



Ask, Father James:

What is the difference between Christian Yoga & Secular Yoga?

Truly, Yoga is undeniably rooted in Hinduism. However, between the 1960s and 2010s, yoga became a familiar exercise amongst some Christians who started adopting yoga postures to meditate on Christian scripture. For instance, these Christians practice yoga by adopting the *Padmāsana*, or *Lotus* posture; i.e., cross-legged” postures; believing that it helps them find mental stillness because the Bible says; “be still” in God’s presence (Psalm 46:10); avoid being “anxious” (Matt 6:25–27) & manifest “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22–23). I have heard these Christians say Yoga poses help them find “peace and quietness” in today’s “noisy and distracted world and to develop an appropriate interior attitude for Christian prayer and worship. They also say, it is no different from Christians who listen and dance to non Christian rock music, and especially loud drums and electric guitars, that are often thought to be inherently evil. These Christians adopt yoga practices for spiritual benefits and have re-named it with catchy appellations like: *Christ Centered Yoga, Holy Yoga, Yahweh Yoga, Stretching for Jesus, Praise Moves and Christoga*. Typically reciting Bible verses & prayers when doing the yoga traditional poses. The question then is; can a Christian honestly and faithfully develop a yoga practice if yoga indeed has Hindu roots without it being syncretism? Those who oppose yoga argue that just as there is no Christian Ouija board, there is no Christian astrology, so there is no Christian Yoga. It is also argued that yoga postures & breathing techniques invite spirits other than the Holy Spirit to occupy bodies of practitioners, causing physical and spiritual harm. On the other hand; Christians who practice yoga have argued that yoga is a worship tool to enhance their relationship with Christ and liken it to ancient Christian disciplines like fasting and arguing that it is a healthy lifestyle (e.g., it can improve circulation, relieve stress and maintain a healthy weight).

Then is yoga religiously neutral? Being neither Christian nor anti-Christian, does its health and fitness claim aid to spiritual development? While one may be getting something out of it spiritually and physically, Catholic doctrinal statements warn against confusing the pleasing sensations of yoga & Eastern meditation with the Holy Spirit. In 1989, the Vatican issued a document saying the practice of Eastern traditions like yoga “can degenerate into a cult of the body,” warning Catholics against mistaking yoga’s “pleasing sensations” for “spiritual well-being.” Also, the Pontifical Council for Culture and Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in 2002 contrasts “Christian faith” with “New Age” practices, such as “yoga, zen, transcendental meditation and tantric exercises [that] lead to an experience of self-fulfilment or enlightenment.”

The Vatican document referred to above, warns that “Some physical exercises automatically produces a feeling of quiet and relaxation, pleasing sensations, perhaps even phenomena of light and of warmth. . . . To take such feelings for the authentic consolations of the Holy Spirit would be a totally erroneous way of conceiving the spiritual life. Giving them a symbolic significance typical of the mystical experience, when the moral condition of the person concerned does not correspond to such an experience, would represent a kind of mental schizophrenia which could also lead to psychic disturbance and, at times, to moral deviations.” (See Pope Benedict XVI, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation* (Vatican City: United States Catholic Conference, 1989) and the 2003 Vatican CDF document that further distances itself from New Age practices).

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