

# YOGA - A SPIRITUAL HEALTH WARNING

*'Yoga is, characteristically, the occult use of breathing exercises, physical postures and meditation for alleged improved mental functioning, health maintenance and 'spiritual enlightenment'. The problems with yoga are its inherently religious nature, the difficulty of separating theory and practice and, potentially, psychological and spiritual hazards.'*

From 'A Parent's Handbook for Identifying New Age Beliefs'.

## INTRODUCTION

Is yoga a suitable activity for Christians? The simple answer to that question is - no! And the probable response to that answer is - why not? So, by way of explanation, this leaflet sets out the reasons why yoga is regarded as an activity which may undermine the Faith of any unsuspecting Christian. In this, as in all matters concerning the Faith, the authoritative voice of the Church must be heard and acted upon. Why take risks when it comes to spiritual welfare? There are many forms of physical exercise which can be undertaken without putting oneself in contact with a practice which is based on, and rooted in, a non-Christian, Eastern spiritual philosophy and lifestyle. 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. (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church n.363)

## WHAT DOES THE CHURCH SAY ABOUT IT?

In February 2003 the Vatican issued a document entitled 'Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life' which traces the development of the New Age movement and the current widespread acceptance of many elements of New Age 'spirituality'. In the section headed '*What is new about New Age?*', the document explains: '*Some of the traditions which flow into the New Age are: ancient Egyptian occult practices, Cabbalism, gnosticism, Sufism, Druidic lore, Celtic Christianity, mediaeval alchemy, Renaissance hemeticism, Zen Buddhism, Yoga and so on. Here is what is new about New Age. It is a syncretism of esoteric and secular elements.'* In the section headed '*The fundamental principles of New Age thinking*', we are warned that: '*Some stages on the way to self-redemption are preparatory (meditation, body harmony, releasing self-healing energies). They are the starting points for processes of spiritualisation, perfection and enlightenment which help people to acquire further self-control and psychic concentration on 'transformation' of the individual into 'cosmic consciousness'. The destiny of the human person is a series of successive reincarnations of the soul in different bodies.....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.'* And in the same section it is pointed out that: '*There is talk of God among New Age practitioners but it is not a personal, transcendent God. Nor is it the Creator and sustainer of the universe, but an 'impersonal energy' with which it forms a cosmic unity.'* This is the spiritual 'philosophy' of which yoga is a part.

## QUOTES FROM THE PRACTITIONERS THEMSELVES

From the recent 'Mind, Body, Spirit' partwork: '*The Asanas (i.e. physical exercises) are the physical postures that form the core of any Yoga session, invigorating the body and mind. The term '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.'*

From an issue of 'Kindred Spirit' - a New Age magazine published in the U.K.: '*Hatha Yoga is the necessary springboard which allows one to dive into deeper esoteric and consciousness-evolving practices'*.

And from the programme of the 2005 National Conference of the dissident 'Call to Action' organisation in Milwaukee, USA: '*Carol Gantner leads morning prayer of gentle yoga and pranayama (i.e. breathing). Yoga is a sacrament, a symphony of soul and motion that emerges from the inside out. We bless the new day through sun salutation, half moon, mountain and other yoga postures.'*

Now, another quote from the 'Mind, Body, Spirit' partwork: *'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.'* A newspaper article promoted classes in Yoga by claiming that it is: *'a way of relieving the stresses of modern life...a way of dealing with sadness and trauma....improving one's confidence, happiness and creativity....enabling the individual to gain greater strength of mind and the ability to cope with unhappiness and face the sorrows of the world with peace.'* (Midland Tribune, May 27, 1995). And, again from the 'Mind, Body, Spirit' partwork: *'Yoga's popularity in the West can be attributed to our need to counter the stresses of modern-day life. In the high-pressured environment in which most of us live, Yoga offers an alternative approach to health based on five basic principles - exercise, breathing, relaxation, diet and meditation. Yogic practices demand self-discipline, but perseverance can lead to a profound sense of well-being and contentment.'* If we looked no further than these last two quotes we might conclude that it all sounds quite harmless and potentially beneficial. But, we would be wrong. Claims such as these only serve to illustrate how our Faith can be undermined. After all, if these benefits can be obtained from a daily 20-minute Yoga session who needs the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the Sacraments and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit? The Sun salutation or Morning Prayers - which is it to be? The following paragraphs provide the answer.

### **BISHOPS HAVE MADE THEIR VIEWS KNOWN**

A few years ago the bishops of overwhelmingly Catholic Croatia objected to government proposals to teach yoga in state schools - and they urged parents to oppose the plans too. *'The long-term effects would be incalculable'* said the bishops. *'The state is attempting to introduce culturally-alien influences that are at odds with Croatia's generally accepted values and cultural traditions.'* Similar projects were abandoned after Church objections in Austria, and the Czech Republic as well as in Slovakia whose bishops described yoga as *'a path to total atheism'* which *'rejects faith in God the Creator, Jesus Christ, the whole act of redemption and Christianity.'* (reported in The Universe, July 27, 2003)

### **SOME DEFINITIONS AND EXPLANATIONS**

*'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.'* (from 'A New Age of the Spirit?' published by The Irish Theological Commission, 1994)

*'Yoga: Sanskrit for 'yoke' or 'union'. In Hinduism, the general category of various kinds of disciplines meant to unite a person with the divine. Yoga can refer to physical (hatha), mental (raja), sexual (tantra) or other disciplines to achieve enlightenment.'* (from 'Catholics and the New Age' by Fr Mitch Pacwa, S.J. published 1992)

*'The positions (in Hatha yoga) cannot be brushed aside as mere exercises. They were devised long ago for the practice of Hindu meditation. An example is 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 serve to align the mythical energy centres or 'chakras', while the forefinger/thumb contact supposedly prevents the 'life force' from dribbling out.'* (quoted from 'The Unicorn in the Sanctuary' by Randy England, published in 1990)

*'Yoga is a combination of physical exercises and the spiritual. No part of yoga can be separated from the philosophy behind it. If you do the exercises you accept the philosophy.'* (from a Reachout Trust leaflet entitled 'Influences from the East')

*'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, for 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.'* (quoted from Randall Baer's 1989 book, 'Inside the New Age Nightmare')

## A SERIOUS WARNING

The following extracts are taken from the website of Clare McGrath Merkle who was a student and practitioner of the eastern healing arts. Since renouncing her involvement with Yoga and the other so-called healing arts she has devoted much of her time to warning about the dangers of New Age beliefs and practices. She says: *'Those in pastoral ministry are finding Catholics in crisis as a result of their involvement in yoga without the knowledge, discernment or reliable resources to effectively minister to them. In order to address this growing problem, it is crucial that there be a greater awareness of the problem and a commitment to minister and educate on the part of Christian leaders.'* It is important to note that these comments are based on the writer's own experience as an advanced yoga practitioner and observations made during her years in the society of practitioners.

*'Hatha Yoga aims for the conscious control of the physical and 'subtle energy' bodies. This emphasis on 'energy', a characteristic of yoga, changes the perception of the world as the arena of divine grace into the perception of 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 the human potential movement (which is) hailed as the precursor of a soon-to-occur evolution in consciousness known as the New Age.'..... 'Adding to the general confusion about the legitimacy of yoga is the guidance Christians receive from Catholic clergy, teachers and spiritual counsellors who practice, write about and advocate Eastern practices, especially yoga, often mixing them with Catholic mysticism.'* For example: *'One Catholic rehabilitation centre for religious is known to teach yoga to those having already had nervous breakdowns.'.....But, 'In any light, yoga is incontrovertibly incompatible with and antithetical to the Christian walk.'... ..'The dangers involved in yogic practice are as great as or greater than any occult pursuit.....'*

The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'occult' as something secret, meant only for the initiated; beyond the range of ordinary knowledge; involving the supernatural, mysterious, magical. Finally, the Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us (n.2117) that: *'All practices of magic or sorcery, by which one attempts to tame occult powers, so as to place them at one's service and have a supernatural power over others - even if this were for the sake of restoring their health - are gravely contrary to the virtue of religion.'*

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