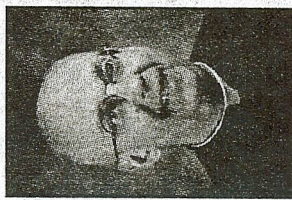


Question and Answer

Moral questions surrounding the usage of yoga in modern times

By Fr. Paul A. La Fontaine



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It is often practiced by Hindus, Buddhists, and Jainists.

Yoga is a system of mental and physical exercises originally intended to help a person transcend the body, sin, and the material world in order: (1) to gain power over oneself, the world, other persons, and even God (magic), or (2) to come to a knowledge of and oneness with God (mysticism) that leads to the complete dissolving of the self.

In much of Oriental religion, God is looked upon as an impersonal "worldsoul" to which everyone and everything belongs. This is called monistic pantheism. Briefly, this means that all things are one, and all things are God. Knowledge of God in

this system comes through intuition rather than through revelation, as in the Judeo-Christian tradition. One returns to the worldsoul through the cycles of metempsychosis, also known as transmigration of souls or reincarnation.

Eastern meditation techniques, such as yoga, involve emptying the mind of all thought. This takes a lifetime of practice, so it is impossible for Westerners to pick up in a few sessions as adults. One of the reasons this is so difficult even for Easterners is that it is unnatural. The mind naturally wants to be active all the time (which is why we dream in our sleep, for example). Western forms of meditation take advantage of this, by beginning mental prayer with imagining events in the lives of Jesus, Mary, or the saints with the help of the rosary, spiritual reading, sacred art, or sacred music.

While it cannot be denied that many yogis have attained a degree of natural virtue (one thinks of Mahatma Gandhi, for example), the Catholic must remember that God has revealed in Christ that true liberation from sin and death comes only through the grace Jesus won for us in His suffering, death, and resurrection. He gives

us that grace in the sacraments of the Church. And we don't have to lose our identities in the process. The three Persons in One God are totally Other, and They create us and love us, body and soul, for our own sakes.

Recently deceased Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., once saw a burlap banner in a church one Sunday. The message on the banner read, "God is other people!" He wished he had had a black magic marker so he could draw a comma between the words "other" and "people."

Yoga and the scriptures of Indian religion (the Upanishads, the Vedas, the Bhagavad-Gita, etc.) from time to time have enjoyed a certain vogue or faddishness in the West. This is the result of boredom with or even a hatred of one's own religion and a craving for the exotic.

In the latest flirtation with the East, some people try, with varying degrees of success, to divorce the physical exercise aspect of yoga from the religious aspect. A true yogi might find this troubling if not insulting (at least at first, until his or her equilibrium was restored).

But there has always been an element of superstition and the occult associated with yoga. As with ouija

boards, tarot cards, astrology, fortune telling, charms, potions, etc., the devil has often attacked vulnerable souls and led them away from true worship of the true God through them.

While there is certainly a place for the comparative study of religions in the interest of genuinely respecting, understanding, and dialoguing with people of different faiths and cultures, Catholics would be well advised to steer clear of the practice of any elements of other faiths, for fear of scandalizing anyone or of transgressing, even unintentionally, the very first commandment: "I am the Lord thy God; thou shalt not have strange gods before Me."

For a more detailed examination of yoga from a Catholic perspective, see *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1913) Vol. XIV, p. 626b and *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1967) Vol. XIV, pp. 1071-1073.

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