

The background of the cover is a detailed stained glass window. It features a complex geometric pattern of interlocking squares and circles, with intricate floral and vine motifs. The color palette is primarily warm, consisting of various shades of brown, tan, and gold, with some cooler tones of blue and white visible in the lower right quadrant. The overall effect is one of historical and artistic richness.

yoga and christianity

Mystical Paths in Tandem

DR OLGA RODRIGUEZ RASMUSSEN

yoga
and
christianity:

Mystical Traditions in Tandem

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FORWARD

The existing similarities evident in the mystical traditions of yoga and Christianity have long been a source of interest to me. My own academic studies in Christian spirituality, and my interest as a practitioner and teacher of yoga, were bound to collide sooner or later. The similarities in the traditions of yoga and Christianity are rarely addressed in an adequate or cogent manner. The time is ripe for providing insights and explanations to the increasing body of practicing Christians who are drawn to practice yoga, but often question how to reconcile their interest in yoga with a profound dedication to their Christian beliefs and heritage.

While some published works have addressed this issue from a more academic viewpoint, I wanted to provide audiences with something a bit more accessible—in a way that could easily be digested in a few hours. This exposition is the fruit of a series of presentations on this topic that I gave at a series of yoga studios and churches in the Washington D.C., area a few years ago.

As I began organizing my thoughts and drafting an outline of the material to be presented, a number of presuppositions began to emerge:

Underlying Presuppositions:

- Many similarities are evident in the traditions of yoga and Christianity, thus providing a basis for establishing common ground between the two. A comparative examination of the two spiritualities and their mystical practices and traditions—which are their primary avenues of intersection—will shed greater light on these similarities.
- There are a wealth of published works by enlightened and gifted authors such as Dom Bede Griffiths, Justin O’Brien, Paramahansa Yogananda, and Raimundo Panikkar, that have already accurately compared both traditions. These works have made positive contributions towards the building of bridges between both traditions—opening lines and avenues of communication, and encouraging dialogue and cooperation between the two. (*See bibliography for additional sources*).
- The Christian tradition is comprised of a vast spiritual heritage and rich mystical tradition of treatises and works recorded over countless centuries—beyond what is contained in scripture. This is a heritage and resource that all Christians have in common, at least through the Protestant Reformation. However, most Christians are not aware of this. This point of reference serves as a springboard for this study and overview.

- Mysticism must be defined in a way that is accessible understood, and agreed upon—before proceeding to illustrate common ground between the two traditions.
- Yoga will be considered within the context of the Hindu tradition. In many ways they are both inextricably linked, even though in actuality, the yoga tradition pre-dated and contributed to what eventually became Hinduism.

These, then, are the presuppositions and inherent beliefs which supported this study and served as its foundation. They were the springboard for the research I began one summer, and which was revised, expanded, and completed, during the following summer of 2003.

INTRODUCTION

What is Yoga?

To the average person, yoga is merely another fitness exercise, activity, or craze engaged in for the purpose of getting into in shape, and/or reducing stress.

To the masses, yoga is simply a trendy, cultural phenomenon, and nothing more than a hot fad—with references to yoga frequently appearing just about everywhere—in magazines, books, and most especially in advertising.

In our Western culture, yoga is primarily considered a physical discipline that is more often than not presented in its sanitized version—that is—devoid of its philosophical foundation and context.

For a smaller and more dedicated percentage of individual practitioners however, yoga is not solely a physical practice—but primarily a spiritual practice, complete with its own system of ethics, techniques for meditating, and everything needed to guide one towards achieving self-realization in this lifetime. Despite the origins of yoga, it is possible for a person to fully enter into the practice of yoga without undermining his/her own religious tradition or faith. The operative word here is practice—for yoga is primarily that—a practice.

Yoga is not rooted in a dogmatic tradition, and does not require assent to a particular body of truths or beliefs. What we define as yoga—is actually a very ancient tradition—spanning what some scholars believe to be perhaps as many as five thousand years. Yoga pre-dates what evolved into the Hindu tradition—but it also constitutes its underlying essence. While the two are very much linked in literature, history, and practice—yoga is in the final analysis, a path leading to self-transformation and transcendence—it is path meant to result in growth and change for its practitioner.

Yoga is not easily defined—it has a long history and is understood in varying ways. A common definition of the word is “union,” coming from the Sanskrit root “yuj,” meaning to yoke or join. In order to shed light on our understanding of this very ancient discipline, let us consider some ways in which the yogic tradition has been explained or defined.

Yoga as Defined by Patanjali

Patanjali, was an ancient sage who lived around 200 A.D., and is often referred to as the “Father of Yoga,” though this not an accurate assessment of his role or impact. The practice of yoga is more ancient and had already been established for several thousand years.

Patanjali, is however, the author to whom the **Yoga Sutras** are attributed. In this inspirational and relevant treatise, Patanjali, offers one of the earliest

definitions of yoga. What follows is my interpretation of over ten different translations:

Yoga chitta vritti nirodhah.

Yoga is the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind.

While this statement or aphorism is both pithy and simple, its essence is not as easily grasped as one would think—and its practice is even more elusive and challenging—for it demands an unwavering commitment on the part of the practitioner. Implied in this *sutra* or verse is that the outcome of a yoga practice leads to the stilling of the mind—resulting in the ability to direct and focus one’s consciousness on higher states—culminating in freedom and liberation.

It is often said that the *asanas*—or the postures or poses of yoga, evolved in order to still the mind in preparation for meditation. Patanjali, in the **Yoga Sutras**, asserts that the *asanas* should be both steady and comfortable. When the practitioner assumes a yoga posture, the body registers an immediate change in its flow of energy. The practice of *asana* overcomes the experience of dualism in its most dedicated practitioners, often resulting in a greater perception and sense of oneness and the essential unity of all things.

In the process of stilling the mind and directing consciousness to its higher states and planes, the yoga practitioner is then able to experience inner transformation leading to a deep encounter and knowledge of his or her own true nature. And for

the rare adept, it can also culminate in the transmutation of the body—from the physical—to a spiritual or immortal one.

An Explanation of Yoga by Georg Feuerstein

Georg Feuerstein, one of yoga's pre-eminent scholars, defines this discipline very simply in his recording, **The Lost Teachings of Yoga**:

“Yoga is the art and science of disciplining the body and the mind.”

Yoga is a spiritual discipline that grants its dedicated practitioner the possibility of attaining inner freedom. Feuerstein notes that yoga is a culture—and not a religion. Yoga has expressed itself in many cultures and periods of time through specific practices.

“Yoga is a tool for expressing the depths of human nature—it is a self-transcending practice.”

It is not only a practice that seeks to balance the body, but also one that gives the practitioner an indication of how to pursue a virtuous life through the application of very sophisticated techniques and ethical observances. Yoga provides a roadmap for living life more fully.

Yoga can be predominantly regarded as an experiential practice to be valued above the mere acquisition of knowledge. In the yoga tradition, experience is always highly valued, and supercedes study in importance or relevance.

Georg Feuerstein notes that yoga is a liberating teaching. In other words, yoga enables us to let go of limited notions that hold us back and define who and what we are. Often, we forget who we really are and associate our essential nature with material things. Who are we really?

“We are immortal, super-conscious beings—we are unlimited and free.”

Furthermore, Feuerstein observes that:

“Yoga is a continuum of theory and practice where one must pay attention to the exercises and techniques embodying theory...”

In this context, it is important to know and understand the theory and the philosophical context of yoga in order to understand its practice. But it is important to remember that we should not become obsessed with its theory—for the experience of one’s yoga practice is to be much more highly valued.

Yoga is also a practice conducive to deeper purification—both spiritually and physically, leading ultimately to greater interior growth. The practice of yoga encourages its practitioner to engage in:

“A profound commitment to self-transformation which is a result of self-discipline...Yoga is a gradual process of replacing unconscious thought patterns with more conscious patterns.”

The implication here is that one makes the time for both study and practice.

Feuerstein explains that yoga is a spiritual discipline capable of leading one to higher levels of consciousness, and which can disclose and reveal the meaning of life to its practitioner. Yoga contributes to greater self-awareness. In actuality, most of us are not fully conscious of whom we really are or of our essential nature as directly connected to the Divine, which the sacred texts of yoga teach. The practice of yoga allows us not only to know our true spiritual nature—but to experience it as well.

Feuerstein believes that the world is stuck in perceiving rational consciousness as the highest form of consciousness. The practice of yoga allows us to access what some may term altered states of consciousness—states where there is no experience of duality—and where the interconnectedness of all living things is experienced and perceived. This experience of consciousness is not reserved for a select few, but is available to all who are willing to awaken to their true nature. Yoga has much in common with the world's spiritual traditions, because they all seek more meaningful and authentic living, and greater connection to the Divine.

A Definition of Yoga by Douglas Brooks

In the book, **Meditation Revolution: A History and Theology of the Siddha Yoga Lineage**, Dr.

Douglas Renfrew Brooks, offers a comprehensive definition of yoga, which is excerpted here:

Though there are many different yoga traditions, yoga is not a term with many meanings. Rather it is a concept used in different ways. In the most encompassing sense of the word, yoga means any concentrated effort directed towards accomplishing a goal. As the Sanskrit root yuj, suggests, one 'yokes' oneself to a task... The term suggests a heightened anticipation, a deliberate preparation, and a goal set upon with a commitment. Yoga then is a process, one through which a person makes a determined effort... Yoga is the practice of concentrating the mind until it becomes one-pointed—that is, until it can focus on a single object without wavering.

Yoga is always an endeavor of human accomplishment rather than a disembodied theory or theology...

Yoga then implies (1) the process of a difficult effort; (2) a person committed to it; (3) the instrument he uses; (4) the course of action chosen; and (5) the prospect of a goal.

Seen in this light, yoga is not as unfamiliar or foreign a concept as

we assume. Instead, yoga is intrinsically human; the simplest and the greatest achievements of civilization require yoga. Without yoga what could ever be accomplished? Placed in the realm of spirituality, yoga is that by which we accomplish the fullest expression of our growth as human beings. To learn yoga is to advance one's own purpose for being human; to teach yoga is to have accomplished the goals that others recognize as most valued. (xxii)

Brooks reminds us that yoga is a practice—and it is a spiritual discipline seeking our liberation, our transformation—and ultimately, our transcendence. Yoga enables us to know our true nature and find meaning through a practice that requires our attentive commitment.

Justín O'Brien on Yoga

We have already considered that yoga is a culture, and that it shares much with the Hindu tradition. However, that does not imply that all Hindus practice yoga in all its forms, though many do embrace some of its practices.

For Christians, it is important to know much more about Hinduism—its culture, traditions, and literature than most of its members do. This is particularly important when one takes in consideration that currently, one sixth of the world

population is Hindu—and one fourth of the world population is Christian. Add both of these percentages together, and they constitute a significant portion of the total world population. If we are to have a greater understanding of each other, we must learn what we can from each other. Prejudice is rooted in ignorance and fear—and lack of respect for others.

The forward to Justin O'Brien's book, **A Meeting of Mystical Paths: Christianity and Yoga**—contains the following quote from *Swami Rama* on yoga, its origins, and Christianity:

The origins of yoga are obscure and go back many thousands of years. Its central teaching is that our essential nature is divine, perfect and infinite. We remain unaware of this reality, however, because we constantly identify with our bodies, minds, and external objects. That false identification makes us think and feel that we are imperfect and limited...Comparing the science of yoga with the great religions of the world, particularly Christianity, one realizes that yoga...offers practical methods to aspirants of any religion, so that they can know the center of consciousness within. Through the meditative methods of yoga one can dispel the darkness of ignorance, and become aware of our essential nature... (ix)

This quote parallels and summarizes what Georg Feuerstein eloquently conveys in his recorded lectures on the **Lost Teachings of Yoga**, regarding our true nature, the origins of yoga, and what this practice can offer us.

One can see similar parallels in images evoked by *Swami Rama* and the following scripture verses from the New Testament and the Psalms:

“The kingdom of heaven is within.” (Luke 17:21)

“Be still and know that I am God.” (Psalm 62)

These verses acknowledge that it is within that that one experiences and encounters the Divine—all that is mystical originates within. For Christians, faith and spiritual practices are the marks and reflections of the inner life with Christ, who ultimately dwells within the heart and soul of the faithful. For the Christian, Christ is the source of all reality.

Elaine Pagels, the New Testament scholar and author of **Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas**, has spent a lifetime researching and examining the faith of the early Christians before the canon of scriptures was codified.

The Gospel of Thomas was rejected as part of the official canon of scripture even though many early Christian sects and communities had access to it and revered it. It had been lost to us but was re-discovered in 1945, in an earthen jar, in Nag Hammadi, Egypt. Pagels, contends that this work was not included in the present day canon of

scriptures because it reflects the belief that divinity is part of our essence, and is present within each and every one of us. This belief was eventually considered heretical. Instead, the **Gospel of John** was chosen for inclusion because that book affirms that only the Incarnate Jesus can truly reveal God and lead the way to him.

Many Christians do not realize that it took the early church over two hundred years to agree on the present canon of scriptures. The current canon, believed to be the divinely inspired word of God, was established in the fourth century, but not without controversy and political machinations of all sorts.

Christian Yoga

Though there are books that have been written supporting the notion of a Christian yoga, Georg Feuerstein, for one, does not agree with the usage of this term. In a very real sense—mysticism and mystical practices within the Christian tradition—constitute its yoga. Certainly the aims of mystical practices in both Christianity and the yogic tradition are very similar—but the practices of both traditions are not interchangeable, nor can they in all fairness to each—be blended.

A number of works have been published addressing various interpretations on what is meant by Christian Yoga—though purists would argue there is no such thing. One can however, adapt yogic practices such as the practice of yoga poses or *asanas*—and link the poses to classic Christian

prayers—to the Lord’s Prayer or to the Psalms, for instance. One can also practice *pranayama*, and breathing techniques in preparation for prayer and meditation in a Christian context. A variety of meditation techniques can and have been adapted for Christian practice, as Thomas Ryan has done in **Prayer of Heart and Body: Meditation and Yoga as Christian Spiritual Practice.**

The Indian Jesuit, Anthony De Mello, SJ, also wrote a number of books where he adapted meditation techniques and practices for a Christian audience. His book, **Sadhana—A Way to God: Christian Exercises in Eastern Form**, still in publication, is an excellent book, and has been a source of inspiration to a wide audience for several decades.

Defining Mysticism

Before undertaking this comparative study of the two mystical paths of yoga and Christianity—it is important to first clarify and explain what is meant by the terms mysticism and spirituality.

St. Thomas Aquinas, the great Christian philosopher of the Middle Ages, defined mysticism very simply and elegantly as:

“The knowledge of God through experience.”

Or, in other words, mysticism is simply:

“The experience of God.”

And who has not had a transcendental experience of some sort at some point? How individuals experience God is not by any means, something that is universal, or even uniform across the board. Each tradition has its own emphasis and each individual's experience is also unique. Yet, there are so many similarities that are so evident across the broad spectrum.

Aquinas' definition of mysticism implies that mystical experiences are not the exclusive domain of a select few. Every human being, by his or her very nature, has the capacity to have mystical experiences. After all, how many of us have not had a profound a sense of oneness or the miraculous, or felt a connection to the Divine while witnessing a sunset at the beach, or the birth of a child, or some equally meaningful moment or experience?

In the wonderful tome, **Mysticism: Holiness East and West**, the authors, the husband and wife team of Denise and John Carmody, present an elaborate discussion of mysticism and how it is understood in both the Eastern and Western traditions. One simple definition they offer of the term is that mysticism is the “*direct experience of ultimate reality.*” (10).

The Carmodys note that:

Mystics are aware of ultimate reality at first hand with such vividness and such vitality that there is no room for doubt. (13)

In other words, what is perceived as real is so obvious, that it cannot be mistaken for anything else.

One of Evelyn Underhill's explanations of mysticism in her book, **Mysticism**, published in the early twentieth century, and regarded as one of the most important contributions to this subject, takes an approach similar to that offered by the Carmodys. In one brief, yet succinct definition, Underhill describes mysticism as:

“the art of union with Reality.”

A mystic experiences oneness or unity with reality. The yoga tradition and its scriptures are replete with acknowledgments of this sense of oneness and the interconnectedness of all things.

Mysticism as described by Underhill and the Carmodys, is the route or path, or practice—by which one discloses or experiences reality—in other words—what is real. In the yogic tradition, mysticism also leads the practitioner away from what is unreal—and what is illusion—to what is real.

This is further supported by Henri Nouwen, one of the great Catholic writers of the twentieth century, who also addressed this notion of reality and what is real:

The mystical life is the life by which I grow towards what is real, and away from illusion... The future of

*Christianity in the West depends on
our ability to live mystically...*

This is a very profound and strongly worded statement, and much is implicit in it. Nouwen believed that Christianity would not survive into the future without mysticism. In its natural course of evolution, the radical next step for the Christian tradition should be the ability for all Christians to live mystically, and not dogmatically—which is often a more primary emphasis. Similarly, yogic texts often address the notions of reality and illusion as we have already seen—what is unreal must be dispelled by various techniques and practices in order to come to a realization of one’s true nature. The practice of yoga provides a comprehensive roadmap for doing this.

Thomas Merton, the prolific Roman Catholic author and Trappist monk, considered one of the greatest Catholic writers of the twentieth century, was also one of the first to explore Eastern and Western mysticism in the 1950’s, and the 1960’s—long before most Christians found it acceptable or fashionable to do so. While he wrote extensively on the subject in the over sixty volumes he produced prior to his untimely death, there is one observation on the life of a mystic that sheds light on the discussion thus far. Merton observed:

*“The purpose of a mystic is not to do—
but to simply be.”*

Feuerstein would agree with this assessment because he has stated that the practice of yoga cultivates the experience of simply “*being*.”

Merton's observation is both powerful and simple when we consider that we generally inhabit a materialistic culture that measures the worth of a human being by what that person does for a living. When people routinely meet in our society for the first time, the question that is most often asked first is: "*What do you do?*"

Judgments are made about an individual's worth—and the validity of his or her contributions to society based on that answer. It would be curious to see the reactions one would get if instead of indicating a chosen profession one would instead respond by saying, "*I do not do anything. I simply AM!*" After all, we are not defined by our jobs or work.

Taking it one step further—what if one dared to affirm—as the God of the Hebrew Scriptures—that simply: "*I Am Who Am?*" To one versed in the yogic tradition this would not be an alien statement, for its teachings continually stress that we are Divine in our essence and thus never separate from God.

Or, what if one instead affirmed: "*I am a mystic!*" What kind of reactions would that elicit instead? And what does it imply on a deeper level? The implications are actually quite profound, if one takes a moment to reflect on it.

If it is true that we are always connected to the Divine, is there a simple way to remember and experience this?

One of the simplest ways to connect with the Divine is through the awareness of the breath. The Persian

poet Kabir spoke so beautifully of the Divine as “*the breath within the breath.*”

In other words, God is as close to us as very own breath—and so is never absent from us. We can live for a while without food, and a little less time without water—but not long without the breath.

Through the practice of a simple breathing or *pranayama* technique, based on the audible sound produced during our inhalations and exhalations, we can be reminded of God’s presence and connect with the Divine.

This technique is often called “*So Ham,*” because the sound that the breath produces in the nostrils during the process of inhalation is very similar to the sound of “so” and the sound produced during exhalation sounds like “ham.” The combination of these two syllables or seed mantras, is in turn a sacred *mantra* that means, “*I AM THAT,*” or, “*I and the Divine are one.*” As one focuses one’s awareness on the breath and its very subtle sound, one realizes the presence of the Divine in one’s own true nature—experiencing union with Ultimate Reality. In this way, we are reminded that the Divine is as close to one as one’s own breath.

Defining Spirituality

Let us now consider the definition of the term spirituality.

The word "*spirituality*" is a term that is often misused and misunderstood.

The **American Heritage Dictionary** defines spirituality in this manner:

1. The state, quality, or fact of being spiritual.

The entry for "spiritual" further explains:

1. Of, relating to, consisting of, concerned with, or effecting the nature of the spirit; not tangible or material.

2. Of, concerned with, or affecting the soul.

3. Of, from or pertaining to God. . .

Often the words religion and spirituality are used interchangeably. But they really refer to very different things. Religion is more concerned with dogma—with basic beliefs, faith, and attributes of God—but spirituality is concerned with how an individual relates to God. Implicit in this discussion is the understanding that spirituality involves lifestyle choices—how one chooses to live life.

The Dominican priest and author, Simon Tugwell, OP, in his book, **Ways of Imperfection**, noted that from a Christian perspective:

The earliest use of the Latin word spiritualitas, remains very close to what St. Paul meant by 'spiritual' (Pneumatikos): Christians by virtue of their baptism, are meant to be spiritual in the sense that they are meant to be led by the spirit and live by the spirit.

Tugwell notes that spirituality directly affects how people choose to live their lives and indirectly what they value. It is in the realm of our every day lives that we encounter the sacred. This is a reality that Christians and yoga practitioners both agree on. The spiritual life is profoundly organic—there is a fluidity involved in the communion of the human spirit and the Infinite Spirit. It is perhaps not as mysterious as it may once have been considered.

A greater percentage of persons today readily accept that ordinary moments in their lives can disclose the extraordinary—moments in which all human beings can and do experience God. When the psychologist, Abraham Maslow, wrote about peak or transcendental experiences in the mid-twentieth century, such experiences were regarded by most to be the exception and not the norm. A critical mass of people now know better.

Christian Spirituality

Many Christians are unaware of the rich spiritual heritage of their tradition. They have never heard of the Patristic Fathers, or read the many volumes of their works—spanning the early centuries of Christianity. Christians are just as unaware of the works of the medieval era—most have not heard of or read the writings of Julian of Norwich, Meister Eckhart, and Hildegard of Bingen. Most Catholics are just as ignorant of the Counter-Reformation—or the Post-Reformation Era, and the works produced during that time—such as the writings of Ignatius of Loyola, Francis de Sales, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, and Therese of Lisieux, just to name a

few. And then there are the authors of the modern era and the twentieth centuries—when luminaries such as C.S. Lewis, Teilhard de Chardin, Karl Rahner and Thomas Merton wrote. Many Protestants have not read the writings of their own traditions or theologians—Charles Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, Martin Luther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and John Calvin.

The breadth of diversity in Christian spirituality startles even Christians. A careful examination of Christianity over the centuries demonstrates that Christian spirituality is not a single thread any more than Christian faith is one exclusive denomination. Spirituality is like a tapestry requiring many dyed threads woven together... (O'Brien, p. xi)

There are as many spiritualities as there are individuals, and movements, and religious orders: Desert Spirituality, Franciscan Spirituality, Salesian Spirituality, Ignatian Spirituality, Medieval Spirituality, and Dominican Spirituality—just to mention a few. Each one of these is undeniably Christian, but emphasizing different charisms—that is to say—Gospel values and virtues. Whole tomes have been written on the many types of spiritualities. Most Protestants might not be aware of the fact that books have also been written on the nuances and diversities of Protestant spiritualities.

As just noted, different spiritual movements recognized in the Catholic Church, are derived from an emphasis placed on particular Gospel values and virtues.

In the following passage, we see one example derived from a letter St. Paul wrote explaining the Christian ideal of life:

The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other. (NIV Galatians 5: 22-26)

Another passage from Paul further illustrates the Christian ideal:

I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit. (NIV Ephesians 4: 1-3).

Salesian spirituality, which is the fruit of the writings of St. Francis de Sales, and St. Jeanne de Chantal, in the seventeenth century, and of their collaboration in the foundation of the Visitation Order, is an example of one of the many spiritual traditions within the Catholic Church, which is rooted in the Gospels, and in such scriptural passages such as the two noted above.

The differences that exist in various spiritual traditions are what virtues they may choose to emphasize. For example, much of Salesian spirituality is based on the cultivation of what are referred to as the “*little virtues*,” many of which are listed in the two passages just noted, such as humility and gentleness.

Another characteristic of this spirituality includes the universal call to holiness—the understanding that holiness can be attained in any vocation or station of life—as long as persons do what they are called to do—and live their lives and do their work to the best of their ability. This was a radical notion in the seventeenth century, when many considered that salvation or enlightenment was only reserved for priests and members of religious orders—certainly not for the laity in general—or women more specifically.

Other spiritual traditions have emphasized different gospel virtues. When the Franciscans were originally founded by Francis of Assisi, its members lived in utter poverty, in simple emulation of Christ—not even personally owning a copy of the Bible.

If one is a Christian, and does not know or recognize some of the Christian spiritual writers mentioned previously, it simply reveals Christians must undertake a more comprehensive study of their own traditions before they can undertake a deeper consideration and treatment of the vast wealth of literature and information offered by the yoga tradition.

Christians have been traditionally schooled in the scriptures and may know their bible stories backwards and forward—citing chapter and verse as easily as they might note their names and ages. Catholics on the other hand, often lack this knowledge and information and are often better versed in their beliefs, practices, and rituals. But until the last thirty years or so, none—but those in theological institutions—were schooled or versed in spirituality.

Now it is not uncommon for Catholics to belong to bible study groups and for Protestants to engage in spiritual practices like walking on replicas of the Labyrinth of Chartres Cathedral in France. This practice of walking the labyrinth in the Middle Ages, was performed as a substitution to undertaking an actual pilgrimage, which was a very dangerous enterprise. In a labyrinth there is only one way in, and one way out. Walking a labyrinth is a very meditative practice. For some, this practice yields deep insights, and is a catalyst for change. How one approaches and walks the labyrinth is a metaphor for how one lives life.

In the first chapter to his book, **A Meeting of Mystical Paths: Yoga and Christianity**, O'Brien describes yoga and Christianity as traditions in tandem. In order to fully appreciate the implication of his statement, we must be informed of our own tradition before we can begin to embrace and appreciate someone else's. Only then can we understand how and where both traditions intersect, and what remains unique to both. Only then can one's tradition truly be enriched by the understanding of another.

We are living in an era where:

Traditional Western approaches to religious thought and spirituality are undergoing revision...we are learning that genuine spirituality exists in many guises. We are admitting that pluralism in approaches does not endanger one's preferred beliefs... (O'Brien, 1)

It was only a couple of decades ago that an Apostolic Delegate from the Vatican to the United States, publicly recognized the importance of reading the scriptures and holy books of both Hindus and Buddhists. He recognized not only that these works are rich sources of spirituality—but that for Christians, and Catholics in particular; they would be the key to a deeper understanding of other people, cultures, and religious traditions. Many of the world's conflicts, divisions, and wars, have been

rooted in religious misunderstandings and intolerance.

Ironically, the tide has turned more recently. In February of 2003, the Vatican, issued a document entitled, **Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on the New Age**, warning Catholics of becoming involved with other traditions and their practices. Luckily many Catholics who are themselves yoga practitioners, and more open in their perspective—have chosen to realize the necessity of building bridges supercedes the practice of fueling more divisions.

The August 2003 issue of **Yoga Journal**, noted that this document issues warnings about many of the practices of the New Age, including the practice of yoga. The document states that all the practices described detract from Jesus and his teachings as the ultimate solution for a culture that is in crisis. However, it neglects to note that yoga is a five thousand year old spiritual practice that has withstood the test of time. Its ability to adapt to different cultures and times has certainly contributed to its endurance.

CHAPTER ONE

YOGA AND CHRISTIANITY: CONVERGING PATHS—AN OVERVIEW

According to Justin O'Brien, the traditions of both yoga and Christianity harbor a number of similarities. These can be readily observed in worship and devotional practices, in how spiritual understanding is gained, and in both traditions' commitment to service.

The Path of Worship

O'Brien points out that currently there are at least four hundred Christian denominations throughout the world. When one takes this figure into consideration, the countless variations in Christian worship services that are possible, simply defy comprehension. Some of the traditions are more sacramental in nature—such as those of the Orthodox, the Anglican, and the Roman Catholic Churches, while many others are not.

Some Christian worship services focus primarily on scripture and its interpretation. This is the norm in mainline Protestant denominations: such as the Lutheran churches,

as well as the Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Methodist, and Baptist churches. This focus is even more evident in non-denominational churches. One must also note that some churches adhere to a more literal interpretation of scripture—while others embrace a more contextual approach and the insights that are the fruit of academic scholarship.

While there is some similarity in worship practices in a number of Christian denominations—there are also some very noticeable divergences. Some traditions are very ritualistic while others are not. Among those traditions that are ritualistic, the use of light, candles, and incense is common, while to others such practices might be completely foreign.

It is important to note that there is variety in how worship is conducted in the yogic tradition as well. But there is at least a common understanding in how it is perceived and what its purpose is:

*Worship, or puja as it is called in the ancient Vedas..has always been viewed as a form for achieving the most profound union with the divine.
(O'Brien, 3)*

In God: A Brief History, John Bowker gives a concise explanation of what is meant by the term *puja*:

The word puja comes from an ancient word meaning 'flower' and 'offering'. It is a widespread custom to make offering to the Gods and Goddesses, often in the form of flowers, or food—as if they were revered guests in the home. In puja, the Deity is present before the worshipper in the image—one sees and views the Deity with respect through the image. It is not the image is the Deity, but that the Deity can be seen through the image. (Bowker, 95)

Bowker notes that there are three identifiable elements common to *puja*:

- **Cleansing.** The need to be clean or pure before approaching God is important—hence the placement and/or use of water near places of worship. This is apparent in the perceived power of rivers and the ritual bathing of devotees and practitioners in the Ganges, which is perceived as a source of life (94). Many existing temples are located near a source of water such as those of Varanasi. Even remote temples have some access to water.
- **Prostration.** The act of prostrating oneself before the deity to honor God with accompanying acts is a

common practice in the yoga tradition and Hinduism. This practice has much in common with the greeting, *Namaste*, where one shows honor and respect to another person. The offering of garlands is another practice in this tradition (94). In some Christian traditions, the practice of kneeling in Church is still in use. Prostration also precedes the ordination of a priest in the Catholic Church, and prostration as a form of penitence has been widely practiced throughout the centuries.

- **Sharing food** (*Prasad*) The food that is offered is believed to be consumed spiritually by the Deity and transformed so that it bears power and grace: it is then offered back as *prasada*, to be consumed in turn by the worshippers in an act that unites them to the Deity (94).

This idea of sharing food is not alien to Christians of various denominations, for it bears some resemblance to the sacrament and practice of communion.

Communion or the sharing of the Eucharist, where Christians consume bread and wine during the liturgy or worship service, is commonly understood in one of two ways:

1. The bread and wine consumed become the actual body and blood of Christ. Catholics believe this happens miraculously and it is known as the dogma of *transubstanciation*. During the Mass or worship service, the priest consecrates the bread and wine and it becomes the body and blood of Christ.
2. The bread and wine are consumed in remembrance of Christ (*anamnesis*), who at the Last Supper on the night before he died simply asked his followers to break and share the bread in his name.

The elements of worship in both the yogic and Christian tradition disclose the devotion of its adherents. As O'Brien notes:

Without knowing it, Christians, in their highest acts of worship, are akin to the practitioners of an ancient form of yoga, bhakti yoga...The sanskrit word is derived from a root word, bhava, which means 'from the heart...' [Bhakti yoga is commonly known as the yoga of devotion.] Christian liturgy functions in similar fashion as bhakti yoga; it is a way of offering oneself totally to the divine and signifying

*that commitment through devotion
and reverence. (3-4)*

The Christian word sacrifice, often used in reference to worship means, “*to make holy,*” and one can note its direct relationship to what is understood as *bhakti* yoga. It is interesting to recall that Catholics before the Second Vatican Council in the 1960’s, routinely referred to their worship services as the “Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.”

It is also interesting to note how the implementation of water and light in religious rituals is universal in many diverse traditions.

In the Christian tradition, water is used in the baptism and reception into the church of its adherents. Water is also used in Catholic liturgies to purify the priest’s hands before the consecration of the bread and wine. A bit of water is also mixed with the wine as well.

Similarly, Hindus and yogic practitioners use water in various ways. They engage in ritual baths in the Ganges River for example. Universally, yogic practitioners regularly use water in various purification practices.

Christians of various persuasions routinely use candles in their liturgies, and light them in churches as they offer their prayers and petitions. Conversely, Hindus perform a ritual service of light called *arati*, where devotees bless themselves with that light.

The Path of Action

Many Christians are routinely engaged in work that is beneficial to society and many others volunteer their time in some kind of service. The underlying notion is that the work one does has impact on the larger community, and for some Christians such good works contribute to their salvation.

In these activities Christians would be practicing a form of karma yoga—the path of skillful actions. Karma means action. No one can live without performing deeds... [Karma] is a Sanskrit designation for the inevitability of human actions and their consequences. (O'Brien, 5)

Doing one's work selflessly is a goal of both mystical paths.

Feuerstein acknowledges that “*karma yoga is the path of self transcending action.*” Our acts are a natural by-product of our existence. Since this is so—“*to exist, is to act.*” We cannot choose not to act. And the implications of our actions can neither be ignored. Yogic practice seeks to discipline the mind in the midst of action so that one can experience inner freedom.

Feuerstein also reminds us that the earliest treatise to consider the role of *karma* is the **Bhagavad Gita**. The treatise observes that *karma* is a direct result of nature.

The Path of Knowledge

The word *jnana* means wisdom. Through the cultivation of wisdom, we are able to know our true nature. Through this path and its practice, we let go of the illusion that the physical realm presents—thus moving away from what is unreal—toward what is real—and Divine in nature.

The great writers and mystics of the Christian tradition, from the desert mystics of the fourth century, to the theologians and philosophers of the twentieth century, have practiced *jnana* yoga, just like the yogic sages throughout the centuries.

They have engaged in:

...The pursuit of the absolute under the inspiration of truth. Whereas devotion and service have characterized the first two examples of the Christian convergence with yoga, this path of human development reveals the conscious effort to understand the ultimate—first as a concept, then as reality...The yogic sages, like Christian mystics such as Meister Eckhart, utilized...the intellect, the buddhi, as a vehicle to uncover the mysteries of truth. (O'Brien, 6-7)

The Royal Path

This path is the way of meditation and contemplation, which is the foundation of the Christian mystical tradition. In the yogic tradition, the practice of ritual and prayer culminate in the discovery of ultimate reality—which the practitioner encounters in the experience of authentic nature.

Patanjali's **Yoga Sutras**, is the manual, so to speak of this path. The eight limbs of yoga and its practice are meant to aid in the practitioner's quest to encounter ultimate reality. To the novice, some of these practices might appear difficult and challenging at best. But the rewards of such practice could not be described.

Similarly:

Christian mystics seem a strange lot and legends describe their lives as a series of incredible adventures, [but] they are actually the most balanced of people, for they involved their entire being in the pursuit of total fulfillment... (8)

O'Brien believes that one can compare the essence of the **Yoga Sutras** of Patanjali, and its teachings, to the works of sixteenth century Christian mystics such as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross.

*[These] authors describe the human ascent from the gross, sensual level to the subtlest, transcendental experiences that supercede rational awareness. Incorporated into the **Sutras** are the traditional threefold phases of purgation, illumination, and union, that are described in many Christian manuals on spirituality. The principle activity that centers the lives of Christian mystics as well as raja yogis is meditation. More than any other exercise, both traditions look to meditation as the [most important practice] for spiritual evolution. (8-9)*

The three classical spiritual phases of purgation, illumination, and union are described in countless Christian works of the Middle Ages, to varying degrees. The practitioner of that time period would indulge in a number of ascetical practices, denying him/herself creature comforts, in order to lessen and remove all desire for material things. Once purgation had been attained, a direct experience of the second phase—that of illumination—might be possible—rendering one’s existence as more spiritual than physical. The ultimate goal was to attain union with the Divine.

This is another description of the three classic stages of spiritual growth for Christian mystics:

1. **Purgative.** *A time of struggle in which false centers are rejected, but they are also still attractive. One experiences an intense civil war, but begins progressing in virtue.*

2. **Illuminative.** *One finds it less difficult to resist temptation. One's true center is God, and one works at progressing in virtue and understanding.*

3. **Unitive.** *The person is united with God in his/her Center. Virtue comes easily, although the possibility of sin remains. (St. Romain, 104).*

YOGA AS UNDERSTOOD FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Justin O'Brien rightly observes that yoga is commonly misunderstood by many Christians. It is often mistaken for an Eastern religion, though as we have seen, this is not an accurate perception or understanding. At its very heart, yoga is both *a science and a holistic practice.*

For a Christian, the techniques and philosophy of yoga can serve as an invitation to foster the biblical injunction to perfect oneself as God's image. (28)

Yoga and Christianity are like two streams flowing from the same fountain of perennial wisdom. Each has a different approach in assisting human development. Like Christianity, yoga is broader than any one culture. To speak of yoga as a wisdom [tradition] means that it transcends cultural labels, that it shares with other wise traditions a timeless quality that makes it a continual resource for human enrichment...Yoga remains free of ethnic, religious, political, or social influence... [Yoga and Christianity] can be considered two paths joined in illuminating... [one's] ignorance with the one light of sacred knowledge." (29)

To put Christian minds at ease, it is important to remember that yoga does not displace religion. Yoga cannot threaten genuine religious beliefs...Yoga's interest lies in the study of human nature and...consciousness...the relationship between mind and body, and the healthy attitudes one should

*have in order to cope with life calmly
and intelligently. (28)*

THE YAMAS

Both Christianity and yoga are governed by ethical standards. For the Christian, these are derived from the New Testament virtues previously observed, the **Beatitudes**, given on the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5: 1-7: 29 and Luke 6: 20-49), and the **Ten Commandments** (Exodus 20: 2-17).

Yoga invites us to remember who we are—to remember our true nature. If we are to experience transcendental awareness, we must live our lives dedicated to our transformation—exercising mindfulness in thought, word, and deed.

Practitioners of yoga, who have studied its philosophy, are familiar with the “*eight limbs of yoga*,” or its various modalities of practice: the moral disciplines, the practice of self-restraint, the *asanas*, *pranayama* or breath control, concentration, sensory inhibition or withdrawal, meditation, and ecstasy—or union with the Divine.

The **Yoga Sutras**, by Patanjali, lay down very specific moral precepts and disciplines regarding personal conduct known as the *yamas* and *niyamas*. These enable the yoga practitioner to attain inner freedom. The Christian scriptures and mystical and devotional literature, have amply addressed the importance of each one of these disciplines in its teachings and practices throughout the centuries.

The five yamas guide one's relationship with other beings. They are:

ahimsa—the art of non-violence in thought, word, and deed

satya—the art of truthfulness towards others

asteya—the art of non-stealing

brahmacharya—the art of sexual continence

aparigraha—the art of non-attachment (O'Brien, 31)

Ahimsa

Feuerstein believes that the first of these disciplines, that of non-harming (*ahimsa*), is the most important. (Feuerstein, LTY, 6). If this precept is not cultivated, then all of your other spiritual practices—your meditation, your *asanas*, *pranayama*, and self-restraint—are worthless. The practice of non-harming underlies all the other precepts, and all of our actions. The practice of non-violence brings to the forefront the question of how we live our every day lives. Feuerstein believes that living in harmony and cooperation is of paramount importance for all yoga practitioners. This is grounded in the notion all created being are interconnected.

Non-harming is also rooted in a reverence for life that most Christians would find familiar. In the creation accounts described in the first two chapters of the book of **Genesis**, it is noted that humans are made in the image and likeness of God. Because of this, Christians are called to treat every human being as a child of God. Some Christians are routinely taught as part of their religious instruction, that their bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit; the implication is that each Christian must treat their bodies with respect, and care for it in an appropriate manner.

For many yoga practitioners, this dictate to act in ways that are in accordance with non-harming, leads them to choose a vegetarian lifestyle. They also tend to be very concerned for how animals bred for consumption are treated. In fact, the dedicated practitioner is very concerned with consumption in general. As Feuerstein notes, “*we are completely responsible for how we are present in the world.*” Thus we need to reflect on our actions, and the impact of what we do, what we buy, and even what we think.

This understanding of non-violence from the yogic perspective has much in common with Christianity—particularly with the Catholic tradition of social justice—deeply rooted in the scriptures and early Christian teachings. Non-violence has always been a part of that tradition. In the first three centuries of Christianity, many Christians routinely were put to death in the Roman Empire rather than participate in military service—so strong was their belief that the taking of another’s life did not reflect the Christian ideal. In

more recent decades, it has become more common for Christians to actively protest against violence in many arenas—in both political and economic realms for example.

Satya

The second precept (*satya*) mandates truthfulness for the yoga practitioner, and it is directly related to non-harming. Feuerstein observes: “*non-harming helps us overcome anger, and truthfulness helps us to overcome illusion.*” In addition, “*a society that is based on lies and deception cannot exist.*”

The practice of lying has become such an accepted practice in our culture and our society that we often hardly blink at dishonesty, even when it occurs on a grand scale. Lying has never been acceptable or condoned by any society or religious tradition, and even our own country was founded on a number of values and ethical principles. Feuerstein, reminds us that Thomas Jefferson did not respect those who were dishonest and he wrote about lying as a contemptible practice.

A couple of verses from an ancient scripture reminds the yoga practitioner that “*there is no virtue greater than truthfulness, [and that] worship without truthfulness is worthless.*”

To be truthful strengthens us as individuals and as a people. To be people of truth is to be people of integrity. When we lie once, it becomes easier to do so again, and in the end, the fruit that we will bear will not be life-giving and will be worthless. But

sometimes to proclaim the truth is dangerous. As noted earlier, many Christians and martyrs of other traditions as well, have given their lives for their beliefs.

If you come from a Judeo-Christian heritage, you cannot help but compare all of the moral disciplines to the **Ten Commandments**. Note particularly, the commands to not lie, steal, bear false witness against another, and to abstain from committing adultery and wantonly desiring another's property.

These ethical dictates are important in both the yogic and Christian traditions. They also bear direct similarity to Buddhism and the **Eight-Fold Path** which regulates proper conduct. These eight steps and the **Four Noble Truths** constitute the major doctrinal themes of Buddhism, and are listed here for the sake of comparison:

The Four Noble Truths

1. *Life is suffering (dukkha).*
2. *Craving is the source of suffering.*
3. *In order to end suffering, one must end craving.*
4. *The means to end craving is the Noble **Eightfold Path**.*

The Noble Eightfold Path

1. *Right views*
2. *Right intention*
3. *Right speech*
4. *Right action*

5. *Right livelihood*
6. *Right effort*
7. *Right mindfulness*
8. *Right absorption.*

The first two of these precepts have as its aim to instill wisdom in the Buddhist practitioner. The next three directly address what is conducive to moral living, and the last three aim at achieving concentration. (Renard, **Buddhism**, 44).

Asteya

Non-stealing (*asteya*) is the next of the *yamas*, and its practice is fundamental to the two traditions under consideration. The practice of non-stealing or respect for what belongs to others is just as highly regarded in other traditions as well and necessary for any culture or society to flourish. When the practice of this dictate is not adhered to, the moral fabric of a society starts to unravel.

According to yogic teaching, non-stealing is being able to be “*equally indifferent to straw or a gem.*” (Feuerstein). Implicit in this *yama* or dictate is the practice or embodiment of non-attachment.

Non-attachment is also a fundamental virtue in the Christian tradition, and is particularly evident in the lives and practices of mystics, who sought to embody non-attachment as way to attain union with the Divine. In the yogic tradition, non-attachment

dispels illusion, thus disclosing our true nature or Ultimate Reality.

When our attachment to things makes us wealthy at the expense of others, this becomes violence—it becomes a form of harming others. The **Catholic Social Teachings** of the last century have addressed this thoroughly in the Encyclical Letters of various Popes and other Church pronouncements, beginning with **Rerum Novarum**, written by Pope Leo XIII, in 1891.

This **Encyclical Letter** ushered in the modern era in the social teachings of the Catholic Church. In this and other subsequent documents, it has been asserted that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity. As such they are endowed with the right to life, to liberty, to a just wage, to health care, to security, to protection under the law, and to freedom of expression and religion—just to name a few. When we deprive another human being of any of these rights, we are in essence doing violence to them—and we are taking from them what is rightfully theirs.

Similarly, the early Christian writers and theologians called for a just distribution of wealth among all. It was considered immoral for one to own property or material things if another was experiencing lack in this regard.

In the New Testament book of **Acts of the Apostles**, we see the first Christians opting for communal living, with wealthy individuals freely sharing their resources with those less fortunate. Widows were provided for, the homeless were

sheltered, and the poor were given food and clothing.

In our current culture, there is a movement towards living a life of greater simplicity. The yogic tradition, as we have seen, dates back to over five thousand years, and the Christian tradition, a little more than two thousand years old, in its teachings and practices, both support and sanction this trend of concern for the have-nots.

Brahmacharya

The discipline of *brahmacharya*, often defined and misunderstood to mean celibacy, really means chastity, and implies using sexual energy in an appropriate fashion. It can also be understood in a more contemporary way, as using one's power judiciously.

Sexuality is rooted in desire, and while desire may be negated by some, it is to some extent, necessary for the human condition to thrive. Desire cannot be totally eradicated, because it gives rise to all other activity. As Feuerstein notes, desire underlies virtue and even an ascetical lifestyle—because the practitioners of each must make the choices to live virtuous lives, or to embrace asceticism. Before the choice can be made, there must exist the desire for an individual choice or lifestyle. Therefore, one should not try to eliminate desire. All of humankind's most memorable accomplishments were rooted in desire. The body is regarded in the yogic tradition as an avenue for liberation, and thus, meant to free the practitioner.

In Tantric perspectives—desire is considered to be part of the Divine plan, order, and nature of things. There is a positive way in which to express desire.

In both the Christian and the yogic tradition, particularly among its mystics, the practice of chastity is believed to enable one to more deeply experience Union with the Divine. This practice is not just physical, but also presupposes the practice of chastity in thought as well. Christians believe that all sexual activity should take place within the context of marriage, which some Christians view as a sacrament. Certainly the Christian is supposed to exercise self-control. In the earlier part of Christian history, sex was regarded as only acceptable for procreation. There are Christians today who still believe this. In the Catholic tradition, the notion of sex for union as well as procreation is a teaching only a few decades old.

In the yogic tradition, there is also the practice of restraint and self-control among married householders. However in the historically more recent Tantric tradition of yoga, sexual energy is anctioned as a way to experience Ultimate Reality or Divine Union.

Aparigraha

Finally, as we have seen, non-attachment (*aparigraha*) is related to the discipline of non-stealing. Implicit in this discipline is the notion of simplicity and freedom from greed. In our society, any attempt to combat an acquisitive nature is

indeed, countercultural. We are constantly bombarded with advertising that urges us to buy this or that product. Indeed, it tells us that we cannot possibly live without the item being sold. Our senses are bombarded, with advertising on TV, on the internet, in magazines and billboards. It has been often quoted that the average person is bombarded with hundreds, if not thousands of ads on a daily basis. To maintain a sense of non-attachment in the midst of all of this requires a heroic undertaking. We are always looking for the next best thing—we upgrade our cars, our computers, and our houses—and are never really satiated in our quest.

The mystics of both traditions have committed themselves to lives of non-attachment. Far from embracing lives of deprivation, the extant literature reveals the rich experiences and the inherent freedom that comes from non-attachment.

THE NIYAMAS

While the *yamas*, govern our conduct, behavior, and relationship towards others, the *niyamas*, govern our own personal conduct—or how we relate to ourselves.

The five niyamas guide one's attitude towards personal conduct. They are:

*saucha—the art of purity that leaves
one’s mind unfettered by prejudicial
thoughts and one’s body...clean
santosha—the art of contentment
under all circumstances
tapas—the art of spiritual fervor
swadhyaya—the art of self-discovery
Ishwara pranidhana—the art of
acknowledging the divinity within
(O’Brien, 31-32)*

Saucha

Purity, (*saucha*) according to Feuerstein, literally means “to shine brightly,” and its practice is essential for the yoga practitioner. Purity refers not only to how we take care of our bodies—and the implied requirement for cleanliness—but it also acknowledges the need for purification of a more spiritual dimension. The body can be purified in its physical and more subtle realms, through the practice of *kriya* techniques, some of them which are quite esoteric. The use of a *neti pot* for the purpose of facilitating nasal irrigation, contributes to keeping the sinuses clean and healthy. This is a practice that has become more main-stream and is even recommended by some clinicians today to relieve the symptoms of congestion and infection.

Other *kriya* or purification techniques, like the custom of swallowing a piece of cloth to remove the mucus along the digestive tract is certainly less appealing to Westerners, though it is an ancient yogic practice.

In the yogic tradition, one cannot achieve union with Ultimate Reality if the body is not properly taken care of. The practitioner must not only routinely clean the body externally, but also purge the internal body of toxic substances. This can be done in many ways, such as engaging in the regular practice of *asanas*, *pranayama*, and the other eight limbs of yoga—in order to transmute and transform the body.

The yogic practitioner will customarily make dietary changes after practicing for some time. Some of these changes occur quite unexpectedly, as the yoga practice purifies the body physically and spiritually. One may find that certain cravings fall away, or that the body seems to require certain foods. Practitioners may feel called to embrace periodic fasting as well. This not only detoxifies the body, but can lead to a greater sense of calm and wellness too.

In the Christian mystical tradition there are countless examples of saints and mystics engaging in practices to purify themselves and to attain union with the Divine. Even today, members of religious orders and monastic traditions embrace austerity by engaging in regular fasting or abstaining from meat.

Purity ultimately improves the quality of one's present life—possibly contributing to a longer lifespan and improved health. It has been noted that cultures or peoples who consume less, often live longer and more productive lives.

Santosha

Contentment (*santosha*) is related to many of the disciplines previously considered. Its practice frees one from greed, anger, frustration, and negative emotions in general, leading to a more tranquil state of mind.

To experience contentment enables one to experience satisfaction. It frees one from non-attachment, and is to be highly valued. Its cultivation is not easy, but its fruits are worthy of pursuit.

Tapas

Austerity (*tapas*) literally can set one on fire. This practice enables one to purify from within, and Feuerstein recommends attending retreats to stoke the inner fire. Ultimately, the cultivation of austerity contributes to health.

A yoga practice of *asanas* can be undertaken to increase *tapas*. There are times when a more vigorous practice is indicated.

Svadhya

Engaging in study (*svadhya*) on a regular basis is important in the yogic tradition. When a practitioner engages in study, it correspondingly leads to an increase in knowledge. This in turn, leads to greater

self-understanding on the part of the practitioner. There are many layers involved in the acquisition of information and knowledge. These can be adequately examined by the patient and dedicated practitioner, willing to put in the time to savor the fruits of study.

Unfortunately, study as a discipline, has not been adequately emphasized in some branches of Christianity, even though there are countless numbers of scholars, writers, mystics, and theologians, who have made the study of the scriptures, history, and their tradition their life's work. Instead, assent to a body of truths or doctrine, or the memorization of bible passages coupled with a literal interpretation of the scriptures has been given preference in Christian Sunday schools. The application of critical thinking has taken a backseat to rote learning. This is changing though, and in some circles, lay Christians are breaking out of this mold and pursuing study in areas of interest.

Ishvara Pranidhana

Devotion to the Lord (*Ishvara Pranidhana*) is a central practice in both the yogic and Christian traditions, and in many ways, all of the previous practices prepares the practitioner and the Christian for this experience. For the Christian, all devotion is meant to lead to a personal experience or relationship with Jesus as Lord and Savior and as the Son of God. For the yoga practitioner, this discipline leads to the realization of Ultimate Reality as one's true nature.

As one reviews the *yamas and niyamas*, one cannot ignore the similarities to teachings that have been part of a Christian's upbringing. Both traditions are solidly grounded in a way of living that is authentic and ethical. This is one area where both traditions have much in common, and it helps facilitate dialogue between the two. The moral disciplines and ethical practices enhances the spirituality of both traditions, and it also makes the world a much better place as well.

PRAYER

Prayer is a key component of any spiritual life. Prayer has been widely written about as a subject. For example, **Centering Prayer**, a form of prayer popularized by Trappists monks, has very ancient root—going back to the Desert Fathers and the Byzantine theologians and mystics of the early Christian centuries who sought to pray unceasingly. **The Jesus Prayer**, on which centering prayer is modeled, is a very simple and ancient prayer:

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me a sinner.”

This prayer evolved from the exhortation in 1 Thessalonians 5: 17-18: "*Be happy at all times, pray constantly.*"

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The words meditation and contemplation are often used interchangeably in the Christian tradition, but they really refer to two different kinds of prayer:

Meditation—or "*tuning into God*"—can involve reflection, use of the imagination, and the senses. Anthony de Mello, an Indian Jesuit and a wonderful retreat master, adapted meditation techniques from the Eastern Christian and oriental traditions and made them very accessible in his book: **Sadhana: A Way to God**.

Contemplation—on the other hand, is "*simply sitting in God's presence*"—enjoying God's presence—and simply being. The noted Trappist monk, Basil Pennington, explains that in contemplation:

*We go beyond thought and image,
beyond senses and the rational mind,
to that center of our being where
God is working a wonderful work.*

Many of us may not feel totally comfortable with this definition or notion of prayer. Thomas Green, a Jesuit retreat master and author, uses the image of one being "*clay in the potter's hand*." In contemplative prayer, we become the clay in the hands of God, to be fashioned by God. As one's prayer life matures, one become more and more aware of being clay in the hands of the potter. Prayer becomes less and less what we do—and more and more what God does in us. Green, beautifully describes prayer as "*the art of learning to waste time gracefully*."

O'Brien observes that monks dating back to the third century were already using the **Jesus Prayer** formula in conjunction with their breath. Writings of mystics contain instruction on breathing techniques, which practitioners of yoga would recognize as *pranayama* techniques.

The repetition of a prayer such as the **Jesus Prayer**, calls to mind the sacred *mantras* of the yoga tradition.

The inherent power of the sacred sound, however, is not released in mechanical way merely by its repetition. Preparation of the student, proper intonation of the sound, and the guidance of a qualified spiritual master make the practice effective. (53)

It was believed by Christian monks that prayers such as the **Jesus Prayer** purified the heart. In yoga we see that the heart center is often stimulated increasing “*the aspirant's ability to love.*” (54) Ultimately the goal for both yoga and the Christian tradition is self-transformation and union with the divine.

Mantra Yoga

The repetition of *mantras*, or prayers, are often counted on the *japa* beads used by Hindus or

practitioners of yoga— or on the Rosary beads used by Roman Catholics. Muslims and Buddhists also count their prayers on similar rings or strands of beads. Catholics of a certain age and generation are more familiar with the constant repetitions of “*Hail Marys*” and “*Our Fathers*” commonly recited with a Rosary.

There are many *mantras* that are chanted in yoga. Yoga practitioners in several schools of yoga are already familiar with them. “AUM,” or “OM,” as it is more commonly written, is perhaps the best known *mantra*—and represents the sound of creation or universal consciousness. The mantra is actually a seed mantra, comprised of three vowels, merging into one sound.

One is reminded that the **Gospel of John** begins with the verse: “*In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God, and the Word was God,*” — clearly demonstrating that the act of creation itself began with sound.

In his book, **Healing Mantras: Using Sound Affirmations for Personal Power, Creativity, and Healing**, Thomas Ashley-Farrand, explains that the word *mantra*, is a Sanskrit word with many shades of meaning. One definition is: “*divine speech.*” (8)

In spiritual and religious traditions all over the world, spiritual states are equated with light. A common spiritual objective is “enlightenment...” For centuries, artists from diverse traditions have

made use of light in depicting great spiritual teachers. A clear indication of spiritual power, light surrounds the priests of the Ark of the Covenant and creates...the halos of Christ, [the saints] and the Buddha. In the first few verses of Genesis we read: 'And God said, Let there be light, and there was light.' Yet if we imagine that light is the highest expression of spiritual power, we are mistaken. The spirit is created and animated not by light, but by sound.

Looking more closely at Genesis we see, 'God said...' The light of divine creation was initiated by sound. The speech of God, according to Genesis, was the source of the spiritual light to which we all aspire...[Likewise, in the Gospel of John], the beginning was not light; rather, it was sound in the form of divine speech...The primary mechanism of creation is sound...

..In the wisdom of the ancient East, we find the same teaching. The whole universe comes about when God decides to manifest reality through the power of divine speech. In some Eastern texts, this power is referred to as Saraswati—the Word.

Sir John Woodroffe's The Garland of Letters includes a translation of a

scripture called the **Sata Patha Brahmana**, written many thousands of years ago. Volume 6 of that scripture opens in this way:

In the beginning was God with power through speech. God said, 'May I be many...may I be propagated.' And by his will expressed through subtle speech, he united himself with that speck and became pregnant. Prajapathi and Saraswati were then created. And Prajapathi is called the progenitor of all beings. (3-4)

In another creation narrative that Thomas Ashley-Farrand makes reference to, we find these words:

*First God as being...
From Being comes Mind...
From Mind comes Desire...
From Desire comes Will...
From Will comes the Word...
From the Word comes everything else... (5)*

More recent texts and teachers echo this ancient idea. Mystic Sufi master Hazrat Inayat Khan has written:

Divine sound is the cause of all manifestation. The knower of the

*mystery of sound knows the mystery
of the whole universe. (5)*

In India, and in the yogic tradition, *mantras* and music in general have always played a special role and have been deemed as a way to engage and experience the Divine:

Ravi Shankar, the contemporary master of the classical music of India, refers to the sound of God's power as Nada Brahma, the divine sound that reverberates through the universe and the 'subtle human body' we all carry with us. Shankar states, 'Our tradition teaches us that sound is God. Music is a spiritual discipline that raises one's inner being to divine peacefulness and bliss. We are taught to work toward a fundamental goal of the knowledge of the unchanging and eternal essence of the universe. Our music reveals the essence of the universe it reflects. Through music we can reach God.'(7)

Many of us who are less versed in astronomy and physics are not aware of the fact that sound exists in the universe:

The edge of the galaxy becomes a noisy hissing cacophony of sound produced by quick shifts in

molecular and atomic energy levels...The giant planet Jupiter produces its own peculiar noise; huge rapid sighs like the intense roaring of a distant surge, triggered by Jovian electricity from storms of such intensity as to be worthy of the god whose name the planet bears. The sun makes noises too, hisses and crackling in quietude and roars of alarming intensity when it spews out giant portions of matter into space. (7)

[Even] in the vastness of space that composes what we call matter, [there are indications of sound...] The power of sound, the power of music, the power of vowels, and the power of speech are the great creative forces of the universe: as custodians of these, human being possess tremendous spiritual power. For centuries, mystical scriptures and teachers of the East have taught mantra as a means for harnessing this power. (8)

Ashley-Farrand very much believes in the power of mantras.

Mantras can help you deal with the material concerns and necessities of life. All of us want or need

*something, or wish to make changes
in our lives... (10)*

Ashley-Farrand documents the usage of *mantras* to make improvements in a number of areas in his life. For example, he attributes his ability to find jobs at various times, by chanting a powerful *mantra*, dedicated to the Lord *Ganesh*, who is the remover of all obstacles. In order to effect the necessary changes, one must repeat the mantra often for a period of forty days:

OM GUM GANAPATAYEI NAMAHA

*Om and salutations to the remover of obstacles for
which Gum is the seed. (15)*

While Christians have always believed in the power of prayer, and Catholics in particular in the repetition of prescribed prayers in the Rosary and Novenas, many do not realize that prayer has been scientifically studied. Larry Dossey, MD, notes this in his books, **Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine**, and, **Be Careful What You Pray For...You Just Might Get It**.

Both of these book document many fascinating experiences and experiments seeking to illustrate the power of prayer. Dossey was also one of the editors of **Alternative Therapies**, a journal that documents many continuing experiments in the world of complementary medicine. One experiment

in particular, demonstrated how bacteria being “*prayed*” over either multiplied or decreased in numbers depending on the intention of those praying.

Dossey believes it is one’s intention that gives prayer its efficacy. Furthermore, a significant characteristic of prayer and intention is that it is *non-local*—basically transcending the space—time continuum. You can send your prayers and/or thoughts to anyone anywhere and literally touch them and affect them. You can even intend for your prayers to take effect at a particular time and place because of non-locality. Practitioners of healing therapies such as **Reiki** and **Reconnective Healing™** already know this, because they routinely engage in sending clients and loved ones distance healing.

ASCETICISM

Ascetical practices have been institutionalized in both Christianity and yoga. An *ascetic* is one who practices rigid self-denial. In the Christian tradition, the flight to the desert by men and women seeking to flee the corruption of the Roman Empire began in the third and fourth centuries. In the fourth century and beyond, those who sought the desert were in essence seeking a new form of martyrdom once literal martyrdom was no longer a viable option to attain instant salvation.

With the **Edict of Milan**, issued in 313 AD, by the emperor Constantine, Christians were no longer persecuted. Christianity became an officially sanctioned religion within the Roman Empire. When Christians were still being executed by the state, martyrdom was valued as a way of attaining immediate salvation. Once that was no longer an option—Christians fled to the desert instead—hoping to die to themselves spiritually, by denying themselves even the most basic of material comforts. They sought instead, a spiritual martyrdom.

The first of these desert mystics were known as *anchorites*—individuals who devoted themselves to asceticism and spiritual discipline. They lived without any creature comforts and very little to eat as well. Over time, these *anchorites* came to live together in communities—thus becoming the first *cenobites*. They lived together, sharing meals and work and worship. The first to organize these desert dwellers was a man by the name of Pachomius, who wrote the first rule for people living in community. By the sixth century in Western Christianity, St. Benedict wrote the first comprehensive rule for monastic communities. All later monastic communities based their rule on Benedict's—to one extent or another.

In the yogic tradition there are *sadhus*, who are in essence, *anchorites*. In this tradition there are four stages a person normally goes through in life. In the first two stages, one is first a student and then a householder. In the third stage, after one's family obligations have been met, one is free to become a hermit or forest-dweller. In the fourth stage one can

become—a *sannyasin*—a wandering monk free of all earthly concerns. These last two stages overlap. *Sannyasis* are the equivalent of solitary monks—or *anchorites*.

During the time that the **Upanishads** were written, about 500 BCE, small groups of disciples lived with a teacher in *ashrams*, monastic communities, and eventually established larger communities. These communities later influenced the establishment and development of monasticism in Buddhism.

In Hinduism there are a number of religious orders that require the taking of specific vows, most notably celibacy. The members of these orders, like their Christian counterparts, wear distinctive religious garb and live a life that is primarily dedicated prayer and meditation.

In many yogic paths and in Hinduism there are *ashrams*, which are the counter-part to Christian monasteries, abbeys, or hermitages. If you compare their schedules, you find they are very similar. In both settings, monks arise early to pray and meditate. There are several times that are designated for prayer during the course of the day. There is also time set aside for work or *seva*, as well as designated times for sleeping, study, and personal practice.

The reality of individuals living as solitaries—or *anchorites*—or renunciates—has been part of Hindu society since the later Vedic period. This period is a long one—spanning from about 1500 BCE, when the **Rig Veda** was codified—to about 1000 BCE.

This is a much older tradition of ascetics than that within Christianity.

Yogic literature is full of mystical figures, many of them cave dwellers at the foot of the Himalayas, living very ascetical lives. Parahansa Yogananda wrote of many of these mystical figures in his famous book, **Autobiography of a Yogi**. These ascetic teachers are endowed with mystical powers, not unlike those attributed to Christian saints and mystics. In yoga, these powers or abilities are called *siddhis*. In the Christian tradition such powers or “*gifts of the Spirit*” are bestowed upon a selected few. Let us just briefly mention some of these powers that appear in both traditions (In his book, Yogananda has a story to illustrate each one of these abilities or *siddhis*):

1. **Incorruptibility**—This term is used in reference to bodies that do not physically decay. There are many documented cases recorded in Christian literature of saints or mystics whose bodies are unexplainably preserved. The book, **The Incorruptibles**, by Joan Cruz, presents a history of incorruptible saints, from the second century to the present...St. John of the Cross, is just one of the many examples listed, and St. Bernadette of Lourdes, who lived in the 1800’s, is one of the most recent examples. Her body is on display in a Church in France. Yogananda, himself, displayed the

state of incorruptibility, for at least for a month after he died, and this was confirmed by the funeral directors who attended to his body.

2. **Levitation**—This refers to the ability to lift up from the ground and remain in suspended animation. There are ample stories of this in both Christian and yogic literature. St. Joseph Cupertino, St. Teresa of Avila, have both been documented as having had this kind of experience.
3. **Bilocation**—This is understood as the ability to physically be in two places, or to appear in more than one body. This ability has been ascribed to many Christian mystics. Yogananda recounts stories of Hindu saints who were also capable of performing this feat, including his own *guru* and teacher.
4. **Not needing food or sleep**—Theresa Neumann, and Padre Pio, in the early to mid-twentieth century, were known to have subsisted on little or no nourishment. Theresa Neumann in particular, was reported to have received communion as the only source of her nourishment for years. Many Hindu Saints have also been able to live with little or no food or water.

5. **Telepathy**—This refers to the ability to communicate with others through thoughts and is another one of the *siddhis* commonly described as being experienced by yogic mystics. Christian mystics too, have been reported as exhibiting this ability.
6. **The ability to transfer a disease from a sick person to a mystic**—From a Hindu perspective, this may be undertaken as a way of balancing out *karma*. From the Christian perspective this may be done out of compassion for the sick person, as a form of personal sacrifice, as a way of experiencing solidarity with the passion of Christ—or as a direct offering to Christ.
7. **Miracles**—Miracles include acts that can range from the healing of the sick, to the more dramatic raising of the dead; both Hindu and Christian literature abound with such stories.
8. **The appearance or manifestation of articles out of thin air**—The ability to manifest material things seemingly out of nowhere, is characteristic of both traditions, but is more common in yogic literature. In the Gospels, Jesus turns water into wine. Today, *Sai Baba*, a Hindu *avatar* and yogic master, often

manifests articles or sacred ash which he gives to his followers as gifts.

Throughout the centuries, monasteries in both traditions have maintained their own religious sites dedicated to fomenting religious scholarship—this has been accomplished through the preservation of texts and teachings. In the Middle Ages, monks, painstakingly copied manuscripts and much of our knowledge of philosophy, literature, and the sciences, has been made available to us because of their work. Ashrams have similarly preserved ancient manuscripts and teachings for even longer generations.

Monastic communities in both traditions have routinely provided guest facilities for pilgrims, in addition to social services. Ashrams have been established for the preservation and teaching of Sanskrit—the language of the scriptures. It is thus evident, that monasteries and ashrams have served very similar purposes throughout the histories of the two traditions...

PILGRIMAGE

Both the Christian and the yogic traditions have a long history of promoting the practice of pilgrimage. In India, there are a number of holy cities that are visited regularly by pilgrims. There is, for example, the holy city of Varanasi, (Benares) on the holy Ganges River, which is home to about fifteen thousand temples.

There is also the practice of attending a sacred gathering—a religious festival called the **Kumbha Mela**, that takes place every twelve years in India, and draws incredible numbers of people from all over the country, and the rest of the world as well. (Recently India celebrated the **Maha Kumbha Mela**—that occurs once every 144 yrs—in other words, every twelve times twelve years).

In the Christian tradition, believers have primarily been drawn to the Holy Land. This devotion to the Holy Land inevitably fueled the ill-fated Crusades, in which Western Christians attempted to wrestle the land where Jesus Christ lived and died, from the control of Muslims.

Catholics have traveled to Rome throughout the centuries, particularly during Holy Years, normally occurring every twenty-five years. Holy Years are decreed by Popes, and are times of special graces and indulgences. Catholics also travel to visit the graves and shrines of saints. Here in the Washington D.C. area where I live, the closest shrine to a Catholic saint is in Emmitsburg, Maryland, where St. Elizabeth Ann Seton is buried. She is the first native-born American saint to be canonized.

In the yogic tradition, the major reason for undertaking a pilgrimage is that it is simply an act of devotion. The pilgrim will go to a site for the purpose of performing rituals there—often times bathing in sacred water—or sometimes making a journey to a sacred site by walking on their knees.

This practice of ambulating along a path on ones knees was common among Catholics in the past, and is occasionally done and seen today.

Perhaps one of the most interesting pilgrimages undertaken today by Christians, is known as **St. Jame's Way**—or *el camino*, where the pilgrim travels to **Santiago de Compostela**, in northern Spain, to visit the Cathedral of St. James. This journey can take weeks or months, depending on the route one takes, or the time of year when the pilgrimage is undertaken. It is believed that James the Apostle brought the Christian faith to Spain. The paths leading to St. James are clearly marked and towns along the way customarily provide water and housing to the pilgrims. This is an arduous undertaking, and not for the faint-hearted. Recently, Shirley Maclaine, wrote about her experiences while doing this pilgrimage, in her book, **The Camino**.

Perhaps the most famous accounting of a pilgrimage is the bawdy story recounted in the **Cantebury Tales**, which tells the story of pilgrims *en route* to visit the shrine of Thomas a Becket in Cantebury, England.

One of the earliest accounts of a pilgrimage in the Christian tradition occurs in the writings of Aegeria, a fourth century nun who undertook a dangerous journey to the Holy Land. Her writings are particularly notable because they present a very detailed rendition of Christian liturgical practices in that period.

THE MASTER-DISCIPLE (GURU) TRADITION

Justin O'Brien reminds us that the Christian tradition is over two thousand years old. Some Christians may not fully realize that Jesus developed a very strong relationship with his disciples. This close relationship that Jesus established with his followers is indeed an example of "*the Eastern relationship of master and disciple.*" (115)

It is important to note that all Christian denominations actively engage in the communication of religious content to their followers as well as their converts. This is accomplished primarily through the work of teachers.

In the New Testament, there are many obvious examples in which Jesus exercises his role as a teacher in relation to his disciples and his followers. One very clear example that comes to mind, involves the story of the **Sermon on the Mount**. In the related passages, Jesus engages his very large audience, and offers them one of his finest teachings. In the scriptures, we also come across many references to Jesus as Master, or Rabbi. Later on in the scriptures, particularly in the **Book of Acts**, and in the Pauline Letters, there are references to the disciples themselves as having their own apprentices.

[The master]...gathered a select group. His instructions were not so much in delivering a timely message as in instilling ways for his trainees to alter their perspective of reality and from this knowledge pursue their life work. The prophet's concern for his audience is to arouse them, to take the message to heart. In shaking people up, the prophet was not always appreciated. He is not interested in acquiring disciples. The master concerns himself with the state of mind and lifestyle of his disciples, but with an intensity and intimacy that is reserved exclusively for them. Jesus enacted both roles, speaking often to the public as a prophet, and to his disciples as a master. (O'Brien, 119)

There are specific references in the Gospel to Jesus sitting down as he gave his instructions. (Matthew 5:1-2, and Matthew 26:55) The word apprentice, in relation to a teacher appears ninety-seven times in the New Testament. (118)

The posture of sitting is a traditional one found in the East; one could officiate at a synagogue or lecture to crowds from a standing position. Sitting, however, was a sign of a special activity. To sit meant that the master was ready to apprentice his students. Yogis trained in the

traditional master-disciple association soon discover that a genuine teacher should be able to sit quietly for a very long time. Moreover, a teacher will not teach someone who fidgets and constantly alters his or her posture. The quieting of the body means that there is an internal calmness of mind disposed now to listen and absorb the teachings.

*In the most ancient spiritual tradition of the Himalayas, sitting near a master in this manner is called, in Sanskrit, **Upanishad**. The recorded oral transmission, **smṛti**, of the ancient sittings were collected under the title **Upanishads**. These writings were the **Vedānta**, the cream of the **Vedas**. They summarized the realized wisdom of the **Vedic** seers. The masters would initiate their chosen students or **chelas** into the ways in which the trainee would personally arrive at the same universal insight. Teaching the **Upanishad** meant an apprenticeship for the disciple who embarked upon a strict training program that involved body, mind, and spirit. The goal of this master-disciple apprenticeship was to bring the chela's level of consciousness to the self-same awareness that pervaded the **Upanishadic** master.*

(119-120) Thus the student strove to emulate and become more like his guru.

While the actual practices by which initiates or apprentices obtain these higher levels of consciousness are not directly listed or explained in the **Upanishads**, the reference to spiritual practice—or *sadhana* is implicit in the texts. The master assesses the progress of his student and determines when he has mastered a particular technique. “The **Upanishadic** experience of sitting near the seer has been the model of the yoga master throughout the centuries.” (121)

In both, the Christian and yogic context, the disciple or student must engage in a particular practice or discipline if spiritual advancement is to be attained. The Gospel notes that: “*Many are called, but few are chosen,*” (Matthew 22:14), implying that the practice is arduous and demands strong commitment on the part of the disciple. (121)

While in the yogic tradition, the relationship between teacher and student—or teacher and follower—is a common one, modern Christians do not see themselves primarily as followers of Jesus, but as believers in Jesus and the Gospel message.

The disciples of Jesus, on the other hand, were not only followers and believers in Jesus, but were also a group held to a much higher standard because they had the opportunity to apprentice with Jesus.

They are not followers of Jesus like the crowds mentioned in the

scriptures. Jesus spoke to these people but did not consider them his disciples. The crowds may have believed and hoped in the words of Jesus but they could not realize the achievement of the disciples without the necessary apprenticeship. (122)

Unfortunately, this tradition of apprenticeship has not been continued, and it is largely absent in Christian practices today, except in Orthodox monasteries, such as the monastery of Mount Athos, which preserve the traditions of the desert fathers. (129) There are no viable examples of a Christian master or teacher, undertaking an apprentice under his/her wing, in most of our denominations today. There is certainly nothing comparable to passing on the teachings of a lineage from master to disciple, as is seen in various schools, styles, or traditions of yoga.

In the West, relatively contemporary monastic writers such as Thomas Merton, Bede Griffiths, and William Johnston, have acquainted Christians with the mystical, spiritual, and meditative traditions of the East. Those Christians who have embraced Eastern practices have often directly experienced being placed in the care of a capable master or teacher.

Nuns and ministers have joined the laity in entering into Eastern monasteries as disciples to learn yoga and zazen [Buddhist sitting] techniques of meditation from acknowledged masters. Some newer

monastic foundations are deliberately structuring their mode of spiritual living along the lines of Eastern monasteries, ashrams, and zendos [Zen Buddhist monasteries]. These voluntary experiments in self-knowledge are answering an increasing desire in Christians to broaden their personal responsibility for their spiritual quest. (129)

One final, perhaps more distinct way in which the teacher-disciple relationship endures in contemporary Christianity is in the practice of *spiritual direction*. In the last couple of decades, many lay persons in the Episcopal and Catholic traditions have flocked to a religious or lay person skilled and trained in the art of spiritual direction. This can also be referred to as spiritual mentoring or spiritual kinship. Here in the Washington D.C., metropolitan area, we have the **Shalem Institute**, run by the Episcopal Church. This institute is dedicated to the training of qualified individuals in the skills and the art of spiritual direction.

MIRACLES AND SIDDHIS

Every Christian has grown up knowing the miracle stories of the Gospels. Catholics and the Orthodox are also familiar with miracles stories associated with their recognized saints.

The Christian tradition of the miraculous traces its origin to the

miracles of Jesus and his disciples in the New Testament. Throughout the development of Christianity, however, various religious leaders have interpreted the tradition differently. Let us for instance, reach back into the stirrings of Protestant Christianity for its explanation of miracles.

*In his **Sermons on St. John**, Martin Luther mentions that:
Apostles have preached the word and have given their writings, and nothing more than what they have written remains to be revealed, no new and special revelation or miracle is necessary.*

*Luther's reading of scripture led him to conclude that the days of the Christian miracle-working ceased with the death of the apostles.
(O'Brien, 131-132)*

The writings of John Calvin are a testament to the belief that the days of miracles were long over. This belief was also affirmed by the modern Protestant theologians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as Tillich, Barth, and Bultmann, and Bonhoeffer. Many of these believed that God would not interfere with—or suspend the laws of the universe.

There are three basic theories or ways of interpreting the role of miracles in Western Christianity:

1. **Apostolic Dispensation.** *In this theory God is allowed miracles in order to establish the credibility of the Christian church during the apostolic period. Thus miracles reinforced Jesus' message. Once the church was secure in the Mediterranean area, God withdrew his dispensation.*
2. **Mythological.** *In this theory the miracles did not happen in a concrete, literal manner. The miracle passages of the Bible are not factual accounts but symbolic descriptions...*
3. **Divine Intervention.** *In this theory the biblical passages are accurate accounts. Yet throughout history as witnessed by saintly people and special places (Lourdes, Fatima, other shrines, holy articles and relics of saints), God has intervened and permitted a dispensation of his power beyond the apostolic period for special people and occasions. This view is generally held by Roman Catholics." (135)*

Other Christian denominations, such as the Pentecostals, Fundamentalist, and Christian Science

churches, have always accepted miracles as being real and possible, especially those concerning the physical healing of individuals. One must also acknowledge the Charismatic movement, popularized during the 1970's, which espoused belief in physical healing through Divine intervention in the form of prayer. (136) This movement began in Protestant churches, and took root in a segment of the Catholic Church as well.

In the yogic tradition, miracles would be known or defined as *siddhis*:

*The **Sutras** describe in chapter three many of the various feats that Christian theologians would classify as miraculous. The **Sutra** texts include methods for achieving clairvoyance, healing power, invisibility, reading minds, bi-location, multiplying food, levitation, and other phenomena that exactly parallels the wonders of the New Testament. These abilities emerge as part of the natural development of spirituality. (140)*

These abilities emerge in the *yogi* as he/she progresses on the spiritual path, and these feats are not displayed needlessly by the practitioner. The tradition of miracles in the yogic tradition spans many centuries before the birth of Christ. In this century alone, the lives of *Rama Tirtha*, *Aurobindo*, *Anandamayi Ma*, *Ramana Maharishi* and others

demonstrate the same miraculous performances as narrated in the New Testament. (141-142)

Aanadamayi Ma, who died in 1982, was reportedly seen bathed in a blinding light that caused one man to lose consciousness, very reminiscent of the Transfiguration of Jesus. *Swami Rama* of the Himalayas told a story where he and his master were almost overcome by an avalanche. His master merely lifted his hand to stop the avalanche in mid air. (142)

There are countless other stories about yogis and saints that exactly resemble the episodes in the gospels. The yogi views the miracle or siddhi as the natural outcome of spiritual development. In fact, many of these siddhis come early in the path of spirituality before the aspirant has refined himself into a saint. The miraculous is not a power bestowed upon someone by an external agent—God or otherwise—but a natural unfolding of latent abilities with human consciousness. These inherent powers are therefore not properly understood by evaluating them as performances of a divine agent intervening with natural laws.
(142)

Accounts of miracles are found everywhere in Christianity, in the yogic tradition, in Buddhism, and just about every religious tradition one can identify.

A brief survey of religions and non-Christian spiritualities easily supports the identical array of miracles or siddhis that only prejudice would attribute to one version of religion. (145)

IMAGES OF GOD

In the Hindu Scriptures there are *a thousand names for God*—each one implying a different shade or philosophical meaning. Yoga practitioners will often chant ancient *mantras* expressing devotion to one of the many countless manifestations and incarnations of God.

In the Old Testament, though God is primarily known as Yahweh—“*I Am Who Am*”, there are many other titles that are also ascribed to God—such as the “*Master of the Universe*” used frequently by Hassidic Jews.

In the New Testament, Jesus who is recognized as the Incarnation of God, is known as *Lord, Messiah, the Vine Dresser, and the Good Shepherd*. Mostly the scriptures employ a variety of symbols to describe God. Note the following:

I am that I am (Exodus 3:14)

Fair (Psalm 27:4)

God of gods and Lord of lords (Psalm 136: 2,3)

Eternal (Deuteronomy 33:27)

Giver of life (Genesis 1:20)
Holy of holies (Isaiah 6:3)
Wisdom (Proverbs 8)
Wrathful (Psalms 88:16)
Surpassing all things in greatness (Isaiah 40:1)

The scriptures also describe God in poetic terms, as well as in anthropomorphic and nature terms:

A star (Revelations 22:16)
Fire (Deuteronomy 4:24)
Sun (Psalm 84:11)
Water (Psalm 84:6)
Wind (John 4:24)
Cloud (Exodus 13:21)
Dew (Hosea 14:5)
A still breeze (1King 19:12)
A stone (Psalm 118:22)
Father (John 20:17)
Mystery (Daniel 2ff)
A Lion (Hosea 11:10)
Mother (Isaiah 66:13)

All of these words, terms, and phrases, in and of themselves, cannot do justice to defining or giving God a name.

[And] yet no tradition within the Bible would claim that its presentation of God is utterly adequate. There seems to be no symbol in scriptures that adequately portrays the totality of God's meaning. God always remains the

mysterium tremendum, that is the “awesome mystery” that defies conceptualization. (O’Brien, 109)

Within the many Christian denominations there is not a universal understanding of who and what God is—let alone of a common way of addressing God. The experience and definition of God is as varied as there are denominations and individuals.

Western religions..have selectively interpreted the contents of the word God. The God of the Calvinists is not the God of Roman Catholics, nor is the God of the Lutherans the same as the God of Orthodox Jews.

When yoga texts refer to Ishwara, sometimes translated as God, this designation means something very different from the denominational concept of the Christian notion of God. What makes the difference in all these instances is not the name but the meaning of the name. (106)

The fact that there are over a thousand names for God in the yogic tradition implies that a yogic practitioner may have a richer understanding of God’s essence.

If one goes outside of the Christian scriptures and examines even older

scriptures, the same descriptions are found. In the Vedas, ten-thousand-year-old scriptures, one reads:

Exceedingly wise, exceedingly strong is the Designer.

*He is creation, disposer, epiphany supreme.
He is our Father who begot us, he is the Disposer
Who knows all situations, every creature.
(Rig Veda 10:82)*

*The Inspirer of all men advances, the Sun,
displaying his mighty shimmering banner.
(Rig Veda 7:63)*

*He who is called Divine Friend brings men together.
The Divine Friend supports both earth and heaven,
Watching over people, never closing an eye.
(Rig Veda 3:59:1)*

*Behold the marvelous mystery of God.
Near though he is, one cannot leave him.
Near though he is, one cannot see him.
He does not die, nor does he grow old.
(Atharva Veda 10:8/332)*

In the **Bhagavad Gita**, we read:

*I am the sacrifice and the offering,
the sacred gift and the sacred plant. I
am the holy words, the holy food, the
holy fire, and the offering that is*

made in the fire. (Bhagavad Gita 9:16)

Consider my sacred mystery: I am the source of all being. I support them all, but I rest not in them. Even as the mighty winds rest in the vastness of the ethereal space, all beings have their rest in me. Through my nature I bring forth all creation, and this rolls around in the circles of time, but I am not bound by this vast network of creation. I am and I watch the drama of works.” (Bhagavad Gita 9:5-9, O’Brien, 110)

The multitude of symbols found in the scriptures suggest the varied attempts of human endeavor to overcome the limitations of the mind in discovering and expressing the meaning of God. (112)

These many symbols can only help us get closer to the divine reality which is God and whose very definition eludes us. The scriptures can open for us a whole new realm of experience and understanding. The following passage is perhaps one many of us can relate to:

But there are some great souls who know me. Their refuge is my own divine nature. They love me with a oneness of love; they know that I am

*the source of all. (Bhagavad Gita
9:13; 113)*

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Bede Griffith writes in **Marriage of East and West: (16)**

[In Christianity] God is represented as the transcendent Lord of Creation, infinitely holy, that is separate from and above nature, and never to be confused with it. But in [Hinduism] God or the Absolute...is immanent in all creation. The world does not exist apart from God, but is in God...God dwells in the heart of every creature. (16)

While Bede Griffith states that the Christian tradition primarily sees God as *transcendent* and the yogic tradition sees God as *immanent*, it is important to note, that according to many scholars, there is a tradition in Christian spirituality supporting the notion and understanding of God as immanent in all things—this is particularly evident in the mystical literature of Francis of Assisi, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, and Hildegard of Bingen, to name a few. Bede Griffith felt that the belief that God is in everything could lead to *pantheism*...though the renegade theologian and proponent of Creation Spirituality, Matthew Fox, would more aptly describe it as *panentheism*, that is, that God is in all things and all things are in God.

He has made a review of mystical Christian literature throughout the ages to support this, citing the works of Eckhart, Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, and many others to support this observation.

A yogic practitioner would feel at home with the definition of *panentheism*, for certainly many a practitioner and scripture would support that God is in all things and all things are in God.

John Renard believes that in the yogic tradition:

*The closest one can come to describing what God is—is to describe what God is not—in yogic texts we hear the term neti, neti—God is not this, not this, not that. In the Christian spiritual tradition this is referred to as apophatic spirituality—sometimes referred to as negative spirituality—in other words, we know what God is through negation—by identifying what he is not. This is in direct contrast to cataphatic spirituality which believes that God can be experienced and known in creation, etc. The ancient text, **The Divine Names**, states what can be positively said about God. (Renard, **Hinduism**, 74)*

God in the yogic tradition—is *Brahman*—or the Ultimate Reality—this God can be envisioned with

or without designated qualities or characteristics. These qualities in images of God are portrayed extensively in language and art. There is however, an implied element of mystery in these portrayals—for truly God cannot be adequately portrayed or defined. Each person identifies or resonates with either one of these basic notions or conceptions of God—God as the undefined or unknowable, or transcendent God—or God as the one who is *eternally* present in all things.

The Book, **God: A Brief History**, by John Bowker, presents a comprehensive overview at how God is envisioned in the major religious traditions. The author acknowledges there are many strands that make up the Hindu or Indian understanding of God. It is worth noting that the word “*Hindu*” dates back to only the nineteenth century—this word directly relates to the Sanskrit word *sindhu* and the Persian word *hindu* meaning river—thus referring to the inhabitants of the Indus valley. Bowker notes that yoga—which as we have seen, comes from the word *yuj*—meaning to yoke or join—is a practice that exacts commitment on the part of the practitioner, along with acts of asceticism and concentration, in order for the practitioner to be able to leave the world and join oneself with God, or the object of devotion.

The perception and understanding of the essence of God, goes through many developmental stages in the yogic tradition. In the *Vedic* period, many Gods are recognized as existing. The *Vedic* religion emphasized rituals and sacrifices to bring the power of the Gods into the world. The **Upanishads** seek

the one universal reality that brings into being and sustains all that is, including each of the Gods. (84)

From one of the **Upanishads** there is this text (**Brihadaranyaka 3.9.1.9**):

*A renowned teacher was asked—
“How many gods are there. He
answered that there are 3,306 (the
number invoked in a hymn to all the
Gods). Yes—said his questioner. But
how many are there really? He
answered thirty-three. Yes—but how
many are there? Six. Yes—but how
many are there? Three. Yes—but
how many are there? One and a half.
Yes—but how many are there?
One... Which one is the One? The
breath. He is Brahman. They call
him that.”*

With the **Upanishads** the quest is no longer for power as it was during the **Vedic** period—but for the insight and knowledge that will set people free. This is evident in the following verse from the **Upanishads**:

*From the unreal, lead me to the real;
from darkness into light; from death
to immortality. (Brihadaranyaka
1.3.28)*

One can almost imagine that this verse was lifted from a New Testament text.

The **Upanishads** further illustrate how *Brahman* is in essence—*Sat-cit-ananda*—in other words, “*absolute being, pure consciousness, and bliss*”. Over time, many forms in which God becomes manifest came to be worshipped. Two major forms of God in the Hindu and yogic tradition, are *Shiva* and *Vishnu*.

Vishnu is understood as the sustainer of all things. He has the ability to come into the world as an *avatara*—an incarnation of the divine. The word *avatar* comes from a root word meaning “*descent*”. An *avatar* can take on any form of creation—becoming a river or tree, or even the time of the day—such as dawn or dusk. *Vishnu* came to be perceived as the great controller and sustainer of the universe. *Vishnu* can make himself manifest in the world as a matter of free choice. According to the **Bhagavad Gita**, the great text of the incarnate *Vishnu*, God says:

Whenever Dharma (ordered and orderly existence) breaks down, and Adharma (the opposite) flourishes, I create myself; I take on existence from age to age, for the rescue of the good and the destruction of the evil, in order to re-establish dharma. (4.8)

So an *avatar* incarnates as the free choice of God, for the protection of good and the destruction of evil.

Shiva, on the other hand, is often referred to as the destroyer. *Shiva*, in his form as *Nataraja*, that is, the Lord of the Dance, sustains and destroys the

universe. The drum *Shiva* holds in one hand in his manifestation as *Nataraja*, summons the universe into being; the flame in his other hand destroys it.

Despite the fact that Indian deities are unique entities, and perceived as separate and multiple by Westerners, Bowker reminds us that:

All the Gods and Goddesses are essentially one...

God is narayana—that is—beyond word and imagination...

Narayana can be equally said to be the more traditional Trinity of Vishnu, Shiva, and Brahma, who are the Lord's forms dispersed throughout the world. In India, this has become a way of understanding how the many Gods and Goddesses are related to the One that God must be—the absolute and unconditioned source of all things, the unproduced producer of all that is. What looks superficially like polytheism (the recognition of many God/Goddesses) is a way in which monotheism becomes practical and practiced in Indian life. This has not always been put into practice, and conflicts have occurred. Even so, it is this fundamental understanding of God that allows any particular form of God to attract to itself other forms of

God in a kind of coalescence of imagination. (104)

That is why, Bowker observes, that it is hard to write a brief history of any of the major Gods or Goddesses of the yogic tradition—because so much of the story has been absorbed into the major figure that the deities can't be easily disentangled from what was written, and what has come to be understood by the devotees of the deities. This is particularly notable with *Shiva*, who scarcely appears in the *Vedas*. Thus, there is very little written in the scriptures about *Shiva*—most of what is known about *Shiva* has been preserved and passed on orally for centuries.

Alain Danielou, who spent a lifetime studying Indian religious traditions, describes the relationship between the many and the one as understood by Indian and yogic devotees, in this way:

In the polytheistic religion of India, each individual worshipper has a chosen deity and does not usually worship other gods in the same way as his own. Yet he acknowledges other gods. The Hindu, whether he be a worshipper of the pervader (Vishnu), the destroyer (Shiva), energy (Shakti), or the sun (surya), is always ready to acknowledge the equivalence of these deities as the manifestations of distinct powers springing from an unknowable Immensity. He knows that ultimate Being or non-Being is ever beyond

his grasp, beyond existence, and in no way can be worshipped and prayed to. Since he realizes that other deities are but other aspects of the one he worships, he is basically tolerant and must be ready to accept every form of knowledge or belief as potentially valid. Persecution or proselytising of other religious groups, however strange their beliefs may seem to him, can never be a defensible attitude.

For a Westerner, and particularly for a Christian, this way of understanding God may seem foreign. A Westerner sees all of these deities as separate gods or entities. To the Indian devotee or yogic practitioner, they are all equal manifestations of an Ineffable Reality.

Hindus believe that God is a single being worshipped in multiple names and forms, in keeping with their view of the infinite as a diamond of innumerable sparkling facets with one facet appealing to an individual more forcefully than another. The fact that one Hindu may worship the God Vishnu, for example, does not negate the validity of other facets, such as Shiva, Durga, Ganesha, the prophet Muhammed, or even Christ. Multiplicity is as natural to Hindus as singularity is to monotheists.

(From the exhibit on Indian Bronze Statues at the Sackler Museum, Washington D.C., 2002-2003).

Each one of the major deities such as *Shiva* and *Vishnu*, have in turn, other manifestations, which may seem daunting to the Western or Christian mind. For example, *Shiva* can and does take many forms—as an *ascetic*, as a lover, as the all-powerful Lord, as the hunter, and as the world renouncer.

While these depictions of God might seem strange to a Christian, most Christians are unaware of the fact that their own tradition struggled with articulating the nature of God throughout its first few centuries.

*The early Christian understanding of God was formed under the pressure of two apparently contradictory truths. One side held to the obvious and absolute truth that God, to be God, had to be One. God must be the one source of all things. This view derived from Judaism and the fundamental truth of the **Shema**: “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, is One.” (105)*

There also prevailed the equally certain view that God was uniquely present in Christ, whose life on earth had been initiated and then sustained by the Holy Spirit. While many Christians believed that Jesus was literally the Son of God, others did not—believing instead that Jesus was an adopted Son of God—and thus the highest of human beings, but not of Divine origin or constitution.

The nature of God was established at the First Ecumenical Council of Nicea, in 325 A.D. The most famous article to emerge from this council is the *Nicene Creed*—summarizing the basic beliefs that Christians were to espouse.

As we have observed, many views on the nature of God and Christ prevailed until then. Some Christians believed that Jesus was God, some that he was adopted by God, and others, that he was an illusion. Some believed Jesus was only human—others that he was divine—and still others that he was neither. These were the various heresies that were gradually exterminated through sheer force and will and a succession of councils.

In trying to speak of God in Christ, and of God as Trinity—three persons in one God—Christians in the Eastern (Greek speaking) and Western (Latin speaking) parts of the Roman Empire fell into serious disputes. This is one of many issues, both theological and political which led to the eventual separation between Western Christianity and the Orthodox Church in the eleventh century.

Eastern Christians were always clear that the reality of the essence of God was totally beyond words and human understanding, thus defying human articulation. And yet Orthodox mystical literature is filled with works describing a hunger and longing for God and for the true sight of God. One medieval writer of the East, Gregory Palamas, spoke and wrote of the energies of God, which animate and permeate all things. This notion of describing the energies of God would be foreign to a Western

Christian. In the Eastern context, one can experience God in the following way—by emptying oneself of all else in order to find God within. Gregory advocated the constant repetition of the **Jesus Prayer**—which helps to create constant quiet concentration on God (*hesychia*), as a way to empty oneself. In this state of quiet concentration on God, a feeling of warmth is often elicited and experienced, leading to the contemplation of the light that is God.

In one of the most famous works of the Middle Ages, the anonymous mystical author of the **Cloud of Unknowing**, wrote the following about God:

God cannot be comprehended through the intellect by humans, or for that matter by angels, for both are created beings. But God is incomprehensible only to our intellect, never to our love.

While we may try to grasp the essence of God, in the final analysis, the essence of God cannot be known—something the ancient yogis were very much aware of. The way to God, as noted by the anonymous author of the **Cloud of Unknowing**, is not through the mind, but through the heart.

THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

I would like to briefly consider how some theological concepts and themes compare in the two traditions in question. Many concepts may be

similar in form—though scholars and theologians will tell you that they will differ in function. For example, let us consider the notion of God becoming human or incarnate—in addition to the idea of three deities in one, and the reality of Divine power being available to humanity. These may seem like they are similar in both the yogic and Christian traditions, but they really are not. One can draw some parallels between both, but one cannot say that what is understood one way in one tradition—is understood the same way in the other.

Revelation

O'Brien rightly observes that:

One speaks of the Bible or any scripture as revelation...These revealed truths...are meant to guide people in understanding the ultimate meaning of life. (96)

For a vast majority of Christians, the Bible is the word of God—whether that word is considered to be inspired or the literal word of God.

...As a written account of centuries of accumulated revelation, the Bible is more like a library in many volumes than a single work. As a compilation of legends, parables, aphorisms, songs, sagas, poetry, sermons, legislation, historical decrees, epics, liturgical rules, quotations, and myths, these writings

*offer a wide mixture of literary genre
to say the least. (96)*

Christians are almost evenly divided in how they interpret scripture or God's revelation. Many choose to interpret the texts literally. Since the nineteenth century, mainline Protestants—have resorted to biblical scholarship and textual criticism—taking in consideration the discoveries of archaeology, history, and ancient languages in order to interpret the scriptures in a contextual manner. Catholics followed this line of research and scholarship later in the twentieth century.

The yogic practitioner is not so much concerned with the interpretation of scripture, but rather with how the scriptures bring a greater sense of awareness, leading to inner transformation. Scripture is directly tied to yogic practice, and over time, through practice, one achieves a deeper understanding of the meaning of the scriptures, and of life. (101)

John Renard, a scholar of Eastern religious and philosophical traditions, offers this explanation of revelation, in his book, **101 Questions and Answers on Hinduism:**

Take the notion of revelation for example. Both traditions teach that truth becomes available to humanity as an eternal divine word. But there are major differences as to how human beings experience the word. Hindus hear and remember the eternal speech without historical

reference. Christians know the word primarily as embodied in Jesus and written in scripture, both concrete historical events. Hindu revelation does not break into the forward march of time as Christian revelation does. Hindu revelation is not supernatural as such, since human beings are essentially divine to begin with. Christian revelation in Christ is believed to elevate humanity. (110-111)

Renard helps to clarify the difference between the two traditions in regards to the concept of revelation. The fact that for the Christian—Jesus is the embodiment of revelation, does put things in a very different context. The scriptures are not merely the divine or inspired word of God—the Word is the Incarnate Jesus himself.

Salvation

Salvation is one of those theological concepts that seem to be uniquely Christian—so much rides on it. The very *raison d'être* for a Christian is to secure the salvation of his/her soul. A nuanced discussion on salvation is excerpted from Renard's book:

Is the Christian notion of salvation analogous to the Hindu idea of liberation (moksha)?

*Some would argue that salvation can be understood as a form of liberation—in Christianity, one is saved by Divine Redemption. In the yogic tradition one is saved from samsara—the endless cycle of birth and rebirth. But the way to achieve the cessation of the cycle of rebirth is by performing actions—without concern for their fruit—as Arjuna is told by Krishna in the **Bhagavad Gita**. But let us look at this more deeply.*

Both traditions appear to offer solutions to a central human dilemma, but since the two traditions define the dilemma in very different terms, the solution also plays very different roles. Both traditions do, however, have broadly similar ways of formulating the question as to the role of human effort in salvation—a variation on the theme of the classic “faiths and works” debate. Hinduism’s Way of Knowledge emphasizes the focused discipline needed to attain awareness of the unity of all things; since there is no other to intervene and save, grace is decidedly secondary. In the Way of Devotion (bhakti), the grace of a loving Deity is all-important, the various ritual activities fading into relative unimportance..A major difference in the means of salvation

between Hindu bhakti and Christianity is that whereas the Christ enters fully into the suffering human condition, Krishna (and other avatars as well) does not save by dying.

Hindu and Christians alike are heirs to great theistic traditions and thus have a great deal to share concerning their central beliefs. Hindu theology speaks of Brahma, Shiva, and Vishnu, as the trimurti, or triple form, but is that analogous to the Christian Trinity? The trimurti is a manifestation of a single deity in three forms, each omnipotent but associated with a characteristic work (creating, destroying, re-creating/sustaining). Sometimes the three are called Sat-Chit-Ananda [as we saw previously]. That is (being, awareness, and joy), thus suggesting something of the essential nature of the Godhead; but not in general the trimurti represents the divine in relationship to the universe. In Christian theology, the Trinity is as much about the very life of God (immanent trinity) as about God's external relations (economic trinity).

Finally, Christians readily see in the Hindu avatars a parallel to the doctrine of the Incarnation. On a relatively superficial level, both

concepts describe the descent of the divine nature into the world of humanity. Hindu and Christian theologians have debated many of the same general types of questions, such whether the humanity that the deity assumes is real or only apparent (docetism), but there are major differences. The various avatars of Vishnu occur for different reasons, mostly to prevent the dissolution of the cosmos. Two of the principal avatars, Rama and Krishna, are intended primarily to save humankind from immorality and to punish evildoers. But since humanity is already essentially divine, Rama and Krishna do not assume the human condition in order to divinize it, but to rescue it from the powers of evil. (110-111).

Creed

Let us briefly consider some remaining theological concepts, as we attempt to show the similarities and differences between both the Christian and yogic traditions:

Do the yogis have anything comparable to the Christian creed? We have considered the *yamas* and *niyamas*, and certainly found similarities between them and the *Ten Commandments*. For the yogic practitioner, there is no comparable doctrinal creed such as *The Apostle's Creed*, or the *Nicene Creed*.

For the yogi or Hindu—devotion to a chosen deity and the deity’s name—is the closest thing to a creed—in the sense that this belief and devotion to the deity provides the structure and internal consistency that creedal and doctrinal formulas provide in Christianity. Hindus and yogis grow up in a tradition that emphasizes a particular religious heritage and narrative around the particular deity of choice. However, this in no way denigrates the importance of other deities for them.

Sín

There is certainly no practicing Christian who has not grown up with the inculcated awareness of the reality and implications of sin and the knowledge of its consequences, and its effects on one’s life. In the yogic tradition sin is understood as the violation of the Divine order. In the **Bhagavad Gita**, sin is recognized as a failure of intention, where one acts out of selfish intention or ulterior motives. It seems to me, this is not a totally alien understanding or definition of sin for a Christian. Catholics are routinely taught that in order to sin seriously, they must consciously choose to reject God’s love and ways.

Certainly this definition has a lot of relevance in today’s world, especially as we contemplate a lot of the corporate and church scandals of the past year or so that were rooted in greed and selfish intent. Implied in all this, is one’s sense of responsibility to the community at large. One must choose to act in a way that reflects good intentions, for others, as well as oneself.

Reincarnation

Of all of the possible topics or theological concepts and discussions, the subject of reincarnation probably serves as the insurmountable divide between both the yogic and the Christian tradition. While reincarnation is alien and even offensive to many Christians, most do not realize that, reincarnation was an accepted notion in the Jewish world that Christianity inherited, and did exist in some form, during the earliest Christian centuries.

There are a number of biblical passages that can be cited, in addition to the writings of early Christians, such as Origen, that indicate that reincarnation was understood and accepted during those times and cultures. Of course, there are scholars who would both support and refute this. Some scholars believe that early versions of the Christian scriptures and texts were edited to delete references to reincarnation; others will argue that some of these passages still exist. It depends on who is doing the biblical exegesis and interpretation.

For an accessible treatment on this subject, I recommend the book, **Reincarnation for the Christian**, by Quincy Howe, Jr., a Harvard trained scholar. Howe's work is particularly useful in understanding not only the role reincarnation played in the early Church, but what place—if any—it could have in Christianity today.

Origen of Alexandria (185 AD) was one of the greatest systematic theologians of early Christianity. He helped to shape much of what eventually became Christian doctrine and belief. Origen

believed that personal salvation was obtained through Jesus Christ. But he also believed in reincarnation. In 553 AD, in the Second Council of Constantinople, Origen was anathematized and his views condemned. This Council was convened by the Emperor Justinian. The charges raised about reincarnation were the following:

1. *It seemed to minimize Christian salvation.*
2. *It is in conflict with the resurrection of the body.*
3. *It creates an unnatural separation between the body and the soul.*
4. *It is built on a much too speculative use of Christian scriptures.*
5. *There is no recollection of previous lives (Howe, 63-64).*

It is important to note that this Council was called by Emperor Justinian without the consent of the reigning Pope, Vigilius, and that it condemned Origen's theology three hundred years after the fact. There are a host of political reasons for why Justinian decided to call this Council and condemn Origen, not the least of which was to attain unity between Christian churches in the East and West, which disagreed on a number of philosophical and theological issues, threatening further divisions within the empire.

It is also important to realize, that Christian dogma developed over centuries. Many Christians simply misunderstand that basic doctrine took centuries to formulate, and was not done under the easiest of circumstances. Conflicts and acrimony often accompanied the final outcome. It wasn't until the

Council of Lyons, in 1274 AD for example, that the Church stated that the soul goes promptly to heaven or to hell at the moment of death—insuring that there would be no possibility for another life. Later, during the Council of Florence in 1439, the Church took the extra step of asserting that at the moment of death, a soul promptly went to heaven or hell, again assuring that reincarnation was not possible. (Howe, 83-84).

Belief in reincarnation was considered acceptable during the time that Jesus lived. It is believed that the *Essenes*, a Jewish sect living at the time of Jesus, seemed to have specifically believed in reincarnation. Some scholars speculate that both Jesus and John the Baptist may have had contact with this fringe sect. John the Baptist in particular seemed to display some of the eccentricities of this group, and it is believed that when Jesus went out into the desert to pray and retreat from the world, that he in fact, visited an *Essene* community to do so.

These are some of the scriptural passages that may make references to reincarnation:

1. *The story of the man blind from birth—was his blindness caused by sins in a previous life? (or was it caused by the sins of his father and ancestors).*
2. *In Matt. 11:13-14, Jesus identifies John the Baptist with Elijah.*
3. *Matt. 17: 10-13, clear statement of preexistence regarding John the Baptist.*

(Both Elijah and John the Baptist are manifestations of a preexistent type—or forerunner.

4. *Philippians 2:6-8, (Jesus, though he was in the form of God...He divests himself of his divinity to take human form—preexistence of Christ). (Howe 62-97)*
5. *The Transfiguration, Matthew 7, references to Elijah returning.*
6. *Death on the Cross, Matthew 27: 46-49, Jesus cries out for Elijah and some wait to see whether he will come. (Howe, 92-97).*

The notion and accepted reality of reincarnation pervades Hinduism just as the theological concepts of fall and redemption pervades Christianity. A few of the classic statements on the subject of rebirth are found in the **Upanishads**—where the earliest formulation of *samsara* or rebirth is found—and in the **Bhagavad Gita**. The principle teaching concerning the eternal nature of the soul is found in chapter 2, verses 16-30.

Probably the most widely known or quoted statement on rebirth from the Hindu scriptures is 2.22 from the **Bhagavad Gita**. (Howe 109):

Just as you throw out used old clothes and put on new clothes, the Self discards it's used bodies and puts on others that are new. (Mitchell, 49)

See also verse 2.13:

*Just as, in this body, the Self passes
through childhood, youth, and old
age, so after death it passes to
another body.
(Mitchell, 48).*

While it may be difficult to prove to Christians that reincarnation could have a place in Christian thought, and certainly the more nuanced arguments for and against have not been treated here, it is hard to ignore that the concept was widely accepted in our early history. Polls do often indicate that a large percentage of people do believe in reincarnation, and most of those people, particularly in this country, are Christians.

Some may consider that reincarnation invalidates the significance of the Resurrection of Christ. Others may deem that salvation is not necessarily obtained in one life-time, but that it is more of a process. Still others may consider that perhaps we have lost some of the original meaning of the teachings of Jesus throughout the centuries. Wherever one may fall in the discussion, one cannot negate that it certainly raises some interesting questions.

CHAPTER TWO

KUNDALINI ENERGY AND CHRISTIANITY

Kundalini Energy from a Christian Perspective

In the forward to the book, **Kundalini Energy and Christian Spirituality: A Pathway to Growth and Healing**, by Philip St. Romain, the Trappist priest, Thomas Keating, recognizes that *kundalini* energy may be at work in many individuals who practice contemplative prayer.

It will be a great consolation to those who have experienced physical symptoms arising from the awakening of kundalini in the course of their spiritual journey, even if they have not experienced it to the full extent described by the author. His compelling testimony is a powerful affirmation of the potential of every human being for higher states of consciousness.

“The awakening of kundalini energy and its various stages clearly

enhances our understanding of how the body takes part in the spiritual journey. Spiritual writers of our tradition have long known that the body must be carefully prepared if it is to receive the higher communications of divine grace. (7)

Keating acknowledges that this powerful energy, though it has enormous potential for good, can be misused for selfish motives. He also notes that this energy, for a Christian—must be directed towards the Holy Spirit. It seems obvious to Keating, that the experiences of many of the Christian mystics, such as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, were ones that can be attributed to a direct experience of *kundalini* energy. On the other hand, it is also very clear that Westerners have very little awareness or knowledge of this powerful energy.

*In order to guide persons having this experience, Christian spiritual directors may need to dialogue with Eastern teachers in order to get a fuller understanding. The importance of the “**Document on the Non-Christian Religions**” [issued by the **Second Vatican Council** in 1965], comes into focus here. The document states:*

The Church therefore has this exhortation for her sons [and daughters]; Prudently and lovingly through dialogue and collaboration

with the followers of other religions and in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men [and women] as well as the values in their society and culture.

Philip St. Romain, documents in this book, **Kundalini Energy and Christian Spirituality**, his own awakening to this energy, and his journey to discover what he could about it. This was a difficult undertaking, because there was nothing in Christian literature that was helpful to his experience, and Hindu literature did not explain things in a relevant context. St. Romain summarizes what he was able to glean from his survey of psychological texts and other disciplines.

He describes his *own kundalini* experience in the following manner:

Of me, but not-me;” and “of God, but not-God.” I can think of only one Source capable of generating such an energy, and that is the soul.

In Catholic theology, it is held that the Soul is the life principle of the body: there is no living body without the Soul. But neither is there a human experience of the Soul apart from the body. Body and Soul are one; a person is an embodied soul.

The Soul is a creation of God; it is not-God. But neither is the Soul separate from God; it stands in relation to God as light to the sun. It is joined with God through the grace of God's creative will, apart from which it would not exist. Therefore, the Soul is a creation endowed with its own unique qualities and energies. It is capable of realizing its dependence upon and union with God, and, in so doing, realizing its true nature. (99)

What is Kundalini Energy?

What is *kundalini*? From Hindu literature, St. Romain recounts the following:

Kundalini is like a highly-charged elixir that is poured into a very delicate and fragile vessel. If there are leaks or weak spots in the vessel, then the elixir will be lost and the vessel itself will be hurt by the powerful energy being discharged. Given an healthy vessel, however, kundalini energy can be harnessed to do a mighty work on earth. (101)

Kundalini energy, also referred to as the Serpent Power, lies dormant at the base of the spine. When

awakened, it rises, as *shakti*, the feminine manifestation of divine energy, through all of the *chakras* and can produce ecstatic states—or lead to devastation, if one is not properly prepared for the unleashing of this energy.

St. Romain notes that there is nothing in Christian teaching about the *chakras*, or the subtle bodies—such as the astral body—or kundalini energy. It is evident, however, when one studies the lives of many mystics, that one can identify experiences of *kundalini*. (110)

Kundalini and Christian Mysticism

St. Romain quotes from the book, **The Theology of Christian Perfection**, by Antonio Royo, O.P., and Jordan Aumann, who document some of the extraordinary phenomena that could easily be attributed to kundalini experiences:

When any of the following phenomena have God as their cause, they are usually found to occur in persons of a holy life...

1. **Flames of Love.** *[This refers to] experiences of burning sensations in the body, considered signs of the mystic's love of God. They describe three levels: (a) simple interior heat, usually in the area of the heart; (b) intense ardors, intense heat that*

causes great discomfort; (c) material burning, which scorches the clothing and burns those whom the mystic touches. Sts. Philip Neri and Paul of the Cross experienced this.

2. **Tears of Blood and Bloody Sweat.** *During times of intense kundalini heat, when emotions are being eliminated through tears, it is possible that blood vessels near the surface of the skin and in the tear ducts would rupture, reddening the sweat and tears. St. Lutgard, Blessed Christina, and several others are listed as recipients of this “gift.” Christ at Gethsemane also experienced bloody sweat.*
3. **Prolonged Absence of Sleep.** *Because the kundalini current maintains the body in a state of freedom from emotional pain, one does not need sleep as in times past. Prayer accomplishes what sleep once did. St. Macarius...St. Rose of Lima, and St. Catherine de Ricci are noted for going long periods without sleep.*
4. **Bilocation.** *This may or may not be related to kundalini, depending on whether we are speaking of the physical body or the astral body. Kundalini does not explain bilocation of the physical body, but it*

can account for the energy that empowers the astral body to leave the physical body and roam about, where it might be seen by those with inner vision. St. Clement, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Anthony de Padua, St. Francis Xavier, St. Anthony Claret, and St. Alphonsus Liguori were noted for bilocating.

5. **Mystical Aureoles.** *Experiences of inner light are commonly associated with kundalini, although it is rare that others should also see these aureoles. There are countless cases of aureoles; Moses, St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Philip Neri, St. Francis de Sales, St. Charles Borromeo, and St. John Vianney are famous examples. The artistic depictions of aureoles around saints in sacred paintings are an expression of this phenomenon.*
6. **Incombustible Bodies.** *This may be unrelated to kundalini. Nevertheless, there is no denying that kundalini transforms bodily tissues; one is seldom sick after undergoing the process. St. Dominic, and St. Catherine of Siena are examples.*
7. **Bodily Elongation.** *I suspect the work of kundalini in producing a body-stretching asana to be at issue here. Blessed Stephana Quizani and*

St. Catherine of Genoa are examples.

In addition to the above, I recognize the work of kundalini in the spontaneous asanas (standing on head, bodily contortions, etc) experienced by St. Therese of Lisieux, and in the temporary paralyzes of limbs experienced by Teresa of Avila.

It is also possible that kundalini is related to stigmata...Could the combination of kundalini and meditation on the wounds of Christ produce stigmata? [This is certainly an interesting question that could take this whole inquiry in another direction?] (112-113).

St. Romain reminds us, that many Christians go through periods of aridity in their prayer and spiritual life—times which St. John of the Cross described as “*Dark Nights of the Soul.*” These experiences of dark nights of the soul, could be related to the changes—physical, spiritual, and psychological—which are endured by those who experience the unleashing of the *kundalini* energy.

Kundalini and the Pentecostal Experience

St. Romain, believes that there is a strong similarity between *kundalini* energy and the Pentecostal experience.

*A strong convergence between Hindu and Christian spirituality can be noted when comparing Siddha Yoga with Pentecostalism. In recent times, Swami Muktananda was most prominent in spreading the practice of Siddha meditation. While reading through Kundalini: **The Secret of Life**, by Swami Muktananda, I was struck by the similarities it shares with Pentecostalism.*

*In Siddha Yoga, kundalini is awakened through the grace of the Master, or Guru. “The Guru and the spiritual energy which he awakens are identical,” wrote Swami Muktananda. “Not only is it the Guru’s task to awaken kundalini, he must also control and regulate the process until the disciple attains the ultimate realization of the Self, and help the disciple remove all blocks which hinder his full development.” And how does the Guru awaken kundalini? Through a graced touch from the Guru called **Shaktipat**,*

when the Guru directly transmits his own divine Shakti (kundalini energy) into the disciple. It is the divine function of the Guru to awaken the dormant Shakti; when the Guru transmits his power into a disciple, the inner aspect of kundalini is automatically activated and set into operation. (115-116)

St. Romain goes on to describe some of the many instances in which Swami Muktananda gave *shaktipat* to his disciples through thought, word, or touch—frequently touching disciples between the brow—or at the level of the sixth *chakra*. Sometimes these individuals experienced shaking involuntarily, or falling down as a result of *shaktipat*. In other instances, spontaneous *asanas*, *mudras*, or *pranayama* are experienced by the initiate into *kundalini*. (116)

In the end, “*the fruit of the spirit observed as a result of Siddha Yoga is greater awareness, bliss, intuitive knowledge, and compassion,*” (117), not unlike what a Pentecostal may experience.

In Pentecostalism, too, we see evidence of the transmission of the spiritual energy through a special touch, usually the laying on of hands by the community, or by a bishop or minister.

As a result of this “Christian Shaktipat,” people frequently evidence spiritual gifts or charisms such as speaking in tongues (a Christian mantra?), prophesying, and healing. Great love for other people begins to well up in the heart. One also becomes deeply fond of spending time in prayer. There and other gifts come spontaneously and effortlessly as the Spirit prompts. (117)

Not all Christians may be familiar with the Pentecostal experience; however, many who were involved in the Charismatic Movement that swept Christian denominations in the 1970’s, may be able to relate to these experiences which are regarded as fruits of the Spirit, given to the apostles after the Pentecost event and experience.

I now wonder whether the laying on of hands in Pentecostal communities does in fact result in a form of kundalini arousal. Could it be that the Baptism of the Holy Spirit is an example of Christian Shaktipat? Swami Muktananda and Gopi Krishna, the two men most responsible for the growing interest in kundalini in the West, have written on several occasions that kundalini energy is what Christians call the Holy Spirit. Is it true? “The Guru

and the spiritual energy which he awakens are identical,” wrote Swami Muktananda. Could it be that the Holy Spirit is the kundalini energy of the Risen Christ? (118)

These are fascinating questions, and a deeper exploration of them is beyond the scope of this paper. However, they can be a source for more thought and reflection.

Kundalini and Scripture

In the final section of his book, **Kundalini Energy and Christian Spirituality**, St. Romain, explores a few scriptural passages that may make reference to the *kundalini* energy.

The Pentecostal phenomena which we have just observed, is rooted in a number of passages. St. Paul deals with the gifts of the Spirit, most notably in 1 Corinthians 12: 7-11:

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of

miracles, to another prophesy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. (NSRV)

In the account of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was sent to the apostles after the death and resurrection of Jesus, we also see an acknowledgment of many of these same gifts of the Spirit. After the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit, which descended as tongues of fire over their heads, they went out to proclaim the Gospel message to the community, and the masses heard and understood this message in their own languages. (Acts 2: 2-13).

St. Romain includes a reference from the Gospel of Luke that is worth noting, involving John the Baptist:

I baptize you with water, but someone is coming, someone who is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to undo the strap of his sandals; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (Luke 3:16, Jerusalem Bible).

This passage may be a reference to the *kundalini* energy. Scripture scholars often identify fire with

the Baptism of the Spirit, and as we have noted, the *kundalini* energy or the *Shakti*, is also described as the Serpent Fire.

St. Romain's book, while certainly not definitive or exhaustive, offers much to the discussion of an energy that may have been deemed the exclusive domain of the yogic tradition. Yet as we have seen, characteristics of the *kundalini* energy may easily be observed in the Christian tradition as well. It only awaits further study and exploration.

CHAPTER THREE

YOGA AND CHRISTIANITY: THE FUTURE

The Future for Two Mystical Traditions in Tandem

In the concluding chapter of his book, **A Meeting of Mystical Paths: Christianity and Yoga**, Justin O'Brien, refers to both the Christian and yogic traditions as companions for the future. They indeed have much to offer each other and to their adherents.

Christians are certainly no monolithic group—there are over four hundred Christian denominations and sects in this country alone. In many instances, these denominations have lost a sense of the sacred. Significant numbers of Protestants, that grew up in mainline churches, have left those denominations and have joined non-denominational and mega-churches within Christianity instead. In these huge churches one is easily lost in a sea of souls. While these huge communities may meet certain needs, there certainly is the loss of the intimacy that is found in a much smaller community.

In the Catholic Church of the last twenty years, there has been a distinct movement to the right, both theologically and spiritually; the advances of the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960's, now almost seems like a figment of one's imagination. *"Its credentials of belief seem to be coercive allegations rather than inducements to discover the mystery of life."* (O'Brien, 165)

Despite these realities within Christendom, O'Brien believes that the task for both Christians and yogic practitioners is to reconnect with the world of nature and to learn to more fully abide in the present moment. Greater concern for nature and involvement in the world, would lead to more responsible behavior. After all:

*How long can we practice faith or do
yoga postures if we breathe polluted
air, digest herbicide-ridden foods,
and exhaust our nerves with stressful
noise and hectic schedules? (165)*

The events of the recent years, and the unforgettable moments of 9/11 will forever change the way we look at things, and have subsequently affected our how we live our lives. Despite the culture of fear we seem to be living in, in our heart of hearts, we know we must make significant changes in our outlook and choices if we are to survive and pass this world on to our children, and our children's children. We can choose to live in fear—and all that fear engenders—or we can live in hope and love—which result in more positive experiences.

It is not just the traditions of yoga and Christianity that need to implement changes and more fully adapt to our present culture. All religious and philosophical traditions need to engage one another in dialogue as well—perhaps now more than ever. We have considered the two traditions of yoga and Christianity in this work—their perspectives are different and grounded in different origins and sources—but as O’Brien states—there is no reason for them to cancel out each other.

The followers of Jesus have gathered together—ecclesia [that is to say, they are Church]—and formed their beliefs into a religious tradition that affirms life here and hereafter. Yoga also proposes a philosophy of life, a genuine spirituality that is in keeping with the highest values of humanity’s religious impulse.

Yoga’s goal is two-fold: the reduction of the roots of suffering and the promotion of health and spiritual well-being. For this it offers physical, emotional, mental and ethical tools. Together both traditions, each in their own way, trace their roots to a primordial source of sacred knowledge. Both traditions honor human beings as sacred. Both share ethical principles founded on love and truth. But whereas yoga emphasizes conscious experience...Christians hold belief as crucial, and while Christianity

centers its devotion around the figure of Jesus Christ, yoga focuses on the personal attainment of the Christ Consciousness. (166)

Bede Griffiths on Christianity and Yoga

Bede Griffiths, the Benedictan Monk, who went to India in the 1950's to found a monastery—and ended up taking over an ashram instead—recognizes the following in his book, **Vedanta and Christian Faith**:

Hinduism and Christianity grew up until recently in complete independence of one another: Each religion...has been engaged in a continuous quest for a right understanding of the nature of God, the Supreme Being, and one's relationship to him...

Many Christians have in modern times been influenced by Hinduism and many Hindus by Christianity, yet very little attempt has been made to compare the orthodox tradition of Hinduism with the orthodox tradition of Christianity. Most commonly it has been the unorthodox in each religion who have felt the attraction of the other, and who have attempted

to combine elements from each religion in a new synthesis. (100)

Perhaps this is where this dialogue must start, with the attraction of the unorthodox in both traditions. Yet it cannot stay there—it must spill over into the mainstream of both traditions, if this dialogue is to bear fruit in any way.

The book, **The Other Half of My Soul**, reveals that Dom Bede Griffiths, a Christian monk who became a *sannyasin* later in life and lived in an *ashram*, by the name of *Shantinavam*, or “*Forest of Peace*,” envisioned “*a truly universal Christianity that is genuinely open to the other traditions, and that learns to ‘speak’ their inner languages.*” (17)

Bede Griffiths believed that all religious tradition had much to offer each other, since they are all part of one whole. He often used the analogy of fingers and a hand to illustrate this unity—with the fingers representing different spiritual traditions—coming together to form one functional hand.

The Church...must open herself up to the presence of God in other religious traditions and seek to integrate their insights, their wisdom, into her own self-understanding and view of reality, thus becoming universal in a more geographical sense. She must make the truths of these other systems of

faith her own...’Christianity cannot grow as a religion today unless it is willing to abandon its Western culture and its rational masculine bias and learn again the feminine intuitive understanding that is characteristic of the East.’” (18)

Christians, historically, have held negative views of other religious traditions—and particularly of non-Christian faiths. But Christians of other denominations have not been exempt from this negativity—often being eyed with suspicion and contempt, and regarded as heretical offshoots. Overcoming this deeply ingrained suspicion that many Christians have of other faiths and their Christian brothers and sisters will entail hard work.

Christianity [as a tradition], has the same contemplative depth as Hinduism and the other Eastern traditions; it possesses vast mystical, psychological, and moral wisdom. What India can contribute is a spark to ignite contemplative renewal on a vast scale, a reorientation of the church toward a rediscovery, and indeed a recovery, of her mystical life, her precious spiritual treasures... (21)

Bede Griffiths himself was part of the development of an Indian Christian spirituality that draws upon the insights of yoga, meditation, and

Tantra, the latter highlighting the role of the body in spiritual formation. He felt that the body must be incorporated into prayer, something that has not been emphasized in Christian spirituality until now. Yoga can prepare the body for meditation and for great breakthroughs that can occur in the meditative state of contemplation, but Tantric yoga can unite the body with the mind in the effort of prayer.

Here the Christian tradition has serious limitations, since the body has often been rejected, at least in recent centuries. This can be aptly illustrated by a medieval Cistercian saying, 'When you enter the monastery, you must leave your body at the gate.' India and the Tantric school of yoga...go in the opposite direction altogether, epitomized in the Tantric aphorism, 'That by which we fall is that by which we rise.' Bede emphasized this teaching again and again. The whole aim of life on earth is to integrate the body with the mind and then surrender these to the Spirit. (22)

Both the Christian and yogic traditions are sources of transcendent knowledge:

Since each path..leads to an authentic experiential awareness of the Source and harmonizes with the same underlying reality, how can their interrelationship not be one of complementarity...? The locus of real encounter is found in the depths of contemplative experience and spiritual wisdom. It is only in that which is deepest in both traditions, in the mystical life of each that we can hope to locate such an encounter. Christians and Hindus have to meet in their transcendent awareness, from the interior core of subjectivity, in the guha, the 'cave of the heart,' [which the desert mystics spoke of]...where we are already one. (142)

Christianity and Yoga [and Hinduism]

One of the earliest authors to address the relationship between Christianity and Hinduism, was Raimundo Panikkar, who first wrote his book, **The Unknown Christ of Hinduism**, in 1964, with reprints as recent as 1981.

Panikkar, is himself an interesting figure—a Jesuit priest and scholar, born of a Spanish mother, and an Indian father. Thus, he grew up in two cultures and religious traditions. While Panikkar's approach focuses on Hinduism *per sae*, he offers a number of

useful insights that are noteworthy, and which are just as applicable to yoga.

The differences between the two religions are often complementary. If Hinduism claims to be the religion of truth, Christianity claims to be the truth of religion. Hinduism is ready to absorb any authentic religious truth; Christianity is ready to embrace any authentic religious value...

Christianity can be experienced in two ways: either as a religion...or as a tangible, historical, and thus concrete and dynamic expression of ultimate Mystery which reveals itself in a faith... Hinduism may be experienced either simply as a religion among religions, or as a tangible, concrete and dynamic expression of the ultimate Mystery, through which one may reach the all-embracing transcendent. (4-5).

Panikkar warns that in studying or comparing different traditions, there is the very real danger of eliminating all differences, or of reaching an understanding of each other that does not take into full account what is unique and true about each tradition. Mysticism presents a point of entry for dialogue and understanding among both traditions. Once a mystic, one is always a mystic. The effects and fruits of the mystical experience cannot be undone.

There are ex-Catholics, ex-Marxists, ex-Buddhists, and so forth, but I know of no ex-mystic. Once the transformation due to an authentic mystical experience has happened, it is irreversible. (22)

Panikkar asks the very viable and germane question—where do Christianity and Hinduism meet?

The meeting of religions is today [the 1960's] one of the most profound human problems. Five possible solutions or approaches suggest themselves...

The first solution advocates strict segregation... Today a proud isolation without care for others would be considered impious egoism and would indeed be the ruination of any religion. We cannot ignore the great contemporary problems common to all races and religions.

A second solution would be the substitution of one religion for the other. This solution is anti-religious and wrong and would only create disorder and confusion on both sides. [These are certainly interesting implications for the

efficacy and morality of missionary work].

A third solution, the persistent dream of an eclectic unity and idealistic embrace, simply disregards the very real conflicts inherent in the situation.

A simple peaceful coexistence, the fourth [solution]...is short-sighted and superficial...Christianity may have to give up its claim to universality, and catholicity... Similarly, Hinduism cannot be satisfied with co-existing with a militant Christianity claiming a right and a duty over the whole world.

The fifth solution [that can be considered here is] interpenetration, or fecundation—and a mutation in the self-interpretation of these religious traditions.

[This implies] engaging in deep human honesty while maintaining a great intellectual openness and a profound loyalty towards one's tradition...

Every encounter is necessarily reciprocal. (32-35)

For Panikkar, the meeting ground or place of encounter between the two traditions is embodied in the reality of Christ.

Christianity and Hinduism meet each other in a reality which partakes of both the Divine and the Human, i.e. in what Christians cannot but call the Christ. (37)

Panikkar does not believe that the two traditions have enough doctrinal parallelisms, despite the fact that there are a number of analogous concepts.

From a Hindu perspective, encounter occurs in the following way:

We only meet in the Absolute; we only meet at the end of our pilgrimage; we encounter one another once we realize that we are one and the same reality. (47-48)

*In Hindu terms, Christianity, like other major religions, will lead its faithful to liberation to the extent that it imparts to their hearts the three central truths of the **sanatana dharma**, the eternal religion: namely, that God is, that he can be realized, and that the purpose of life is to realize him. (69)*

Panikkar added much to this discussion of the possible encounter and meeting of Christianity and Hinduism, over forty years ago, and while his book is more scholarly and apologetic in its approach, it does offer another perspective and insight. Certainly his perspective of the inter-penetration of traditions is one that has value and merits to be more adequately explored and discussed.

Ecumenism and Merton

There were a couple of brief, shining moments in the 1980's, when various religious and philosophical traditions converged.

In 1988, religious leaders met in Assisi, Italy—the birthplace of St. Francis—to pray for world peace. Groups gathered together subsequently on the anniversary of this meeting, coming together in Montreal, Canada, for a similar meeting of like minded souls. This created an opportunity for mystics and spiritual practitioners of all walks of life, to listen to one other, share their wisdom and scriptures, and their most valued spiritual practices, “*in an act of faithful common witness.*” (Ryan, 126)

Thomas Ryan wrote of this annual gathering in **Prayer of Heart and Body: Meditation and Yoga as Christian Spiritual Practice:**

*[This annual gathering] is precisely as the word “interfaith” implies, a meeting between **people of faith**. For the Christian it should be an*

occasion to discern, and rejoice in, the richness of God's self-revelation. John 3:16 does not say "God so loved the church" but rather that "God so loved the world." This means that Christians will not be the only ones with some light to radiate. We can learn something of value from others.

In the words of Thomas Merton: "The 'universality' and 'catholicity' which are essential to the church necessarily imply an ability and a readiness to enter into dialogue with all that is pure, wise, profound and humane in every kind of culture. In this one sense at least, a dialogue with Oriental wisdom becomes necessary. A Christian culture that is not capable of such a dialogue would show, by that very fact, that it lacked catholicity."

Merton himself set out on that quest for "oriental wisdom" on the trip to Bangkok which ended in his accidental death. "The Catholic," he said, "who is the aggressive specimen of a ghetto Catholic culture, limited, rigid, prejudiced, negative, is precisely non-Catholic, at least in the cultural sense. Worse still, he may be anti-Catholic in the cultural sense and perhaps even, in

some ways, religiously, without realizing it.”
(Ryan, 126)

Merton’s words are fraught with meaning, and powerful, and they invite deep reflection from all Christians. If God so loved the world—and all of its people—then we are all brothers and sisters to each other—and we all have much to offer and share with one another.

Thomas Merton’s great adventure to the Eastern cultures and religious traditions he held in esteem, is recorded in the book, **The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton**, a work that was published posthumously, and is one of my favorite and most insightful of his writings. During this journey, the first and last Merton undertook as a Trappist Monk, he met with many noted religious figures, such as the Dalai Lama, and the Buddhist Monk, Thich Nhat Han,

In his last journal entry, written six days before his death in 1968, Merton wrote one of the most profound and moving spiritual reflections I have ever read—an experience that can only be understood and defined as deeply mystical. Everything came together for him in this one experience—the philosophical and spiritual traditions of both the East and West—were no longer on opposing sides of a spectrum—instead, they had merged into one. I find his entry as inspiring today, as when I first read it decades ago, while I was in my twenties.

The following excerpts are from this entry, and describe Merton's experience as he visited the huge Buddha statues of Polonnaruwa, in Kuala Lumpur:

I am able to approach the Buddhas barefoot and undisturbed, my feet in wet grass, wet sand. Then the silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing, the peace not of emotional resignation but of sunyata, that has seen every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything—without refutation—without establishing some other argument. For the doctrinaire, the mind that needs well-established positions, such peace, such silence, can be frightening. I was knocked over with a rush of relief and thankfulness at the obvious clarity of the figures, the clarity and fluidity of shape and line, the design of the monumental bodies composed into the rock shape and landscape....

Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves became evident and obvious. The evidence of

the reclining figure, the smile... The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no “mystery.” All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya—everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. I don’t know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination. Surely, with Polonnaruwa, my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for... (Merton, 230-236).

The Snowmass Ecumenical Conference

I would like to conclude with a reference to the **Snowmass Ecumenical Conference** that occurred in 1984. Spiritual teachers from a variety of religious traditions—such as:

“Zen Buddhists, Tibetan Buddhists, Hindus, Jewish, Islamic, Native American, Russian Orthodox, Protestant and Roman Catholics—were invited to gather at St. Benedict’s Monastery, Snowmass, Colorado to meditate together in

silence and to share their personal spiritual journeys.” (114-115)

At this gathering, representatives of the various traditions were able to arrive at several points of agreement. The members of this group continued to meet in subsequent years. The following points indicate areas of convergence in the varying religious traditions, and offer a starting point for dialogue:

1. *The world religions bear witness to the experience of Ultimate Reality to which they give various names: Brahman, Allah, Absolute, God, Great Spirit.*
2. *Ultimate Reality cannot be limited by any name or concept.*
3. *Ultimate Reality is the ground of infinite potentiality and actuality.*
4. *Faith is opening, accepting, and responding to Ultimate Reality. In this sense faith precedes every belief system.*
5. *The potential for human wholeness— or in other frames of reference, the possibility exist for experiences of enlightenment, in addition to that of salvation, and for transformation,*

blessedness, and nirvana—is present in every human person.

6. *Ultimate Reality may be experienced not only through religious practices but also through nature, art, human relationships, and service to others.*
7. *As long as the human condition is experienced as separate from Ultimate Reality, it is subject to ignorance and illusion, weakness and suffering.*
8. *Disciplined practice is essential to the spiritual life; yet spiritual attainment is not the result of one's own efforts, but the ripe fruit of the experience of oneness with Ultimate Reality. (115)*

In 1986, the following points consisting of a more practical nature were added to the original document:

I. Examples of disciplined practice common to us all:

1. *Practice of compassion*
2. *Service to others*
3. *Practicing moral precepts and virtues*
4. *Training in meditation techniques and regularity of practice*
5. *Attention to diet and exercise*
6. *Fasting and abstinence*

7. *The use of music and chanting and sacred symbols.*
8. *Practice in awareness (recollection, mindfulness) and living in the present moment*
9. *Pilgrimage*
10. *Study of scriptural texts.*
And in some traditions:
11. *Relationship with a qualified teacher*
12. *Repetition of sacred words (mantras, japa)*
13. *Periods of silence and solitude*
14. *Movement and dance*
15. *Formative community*

II. *It is essential to extend the formal practice of awareness into all the aspects of our life.*

III. *Humility, gratitude, and a sense of humor are indispensable in the spiritual life.*

IV. *Prayer is communion with Ultimate Reality, [God] whether It is regarded as personal, impersonal, or beyond them both. (115-116)*

It goes without saying, that the meeting of the representatives the religious and spiritual traditions in attendance was a significant step in establishing dialogue between the various groups, leading to a

greater awareness and understanding of the various traditions and their practices.

The **Snowmass Conference** provided a tangible and concrete example of hope, particularly when one considers the wide divergence of traditions that were represented at this gathering, with their varying scriptures, and spiritual practices. If all of these groups could come together and find commonality in their own traditions, certainly practitioners of yoga and Christianity can overcome their differences, or at the very least—increase their understanding and respect for each another.

Much work has to be done to make the similarities between the spiritualities of the East and Christianity better known to the average Christian. This will require not only an intensive study of the spiritual disciplines of other religious cultures but above all a firm grasp of our own. (117)

We have already alluded to the fact that many Christians are not as well versed in their traditions as they think they are—having done little study on their own beyond what knowledge they may have acquired in Sunday schools or in their parochial education. Christians must first undertake a deeper study of their own immediate denomination, and its sources. Secondly, they must understand more about Christianity as a whole, and its roots, its development and evolution as a major spiritual force. Only then, can Christians truly understand the

vast riches of the yogic tradition, without fear or apprehension.

As we have seen, others have already laid the groundwork for us—showing us how there is much common ground in both the yogic and Christian traditions. We have only scratched the surface here. It is up to each one of us to continue to explore ways in which we can deepen these connections. It is up to us to build upon this common ground. We will be better people for it, and the world will be a better place as well.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Who am I? I see myself primarily as a mystic and semi-contemplative. My upbringing was rich and diverse, and I had the opportunity to travel as a daughter and granddaughter of diplomats, growing up and living in many wonderful places.

Towards the end of my career teaching theology and spirituality, which spanned nearly 25 years, I became both a certified Yoga instructor and Reiki practitioner and teacher in the Northern Virginia area. I have a doctoral degree in spirituality and education, and these areas remain a great passion of mine, in addition to teaching both yoga and Reiki.

During my professional career, I worked in campus ministry and taught religious studies in a number of institutions including St. Louis University, Washington University, and as Chair of the Religion Department at Convent of the Visitation School in Minnesota in the eighties, and then at Georgetown Visitation Preparatory School, in Washington, DC, during the nineties.

I am currently engaged in introducing and igniting a passion for meditation in others as part of a broader project, **Meditation Pure and Simple**, which not only includes this book – but

a website, a **Facebook** page, and **YouTube** channel – all bearing the same title!

Take a break and visit **Meditation Pure and Simple** on **Facebook** and **YouTube** for 90 second meditations and affirmations posted daily. Share them with others!

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