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Editor's Introduction

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Editor's Introduction

IN recent years numerous reports have appeared in the news about the objections of various Hindu and Christian groups to the adoption of yoga by Christians and other non-Hindus. The main theme of this issue of the JHCS is to address this controversy from different perspectives, with Patañjali's Yogasūtras as the main focus.

Andrea Jain introduces us to the dispute in the first essay. One of her main points is that Hindu and Christian opponents to the assimilation of yoga by Christians agree on one thing, namely that yoga is essentially Hindu. Those Christians who oppose yoga practice often enough see Hinduism and yoga in a purely negative light, as espousing paganism, the cult of the body, and even the demonic. Far from leading to spiritual liberation yoga practice is said to lead away from God and the salvific truths of biblical revelation. Yoga practice should therefore be avoided by Christians. Hindu opponents, for their part, object to the misuse of yoga, which means the uprooting of yoga from its proper Hindu spiritual home, for quite different reasons. In their understanding, the abuse of yoga practice is done either for crass commercial gain or with the hope of integrating yoga into Christian spirituality, attempts which must inevitably lead to a superficial synthesis that ends up emptying yoga of its original depth and power. But in both cases, writes Jain, all these objections operate with the mistaken assumption that yoga is a "static homogenous system," whose practice and belief system are necessarily Hindu. Against this view, Jain argues, history has shown that yoga has instead flourished outside its original Hindu context, undergoing a multitude of transformations in its association with quite varied religions and philosophies, each time making valuable contributions to spiritual growth and wellness. Yoga is therefore not only for Hindus.

T. S. Rukmani 's focus is on comparing one element of classical yoga teaching, namely Īśvara, the "Lord," with the Christian understanding of God. This comparison will help determine the compatibility of yoga doctrine and practice with Christian teaching and spirituality. She begins with Patañjali, the compiler of the Yogasūtras (YS), and continues with later commentators on the YS, especially Vijñānabhikṣu (16th century). She sees Vijñānabhikṣu as deviating from the original teaching of the YS when he attributes to the Lord a role in the manifestation of the universe, but not in the extreme sense of the Christian *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing). Further Vijñānabhikṣu concedes devotion to the Lord, but only for those individuals who are less spiritually advanced, i.e. those who have not yet attained to a state of mind in which effort alone would suffice for yogic practice. Even though Vijñānabhikṣu's work displays a theistic strain not found in the YS he does not go so far as to make the Lord, Īśvara, the direct cause of enlightenment or liberation. Classical yoga teaching, then, as represented by the YS and its various commentaries, diverges strongly from Christian teaching in regard to both cosmology and spiritual liberation.

In the third essay Gerald Larson questions the conventional conceptualizations of theism found in Abrahamic as well as in South Asian and East Asian traditions. In contrast to these understandings he states that the conception of God (Īśvara) found in Pātañjala-Yoga is of an altogether different type. To understand who or what God is in the YS one must first de-personalize, de-anthropomorphize, de-mythologize and de-conceptualize one's usual way of thinking about God. Hence, in the YS God is neither personal nor a world creator nor reducible to any of the conventional religions of the world nor does the understanding of such a God have anything to do with philosophical conceptualization. Larson does not argue his case only on the basis of what the YS teaches, but he also marshals arguments from outside yoga, from the fields of cognitive psychology and philosophy of mind, to deconstruct naïve notions of human personhood that are all too often projected onto God. Moreover, God in the YS is outside of all temporal frameworks. The proper understanding of God's relation or rather, non-

Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies 25 (2012):1-2

relation with the world, might then appear closer to atheism than to traditional theisms. "God," says Larson, "cannot be a creator in any meaningful sense, nor can God be personal in any intelligible sense. God as consciousness cannot be a thing or an entity." He concludes that "God for Yoga is a mediating position between the theology of Advaita Vedānta and the 'theology' of Buddhist thought."

In contrast to Rukmani, Graham Schweig argues in defense of a real theism in the Yoga Sūtra. He writes, "Yoga as explicated in the Yoga Sūtra possesses a strong and natural theological character, containing a distinct, open-ended raw theism that necessitates the expansion of the domain and definition of the term." He reminds us that Hindu conceptions of Deity from earliest times have often enough been fluid and open-ended, sometimes even affirming both theism and non-theism at once. Only rigid understandings of theism, beholden to one or another particular theological or philosophical system, would deny this element in the YS. He therefore approves of Larson's deconstruction of standard ideas about what theism ought to be, as this allows for a broadened understanding of theism, one that is potentially still in the making. The YS understanding of theism, he asserts, is flexible, a position underscored by its teaching in 2.44 of iṣṭa-devatā, or "chosen/desired divinity." The word devatā, when connected with Īśvara, the Lord, is an example of strong theistic language. Schweig thus argues for a bhakti or devotional current in the YS. And, too, the word samāpatti, "falling into a state or condition," appears to express the experience of divine grace, even if the more commonly used terms for grace are not used by Patañjali. Schweig concludes that a comparison of the YS understanding of God and the Christian understanding of God requires a broadened understanding of theism, one not bound to any single religion or philosophy as its standard or definition. He concludes his essay with a list of ten dimensions of a comprehensive definition of theism, a list which is intended to facilitate more fruitful interreligious theological comparison.

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