

16/14 Yoga and other such activities

(A report from the Social Issues Committee.)

Key points

- Christians are called to obey the first commandment and therefore not to participate in the worship of false gods.
- Encourages discernment for the individual Christian, noting that yoga, as it is practised in contemporary Sydney, may or may not involve the worship of false gods.
- Advises churches and schools to seek alternatives to yoga if they desire to offer a program of relaxation or physical suppleness similar to yoga.

Purpose

1. The purpose of this report is to respond to the Synod's request in resolution 16/14 as to whether yoga and other such activities are inconsistent with the gospel and, if so, should not be offered by our churches or Diocesan Organisations, or allowed to be held in their premises.

Recommendations

2. Synod receive this report.
3. Synod pass the following motion at the request of the Standing Committee –

“Synod, noting the report on *Yoga and Other Such Activities* in response to Synod Resolution 16/14, thanks the Social Issues Committee for its work on this matter and –

 - (a) emphasises that Christians are called to obey the first commandment "You shall have no other Gods before me" and thus must, as Christ's disciples, avoid participating in the worship of false gods;
 - (b) recommends that individual Christians should exercise discernment with respect to yoga and other such practices, which may or may not contain elements of worship of other gods;
 - (c) advises churches not to rent out their premises to yoga classes on account of the spiritual confusion this may cause;
 - (d) advised schools, and other Anglican institutions not to engage in yoga and other such practices, but to seek alternative means of promoting health and well-being; and
 - (e) urges Anglicans, clergy and laity alike, to consider the missional significance of the widespread uptake of yoga by Australians of Western European cultural background in recent decades.”

Background

4. At its session in October 2014, Synod resolved as follows (16/14) –

“Synod –

 - (a) notes that in multi-cultural Australia there are many activities available for public participation which are based on, or derived from, Eastern religious practices and beliefs, including yoga, tai chi, some martial arts, and dragon boating,
 - (b) notes that some of our Diocesan churches and organisations offer such activities or allow them to be held on their premises,
 - (c) notes that some Christians believe such activities are contrary to the gospel, and lead those involved in them to inadvertently worship idols and false gods, and access evil spiritual forces; and accordingly,
 - (d) requests the Social Issues Committee of the Diocese to report back to the next Session of Synod as to whether such activities are inconsistent with the gospel, and if so, should not be offered by our churches or Diocesan organisations, or allowed to be held on their premises.”
5. This report sets out the response and thinking of the Social Issues Committee in regard to this matter. The members of the Social Issues Committee are Dr Karin Sowada (chair), Dr Megan Best, the Rev Dr

Andrew Ford, Canon Sandy Grant, the Rev Dr David Höhne, the Rev Dr Michael Jensen, Mr Darren Mitchell and Dr Sumithra Muthayya.

Summary of findings

6. Individual Christians should take note of their consciences in choosing to participate in yoga and other such activities, and the consciences of those who will see them so participate. They should make an informed decision about the spiritual content, and if there is an element of false worship involved, remove themselves. Specifically, yoga – as it is often practised in modern Sydney – is not necessarily problematic for believers. Due to the strongly religious nature of some forms of yoga, Christians should be sure that their practice of yoga does not involve them in false religious practice.
7. Churches and other institutions such as schools should be more cautious. This paper recommends that churches examine carefully the context that they are in, and judge accordingly; and certainly ask questions of the leader of any proposed yoga class. It would be, in our opinion, advisable in most cases for a church not to rent its premises to a yoga class.
8. Anglican Schools should investigate alternatives to yoga, such as Pilates; or should strongly consider renaming yoga classes in a suitable way (an option that one Anglican school has exercised). This keeps in mind the possible fall-out from an outright rejection of yoga, but also focuses on the physical and health benefits of the exercise, ensuring that there is no spiritual confusion.
9. The question of the missional significance of the widespread uptake of yoga by Australians of Western European cultural background should be investigated with a view to asking what this is saying about their spiritual openness (or otherwise).
10. By analogy with this examination of yoga, 'such activities' (Tai Chi, dragon boat racing, and so on) should be addressed carefully on their own terms. A Christian will not want to engage in the worship of any but the true God, and so should ask in each instance whether they are participating in an act of false worship.

Explanatory Note

11. The terms of reference of the question asked of the SIC ("such activities") is extremely broad and covers a wide range of potential practices. This paper has attempted to address one such practice – yoga – and develop some principles from there.

Yoga and its Christian critics

12. Can a Christian practise yoga? Ought a Christian church rent its premises to a yoga teacher? Should a church school offer yoga?
13. For leading US evangelical commentator R. Albert Mohler, Jr., the answer is 'definitely not'.¹ Mohler notes how the practice of yoga has become a completely mainstream part of contemporary Western culture, such that even the US First Lady, Michelle Obama, would announce that yoga was on offer as part of the annual White House Easter Egg Roll – essentially a Presidential party for children.
14. Citing a book by Stefanie Syman entitled *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America*,² Mohler notes that that yoga's history is not uniform, and is extremely complex. The tradition involved thousands of gurus with an enormous variety of beliefs and practices. Nevertheless, as the practice has been introduced to the West, it has become more singularly 'a way to stay healthy and relaxed'.
15. For Mohler, Syman's history makes it clear that 'yoga cannot be fully extricated from its spiritual roots in Hinduism and Buddhism'. Its arrival in the West has signalled a shift to a post-Christian era, in which a nebulous 'spirituality' has replaced traditional Christian adherence. Yoga's advance 'points to the retreat of biblical Christianity in the culture'. He concludes –

"When Christians practice yoga, they must either deny the reality of what yoga represents or fail to see the contradictions between their Christian commitment and their embrace of yoga. The contradictions are not few, nor are they peripheral. The bare fact is that yoga is a spiritual discipline by which the adherent is trained to use the body as a vehicle for achieving consciousness of the divine. Christians are called to look to Christ for all that we need and to obey Christ through obeying his Word. We are not called to escape the consciousness of this world by achieving an elevated state of consciousness, but to follow Christ in the way of faithfulness".

¹ <http://www.albertmohler.com/2010/09/20/the-subtle-body-should-christians-practice-yoga/>

² Stefanie Syman, *The Subtle Body : The Story of Yoga in America*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010).

“Christians who practice yoga are embracing, or at minimum flirting with, a spiritual practice that threatens to transform their own spiritual lives into a “post-Christian, spiritually polyglot” reality. Should Christians willingly risk that”?

16. Mohler’s position contra yoga is that, in the words of evangelical scholar Douglas Groothuis: ‘All forms of yoga involve occult assumptions’.³ Practising yoga as merely a physical activity is not possible, he argues, because in yoga body and spirit overlap completely. Thus, the Christian who engages in yoga may actually be in contradiction of what the gospel says about human nature and its relation to God. Yoga’s emphasis on meditation as ‘emptying the mind’ is, for Mohler, at odds with a Christian view of meditation, which involves contemplation of the Scriptures.

17. Mohler is sensitive enough a critic to realise that yoga as it is often practised in the West is not simply a replication of an ancient Indian practice, but is a form of syncretism. It has become something else again. But it is still, as far as he is concerned, a form of spirituality; and, as such, in contradiction to Christian discipleship, a ‘symptom of our postmodern spiritual confusion.’ This means that, for him, yoga is not simply incompatible with Christianity but actually a threat to it.⁴ Yoga distracts from Christianity, providing inferior and erroneous answers to questions of human flourishing and life after death. A Christian who practises yoga is sampling an ‘entry drug’ to a New Age spirituality which is essentially individualistic and selfish.⁵ For Mohler, the entry of yoga into the cultural mainstream is evidence that American culture has become syncretistic and decadent.

Biblical religion demands exclusive worship of the one true God

18. There is no question but that Biblical religion demands exclusive worship of the one true God. He is to be worshipped alone, and is to be worshipped according to the way he himself sets out. One must not have false gods, but it is also the case that one cannot worship the true God falsely. The syncretism of Israel receives the most vehement opprobrium throughout the Old Testament. The New Testament reasserts this message. The Gospel calls Israel to worship the true God truly, through Jesus Christ. It also calls Gentiles to abandon their worship of idols, and their syncretistic practice, and follow the true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9). There is no hint of compromise here. Idolatry is proscribed as John says: little children, keep yourself from idols (1 John 5:21).

19. Does yoga as it is often practised in the 21st century West fall under this category? Is it a dangerous practice which indicates the de-Christianisation of the participant and the society in which we live?

20. To summarise, then, the concerns, expressed by many Christians, are that –

- (a) Yoga is a form of Hinduism, a religion Christians believe to be false,
- (b) Yoga is occult, or pagan,
- (c) Yoga is spiritually distracting, and an entry drug to the New Age, and
- (d) Meditation as encouraged in yoga is an anti-Christian and dangerous practice.

The broader context: globalisation and multi-culturalism

21. In order to analyse the contemporary practice of yoga in the West, we need to step back and try as best we can to grasp the social and cultural conditions under which we labour as Christians to honour our Lord. These social and cultural conditions have also shaped the contemporary practice of yoga.

22. The late modern phenomenon called globalisation is marked by the growth of vast urban centres inhabited by diverse sub-cultures, such that each large city begins to look more like each other large city and less like it belongs to the country that it is in. The novel telecommunications technologies and airlines connect the world, and facilitate an extraordinary complex of interactions between peoples of different cultures. What has emerged, broadly speaking, is a truly global culture, in which people who might have a different skin colour or a different faith have as much in common – say, a love of Manchester United, or an interest in chess – as someone of the same skin tone and religion.

23. In addition, Mohler is right to observe that the permanently wired world has left Westerners disconnected from the more traditional forms of religion associated with their cultural heritage. Christian adherence has waned, and there is a palpable loss of faith in (and thus influence of) the mainstream Christian churches. For many contemporary people, the business of ‘spirituality’ is an individual affair. People now say in increasing numbers that they are ‘spiritual but not religious’. One study, cited in *The Guardian* newspaper, found that 20% of Britons and 25% of Americans called themselves ‘spiritual but not religious’.⁶ In the 2009 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, the number of Australians describing

³ <http://www.albertmohler.com/2010/09/20/the-meaning-of-yoga-a-conversation-with-stephanie-syman-and-dough-groothuis/>

⁴ Andrea R. Jain, *Selling Yoga : From Counterculture to Pop Culture*.

⁵ <http://www.albertmohler.com/2010/09/20/the-meaning-of-yoga-a-conversation-with-stephanie-syman-and-dough-groothuis/>

⁶ <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-20888141>

themselves as spiritual (47%) exceeded the number describing themselves as religious (39%); and twenty-nine per cent of young people under the age of 30 described themselves as 'spiritual but not religious'.

24. Eastern 'spirituality' has thus become a significant phenomenon in the West, especially since the 1960s. Partly, this is because of the lure of the exotic and the alternative. Partly this is because the practices of Eastern religion have been adapted to suit Western lifestyles and tastes. The entry of Eastern religious practices was popularised like never before with the visits of major pop stars to the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1967. Connection with celebrities – people with the fame and the power and the funds to travel, and renowned for the individualism so beloved of the West – was a powerful conduit running East to West, and remains so.

25. In addition, we inhabit what we might call a 'popular' or 'consumer' culture, in which the conditions of freedom expressed through economic choice prevail. That is: Western individuals value their freedom to express their individuality through consumer choices, and will pay for authenticity and variety. For example, the availability of cuisine from around the globe is a way in which a middle-class Westerner can purchase and sample an experience that is at once exotic and yet (literally) consumable. We delight in the choice we can make between Serbian, Nepali and Peruvian cuisine, all in the one urban street, and we feel like a citizen of the modern globe as we do, sampling Serbian-ness or the alternatives.

26. A contemporary world city, like Sydney, is not a place in which a particular religion can be said to have a stranglehold. Christians who live in such an environment are called on to live with neighbours who bring with them the cultures, customs and religious practices of many different places; and they are called upon to live with neighbours who are keen to sample many of these strange new things. It is in such an environment that the contemporary phenomenon of yoga, as often practised by many Western people who have no other connection with Eastern religion, has developed.

27. In sum –

- (a) the cultural context in which we live is impacted by globalisation,
- (b) consumer individual choice is much prized, and
- (c) there is a sense of disconnection from community and self, health and life balance in the fast-paced world.

What is 'yoga'?

28. 'Yoga' is notoriously difficult to define, and even its proponents and practitioners disagree about what it is, and what it means. The Wikipedia definition reveals this complexity –

Yoga is a physical, mental, and spiritual practice or discipline that denotes a variety of schools, practices and goals in Hinduism, Buddhism (including Vajrayana and Tibetan Buddhism) and Jainism, the best-known being Hatha yoga and Raja yoga.

29. This definition tells us that Yoga is diffuse and not linked with one particular religion. Its origins are certainly within Eastern religious systems, particularly Hinduism. The history of yoga, however, is not restricted to one religious tradition, and indeed, scholars note the malleability of yoga, as it moves from tradition to tradition.

30. This is not the place for a description of the complex varieties of traditional yoga. That is not our focus here. What we need to note is that, while yoga's origins lie in Eastern religion and philosophy, its adaptation for practice in the West has transformed it. As Andrea Jain argues –

Postural yoga is a 'transnational cultural product'.⁷

31. Jain contends that, while yoga undoubtedly has its origins as a form of meditation within Hinduism, yoga's use in the US since the 1980s has undoubtedly 'diluted its spiritual content.' Scholar David Gordon White of the University of Santa Barbara writes –

In the United States in particular, yoga has become a commodity. There is a gap between the ancient, "classical" yoga tradition and yoga as we know it.⁸

32. Yoga, as it is often practised in Australia and like cultures, is more an American consumer product than an Indian spiritual practice. Thus, the definition of yoga offered on the yoga.org.nz website states that –

⁷ Jain, p. ix.

⁸ David Gordon White, ed. *Yoga in Practice*, Princeton Readings in Religions (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012), p.3.

Yoga is a practical aid, not a religion. Yoga is an ancient art based on a harmonising system of development for the body, mind, and spirit. The continued practice of yoga will lead you to a sense of peace and well-being, and also a feeling of being at one with their environment.⁹

33. Westerners who practise yoga do so for the most part without seeking to engage in a deeper study of Hinduism. Yoga is marketed to consumers for its health benefits, and for its capacity to produce relaxation. Claims are made for its ability to enhance physical strength, and improve heart health. The Australian Bikram yoga website,¹⁰ for example, while having various 'Eastern' symbols in it (which gives the impression of authenticity), indicates that none or few of the teachers are of Asian or Indian background, and nothing in the material advertising Bikram¹¹ yoga suggest that anything religious is on offer. Rather, the following are listed as benefits –

- “Endurance is boosted through consistent practice”,
- “Your peripheral circulation improves”,
- “Willpower, self-control, concentration and determination are strengthened in this challenging environment”,
- “Just as when your body raises its temperature to fight infection, the raised temperature in the room may assist in improving the proper functioning of your immune system”, and
- “With regular practice, discipline and honest effort you will –
 - Reshape your body
 - Reduce the risk of sports injury
 - Reduce the effects of stress
 - Clear your mind and calm your soul
 - Tone and strengthen muscles
 - Develop increased strength, balance, flexibility, coordination and endurance
 - Increase your energy level”

34. ‘Calm your soul’ is the only vaguely religious term used, although it is possible to use this word in a broad sense not indicative of any religious or metaphysical claims.¹² The claim is often made that yoga is a ‘spiritual’ form of exercise. It is hard to know what is meant by ‘spiritual’ in this context. It is a vague word in 21st century culture, indicating perhaps a drive to inner peace and a balance of the mental and physical in one’s life. It may be offered as an alternative to ‘religious’ (see above), but not necessarily.

35. Andrea Jain notes that both Christian critiques and some Hindu advocates of yoga pursue what she calls an ‘essentialist’ definition of yoga (for which, see Mohler above).¹³ These definitions emphasise the Hindu origins of yoga, and claim that the contemporary practice of yoga, if it is to be authentic, will lead to involvement in Hindu religious practice and belief. Nevertheless, there is no evidence that Westerners are turning *en masse* to accept Hinduism via yoga. Indeed, a quick survey of local Christians discovered a number who have been practising yoga for a length of time and were not remotely concerned about the possibility of a compromise to their faith. One respondent, for example, wrote –

“I’ve been practising Bikram yoga for 11 years mainly for my back health but for an all over comprehensive workout. There is nothing about it that compromises my faith. Some of the instructors are a bit herbal but nothing is indoctrinated. A measure of maturity and wisdom along with a large grain of salt keeps you spiritually safe.”

36. Another said –

“From my experience, albeit limited to one location but with 4-5 ‘yogis’, they vary in the why though the exercise experience is similar. Some of the call to be in the moment and learning to respond to stressful positions by breathing and noticing, can be useful and not only in the class. What I am uncomfortable with I don’t do, in terms of ‘ohm’ chanting or joining in the namaste.¹⁴ There are a variety of styles that I think reflect different aspects of the practice so probably worth being accurate about which practice you’re critiquing.”

⁹ http://yoga.org.nz/what-is-yoga/yoga_definition.htm

¹⁰ <http://www.bikramyoga.net.au/index.php/newcomers/postures-a-benefits>

¹¹ Bikram yoga is a 1970s synthesis of Hatha yoga techniques.

¹² Indeed, the Hebrew word *nephesh*, often translated ‘soul’, is like this.

¹³ Jain, p. 163.

¹⁴ A greeting meaning ‘I bow to the divine in you’, accompanied by a bow with the hands in a prayer-like gesture.

37. A third said –

“I am yet to find anything that offers the same physical benefits as yoga for me... I have neither forgotten nor am ignorant about the actual origins of yoga. Doing the physical poses, stretching, etc does not necessarily equate to a link with the spiritual aspects of it. It's a heart matter. I know to whom my heart is connected and placing my body into a particular position in order to stretch muscles, etc doesn't alter that.”¹⁵

38. What these quotations reveal is that, quite apart from any religious or spiritual component, yoga encourages the individual to self-awareness, without judgment. For Westerners, it does not necessarily point to a higher power or an alternative deity as the source of comfort and inner peace. Rather, it teaches reliance on the self for these (which may be spiritually problematic, but in a different way).

39. In conclusion –

- (a) Postural yoga as commonly practised in Western cultures is not a religion, nor is it directly religious, but it emerges from an Eastern religious background. It therefore retains some of that vocabulary and outlook, but it is important not to assume that origins equate to contemporary belief or practice.
- (b) Yoga is chiefly sold as having health benefits for the practitioners, but does so by inviting them to consider themselves as more than bodies. In this way, it has a quasi-spiritual component.
- (c) Yoga as commonly practised aims to teach self-acceptance and inner peace through self-discipline and self-reliance.

Scripture, Theology and Mission

The teaching of Scripture

40. Holy Scripture is adamant that the God of Israel is God without peer or parallel, and that he is to be worshipped without compromise (Deuteronomy 6:4). The commandment that came to Israel, which was to shape their life, was to worship Yhwh only, without addition. He was not to be introduced to a fertility goddess and made her husband, or to be considered as an option amongst a pantheon of deities. He would brook no rival. The challenge of Elijah to the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18) proved that not only was worship of another deity blasphemous, it was also futile, since Yhwh was the only true god. To enumerate the passages of the Old Testament where Israel is condemned for allowing the shrines and temples of other gods to flourish alongside the Temple of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the one who made the heavens and the earth, would be exhausting.

41. The jealousy of God is one of his most definite and fierce qualities. He is no mute idol, nor is he to be represented by the creation of idols. His exclusive love for his people, and his faithfulness to them, was to be met with a response of exclusive worship. The holiness of the people was to be a representation of his holiness (Leviticus 20:26). God's choice of only them as his people, from the nations that surrounded them, was to be mirrored by their singular devotion to him. That is to say: monotheism and election are two companion doctrines in the Old Testament.

42. The tension for the New Testament comes with the inclusion of the once-excluded Gentiles, who were marked by their worship of false gods and the impure practices that flowed from such worship. Jesus Christ himself anticipates the mission to the Gentiles throughout his ministry, and then the book of Acts records the preaching of the gospel as it travels through the Greco-Roman world. There are several encounters with pagan religion recorded in Acts, including the riots in Ephesus because of the cult of Artemis, and the observation of the many religious shrines of Athens by Paul.

43. At the heart of the theology of Acts, and at the heart of the theology of Paul the apostle, is the shocking discovery that the gospel of free justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ comes first to the Jew, and then to the Gentile; and that this means that table fellowship between the two groups was now permissible, since the old boundary markers had dissolved. Indeed, segregation of the people of God was unacceptable. This meant that the old scruples of the Torah about food and ritual impurity were no longer to be required for entry into membership of the people of God.

44. Nevertheless, while Gentiles were admitted to the table, the criterium for admission was faith in the Lord Jesus Christ – which was faith in the one Lord and God of Israel (1 Corinthians 8). That is: you couldn't bring your faith in pagan gods to the table! Of that, the New Testament is absolutely clear. John finishes his first letter with the clear command: Keep yourselves from idols (1 John 5:21). Paul intensifies it in 1 Corinthians 10:14: flee the worship of idols. The exclusivity of Christian worship is not less in any way than the exclusivity of Israelite worship – it has a singular object.

¹⁵ Quotations come from a survey on social media conducted by the author of this paper.

45. Because of the mission imperative of the gospel of Jesus Christ, however, the exclusivity of the people of God could not ever be maintained by a physical separation, or by the erection of physical barriers. Further, the abolition of Torah as a way of life for the new people of God was not replaced with a new set of religio-cultural habits. Christians were to live in the midst of the nations; and were planted in the urban centres of the ancient world, where they carried on as (it seemed) ordinary citizens. They were to live 'such good lives among the pagans' that their lives would be a commendation of Jesus Christ. Their gathering was a heavenly reality; and while that was to be expressed by their regular gathering with local believers, it meant also that they did not withdraw from gathering with and eating with pagans and other outsiders.

46. In addition, the triumph of Jesus Christ means that false gods are exposed as a nullity (Colossians 2:15). It is no accident that the Reformation movement led to what Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor calls 'the great disenchantment'.¹⁶ That is: a return to a biblical faith in the Western church led to a commensurate loss of faith in the world as a place permeated by spiritual forces. The gospel eradicates superstition where it is heard (and promotes scientific thinking), because it declares the sovereignty of God over creation and the victory of Christ over the powers and principalities. Despite some facets of the charismatic movement returning to a fascination with exorcisms and the demonic, biblical Christianity retains its focus on the word of the gospel as a declaration that the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. For 'everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is to be received with thanksgiving, for it is sanctified by God's word and by prayer' (1 Timothy 4:4-5).

47. We conclude then that a Christian need not fear somehow an inadvertent taint by participating in much of what is labelled 'yoga'. Yoga as it is often practised does not necessarily require involvement in false worship, or acknowledgement of a spiritual reality aside from the gospel. Just as a Christian can eat Thai food in a restaurant which has a Buddhist shrine, or can eat halal food prepared by a slaughterman who says prayers as he kills the animal, with no suggestion that by somehow eating in this way he or she is sharing in Buddhism or Islam or risking demonic possession, so it may well be that a Christian participating in yoga is not participating in non-Christian worship.¹⁷

48. A key passage for this discussion then is 1 Corinthians 8 -10, where the apostle Paul is grappling with the very issues we have been describing, namely: how does the Christian church express its singular holiness while living cheek by jowl with pagans – especially in a multi-cultural and cosmopolitan city such as ancient Corinth? Paul's nuanced and subtle argument runs something like this: food offered to idols is not thereby tainted, since idols aren't anything anyway, and if you treat it as just food then you are not committing an act of false worship. But your conscience may lead you to think that this food is somehow still tainted by its connection to idols. Therefore, do not eat it. Likewise, use your freedom to make sure that other believers are not tempted to break with what their consciences are telling them. Refraining from eating meat is preferable to wounding another's conscience. And if that is so, then something very grave is going on. It is a very serious thing to think you are participating in the worship of false gods, because idolatry turns out to be demonic, and provokes the Lord to jealousy.¹⁸

49. Paul's priority is what eating *communicates*. By arguing that Christians should do all 'to the glory of God', he is urging that believers seek the good of the other 'so that they may be saved' (1 Corinthians 10:33). Believers should not naively compromise themselves by participating in the worship of idols. But they should also develop a strong conscience by realising that idols are nothing. Paul is not concerned with the taint that objects are said to carry: he is concerned about what people *think* about such objects to which a particular sacredness is ascribed. It is the subjective, rather than the objective, aspect that is his concern when it comes to eating meat. In 8:10, for example, Paul notes that some 'with knowledge' may eat in the temple of an idol in liberty, without compromising their faith – but that in doing so they may lead others into very grave sin.

Putting Scripture into practise

50. The question is to what degree the practice of yoga is analogous to eating food served to idols. We certainly live in a multi-cultural and cosmopolitan setting akin to first century Corinth. Increasingly, Christians have to live in a world in which East and West overlap and cannot be easily separated. On the one hand, secular Westerners dabble in quasi- or pseudo- Eastern practices like postural yoga with no thought to the religious or spiritual aspect of it. At the same time, our cities are filled with people who come from cultural backgrounds where these things *do* have a specific religious and spiritual meaning.

¹⁶ Charles Taylor, *The Secular Age*, Harvard University Press, 2007

¹⁷ Christians are right to consider carefully the apparently religious aspects of various activities, but an overly tender conscience in this area may make us blind to our complicity in businesses, activities and communities in which human sinfulness is perpetuated. The New Testament calls greed a form of idolatry (Colossians 3:5) after all – there is a spiritual significance in that which is apparently basely material.

¹⁸ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Nottingham, England: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. ; Apollos, 2010), p. 443ff.

51. What one communicates to the culture by participating in something like yoga may be very different depending on the background of the person. The analogy is then possibly relevant because, for some people in modern Sydney, yoga *does* mean participation in a particular alternative religious practice. Paul would be quick to say that a strong conscience would have no problem with the yoga as it is often practised here. The knowledge that Christ is Lord and the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit in the Christian body are the trump cards here. The Christian should keep her eyes and ears open for moments when her faith will be challenged or compromised; but then that might be the case in *any* activity outside the church, not simply one with a quasi-religious/spiritual component.

52. For the sake of the conscience of the other, however, a Christian person or a Christian organisation may wisely choose to forgo the practice of yoga. This takes careful discernment of the kind that Paul encourages us to pursue in 1 Corinthians 8-10, and of which this paper is hopefully a model. There is not a straightforward answer here. What may be fine for an individual may, because of a differing context, be questionable for a church or school. For example: there is no objective problem with an individual Christian practising yoga as it is commonly practised in contemporary Sydney. She may choose, however, if friends of hers understand her practice of yoga to be a participation in the worship of a false god, to lay down her right to practise yoga. This will take an individual's discernment of particular situations.

53. A school or a church will say more than an individual by their endorsement of yoga. Can a church rent out its hall to a yoga practitioner? At one level the answer depends on the practitioner, but we think there is nothing in principle against that possibility - whereas, we think there would definitely be a very obvious problem with renting the hall out to, say, a witches' coven or a Buddhist meditation class. Yoga doesn't necessarily fall into that category. What may govern the decision of the church is the message that renting out the hall to a yoga class may send to the community, especially given the multi-cultural context. Is it suggesting that syncretism is okay, or tacitly endorsing false worship? A school is in an even more responsible situation, since it is charged with the nurture of young souls. Is there a way of having the benefits that yoga offers – relaxation, physical suppleness, an awareness of one's health, and so on – without the suggestion that an Eastern spirituality has been endorsed? We believe compromises are possible here, but also that the principle of conscience as outlined in 1 Corinthians 8-10 should be the guiding one.

54. It is worth adding that for many secular people a Christian rejection of yoga may be in itself a stumbling block. That is (and this is certainly true at an anecdotal level at least) perceived Christian fussiness over yoga can cause a bewilderment and anger that obscures the gospel. It appears as if the Christian is overly fearful of what, to the secular mind, is nothing at all. That contradicts what Christians want to declare about the clear victory of Christ over the spiritual realm.

55. The attraction of yoga for the community raises questions about the philosophy of the self that it promotes, and whether and how this opens up the possibility for gospel conversations. To focus on yoga as a practice contrary to the gospel (which we don't believe it necessarily is) rather misses an opportunity to ask why it is that yoga has become so attractive. There are points of contact between yoga and the gospel, and points of clear dissonance. A good doctrine of creation and the resurrection body allows us to see that we are never whole as persons unless we include our bodies. The technological world often treats human beings either as machines or as disembodied brains. We live in a world with an inability to find relaxation or peacefulness. There is no *rest*. The natural rhythms of day and night, the seven day week, and the round of the seasons simply do not exist for the inhabitants of the urban landscape. Yoga offers a moment of physical calm, a discipline for those who are yo-yoing between hyper-work and hedonism. It also offers a respite in a world in which people are being constantly evaluated and judged.

56. The Christian gospel does teach us of a kind of rest, but it also teaches us of a restlessness, too. The 'peace of God which passes all understanding' comes from the merciful, gracious sovereignty of God expressed in the gospel of Christ. We are offered an unsurpassable security. But a Christian ought also to feel the true burden of the present age: that she is scared by sin herself, and that the world is a world in open rebellion against the creator. The Christian liturgy invites us to confess our sins as we approach God and find in him 'no condemnation', not because we are fine as we are, but because what we are has been transformed. We do not find a point of self-acceptance, but are introduced to a moment of God-acceptance.

57. The Church is not the provider of all a human being needs. It is not a separate political world, or a separate economy. It does not exist to run exercise classes or open hospitals. It may do these things, and many churches have, where they are lacking. But it exists for the human being as a redeemed creature. That is: finding that Christians are getting something out of yoga does not necessarily mean that churches should start stretch classes! Nevertheless: it is worth asking why the holistic and physical aspects of yoga don't find their equivalents in the version of Christian spirituality being offered in our churches today. Are we really practising and preaching the *peace* of God? Is our Christian faith disembodied, like so much of Western life, or even opposed to the body in some way? How do we help people who are in the throes of

stress, or burdened by chronic illness? Doesn't the Christian gospel – and the practice of Christian faith – offer us help in these moments of crisis? Further discussion of these questions is beyond the scope of this paper.

Conclusion

58. In conclusion, we cannot underscore enough the imperative for Christians to not engage in the worship of any other god than the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is no room for any kind of compromise or nonchalance on that front. We cannot worship him truly and participate in the worship of any other. With the example of yoga as practised in contemporary Sydney, it is by no means clear that false worship is being undertaken. In some circumstances it may be; in others it may well not be. Yoga has been actively secularised by its proponents; but in many cases religious elements may remain. This calls for careful discernment by Christians and by Christian leaders.

59. As such, we recommend that Synod pass the following motion –

“Synod, noting the report on *Yoga and Other Such Activities* in response to Synod Resolution 16/14, thanks the Social Issues Committee for its work on this matter and –

- (a) emphasises that Christians are called to obey the first commandment "You shall have no other Gods before me" and thus must, as Christ's disciples, avoid participating in the worship of false gods;
- (b) recommends that individual Christians should exercise discernment with respect to yoga and other such practices, which may or may not contain elements of worship of other gods;
- (c) advises churches not to rent out their premises to yoga classes on account of the spiritual confusion this may cause;
- (d) advised schools, and other Anglican institutions not to engage in yoga and other such practices, but to seek alternative means of promoting health and well-being; and
- (e) urges Anglicans, clergy and laity alike, to consider the missional significance of the widespread uptake of yoga by Australians of Western European cultural background in recent decades.”

For and on behalf of the Social Issues Committee.

KARIN SOWADA

Chair

20 July 2015

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