

YOGA - A WARNING

Is yoga a suitable activity for Christians? The simple answer to that question is - no! Why?? Because yoga is an activity which can undermine the Faith of any unsuspecting Christian. There are many forms of physical exercise which can be undertaken without putting oneself in regular contact with a practice which is based on, and rooted in, a non-Christian, Eastern spiritual philosophy and lifestyle. In this, as in all matters concerning the Faith, the authoritative voice of the Church must be heard and acted upon. Remember the Penny Catechism question: Which must you take most care of, your body or your soul? Answer: I must take most care of my soul.

The Vatican document, *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life*, traces the development of the New Age movement and the current widespread acceptance of many elements of New Age 'spirituality'. In the part headed 'New Age Spirituality' it includes yoga in a list of traditions which '*flow into the New Age.*' Also, in the section headed 'The fundamental principles of New Age thinking', we are warned that: '*Whilst psychology is used to explain mind expansion as 'mystical' experiences, Yoga, zen, transcendental meditation and tantric exercises lead to an experience of self-fulfilment or enlightenment.*' A very timely warning when we consider that a popular recent partwork called 'Enhancing your Mind, Body, Spirit' introduced an extensive segment on Yoga in this way: '*The physical postures that form the core of any Yoga session, invigorate the body and mind. These physical exercises are called 'asanas'. The word 'asana' means 'steady pose' (each posture is meant to be held for some time). The Asanas help to redress the body's harmony by helping to align the spine and head, improve blood flow, induce a state of relaxation, energise glands and organs and enhance well-being. This is the result of the seven major centres of energy (the Chakras) being brought into balance.*' It goes on to describe a basic exercise called 'Sun Salutation': '*The Sun salutation is a sequence of 12 Yogic postures performed in a continuous flowing motion, punctuated by six deep breaths. It can be thought of as a slow Yoga dance - almost a meditation in its own right. Saluting the Sun originates from the ancient practice of divine prostration - an act of bowing down in homage to the Sun, the creative life-force of the universe that exists within all of us.*'

In a booklet setting out a Catholic response to the New Age phenomenon, the Irish Theological Commission stated: '*Yoga classes are presented as physical exercises for the sake of health, wholeness, slimming or a variety of other reasons. Many Christians see nothing in yoga apart from the physical aspects of it. But let us look closer. The eastern religions can be called the Yogic Tradition, and it originated in India, the home of the gurus. The main themes of this tradition are transcendentalism and the spiritual journey. The Yogic world view is tied up with their belief in the world of karma which traps people into the cycle of suffering and evil. One needs to seek liberation from karma through the disciplines of Yoga, which involve the discipline of the body in exercises and diet to liberate the true 'life force' and set one on this road to enlightenment. Reincarnation and karma are basic beliefs in the yogic tradition.*'

The word Yoga is Sanskrit for 'yoke' or 'union'. In Hinduism, it refers to various kinds of discipline - physical, mental or sexual - which are meant to unite a person with the divine.

The physical yoga - which is the most common in the West - is called Hatha Yoga. But - '*The positions in Hatha yoga cannot be brushed aside as mere exercises. They were devised long ago for the practice of Hindu meditation.*' So says another writer who has studied the influence of New Age practices among Catholics - and he goes on to describe the well-known lotus position: '*Once the practitioner is seated on the floor he pulls his legs in close to the hips, with feet resting on the opposite thighs. The erect back and head align the mythical energy centres or 'chakras', while the contact between forefinger and thumb supposedly prevents the 'life force' from dribbling out.*'

Whether one realises it or not, Yoga is a combination of physical exercises and the spiritual. No part of yoga can be separated from the philosophy behind it. Another New Age writer, someone who was deeply involved in New Age practices, says this: '*Often it is thought that Hatha Yoga is benign and somehow disassociated from the rest of the total Yoga system. This is a potentially dangerous fallacy. Hatha Yoga is part and parcel of the whole of yoga, with many of the same dangers. In addition, it also functions as a door through which the curious sometimes walk to explore other aspects of the New Age.*'

And here are a few words from a long-time Yoga practitioner and teacher who has since renounced her involvement in order to warn others: *'Hatha Yoga aims for the conscious control of the physical and 'subtle energy' bodies. This emphasis on 'energy' sees the world as a domain defined by science, technique and control. Yogic control of body and mind is particularly popular now as we in the West develop a renewed fascination with self-realisation programmes and the coming evolution in consciousness known as the New Age.'* These words should be heeded - forewarned is forearmed!

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