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The Subtle Body — Should Christians Practice Yoga?

When Christians practice yoga, they must either deny the reality of what yoga represents or fail to see the contradictions between their Christian commitments and their embrace of yoga. The contradictions are not few, nor are they peripheral.

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Some questions we ask today would simply baffle our ancestors. When Christians ask whether believers should practice yoga, they are asking a question that betrays the strangeness of our current cultural moment — a time in which yoga seems almost mainstream in America.

It was not always so. No one tells the story of yoga in America better than Stefanie Syman, whose recent book, *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America*, is a masterpiece of cultural history. Syman, an engaging author who is also a fifteen-year devotee of yoga, tells this story well.

Her book actually opens with a scene from this year's annual White House Easter Egg Roll. President Barack Obama made a few comments and then introduced First Lady Michelle Obama, who said: "Our goal today is just to have fun. We want to focus on activity, healthy eating. We've got yoga, we've got dancing, we've got storytelling, we've got Easter-egg decorating."

Syman describes the yoga on the White House lawn as "sanitized, sanctioned, and family-friendly," and she noted the rather amazing fact that a practice once seen as so exotic and even dangerous was now included as an activity sufficiently safe and mainstream for children.

In her words:

There certainly was no better proof that Americans had assimilated this spiritual discipline. We had turned a technique for God realization that had, at various points in time, enjoined its adherents to reduce their diet to rice, milk, and a few vegetables, fix their minds on a set of, to us, incomprehensible syllables, and self-administer daily enemas (without the benefit of equipment), to name just a few of its prerequisites, into an activity suitable for children. Though yoga has no coherent tradition in India, being preserved instead by thousands of gurus and hundreds of lineages, each of which makes a unique claim to authenticity, we had managed to turn it into a singular thing: a way to stay healthy and relaxed.

In her book, Syman tells the fascinating story of how yoga was transformed in the American mind from a foreign and "even heathen" practice into a cultural reality that is widely admired and practiced.

In telling this story, Syman documents the ties between yoga and groups or movements such as the Transcendentalists and New Thought — movements that sought to provide a spirituality that would be a clear alternative to biblical Christianity. She traces the influence of leading figures such as Swami Vivekananda and Swami Prabhavananda, along with Pierre Bernard and the now lesser-known Margaret Woodrow Wilson. Each of these figures played a role in the growing acceptance of yoga in America, but most were controversial at the time — some extremely so.



Syman describes yoga as a varied practice, but she makes clear that yoga cannot be fully extricated from its spiritual roots in Hinduism and Buddhism. She is also straightforward in explaining the role of sexual energy in virtually all forms of yoga and of ritualized sex in some yoga traditions. She also explains that yoga “is one of the first and most successful products of globalization, and it has augured a truly post-Christian, spiritually polyglot country.”

Reading *The Subtle Body* is an eye-opening and truly interesting experience. To a remarkable degree, the growing acceptance of yoga points to the retreat of biblical Christianity in the culture. Yoga begins and ends with an understanding of the body that is, to say the very least, at odds with the Christian understanding. Christians are not called to empty the mind or to see the human body as a means of connecting to and coming to know the divine. Believers are called to meditate upon the Word of God — an external Word that comes to us by divine revelation — not to meditate by means of incomprehensible syllables.

Nevertheless, a significant number of American Christians either experiment with yoga or become adherents of some yoga discipline. Most seem unaware that yoga cannot be neatly separated into physical and spiritual dimensions. The physical *is* the spiritual in yoga, and the exercises and disciplines of yoga are meant to connect with the divine.

Douglas R. Groothuis, Professor of Philosophy at Denver Seminary and a respected specialist on the New Age Movement, warns Christians that yoga is not merely about physical exercise or health. “All forms of yoga involve occult assumptions,” he warns, “even *hatha* yoga, which is often presented as a merely physical discipline.” While most adherents of yoga avoid the more exotic forms of ritualized sex that are associated with tantric yoga, virtually all forms of yoga involve an emphasis on channeling sexual energy throughout the body as a means of spiritual enlightenment.

Stefanie Syman documents how yoga was transformed in American culture from an exotic and heathen practice into a central component of our national cult of health. Of course, her story would end differently if Americans still had cultural access to the notion of “heathen.”

The nation of India is almost manically syncretistic, blending worldviews over and over again. But, in more recent times, America has developed its own obsession with syncretism, mixing elements of worldviews with little or no attention to what each mix means. Americans have turned yoga into an exercise ritual, a means of focusing attention, and an avenue to longer life and greater health. Many Americans attempt to deny or minimize the spiritual aspects of yoga — to the great consternation of many in India.

When Christians practice yoga, they must either deny the reality of what yoga represents or fail to see the contradictions between their Christian commitments and their embrace of yoga. The contradictions are not few, nor are they peripheral. The bare fact is that yoga is a spiritual discipline by which the adherent is trained to use the body as a vehicle for achieving consciousness of the divine. Christians are called to look to Christ for all that we need and to obey Christ through obeying his Word. We are not called to escape the consciousness of this world by achieving an elevated state of consciousness, but to follow Christ in the way of faithfulness.

There is nothing wrong with physical exercise, and yoga positions in themselves are not the main issue. But these positions are teaching postures with a spiritual purpose. Consider this — if you have to meditate intensely in order to achieve or to maintain a physical posture, it is no longer merely a physical posture.

The embrace of yoga is a symptom of our postmodern spiritual confusion, and, to our shame, this confusion reaches into the church. Stefanie Syman is telling us something important when she writes that yoga “has augured a truly post-Christian, spiritually polyglot country.” Christians who practice yoga are embracing, or at minimum flirting with, a spiritual practice that threatens to transform their own spiritual lives into a “post-Christian, spiritually polyglot” reality. Should any Christian willingly risk that?

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

Stefanie Syman, *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010).

Douglas R. Groothuis, *Unmasking the New Age* (InterVarsity Press, 1986).

The edition of *Thinking in Public* released today includes my interviews with Stefanie Syman and Doug Groothuis. You can find it at <http://www.albertmohler.com/category/podcast/> You can also subscribe at iTunes.

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