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IDS-1400: Multireligious Intensive  
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## INTERROGATING YOGA

In the fall of 2009, an orofacial pain specialist suggested that I find ways to reduce my overall stress. Two years prior, I had graduated college and moved to New York City from my small hometown, where I developed stress-induced lockjaw and other symptoms of persistent anxiety. I had recently moved back home to seek relief. The doctor suggested yoga as an option, and I was happy to hear it; I had tried out some online yoga videos in my tiny city apartment, and occasionally attended group classes at Yoga to the People in the East Village. I liked the way my body felt after those classes, and I felt calmer every time I practiced yoga, even when it was at home with a YouTube video or audio recording.

I signed up for a Yoga 101 workshop at a local studio, which met several times over the course of a month. After classes, I felt calm and confident - a rare occurrence in those days - and I was keen to continue practicing and learning more. I soon found out about a sliding scale, donation-based school that had just opened down the road: classes would be taught by two of the most well-regarded teachers in the area, and you could attend for free if you volunteered to tidy up and check students in for class. I signed up for the workstudy program and started attending classes more and more frequently. By early 2011, I had registered for my first yoga teacher training (YTT), intending only to deepen my personal practice. After the training, much to my surprise, I started teaching weekly classes and weekend workshops and, after my second teacher training, eventually co-led several sessions of the YTT at the school. I volunteered a lot of my time outside of classes, too, managing the workstudy crew, supporting the school's financial management and communicating with students and other teachers. That labor and those hours

felt like a small exchange for the depth of learning I'd received, for the ways I had transformed due to my practice, and to my teachers for their efforts to keep the school alive. Teaching yoga was never a commercial endeavor for me- in fact, I always had a "real" job to pay the bills. The work I did for the school was something else- an offering to a community I loved.

My path into yoga practice and teaching is not uncommon. Many of my fellow trainees took the same route from student to workstudy to trainee to teacher, and I've seen that pattern replicated in other schools in other states. In fact, in some yoga studios the pathway is compulsory: the only way to become a teacher is to go through a branded training program like Bikram or Iyengar. But neither of my main teachers ascribed to any one lineage, and their classes and teacher trainings were a mixture of influences and emphases. One teacher came from a background in professional dance and acrobatics, and trained through the Sivananda and Jivamukti schools. The other teacher trained at Kripalu, cited Iyengar, Anusara, Integral Yoga, Erich Schiffman, and Yogi Hari as his main influences, and was a committed devotee of Amma, the hugging saint. Each with their idiosyncratic jumble of lineages, they taught in a style that seemed wholly their own, using uniquely-worded cues and their own style of physical assists. Each teacher also offered workshops outside of *āsana*<sup>1</sup> in topics ranging from the *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali* to ayurveda and *kīrtan*<sup>2</sup>, presenting each of these as a component of "yoga" in the broader sense.

As a student, this was both compelling and confusing. It seemed like yoga was a beautifully broad set of interlinked concentrations that I could explore, eventually to settle on a direction that best suited my interests and capacities. At the same time, I started asking myself more and more frequently what exactly it was that I was practicing and teaching. It was not

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<sup>1</sup> *āsana* - Sanskrit for "seat," often used (including here) to describe the physical posture practice.

<sup>2</sup> *kīrtan* - devotional chanting in the *bhakti* yoga tradition, often a call and response format.

exactly religion, nor was it entirely secular. It was not a New Age blend of influences: as teachers, we were explicitly cautioned about using language and imagery from traditions like Buddhism in order to reduce student confusion. Yoga as I understood it was its own category of philosophy and practice, with a unique worldview and aims. It seemed to extend in many directions at once, shaping itself to meet the individual needs of the practitioner. It also seemed unknowably vast.

Meanwhile, I made sincere spiritual commitments. I adopted a vegan diet and a daily home practice, and received mantra initiation and a spiritual name. I now regularly consult a Vedic astrologer, and pursue independent studies of Sanskrit and Indian devotional music as part of my spiritual development. Though I stopped teaching public classes during the pandemic, these questions linger: what exactly are we doing when we practice yoga? How do we understand yoga in the context of twenty-first century American spiritual life? Does the curious phenomenon of yoga change our understanding of multireligious identification? And perhaps most importantly, what are we appropriating when we practice and teach yoga in this country, and from whom?

In *Yoga Body, The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*, Mark Singleton uses the terms “postural yoga” and “transnational anglophone yoga” to describe the movement-based classes that I both attended and later taught: physical practices that owe as much to European gymnastics and nascent Hindu nationalism as to Patañjali and the *Gītā*.<sup>3</sup> While this definition is appealing in its specificity, it doesn’t address the full spectrum of practices, teachings and texts that I have encountered as an American practitioner. Later in this paper, I will explore the “American yoga” presented by Christa Schwind in her thesis, “Tracing an American Yoga: Identity and

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 9-10.

Cross-Cultural Transaction”.<sup>4</sup> I like her terminology because it can include the spiritual, physical and commercial elements that dominate much of the discourse on yoga today, and preserves the specific location of America as the site of my inquiry. I will use “yoga” and “American yoga” interchangeably throughout this paper, and will specify when I am describing other phenomena.

### ***Is Yoga Religion?***

I came to yoga looking for a pain remedy and ended up with a new understanding of life and the universe. I was raised in an extended family of Bible scholars and ministers, and grew up attending Sunday worship services in my small college town. As a middle schooler, I started to notice the distance between what my church was choosing to teach and speak about, and the things that mattered most in my adolescent life. I gradually stopped attending worship, and by the time I entered college, religion and spirituality was no longer on my radar. It wasn't until I started attending yoga classes regularly that I noticed its absence along with its unexpected reappearance. In my first teacher training, a fellow trainee commented that she felt more connected with her childhood Jewish faith as a yoga practitioner than she had in years. I felt the same: that somehow the practices I was learning- body and breath movement, disciplined meditation and especially *kīrtan*- were filling me with a long-lost sense of belonging and connection to the eternal. Guided by my teachers, I started to explore yoga philosophy and metaphysics more deeply, in order to integrate that felt connection into my life.

At the same time, my teachers were adamant that yoga was *not* religion. In our study of the *Yoga Sūtras*, they pointed out that God is rarely mentioned, though the traditional

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<sup>4</sup> Christa Schwind, “Tracing an American Yoga: Identity and Cross-Cultural Transaction,” *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* (Ph.D., Ann Arbor, University of Denver, 2015), ProQuest One Academic (1727755021), <http://dtl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/tracing-american-yoga-identity-cros-s-cultural/docview/1727755021/se-2?accountid=202487>, 1-52.

philosophical school of Yoga (along with fellow Indian philosophical schools Sāṅkhya, Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika and Vedānta) itself is understood to be theistic<sup>5</sup>. In his first chapter on meditative absorption, Patañjali says that *samprajñāta samadhi* might be gained by “*Īsvara pranidhanat*” or devotion to a personal God (1.23).<sup>6</sup> The concept of Īsvara was presented repeatedly in my trainings as any image or entity that we as practitioners felt best represented the Divine to us, with no limits on which (if any) religious tradition it came from. We were merely encouraged to explore this on our own so that we might eventually settle on a name and form that could become the focus of our meditation and devotion. We studied the *Bhagavad Gītā* (an explicitly theistic text) but were never pressured to join ISKCON,<sup>7</sup> and though we practiced *kīrtan* using the names of Hindu deities, it was presented as a potentially secular activity that was mainly useful in that it calmed and focused the mind by virtue of communal singing and phrase repetition.

Thomas Tweed defines religions as “confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries.”<sup>8</sup> Some of this was certainly present during my formation as a yoga practitioner: *kīrtan* can be an intensely joyful practice, and much of Chapter 2 of the *Yoga Sūtras* is, more or less, a practical manual for the avoidance of suffering (2.16-3.3). However, not all American yoga studios host *kīrtan* and few teach yoga philosophy outside their teacher training programs, so there is no guarantee that even a sincere student will be exposed to these practices and texts. Further, Tweed’s definition of religion seems to be concerned with something much broader and more indelible than what a small community of yoga practitioners might be able to

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<sup>5</sup> Edwin F. Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali: A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 81.

<sup>6</sup> Bryant, *Yoga Sūtras*, 81. *samprajñāta samadhi* is a penultimate meditative state in which the only remaining thought in the mind is the thought of ending all thought

<sup>7</sup> ISKCON - the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, also known as the Hare Krishna movement

<sup>8</sup> Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, UNITED STATES: Harvard University Press, 2006), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dtl/detail.action?docID=3300389>, 54.

conjure. He explains that religions “mark and traverse not just the boundaries of the natural terrain and the limits of embodied life but also the *ultimate horizon...*of human life.”<sup>9</sup> Despite the many discussions of life, death, and God included in my yoga education, our school did not habitually conduct rituals to mark these transitions, and we collectively celebrated no holidays, religious or secular. Held up to Tweed’s definition of religion, yoga, even the spiritually-inflected forms I studied, comes up short.

The assertion that yoga is different from religion is the subject of considerable public scrutiny and debate. In Christian evangelical and pentecostal circles, there is a broad suspicion of yoga and a belief that it constitutes religious activity: some claim that the *sūrya namaskar* or sun salutation sequence is a form of idolatry.<sup>10</sup> In a 2010 opinion piece in the Pittsburgh Post Gazette, Aseem Shukla of the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) decried what he sees as the obfuscation of yoga’s Hindu roots, saying, “Hinduism, as a faith tradition, stands at this pass a victim of overt intellectual property theft, absence of trademark protections and the facile complicity of generations of Hindu yogis, gurus, swamis and others that offered up a religion's spiritual wealth at the altar of crass commercialism.”<sup>11</sup> Among some Christians and Hindus, there appears to be a shared understanding that yoga can be distanced only so far from its religious underpinnings. Interestingly, few have suggested that people stop practicing yoga entirely, particularly as the health benefits of regular practice become more widely accepted. For example, yoga’s growing popularity among the Christian faithful has led to the development of, among other things, “Christian yoga,” a physical posture practice that replaces Sanskrit terms and metaphysical concepts with Biblical language and aims, thus avoiding a conflict of commitments.<sup>12</sup> And

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<sup>9</sup> Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 76.

<sup>10</sup> Candy Gunther Brown, “Christian Yoga: Something New Under the Sun/Son?,” *Church History* 87, no. 3 (September 2018): 659–83, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640718001555>, 660.

<sup>11</sup> Aseem Shukla, “Yoga: Stolen from the Hindus,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, April 25, 2010, Online edition, <https://www.post-gazette.com/opinion/Op-Ed/2010/04/25/Yoga-stolen-from-the-Hindus/stories/201004250220>.

<sup>12</sup> Candy Gunther Brown, “Christian Yoga”, 660.

Shukla writes, “All of this is not to contend, of course, that yoga is only for Hindus. Yoga is Hinduism's gift to humanity to follow, practice and experience.”<sup>13</sup>

The practice of yoga is understood to improve practitioners’ health and wellness. My experience with Dr. Lim was hardly unique: in 2016, a study conducted by Yoga Journal and the Yoga Alliance found that for the over 36 million Americans practicing yoga, the key drivers of attendance were related to mental and physical improvement, and the top four perceived benefits were related to health.<sup>14</sup> This, along with the growing body of research that affirms yoga’s physical and mental health benefits, has prompted public schools across the country to begin integrating the practice into their physical education curricula. Still, the potential religiosity has been a sticking point for both the religious and non-religious public, and the US legal system has had to weigh in. In a 2015 response to litigation by evangelical parents, a California appeals court ruled that “yoga taught in a public school is not a gateway to Hinduism and does not violate the religious rights of students or their parents.”<sup>15</sup> In May of this year, when the state of Alabama lifted its 1993 ban on the teaching of yoga in public schools, it was quick to pass strict guidance that disallowed the inclusion of meditation with yoga instruction, and required parental permission to participate.<sup>16</sup> The HAF’s Take Back Yoga campaign describes such spiritually-scrubbed classes as “perfectly acceptable,” but that absent the spiritual guidance of an

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<sup>13</sup> Shukla, “Yoga: Stolen from the Hindus”

<sup>14</sup> Ipsos Public Affairs, *2016 Yoga in America Study*. Yoga Alliance and Yoga Journal, January 2016. <https://www.yogaalliance.org/Portals/0/2016%20Yoga%20in%20America%20Study%20RESULTS.pdf>, 26.

<sup>15</sup> Associated Press, “Yoga Classes Do Not Violate Students’ Religious Rights, Californian Court Rules,” *The Guardian*, April 3, 2015,

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/apr/04/yoga-classes-do-not-violate-students-religious-rights-californian-court-rules>.

<sup>16</sup> Bill Chappell, “Alabama Will Now Allow Yoga In Its Public Schools (But Students Can’t Say ‘Namaste’),” *National Public Radio*, May 21, 2021,

<https://www.npr.org/2021/05/21/999020140/its-now-legal-to-practice-yoga-in-alabamas-public-schools#:~:text=Alabama%20Drops%20Its%20Ban%20On%20Yoga%20In%20Public%20Schools%20Alabama,And%20meditation%20is%20not%20allowed>.

enlightened master, “modern day ‘yoga’ is āsana without understanding, faith, or intention, and therefore, merely remains at the level of physical exercise.”<sup>17</sup>

These desacralized yogas may indeed be missing something essential: though exercise-based yogas have been found to deliver physical and mental health benefits, they appear to be less impactful than spiritually-inflected forms. A 2011 study found that an exercise-only yoga program resulted in decreased participant depression and stress, along with an increased sense of hopefulness, and increased flexibility. However, a yoga program with an integrated ethical and spiritual component additionally reduced symptoms of anxiety and decreased participant salivary cortisol levels.<sup>18</sup> This suggests that followers of exclusivist religious traditions are right to be suspicious of yoga: the spiritual element may be what makes the practice maximally effective as a health intervention.

A commonly held position among practitioners and teachers is that yoga is spiritual rather than religious: my fellow trainee expressed this when she found that her yoga education had brought her closer to the heart of her childhood Jewish tradition. Echoing my teachers, Shukla writes, “Yoga asks only that one follow the path of yoga for it will lead one to become a better Hindu, Christian, Jew or Muslim. Yoga, like its Hindu origins, does not offer ways to believe in God; it offers ways to know God.”<sup>19</sup> Yoga can be delinked from religion, because it is a means rather than an end, a choreography rather than a dance. Twenty years earlier, Peter H. Van Ness concurred in an article for the *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, affirming yoga’s essential spirituality given its underlying concern with “wholeness and self transformation,” coupled with the “potential to subvert and redirect the materialistic values of

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<sup>17</sup> Hindu American Foundation, “The Hindu Roots of Yoga and the Take Back Yoga Campaign,” 2021 2003, <https://www.hinduamerican.org/projects/hindu-roots-of-yoga>.

<sup>18</sup> J Andy Smith MA et al., “Is There More to Yoga Than Exercise?,” *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine* 17, no. 3 (June 2011): 22–29.

<sup>19</sup> Shukla, “Yoga: Stolen from the Hindus.”



contemporary consumerism toward an understanding of self and society that elevates personal and social equanimity over competition and dominance.”<sup>20</sup> Though Van Ness may be dismayed to see the way yoga in its current form has been extensively commercialized, commodified, branded and sold, his point stands and is widely accepted among yoga practitioners today.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the ongoing culture war over the yoga being taught in American public schools, yoga does not appear to qualify as a religion. At the same time, it appears to be inextricably indebted to Hinduism. Though yoga practice can be divorced from its spiritual and ethical underpinnings in order to satisfy some practitioners and consumers, the most effective forms appear to retain a spiritual component. Academics and practitioners alike have asserted that yoga is “spiritual but not religious,”<sup>22</sup> but even this categorization rests on a Christian division between spirituality and religion, and therefore may not be entirely up to the task.<sup>23</sup> Rather, yoga appears to defy easy categorization, troubling the religious and spiritual waters of both practitioners and non-practitioners alike. As Shreena Gandhi writes in *Translating, Practicing and Commodifying Yoga in the U.S.*, “It is apparent that yoga never really fit neatly anywhere, and at anytime. This malleability and boundary crossing is still the case today, and has been the case from the time yoga entered into the American religious landscape.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Peter H Van Ness, “Yoga as Spiritual but Not Religious: A Pragmatic Perspective,” *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 20, no. 1 (January 1999): 15–30.

<sup>21</sup> Ipsos Public Affairs, “2016 Yoga in America Study,” 26.

<sup>22</sup> Van Ness, “Yoga as Spiritual but Not Religious: A Pragmatic Perspective.”

<sup>23</sup> Shreena Niketa Divyakant Gandhi, “Translating, Practicing and Commodifying Yoga in the U.S.,” *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* (Ph.D., Ann Arbor, University of Florida, 2009), ProQuest One Academic (746585824), <http://dtl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/translating-practicing-commodifyin-g-yoga-u-s/docview/746585824/se-2?accountid=202487>, 50.

<sup>24</sup> Gandhi, *Translating, Practicing and Commodifying Yoga in the U.S.*, 50.

### *Is My Yoga Authentic?*

In my early days as a yoga student, I was enamored by my teachers. They seemed to move with both grace and equanimity, with a clear-eyed and compassionate understanding of the world and human behavior. At the start of classes, they shared personal stories woven through with yoga teachings, modulating seamlessly between a vulnerable relatability and complex philosophical notions. When I signed up for YTT after my first year of consistent practice, it wasn't because I intended to teach. Rather, I wanted to become a human being like my teachers: someone who could see life's subtle currents, and engage them wisely.

At the time, I was unbothered by the idea that my teachers were sharing their own distinct, idiosyncratic version of yoga. I assumed on some level that a unified understanding of yoga was out there in the world somewhere, and that if I studied long enough I would eventually grasp it. To my surprise, the more I learned about yoga, its practices and its sister philosophies, the less I understood.

I had fallen into a common American assumption about religions and cultural flows: that they resemble trees, each branch growing from a central trunk, each new expression fundamentally linked to the others by virtue of substance and shared history, if not location. It is no wonder that when I tried to map yoga onto this model I came away confused and frustrated: it does not adequately express the many-centered and multilayered process of transaction that gave rise to the yoga I learned in a tiny one-room school in Carrboro, North Carolina.

In her 2015 dissertation "Tracing an American Yoga Identity", Christa Schwind deploys Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of rhizome to theorize about yoga's genealogy:

The process of becoming an American yoga involves both an exchange and a fluidity of transaction, and thereby reflects the multiple spaces and places that yoga may occupy. Again, yoga in America may be likened to bamboo...a rhizome that develops in underground networks and springs up in unpredictable cycles of growth and

flourishment, a symbol of transaction that contains both cultural and economic significance, and when planted changes and adapts to new and different locations.<sup>25</sup>

If we accept the rhizome model, any given iteration of yoga can be linked to any other iteration due not to a common ancestry but to its relationships with other forms, and its unique movement within and across boundaries of historical location, nation state and lineage.<sup>26</sup> It explains how a person today might practice both hot yoga and the *karma yoga* of the Bhagavad Gītā, calling them both by the same name and seeing no apparent conflict. It also explains how I might learn from a teacher during *āsana* class that yoga is uniting body and breath, during a workshop on the Sūtras that yoga is discrimination between the real and the unreal, and during evening *kīrtan* that yoga is union with the Divine. The model explains how yoga appears to shift each time it is taught, and permits it to do so without ever jeopardizing its authenticity.

This theory poses the question of authentication: are there any criteria that would disqualify a form from calling itself yoga? For that, Schwind draws on critical theorist Homi Bhabha's notion of the in-between or hybrid, claiming "The discourse surrounding yoga is beyond the control of any one community's monolithic claims to authenticity and/or tradition, as yoga exists in process and thereby both outside of and inclusive of a binary."<sup>27</sup> If yoga is and has always been an ongoing process of transaction between individual actors, cultures and across time, the question of whether any given form is or is not authentic may be beside the point; on the one hand, it is because it says it is. On the other hand, by claiming to be "yoga," it situates itself within an evolving landscape of interactions and reveals its position relative to the other yogas nearby. This means that we can understand Corepower Yoga™ as an authentic form of yoga, but one that could only flourish in the 21st century American capitalist context.

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<sup>25</sup> Schwind, "Tracing an American Yoga", 54-55.

<sup>26</sup> Schwind, 53-54.

<sup>27</sup> Schwind, 55

Any conversation about yoga and authenticity ought also to concern itself deeply with cultural appropriation. Though Schwind offers that “Yoga exists in America both as the remainder of the constructed binary between East and West and as an open space for the creation of unique qualities among new landscapes,”<sup>28</sup> she momentarily sidesteps the issues of power and representation within those landscapes. If we understand the phenomenon of American yoga to be constructed in an ongoing dialogue between India and the West, we must include concurrent conversations about appropriation and harm. Unitarian Universalist Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley defines cultural appropriation as a form of plagiarism,<sup>29</sup> and the HAF asserts that yoga is the intellectual property of Hinduism and should be acknowledged as such.<sup>30</sup> Without question, the legacy of British colonialism along with American cultural imperialism and White supremacy culture continues to impact the way yoga is currently practiced and is flourishing in this country. It affects who attends classes, who trains to become a teacher, and which teachers become the most popular. It affects which voices are loudest in scholarship and the public sphere, who gets invited to speak at conferences and whose work is published. Any analysis of American yoga must reckon with the disproportionate power that White people have held and continue to hold in the construction of the yoga landscape, even if we accept that the yogic rhizome has arrived here as a result of a longstanding and ongoing cultural exchange.

Of the wide variety of yogas being practiced in America today, many would not meet Shukla’s criteria. However, the emergence of these forms tells us something important about the growth and health of the yogic rhizome here. It is well worth examining the cultural forces, including White supremacy culture, that are prompting the development and growth of branded,

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<sup>28</sup> Schwind, 59

<sup>29</sup> Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, “Cornrows, Kwanzaa and Confusion: The Dilemma of Cultural Racism and Misappropriation,” *Liberal Religious Education Journal* Fall 1995, no. Bridges to the Future: From Assimilation to Pluralism, accessed August 17, 2021, <https://www.uua.org/multiculturalism/introduction/misappropriation/37852.shtml>.

<sup>30</sup> Hindu American Foundation, “The Hindu Roots of Yoga and the Take Back Yoga Campaign.”

commercialized and desacralized forms. For the sincerely curious, this becomes a task of continuous education and inquiry, not unlike the practice of yoga itself. It is also not for the faint of heart: it requires a reckoning with what exactly yoga can do for us, and the ways it might not serve us fully.

### ***Is Yoga Enough?***

In his 2009 article, “The Body between Religion and Spirituality,” Giuseppe Giordan theorizes that the growth in popularity of Hinduism and Buddhism in the western world has precipitated a shift from religions, which control and repress the body in favor of the mind, to spirituality, which starts with the body as its basis for understanding the world and relating to spirit.<sup>31</sup> Demographic trends seem to support at least the decline in religious affiliation: a 2018/19 Pew Research poll found that 26% of Americans identify as “religious nones,” up from 17% ten years ago.<sup>32</sup> Whether the decline is due to the influence of non-Abrahamic traditions or merely a trend in its own right, a growing number of Americans are indeed charting their own paths away from religion. At the same time, the American yoga industry is experiencing tremendous growth: In 2016, 37 million Americans were practicing some form of yoga, having nearly doubled since 2013.<sup>33</sup> More Americans than ever are familiar with the history and philosophy of yoga, and 83% of practitioners perceive it as spiritual.<sup>34</sup> As these practitioners mature and their numbers grow, will their expectations of spiritual care change? What might this mean for vocations like chaplaincy, as people experience and interpret death and illness through a semi- or explicitly

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<sup>31</sup> Giuseppe Giordan, “The Body between Religion and Spirituality,” *Social Compass* 56, no. 2 (June 2009): 226–36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768609103356>, 230.

<sup>32</sup> Pew Research Center, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace” (Pew Research Center, October 17, 2019), <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace>.

<sup>33</sup> Ipsos Public Affairs, “2016 Yoga in America Study” (Yoga Alliance and Yoga Journal, January 2016), <https://www.yogaalliance.org/Portals/0/2016%20Yoga%20in%20America%20Study%20RESULTS.pdf>, 6.

<sup>34</sup> Ipsos Public Affairs, “2016 Yoga in America Study”, 26.

yogic lens? Regardless of whether yoga is religion, spirituality or both, can it support people in crisis?

To answer those questions, I can only reflect on my own experience of my mother's death in spring 2021. In the winter of 2018, the yoga school that had become my spiritual home closed its doors. Absent the gravitational pull of our shared space, our community of practitioners and teachers scattered to other studios or to no studios at all. I continued to teach weekly classes in a commercial studio until the summer of 2019, when I realized that I could no longer do so with integrity. As the pandemic began and my mother got sick for the last time, I continued my daily *āsana* practice at home and my weekly online Sanskrit study sessions, but a sense of connection to community was getting more and more difficult to feel. When my mother finally left her body in March, I felt I had nowhere to turn for counsel that understood the shape of my heart, my beliefs about family, death, reincarnation and God, and the words that might ease my journey through grief.

It seems that I was looking for religion, specifically the element that Tweed describes as “making homes and crossing boundaries.” I did not find such a home in the Christian congregation of my childhood, nor have I found it inside any of the nine Hindu temples and mandirs in my area. At the same time, my devotion to God has continued to evolve, now newly inflected by the loss of my mother. In a sense, I have become like one of my original yoga teachers, cobbling together my own blend of yoga practices, Hindu cosmology and the occasional Christian symbol. I cannot say whether my vision of reality is like anyone else's, because without community and shared ritual language, I lack the opportunity to collectively reflect on the teachings and how they reverberate through my life. I cannot help but wonder how

many other yoga practitioners like me are out there, craving the particular nourishment that religion provides, and unable to find it.

As the cultural landscape continues to shift, scholars may need more flexible ways of talking about the cultural flows that have historically been called religions: it may be worth interrogating whether religion and spirituality are indeed separable, or if yoga's refusal to entirely fit either category sufficiently disturbs the binary. The growth of religious nones may presage a world in which spiritual fluidity is the norm: a landscape in which each individual is assumed to construct their own idiosyncratic blend of beliefs and practices- in that landscape, yoga is already well-positioned to play a supporting role. We may also see yoga become more institutionalized as individual centers find ways to serve practitioners' spiritual needs in times of crisis. What seems certain is that yoga will continue to flourish, adapting to individual needs and the cultural moment as it has always done. As a committed practitioner without a current spiritual home, my task is to ask questions that enrich my understanding of the yogic rhizome, and that enable me to dive deeper into my practice with sensitivity, clarity and integrity.

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