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Editor's Introduction

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Editor's Introduction

THE main theme of this year's issue, "Yoga and God: Hindu and Christian Perspectives," continues a theme taken up five years ago by this journal, called "Yoga and Christianity." The articles appearing in the present issue tend to give more explicit attention to the challenge of reconciling Christian theology and spirituality with various yoga systems than did the essays from 2012. Unlike the purely negative approach taken in recent years by many Christian groups to the question of integrating yoga practice and philosophy with Christian spirituality and teaching, the first three authors here affirm the value of yoga practice for Christians while at the same time occasionally pointing out difficulties in reconciling yogic teachings with Christian theology.

In the first essay **Michael Stoeber** begins by noting the strikingly wide range of contemporary yoga practices and yoga practitioners in the West. Some of these organizations and individuals intentionally seek to integrate yoga into a Christian context. This practice has led to recent objections raised by both Hindu and Christian groups. Christian criticisms include the psychological and spiritual dangers of yoga practice and the dangerous divergence of yoga teaching from Christian doctrine. Hindu critics, for their part, sometimes object to the "western corruption of traditional yoga theory and practice" expressed in yoga's alleged narcissism, consumerism, and the neglect of yoga's traditional moral foundation by contemporary yoga practitioners. Stoeber goes into impressive detail in presenting these vary different arguments and objections, after which, in the main body of his

article, he examines the phenomenon of Christians practicing a particular kind of yoga associated with Sikhism called "3HO/KY Kundalini Yoga." This kind of yoga practice has shown itself to have great practical value in addressing a multitude of human psychological and physical challenges, but its overall goal is union with the divine as this is understood in the Sikh tradition. The question of the doctrinal relation of Sikh and Christian teaching and the attendant danger of syncretism leads the author to reflect on the possible value of this form of yoga without compromising Christian teaching. The veneration of Sikh gurus, he notes, has a parallel in the Christian appreciation of its own saints. The Sikh understanding of the unity, presence, and graciousness of the divine parallels Christian teaching on God. Yet, Stoeber concedes, the very similarity of the two religions might raise objections by Christian ecclesial authorities about possible syncretism and its distortion of Christian teaching. Stoeber goes on to note, however, that the recent phenomenon of interreligious prayer can be experienced as a valuable spiritual practice for people from different religious traditions. Could such an inter-religious practice not give validity also to Christians practicing yoga rooted in spiritual traditions different from their own? In closing, Stoeber offers practical advice for Christians on this point and raises important questions to help the Christian practitioner discern where they now stand with regard to their own faith as they find themselves immersed in a new world of religious discourse and practice. He also suggests that the experience of practicing a form of yoga rooted

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in a different spiritual tradition might help Christians refine their own theology and practice.

In the following article **Stephanie Corigliano**, a student of the late Pattabhi Jois, reflects on the place of devotion to God in her master's teaching. She first notes how T. Krishnamacharya (1888-1989), her teacher's teacher and indirectly the founder of many contemporary forms of postural yoga, espoused a non-sectarian form of devotion. Devotion is seen here as an ideal way to focus the mind, but it can also be an expression of real love of God. The author compares "Christian Yoga," i.e. the combining of aspects of Hindu yoga philosophy and practice with Christian spirituality and its Christ-centered hope for salvation, with the yoga tradition of Krishnamacharya. She then introduces a long list of Christians, both in India and the West, who incorporated various facets of yoga practice and teaching into their Christian spiritual path. All sought to deepen their prayer and spirituality with the help of yoga. After this she presents various 20th century Hindu figures who affirmed the validity of the spiritual paths of others while remaining committed to their own Hindu tradition as superior and more inclusive. Among these Hindu teachers was T. Krishnamacharya. In one of his important works, the *Yoga Rahasya*, Krishnamacharya treats Patanjali's *Yoga-Sutra* as a bhakti or devotional text. Although the Lord here is understood to be Vishnu-Narayana, in other texts Krishnamacharya treats bhakti in a non-sectarian way, allowing the practitioner to choose his or her own object of devotion. Corigliano points out this convergence of the inter-religious blending of yoga and devotion in Krishnamacharya with Christian yogis such as J. M. Dechanet (1906-1992). However, whereas

Dechanet advocated sectarian, i.e. Christian, devotion, Krishnamacharya's yoga espoused a "religiously neutral space," leaving it open to the yoga practitioner's particular understanding of the divine. However, the lack of an explicit sectarian commitment has led many contemporary practitioners of yoga to omit bhakti from their practice altogether, especially since Krishnamacharya's yoga initially focuses on asanas and pranayama.

Next **Bradley Malkovsky** focuses on the connection between spirituality and the perceived personhood of the divine in the teachings of Hindu yoga and Christianity. Starting with the ancient *Yoga-Sutra* and continuing through contemporary Iyengar yoga, he presents a trajectory of greater and greater recognition of God as Person, finally ending with Christian spirituality, which, to a considerable degree, converges with Hindu bhakti traditions. He gives special attention to where Christian spirituality, its anthropology, its understanding of the final goal, and its concept of God are similar to but also different from understandings of the divine and the human person in both classical and contemporary yoga. He ends up explaining the justifiable doctrinal wariness of certain Christians to take up yoga, but he also explains why this rejection of yoga is often misinformed about the spiritual (not just physical health) benefits of yoga practice. He adds that yoga practice, disconnected from prayer and devotion, has the capacity to lead the practitioner to a very different but also legitimate experience of transcendence and freedom than that of Christian spirituality, which is grounded in love. Christians should be aware of this experience, as difficult as it is to

reconcile on the conceptual level with the experience of divine love.

In response to these three essays **Andrea Jain** begins by giving examples of Western yoga teachers who connect yoga practice with their own personal understandings of God and what it means to have a relationship with God. This is a sign that commercial yoga in the West can be more than the pursuit of health and physical well-being. In addition she gives examples of Christians practicing yoga in quite different ways and for different purposes, sometimes using it to spread the Gospel, sometimes to overcome various addictions, sometimes to deepen their own Christian spirituality. Yoga's original connection to other spiritual traditions, especially Hinduism, is sometimes eliminated altogether in these Christian brands of yoga. Clearly there are many reasons why Christians

practice yoga. Jain notes that an underlying concern of the three essays to which she is responding is whether yoga is compatible with a Christian understanding of God. She finds that such an approach runs the danger of essentializing yoga. But, as she adds here and in many of her previous writings, there is nothing static about what yoga is or to whom it might belong. She notes that the authors of the three essays, trained in Christian theology or philosophy of religion, are asking questions that are irrelevant to most Christian practitioners of yoga. They are simply doing yoga anyway as Christians without a concern for the questions that academics ask.

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