

# Yoga trades union with Christ for union with the cosmos

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The recent decision by Benedictine College not to offer recreational yoga classes next fall has sparked some controversy.

The criticism generally falls into two categories: 1) Yoga classes just involve stretching and strengthening exercises with no religious content. So what is the problem? Or 2) Not offering yoga classes is disrespectful to Hinduism and Eastern mysticism, thus harming interfaith relations and dialogue.

Yoga has become very popular in secular American culture. It is probable that many Leaven readers have participated in yoga classes, possibly finding the exercise routines physically beneficial and emotionally calming. So what is the big deal? Originally, yoga was not an exercise and relaxation program. It was developed as part of Hindu spirituality. Hinduism itself is difficult to define, because there is no central authority or founding figure or official creed. Hinduism is based on the Vedas, the world's most ancient religious text. Hinduism is polytheistic, thus holding that there are many gods.

Yoga is considered one school of authentic Hinduism. The word yoga means: "to yoke together" or "to bind." With what does yoga seek to bring us into union? For some practitioners of yoga, it is a vehicle or tool to bind them to one or more of the Hindu gods. For a Christian, this is highly problematic, since there is only one God.

For other devotees, the goal of yoga is to unite oneself with a "higher reality" or what might be termed "infinite consciousness." This presents another set of problems for the orthodox

Christian because it is a form of pantheism, where everything is considered divine and there is no distinction between spiritual and material realities.

There are several major traditions of yoga, all of which developed out of this pagan spirituality. The most popular and prevalent tradition in the United States is Hatha yoga that focuses principally upon physical postures and breathing techniques. If a Catholic finds that participation in such a yoga class helps them physically to gain flexibility and strength and emotionally to become calmer, is there really an issue?

There could be! Most yoga practitioners do not know about the intent or motivation of their instructor or guru. The positions in yoga originally had a spiritual meaning. Several yoga positions were developed as a means of physically inviting a god/demon to be in union with you. Some yoga centers actually have images of Hindu gods, which should make you more wary of the intent of the instructor or guru.

However, if there are no such images to Hindu divinities at a yoga center and the instructor sincerely disavows any intent or attempt to introduce participants to a particular spirituality, is there any possible reason for concern?

Before responding to that question, I wish to preface it by stating that I do not believe it is possible for a demon to enter a person without some sort of invitation or consent. I also believe we should recognize and even celebrate common ground that we have with adherents to other religions. We can learn from positive practices of those in other religious traditions.

For instance, we can learn from the ascetical practices of other religions that seek to provide a path to liberate ourselves from disordered attachments to material things or human relationships. We can find inspiration in the fidelity to prayer by adherents of other religions, and express admiration for their sincere desire to encounter God.

Nevertheless, I question the prudence of participating in yoga classes when you can receive the same benefits from other exercise or fitness programs. There is an even more serious concern for a Catholic college to offer yoga classes to its students. Even if the college is confident that students are not being introduced to a non-Christian spirituality by a campus yoga class, they run the danger of giving students the impression that all yoga classes are harmless. Dominican priest Father Ezra Sullivan, in a series of articles about yoga, summarizes the results of an Australian national survey published in *The International Journal of Yoga*. Father Sullivan observed: “Although most respondents commonly began yoga for reasons of physical health, they usually continued it for reasons of spirituality. In addition, the more people practiced yoga, the more likely they were to decrease their adherence to Christianity and the more likely they were to adhere to nonreligious spirituality and Buddhism. In other words, whatever their intentions may have been, many people experience yoga as a gateway to spirituality disconnected with Christ.”

At best, the spirituality of yoga attempts to bring its practitioners into some sort of communion with an impersonal universe. To give up the joy and peace resulting from a personal friendship with Jesus for some impersonal union with a cold and unloving cosmos is a trade you do not want to make.

If you want some of the physical and emotional benefits that some experience from yoga exercises, I suggest that you Google Pietra Fitness. There you will find a Christian alternative with none of the risks.

For those who think Christians choosing not to practice yoga is an insult to Hindus, I think the opposite to be true. To call something yoga that has been stripped of the spirituality that is its inspiration and foundation, I consider a much more serious affront to the devout Hindu. The most recent Pew study of religious practice in the United States saw the number of “nones”

— Americans who claim to be spiritual and have no religious affiliation — continue to grow. If you want to decrease the chances of your son or daughter from becoming a “none,” then do not sign them up for yoga class.

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