep love and appreciation for His mercy and His grace."¹⁷⁸

The Power (and Limitations) of Intention

As part of the individual role and responsibility in one's own religious path making, Christian Yoga advocates consistently underscore the power of intention in authenticating the practice as Christian (common among Christians practicing yoga) and protecting the Christian individual from slipping under the influence of malevolent forces (unique, by my definition, to Christian Yoga). Intention is of foremost importance: "Our hearts and intentions give our practice its meaning."¹⁷⁹ Ryan speaks of the centrality of Jesus in Christian faith, saying it should come "as no surprise that Christian spirituality is deeply personal, locking onto the person of Christ."¹⁸⁰ Therefore, "if Christians adapt Eastern methods of meditation and yoga, they will center them on the person of Jesus."¹⁸¹ Those from mainstream Protestant backgrounds and independent Bible-based traditions spoke easily and often of the close relationship with Jesus they cultivate during their yoga practice. Christian Yoga DVDs, books and classes start with Bible verses and declarations of intention to

¹⁷⁸ Boon, *Holy Yoga*, xii. Telephone and e-mail interviews conducted by author, September 2010 through March 2014.

¹⁷⁹ Zach, Smothers, and Chalfant, *Christian Yoga*, 50.

¹⁸⁰ Ryan, *Prayer of Heart and Body*, 228.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 229.

“keep Jesus at the center” and “invite Jesus into your heart.” Illustratively, the “Extending Grace” DVD packaging explains that “every class is inspired by a verse, opens and closes in prayer, and includes an on-going (sic) prayer related to grace – allowing you to actively apply that verse to your life.”¹⁸²

In varying degrees, the direction and focus of thoughts (on Jesus, for example) can be entirely sufficient and allow the Christian practitioner to navigate any yoga practice regardless of setting, or be just one of a number of conditions for consideration. In the *Holy Yoga* “frequently asked questions” Boon warns against practicing in “secular studios” as “spiritual compromise is possible if you enter a yoga class that is not Christ-centered.”¹⁸³ Zach et al. allow “there may be some yoga classes that you can find at a local gym or YMCA that are very neutral in their spiritual emphasis,” but practitioners are reminded to “test everything ... (1 Thessalonians 5:21).”¹⁸⁴ This suggestion of concern, underscoring the depth of care to be taken, delineates Christian Yoga as an emergent religious practice distinct from Christians who practice yoga. In other words, it is when individual intention (critically important in itself) cannot *entirely* purify the practice that something more systematic (visible, formal and named) becomes necessary.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² *Extending Grace*, DVD (Atoning Yoga, 2012).

¹⁸³ Boon, *Holy Yoga*, 30. Boon changes her position on this question, as will follow.

¹⁸⁴ Zach, Smothers, and Chalfant, *Christian Yoga*, 132, 236.

¹⁸⁵ The maturity of the Christian does seem to matter in considerations of risk. Some Christians are capable of shielding themselves adequately and others cannot, or may not want to take chances. Bordenkircher alludes to this, with nuance; note the conditional if: “If God is in you, if you are living with the Holy Spirit in you, then you get in touch with that in ways that [are] going to expand your faith . . . *if there’s another faith that’s in you*, then you’re going to get more in touch with that.” (Emphasis mine.) Susan Bordenkircher, telephone interview by author, February 27, 2014.

Breath and Union

Some metaphors and principles, common in yoga vernacular, are particularly easy to translate into Christian imagery: emphasis on breath, and notions of union in particular. These are not unique to Christian Yoga, but shared with Christians practicing yoga, reiterated here in the particular voices of Christian Yoga leaders. The image of yoga as “union” works handily with the imagery of being united with God or yoked with Jesus. Christians (along with many yoga practitioners) sometimes imply a direct translation between yoga and union, “in union, in ‘yoga,’ with [Christ],” and sometimes speak of yoga’s unifying power as a function, where “the original purpose of yoga was to create a pathway to God.”¹⁸⁶ Boon writes specifically to the concern that union might mean, as in “traditional Eastern yoga,” the goal is “becoming one with God.” Rather, “Holy Yoga sees [union] as becoming surrendered to God, devoted to Him and united with Him in purpose.”¹⁸⁷ The breath metaphor operates at two levels: as the infusion of creative power and as representative of continued life; breath is both the mechanism of God’s creation of humanity and an element of daily existence so inherent and natural that its goodness defies refute. “Breath is life.”¹⁸⁸

The images and metaphors of union do not align perfectly, and some theologians (Miller and Elliot, from the previous chapter, for example) in fairness point out that where yoga exhibits ties to Hindu or pre-Hindu Indian religion, there are bound to be some irreconcilable differences with Christianity. While the Christian

¹⁸⁶ Both these uses are common; the specific citations are from New Day Yoga founder. Dayna Gelinas, “About Me,” New Day Yoga, accessed February 22, 2014, http://www.newdayyoga.com/index.php?com_content&view=article&id=3&item=6.

¹⁸⁷ Brooke Boon, *Holy Yoga*, xv.

¹⁸⁸ Zach, Smothers, and Chalfant, *Christian Yoga*, 123-130. The tenth chapter, “Breathe” cites Numbers 27:16, “O Lord, you are the God who gives breath to all creatures” and Psalm 34:1-2 from The Message, “I bless God every chance I get; my lungs expand with his praise. I live and breathe God.”

Yoga leaders are not concerned about dangers in these differences (frequently alluding to these as the “philosophical differences”), they are aware of the criticisms and, in some cases, echo anti-yoga vigilance. Boon suggests that the non-Christian music in a traditional yoga class could lead to undesirable states of mind.¹⁸⁹ Ryan is guarded when it comes to chanting *Om* albeit with nuance that values interfaith understanding while cautioning against practicing something without fully comprehending it.¹⁹⁰ Zach et al. emphasize there “are legitimate concerns and we need to be careful in evaluating yoga as a practice for Christians,” demanding “great discernment in recognizing what is honoring to God and what is not.”¹⁹¹

Both Christians practicing yoga and Christian Yoga practitioners are aware of what they characterize as “attacks” from other Christians and others and the objections enumerated in Chapter 2.¹⁹² This awareness emerges in the 2006 and 2007 publications, distinct from those published prior. The tone and imagery in Roth’s book (both 1989 and 2005 editions) indicates a lack of concern with these types of objections. She does not shy away from the cobra image, sketched to illustrate Cobra Pose. She does acknowledge possible worries, but addresses them in a matter of a few paragraphs. In the more recent publications by Bordenkircher,

¹⁸⁹ Boon, *Holy Yoga*, 35-36.

¹⁹⁰ Thomas Ryan, “Christians Practicing Yoga | Question: What’s with the chanting of ‘OM’ that often occurs at the beginning and ending of classes?” accessed October 5, 2014, <http://www.christianspracticingyoga.com/faq5.htm>.

¹⁹¹ Zach, Smothers, and Chalfant, *Christian Yoga*, 31.

¹⁹² Bordenkircher reports, “We got a negative response from very traditional Christians and we got a negative response from very hard core yoga folks who didn’t want their practice to be changed in any way.” Smothers says she received death threats “from both sides” when the Yahweh Yoga studio opened in Chandler, AZ. Susan Bordenkircher, telephone interview by author, February 27, 2014. Deanna Smothers, telephone interview by author, March 5, 2014.

Boon and Zach et al., the sections addressing Christian concerns are extensive, taking objections from Chapter 2 to task, one by one.

Jo Ann Bauer, marketing director for *Holy Yoga*, does not think there is any geographic or denominational pattern distinguishing teachers who run into roadblocks taking yoga back to their home churches as opposed to those who find an easy opening. "It depends much more on the local pastor or elders. We will have someone meet objections and then someone in the exact same denomination who does not have any problems at all."¹⁹³ This underscores and reflects the localized nature of Christian behaviors in the United States, contrary to a strict denominational or generalized geographic model. When practitioners speak of yoga and Christianity, in particular as part of individual discernment, local authority prevails. Most often this is found in encounter narratives following some sense of unease, a step toward resolution: "Then I spoke to my [pastor or husband] about it."¹⁹⁴ Local church leaders hold considerable power both in their response to these conversations and in their approval or blocking of yoga from being a sanctioned activity on church property. Bordenkircher relates an anecdote wherein her pastor asked if they might initially "call it something besides 'yoga'" and thus for some time it was not (the classes bore the name "Outstretched in Worship", also the title of Susan's early DVDs).¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Jo Ann Bauer, telephone interview by author, March 7, 2014.

¹⁹⁴ Telephone and e-mail interviews conducted by author, September 2010 through March 2014.

¹⁹⁵ Susan Bordenkircher, *Yoga for Christians: A Christ-Centered Approach to Physical and Spiritual Health* (Nashville, TN: W Pub. Group, 2006), x. The parallel between local clergy authority and broad stroke stereotypes about Hindu pluralism leads me to wonder if the American Christian does not worship as many gods as one imagines (through the Orientalist mind-myth) the Hindu might. Or at least that as a body, Christians might not seem to worship just as diverse a pantheon, were we to characterize each god by measure of grace, forgiveness, wrath, perniciousness and whimsy, as the pantheon imagined in the mystic Far East. The one Christian god surely is interpreted with widely divergent personae.

Guarding against Syncretism

Christian Yoga practitioners do not consider their practice a combination of religions. Rather, they are heavily invested in the purity of both the yoga and the Christianity. Harkening back to Chapter 2, Christians simply practicing yoga may preserve a portion of yoga's religious grounding, but syncretism is too weighty a word for what may be part of the landscape of the Christian life, not particularly distinct from their other regimens of health and psychological well being. Christian Yoga practitioners are more adamant.

In *Christian Yoga*, Zach et al. warn very explicitly against this manner of syncretism. The Christian should not partake in "the mixing and fusing of different systems of belief," as, "We want to consecrate our Christian yoga practice, not mix it in with other faiths." These same pages are dense with advice for the Christian to avoid this error. Foremost is the imperative to subordinate yoga to life in Christ. The Christian must be cautious not to view Christ as "just another way to salvation" or to put "a veneer of Christ on top of practices that deny him." They make a distinction between "surface signs of Christianity in our language and environment" and true, substantive change of the substrata. Discernment is called for in identifying the purely "physical (non-spiritual) elements", the "beneficial spiritual practices . . . that are compatible with Christian spirituality," and (to be avoided) "the philosophies and practices that are incompatible with Christ and our life in Him."¹⁹⁶

Even Bethany Connelly, a second generation Christian Yoga author (*Holy Yoga* certified) and generally less cautionary than other authors, admonishes that in yoga "there are moments where one must be careful not to intermarry with practices that

¹⁹⁶ Zach, Smothers, and Chalfant, *Christian Yoga*, 42-43.

do not align with the Lord,” and asks “Where do you find yourself tempted to intermarry with worldly ways?”¹⁹⁷

Despite the seeming equanimity in the often used “100% yoga / 100% Jesus,” Christian Yoga does not bring yoga into this paradox as an equal partner with Christianity. This is primarily a function of the meaning attributed to the word yoga in this domain. The Christian Yoga practitioner does not consider him or herself 100% – or even the least bit – Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, or affiliated with any other possible yoga-based heritage. The purity or integrity of the yoga in this equation is strictly a reference to a Modern Postural Yoga (see Chapter 2 on De Michelis classification), understood through the lens of modernization and devoid of long running historical roots or, alternatively, referencing a history so ancient that it predates religion itself. In other words, 100% yoga refers to the quality and integrity of the physical yoga practice, often including breath and meditation practices or techniques, but not a religious tradition. It is important to these practitioners (economically and otherwise) that what is yoga remains connected to the yoga that draws and benefits so many practitioners.¹⁹⁸

The yoga is kept “100% Jesus” or purely Christian in two ways: first and foremost by underscoring the practitioner’s intention (for the practice to be Christian) and by the disenchantment of the otherwise-sourced elements. Thus Christians may take part in what were previously, or are in a different context, non-Christian movements, sequences, and vocabularies, but because they are deploying

¹⁹⁷ Bethany B. Connelly, *Finding Jesus on the Mat: Your Yoga Daily Devotional* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012), 248-249.

¹⁹⁸ Smothers explained to me that Courtney Chalfant, co-founder of Yahweh Yoga, remains an active participant in “traditional yoga” circles specifically to maintain her credibility as a fitness instructor in this domain. Traditional yoga here means the very mainstream/secular current: Chalfant is a Lululemon (manufacturer of boutique yoga products) ambassador. Deanna Smothers, telephone interview by author, March 5, 2014.

the movements themselves as only the mechanical, scientific or bodily part of the practice, the intention they bring to the mind-spirit portion of the practice prevails and transforms the experience as a whole. Of all the Christian Yoga programs, *YogaXoga* is by far the most explicit about having removed the spiritual elements and demystified yoga. In fact, *YogaXoga* offers both a “Demystified Yoga” and (separately) “Christian Yoga” in a uniquely illustrative two step process that highlights precisely the course that yoga navigates in the broader sphere: first, transformed into something secular, then re-infused with spiritual meaning. Any residual non-Christian dust that might cling to an ancient religious practice is blown off by the Christian practitioner’s intention and focus.

What Makes It Christian?

What really makes the yoga Christian? Teachers and studio leaders weave Christian elements into classes, books and training curriculum to create the overall effect: music with Christian lyrics, scripture used pervasively, and visual elements (most prominently crosses) in studio spaces and printed on mats and other products. Boon writes that use of Christian music is an important component; Yahweh Yoga studio classes play only Christian (lyrical) music. The Yahweh Yoga studio in Chandler, Arizona, is an unequivocally Christian safe place: there are no statues of Kali or Nataranja, no images of Buddha or any gurus (unless one counts Jesus), and plenty of Bible verses on the walls and Jesus in the conversation. Notice the 180-degree twist on the idea that yoga postures are the entry point to a meditative state of mind: It is not the posture that creates the focus, but the Bible passage that creates the focus on the bodily lesson.

How far does the transformation go? Candy Gunther Brown writes in *The Healing Gods: Complementary and Alternative Medicine in Christian America* (2013) about the infiltration of Eastern religion-based practices into the medical

mainstream, and seems to trivialize the activity of Christian Yoga practitioners, making parallels with Christian aerobics. (Her thematic claim is that the spiritual roots of yoga are being intentionally swept under the rug.)¹⁹⁹ This is similar to Boon's response to my question about whether there was anything *particular* about yoga that made it amenable to being a spiritual practice: she denied as much.²⁰⁰ Boon might concur with the minimization of what the Christian Yoga movement actually accomplishes, though she would put the end result in a positive light. Because God infuses everything the Christian does that is good or well intentioned, anything could be made Christ-centered. This suggests a third recurrent conceptual theme: God is good and powerful. As Bordenkircher posits, "Suggesting that yoga cannot be separated from its Eastern history and therefore should not be practiced by Christians is like saying Christians can't enjoy the sunshine God provides because some religions actually worship the sun. ... If God is big enough to make the sun, is He not big enough to discern those who enjoy it from those who worship it?"²⁰¹

Perhaps emboldened by belief in a good creation, Christian Yoga proponents suggest a way of bringing something into a religious framework without destroying it

¹⁹⁹ Candy Gunther Brown, *The Healing Gods: Complementary and Alternative Medicine in Christian America*, 1 edition (Oxford University Press, USA, 2013). Brown proposes a subterfuge I have not observed. She argues because the economic incentives for demystification of Eastern religious traditions and healing practices are so compelling, consumers of these practices ought be ever vigilant of the religious or metaphysical presumptions behind the practice, including of yoga. My Christian Yoga informants (several authors of works cited by Brown) were aware of and spoke of the history of yoga (not always with entire accuracy, a challenge for anyone). While I appreciate Brown's "Christian Yoga" chapter for its enumeration of key people and events, the *caveat emptor* seems overstated, minimizes the historical reality of yoga's cultural demystification (my assertion of this cultural reality is not to say it is defensible or innocuous, replete as it is with objectionable Orientalist presumptions), and casts the purveyors of Christian Yoga and purveyors of complementary and alternative medicine, generally, in what seems an unfairly chastising light.

²⁰⁰ Brooke Boon, telephone interview by author, March 7, 2014.

²⁰¹ Bordenkircher, *Yoga for Christians*, 4-5.

or taking anything away from the pre-existent framework. All proponents of Christians practicing yoga (whether labeled as Christian Yoga or not) adamantly assert that a person taking this turn needs to be well grounded in his or her faith. Christians who practice yoga are able to embrace the paradox, if there is one. Ryan illustrates this in strong contrast to Dave Hunt (of Chapter 2) when he provides a theological answer to one of the questions at the root of the Christian yoga debate: "Is God identical with, or distinct from, the Self?" Ryan's answer is that "beliefs about God are expressed in paradoxical ways that fall short of embodying ultimate truth." He proceeds to speak of two paradox-embracing doctrines: of participation and of negative or apophatic theology.²⁰²

All these themes converge on the question of power. Does God have the power to make all things good, irrespective of origin? For that matter, did God create it all to begin with? And, perhaps most importantly on the question of contemplative practices: Does the individual have the ability to generate or enter an experience of God separate from god's willingness to bestow such an experience? Senarighi emphasizes this last question, reminding me of her Lutheran theology: the transformational work is always being done by God, she says, while at the same time, liturgically, she opens and closes her classes with reminders to the class participants about the importance of creating stillness for God to enter.²⁰³ These are not new questions for Christians and they dovetail in particular with persistent theological debates about the source and pursuit of Godly gifts.

²⁰² Ryan, *Prayer of Heart and Body*, 24.

²⁰³ Cindy Senarighi, telephone interview by author, March 6, 2014.

Next Generation Christian Yoga

After their training, Christian Yoga instructors can and do build and modify what they have learned.²⁰⁴ In 2012 Bethany Connelly, a Holy Yoga graduate and Yoga Alliance registered teacher, self-published *Finding Jesus on the Mat: Your Yoga Daily Devotional*, a completely unapologetic book that includes references to non-Christian traditions and worldviews, the very concepts Ryan in 1995 called “strange to Christian ears.”²⁰⁵ Unlike *Holy Yoga’s* conspicuous omissions of any Sanskrit names of postures and cautions against being drawn into Eastern or New Age practices, Connelly’s 365 single page entries use all Sanskrit names for postures as well as English translations, and include discussion of *chakras*, *ayurveda*, *mudras*, *bandhas*, *nadis* (called only “lines of energy”), *kundalini*, *om* chanting, etcetera.²⁰⁶ By starting the book with yoga philosophy, including an explanation of *gunas*, *sutras*, individual *yamas* and *niyamas*, and one day for each chakra, Connelly sets a tone of embrace of the philosophical roots of the practice, acknowledging the “enormity of yoga” and interpreting this as a sign of God’s abundant gifts.²⁰⁷

Reminiscent more of Roth’s benign illustrations than the evil serpent described in Chapter 3, Connelly does not shy from naming Cobra Pose as such, but deploys *Isaiah* 11:8-9: “The infant will play near the cobra’s den, the young child will put its hands into the viper’s nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters

²⁰⁴ While this is true, trademark holders do clearly attempt to preserve some consistency. In classes held in Phoenix area churches, Holy Yoga trained instructors hand out fliers branded with the Holy Yoga trademark.

²⁰⁵ Ryan, *Prayer of Heart and Body*, 156-178.

²⁰⁶ Boon, *Holy Yoga*. Bethany B. Connelly, *Finding Jesus on the Mat: Your Yoga Daily Devotional* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012), 33-39, 48-51, 69, 198, 201, 305.

²⁰⁷ Connelly, *Finding Jesus on the Mat*, 4-39, 1-2.

cover the sea."²⁰⁸ Even "Day 329, Kundalini Yoga," is taken in stride: "Pondering kundalini energy, reflect on how you feel the Lord's energy working in you."²⁰⁹ The use of *namasté*²¹⁰ is characterized as a gesture of "humility, appreciation and gratitude" and underscored by citing *Phillipians* 2:3-4: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit."²¹¹

Connelly structures each day with a reflection followed by a scripture verse and a prayer, often inclusive of one or two scripture references as well. Scriptures are sometimes from *The Message*, the paraphrased modern language Bible written by Eugene Peterson. Connelly ends every brief commentary with instruction to "commune with Jesus" or variations thereon such as "asking Jesus about" or "reflect with Jesus on" the topic of the day. Connelly's presentation contains no apologies and no apologetics. She simply presents one daily snippet after another, and however seemingly controversial or mundane the topic (props and sign-in waivers make the list), tops it off with scripture and makes it thus relevant and presumably palatable to the Christian reader. Connelly seems not to be particularly concerned with the naysayers.²¹²

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 83.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 277.

²¹⁰ *Namasté* is used at the end of many studio yoga classes and is commonly paraphrased as "the divine in me recognizes the divine in you."

²¹¹ Connelly, *Finding Jesus on the Mat*, 73.

²¹² I did not speak to Connelly, but several of the other Holy Yoga teacher-training graduates told me how bolstered they feel by the presence of the Holy Yoga community. Other interviewees expressed similar sentiments about Yahweh Yoga leadership, and this is a common theme on the Christians Practicing Yoga Facebook page: people are encouraged and heartened by the existence of this community of like-minded people. Telephone and e-mail interviews conducted by author, September 2010 through March 2014.

Christian Yoga Summary

This chapter explored the loosely fitting characteristics of “Christian Yoga.” There is no question something is afoot under that heading. There is equally no question about its fluidity. A striking illustration of just how fluid came through my interview with Brooke Boon, who, though she does not waver on the use of the phrase “Christian Yoga” for what *Holy Yoga* teaches and represents, has shifted her stance on practicing in secular spaces. In *Holy Yoga: Exercise for the Christian Body and Soul* (2007) she was adamant that Christians should not practice other than in a Christian setting. In a 2014 interview, Boon said if there was one thing she could change about the book, it would be this: She no longer holds, as previously written, that Christians should *only* practice “Holy Yoga or another overtly Christ-centered yoga.”²¹³ Boon says she felt pressured by her publisher and “was younger then.” She and Jo Ann Bauer, communications director for Holy Yoga, concur: They do not think all Christians need to be practicing Holy Yoga, and that Christians who practice in “secular settings” do not have anything to fear.²¹⁴ This is a significant turn, and one that challenges the typology implied by the chapters of this work.

Nonetheless, I assert that meeting and framing the dangers described in Chapter 2 is a defining attribute of Christian Yoga in the recent past – and one that will persist so long as some Christians continue to issue warnings and foster concern.²¹⁵ More than any theme, Christian Yoga practitioners consistently identified

²¹³ Boon, *Holy Yoga*, 38.

²¹⁴ Brooke Boon and Jo Ann Bauer, telephone interview by author, March 7, 2014.

²¹⁵ The Holy Yoga website underwent significant renovation between my first (fall, 2010) and most recent reviews (summer, 2014). In 2010 a page listed “Holy Yoga’s Response to the Christian Yoga Controversy” (primarily a list of scriptures including 1 Timothy 4:4-5, Romans 12:1-2, Mark 12:30 and Romans 11:36). No page so directly highlights the controversy (although a three part video series features Boon making similar points). This raises a methodological challenge of doing research using

a discomfort, fear or concern, either perceived or experienced, in their approach to yoga (preceding their discovery of Christian Yoga). Pastor Senarighi spoke at length of “fear-based faith” and her hope that the strength of that voice in the American Christian landscape may be waning. Because she perceives such a shift (and I speculate, due in no small part to her own increasing confidence), “only in the past year” she introduced a few Sanskrit words into her classes, including the use of the closing salutation, *namasté*. It may be that Christian Yoga in general, as evidenced in Senarighi’s recent change, in Smothers’ shift to the more loose fitting label Christian-style yoga over Christian Yoga, and in Connelly’s permissive book, is building confidence that will continue blurring the difference between Christians “just” practicing yoga and Christian Yoga.²¹⁶

Internet sources, especially in an area that is quickly evolving. A screen capture of the page from 2010 is in possession of the author.

²¹⁶ I anticipate another change as well: Christians practicing yoga, with the availability of Christian Yoga materials and apologetics, will increasingly incline toward calling the yoga they practice Christian out of sheer convenience and accessibility. Churches in particular will avail themselves of materials that circumvent some of the controversy, now that said materials (both Christian yoga and Christian alternatives to yoga) are broadly available.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Yoga used to make a Christian nation writhe; now it has become an embodiment of the country's religious and social elasticity.

-- Leigh Schmidt, *Huffington Post*

Why Christian Yoga Here and Now?

Yoga carves out a distinctive place in U.S. popular culture as an instrument of transformation. Is this transformative power limited to the physiological? In recent decades, the booming business of yoga as part of the fitness industry certainly dominated the mainstream conversation. De Michelis calls contemporary (postural) yoga classes liminal spaces for secular rituals of healing. This synthesis may unduly overstate secularization, as in the same pages she writes of how this practice lends itself to the "cultivation of the 'Self' and of privatized forms of religiosity," or precisely those activities historians and sociologists characterize as the seminal religious pursuits of the American seeker.²¹⁷

Most Americans work from an imaginary of yoga at least partly in the spiritual realm, whether by association with meditative practices or by an understanding of posture practice itself as a psycho-spiritual technique impacting emotional and mental states, at minimum, "stress reducing." Characterization of meditative, devotional, and more esoteric practices as types of yoga divorced or distinct from the predominant *asana* practice misses the fact that popular perceptions of the latter are muddled with the former by both history and misunderstanding. Yoga in the United States rose to popularity concurrently with powerful cultural forces: "Eastern turns", shifts toward a "new new age" and continued evolution of a "religion of no

²¹⁷ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 252-260. See King for a relevant commentary on the "modern privatization of 'the mystical', particularly insofar as it renders traditional Asian religiosity amenable to a postmodern market-place characterized by a kind of post-Christian secularism." Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 283. Development of this thought found in Chapter 8.

religion.”²¹⁸ Christians who find yoga compelling are confronted by equally powerful voices speaking for Christian purity of tradition and anti-syncretism. How will the Christian yoga practitioner respond? With a creative, intentional retort that draws a new imaginary: yoga as a practice given and blessed by God, for the health of body, mind and spirit.

The journalistic coverage of Christian-yoga controversies points to some perceived significance, in the public sphere, of both the predictable and creative choices Christians make. This may stem from curiosity about Christians themselves, but seems to also serve as a sort of litmus test. Christians (whatever type of Christians they might be) hold some national cultural authority. If and when Christians publically embrace, or publically reject yoga, will continue to mold both yoga and Christianity, including perceptions of each in the secular sphere. The myth of affable pluralism is trumped by the myth of Christian uniformity (and bewilderment when Christians disagree!) in the attitude of the U.S. media toward the question of Christians and yoga: controversy sells, no doubt.²¹⁹

Internet and social media technologies as democratizing tools shift the way individuals and organizations construct and authenticate authority. Minority and dissenting voices may gain standing and recognition. At the same time, each of the Christian Yoga websites directs traffic to many of the others. Everyone in the

²¹⁸ A “new new age” comes from the closing chapter of Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*. The phrase “religion of no religion,” attributed originally to Spiegelberg, the professor who greatly influenced the founders of Esalen, comes from Kripal, *Esalen*.

²¹⁹ Christians are not the only ones in a yoga encounter, or taking yoga as their own. Several books on Jewish Yoga are available. The *Yoga Journal* article (April, 2001) on yoga and religion features, in detailed vignettes, Jews, Christians and Muslims who practice yoga. In a telling contrast, the *Yoga Journal* article in 2012 featured a panel of a Christian, a Vedic scholar, a depth psychologist and an Ashtanga practitioner/author. Ferretti, “Beyond Belief”: 82–101. Reder, “Reconcilable Differences”: 78.

Christians Practicing Yoga, Yahweh Yoga or Holy Yoga Facebook group has the same opportunity to engage in definitional, theological conversation (mostly self-affirming and supportive). This same electronic connective tissue blurs distinctions some would consider important. Through an automated Ebay watch, configured to search for "Christian Yoga," I alternatively received alerts to the availability of work by Thomas Ryan (quintessentially a Christian practicing yoga), *An Invitation to Christian Yoga* by Nancy Roth (or *Holy Yoga* by Brooke Boon) and a variety of DVDs by PraiseMoves, a "Christian alternative to yoga" – once, poetically, all three in the same alert.²²⁰

The landscape of religious pluralism in the United States and nearly unlimited experience availability is not just one of freedom, but also of confusion, contention and their anxiety-inducing cousin, judgment. Despite the panorama of self-determination painted by religious studies scholars, an American finds herself faced with the distinct and ever present possibility of making the wrong choice. Nearly everyone I spoke to held an opinion on Christian Yoga, sometimes formed extemporaneously. One professional colleague reacted to my thesis topic by telling me that yoga and Christianity could not be combined because Christianity is all about the afterlife and yoga is about the present. From a Christian yoga teacher, regarding the fact that one of the Christian Yoga studios does not chant *Om*, I heard, "It doesn't seem right that they would leave pieces out." These are intelligent, educated people who do not hesitate to assess. Multiplicity of religious and spiritual options seems to open the door for relativism and universalism, as some religious historians bemoan and others celebrate. (I worry the call for continuous judgment might also erode civility.) Certainly pluralism demands discernment and choice.

²²⁰ "New items that match: Christian Yoga," automated Ebay notification, received by author 04-10-2014, email reference id: [#011518c34cf7431a9edabcbfa3611464#].

A Christian American's facility for stepping in and out of a yoga studio, belief unshaken, and in and out of a church sanctuary, yoga practice unchallenged, stems from the degree to which they perceive control over what is absorbed or deflected from these environments and traditions. The difference between someone who will or will not practice yoga in a "secular studio" or chant *Om* or even strike a pose possibly originated in another tradition may be synthesized by how porous he or she believes his or her body, mind or spirit might be to the influence of these spaces, practices, actions and words. In many cases, individuals are credited with extraordinary power to preserve (and indeed define) the Christianity of a practice by their intentions.

While some Christian Yoga advocates may be softening about whether it is acceptable to practice in a secular setting, the implication remains that some settings may not be safe or may not be an appropriate match for some Christians. And this means that Christians are called upon continuously to assess not only their own religious steadfastness, but also the degree of secularity of each space and class. Christian yoga practitioners distinguished between "practicing yoga at a gym" and in "a studio" with the former being the more secularized, purely for exercise, type of yoga. These distinctions and the accompanying market pressures may lead to removal of offensive artifacts or language, creating a "demystified" space that some already bemoan as having lost something of the essence of yoga. Market pressures lead to presentation and repackaging that in turn marks the practice as variously spiritual, secular or religious.

Thomas Moore spoke in early 2014 about creating a religion of one's own, as the title of his latest book invokes. His themes dovetail with those of this project: that pluralism is a given, that intention is paramount (including a certain depth of intention that goes beyond just picking and choosing the easy, likeable parts), and

that a world full of “religions of our own” would be harmonious.²²¹ Kripal underscores some of these same themes when he speaks of the religion of no religion: that such a trend has deep roots and a long trajectory but that it takes a secular democracy – a democracy he seems to think has not quite matured and maybe even is dependent upon the realization of this religion-of-no-religion – to come to its logical and complete fruition.²²² Accordingly, addressing Stanford University graduates in 2014, Zoketzu Fisher articulates a defining contemporary position with respect to the religious or spiritual life: “The world now is too varied and connected for old paths to work. Not that the old paths are outmoded – they are as useful as they ever were, perhaps more so. But they need to be reformatted and reconfigured for our lives as they are now.”²²³

But who accomplishes this reconfiguring? After all, sometimes individuals are mistaken. Treating the dilemma of interpreting religious phenomena sometimes differently than those who experience them, Ivan Strenski draws on Charles Taylor, quoting: “Making sense of agents does require that we understand their self-descriptions,” but “may indeed, often must, take account of their confusion, malinformation, illusion.”²²⁴ This potential lack of accurate self-consciousness can further complicate the analysis of syncretism, obfuscating the impact of preexisting cultural norms and, against those unspoken norms, changes that emerge from

²²¹ Thomas Moore, “A Religion of One’s Own,” lecture at Changing Hands Bookstore, Tempe, AZ, 01-22-2014 (author in attendance). On these themes see Thomas Moore, *A Religion of One’s Own: A Guide to Creating a Personal Spirituality in a Secular World*, 1st Edition, 1st Printing edition (New York: Gotham, 2014).

²²² Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, 1 edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2008), 464-468.

²²³ Norman Fischer, “Useless Advice,” *Shambhala Sun*, November 2014, p. 65.

²²⁴ Ivan Strenski, *Thinking about Religion: An Historical Introduction to Theories of Religion* (Malden, MA ; Oxford: Blackwell Pub, 2006), 213. Strenski cites Charles Taylor from “Understanding and Ethnocentricity.” *Philosophical Papers: Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, 2 (1985).

individual agency or resistance. Sometimes facts are blatantly in error, and quite often they are vastly simplified. (If these practitioners were academics one could accuse them of essentialism; as people not making academic claims, I am inclined to call them functioning adults.) So why do scholars care what these minority, occasionally mistaken, voices are saying?

Why Study Christian Yoga?

I chose to examine Christian Yoga not because it is particularly momentous or unusual, but because this research highlights choices people make every day: to accept, reject, incorporate, modify and remold the morass of practices and beliefs that circulate in a plural society. In mathematics, tessellating means filling space entirely, without gaps, by the non-overlapping repetition of a shape. Two-dimensional ones are the easiest to imagine: circles do not tessellate a plane; squares do. In shortsighted moments one might expect individuals to arrange their lives such that beliefs and practices tidily tessellate: this hour of life, spiritual; that practice, secular; that belief, religious. More likely, the overlaps and gaps are significant. Some Christians practice yoga as a deliberate addition to their religious life, others practice yoga as a quasi-competitive fitness regime, and still others not as prayer or worship, but just as one of the things they do. Does it sometimes occupy the spiritual space in life's topography? Certainly. And sometimes it does not.

As Reder writes in the *Yoga Journal* in 2001, "If yoga clashes with your faith, how do you work out joint custody – of you? If you're trying to patch together a personal spirituality from your religion and yoga, where do you place the seams?"²²⁵ The titles of these blogs, both authored by Christians who practice yoga, propose

²²⁵ Reder, "Reconcilable Differences": 78, 81.

some poetic solutions: "Not Strictly Spiritual" and "Imperfectly Whole."²²⁶ By perusing and listening to this poetry – to the descriptions, explanations, theological musings, strategies, and retorts – significance emerges. The perception of incongruity, the starting point for this and many a fruitful inquiry, comes full circle in the resolution of complexity into a life.

Concluding Remarks

Should Christians practice yoga? Many of my informants mistakenly thought this formed my underlying research question. What interests me are the less straightforward questions of why Christians seemed to find, "Should I practice?" a question worth asking, that the answer was not equally clear to all who asked, and that the answer varied considerably among Christians. Should someone come to this paper as part of his or her discernment hoping for a verdict, I apologize for the disappointment. I hope I represented some variety of perspectives with fairness, lent some clarity to the questions at hand, and provided some pointers to materials that may further inform the search. I propose that an answer's merit is best gauged by the next question it leads to. My hope is that any reader may be transformed a little by what is found here, as a scholar and as a person, and continue onward buoyed on a current of changing questions.

As a researcher I tried to leave each conversation having accepted the story offered without redirection. I conclude with the one instance where that may, inadvertently, not have held true.

I have practiced yoga for many years. A teacher whose class I had attended several dozen times asked me about my project and I shared: "Christian Yoga." She

²²⁶ "Of Course Yoga Is Spiritual. That's the Point! | Not Strictly Spiritual," accessed February 9, 2014, <http://www.notstrictlyspiritual.com/2014/01/course-yoga-spiritual/>. Renee Aukeman Prymus, "#christianspracticingyoga," Imperfectly Whole: Yoga & Christianity, accessed December 7, 2013, <http://reneeprymus.com/tag/christianspracticingyoga/>.

volunteered that she had been a Christian, and Jesus was still important in her life. "Sometimes," she said, "I work in a little of that." I expressed surprise that I would not have noticed, given my finely tuned researcher's ear (humility not being my claim in this moment). "Oh, absolutely," she confirmed. "What do you think I am referencing but the Psalms when I say to 'have joy in your heart, always?'" Since then, with my better-tuned ears and awareness of her background, I have heard this reference and others, never with explicit Biblical reference but using undoubtedly Christian language. I suspect the references have become more frequent though I cannot provide definitive proof. I do assert the more Christians self-identify to their yoga teachers (and Christian yoga teachers to their students, even if only in private) the more an astute observer might notice some "Christian stuff" that has been infiltrating yoga classes all along.

Scholars of religion in the United States are familiar with the challenge in defining unambiguously what is Christian, religious or secular in a conversation about joy, peace, or compassion. Whether these are secularly or religiously proclaimed probably only matters to those attempting to analyze or adjudicate. While I find the analysis important and intriguing, I am likewise happy to participate without resolution in such a messy milieu: secular-spiritual, multiply determined and continuing to change. That mess, for me, is part of the yoga attraction.

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APPENDIX A

INTERNAL REVIEW BOARD EXEMPTION CORRESPONDENCE

EXEMPTION GRANTED

Tracy Fessenden
SHPRS - Religious Studies Faculty
480/965-7467
TRACY.FESSENDEN@asu.edu

Dear Tracy Fessenden:

On 12/12/2013 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Type of Review: | Initial Study |
| Title: | Christian Yoga in the United States (1980 - 2013) |
| Investigator: | Tracy Fessenden |
| IRB ID: | STUDY00000392 |
| Funding: | None |
| Grant Title: | None |
| Grant ID: | None |
| Documents Reviewed: | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Author-Expert Recruitment and Consent Form, Category: Consent Form;• Teacher Recruitment and Consent Form, Category: Consent Form;• Christian Yoga U.S.docx, Category: IRB Protocol;• Christian Yoga U.S.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); |

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (2) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation on 12/12/2013.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Jennifer Wilken
Jennifer Wilken