

An Evaluation of “Holy Yoga” as a Contextualized Strategy for Reaching Hindus

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Abstract

Even though the practice of yoga is thousands of years old, it is increasingly enjoying globally popularity and even hybridization. This article examines the arguments for and against using Holy Yoga, and ultimately takes the position that Holy Yoga is an effective and appropriate form of contextualization as long as it focuses on God rather than on self. First, we give a brief overview of traditional yoga’s emphasis on *moksha* (liberation), self-discipline and concentration. We then describe Brook Boon’s Christianized version, called Holy Yoga, which replaced Hindu idols with Christian symbols. Last, we discuss various concerns that have been raised (mostly by those familiar with yoga in the West) about the notion of Christian Yoga.

Introduction

A few years ago, a South Asian named Les¹ and his American wife Laura joined a mission agency and set up a new team in India. They began using a new strategy, Holy Yoga, to reach out to Hindus in India. This practice has attracted a number of Hindus in their city, enabling them to start some new fellowship groups for seekers and new believers. However, using yoga as a means for evangelism is still highly controversial in India. Some workers believe that it is an appropriate contextualization of Christian prayer and morning meditation; on the other hand, some workers regard the use of yoga as syncretism.

This article will examine the arguments for and against using Holy Yoga as a means to reach out to Hindus. First, we will describe Holy Yoga by giving a brief overview of traditional yoga and it has been modified in Holy Yoga. Then we will discuss the strengths and problems with Holy Yoga. Ultimately, we take the position that Holy Yoga can be an appropriate practice as long as it focuses on God rather than on self.

The Context of Traditional Yoga

Burnett (2006) explains that the word yoga itself is derived from the Sanskrit root *yuj* (English “yoke”) meaning “to unite” or “to link together.” It is used to imply the means or the path by which individuals unite with God (Singh 1991). In the *Bhagavad-Gita*, it is written that yoga is an instrument of *moksha*, or liberation from the bondage of births and rebirths (Thirumalai 2002). The ultimate goal of yoga is to unify the spirit in a supreme absorption by removal of all distractions and to concentrate (*dharana*) the mind (Burnett 2006). The term is also used to describe various techniques within asceticism and methods of meditation (Burnett, 2006).

The origins of yoga are still under debate (Burnett 2006). Yim (2009) states that the earliest origins may come from the Indus Valley (3300–1900 BCE) or from pre-Vedic eastern states of India. Some archeologists have found that some deities’ statues are resting in the posture of various yoga practices. Yoga was first written in the Upanishads. However, it is

commonly believed that yoga was developed between 300 BC to AD 300, as it was given its classical form in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali in that period. Burnett points out that “Patanjali built upon Sankhya philosophy by adding a theistic component with the belief in a supreme deity called Ishwara” (Burnett 2006:191). In other words, yoga has a strong relation with Hinduism. In yoga, it is believed that the world is just illusory; people imagine that the world is real because the “self” is in ignorance of its true nature. So the “self” has to practice meditation in order to reach a state of passivity and find freedom and liberation from this illusory world (Burnett 2006).

Singh (1991) points out that yoga has eight types of self-discipline. The first two are the preparation stage, *Yama* and *Noyama*, with the purpose of purifying “the heart and bring[ing] about ethical discipline”(Singh 1991:146). *Asana*, *Pranayama* and *Pratyahara* comprise the next steps. *Asanas* are the yogic postures which focus the mind for concentration and discipline the body. *Pranayama* is the name for the breathing exercises that help one gain mastery of vital energy. *Pratyahara* also allows one to withdraw and detach from all outward sensations and look inward (Burnett 2006; Singh 1991). The last three steps, *Dharana*, *Dhyana* and *Samadhi*, are all referred to as *Raja yoga*. *Dharana* means concentration and is a process of fixing the mind on a single point. *Dhyana* is meditation of an unceasing flow of thoughts and ideas toward an object. Such meditation leads to the final stage called *Samadhi* or “self-collectedness” (Singh 1991). Besides practicing the breathing exercises, postures and meditation, yogis (practitioners) also chant *mantra*, a repeated word or phrase from Sanskrit. Yogis believe that this practice can help them to generate powerful vibrations that are absorbed into the soul (Burnett 2006).

Yogis sometimes claim that they can attain supernatural powers, become clairvoyant, and become adept at mind-reading and thought-transmission. If a yogi goes further, he claims he can attain the superconscious or *nirikalpa Samadhi* (Singh 1991). Usually, just the *sadhus* (holy men) can attain this stage, and it is believed that they have liberated the soul (Singh 1991).

There are several different types of yoga; the most popular type in western countries is *Hatha yoga*. Yogis believe that there are two warring impulses in our body, and they cause the mind and body restlessness. *Hatha yoga* tries to harness these two currents and make them unite in both body and mind through breathing exercises and postures. However, many yogis regard *Hatha yoga* as a preliminary exercise before real yoga starts (Burnett 2006).

Yoga became widely known in America in the 1960's. The most influential form was Transcendental Meditation, founded by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Maharishi started to teach a new form of yoga in India which was derived from *Bhakti yoga*. Not gaining many followers in India, he moved to America in 1959. Some celebrities like the Beatles started to learn meditation from Maharishi, and the number of followers of Transcendental Meditation exploded. By 1972, 10,000 new meditators were being enrolled each month (Burnett 2006). Although Maharishi's close disciples heard him teach from the religious *Bhagavad Gita*, he still claims that yoga is not a religion but a philosophy. He called his movement the “Spiritual Regeneration Movement” and later “Science of Creative Intelligence” (Burnett 2006).

In 2014, the United Nations declared June 21 as International Yoga Day, as proposed by India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi. From that year forward, a large-scale yoga performance has been held in India on every International Yoga Day (Anjali 2018). In 2015, more than 35,000 people from 84 nationalities practiced yoga together in Delhi on the first international yoga day. Another 60,000 people, together with Prime Minister Modi, practiced

yoga in Dehradun (Taneja 2018). Many other yoga events as well were held that day in India and all over the world.

Holy Yoga

The label “Holy Yoga” refers to a specific form or practice of Christian yoga. According to Brooke Boon (2009), the founder of Holy Yoga Global LLC, Holy Yoga is “specific for Christian and those who are seeking a relationship with Christ” and is “a profound physical worship to Christ through prayer, breath work and movement” (Boon 2009:xi). Boon, an American of Jewish descent, started practicing Eastern and new age yoga in 1999, eventually becoming a yoga teacher. In 2001 Boon came to know Christ, and she felt a call to use her knowledge of yoga to worship and glorify the Lord. Boon identifies herself as a Jesus follower and a fellow pilgrim rather than as a formal theologian. After her conversion, she was unsure whether she should continue the practice of yoga because she came across numerous articles that objected to yoga, even to Christian yoga (Boon 2009). After a good deal of internal struggle, she arrived at “Holy Yoga” as a solution, and she registered Holy Yoga Global LLC in 2006. Besides teaching yoga classes, Boon established different Holy Yoga instructor training programs. She is also the Executive Director of Holy Yoga TV and President of the Board at Holy Yoga (Holy Yoga 2018b).

Holy Yoga Global LLC’s aim is “to establish Christ-centered communities across the globe where individuals are intersected by the living God through the practice of yoga and living beyond themselves” (Holy Yoga 2018c). Their stated mission is as follows:

Holy Yoga is an experiential worship created to deepen people’s connection to Christ. Our sole purpose is to facilitate a Christ honoring experience that offers an opportunity to believers and non-believers alike to authentically connect to God through His Word, worship, and wellness. Holy Yoga exists to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth through the modality of yoga (Holy Yoga 2018a).

Obviously Holy Yoga’s objective is not just to provide some basic yoga training in the USA. They also want to use Holy Yoga as a means to reach out to all peoples and bring them to Jesus Christ. The Holy Yoga master program includes Bible studies and biblical applications of Holy Yoga for grief trauma and mental illness. The organization indicates that they desire for Holy Yoga to restore children with backgrounds in human trafficking to holistic health and a relationship with Jesus (Boon 2015). They also set up support groups for missionaries who use Holy Yoga as a method for working with unreached people groups.

Boon (2009:xiii) emphasizes that “Holy Yoga is all about Christ.” She believes that yoga itself is a physical exercise to strengthen and improve muscle flexibility and a practice designed to increase spiritual growth. Boon states that Holy Yoga or any kind of Christian yoga is not religious; rather, it is a practice of the body’s alignment, mindful breathing and purposeful reliance on God (Boon 2009). She emphasizes that “yoga is a unique way to worship God through the ancient practices and disciplines of body prayer” (Boon 2009:xiii).

In Holy Yoga, yogic methods such as visualization, controlled breathing and chanting are replaced by praising Christ and focusing on Christian images such as a candle, a cross, or a picture of Jesus. Instead of chanting of the names of Hindu deities, adherents recite Bible verses while Christian music is played in the background (Got Questions Ministries n.d.). All these practices are to help practitioners “clear the mind, calm the body, connect with God” and “use yoga as a Christian worship experience to deepen one’s faith in God” (Got Questions Ministries n.d.). Boon emphasizes that in Holy Yoga the goal is union with God

(Boon 2009:xv). This goal is in contrast to the objective in traditional raja yoga of “becoming one with God.” In Christian yoga, devotees are “surrendered to God,” “devoted to Him” and “united with God” in accordance with the Bible’s teachings (John 17:20-24, Colossians 3:14). Holy Yoga is also derived from *Bhakti Yoga*, but their goal has changed from “merging with the supreme being” to “immersed in Holy Spirit,” getting in touch with the Holy Spirit, and being devoted to him by pouring out all our heart (Boon 2009). Therefore, the practitioners pursue unity of body, mind and the Holy Spirit that dwells within (Boon, 2009). The yogi can attain this unity through spiritual discipline and physical effort.

Humans are integrated beings: our thoughts, feelings, bodily experiences and spiritual longings cannot be separated (Boon 2009). Therefore, in order to worship God fully, we need to be authentic, and Holy Yoga is a means to unify ourselves so that we can open up fully to God. Boon (2009) believes that Holy Yoga helps with the prayer life. Opening up to various body postures can facilitate prayer by quieting the body and mind to all worldly distractions.

According to Boon (2009), Holy Yoga is divided into three main structures: physical postures, breathing and meditation. The postures are designed to increase the body’s efficiency and total health. By learning how to control breathing, one can improve the health and function of both the body and the mind. The postures and breathing techniques are preparing the mind and body for meditation. By posturing the body and controlling one’s breathing, one can find a healing silence that reduces stress. In other words, practitioners are using traditional yoga posture, but the sequence and manner are different and conjunct with specific language, in order to connect with Christ.

Reasons for Opposing Holy Yoga

Some Christian leaders have opposed Holy Yoga as syncretistic. Note that much of this debate is in the West and was engendered in the context of criticism related to Transcendental Meditation in the USA. Such arguments may not be as easily applied to Hindu background believers (HBBs) in India.

Thirumalai (2002:56) argues that while modern forms of yoga may be “nicely stripped of its religious basis” and “promoted as part of self-help spiritual tools for the culture” in modern times, the theology of yoga is fundamentally counter to Christianity. Additionally, Burnett explains that the meaning of meditation in yoga is profoundly different from that in the Bible. In Scripture, meditation means “diligence in religious practice” or pondering God without any notion of “dissociation from the world” or “absorption into the ultimate reality” (Burnett 2006:203). Ultimately, Burnett argues that yoga and Hinduism cannot be separated, since yoga was born as a spiritual discipline within Hinduism (Burnett 2006). Therefore, many Christians believe that Christians who practice yoga participate in idolatry and false worship.

Note, however, that Boon (2009) strongly believes that yoga did not come from Hinduism; on the contrary, Hinduism incorporated some of the physical practices of yoga just as other religions did. The yoga positions that have been found in the Indus Valley were probably developed much earlier than Hinduism.

Some opponents argue that there are many other healthy exercises other than yoga, and Christians need not choose such a dangerous and syncretic practice (Brinkmann 2012; Got Questions Ministries n.d.). Other argue that connection with God through meditation, concentration, or the disassociation of oneself is not based on scripture; rather, Jesus said that he is the way to the Father (John 14:6) (Got Questions Ministries n.d.). The focus on self in

yoga is seen as unbiblical because we should deny ourselves and focus on the Savior (Matthew 16:24) (Got Questions Ministries n.d.).

In response, proponents of Holy Yoga point out that meditation and even disassociation of oneself can assist one to become more reliant on God.

Reasons for Supporting Holy Yoga as an Evangelistic Approach to Hindus

DeAnna Smothers, co-founder of a Christian yoga center called “Yahweh Yoga,” has stated, “Christian Yoga help us draws closer to God by meditating on his word and keeping our temple clean and healthy.” Practicing yoga can help Christians understand Paul’s concept of the body as the temple of God (O’Neal, 2007). Smothers’ interview demonstrates that some Christians really feel that Christian Yoga can help them to draw closer to Christ.

Burnett (2006) states that, in a broad sense, most believers of all the world’s major religions are fundamentally bhakti yogis. Bhakti yoga is the process of realizing the true self by devotion to a chosen god. Such devotion is not just restricted to Hinduism: it is also found in Buddhism and some forms of Sufism (Burnett 2006). Therefore, by redefining its meaning, yoga can be envisioned as any embodied spiritual practice.

Actually most of my (Poon’s) South Asian friends argue that yoga is simply a scientifically proven health exercise, not a religious activity at all. An Indian pastor called Bapi told me that modified yoga is one of the best ways to reach Hindus. As the Bible says, “on his law he meditates day and night” (Psalm 1:2). The pastor explained that there is nothing wrong with yoga if we can use a Christian perspective to meditate on Jesus Christ.

A few HBBs did express concerns to us about meditation. Kaushic, an Indian missionary who is serving Hindus in the Philippines, thinks that the use of the word “OM” is a way of invoking Hindu deities. If “OM” is changed to the name of Jesus, and the meditator recites biblical content, then it is appropriate. In fact, Kaushic reported that Hindus are already using yoga to spread their own religion. Yoga provides excellent opportunities for discussing self-discipline and becoming united with God in a biblical sense.

Joe Suozzo (n.d.) outlines his defense of the practice in his essay on Holy Yoga. Yoga can be embraced for the glory of God in Christ. Joe and his wife Dianne served as evangelical missionaries for 10 years as church planters among Hindus in India. Both Joe and his wife received formal theological training before they went to India. When they were in India, they studied in Banaras Hindu University in the philosophy department as tentmaking missionaries. Dianne has also been involved in the Holy Yoga ministry since 2007 (Suozzo n.d.).

Joe and Dianne said they would rather spend time with Hindus than go to church on Sunday mornings. When they were living in a Hindu village, Dianne would wear the traditional *sari*, *bindi*, *sindur* (red powder on the edge of the hairline) and other items a Hindu married woman would wear. They would also use the *Satsang* (Hindus worship) style to conduct fellowship meetings. They would sit quietly before the seekers and have long periods of silence and reflection. Although these contextualized approaches were criticized by their fellow missionaries and even by the Indian Christian community, they brought many Hindus to Jesus and set up over 35 house churches. Suozzo argues that critics often “pull away without taking a closer look at how many of the cultural aspects within Hinduism can become tremendous open doors to the gospel message” (Suozzo n.d.).

Using Holy Yoga carefully

Moreau states, “Contextualization means that the message is defined by Scripture but shaped by culture” (Moreau 2012:19, 35). Moreau also claims that “without contextualization, people will not connect to Christ in a way that moves their hearts. Faith will feel foreign” (Moreau 2012:18-19). When reaching out to Hindus, yoga and various forms of Hindu worship may be utilized but can be given new meanings. These redeemed practices can increase the receptivity of the participators and make Jesus be more meaningful to them (Suozzo n.d.). As Holy Yoga modifies traditional yoga practices by giving them explicit Christian meanings, “such functional substitutes are generally effective, for they minimize the cultural dislocation created by simply removing an old custom” (Hiebert 1984:110).

While interviewing some of my (Poon’s) Indian Christian friends, I noted that they felt proud to embrace their national practice of yoga in a Christian way. South Asians are often keen to join a yoga class, and they think that it is more of a healthy exercise than a religious practice. A Hindu scholar named Rajiv Malhotra gave a detailed analysis and explanation about Boon’s cross-culture mission objective of Holy Yoga (“Rajiv Malhotra interviews” 2017). Malhotra “warns” (tongue in cheek) the Hindus to be alert of the use of Holy Yoga for Christian evangelism in India. The approach “threatens” Hindus globally, because it is an effective method of evangelism. Therefore, from our point of view, Holy Yoga can be a means to reach out to Hindus at a primary stage of evangelism. As Burnett (2006) quotes from the French Benedictine monk Jean-Marie Dechanet, Christian yoga is good for one’s own spiritual development. Hatha yoga can be a “preparation for communion with God, an emptying of oneself to appreciate more fully the grace of God” (Burnett 2006:202).

If Christians use Holy Yoga to reach out to Hindus, they may grasp what it means to be united with the Holy Spirit and to worship Christ with our entire being. On the other hand, Holy Yoga cannot replace other forms of prayer and worship; it should go side by side, since the main purpose of Holy Yoga is to empty our minds and strengthen our bodies so that we can concentrate on God. We still need the words of God to fill us up. Holy Yoga must also have fellowship and sharing of the central aspects of gospel, like the divinity of Jesus Christ, redemption, and the resurrection. Suozzo states, “contextualization only slides into syncretism when embracing or adapt in certain practices compromises core tenets of the faith” (Suozzo n.d.:5). To avoid falling into the trap of syncretism, the leader must have a rich Bible knowledge, be able to discern their own biases and misinterpretations, and be open to the work of the Holy Spirit (Hiebert 1984). As Hiebert pointed out, the leader must have a “metacultural framework that enables him or her to translate the biblical message into the cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimension of another culture” (Hiebert 1984:109). Therefore, it is very important that the Holy Yoga teacher or instructor know the Bible and traditional yoga well, so that he can have proper discernment. It is worth noting as well that Hinduism has a wide range of diversity, so Hindus often have different religious views which affect their interpretation of yoga.

Conclusion

Yoga can be a neutral practice and means for Christians to reach out to the Hindu world, since South Asians often already embrace yoga, and many just treat the practice as a healthy exercise rather than a Hindu form of worship. Workers who use Holy Yoga have removed yoga’s eastern pantheistic philosophy and idolatry and replaced them with Jesus at the center. Practitioners of Holy Yoga meditate on the God’s Word of God and Spirit.

However, as contextualization is an ongoing process, and since using Holy Yoga as a means to reach out to Hindus is still a relatively new approach, missionaries and church

leaders must regularly review the practice to ensure that the participants are seeking Jesus rather than self-realization.

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¹ The names are pseudonyms for the sake of confidentiality.