

IS YOGA HINDU?

On the Fuzziness of Religious Boundaries

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In 2010 an unlikely controversy erupted after an advocacy group for Hindus in the United States, the Hindu American Foundation, inaugurated a campaign called “Take Back Yoga.” Aseem Shukla, one of the organization’s cofounders, writing that Hinduism is “a victim of overt intellectual property theft,” exhorted Hindus to “take back yoga and reclaim the intellectual property of their spiritual heritage.”¹ For Shukla, the existence of the Yoga Sutras, Patanjali’s second-century CE Sanskrit text on yoga, is proof that yoga is an essentially Hindu practice. This understanding of yoga found favor not only among Hindus but, perhaps unexpectedly, also among a segment of Christians. Albert Mohler, a Southern Baptist theologian, extended Shukla’s argument to what may have been its logical conclusion by insisting that Christians were flirting with spiritual destruction by taking on such ineluctably non-Christian practices. Although Shukla did not go so far as to argue that yoga’s Hindu character means that members of other religious traditions cannot practice it, other Hindus seconded Mohler’s point, arguing that the philosophy that underpins yoga is fundamentally Hindu and fundamentally contrary to Christian dogma and practice.²

1. Aseem Shukla, “The Theft of Yoga,” *Washington Post*, April 18, 2010, newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/aseem_shukla/2010/04/nearly_twenty_million_people_in.html (accessed February 15, 2013).

2. For instance, see Rajiv Malhotra, “A Hindu View of ‘Christian Yoga,’” *Huffington Post*, November 8, 2010, www.huffingtonpost.com/rajiv-malhotra/hindu-view-of-christian-yoga_b_778501.html (accessed February 15, 2013).



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Controversies and disagreements such as these about boundaries between religions are not new, although they are today better publicized than ever before. In 1989, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, later to become Pope Benedict XVI, issued a “Letter on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation.” There, he stated that attempts “to fuse Christian meditation to that which is non-Christian” should be examined so “as to avoid the danger of falling into syncretism” and that forms of meditation that involve bodily posture “can degenerate into a cult of the body.”³ Despite the anodyne tone of this letter (unlike Mohler, Ratzinger nowhere categorically asserts that Christians should not practice yoga), it provoked anger from some yogis who saw this as another example of Christian intolerance. Going back a century earlier, we find still more debates about Christianity and yoga. The most influential modern Hindu voice in the west, Swami Vivekananda, is remembered for the positive impression he made upon those who attended his speech at the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago in 1893. Less well remembered are the polemics between Vivekananda and the Methodist Bishop W. X. Ninde, recorded in the *Detroit Free Press* in 1894, concerning the relative value of the Christian and Hindu religions.⁴ Even more surprising might be Vivekananda’s own intolerance toward Hatha Yoga, the type of yoga that emphasizes mastery of physical postures: “Our Bengal is the land of Bhakti [devotion] and Jnana [wisdom]. Yoga is scarcely mentioned there. What little there is, is but the queer breathing exercises of the Hatha-Yoga—which is nothing but a kind of gymnastics.”⁵

Vivekananda’s attitude toward body-oriented yoga practice was not unusual for educated Hindus of his era. Hatha yogis (or *jogis*, in the vernacular) were popularly considered little more than bands of disreputable vagrants, fakirs who performed feats of endurance and magic tricks to make a living. By contrast, Vivekananda championed what he called “Royal Yoga” (*raja-yoga*), a type of meditational yoga based on his own modern reconstruction of certain teachings from Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras.⁶ It is clear that different Hindus have given different answers to the questions surrounding yoga. Who should practice yoga? Is postural yoga a nonsectarian spiritual practice that bestows its benefits on people of all faiths, as Deepak Chopra and many other yoga aficionados maintain? Is it a fundamentally Hindu practice fit only for those who would renounce their Christian, Islamic, or Jewish beliefs, as a few Hindus have recently argued? Or perhaps, following Vivekananda’s line of thought, is postural yoga nothing but “a kind of gymnastics,” open to all yet devoid of any spiritual benefit?

3. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and Alberto Bovone, “Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger’s Letter on Christian Meditation,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 11 (1991): 128–29, at 133.

4. Philip Goldberg, *American Veda* (New York: Harmony Books, 2010), 78.

5. As quoted in Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 73.

6. For an earlier understanding of *raja-yoga* as a type of tantric practice, see David White, ed., *Yoga in Practice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 242–54.



In this essay, I will briefly reflect on two periods in the history of yoga that, although distant from our time, may yet provide some lessons to help answer these tangled questions. First, I will examine the hostilities toward Patanjali's yoga expressed in the first millennium by some authors who were influential in shaping what we now call Hinduism. Second, I will discuss the fascinating ways in which the Hindu practices of the Hatha yogis became intertwined in second-millennium India with the teachings of the Sufis, adherents of the mystical branch of Islam. The way yoga has interpenetrated such different traditions as Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity is historical evidence of the permeability, or “fuzziness,” of boundaries between religions.⁷

Patanjali's Yoga and Its Early Critics

Patanjali's Yoga Sutras have been translated into English many times, more times than any Sanskrit text except the Bhagavad Gita. Since his text was popularized in the West by Swami Vivekananda in the late nineteenth century, yoga practitioners have often regarded Patanjali as representing the authoritative “classical” teaching of yoga. Yet yogis who practice one of the many forms of modern postural yoga and claim Patanjali as the founder of their lineage are sometimes at a loss to explain why Patanjali has so little to say about yoga postures, or *asanas*. Of the 195 *sutras* that make up Patanjali's text, only three discuss postures:

2.46 Posture should be steady and comfortable.

2.47 [Such posture should be attained] by the relaxation of effort and by absorption in the infinite.

2.48 From this, one is not afflicted by the dualities of opposites.⁸

Despite Patanjali's reticence on the topic of *asana*, he is still considered by many Western yogis to be the most important yoga author. Furthermore, despite his lack of mention of any of the gods of Hinduism, modern Hindus regard him as the most important Hindu yogi.

Still, Patanjali's yoga has also had its detractors, and not just among Southern Baptists. According to other Sanskrit authors of his own era, Patanjali's teachings were deeply flawed. One reason given was that he relied on the Samkhya school of philosophy for his yoga's philosophical framework. Samkhyas taught that there are two fundamental principles: spirit (*purusa*) and material nature

7. The term *religion* originated in Europe and was adopted only relatively recently in Asian languages. The assumption, for instance, that a person can belong to only one religion at a time is not universal. For one case study, see Jason Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

8. Edwin Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali: A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary* (New York: North Point Press, 2009), 283–89.

(*prakṛti*). Unlike later nondualists in India, Samkhya philosophy teaches that true philosophical understanding reveals the absolute difference of these two principles. The ultimate goal, described both by Samkhya and by Patanjali's Yoga Sūtras, is "aloneness" (*kaivalya*), portrayed as each individual spirit separating itself from material nature in its true form as pure consciousness. Interestingly, the Samkhya-Yoga ideal of aloneness most closely resembles the teachings of Jain philosophy, more than it does Buddhism or Hindu Vedānta.

Also like the Jains, both the Samkhya and Patanjali's Yoga school stressed the centrality of nonviolence (*ahiṃsa*), the principle reinterpreted and made famous in the twentieth century by Mohandas Gandhi. The question of animal sacrifice, in particular, created a deep division between religious sects in the first millennium CE. The Vedas, the ancient texts revered by most Hindus as the highest authority, set down an elaborate system of rituals that include the sacrifice of horses, goats, and cattle to gods such as Indra, king of the Vedic pantheon. Yet by the second century CE, the approximate date of Patanjali's Yoga Sūtras, the teaching of *ahiṃsa* had gained a wide foothold, not only among Buddhists and Jains but also among other groups of renunciators such as the followers of Patanjali's yoga. Patanjali teaches nonviolence as the very first of the ethical observances and insists that it is a universal value, "not exempted by one's class, place, time, or circumstance."⁹ Commentators on the Yoga Sūtras were quite explicit in their condemnation of the Vedic ritualists, reaffirming that all acts of violence, even the holy violence enjoined by the Vedas, caused demerit that would eventually land the sacrificer in hell. In this way, Patanjali's Yoga philosophy and its affiliated school of Samkhya had more in common with Buddhism than with the exegetical schools of Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta, which insisted on the absolute infallibility of the Vedas.

For Kumarila Bhaṭṭa (seventh century CE), the most influential of the Vedic ritual theorists, Patanjali's rejection of holy violence, and by extension his rejection of the absolute authority of the Vedas, loomed especially large. Kumarila wrote, "The treatises on righteousness and unrighteousness that have been adopted in Samkhya, Yoga, Pāncarātra, Paśupata, and Buddhist works . . . are not accepted by those who know the triple Veda."¹⁰ In the eighth century CE, the Vedānta philosopher Śaṅkara, another author who took the Veda to be the absolute source of all knowledge, similarly attacked Patanjali's yoga. For Śaṅkara, the primary problem was not Patanjali's rejection of Vedic ritual injunctions. Rather, Śaṅkara found fault in what he considered to be Patanjali's anti-Vedic dualist philosophy, which relied on the Samkhya school's idea of the two absolute,

9. Bryant, *Yoga Sūtras of Patanjali*, 248.

10. Andrew J. Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 3.

irreducible entities, spirit and nature. Sankara, committed to nondualism, argued that the dualism of the Samkhya and yoga schools showed that both were non-Vedic: “By the rejection of the Samkhya tradition, the Yoga tradition too has been rejected. That is because contrary to revealed texts, the Yoga school teaches that primordial nature is an independent cause . . . even though this is taught neither in the Vedas nor among the people.”¹¹

Among groups of yogis who did agree with Patanjali that violence was an absolute, universal evil, the Pasupatas stand out as the most influential in the first millennium CE. While relatively obscure today, it is they, not Patanjali, who are the forefathers of the later medieval movement of Hatha Yoga. They also have more connection to the symbols and practices we now consider typically Hindu. Unlike Patanjali, for instance, they explicitly discuss the importance of the worship of Siva, one of the major gods of the post-Vedic Hindu pantheon. Their worship involved singing and dancing in praise of god, anticipating styles of Hindu devotionism that became more and more prominent in later centuries. Most important, they taught that yoga in its highest form consisted of the union (*sam-yoga*) of the yogi with the highest god, an understanding nowhere reflected in Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras. It is for this reason that the Pasupata commentator Kaundinya criticized Patanjali’s yoga, saying that “those who have won supposed release through Samkhya-Yoga, indeed all creatures from the god Brahma down to the animals, are considered ‘beasts.’”¹²

This is not just an example of yogic trash talk from the sixth century CE, although it is indeed that. It is also a theological statement, a reference to a trio of theological concepts that went on to influence other Hindu sects. According to Pasupatas, a *pasu*, or “beast,” is a being not yet liberated. The word *pati*, “master,” refers to Lord Siva himself, who is “master of beasts” (*pasu-pati*). Siva is the protector of all beings, and it is he who is ultimately responsible for bondage and liberation. The third concept is the *pasa*, “fetter.” It is through the fetters created by Lord Siva that beings are bound to the cycle of suffering and rebirth; it is also Lord Siva who removes their fetters. For Patanjali, liberation is by means of one’s own power, yet for the Pasupatas and other later groups of Hindus, it is god’s grace, and not the individual efforts of the yogi, that allows the individual self to join the ranks of the liberated beings.¹³ The playful image invoked through this trio of alliterative words—*pasu*, *pati*, *pasa*—is the nomadic life of the pastoral cattle herder.

11. My translation from the Sanskrit of Sankara’s commentary on Brahma Sutra 2.1.3, in *Brahmamimamsa-sutram*, ed. S. A. Kaundinyayana (Varanasi: Caukhamba Vidyabhavana, 2002), 540–42.

12. R. A. Sastri, ed., *The Pasupata Sutras with Pancarthabhāṣya of Kaundinya* (Trivandrum: University of Travancore, 1940), 5; my translation.

13. For a summary of Pasupata theology, see Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 5 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1955), 130–49.

Is there any good that may come of following Patanjali's teachings? An eighth-century Pasupata text, the "Song of Lord Siva" (*isvara-gita*), gives a more evenhanded assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of Patanjali's approach. In that text, Lord Siva says:

Yoga is known to be of two kinds.
The first is considered the yoga
of non-being. The other is the
great yoga, the very best of all yogas.

The yoga in which one's own essence
is known to be empty, free from
false appearances, is named the yoga
of non-being. Through it, one sees the self.

The yoga in which one discerns the self
as eternally blissful, free from blemish,
and united with me is called
the great yoga of the supreme Lord.¹⁴

The "yoga of non-being" described here refers to cessative yogas such as Patanjali's that do not understand the ultimate state of liberation as union with a supreme deity or ultimate reality. Such yogas enable the practitioner to discern the existence of a pure, eternal self free from material nature (*prakṛti*). This yoga of nonbeing does not, however, reveal the self's unity with Lord Siva. It is useful as a means to discriminate between the true, eternal self and the egoistic self that is subject to change, a preparatory practice for liberation. But it is powerless to move the yogi from this dualistic discernment of the self's difference from material nature to the higher knowledge of the self's oneness with God. That job falls to the "great yoga," understood as the union of the self (*atman*) and the Lord (*isvara*). The word *yoga* itself comes from the Sanskrit verbal root *yuj*, meaning to join or unite. One of the peculiarities of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, however, is that this is not how he understands the term. Indeed, the ultimate goal of Patanjali's yoga is the opposite: it is the "disunion" (*vi-yoga*) of the two fundamental principles of Samkhya-Yoga philosophy, *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*.

In light of Patanjali's uneasy relationship to the yoga traditions of union with god presented in texts such as the Bhagavad Gita (Song of Lord Krishna) and Isvara Gita (Song of Lord Siva), what is his connection to Hinduism as we understand it today? Aseem Shukla, cofounder of the Hindu American Foundation, implies that Patanjali's text is proof that yoga's roots are unambiguously Hindu, rather than Buddhist, Jain, or Islamic:

14. Translation of Isvara Gita 11.6–7, from Andrew J. Nicholson, *Lord Siva's Song: The Isvara Gita* (Albany: State University of New York Press, forthcoming).



Hinduism in common parlance is identified more with holy cows than *Gomukhasana*, the notoriously arduous twisting posture; with millions of warring gods rather than the unity of divinity of Hindu tradition — that God may manifest and be worshiped in infinite ways; as a tradition of colorful and harrowing wandering ascetics more than the spiritual inspiration of Patanjali, the second century BCE commentator and composer of the *Yoga Sutras*, that form the philosophical basis of Yoga practice today. . . .

So Hinduism, the religion that has no known origins or beginnings is now younger than yoga? What a ludicrous contention when the *Yoga Sutras* weren't even composed until the 2nd Century BCE [*sic*]. These deniers seem to posit that Hinduism appropriated yoga so other religions may as well too! Hindus can only sadly shake their heads, as by this measure, soon we will read as to how karma, dharma and reincarnation — the very foundations of Hindu philosophy — are only ancient precepts that early Hindus of some era made their own.¹⁵

The thread of Shukla's argument is slightly difficult to grasp here, perhaps in part because of confusion surrounding the use of the words *Hinduism* and *yoga*, as well as a confusion of dates (most scholars date the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali between the second and fourth centuries CE, not second century BCE).¹⁶ As Shukla rightly acknowledges, Patanjali was a relative latecomer to the yogic scene. However, far from being proof of the true Hindu nature of yoga, Patanjali's text exemplifies the ambiguity of the very notion of "Hinduism" as applied to the first millennium CE in India. Is Patanjali's text Hindu? It is hard to say, as the word *Hindu* was not regularly spoken in any Indian language until fifteen centuries after Patanjali.¹⁷ In some ways, it seems the *Yoga Sutras* have the characteristics of a "Hindu" text; for instance, they state that one of the preliminary stages of yoga is "contemplation of the Lord" (*isvara-pranidhana*). Patanjali also says that the syllable designating this Lord is "Om." Yet as Patanjali's critics Kumarila, Sankara, and Kaundinya point out, in other ways the text falls short. According to Kumarila, whose entire project was the systematic defense of Vedic ritual, Patanjali comes dangerously close to the Buddhists in denying that all rituals, including animal sacrifices, must be done exactly as they are enjoined in the Vedas. Sankara, celebrated by many Hindus as the greatest mind in their religion's history, describes the dualistic philosophy that Patanjali presents as non-Vedic. For the Pasupata author Kaundinya, the problem is that Patanjali is not theistic enough.

15. Shukla, "Theft of Yoga."

16. By referring to Patanjali as a "commentator," Aseem Shukla appears to accept the theory that the author of the *Yoga Sutras* was the same person as the grammarian who composed the *Mababbasya* (*Great Commentary*) in approximately the second century BCE. Most scholars today believe that there were two different authors named

Patanjali, one who wrote the *Mababbasya*, and the other who wrote the *Yoga Sutras* four hundred to six hundred years later.

17. On early uses of the terms *Hindu* and *Hinduism*, see Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism*, 196–201.

Patanjali presents “contemplation of the Lord” as a preliminary practice, a part of one of his eight limbs of yoga. Furthermore, Patanjali nowhere identifies the “Lord” (*isvara*) that he speaks of as any one of the familiar gods of the Hindu pantheon. Though some have tried to argue that Patanjali’s god was Siva, Vishnu, or Krishna, Patanjali’s Sutras themselves are mute on this question. But the problem here is not Patanjali’s. It is our problem in attempting to apply to him a concept of “Hinduism” that did not exist in his era. What we confidently know is that, according to many Siva-worshippers as well as to the upholders of Vedic authority in the first millennium CE, Patanjali’s teachings were defective.

If Patanjali was indeed drawing upon earlier yogic sources, were those sources as unambiguously Hindu as Aseem Shukla and the Hindu American Foundation proclaim? In the twentieth century, many books on the history of Indian religions, such as Mircea Eliade’s pathbreaking *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, traced yoga’s origin to between 2600 and 1900 BCE. Their evidence came from archaeological sites in the Indus River Valley, where small carved stones, designed for stamping clay seals, seemed to show humanoid figures seated in a yoga posture. One tantalizing stone in particular was interpreted by the British archaeologist Sir John Marshall as a “proto-Siva” figure doing yoga. If true, this would establish that thousands of years before Patanjali and the Pasupata Sutras, Siva was worshipped by yogis in South Asia. However, in the past thirty years scholarly consensus has shifted away from this interpretation. Among the doubts expressed by scholars: if these were indeed yogis depicted on the Indus Valley seals, why did the artistic depiction of yogis disappear for almost two thousand years, until the first century CE? And why did these first-century artworks depict Buddhist and Jain yogis, with depictions of Siva coming only later? Surely, the burden of proof here must be on the person who seeks to make a connection between these geographically and temporally distant artistic representations. As David Gordon White remarks, “Anyone seeking to reconstruct the history of yoga and yogis must resist the temptation of projecting modernist constructions . . . onto the past.”¹⁸ Like a Rorschach blot, the Indus Valley “proto-Siva” seal may tell us more about modern longings than it does about the existence of yogis in the Indus Valley civilization 4,000 years ago.

A more sober reading of the historical record suggests that the types of spiritual exercises we now categorize together as yoga, including methods of breath control, mental concentration, and seated postures, developed in the first millennium BCE in South Asia. The development of these exercises was not the

18. David Gordon White, *Sinister Yogis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 48. For a summary of recent arguments surrounding the “proto-Siva” seal, see Geoffrey Samuel, *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3–8.

exclusive “intellectual property” of any single sect or religion. Rather, it was a project shared among diverse groups that we may retrospectively label “Hindu,” “Buddhist,” and “Jain,” along with other sects, such as the “Fatalists” (Ajivikas), whose teachings have largely been lost. Thus we find, in the second half of the first millennium BCE, the first unambiguous references to “yoga” and meditation (*dhyana*) in certain late sections of the Vedas, along with the early texts of the Buddhists and Jains.¹⁹ As the influential historian Johannes Bronkhorst usefully reminds us, “The spiritual discipline yoga does not belong to any philosophical system, but may, or may not, get connected with a variety of philosophies, depending on the circumstances.”²⁰ Neither Patanjali, nor the Buddhists, nor the Pasupatas suggested that yoga belonged only to one group. Yoga in classical India was like open-source software. It was distributed freely and modified by different authors, all competing to come up with the best version for liberation.

Sufis and Yogis in the Mid-Second Millennium

The issue of determining whether Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras is “Hindu” is largely a problem of anachronism, since the word *Hindu* was not used in any of the Indian languages of Patanjali’s time. While his text shares certain features with religious movements that we today consider Hindu, in other ways his text falls in the fuzzy, indeterminate realm of “neither Hindu nor not-Hindu.” However, jumping ahead approximately fourteen hundred years—to the mid-second millennium in northern India—“Hindu” was an epithet that speakers of Indian languages were beginning to use to describe themselves. Furthermore, contrary to some recent accounts that *Hindu* merely had geographical or ethnic connotations, this term was sometimes used in an unmistakably religious way in the late medieval period.

We find one remarkable example in the sixteenth-century poet Eknath’s humorous “Dialogue between Hindu and Turk” (*Hindu-Turk Samvad*), written in the vernacular language of Marathi:

Turk: Your Brahma laid his daughter.
The Vedas he preaches are all false.
Your Sastras, your Vedas, your “Om”
Are all evil tricks . . .

Hindu: Father Adam and Eve made a pair.
You have read this book.
You don’t know your scriptures, you fool.
Why do you quarrel with us?

19. See White, *Sinister Yogis*, 38–39; Samuel, *Origins of Yoga and Tantra*, 133–40.

20. Johannes Bronkhorst, “Yoga and Sesvara Samkhya,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 9 (1981): 317.

Adam and Eve enjoyed each other:
 From that came the world of men!
 You give your name as Adam.
 You speak, and make a fool of yourself!²¹

Here and in other works of the same period, the word *Hindu* not only denotes a geographic identity but also refers to modes of belief and practice that we would nowadays refer to as religious.²² It is also clear that authors such as Eknath, who was born a Hindu Brahmin, had at least a basic understanding of the tenets and practices of Islam.

However, when we look at the ways that yoga was described in texts between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries in northern India, it is remarkable how frequently we find forms of what we now think of as “Hindu yoga” mixed with the Islamic practices of the Sufis. There appears to have been impetus to traverse this boundary from both sides: on the Hindu side, by a group associated with Hatha Yoga known as the Nath Yogis, and among Muslims, by Sufis of the Chishti and Shattari orders. The phenomenon of Muslims practicing yoga in India continued well into the period of British rule. In the British census of 1891, for instance, under the heading “miscellaneous and disreputable vagrants,” 38,137 “Muhammadan Jogis” (yogis) were enumerated in the province of Punjab alone; more than 17 percent of the yogis counted in the census were Muslim. By 1921, the number of Muslim yogis counted in the census had fallen to less than 5 percent.²³ What at first glance may have seemed a typographical error by a British official was actually more evidence for a well-established Islamic branch of yogis.

The most notable record of Sufi adoption of yoga practices comes from a text called the *Pool of Nectar* (in Sanskrit, *Amrtakunda*). This text no longer exists in its Sanskrit or Hindi original, but a scholar of Sufism, Carl Ernst, has documented various recensions in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu.²⁴ These recensions are not so much translations as they are transcreations of what Ernst surmises was originally a Hindi text called the *Verses of Kamakhya*.²⁵ This earlier text seems to have contained traces of the influences of both the Nath Yogis and the Kaula tantric tradition made famous by the Kashmiri philosopher Abhinavagupta. Yet the *Pool of Nectar* had an influence far beyond its origins in India. One anonymous Arabic translator, perhaps in the fifteenth century, incorporated

21. As translated in Fred Clothey, ed., *Images of Man: Religion and Historical Process in South Asia* (Madras: New Era Publications, 1982), 180–81.

22. See Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism*, 196–201.

23. Carl Ernst, “Situating Sufism and Yoga,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 15 (2005): 38.

24. Carl Ernst, “The Islamization of Yoga in the *Amrtakunda* Translations,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 13 (2003): 202–3.

25. Ernst, “Islamization of Yoga,” 206.

an introductory narrative into his version of the text that can be traced back to the Gnostic *Acts of Thomas* in Syriac or Greek. Another Arabic recension ended up in the hands of the fifteenth-century Yemeni Jewish scholar Alu'el, who incorporated its tantric yoga teachings about the breaths of the right- and left-hand channels, corresponding to sun and moon, respectively, in his exegesis of the Book of Genesis.²⁶ Although modern Hindu nationalists argue that the theologies of Islam and Christianity make those religions incompatible with yoga, the dispersion and popularity of the translations of the *Pool of Nectar* seem to indicate the contrary.

One example of the way that the *Pool of Nectar* adapts yogic teachings to make sense to a Muslim audience is its adaptation of the seven *cakras*, or power centers, which are among the most common features of tantric yoga physiology. Each of the seven *cakras*, beginning with the root *cakra* located at the perineum, is associated with one of the Arabic names of God.

| <i>Location</i> | <i>Form of address</i> | <i>(Name of God, in Arabic)</i> |
|-----------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Seat | "O Lord" | (<i>ya rabb</i>) |
| 2. Genitals | "O Mighty One" | (<i>ya quadir</i>) |
| 3. Navel | "O Creator" | (<i>ya khaliq</i>) |
| 4. Heart | "O Generous" | (<i>ya karim</i>) |
| 5. Throat | "O Controller" | (<i>ya musakkbir</i>) |
| 6. Eyebrows | "O Knowing" | (<i>ya 'alim</i>) |
| 7. Brain | "O Lifegiver" | (<i>ya muhyi</i>) ²⁷ |

The correspondences in this text are actually much more elaborate, including Sanskrit mantras spelled phonetically (*hum*, *aum*, *brim*, *brinsrin*, *bray*, *yum*, and *bansamansa*) and the names of astrological bodies (Saturn, Mars, Jupiter, Sun, Venus, Mercury, and Moon). Perhaps most provocative for a monotheistic text, each of the seven *cakras* also corresponds to the name of one of seven goddesses called *yoginis* ("female yogis"), which include Sarasvati and Kali.²⁸ This list seems to have been inspired by the tantric cults of the *yoginis*, who are usually enumerated as sixty-four, along with seven mother goddesses called *matrikas*.²⁹

Also employed in the *Pool of Nectar* is a technique of "translating gods," finding Near Eastern equivalents for the gods and holy men of South Asia. So, for instance, the gods Brahma and Visnu are equated with Abraham and Moses, respectively. Three major figures of the Nath Yoga tradition, including its mythical founder, Matsyendra Nath ("Lord of the Fishes"), and his disciple Gorakh Nath, are also equated with Islamic prophets, in a section concerning complete control of the breath:

26. Ernst, "Situating Sufism and Yoga," 32.

28. Ernst, "Islamization of Yoga," 208.

27. Translation adapted from Ernst, "Islamization of Yoga," 208.

29. Ernst, "Islamization of Yoga," 219–20.

When you have reached this station, and this condition becomes characteristic of you, closely examine three things with thought and discrimination: 1) the embryo, how it breathes while it is in the placenta, though its mother's womb does not respire; 2) the fish, how it breathes in the water, and the water does not enter it; 3) and the tree, how it attracts water in its veins and causes it to reach its heights. The embryo is Sheikh Gorakh, who is Khidr (peace be upon him), the fish is Shaykh Minanath [Matsyendranath], who is Jonah, and the tree is Shaykh Chaurangi, who is Ilyas [Elijah], and they are the ones who have reached the water of life.³⁰

The technique of finding Islamic equivalents for Indian yogis and gods shown here has strong resemblance to the method of “translating gods” described by the Egyptologist Jan Assmann, in which Egyptian gods were identified by Greek authors in terms of their Hellenistic equivalents. So Amun, chief of the Egyptian gods, was understood to be Zeus; Apollo was identified with the sun god Horus, and so forth.³¹

While “translating gods” may appear to be a technique inappropriate for a monotheistic religion such as Islam, historically most Muslims in Persia and South Asia have accepted that charismatic saints, such as Moinuddin Chishti, who established the Chishti Sufi order in India, possess miraculous powers (they are famous from accounts of their holiness and wonder-working). The shrine where Moinuddin Chishti is buried in Ajmer, northern India, is a site of pilgrimage not only for Muslims but also for Sikhs and Hindus, who visit his tomb not as an abstract gesture of interreligious understanding, but for the very real spiritual and material benefits they hope to attain. Such is the case also for the tombs (or *samadhis*) where major saints of the Nath Yoga tradition are buried. In a landscape replete with saints and wonder-workers, it is little problem to equate the biblical Jonah with Matsyendranath, the first Nath Yoga patriarch, who while in the belly of a fish overheard Siva's teaching of yoga at the bottom of the ocean.³² In a similar spirit, an eighteenth-century Islamic text, *The Coral Rosary of Indian Antiquities*, describes India as a holy land because it was the site of Adam's descent to earth on the island of Sri Lanka after he was expelled from Eden.³³

30. Ernst, “Islamization of Yoga,” 211.

31. See Jan Assmann, “Translating Gods: Religion as a Factor of Cultural (Un)Translatability,” in *The Translatability of Cultures*, ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 25–36.

32. On Matsyendranath, see David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 222–29.

33. See Carl Ernst, “India as a Sacred Islamic Land,” in *Religions of India in Practice*, ed. Donald Lopez (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 556–63.

The Future of Religious Syncretism

Perhaps because Sufism's openness to and acceptance of other religions' practices and figures did not conform to Western stereotypes of Islam, many earlier scholars of Sufism sought to find evidence of its non-Islamic origins. William James, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), was merely recording the conventional thinking of his era when he wrote:

In the Mohammedan world the Sufi sect and various dervish bodies are the possessors of the mystical tradition. The Sufis have existed in Persia from the earliest times, and as their pantheism is so at variance with the hot and rigid monotheism of the Arab mind, it has been suggested that Sufism must have been inoculated into Islam by Hindu influences.³⁴

Among those who suggested the Hindu nature of Sufism was Eduard Sachau, who in 1888 wrote that "in the Arabian Sufism the Indian Vedanta reappears."³⁵ Such outlandish assumptions show that late nineteenth-, and early twentieth-century ideas about cross-religious influence were quite simplistic even among scholars, and the situation has not much improved.

In particular, the language of "syncretism" is still often invoked in order to explain religious cross-influence, as in Cardinal Ratzinger's warning about yoga.³⁶ The term *syncretism* itself has had a complicated cross-cultural history. As Assmann has noted, the Greek term *synkretismos* was used by Plutarch to refer not to religious mixing but rather to a custom on the island of Crete. When faced with a foreign threat, Crete's inhabitants would put aside their intramural differences to form a sacred alliance in order to repel the invaders.³⁷ Only later, beginning with the Protestant Reformation, was the word *syncretism* redefined as a false merging of incompatible doctrines and practices among Christian sects. The word's meaning has remained largely unchanged, though it now encompasses illicit religious mixing beyond Christian sects. Its pejorative sense and undifferentiated application to a variety of different cross-religious phenomena make syncretism essentially useless as an analytical category for the critical study of religion.

Implicit in this pejorative sense of *syncretism* is the idea that religious mixing is something that weakens or irrevocably taints the religion into which the foreign ideas are mixed. By some Christian accounts, even one "Sun Salutation" is a form of syncretism that threatens the possibility of salvation for a God-fearing Christian. Based on this understanding of yoga postures as fundamentally Hindu, even when stripped of all outward signs of religion, a debate is currently under-

34. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902; repr. Rockville, MD: Arc Manor Press, 2008), 294.

36. Ratzinger and Bovone, "Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger's Letter on Christian Meditation," 128.

35. As quoted in Ernst, "Islamization of Yoga," 200.

37. Assmann, "Translating Gods," 34.

way in a school district in Encinitas, California. There, a group of parents backed by the National Center for Law and Policy, a Christian advocacy group, has argued that performance of a yogic Sun Salutation in an elementary school gym class is a form of neopagan worship of the Hindu sun god Surya. The stricture applies whether or not the students themselves chant in Sanskrit or know even the English names of the physical postures they perform. Encinitas's program for yoga in schools is partially funded by the Jois Foundation, which is associated with the family of the recently deceased Shri K. Pattabhi Jois, one of the central figures in the twentieth-century invention of postural yoga.³⁸ Complicating this debate further is that Jois frequently in his writings stressed the spiritual benefits of yoga and that the National Center for Law and Policy, although opposing yoga in schools as a threat to the separation of temple and state, has frequently supported efforts by Christians to allow prayer in public schools.

The confusion surrounding these debates about the possibility of “Christian yoga” and about the practice of yoga in secular spaces such as public schools reflects an impoverished understanding of the way that religious practices and beliefs interpenetrate one another as a matter of course in pluralistic societies. In the metaphor of contamination underlying most of these debates, a drop of a foreign religious substance compromises the purity of that with which it comes into contact, like a sewer contaminating a pristine brook. The goal of the practicing Christian, therefore, is to keep her religion free of non-Christian influences. Similarly, the impossible goal of secularism implicit in the “wall of separation” metaphor is that the public school principal must keep her school free of all eruptions of private religion into the public sphere.

The examples I have provided here of religious mixing and religious indeterminacy in premodern South Asia, while seemingly exotic, are not fundamentally different from the way in which Christianity has absorbed, and at times been strengthened by, the intrusion of foreign, un-Christian elements. Christian theology at its very root borrowed concepts of the immortal soul and the infinity of God from Platonism and Stoicism: those concepts were absent in the Semitic, pre-Hellenized form of Christianity. Again, in the thirteenth century, debates about adulteration swirled around Thomas Aquinas, who was condemned by the archbishop of Paris and by the so-called Augustinians for introducing concepts from Aristotle to the pure Christian theology of Aquinas's predecessors. Of course, he went on to be canonized in 1323, and Thomism remains among the most robust Christian theological traditions to this day (and an influence on the

38. Katherine Stewart, “Protesting Yoga in Schools, but Welcoming Bible Study,” *Religion Dispatches*, February 18, 2003, www.religiondispatches.org/archive/culture/6843/protesting_yoga_in_schools__but_welcoming_bible_study/ (accessed February 28, 2013).

thought of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI). If indeed, as Aquinas wrote, “every truth, no matter who utters it, is from the holy Spirit,” then it should be possible for Christians today to acknowledge the potential value of infusions from non-Christian sources.³⁹

In lieu of the contamination model of religious mixing so common, not only in Christianity, but also in modern Islamist and Hindu nationalist discourses, we might look to the relatively young discipline of contact linguistics to add nuance to different types of cross-religious influence. On the one hand are examples of language mixing, like the introduction of foreign words into English (*mosquito* or *pajama* from Spanish and Hindi, respectively) that have no influence on the morphology or syntax of the English language. To make a plural of *pajama*, the speaker of English does not revert to the rules of the Hindi language (in which the plural is *pajame*) but, instead, adds the English suffix “s.” On the other hand, some language contact does function at a deeper level and alters syntax, as is the case with the influence of India’s regional languages on Indian English.⁴⁰ To make the analogy between language contact and religious contact, take, for example, a Protestant Christian who practices Transcendental Meditation, one of the most successful and “secularized” types of meditation derived from medieval Hindu practices.⁴¹ She sits in a comfortable chair for twenty minutes twice a day, focusing on the syllable *brim*. She knows this syllable comes from the Sanskrit language, but not much more than that. She has no idea, for instance, that this “seed mantra” was used in the liturgies of medieval tantric yogis to worship the mother goddess Bhuvanesvari, the “Mistress of the World.” Nor does her TM practice prevent her from attending church with her family or from praying there for the safekeeping of her son and daughter.

On the other hand, another type of religious mixing takes place in the practices of a South Indian Christian woman who venerates the Virgin Mary in ways reminiscent of the worship of the Hindu goddess. The Christian woman sings devotional songs in her native Tamil that take, from hymns of the Alvar saints, religious tropes of love for and separation from god. Moreover, she applies the practice of “auspicious viewing” (*darsan*) to an image of the Virgin. Both of these hypothetical cases are examples of “religious mixing.” In the first example, there is little or nothing adopted from Hinduism to displace Christian modes of worship and belief. The second, however, is a profound imposition of Hindu “ritual

39. As quoted in Jacques Maritain, *An Introduction to Philosophy* (1931; repr., New York: Continuum, 2005), 53.

40. This deeper type of linguistic influence is known as “source language agentivity,” as opposed to “recipient language agentivity.” For examples from Indian English, see Claudia Lange, *The Syntax of Spoken Indian English* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2012).

41. See Lola Williamson, *Transcendent in America: Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements as New Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 80–105.



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syntax” onto the Virgin Mary, here reconceptualized as a Hindu goddess in all but name. Both might be dismissed as mere syncretism by modern Christians and Hindus whose main concern is erecting walls at the borders between religions. However, the latter example should be much more troubling to them. For a secular theorist of ritual theory, is it also potentially much more exciting. These two examples of religious mixing are different in important ways. Both secular scholars of religion and theologians working within specific religious traditions need to develop a new vocabulary that will help them to describe such differences.

In this article, I have offered two examples of religious indeterminacy from premodern India. The first example of the “classical” yoga as presented in Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras illustrated yoga’s flexibility to be adapted for different philosophical schools and religions; for instance, practices that Patanjali represented as bringing about aloneness (*kaivalya*), the absolute disjunction (*vi-yoga*) of material nature and spirit, were theorized by the Pasupatas as merely preparatory for the eventual union (*sam-yoga*) of the yogi and Lord Shiva. The example of interchange between Sufis and Nath Yogis in the mid-second millennium CE showed that yoga has not been exclusive to the Indic traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, even in the premodern period. Muslims practiced yoga widely across northern India, without any apparent concern that they were violating their tenet that “there is no God but God.” To some observers, the many different recensions of *The Pool of Nectar* may seem a case study in contamination, in the dangers of blind syncretism. However, the number of translations of this text and their wide diffusion suggest that many audiences welcomed the practices described there as complementary to Sufi practices of breath control and God contemplation. More recently, Christians, such as the Benedictine monk John Main, have seen the potential of Hindu and Buddhist meditation to help revivify contemplative traditions within Christianity. I propose that rather than seeing “Christian yoga” as a sign of the apocalypse, or of the end of the Kali Yuga, we would better regard it as a promising new confluence (*samgama*), like “pure water poured into pure water.”⁴²

42. Katha Upanisad 4.15, translated in Patrick Olivelle, *Upanisads* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 242.