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The Trouble with Yoga

A Catholic may practice the physical postures, but with caveats

By: [Michelle Arnold](#)

In the last few years yoga, to use Internet lingo, has gone viral. Stores are filled with yoga clothing, equipment, books, and videos; churches and synagogues offer yoga classes to their congregants, with some Christian communities claiming to offer “Christian-based” programs; and even the in secular world paeans to and critiques of yoga fill the bookstore shelves.

Many Catholics have been asking if they can use yoga, and they have been given a wide spectrum of answers by clergy and lay Catholic leaders. What exactly is yoga? Are there legitimate concerns about its use by Christians? Have Catholic leaders been fair and accurate in their analysis of the strengths and dangers of yoga?

What is yoga?

Classical yoga is a holistic (i.e., “whole body”) discipline originating in Hinduism that seeks enlightenment through a series of exercises that unite the body, mind, and spirit. Enlightenment is the end, and union (*yoga*, “yoke”) is the means.

There are various branches of yoga that take complementary paths to enlightenment. Among them are Bhakti, Hatha, Jnana, Karma, Mantra, Raja, and Tantra yoga. The form most familiar to Westerners is Hatha yoga, which seeks to ready the body for enlightenment through bodily postures. Hatha yoga, on which this article will focus, is considered by many of its non-Christian practitioners to be a spiritual path.

Hatha yoga is not practiced merely by assuming a bodily pose used by practitioners of Hatha yoga, contrary to the claims of some Catholic critics. Susan Brinkmann, a staff writer for the Catholic apostolate Women of Grace, writes, “Even in [yoga] classes where Christians change the names of the postures to more biblical concepts doesn’t negate the source of the [preternatural] power within the postures” (“Yoga,” Women of Grace Study Series, pp. 19–20).

This assertion shades into superstition, ascribing magical effects to a physical action based solely upon its external performance (cf. CCC 2111). But let’s be clear: The body postures of yoga are in themselves neutral. Moving the body into a certain position does not necessarily engage the person in any particular spiritual activity.

Look at the classic Christian prayer posture of kneeling: Merely lowering the body to the knees does not engage the person in the worship of God. Depending upon his intent and actions,

someone on his knees could be weeding his garden, or proposing marriage, or searching for lost change under the sofa. The posture must be combined with intent and other prayerful action (e.g., folding hands, speaking words) for kneeling to become an act of worship.

Bodily postures or rhythms of breathing may have various physiological or psychological benefits, provided they are done under the supervision of a doctor or other qualified expert. The disciplines common to Hatha yoga have been used by doctors and therapists for the treatment of various medical ailments, including heart disease, asthma, back pain, and even post-traumatic stress disorder.

In its 1989 document *Some Aspects of Christian Meditation*, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (then headed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI), acknowledged this, noting, “Some physical exercises automatically produce a feeling of quiet and relaxation, pleasing sensations, perhaps even phenomena of light and of warmth” (28).

The risk is in the physiological effects of yoga postures being mistaken as spiritual effects: “To take such feelings for the authentic consolations of the Holy Spirit would be a totally erroneous way of conceiving the spiritual life. Giving them a symbolic significance typical of the mystical experience, when the moral condition of the person concerned does not correspond to such an experience, would represent a kind of mental schizophrenia which could also lead to psychic disturbance and, at times, to moral deviations” (*Aspects* 28).

In other words, pleasing physical sensations must not be confused with the mystical ecstasies experienced by Christian saints such as Teresa of Avila or John of the Cross. To make such a mistake is not only foolish but could be spiritually and psychologically dangerous.

Problems with yoga

The use of yoga as a spiritual path is highly problematic. There are three major areas in which the spiritual practice of yoga is not in line with Catholic spirituality.

Monism

Monism is a philosophy that holds that all that exists is one. Rather than the communion that exists between God and his creation that Christians hold to be true, the monist believes that any distinction between God and the universe is illusory and that the enlightened person will become “one” with the divine, without any distinctions between persons.

The CDF’s *Aspects* document puts it this way: “A consideration of these truths together brings the wonderful discovery that all the aspirations which the prayer of other religions expresses are fulfilled in the reality of Christianity beyond all measure, without the personal self or the nature of a creature being dissolved or disappearing into the sea of the Absolute” (15).

Say you are lying on your yoga mat listening to the teacher's instructions. How can you discern when the instruction is shading off into monism? As one example of what to watch for, be wary of the mantras commonly used in yoga practice. In *Yoga for Dummies*, authors Georg Feuerstein and Larry Payne offer a classic yoga mantra: "So 'ham" (pronounced *so-hum*). The authors explain that this mantra "means 'I am He,' that is, 'I am the universal Self,'" which they recommend you repeat in time to your breathing—*so* on the inhale, *ham* on the exhale (p. 317).

The translation given of *so 'ham* is classic monism: identification with the divine, to the extent of merging the self into the divine and the divine into the self. So keep in mind that if you're asked to intone anything in a language you don't know, it may be expressing a concept that runs contrary to your beliefs.

Gnosticism

It may seem strange to say that a spiritual path that incorporates physical postures and techniques into its practice is anti-material. But yoga as a spiritual path stresses the necessity of detachment from the material world, to the extent of affirming that the material world is illusory and that all that matters is the spiritual.

Although yoga did not spring up within the Christian tradition, this view of the material as the "enemy" of the spiritual resembles the Christian heresy of Gnosticism, wherein salvation (for the yoga practitioner "enlightenment") is sought by freedom from the material.

The authors of *Yoga for Dummies* explain the nature of the enlightenment sought through yoga in this way: They recommend sitting in a warm environment and maintaining stillness. You are asked to focus on the sensations of your body and what separates you from the air around you, with the expectation that you'll discover that "no sharp boundary really exists." (One does—it's called skin.)

As you do this, the goal they ask you to seek is "a sense of the all-comprising expansiveness of enlightenment, which knows no boundaries" (p. 12). In other words, these yoga instructors are teaching that enlightenment means coming to the understanding that there are no distinctions (i.e., "boundaries").

While Christianity stresses the importance of detachment from all that separates the believer from union with God (cf. CCC 2556), the purpose of detachment is relational. It brings us into communion with the Triune God and with the saints in glory. The union is forged by love, which gives and receives—not drowned into an impersonal divine but freely shared between the Persons of God and the persons of his saints. "I want to see God" expresses the true desire of man. Thirst for God is quenched by the water of eternal life" (CCC 2557).

Technique

The Church teaches that “Christian prayer . . . flees from impersonal techniques or from concentrating on oneself, which can create a kind of rut, imprisoning the person praying in a spiritual privatism which is incapable of a free openness to the transcendental God” (*Aspects*, 3).

Yoga, on the other hand, is all about technique and self-concentration. The various forms of yoga, including the exercise version of Hatha, have as their end enlightenment, attained by various methods of “quieting” the mind and focusing on the self. The forms of yoga are themselves techniques to enlightenment. *Yoga for Dummies* ticks off a list: “devotion . . . physical discipline . . . wisdom . . . self-transcending action . . . potent sound . . . Royal yoga . . . continuity . . . dedication to a yoga master” (p. 12). Again, these are the means; enlightenment is the end.

For the Christian, prayer is an unmerited gift. There is effort involved, but no specific technique will ensure us a productive result. “Prayer is both a gift of grace and a determined response on our part. It always presupposes effort. The great figures of prayer of the Old Covenant before Christ, as well as the Mother of God, the saints, and he himself, all teach us this: prayer is a battle. Against whom? Against ourselves and against the wiles of the tempter who does all he can to turn man away from prayer, away from union with God” (CCC 2725).

Can yoga be “baptized”?

The question arises whether yoga can be “baptized” into the Christian tradition for use as a Christian prayer.

Many Christians try. Yoga ministries such as Holy Yoga seek to “practice with our minds set on whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy (Phil. 4:8), not with our minds emptied. We meditate on the wisdom of God’s Word (Psalm 119:9-16, 26-27), not on man’s wisdom. We seek the transcendence and glory of God, not our own” (holyyoga.net).

Holy Yoga practitioners exchange the classical mantra *om* (a Hindu symbol for the higher self) for the more biblical *shalom* (Hebrew, “peace”). While depending on a certain syncretism between vastly different spiritual traditions, Holy Yoga advocates affirm, “We know that yoga is a spiritual discipline much like fasting, meditation, and prayer that cannot be owned by one specific religion. While yoga predates Hinduism, they [Hindus] were the first to popularize the discipline of yoga by giving it written structure. The language originally given to yoga postures was in Sanskrit. Holy yoga teaches their instructors to teach in their native tongue.”

Assertions like these from Christians that seek to strip yoga from its Hindu roots drive Hindu yoga experts up the wall. Subhas R. Tiwari, a professor at the Hindu University of America who holds a master’s degree in yoga philosophy, states: “Such efforts [to Christianize yoga] point to a concerted, long-term plan to deny yoga its origin. This effort . . . is far from innocent. It is reminiscent of the pattern evident throughout the long history and dynamics of colonizing

powers” (“Yoga Renamed is Still Hindu,” *Hinduism Today*, January-February-March 2006). Tiwari believes efforts to Christianize yoga are unjust “encroachment” and thinly veiled Christian proselytism of Hindus.

Attempts to “baptize” yoga imply that a Catholic spirituality can be attached to yoga postures. While it is possible that some Catholics may be able to recite the rosary or to pray other Catholic prayers while engaging in the otherwise neutral postures and breathing techniques common to yoga, it is inadvisable for lay Catholics to devise a spirituality for themselves that they have pulled from a non-Christian spirituality that is generally little known and understood by Western Christians. This is particularly the case if those Catholics do not have a solid grasp of the differences between Christian spirituality and the various non-Christian Eastern spiritualities.

Catholic critics

In addition to the legitimate dangers involved in Christians co-opting non-Christian spiritualities and seeking to refashion them for Christian use, there is danger at the other end of the spectrum: Some Christian fundamentalists are tempted to find the devil lurking under every yoga mat.

Type “catholic yoga” into the Google Internet search engine and one of the first results is a news article that is summarized as “The Catholic Church’s best-known exorcist [Fr. Gabriele Amorth] says Harry Potter and yoga are evil.” A perusal of the resources of Catholic apostolates geared to the needs of Catholic women finds wide-eyed claims of a worldwide conspiracy among Hindus to infiltrate the West and bring about the downfall of Christianity through yoga (Brinkmann, “Yoga,” p. 20).

Such wildly overreaching Catholic critiques are problematic on any number of points. To begin with is the elementary mistake noted before that particular bodily movements have power in and of themselves, independent of intention or design, to invite in “supernatural powers [more properly defined as preternatural powers] . . . through these exercise positions” (Brinkmann, p. 20). Not only is the claim superstitious, but it indicates a lack of familiarity with the Christian understanding of metaphysics.

These claims also show a lack of regard for non-Christian Eastern religions that the Church does not share. While *Some Aspects of Christian Meditation* is liberally quoted by some Catholic critics of yoga, they ignore its observation that “genuine practices of meditation which come from the Christian East *and from the great non-Christian religions*, which prove attractive to the man of today who is divided and disoriented, [can] constitute a suitable means of helping the person who prays to come before God with an interior peace, even in the midst of external pressures” (*Aspects*, 28; emphasis added).

Unfortunately, Catholic critics of yoga often rely on Protestant Fundamentalists to make their case against yoga. This may be understandable, given the scarcity of informed Catholic critiques on which to draw. But Protestant approaches to Christianity often differ significantly from

mainstream Catholic approaches. This is especially the case when it comes to Protestant Fundamentalists, such as Dave Hunt, who are hostile not only to yoga but also to Catholicism and yet are quoted without qualification or caveat in Catholic materials (again, in the Women of Grace Study Series).

Bottom line

Should you take up yoga? As a spiritual path, yoga is incompatible with Christian spirituality. But if you can separate the spiritual/meditational aspects of yoga from the body postures and breathing techniques common to yoga, then you might be able to use those postures and techniques beneficially for health. If you're at all unsure of your ability to do so, you may well be advised to find another form of exercise.

On the other hand, Christians seek as the goal of their prayer to "flow into the way to the Father, which is how Jesus Christ has described himself. In the search for his own way, each person will, therefore, let himself be led not so much by his personal tastes as by the Holy Spirit, who guides him, through Christ, to the Father" (*Aspects*, 29).

<http://www.churchmilitant.com/news/article/awakening-the-serpent-within>

Awakening the Serpent Within?

Yoga: an invitation to demonic possession

by [Michael Lofton](#) • June 14, 2015

Many Catholics think Yoga is simply harmless stretching, but is it?

In fact, [Yoga is a religion](#), and its purpose is to [awaken one's Kundalini](#). What is "Kundalini"? In Hinduism, Kundalini is actually a goddess that resides at the base of the spine and is awakened by the practice of Yoga. In other words, according to [St. Paul](#), Kundalini is a demon.

Given that the purpose of Yoga is to awaken one's Kundalini, it can be said that Yoga is simply an invitation to demonic possession, contrary to what [some ignorant Catholics](#) are saying. Still skeptical? According to [this site](#), here are some of the signs one's Kundalini has been awakened:

- Involuntary jerks, tremors, shaking, itching, tingling, and crawling sensations, especially in the arms and legs
- Energy rushes or feelings of electricity circulating the body
- Intense heat (sweating) or cold, especially as energy is experienced passing through the chakras

- Spontaneous [pranayama](#), [asanas](#), [mudras](#) and [bandhas](#)
- Visions or sounds at times associated with a particular [chakra](#)
- Diminished or conversely extreme sexual desire sometimes leading to a state of constant or whole-body orgasm
- Emotional upheavals or surfacing of unwanted and repressed feelings or thoughts with certain repressed emotions becoming dominant in the conscious mind for short or long periods of time.
- Headache, migraine or pressure inside the skull
- Increased blood pressure and irregular heartbeat
- Emotional numbness
- Antisocial tendencies
- Mood swings with periods of depression or mania
- Pains in different areas of the body, especially back and neck
- Sensitivity to light, sound and touch
- Trance-like and altered states of consciousness
- Disrupted sleep pattern (periods of insomnia or oversleeping)
- Loss of appetite or overeating
- Bliss, feelings of infinite love and universal connectivity, transcendent awareness

If you know anything about spiritual warfare and exorcism, many of these symptoms are red flags for demonic possession. So should a Catholic practice Yoga? A better question is: Do you want to invite demons into your body and break the First Commandment by practicing a religion that believes there are gods other than the God of the Bible?

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