



AUC: Asian Journal of Religious Studies

AJRS 64/5 Sept-Oct 2019, P-ISSN 2249 –1503 5-7

DOI:10.5281/zenodo.4274839

Stable URL: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4274839>

How Can We Understand Yoga and its Practice as a Christian Believer?

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To begin let me quote NA 2 of Vatican II where it says: “The Catholic rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men. The Church, therefore, urges her sons to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture.”

This is the general attitude and conviction of the Catholic Church regarding other religions and their beliefs and practices. Though the history of yoga traces its beyond the Arian religion, namely Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism (refer the researches done around 1920 in Harappa- Mohanjedaro: KCBC Kraisthava Vishwasavum Yogacharyum - Christian Faith and practice of yoga, POC Kochi 2019), yoga is now more identified with organized religion. So people identify easily yoga with Hinduism or Buddhism. Of course, yoga has been developed systematically by the Hindu Sanyasis. The contribution of Pathanjali Maharshi (around 5th Cent. BC) is commendable in this regard and he has

made it a discipline beyond that of religion and mainly as a psycho-spiritual art and has kept God outside of yoga's purview.

We know that the Christian mystics and desert fathers have made use of meditation and silence as ways to deepen spiritual experience of God. Following this wisdom of the fathers, many in India have tried yoga for deepening spiritual quest and union with the divine. Some examples are Robert De Nobili, Francis Acharya, Bede Griffiths, Sara Grant, etc. Following the teachings of the Vat. II on other religions, esp., the quote above, many have felt that yoga would be a good sign of inculturation and could bring the followers of other religion, especially Hindus into a dialogue of life. They felt that yoga is more of an art to discipline the body and mind which would help the person to be more disposed to the promptings of the divine.

“Some physical exercises automatically produce a feeling of quiet and relaxation, pleasing sensations, perhaps even phenomena of light and of warmth, which resemble spiritual well-being. To take such feelings for the authentic consolations of the Holy Spirit would be a totally erroneous way of conceiving the spiritual life. That does not mean that genuine practices of meditation which come from the Christian East and from the great non-Christian religions, which prove attractive to the man of today who is divided and disoriented, cannot constitute a suitable means of helping the person who prays to come before God with an interior peace, even in the midst of external pressures.”(Some Aspects of Christian Meditation, Cong. For Doctrine of Faith, Oct. 15, 1989, No. 28).

Having said these I am given to understand that there are a few discussions on whether a Christian can practice yoga. Is it something against faith or while practicing yoga what should a Christian be aware of? In 2015 UN has declared June 21 as International Yoga day. Ever since that time, yoga which was believed to be solely Indian got a universal recognition and in the present day life situations more and more people begin to practice yoga in their own way with their own understanding. We must say that

some reject outright yoga and any type of inculturation as against Christian faith and consider them as sinful. Some feel that there is absolutely no problem in practicing yoga and the various types of meditations because they all lead to serenity and spiritual depth and enlightenment. They are too optimistic. A good number of people take yoga as a tool or as an exercise pattern for body and mind without going into the philosophical and spiritual intricacies. There are also some who feel that like music or art one can also Christianize yoga and use it. The Kerala Catholic Bishops' Council has studied this matter and come out with solid teaching treating yoga in its entirety. It may be good to refer to this matter for those who would like to have a detailed view. I feel also that we should not exaggerate something which is not central to our life and faith. In our dealings and treatment, the unimportant should not become important and vice versa.

The Second Vatican Council has taught us that there are elements of truth and goodness in other religions and whatever good lies latent in the religious practices and cultures of diverse peoples, is not only saved from destruction but is also cleansed, raised and perfected unto the glory of God (LG 17). But whatever truth and grace are to be found among the nations, as a sort of secret presence of God, He frees from all taint of evil and restores to Christ its maker, who overthrows the devil's domain and wards off the manifold malice of vice. And so, whatever good is found to be sown in the hearts and minds of men, or in the rites and cultures peculiar to various peoples, not only is not lost, but is healed, uplifted, and perfected for the glory of God, the shame of the demon, and the bliss of men (AG 9).

Living in India, it is the duty of us to find ways and means to help the gospel values sink deep into the culture and milieu of our land. We need to deepen our Christian faith and practices through the various elements found in this culture, (of course that are not against the mind of Christ) because that is the way our people understand the gospel and Jesus Christ, the Word made God. It is better to recall the statement of Mahatma Gandhi who said, un-

less for the Christians, he would have been a follower of Christ. Knowingly or unknowingly or better to say unwittingly, we made Christianity look foreign, and the elements in this land pagan and unacceptable. Let us put into practice the call of the Second Vatican Council to dialogue with the world, dialogue with cultures and dialogue with religions. We must know that yoga has now become an item in school curriculum and our young generation is learning this. We cannot shut our eyes to these realities. Hence we have to evaluate where practice of yoga may become unacceptable to Christian faith or rather we need to caution our people the possible dangers while doing yoga.

As we have seen some people make use of yoga for preparing the body and mind for meditation and contemplation; some use yoga for deep mystical experience and some others take yoga like the Buddhist to empty the mind and body from God experience or rather reducing God to some earthly reality. The Church is against the last type of yoga practice which aims at limiting meditation for emptying or for self fulfillment without any reference to the Almighty God revealed through the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. The person praying creating an empty space so that it may fill by the richness of God is welcome. The emptiness which God requires is that of the renunciation of personal selfishness, not necessarily that of the renunciation of those created things which he has given us and among which he has placed us. There is no doubt that in prayer one should concentrate entirely on God and as far as possible exclude the things of this world which bind us to our selfishness. On this topic St. Augustine is an excellent teacher: if you want to find God, he says, abandon the exterior world and re-enter into yourself. However, he continues, do not remain in yourself, but go beyond yourself because you are not God: He is deeper and greater than you. "I look for his substance in my soul and I do not find it; I have however meditated on the search for God and, reaching out to him, through created things, I have sought to know 'the invisible perfections of God' (Rom 1:20)." "To remain in oneself": this is the real danger. The great Doctor of the Church recommends, concentrating on oneself, but

also transcending the self which is not God, but only a creature. God is "deeper than my inmost being and higher than my greatest height." In fact God is in us and with us, but he transcends us in his mystery (Some Aspects of Christian Meditation..., Nr. 19).

Of late some tendencies connected with the New Age have become very noticeable. This is in the understanding of spirituality and God experience. Spirituality is more connected to ones' serenity, feeling good, unrelated to people and things, being good to oneself and so on. One feels that one can be a spiritual person without being related to God or connected to the Divine. What matters is one's equanimity, serenity, enlightenment, and so on. In this area yoga and transcendental meditation and tantric exercises can become dangerous for faith life. This is the caution that the recent Church teachings on yoga puts forth to its members. Yet another danger is the possibility of considering grace and peace as something created and earned through one's efforts, without considering them as the Gifts of the Holy Spirit. These are very narrow and subtle differences but very significant ones which may easily lead people to syncretic spirituality. Again it must be borne in mind that in yoga one finds one's salvation in self-fulfillment and realizing the God element in oneself. But we know that in the Christian faith salvation is communion with the triune God and in relationship with others. So also prayer or meditation in yoga is more of conversing with oneself and for a Christian it is communicating with God and learning to be obedient to his will. What is therefore needed is training our faithful well to use yoga to prepare the mind and body for deeper God experience in prayer. People must be helped to distinguish between supernatural grace and feeling good experience in yoga or meditation. The Holy Father Pope Francis in his address has eloquently said: "You can follow a thousand catechism courses, a thousand yoga or Zen courses and all these things. But none of this will be able to give you the freedom as a child of God" (Vatican Radio Address, Jan 9, 2016). He has also cautioned that yoga can lead one to erroneous faith and syncretic spirituality. But the Pope has never denied its good effects on mind and body.

Yoga can be helpful in this modern age where people are overloaded with stress and tensions. People get easily upset and feel worn out. Here practice of yoga can help people to get refreshed in mind and body. The syncronization of the body and mind is very essential. In Pranayama a Christian can breathe in remembering the Triune God. I know some people doing Soorya Namaskaram reciting the Lord's Prayer for each step.

Thus I find it is a responsibility of the Christians to Christianize yoga. It will be a great help to keep our body and mind agile, healthy and sensitive to the world outside. Moreover, a serene mind, a disposed body and inner tranquility will definitely help a person to deepen his relationship to God, the core of one's being and to his fellow human beings. Today's big problem is that man is not at home with himself. He is torn apart and divided within himself. His tranquility and equanimity are lost. Yoga will definitely help in this stage. It will also help us to be devoid of our passions and compulsory fixations. They say yoga is the golden key that unlocks the door to peace, tranquility and joy. Yoga is not a must for a Christian to deepen his spiritual journey; but it is helpful to present ourselves to be physically and mentally prepared to receive Christ the Word. It is like the soil being prepared well to receive the seeds to produce 100 fold fruits. But if only the soil is prepared and no seed is sown, then it is useless.