# Seeking to Clear a Path Between Yoga and Islam

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## Body

As a community activist in Queens, Muhammad Rashid has fought for the rights of immigrants held in detention, ***sought*** the preservation of local movie theaters and held a street fair to promote diversity.

But few of those causes brought him anywhere near as much grief and controversy as his stance on ***yoga***.

Mr. Rashid, a Muslim, said he had long believed that practicing ***yoga*** was tantamount to "denouncing my religion."

"***Yoga*** is not for Muslims," he said. "It was forbidden."

But after moving to New York in 1997 from Bahrain, he slowly began to rethink his stance. Now Mr. Rashid, 56, has come full circle: not only has he adopted ***yoga*** into his daily routine, but he has also encouraged other Muslims to do so -- putting himself squarely against those who consider ***yoga*** a sin against ***Islam***.

In New York City, where ***yoga*** has become as secular an activity as spinning or step aerobics, the potential sins of ***yoga*** are not typically debated by those clad in Lululemon leggings. But in some predominantly Muslim pockets like Jackson Heights, Queens, ***yoga*** has been slow to catch on, especially among first-generation immigrants, newly arrived from cultures where ***yoga*** is considered Hindu worship.

When Mr. Rashid, who also tutors children, had his students learn ***yoga*** to help improve their concentration, three Muslim students quit after a few ***yoga*** sessions, he said, in part, he believed, because of their families' stance toward the practice. "I am putting them in something extra that is not in the Muslim religion," he said. "The parents did not accept it."

The religious opposition to ***yoga*** also extends to some Christian sects. One widely publicized clash came in 2010, when R. Albert Mohler Jr., an evangelical leader and the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, declared the practice of ***yoga*** blasphemous because of what he said were its pantheistic roots.

In India, near-annual pushes by members of Parliament to make ***yoga*** compulsory in schools have riled Muslim parents who feel it bridges on indoctrination. When a member of Parliament proposed to insert ***yoga*** into most curriculums in 2010, wording was included to exempt things like madrasas, or Islamic schools.

Four years ago, a council of Malaysian Muslim clerics issued a fatwa against ***yoga***, declaring it haram, or forbidden by Islamic law. The ruling followed similar edicts in Egypt and Singapore, where one of the earliest bans was issued in the early 1980s.

The fatwas typically cited the Sanskrit chants that often flowed through ***yoga*** sessions and which are considered Hindu prayer by some Muslims. According to "***Yoga*** in the Hindu Scriptures" by H. Kumar Kaul, yogic principles

were first described in the Vedas, the Sanskrit scriptures that form the backbone of Hinduism, and are considered to be over 10,000 years old.

Even the word "namaste," which is often used to open and close a ***yoga*** session, invokes the divine.

Given that cultural history, it was understandable that when Mohd A. Qayyoom, an imam who runs the Muhammadi Community Center of Jackson Heights, joined a ***yoga*** demonstration at an interfaith festival in Jackson Heights last summer, it did not go unnoticed.

His participation drew instant reproach from the community, he said. "As soon as we finished our event, they said, 'Imam, what is that, why are you doing that?' " he said. " 'This is not within our ***Islam***.' "

But Imam Qayyoom said he had come to believe that ***Islam*** and ***yoga*** could be compatible -- if the Sanskrit benedictions are left out, he said, and women's skin-tight ***yoga*** gear is traded for more conservative garments. "Reformed, it will be more popular" among Muslims, he said. "It will not contradict with Islamic religion." Others are less convinced.

Anwar Hassan, 27, who is from Bangladesh and works in the Queen of Sheba grocery in Jackson Heights, said ***yoga***'s roots were irreconcilable with his faith.

"When I came here, I see there is ***yoga*** and everything, but we don't go," Mr. Hassan said. "A lot of people, they are new to it so they think it's a gym class, or something. But Hindu people started it, and I think it's Hindu religion, so I don't go."

When Alex Eingorn prescribed ***yoga*** recently to a Bangladeshi woman who came to him with spinal pain at his Better Health Chiropractic clinic in Midtown Manhattan, "she looked at me in horror," he said. "She said, 'I'm a Muslim, I can't practice a different religion.' " Mr. Eingorn persuaded her to try it, he said, by saying that in New York, it is considered a secular practice.

Mimi Borda, 46, who runs MiMi for Me ***Yoga***, a serene studio in Jackson Heights that is one of the neighborhood's only ***yoga*** centers, has had to make similar allowances. "If there is a little chanting going on, right away this is a turn- off" for some of the Muslims who sign up for her sessions, she said. "Often they won't come back."

In response, Ms. Borda has tailored certain classes, cutting out Sanskrit chants if she thinks it will upset certain students. "Emphasizing the physical, they're kind of cool with it," she says. "They feel safe."

For Ms. Borda, who has taught ***yoga*** to a variety of audiences, including Hasidic women in Brooklyn, it came as a shock, when shortly after opening a previous studio in the area eight years ago she was approached by a Muslim student who voiced concerns with customary chants like "ohm." She found herself fielding questions like " 'Is 'ohm' God? Is 'ohm' Allah?' " she said.

Ms. Borda adapted her classes for her new clientele, either omitting chanting, or adding both "shalom" and "amen" to the sign-off of namaste.

"A lot of us in the Western world, we look at it as anything that is going to enhance the way we look aesthetically," she said. Some Muslim students, she added, were "not looking at the physical aspect, they're looking at the spiritual aspect."

For many immersed in a culture where vinyasa ***yoga*** is more readily associated with a New York Sports Club than a Hindu temple, the origin matters little. And for some of the devout living here, the American conception has overridden the beliefs with which they were raised.

When Mr. Rashid finally took up ***yoga***, he said there were more similarities with his faith than contradictions. In salat, the five-times daily Muslim prayers, which entail a meditationlike centering of focus and several kneeling bows, he felt there were echoes of yogic poses.

"I discovered whatever I'm doing in ***yoga***, I'm doing five times a day in prayer," said Mr. Rashid, who is from Dhaka, Bangladesh.

During the daylong ***yoga*** class at the festival that Mr. Rashid helped organize in Jackson Heights last summer, classes were halted for salat. Imam Qayyoom and others performed those prayers on their ***yoga*** mats.

It dawned on him then, the imam said, that many Muslims, in a sense, practice yogic postures several times a day. "Maybe they're getting that same benefit in their prayers," he said. "Maybe they don't need to do ***yoga***."

Online Correction: April 8, 2012, Sunday

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction: A previous version of this story misstated the surname of the owner of MiMi for Me ***Yoga***. Her name is Mimi Borda, not Mimi Bord.

*http://www.nytimes.com*

## Graphic

PHOTOS: Muhammad Rashid, left, practices ***yoga*** in Queens, but he has had mixed results trying to get other Muslims in the community to do the same. (A16)

Mimi Borda adjusted some classes at her ***yoga*** studio in Jackson Heights, Queens, to address the concerns of Muslim students. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY KIRSTEN LUCE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES) (A18)

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